

CONTRABAND LOVE

LOVE

*Love is contraband in Hell,
cause love is an acid
that eats away bars.*

*But you, me, and tomorrow
hold hands and make vows
that struggle will multiply.*

The hacksaw has two blades.

The shotgun has two barrels.

We are pregnant with freedom.

We are a conspiracy.

—Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*
(Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 130.

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I STATE

LOVELESS WORLD

Kenneth Chappell

Pulling me close yet forsaken astray

Picking and choosing who is spared and betrayed

Trapped in times they portrayed to not understand

Shadowed away in proclaimed free-land

Is it your land or is it my land?

Yet our youth is stranded in Riker's Island

Loveless death yet so soft

Enslaved in Projects, announced "New Lofts"

Loveless world loveless heart

When does it end? Where do we start?

A CLOSER LOOK AT “CRIME”

Asar Imhotep Amen, Ph.D. (aka T.T. Thomas)

I (we) do not accept the common usage of the term “crime.” Why? Crime is not solely the violation of legal codes. It encompasses behavior that violates human rights. But beyond the legal understandings, crime shatters relationships, both social (including political and economic) and interpersonal. Substance abuse and sex work, activities defined as against the law, certainly impact the lives and rights of others, but could be addressed more effectively outside the criminal justice system. Crime is a relative matter that changes with the disposition of legislative bodies.

Homicide is typically considered a crime unless the perpetrator acted in self-defense, by reason of insanity, or “in the line of duty” as a member of a police force, legal execution team, or a military body. Indeed, soldiers might be criminally liable for refusing to kill on order, or for refusing to register with selective service.

It is considered criminal behavior to lie under oath, but otherwise lying is lawful for everyone from presidents to common folk. It is illegal to speak about classified documents, and it is illegal not to speak before grand juries – unless the speaking would involve self-incrimination, in which case it becomes legal not to speak (unless one has been granted immunity from prosecution, in which case it becomes illegal not to speak!).

In short, everything from killing (or refusing to kill) to speaking (or refusing to speak) is or is not a crime, depending on the widest range of circumstances. So divorced is civil law from moral reflection that we barely blink when presidents somberly intone that we have to stop violence in America, while as a nation “we” spend thousands of dollars a minute building bombs.

In American colonial times, crime was tied up with definitions of sins. Today, the fact that crime is thought to be strictly a legal concept obscures the extent to which our criminal law continues to be rooted in moralistic biases about

unacceptable individual behavior rather than in consistent concern about how some violate others.

Behind every legal judgement on criminality is more powerful social judgement. The government must pass a law to declare a particular act a crime. In many ways, the law creates the crime that it punishes. In other words, society prepares the crime. The “criminal” just commits it. For example, in many feudal societies, hunting game on the landowners’ property was considered a legitimate way to put food on the table, until the lawmakers decided it was “poaching.”

All crimes are acts that society, or at least some dominant elements in society, sees as a threat. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a majority of the people who – in their efforts to survive – took food off the shelves of decimated grocery stores, were people of color; they were routinely called “looters” and charged with crimes. Anglo-Europeans engaging in the same acts were called “resourceful.” The criminalization of poverty was played out before our eyes on the evening news.

This is not to imply that certain acts, especially acts of violence, do not cause real harm and do not need to be stopped. Though the law often represents the interests of the dominant class, there are common shared interests for safety and well-being that must be honored and respected. Clearly, in order for any society to function, acts such as murder, rape, kidnapping, and armed robbery along with corporate and government practices must be proscribed and held to a minimum. My concern, however, is within the slippery slope we can find ourselves on as soon as we accept existing conventional understandings of crime as having sacrosanct status.

In picking out whom to punish, “our” criminal justice system deals most harshly with those already victimized by basic social, economic, and political injustices. While behavior that could be considered criminal permeates all levels of our society, wealthy and middle-class people who engage in criminal activity tend to receive little or no penalty, while people of color, the poor, and other exploited people engaged in similar activities are given harsh sentences.

Youth from poor communities are routinely charged with crime and go to prison, while youth from middle-class communities are given a warning and sent back to school or to a psychologist. The penal system too easily becomes the repressive arm of the state, which reinforces the oppression of the exploited. Instead of correcting the problems it is intended to relieve, the justice system itself in many ways has become a monstrous crime against humanity. Each of us inevitably brings our own assumptions and prejudices to the decisions we make each day. Still law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and juries have broad-ranging discretion that has a permanent impact on the future of others.

Selective enforcement allows those in power to use “criminality” as a label to condemn those on the margins of society whom they wish to control. The label of “criminal” is a permanent one today in the United States. A conviction, no matter how old, may successfully keep a person from ever obtaining viable employment, decent housing, or certain constitutional rights such as voting.

Criminalization has become a tool of social control. It is more “politically correct” than outright expressions of racism/white supremacy or classism, but it accomplishes the same purpose. It is possible only when people are convinced that criminal behavior is solely a result of individual weakness or inherent badness rather than the direct outgrowth of social inequality, poverty, racism/white supremacy, deteriorating education, and decaying communities.

It is easy to track the growth over the past forty years of the myth of the “criminal type” and the ways in which those in power have manipulated the inherent racism/white supremacy and classism in “our” society to cast poor people and people of color as “criminally inclined.”

I (we) reject the concept of criminality that supports the myth of a criminal type, a concept that grows in part of ignorance and fears rooted in biases and prejudices. This concept of criminality represents a gross distortion of the nature of those caught up in the criminal justice system and provides a simplistic explanation of highly complex social problems. It tends to project distinctive images of good people as opposed to bad people, and victims as opposed to villains. These

misunderstandings result in the perpetuation of the criminal stereotype, although behavior defined as crime occurs at all levels of society.

Too often the social policies of America benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. Law protects power and property; it safeguards wealth; and, by the same token, it perpetuates the subordinated status of the people on the bottom.

This is particularly the case with the penal system. This system has penetrated all aspects of the lives of the poor. While wealth and material success are valued by this culture, the poor are feared. It is not hard to see, therefore, why most Americans have shown little concern for the increasing numbers of poor citizens in U.S. prisons. As a nation, the United States has encouraged this oppression. Those who dissent have been neutralized. Neutrality enabled the status quo of oppression (and therefore violence) to continue. It is a way of giving tacit support to the oppressor.

THE VALUE CYCLE

Madisty Thomas

... For nothing, for nothing...

A Life Less Valued

remains in waiting.

... For nothing, for nothing...

A Life Less Valued,

once Fighting,

remains in waiting

in a cell.

... For nothing, for nothing...

A Life Less Valued,

once Obeying,

remains in waiting

in a cell.

... For nothing, for nothing...

A Life Less Valued,

once Clinging,

remains in waiting

in a cell,

in limbo.

Awaits.

Judgement:

A Life Less Valued and The Maker choke on tears.

Repeat:

For nothing, for nothing...

EXCERPT FROM

CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY: AN AFRIKAN-CENTERED CRITIQUE

Asar Imhotep Amen, Ph.D. (aka T.T. Thomas)

A people already invisible can be easily made to disappear as this is the primary function of ghettos and prisons in Amerika.

INTRODUCTION:

The United States is predicated upon permanent disparities and inequities in life expectancy, mortality rates, education gaps, incarceration, economic solvency, and counter-development burdened upon Afrikans domestically and internationally. Founded in enslavement, these disparities were facilitated by military conquest, and perpetuated through economic, legal, and social stratification with Afrikans occupying the lowest echelons of the Amerikan caste system. Afrikans have forcefully served as the cash crop of the United States and the so-called “New World,” a permanent source of free and cheap labor in the plantation and prison systems; a varying source of free and enslaved soldiers for all major wars fought in North Amerika and the European wars; and an endless source of flesh for medical experimentation in prison, plantation, and military sites. Entire industries were created to dehumanize and master the control of the Afrikan population in the United States for profit and superiority. Put simply, the suppression of Afrikan culture and life provides the lifeblood of the United States and their allies. This suppression, violent and repressive, permeates the space in which Afrikans exist and is experienced as power disparities.

CRIMINOGENIC AMERIKAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY:

When we focus on seasoned individual adult serial killers and juvenile “trench coat” mafias ignoring questions about a culture that could continuously produce so many, so often, so masterfully, we become distracted by symptoms and lose sight of the disease. Even though the culture and individuals indigenous to it (those who created it and sustain it and it them) are trying to profoundly qualify this fact by trying to

make the individual appear abnormally or uniquely neurotic or psychotic, it is not the individual where fault lies. It is the culture that is problematic. European culture is “criminogenic.” It is a society which breeds unusual numbers and types of criminals and a relatively high level of crime and violence. Cultures can be psychologically diagnosed and classified just as the individuals within them can. European culture is as psychopathically criminal as are the vast majority of individuals it produces.

