**behind the walls of oppression: why incarcerated black lives matter**

**By Sun-Ra**

**Introduction**

This is the first essay in a series of prisoner writings entitled *Prisoner-Led Dialogue: On the Necessity of Destroying the Prison and the Miserable World that Thrives Upon It*. Prisoner writings such as these will be shared not only with anarchists, activists, and prison destructionists of all stripes throughout the Midwest, but also (and especially) among incarcerated people across the same region—and beyond. Functioning as a platform that can center radical voices from *inside* prison walls, the series intends to spark a dialogue *between* prisoners. It’s not often that folks who are being held hostage inside cages are found leading the critical and strategic discussions about insurrection, about the destruction of prison society, about how we’re going to take our lives back. This series is an attempt to change that.

Sun Ra has been held captive by the state for 18 years. He has existed under systems of racial and social control his whole life. He is currently being held in a maximum security penitentiary in Southern Illinois. Philosophically, Sun Ra identifies with Pan Africanism, Black Liberation Struggle, Black Autonomy/Communalism, and Anarchism. In his words:

I desire a world where a new humanity, and a new community can develop, a world where all life can flourish, a world without superiority complexes, a world without artificial scarcity, a world without ecological destruction and exploitation, a world without deaths from curable disease, a world without “pies in the sky,” a world without militaries and weapons of mass destruction, a world without the IMF and World Bank; in short—a world without destroyers.

Spiritually, Sun Ra embraces what he calls “Sankofa Soulism” as a process of healing a black (African) amnesia that traces back to well before the Transatlantic Slave Trade:

*Sankofa is the Remembrance—named after a bird in Africa that walks forward while looking backward. Sankofa is an African word that means “go back and fetch it”: one’s history, historical consciousness (memory), and identity. Sankofa is an Ancestral Mandate—the symbol of the Sankofa bird was found on unearthed coffins of African captives (slaves)—a reminder that people without origins (roots) are dead. In the context of Black Liberation Struggle in Amerikkka, it is imperative that we know and understand our past in order to move forward—toward freedom.*

*Sanfoka Soulism is, then, Black ontology—a rebirth, an awakening, a resurrection, as a result of illumination and deep knowledge of self. It has always been a heightened level of spiritual self-consciousness (profoundly expanded awareness achieved by a true education) that has given birth to revolutionaries. Sankofa Soulism encompasses a process of decolonizing the mind from an African-centered perspective—the 1st revolution.*

Some of us who have been in contact with Sun Ra have shared his writings among ourselves, on the radio (community and pirated), and as reading assignments in college classrooms. Now, a few of us are sharing his words with a large number of inmates throughout the Midwest.

In his open letter below, Sun Ra is directly addressing potential (and existing) black rebels within the prison system—in other words; “new Nat Turners” whom the status quo cannot permit to become spiritually and politically conscious. Sun Ra’s will be the opening remarks in this prisoner-led dialogue on prison demolition. To suggest that Sun Ra is uniquely fitted to begin this discussion would be a profound understatement. Why is that? —As an end to this brief introduction, let us illustrate our point by another quotation from our author:

I liken myself to an “arsonist.” I toss mental embers to the wind, under the concept of “each one, teach one”—with the aim of setting raging wildfires against these global grand dragons and their systems of global domination and rapaciousness.

I’ve allowed myself to be seduced by the truth and beauty of another “arsonist.” Her beauty appears to have indigenous curves and contours, as well. It’s a real love affair. Politically and socially, we are in the same prison, and have a common enemy. So, she has assisted in keeping a kindle to the fire that burns deep within. Our hatred burns equally for our enemies’ megalomaniacal world. But our love for the new community—the community of life—is even deeper. We are comrades. They call her Anarchism…

My message is a call to revolt.

*Unconnected consciousness is destruction’s keenest*

*tool against the soul. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

Behind the Walls of Oppression:

Why Incarcerated Black Lives Matter

radical flames of truth from the cages of a social system of racial control whose chains have for too long robbed prison-captives of our freedom, our humanity, our time, and our innate right to self-determination––INCARCERATED BLACK LIVES MATTER! We matter because we are inherently linked to the revolutionary struggle of the Black Lives Matter Movement. There are approximately one million Black Brothers & Sisters locked down and repressed inside cages throughout America’s prison camps and jails just like you. Black people only account for 12% of the entire U.S. population, but yet a disproportionate 50% of the bodies that occupy the cells in America’s prison system are also black like yours. This is not by fate or chance, or by a criminal gene in Black people, but by deliberate design. It is the direct result of a historical continuum––***a genocidal process*** that Black folks have been resisting in many strategic forms ever since the first Afrikan was captured (kidnapped), put in chains, put on a slave ship, and enslaved at the barrel of a gun in America 400 years ago. And today the saga of our resistance continues.