We need only look to the work of early European criminologists who studied their own people’s internal and global (i.e. historical) patterns to see their gross abnormality relative to virtually everyone else. Through the eyes of their own scientists, we can see that even in the early stages of their play at moral civilization they outdistance all other nations and cultures in criminal (and penal) behavior. Essentially, even though the rate of increase in criminal acts in different European nations was different (a fact not changed by a preference by disproportionate numbers of individuals in different European countries for different types of violent and/or property crimes), each of these individual rates consistently increased. Without exception, they were all excessive when compared to other nations. It is not unrelated that the same applies to their undercounted, even though still comparatively extremely excessive, cases of psychosis and other serious, and not so serious, mental disorders.

Even though many of us have been brought into the grip of their innate psychosis, this European-nonEuropean disparity still holds strong. It is only their use of the media to portray themselves as sane and innocent that makes many of us believe otherwise. They have not changed simply because we have been outfitted with blinders. A serial killer or child molester or drug addict doesn’t exactly stop being what they are between crimes. They just aren’t doing their thing at particular moments. Clearly, to understand or treat such serious problems our focus must be enlarged far beyond moments of dramatic explosion to identify patterns, anticipate eruptions, seek root causes and means of prevention.

It is also this self-serving portrayal that projects the illusion that there is a workable solution within the Western cultural context that would not call for the

total dismantling of European culture. But, knowing this is a biologically and culturally infused genetic trait, we need to take the next logical step and ask if it is even possible for Europeans to exist outside of the European culture and the global reality they have imposed on everyone else. In other words, the White man dares to think himself civilized. His “legitimate” theft of the wealth and resources of others now “exempts” him from the need to commit “crimes in the street,” to look the people he robs, rapes, and kills directly in their eyes as did his “pioneering” and colonizing fathers. With one stroke of the pen, he wields (rather than a pistol held to the temple or a knife to the throat), he deludes himself by thinking himself “good,” “decent,” and “law-abiding.” Their goodness and decency are but psychopathic illusions created by a repressive denial of the truth.

Be that as it may, the European nations as a whole, as well as the individual societies that comprise it, have higher incarceration, arrest, and violent and nonviolent crime rates than any nations of comparable size. Such comparisons tell us much about the moral and ethical substance of cultural priorities. When nonEuropean countries work with all their might to become cultural shadows of Europe, yet still have crime and imprisonment, while being unable or refusing to become *culturally* European, those rates are still lower than that of both new and old European countries. It is then we can see a clear linear connection between culture and crime. Individually and collectively, the closer we move toward Western culture the more we become prone to adopting and defending criminal behavior as innately human. Likewise, the further we exist beyond the pale of it the less likely we are to find the crime natural.

Western culture is criminogenic culture. Like any other culture, it inevitably and naturally reproduces itself in whatever that flows from it. When its afflicted hand is forced into the nonEuropean public because of a contradiction brought about because it is caught being immoral and unethical while playing the moral and ethical judge of others, it only need explain away its abnormality as a problem of a few troubled “individuals.” But the need to hide behind this lie will only last a short time more. Because if nothing changes, it is only until the explanation of their criminality will become irrelevant. For once it successfully turns the world into

itself, it will have both made the world inherently criminogenic and further moved itself into the position of being humanity's savior because of its greater experience in managing its own historically chronic criminality, i.e. criminals and criminality, however, they may be measured or described, are sociocultural products. They carry and express the sociogenic inheritance of their societal progenitor. Crime and society are blood relatives. They are intimately and inextricably related. Criminal personalities, like all personalities, are to a significant degree socially created and defined. Their behavioral characters can only be manifested within a social context. They therefore cannot stand outside social time, place, and circumstance—neither criminality nor criminal personalities can exist in the absence of a social milieu.

The White Amerikan and the worldwide European ruling classes in general, refuse to accept and repent their historical and contemporary theft of the lands, resources, and taking of lives of their own and other peoples: their enslavement, serfdom, and peonage of their own and Afrikan peoples; their colonization and rapacious exploitation of virtually all non-White peoples; their eradication of whole ethnocultural groups; their mass murder of millions of persons; their scandalization and assassination of the character of Afrikan peoples; their destruction of many of the Earth's streams, rivers, lakes, seas, and ocean (ecocide); the wasting of its natural treasures; their loosening of incurable diseases on vulnerable populations; their development and use of weapons of mass destruction; their assassination of national leaders, overthrow of duly elected governments, and other intrigues against legitimate organizations; their warmongering and dissemination of murderous arms among nations for profit and political advantage; their addicting of whole populations to self-destructive habits, appetites, and drugs; their falsification of the consciousness of the Earth's people, and numerous other heinous crimes against Humankind and Nature.

Because of their need to deny their long criminal history and contemporaneous criminality, their refusal to recognize that they pose the gravest danger to every type of life on Earth, and their need to divert theirs and the world's attention away from the facts listed above, the White Amerikan and European communities must compulsively project the alleged criminal activities in the New

Afrikan community as representing the greatest danger to Amerikan society and European civilization.

European society systematically manufactures the very acts it purports to detest while projecting these psychopathic behaviors on others. By its very nature, it systematically produces greater numbers of more sophisticated and amoral criminal mentalities. By *our* assimilation into them we increasingly do the same. In other words, individual criminal behavior tends to be based on proximity, meaning in a hypersegregated society that European disproportionately commit criminal acts against Afrikans. But, even given this fact, European-on-Afrikan criminal behavior has become increasingly more prevalent, sophisticated and amoral in their institutions, which uphold white supremacy. So, I ask, who has a more criminal propensity of all the world's people? History (his-story) clearly reveals the obvious answer.

INDIVIDUALISM, SELF-BLAME, AND CRIMINALITY:

One of the ideologies (there are a number, but we will look at just one in this paper) projected to maintain European dominance, is the ideology of individualism. We hear a great deal today of the “do-your-own-thing” and “I-do-mine” kind of situation; the so-called individualization of success and failure is seen as the result of what we call personal ineptness or misbehavior, as a sign of moral inferiority. That is, those peoples within themselves, some individual shortcoming or ineptness: ultimately, failing as a result of some moral problem within their personalities.

William Graham Sumner, a “pioneering” and influential Amerikan sociologist, indicated that the poor are shiftless and impudent. They are negligent, impractical, and inefficient; they are idle and intemperate, the extravagant and the vicious. Even those people who founded social work and the so-called helping-professions, and who saw themselves as “liberals,” often saw the behavior and the failure of victims of Eurocentric domination as a result of their personal misbehavior or the result of their moral weakness. We call this kind of approach the individual moral sensibility, which is used to justify the culture of inequality.

That is, this individualism, this individual moral sensibility tries to persuade us that this society is equal, and that this society makes available to all individuals equal the opportunities to advance in it, and if they fail, it is the result of their own personal problems. Of course, it becomes obvious that this kind of approach is a rationale and a rationalization by the means of which the society itself ignores its own input as far as the failure of a person or people, such as Afrikan Americans are concerned. It helps us to ignore the impact of the social structure upon individual achievement and mobility. It tends almost literally to try and eradicate the idea that the individual succeeds or fails within a social structure.

Since the individual does not succeed or fail in a vacuum but succeeds or fails in a social system, the social system must be taken into consideration when we evaluate individual success and failure. This implies the possibility that the social structure itself may be principally responsible for the success of some and the failure of others. However, a society developed by the imperialistic European, who arrogates himself the dominance and rule over the vast majority of people, cannot afford to truthfully and honestly look at the possibility that it is the structure of Eurocentric society itself that greatly influences the individual and group fates of all people of color.

While many of our liberal friends may not see the so-called success or failure, or the condition of Afrikan Amerikan people or people of color in general as a result of a moral problem, and they would possibly argue that the poor are no more morally decrepit than are the middle-class or are the upper-class, they still tend to maintain the social status quo in a modified form by projecting a kind of scientific ideology, one that appears at first to be neutral in its orientation.

This ideology speaks of such apparently neutral things such as the psychodynamic make-up of the individual; it speaks of the weak ego; the dark side of the personality overtaking the light side of the personality. All kinds of systems, names and intra-psychic mechanisms are invoked to explain the subjugation of some people and the domination of others, the so-called success of some and the failure of others.

We hear sociologists and criminologists talk about cultural commitments, i.e. those who are committed to mainstream values and the mainstream behavior against those who belong to an ostensible culture of poverty, who have absorbed a different system of values. They offer us family background, and they offer us various types of child-rearing approaches that presumably do or do not prepare the individual to deal with the middle-class White society; family backgrounds which do or do not provide the individual with the ability to solve his or her social problems. Educationists go deeply into the cognitive structures of the victims and indicate the means by which they are deficient in academic or other abilities.

Social psychologists offer us explanations in terms of interpersonal competence and behavior, and the failure of communications to occur between family members and other people. We get a host of definitions and a host of “explanations.” However, we rarely, if ever, get an approach that looks at the political system and the political aims of the imperialistic European, and in what ways those aims contribute to the critical situation that we see ourselves in today. From the Eurocentric reference point, normality is established as a model of the “middle-class,” “Caucasian” man of European descent. The more one approximates this model in appearance, values and behavior, the more “normal” a person is considered to be. But in reality, the most insane people on Earth today are used as models for sanity. The sanity of the racist European is not questioned. The possibility that what we call normal is itself insane is not questioned; that the organization of this society, the nature of its human relations, the structure of its economic systems, the values (or lack thereof) that motivate it, are the result of the madness of a people.

THE POLITICS OF CRIMINOLOGY AND DIAGNOSIS:

When we talk about the so-called “diagnosing” of Afrikan Amerikan people, along with people of color in general, it involves an analysis not only of the behavior of Afrikan people, but of the behavior of society as a whole; we must recognize fact and face up to it as a people. Diagnosis then is not merely procedural or neutral. It is political to the core: it is a political act.

Through diagnosis, the ruling society applies its ideological measures to the recalcitrant members of that society. It maintains, through diagnosis, the status quo. Most of all, through diagnosis, it maintains society, which justifies its unjustifiable repressions. Thus, when an individual is labeled in an unjust and unequal society and is labeled by the very people who maintain its injustice and inequality, then the very diagnostic process itself, and the very labels attached to the victims/survivors of that society are the very means by which repression is carried out in that system. Consequently, those folks who are in the so-called helping-professions and in the “business” of diagnosing other peoples’ behavior must recognize the degree to which they are a part of the repressive mechanism of that system.

PREGNANCY & INCARCERATION

Tanesha Westry

According to the *American Journal of Public Health*, between 6 and 10 percent of incarcerated women are pregnant; in one year alone, 1,400 women gave birth while incarcerated in the United States. Some may not even realize that they are pregnant; believe it or not, many times the woman does not know she is pregnant, even if she is around 6 months. If the “inmate” is still in jail two weeks after being booked, they are given a full medical exam just like all the other inmates. That is when most women find out they are pregnant and have had no prenatal care at all. And many who knew they were pregnant and did not have any prenatal care before they were arrested are put on prenatal vitamins. When that woman is first arrested, she is taken to the jail for booking. If she knows she is pregnant, this is put into the computer and in a few days, they will do a pregnancy test to see if she is. But there are many times that they aren't.

When incarcerated during pregnancy, women have to wear belly chains and in some states are put into pregnancy units in prison. Women are usually moved to a special pregnancy unit, where about 20 other women are incarcerated. (It makes you wonder of the cold-heartedness of the judges, who would send pregnant women to prison, when there are other alternatives to incarceration.) Fortunately, they do get them to go through childbirth classes. They have group therapy sessions in Parenting, Substance Abuse, Domestic Violence, Prenatal Care, Childbirth, and Postpartum. A childbirth educator also comes to the hospital after delivery to check on the women.

They have to labor alone and during the labor, no one is allowed in the delivery room. In addition to being forced to labor without a support person present, it is sad to say that the entire labor and delivery is monitored the whole time by prison guards. They are handcuffed 30 mins after giving birth. (Can you imagine trying to hold or nurse a baby with handcuffs and chains on?)

According to the website and movement *Women in Prison*, 46 states have no legislation that restricts the shackling of pregnant women in prisons, jails, and

detention centers. They do have 24 hours with their baby. In most states, the law maintains that a woman with a vaginal birth must be out of the hospital by 24 hours after delivery. Some women go back to population, lost after giving birth. In most cases that causes some women to turn to pills, getting high by taking others' psychotropic drugs trying to dull the pain from the separation of their child. (At times I wondered how I would feel If I had to leave my baby. I probably would refuse to eat, and wouldn't be able to sleep, crying all night and day. And having the thought in your mind that you can lose your baby to the system.) Even if women in prison finish their time, they are at risk of losing their children if their time exceeds more than two years. After two years, most states maintain that a mother will lose all parental rights.

Some jails and prisons do allow breastfeeding. Although it's not very likely, it is possible for prisoners to breastfeed, if the prison is nearby the child's place of residence and the fostering or adopting family is willing to cooperate by picking up the frozen breast milk.

Mothers are more at risk for postpartum mental disorders. The combination of being separated from their babies, the severe isolation, and the poor physical care during the pregnancy and postpartum periods place new mothers at an increased risk for mental disorders following birth, including postpartum depression and postpartum psychosis.

COLORBLINDNESS AT THE COURTHOUSE: A CONFESSION AND A CONUNDRUM

Bruce A. Craft

The come-to-Jesus-meeting as I called it, as we all called it in the trenches of the criminal justice system, always occurred about a month before the final trial date, the judgment day the court would not continue. “Hey, Bruce, you met with your client yet?” was the common refrain in the hallway or elevator or sidewalk at the courthouse, casually asked by any one of dozens of prosecutors in passing, and my well-rehearsed reply rolled off my tongue: “I discussed the offer with him, but he hasn’t come to Jesus yet. Give me another day or two and I’ll go back out to the jail. Let it sink in for a few days.” Then the turf talk began, my quick-in-passing argument to the Assistant DA about the inherent weakness of the State’s case to justify the offer of too many years, and the inevitable hammer thrown back at me: “The old white-haired ladies on the jury ain’t gonna buy that.” And I knew it. In some surreal role reversal, I now became a quasi-agent of the State, trying to convince my client to take a deal, to swallow the bitter pill of what the rest of the world calls justice.

Fast forward from the marble steps of the courthouse, where Justice is dressed up so elegantly in her expensive stone floors, imported rainforest woods, shiny brass chandeliers, and even ceiling medallions emblazoned with gold leaf, across town to the government owned windowless bed ‘n’ breakfast, a concrete building so hideous that a Soviet-era missile bunker looks downright inviting in comparison. Citizens, mostly the old white-haired jury ladies and their gray-flannelled husbands who hold great sway in everything from the Garden Club to the pocketbooks of the politicians, have refused to pass bond issues for the past thirty years to build a new jail. Seems as if public sentiment says this squalor – where brown recluse spiders outnumber the 1,500 humans here and stomping rats the size of small cats passes for entertainment – is good enough for those who sadly find themselves calling this place “home.” I park the car in the gravel lot by AAAA Bail Bonds (my friend owns it and decided to use four A’s so he would be first

alphabetically in the Yellow Pages, as if he needed any more customers since he leased space from the Sheriff to locate his portable-building bail bond business less than an easy 9-iron from the front door of the jail and had to hire help and stay open 24/7/365 just to handle it all) and walk over to the guard shack, sign the book, flash a smile, and with a wave disappear behind twenty feet of razor wire. Once inside, a guard decked out in enough paramilitary garb to pass for a Navy SEAL ready to assassinate Osama bin Laden escorts me to the Client Interview Room – a fancy name for a converted closet-sized cell with two steel folding chairs right in front of the Foucaultian panopticon from where the guards could lip-read your attorney-client privileged conversations – for the inevitable come to Jesus meetin’.

At this late date, the discussion usually began and ended with jury selection. The facts were in the can, the trial strategy was in place, and the only variable was what the jury would do and then, worst case scenario, what the judge would do in sentencing. In order to coerce a plea, the judge usually promised that if we “let” this case go to trial and the jury convicted then the sentence would be far worse. My experience taught me not to second guess Hizzoner’s unmistakably unbiased (place tongue inside cheek and bite down hard here) advice along those lines. Black or brown, poor, and clearly the “Other” to the educated country-club types who responded to the jury summons, my clients usually understood that their best interests lay in accepting the five years rather than risking the twenty-five.

My white clients, especially those with drug charges, rarely heard that discussion and almost never in the confines of the Four Bar Hilton. We worked out their deals before arraignment. It was a squeaky-clean process for a well-oiled machine: run Junior through Daddy-paid rehab followed by six months of clean drug tests and the charges were dismissed or reduced to a misdemeanor with unsupervised probation. Junior inevitably would return to my office within the year, either to sign paperwork to get his record expunged so IBM would hire him or to pony up another retainer with Daddy’s checkbook so we could start the process all over again.

This is the ugly underbelly of the justice system. This is not just my story. This is the story of the system, one so insidiously infected by racism and poverty

and not-benign neglect that fundamental fairness fails to exist unless you are white and can buy it.

We – those of us on the courthouse steps and walking the marbled halls of justice – were not “colorblind.” We just thought we were. We were numbed by the system and blind to the evils it hid behind the cloak of justice. We lapped up the law school Kool-Aid like parched dogs in the August heat and believed whatever neo-liberal or neo-conservative patter that was offered up, whether the pablum about justice being blind or the drink of bitter hemlock that the Constitution will heroically come to the rescue like it did for poor (and white) Clarence Earl Gideon. In retrospect, I question whether I ever was “colorblind,” a term loosely thrown around in the criminal justice system when, in fact, justice is not blind to color or anything else that approximates the “Other.” I confess: I was not. I walked the walk and talked the talk – because that is what we were taught to do – but in the last analysis I became immune to the diseases infecting the criminal justice system. And I was not alone.

Michelle Alexander suggests that “colorblindness” has become an objectified blanket that masks the formalized discriminatory practices of the American criminal justice infrastructure to create a racial caste system.¹ My experience also teaches that the supposed blindfold covering the eyes of Lady Justice is shot through with holes, rendering “blind justice” nothing more than a synonym for a Jim Crow “Whites Only” sign. Neil Gotanda argues that any “attempt to deny racial consideration is, at its root, an attempt to hide the underlying racial oppression.”² The thesis employed by Alexander and Gotanda holds that no matter the rhetoric the simple fact of systemic discrimination exists. That is the conundrum of the criminal justice system: high flying rhetoric and day-in-and-day-out practice are

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 2-3.

² Neil Gotanda, “A Critique of ‘Our Constitution Is Color-Blind,’” in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2013), 37. Originally published in *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 44 (1991).

often diametrically opposed, putting the “Other” in the vice grip of the Prison Industrial Complex.

I lifted my veil and looked in the mirror. And what I saw I did not like. But at least I looked and faced my own reality. Baldwin’s baby is crying, crying, crying – crying like it means to wake the dead.³ We must hear that cry and lift the universal veil that covers the horrors of racism and the criminalization of poverty in the so-called criminal justice system. Now.

³ See James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 197. Originally published in 1974.

VOICE BEHIND THE VEIL

Dece

The Aftermath of the Willie Lynch Syndrome

Mistreatment of millions based on Skin Tone

Only expect me to Dunk or reach the END ZONE

All Empires fall, Babylon, EGYPT and “then Rome”

Illegal Immigrants, the Gov’t trying to send Home

I’m no citizen according to the 13th Amendment

NEO Nazis in the SENATE, Cops’ terror on melanated Tenants

I ogle the 15th Amendment with a Microscope

the Denial of suffrage and the right to VOTE

The speech of Elitists and their Pompous lies

MASS lynching after the 1877 Compromise

If you possess knowledge of self, you’re called extreme

U.S. WAR Machines, and the Arming of Repressive Regimes

across America, some kidnapped girl scream!

SOLD AS A SEX slave and no longer seen

Powers that be doesn’t want me with *any wisdom*

Quick to accuse me with Anti-Semitism

How when I’m Afro-Asiatic, a descendent of NOAH

Ruth was a Moabite, which are Moors

In 711 landed on Iberian Shores and entered Spain’s doors

Colonized “this” Continent with 101 Wars

Tore down our rounds and replace my face with yours
Pump me up with medication and improper Education
No matter the Social Elevation, I still hear degradation
Hear Congratulation at Graduation, then pay tuition
to receive a degree and puts me in a low position
Sprung from a Tree with no Fruition
MY People get shot everyday, A Plot of the NRA
Indigenous Americans without A Place to STAY
Attainable dreams, chased away
FEMA and Homeland Security We gotta face today
Rogue Police shoot our teens in the Back
Only for the DA and Grand Jury to justify the ACT
Some Crying Mother relying on Benjamin Crump
Racial tensions rise under treasonous Trump
The Mueller Probe, ex Military going rogue
While Passive Preachers quoting Job
“The Black Codes” and “Colorable Law”
Strips my sovereignty and clamps me in its claw
Turbulence and Turmoil, Offshore drilling for oil
While the Queen sit Royal, Congressmen are disloyal
The blue collars toil for Checks, Yet up to their necks in debt
America’s Prison Industrial Complex, stalk us
The RJC vs The Congressional Black Caucus

Snatchin babies at the borders, fathers not allow' to hug daughters

Detainees classified as rapists and Drug Porters

Snow, Hail, Hurricanes and Earthquakes

America's future is now in the WORST shape

Unknown diseases affecting the birth rate

Theologians Claim the Canaanites possess cursed traits

SHOUT slavery is gone, but racism has grown

Botham Jean shot inside his own home

Fleeing Africans seek Asylum and refuge

WARzones in Chicago and Baton Rouge

Jon Burge tortured and killed, but never was tried

Only got time 'cause he lied

The fraternity order Celebrated him after he died

Guilty was the verdict of officer VAN DYKE

HBB and IWOC must lead the Prison STRIKES

BLACK ASPHALT

Eugene McNeil

Course; hard and cold I am used to transporting many things...

Often forgotten and dismissed of importance

Abandoned, left alone, feeling the elemental sting.

Spills of decay in a world full of destructive garbage and junk;

Hatred seething rallying crowds into a divisive junk...

Blood puddles and faded chalk lines are the tombstones of our ancestors' demise;

Gone in a blink of an eye like our memories of the callous, inequality, murders on the rise

It's no surprise I've always been and seen this a long time coming;

From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin and the martyrs' souls who sing a song of history running...

I am around the courtyard where we all hung,

like strange fruit that Billie Holiday Sung.

I can imagine just how the NFL players feel,

Given much wealth but being stripped of our dignity was not on the contract or a part of the deal.

INTERLUDE A

MADD—1

Alex Cruz

I draw near

I bend down and touch the face in
The coffin. Slightly wonder'n what did it cost 'em

And what determines a loss from a win

I step back

Thinking back to the place where I was left at

Back to where the skies were all jet black

And all the smokers had let their eyes wax...

-Red.

Looking irritated, consumed by all the hatred in this
deathtrap.

Frustrated from living gutter like irrigation.

I find no elevation from out my station,

Where we consuming brown water.

In the sewers we maneuvered in

And got well acquainted,

With pollution while searching for solutions;

Where we was truant.

Was looking to school (but)
Now I'm looking for new means.
Busy while pursuing the cool – “breeze”.
(Think'n we could rule in/it, the ruin,
when *we never drew it or in...*)
Juvenile prisons–
Our youth consume in;
Got police on the streets cruising
Perusing my blue jeans
–For sagging, harassing the fragments
Of society;
Considered Zigzagging,
And living savage for bagging that raw.
Sorta tragic like Lucifer after the fall.
My Frustration's carving my mind's renovation,
I'm change'n–Fast pace'n,
Those 'streetz' got me chase'n the pavement;
I change lanes–and...
Fuck school
It's lacking my mind's penetration.

So, I'm lacking in patience
Though look at my station,

Where's the elevation?

If final destinations are where I'm dead or in prison-

Which always stares- squared and adjacent.

And O-G's get to play (dead) dad;

Where the plot's always blatant, cuz

They just came from where we're going to stay at.

Why do you think under this anger? - I stay mad...

And why are all the counts that are ever read,

About how I stay bad... I think I'd rather stay mad...

II

SOUL

TOMORROW'S YESTERDAY

Dom Roscoe

Tomorrow's Yesterday is a gateway to a clairvoyant vision.

It is the untold truth of things that has yet been seen or written.

Although not forbidden, we still alter its ways; because when

trying to stay focused, we still go astray;

So who is to say, not to live for today, when tomorrow's not promised anyway?

Or, that living for tomorrow might be the problem solver;

But for a dead giveaway.

Some mistakes are made on a daily basis; but,

don't mistake actions made while comparing races.

Because, surely some are running; but, only just

to live above and beyond their means.

Still; some are actually hindered, and stuck in

between the seems, and dreams; where what

seems to be, may not actually even exist in my

reality.

Tho, those are the things they say, that makes us

different in our totality.

Because in their minds, my mind is not of their

same morality; but, that was then, and this is

now some would say; so what is their formality?

Is it to make us languish, even though we are adroit people?

Because in their eyes, we're still seen as less, when we should

be seen as more, if not equals; that's parallel,

and that's why this is not the end of our stories.

We, will always have sequels, and be forever there; playing

different parts,

Therefore, Tomorrow's Yesterday is "Today" for me and my

people—but with different starts...

IN BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

A. Castro

Life between two worlds is
sometimes hard. Which side do I
belong when one or the other pulls
the race card?

At times when they rival and the
situation get tense. Do I take
advantage and play both sides of
the fence?

When comments are made and the
others not around do I have my say
and find a common ground?

What common ground would I have
without betraying my brother? I see
the pain and pride from one side to
the other.

When I try to mediate, my efforts
are futile, so I keep my mouth shut
and hopes up and just remain
neutral.

THESE HANDS

Marla Miller

These hands
held my mother's hands
and trusted her to keep me safe.
These hands
young, sweaty palms as I held
the hands of my first love.
These hands
held the books, the pencils,
and the diploma –
against all odds.
These hands
did as they were told
cooking, cleaning, and caring
so my mother could work.
These hands
dug through trash for cans for money
and for discarded food
so we could eat.
These hands
found the wallet and gave
it to my mother,
trusting she would do right.
These hands
forced to sign
what wasn't mine because
mother said we needed shoes.
These hands
so young,
shackled at nineteen because
I did what mother said.
These hands
signed the plea,
not sure what it meant,
but the court said it was mercy.
These hands
held the report,
labeling me as a felon
for life –
nine counts to be exact.
These hands
held another's hands

as we said "I do" and cradled
the babies that soon came.
These hands
completed the job
applications and checked the box
knowing that the call would not come.
These hands
asked to care for
another's child like my own and
denied for something so long ago.
These hands
prayed for mercy
and finally could vote –
thirty years later.
These hands
held books, typed on a computer, and
held more diplomas –
against all odds.
These hands
still fill out the
job applications and wait for a call
that never comes.
These wrinkled hands
still pray for
mercy and forgiveness and a job,
but the mercy and the job don't come.
These hands
aged by the decades,
still shackled
by the invisible chains.
This heart
so full of love and life,
forgiven by my Creator.
This mind
educated and passionate,
filled with shattered dreams.

SELF PORTRAIT IN TATTOOS

Eric T. Robinson

He was charming & dangerous.
5'11. Brown eyes, curly hair. And
A body full of tattoos, which tells his
Story. "Hear, See, Speak No Evil" "Small"
"Shark City" on his left arm, "live, love, light"
"Serena" "Honor" "Fear No Man" in red
Letters with 3 teardrops under the "F"
S symbolizing "spiderweb" covering his entire
elbow. "Money over Everything" & "Only God Can
Judge Me" on his right entire arm.
His chest stating "live, love, life" on his ribcage
"Joshua" on the middle of his stomach in
bold letters "R.I.P. Nadine," & far left near his
waistline a rose with "savage life" written
under a very sharp intellectual man,
who was very dangerous to himself, before
another human being. Can you not
read the pain inflicted & permanently
imprinted on his body. Taking pain
to show "pain," charming enough to not
let you see the pain, only let you read it.
Notice he doesn't have "Eric" anywhere
on his body. That one is too painful
to get tattooed, He'll lose his charm
and begin to weep, like a punished child.
Eric & Eman were tussling for years, and
Eman won, and took over his whole

Body & mind, only leaving Eric the soul.

When he introduces himself,
In a normal fashion he'll blurt with
A smile "Eman," wishing he would
Have said "Eric" & when he meets
A woman, with a straight face, eyes
locked, he'll finally say "Eric" with
his whole body screaming "Eman"
is this man a Gemini? No a
Sagittarius, with the real definition
Of a Gemini. A dangerous man
to himself, head & heart, not on
accord, body & soul, lighting
all day everyday, somehow he
keeps his charm. That smile
hides the "Anxiety," depression,
bitterness, hate, embarrassment,
pain, most important, the tears.

A very charming and dangerous man.

DOWNTOWN NORFOLK

Dom Roscoe

She has been around for many years, And once the tragedy of many fears.

Fears of losing yourself, and some fears of being sold and traded as a black man or woman, Like goods on a shelf.

This was hardship, this was a harbor feast, or shall I say a harbor fest.

This was waterside drive, the ducks,

Where the slave ships, came and never rest.

This is where many of my ancestors got humiliated, ridiculed, and separated. This is history that was lost, but now being celebrated.

I am my ancestors; reincarnated.

This was downtown Norfolk, where I was born and raised.

But we switched from being down, to up town because of change. Change adds up with sense, but now cents make dollars.

They say money can't buy love, but sure can help change problems. So, out with these good old days, of those ol' ways.

Now, not letting it stand, like confederate statues. However, we are still on the thoughts;

Thoughts of how a nation could allow such hatred to take passage, after all we've fought. But, this is still Virginia, and it seems that they still want us to remember, this was their land.

Now, welcome to our new Downtown Norfolk, filled with different people and different values, but still clans.

SWEET DREAMS

Eugene McNeil

I used to have DREAMS instead of nightmares
Visions of Unity; Patriotism; & ol' school Everybody Cares

There were sweet sounds and melodies;
Silky voices; bass lines and harmonies...

Everybody I know swayed in unison to these rhythmic sounds;
Snapping our fingers & tapping our feet; feelings of joy being passed around.

Heartfelt laughter and giggles filled this space
Important conversations; manners; amens & saying grace

Historical pride in this country; land and nation born.
Freedom fighters; abolitionist & activist martyrs we mourn

The music of festivity morphs and fades.
Replaced by screams & horrors and deception like a masquerade...

My eyes tear up not wanting me to see,
My mind is assaulted; ambushed and deceived.
Systematic oppression and economic genocide;
Or great America in turmoil; divided by racist pride
Unhealing sores infected with puss.
Lying politicians motivated by lust.
My DREAMS are living nightmares now...
I wake up in prison shackled and bound.
Understanding that my dreams are realities found...

OH: SAY CAN YOU SEE?

Eugene McNeil

I do not march to the drums of the same systematic beat,
Instead I now take a knee to the anthem; choosing to stay in my seat.
How can the greatest country known to humankind allow such inequality to
seductively thrive; Keeping racism undercover and oppression alive.

Home of the Free and Land of the Brave;
Over 150 years of Emancipation Proclamation yet
still I'm a slave? To protect and serve is what our
police are trained;
Senseless killing of Black Youths never knowing their
name. Filling up jails and prison is at an all-time high;
Scare tactics and fake news; believing a lie?

Burying bodies one victim of many,
Mandatory minimum victimized
plenty,
You think you know the truth being spoken behind
closed doors; Laws created to kill the impoverished
children, my child or yours?

More gun rights and building a border wall and even wasted money on
travel bans; Let's divide America, drawing more lines in the sand.
Redistricting and election polls based on wealth;
Repeal and replace Obamacare let millions die
without health. New leaders in politics only thinking
about "self."

A LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Megan Palko

Dear past Megan (circa 2010),

I am not writing to you as an older and wiser version of yourself for the purpose of showing you the ropes. I am not going to point out how stubborn and inconsiderate you can be, or that trying to do everything on your own will continue to backfire. I am writing to you because you are the version of me right before everything changed. You are the version that was so steadfast in your toxic beliefs. You are the version that most needs to change. You are the version who needs an intervention. You are the version that needs to be loved. And you need to learn to love others.

Politics are not loving, but love is political.

You think a lot about love and politics, and how these things seem to not interconnect, but in fact do. We (you and me - future you) find ourselves loving people whom we don't politically align with. Your political views are going to flip sides (from democrat to something far more on the left); don't be nervous, but even after that that statement will continue to ring true. 2010 is 2 years after Obama was elected. You couldn't vote then but if you could you would have voted for him. He was charismatic, a democrat, and "loving." More loving than the republican ticket. He cares about those on the margins of society, and promises to keep their interests in mind. (He doesn't, but not in the ways you think.) Just around this time you will start to tune in to national media, and notice the vitriol that exists amongst

commentators and news anchors. A vitriol that is echoed by national leaders. Leaders that were elected to represent us, and have our best interests in mind. Leaders that love their constituents enough to take on the burden of representing them. Really though, what you start to see is that national politics are in desperate want of love, real love. Love doesn't seem to be a part of the larger conversation. And if it is, it isn't unconditional or moral. Love (here or rather there) is a hollow word, a political bargaining chip to gain power and prestige. It isn't sacrificial. A false verb, implying the action of love but not actually invoking it.

Politics are not loving, but love is political. What then does it mean to have a politic or ethic that is rooted foundationally in love, and what does this love even look like?

Be careful: Love can be performative, rather than an act we perform.

It is going to make you uncomfortable but you have to talk about political things. You have to listen to folks who are outside of your comfort zone. Especially folks who you don't see in your everyday life. It is an imperative in the world we live in, and the world you will inherit. Your worldview will be shattered, and reformed, and then shattered again. Each time this happens work desperately hard to not let yourself be hardened. I worry about how you might distance yourself from your convictions when the actual "doing" of what you believe in becomes harder than the identifying of what you believe. Doing is the loving. Loving on others, is imploring the ideals that you believe in.

Talking about all of this is kind of confusing, and I imagine you are sitting there with a quizzical yet exasperated look on your face, but bear with me. On August 9, 2014, a black eighteen year old named Michael Brown, someone you don't know personally but will end up caring about deeply, will be murdered. His death will be shocking, unbelievable even. The more you find out the more you will see a large interconnected, interwoven, intentional system of violence against black folks. You will be enraged. Let yourself feel that. Let it drive you.

On November 24, 2014, Michael's murderer Darren Wilson is not indicted. He will not be charged. He will not be held responsible for his actions. You will see this scenario over and over and over again. White cops killing black men, but black men are the "criminals." As you sit in the living room of a family you have not yet met, crying as you put to sleep a child who has not yet been born, you will devote yourself to whatever cause or movement that can make this stop. Go with it; it is better to be working towards something than stuck and immobile. But be careful, my love. Be careful of seeing yourself as the savior. Be careful of confusing someone else's struggle for your own. You do not experience racism. *You do not know* what that is like. Don't pretend to.

Talking about the political can get too meta, too fast, and can disconnect you from the people around you (it doesn't have to). It can go from helping your black neighbor Lilton work through some ideas, to framing your friendship with him as somehow being an act of antiracist activism. I'm not saying that it can't be, but I'm guessing Lilton didn't really sign up to participate in that with us. When we frame

things like that, we are falsely adopting an antiracist identity, and then assuming we are participating in the love it invokes. Our friendship with Lilton is less about Lilton and more about what Lilton looks like. Please, ask yourself each time you start a new friendship, and a new connection whether or not you are being selfish, whether or not you are trying to gain cool points by spending time with the black activists on your campus. (You will be, but it can be ok if you start to acknowledge and disrupt that in yourself... I will explain more later.) Ask, am I actually doing the act of loving my neighbor? What would it look like if I refocused all of the energy I spend projecting an image of antiracism into actual acts of antiracist service? What if I let the loving precede the identity?

Love Disrupts.

How do you do all of this? I still struggle with this question and maybe this section of my letter to you, past Megan, will also be for a future version of myself.

After Michael Brown was murdered you are going to start to notice all of the racist ass shit that runs through your head. Like, when you are walking down the street and a black man happens to be walking towards you. Stop thinking that he is walking towards you because he wants to somehow hurt or take advantage of you. How self-centered that fear is, how incredibly ridiculous it is to think that people of color are here to revolve around you. Stop moving to the other side of the street. Say hello. Smile, if you are feeling like it.

Or like when you leave your favorite coffee shop and are startled by a black guy that is outback smoking a cigarette. He is gonna look at you like a deer in

headlights, terrified, and tell you that he was sorry and didn't mean to startle you. As if the back parking lot was somehow your personal space that he had invaded. Think about how afraid he must be of you, a scared white woman late at night alone in a parking lot with him. Think about how people who look like you would probably call the cops and report a suspicious black man, possibly dangerous. Think about how people like you can effectively end someone else's life by making that call to the cops. Think about the power you have, and how hideous it is.

Take those thoughts and instead plant love and generosity every time you are faced with your racist intuition. Disrupt yourself. When you see a black man on the street walking towards you, discard the racist fear that he is out to get you, and replace it with more probable scenarios. Like, dude is probably going to the store to grab a pack of smokes. Or he parked really far away and is walking to his destination. OR he just fucking lives here. He doesn't need a reason to be walking on the street. I would argue that this disruption is going to equip you with the ability to soulfully love other people.

Before you go trying to change the world, make those changes internally and continue to realign yourself. Follow paths of love, not political parties. Test ideologies that you are going to come across by asking yourself who is included in this? Who benefits from this? Test it against your understanding of love, well rather my understanding of love which is this:

Love is dangerous. It is radical. It is soft. It is protective. It is equitable. It is political.

Love is challenging.

Love is struggling with people.

Love is unyielding in its quest for justice.

Love is an action and an ideology that will sustain the work that you do.

Love is worth it.

Learn to love dear Megan, not in the sappy kind of romantic way but in the hopeful, critical, constructive, kind, fun, political way.

And let others love you back.

<3, Megan (circa 2018).

INTERLUDE B

THE DUKES' SAGA



John and Vivett met as students in Jr. High School in Elmont, NY. They were really good friends throughout Jr. High, High School, and into young adulthood, often talking about the romantic relationships they were in separately and where they saw their lives in the future. It was a very special friendship because of the personal nature of these conversations.

Unfortunately, the actions of one fateful night in 1999 drastically altered John's life. He murdered a man, and was sentenced to 20 years to life in prison. The two friends lost contact. After 15 years of literally no communication with one another, a mutual friend of theirs, Mr. Pablo Sinclair, serendipitously reconnected them in June of 2015 when he saw Vivett at a reggae festival in Eisenhower Park and shared with her that throughout the years of his incarceration, John had always asked about her. She felt guilty that she had not been a better friend, had not kept in touch with him; however, she was excited to see how her old friend John was doing, especially after enduring almost two decades of incarceration. What was he like? Had he changed? How was he?

After two months of exchanging letters and phone calls between them, on August 7th, Vivett went to visit John at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Westchester County, NY. She went back on August 12th. On that day, he proposed to her. She accepted. They courted for nine months and were married on May 28, 2016. Their journey back to each other is nothing short of profound and undoubtedly orchestrated by Divine Appointment. Join them on their journey as they share the healing power of love, acceptance, transparency, and truth that they've experienced individually and collectively through the lens of mass incarceration from the inside and the outside.

LOVE LETTERS

John Dukes

May 18, 2018

Yesterday, today, tomorrow, forever...

I love all we share in our sweet life together!

May 13, 2018

Dear Vivett C. Dukes,

I still do! I'm fighting for our love these days — you did that! I'm up late writing letters to people on our behalf. I'll never forget how this administration handled our marriage. I'll never forget how difficult outsiders made it for us. In spite of it all we loved each other. We still love each other. We prayed and fasted against the powers of darkness. We drew closer together in ways we didn't know possible. I cried. You cried. I never experienced love on this level. I know God has something powerful in store for us. I know God has us! I love you and like you more each day. Thank you for everything sweetheart. 5-28-16 to forever. Enjoy your Mother's Day. Belle, you've earned love and so much more. I can't wait to experience loving you on the outside. Praise God! Always, Praise God!

Love always,
Your husband,
John

I'M FEARFUL OF THE DAMAGE REDUCED VISITS MIGHT HAVE ON OUR MARRIAGE...

Vivett Dukes

March 20, 2017

Although they are incarcerated, people behind bars still possess a God-ordained, inalienable right to love, be loved, and have human contact visits while in prison. This seems like a no-brainer, yet there is such a visceral societal push to punish incarcerated individuals and those that love and support them repeatedly.

My husband and I continue to feel the reverberation of this backlash. It hurts. I'm grateful that the prison where John resides is only about 45 minutes to an hour away. That's really close considering there are men, women, and children who travel upwards of eight hours to maximum security prisons in Upstate NY to visit their loved ones who are incarcerated. The time John and I spend together on a visit is precious. To look into each other's eyes, pray together, laugh together, hug each other, hold hands, share tender kisses, eat meals together – all of these moments coupled with daily half an hour phone calls literally sustain the bond of our marriage. Some of the fondest memories of my life have been with John in Sing Sing's visiting room. To find the liberating freedom that Love and Truth inherently entail in a maximum security state prison is a paradox many can't quite wrap their minds around – not even me, at times.

The threat of not being able to visit my husband freely between 8:30am - 3:00pm, Monday through Friday and one day on the weekend each week is becoming more eminent. I'm fearful of the damage limited visits would do to our relationship. I'm scared that we won't be able to make it through these last couple years of his bid unscathed with reduced visits or worse, with video-conferencing visits in lieu of visits that allow for physical contact looming over us. Our weekly (sometimes more) visits are the air our marriage breathes. Governor Andrew Cuomo has introduced a bill that is trying to choke our marriage out. And like any perceived threat to my marriage, I will not stand idly by while it is attacked.

I WAS SCARED TO LOVE – ESPECIALLY TO LOVE SOMEONE IN PRISON

Vivett Dukes

April 14, 2019

John asked me to marry him on our second date. We both knew we were well suited for one another and mirrored the qualities we desired and needed in a spouse – but the obvious barrier of prison was very much present. I had come out of an emotionally unavailable relationship a year and some months prior. I put in the work to get to see and love myself the way God sees and loves me. I was scared to love a man again – especially to love one in prison. It just seemed too hard. How would we make it through the next almost four years until he maybe got released from prison? (His sentence was 25 to life so there really were no guarantees.)

When I tell you this has been the greatest walk of faith of my life, I kid you not – and I'm so happy that I took that leap of faith and married John. Our marriage is not without challenges. The reality is that no marriage is. Knowing myself and my needs and wants prior to getting married helped make the decision to accept John's proposal a doable one. I had to remind myself that God did not give me a spirit of fear but of love, of power, and of a sound mind. I stopped being afraid of love and began to embrace the love that John continues to show me every day of our lives together. He takes such good care of my heart. Being in a relationship and ultimately married to someone who is/was incarcerated is not for everyone, that's for sure! By sharing, I pray someone who's been scared to love steps out on Faith and loves regardless. #speakyatruth

III

SOLIDARITY

A PLEA FOR LOVE

Dom Roscoe

To whom it may concern,

I, Dom Roscoe, am writing to you imposing this question; what is needed for a social healing? Meaning, the rehabilitation methods of regaining feeling in a society that's dying at the roots. Where as our minds are so cluttered, that there is no thought to how we feel, so we react off impulse with steel and shoot. Shots from a steal that becomes a theft of a life that has been taken and lost in the midst of the game; because now we have lost our way. The ways of our forefathers, and ancestors. We have lost the LOVE and control of our communities, which has helped raise our brothers and sisters. Thus making it harder to grab the attention of our youth. They are coming up in a sickened society with no LOVE being shown, where their pain is their diagnosis, and they are mentally prone to medicate themselves with pills to try and heal how they feel and hide from the truth, which is LOVE is LIFE and how our community (COMM)-(UNITY) is being broken into two. First off, we need to learn how to (COMM) communicate with each other respectably because somewhere down the line our communication skills have been cut off from each other and need to be rebuilt, restructured, and revitalized; -HEALED-. Secondly, we need to reiterate our (UNITY) amongst the masses, in hopes that it surpasses the HATE and brings forth LOVE. Something that's pure and not irate. Can you relate? But wait, does a social healing need to be more than appealing? What about more than a thought; or, more than a feeling? Can it be given? Does this question warrant more than attention? Maybe we need actions to be able to retain conviction! Maybe it is the feeling of benevolence and brotherhood that people should have for each other. One way or the other that's LOVE and a true meaning. Because if you can LOVE yourself, you can LOVE your brothers and sisters, and LOVE your COMMUNITY as a whole, believe it. So let's UPLIFT and BUILD. Let's BE BOLD. The TRUTH shall be told. I mean it—

This is A PLEA FOR LOVE that we need to uphold! I've seen it....

Sincerely,
DOM ROSCOE

In the struggle together, always.....

LETTER TO THE MIRROR

Eugene McNeil

Hello, my name is EBONY and I am described as black in color, but really, I am much more than this. I am bigger than the spectrum of hues. I am deeper than the pigment or dye for clothes. I am misunderstood and categorized as being bad or evil. So much so that anything associated with me gets a negative connotation. You see white people fear what they cannot understand. And they restrict and limit other cultures only to classify and label them as they denounce to assert some form of supremacy through oppression. Somewhere in this deceptive agenda that white must be separate from black or that they cannot be on the same level. Truth of the matter is that this is a blatant lie we see. Taste and feel that abstract can be a beautiful thing. Co-existing and complimenting each other's values. I am Ebony regardless of the slanderous accusations against my character. Properties all attempt to embrace diversity been reported by the fear which has evolved into a belief system. Taught and bred to divide. So as we evolve as people I am connected in every element, mineral, or practice of matter. Blending yet still holding integrity, I am infinite. Dark and quiet, unmoving and fluid.. Enduring strength. Persevering and patient. I am loving beyond and comfort surround. I am embracive and accepting. Waiting to be discovered. Reflection in the mirror.

THREE

Dece

This letter is for my precious son named Three. It's Ironic because you are my third boy and your mother's third boy as well. You may be wondering why I chose that name to title you with, being that it's numeric in nature. The truth of the matter is, three is the most powerful number and word used in Ancient and Modern Times. Three represents Knowledge, Wisdom, and Understanding, sun, moon, and stars, Man, Woman, and Child. Food, clothes, and shelter, love, peace, and happiness, Freedom, Justice, and Equality. In matter it represents Solid, Liquid, and Gas. It's First, Middle, and Last, Cold, Warm, and Hot, upper class, middle class, lower class, Gold, Silver, and Bronze. For, Against, and Neutral. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity. Electrons, Protons, and Neutrons and in government it's Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. Federal STATE and Local, The Pineal Gland, which is the Third Eye. Earth is the third planet, Air is three letters and so is the sun. It represents the Chi. The Earth is composed of the mantle, core, and crust. It's the pyramid. It's the USA the FBI, CIA, IRS, NRA, NSA, DMV, SSA, MLB, NHL, NBA, NFL everything on a major scale. It's the regions of the sun, which is photosphere, chromosphere, and the corona. Everywhere you turn and look you'll see your manifestation. In Fairytales from the Three Little Pigs, Three Blind Mice, Goldilocks and the Three Bears. It's your Body, Mind, and Soul, Lithosphere, Atmosphere, Stratosphere. Our Ancestors were persecuted by the CSA and the KKK. Three is the magic number, third time's a charm, Three the hard way. Even in Horse racing there's the Triple crown. Three point shot in Basketball, three points for a field goal in Football, Triple play in Baseball. Noah had 3 sons, the 3 sons of Adam, the 3 wisemen who visited the Holy Child. The 3 major religions, Muslim, Jew, Christian. Wrestlers get pinned with a 3 count. There's also Morning, Noon, and Night, Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner. You are my MVP, every boss is a C-E-O and at every event there's a V-I-P. An Alias is AKA, C is the 3rd letter to See in S-E-E, the Sea — is S-E-A. They say three is company, yet some say three is a crowd, three colors in a

traffic light. Just remember the Top is 3 letters and so is the Sky, where you may see an UFO. Three is the EGO, Three is Fun, but most of all Three is my son. Next time someone joke your name stand up so Tall. And ask them what do their name mean, because yours means All.

FEAR, LOVE, AND, WAR.

Brandon Jones

I guess to fear somethang. You must first know it exists. And to conquer that fear. Do you challenge it. Or just stray away. Whatever you choose. The road won't be short. But sometimes life is short. But sometimes life is long. In many cases. And many places. I'm in a far out land. Surrounded by new faces. In a world where everybody human. So don't judge me by my color. Red means stop . And green means go. Black is always beautiful. And white is as pretty as snow. So who picks who will stay. And who picks who will go. So put me on a ship, with everlasting gas. My destination i don't know. But i don't want to get there fast. Just peace of mind and some happy times is what we all strive for. Who came up with the three words. Fear love and war. And how can you put up a wall. To keep me isolated in a world that's ours. People doing bad stand naked in the rain. As pain pours down like showers. And if you ever happen to find true love. Hold it in your grasp like your first teddy bear. Angels welcome us into heaven ... While god watches over us everywhere.

UNTITLED

Kendrick McCray

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.

—*James Baldwin*

My understanding of Love in this context is far beyond emotional and physical. This is the intimacy between Love and Life. Life as in how we carry ourselves, how we speak to one another, and how we approach our issues of everyday living.

I believe that Love has to be courageous and bold in order to defy Hate within all of its many disguises. Hope has to be motivated by encouragement in order to persevere hardships. To create a social change, all above must be socially exchanged internally as well as externally.

I agree totally with bell hooks' statement revolving around not having the ethic of love within political judgment, but to go deeper, that same ethic must be installed in judicial and legislative positions as well.

The voices and actions of poverty screams, "I am a product of any environment and by design this belief manifests itself through crime, drug abuse, unemployment, and all of the other negatives that coincides."

If we see this belief acting out, then it's the responsibility of the powers that be to change that environment since they are the very same ones who created it. When the people of the ghetto look out their window, they see broken glass and dirt. The love and hope happens when that vision is changed with rich soils, producing flowers of color.

Whenever such laws are broken, all shouldn't require jail and prison terms. A simple solution is to cater not only to the victim, but also to the accuser to prevent the issues from continuing.

For those who steal to provide we help treat their addictions, create a facility that offers education, trades, and therapy to lessen the percentages of recidivism.

This is one example of authorities showing love and offering hope, but most of them will blindside this request as a solution with rhetoric in a sense of not being soft on crime. Why do love and hope have to be compared to being soft? As people under one nation, and one God, we have to do better.

INVISIBLE

Eugene McNeil

My eyes are open wide but I cannot see

No color; no hues; no pigment to describe me

Who I am I really can't explain?

There are no lies or labels that truly give me my name...

Perplexed; Stripped and Abused.

Beaten; Raped and Accused.

Sold for nothing and traded my Hope in for Despair...

Watching humanity pass me by without a care.

I know you see me! I see your face

As you hide behind your denials.

I know you hear me! My voice crying out

But getting no sympathy from your mask full of smiles.

Justifying murder at an alarming rate;

Statues of Slavery and Confederacy in debate...

Absence of Love can only be Hate...

A human being ERASED; left invisible, devoid of Fate!!

H.O.P.E.

Dom Roscoe

What is H.O.P.E.? My H.O.P.E. is *Helping Oppressed People Elevate*.

It is the ability to overcome fear of losing oneself, or oneness when trying to accelerate.

It is trust, and the instant gratification of change, when you feel like you've won "This" in a turtle race.

But what is "This"? Is "This" what was lost? Is "This" freedom but at a cost? Because nothing is really free;

Although it seems that "This" is you, and "This" is me.

But if you're not of my same struggles, then how can it be "We"?

When "We" are supposed to be equal; but "We" are so different.

Now "We" are no longer powerless; because the powers have shifted.

But "We" have always been a gifted people; spiritually and mentally.

And now "We" have no voices being heard in so many different ways, physically and lyrically.

But for those that are quiet, does silence start a riot, if you're really not hearing "We"? Or have "We" ever been heard?

When therefore a word like H.O.P.E. is less, but should be more than just absurd.

"Sense" messages, have been expressed thru writings and drawings on walls and pages with many words and signs.

So, this is my message of H.O.P.E. and me Helping Oppressed People Elevate thru opening their MINDS;

For awakening hope, is hopes of understanding different places thru [their] times; Therefore, constant elevation parallels Knowledge is Power to those who are inclined;

So, this is for, whoever H.O.P.E. more, and shies less—
THRU OUR BLACKNESS; . . . "WE" THE PEOPLE . . .

ABOLITION SONG

*A Song Recorded by Jailed Artists in the Humanities Behind Bars Music Program,
Facilitated and Produced by Kole Matheson*

Speaker 1: Lo

Why be silenced,
Liked behind iron
Or discover triumph
without tryin'
We are labeled,
Everyone is violent.
But that isn't true.
Statistics are lyin'.
If there wasn't a jail to fit a brotha in
There wouldn't be money to fund another pen
Or a common web to give a court conviction
We need more treatments and support systems
Stimulus bills can pave the way for access.
N.A. courses, A.A. classes.
To show initiative,
Boy, it takes practice
To enjoy every nation, especially our blackness.
You could love self but that would be selfish.
The Lord loves us all and showed us to be selfless.
You can show love and gain what respect is
Or you could help no one and continue to be helpless.

Speaker 2: The Boi Snique

I'm not a slave to the system because the system enslaved
Even though I came out unscathed, numerous ways
'Cause the things that I used to get paid was foolishly praised
And the money that I spent was negligent and in vain.
Those things came to pass quickly,
Just like no contact, doin' my bid
With old friends sayin' they miss me
They kept it moving' sayin' they won't forget me

But out of sight, out of mind, out of spite, out of time
And then it hit me
'Bout ten years later I'm back
new and improved
Fresh man but still in the groove
Still wouldn't loose
Played tough like leather straps
But in reality, I was down to be
Assed out like leather chaps.
But try to make it a slow-mo
Jumped back in the game
From hunger pains, movin' dolo
Told myself I could make it on slow-mo
But then I turned up,
Still got to pause for a second, just to learn but
We all here caught in a rut
But we gotta make life what we want
Yeah

Speaker 3: Hakim

This world's out to condemn us
To translate, Judas. Lost without the cure
Consumed by the sickness
Take up your cross, salute the boss
Jesus Christ the righteous
Who died on Calvary, to set us free
From the bondage to the enemy
Evidently
The Passion of Christ is worth more money than Monopoly.
Time to suit up, boot up,
Represent God's property.
Heaven-bound, who's stoppin' me?
Cut out all the mockery.
What's the remedy?
This world's lost pathetically. Need Jesus medically.
His grace and mercy is nobility.
The true reality
Let it sink in, get the picture, put faith in scripture
Immanuel is the absolute fixture.

Satan's out to trick ya
Don't let him be a winner
Jesus Christ said I'll always be around like the spinners

Speaker 4: Johnny Dance

In the coldest day and the darkest night,
A foolish addict refuses to fight
For in his fight he reaches his flight
And recovery turns his darkness to light
Aha, aha, prison
Prison, our prison
You have my body but not my mind
I didn't choose to come here,
I was taken by force
Not by choice.
One day soon this nightmare will be over
Where I will end
Will allow me to blend
Near my friend and all my kin
We'll all stay awake, what can I say?
There is no future
Or life
With all this strife
And death of the mind and the soul
Of my friends
And my kids
Don't bend to this system.
Lend a hand and stay away
From this land, of the free,
Called America
Where the innocent are victimized and ostracized
Because of the color of their skin.
We are all victims by him who make money
Off our bondage
In the name of the law
Freedom means being free,
Not dumb
Stay away from this trap.

Speaker 5: Anonymous

God will handle me and help me embrace all my brokenness
God will guide me with strength and rescue me with his grace
Encourage me with faith and give me hope for the future
God will lead me in prayer and be with me in Spirit
Set me free from the slavery of sin
As long as I'm alive in God
Shout from the rooftops that Jesus is Lord
And fill myself up with the Holy Spirit
The power that I starve for is righteousness within me
This is why I must love God
With all my heart, soul, mind, and strength
And in truth I'll be on my way to be set free
And filled with the word God has given me
The Lord promise me that he will forgive me for all my wrongs.

You can listen to the full recording of this piece via SoundCloud here:



::: ABOUT THIS ZINE :::

Contraband Love is an inside/outside collaboration of Humanities Behind Bars (HBB), featuring the creative & critical work of people impacted and outraged by incarceration in the United States.

We are incredibly grateful for the outpouring of submissions and support from our extensive pen-pal network in Virginia and beyond, as well as HBB students at Norfolk City Jail. Thank you to our currently and formerly incarcerated contributors and comrades as well as folks writing and organizing in solidarity with them.

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Kendrick McCray, Dr. Alison Reed, and Derek 'DJ' James / Photo by Ericka Smith

Our Mission

In 2016, Dr. Meghan McDowell and Dr. Alison Reed, both professors at Old Dominion University, co-founded Humanities Behind Bars after facilitating a weekly reading group at Norfolk City Jail. As they established this community partnership and educational ties between the university and jail, the Humanities Behind Bars (HBB) program grew into a grassroots collective of teachers, students, activists, and artists committed to imagining a just world. Our work is rooted in community-based education and organizing that centers formerly and currently incarcerated people and their loved ones. HBB also draws inspiration from inside/outside programs centered on the creative and critical power of artists and activists impacted by incarceration, such as “Humanities Behind the Walls” at Arizona State University/Perryville Women’s Prison (with which Dr. McDowell was previously involved) and considers this model one of many in its abolitionist genealogy. Our volunteers are dedicated to serving the professional goals of students on the inside while developing transformative pedagogies that inspire healing and holistic visions of social life.

What We Do

In addition to teaching and learning with students at Norfolk City Jail, Humanities Behind Bars hosts letter-writing hours in order to build solidarity with incarcerated writers across the state of Virginia. We also facilitate critical spaces in the Tidewater community, such as a reading and film series for collective study and critique of the Prison Industrial Complex. Our political education program thus models our commitment to cultivating inside/outside alliances and abolitionist praxis.

HBB hosts regular book drives to expand the Norfolk City Jail Library. HBB also collaborates with local organizations on publications featuring the work of Seven Cities currently and formerly incarcerated writers and artists.

The HBB Music Program, facilitated by Kole Matheson, provides a platform for incarcerated artists to showcase their original lyrics and sounds.

Moreover, we co-organize a legal defense and bond fund: HBB works alongside the Tidewater Solidarity Center, a coalition of organizations, communities, and individuals committed to radical solidarity with incarcerated workers and activists. They support currently incarcerated people with access to funds that reduce the harm of state power (e.g. surveillance, detainment, and incarceration) through practical means such as pre-trial bonds/bail and legal representation. If you would like more information or would like to donate, please go to:

<https://tidewatersolidaritycenter.wordpress.com>

Please visit paypal.me/HumanitiesBehindBars to support our work building networks of care with currently and formerly incarcerated comrades. Your donation helps us cover the costs of books, legal fees, hygiene supplies, and more!



How to Contact Humanities Behind Bars

If you are interested in joining our cause, we'd love to have you become a part of our mission! Join our email list so that you can get regular updates on our projects!

Director – Dr. Alison Reed

Graduate Research Assistant – Meghan Morris

Student Justice Coordinator – Danielle Goldstein

Treasurer – Casey Guditus

Music Director – Kole Matheson

Resident Poet & Artist – Derek “DJ” James



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