The Black Lives Matter Movement is built on the righteous indignation over the unjust criminalization and systemic murder of Black people at the hands of a racist Police State spread across America. Our communities are under direct occupation of a militarized, colonial police force. The uprising of the BLM movement is a beautiful act of resistance to the racial oppression and destruction of black bodies, and as such it is also an indictment of the world, an indictment against the Amerikkkan social system and our place at the bottom of it. As you sit in a cage for the benefit of White domination and exploitation––at the expense of Black subordination––the racist colonial armed forces (police) murder us with impunity: every 28 hours a Black person is murdered by the police. This People’s Movement (BLM) that is fearlessly confronting State sanctioned violence is imbued with a profound perception that in America Black Lives don’t matter; that is, black bodies have no social value to the society at large other than to be exploited according to the interests and necessities of the American state and capitalism. In a technologically advanced White Supremacist America, Black people have become a superfluous population––that is, We are obsolete. President Obama even devalued the Black youth who amplified their outrage in Baltimore over the murder of Freddie Gray by the police––labeling them as “thugs.”

To set fire to our Black Consciousness, we have to get at the root of the devaluation/dehumanization of Black life by the White power structure in this country––we have to put this *process* in its historical context. When the late John Henrik Clarke stated:

*History is never old, everything that ever happened continues to happen*

He was speaking essentially of *process*. At the root of this process––the devaluation/dehumanization of Black life––lies what is known in history as the “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.” This process of enterprise laid bare the criminalization of the elite white male mindset (capitalism). Therefore, a rationale was needed in order to indoctrinate and hence “justify” this crime against Black (Afrikan) humanity (“justifiable homicide”) to the European, White World. Enter the Catholic Church. This powerful, woman-hating, patriarchal institution provided the “justification” for white male criminality and destruction (genocide) by deeming our Afrikan ancestors “lesser beings,” who had “no souls.” Therefore, the ideology of Black (Afrikan) dehumanization and racism was constructed and programmed into the European/White world in order to rationalize the enslavement and captivity of our Ancestors. That is, in order to “save” them––a *process* of “salvation” that destroyed 60 to 100 million black bodies—all in the name of “Jesus.” There never was a separation of church and State within the colonial process: the black-body snatchers had a bible in one hand and a gun in the other.

Being classified as “sub-human” at the very foundation of this nation-state—for the sake of profit and production, for the sake of soothing the white conscience, for the sake of one the greatest crimes against humanity in the history of the world—is the bloody root, the bloody truth, of the devaluation and dehumanization of the black people in this racist pigmentocracy of America: white over all people of color.

Police terror and containment, lynching, and the mass incarceration of black bodies in America is *of* the same tree—the strange fruit—the same bloody root. The racist and oppressive face of the police in our communities has its origins in the slave patrollers of yesterday. These were gangs of poor white men commissioned by the slave owning class in order to control the movement and conduct of black captive bodies at night. Rounds were made, entering and searching cabins to ensure that black captive bodies were in “their place.” Captives caught outside after dark without his/her “pass,” or “walking papers,” were in extreme danger of black bodily harm. Slave patrollers were also commissioned to hunt down insurgent and rebellious slaves who rose up with a clinched black fist to strike a blow at their oppressors, as well as the countless slaves who chose to resist by way of becoming a new Afrikan Outlaw—that is, by escape!

These new Afrikan Outlaws were tracked down by black-body bounty hunters as a result of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (and were, of course, hunted prior to this law). Imagine (*remember?*) an eyewitness account provided by the escaped outlaw, rebel-abolitionist Harriet Ann Jacobs as she highlights the brutal conditions that people endured during the time of Nat Turner’s insurrection (1831):

*It was a grand opportunity for the low [poor] whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to experience a little brief authority and show their subservience to the slave holders…At night, they formed themselves into patrol bands, and went wherever they chose among the colored people, acting out their brutal will. Many women hid themselves in the woods and swamps, to keep out of their way. If any of the husbands or fathers were told of these outrages [rapes], they were tied up to the public whipping post, and cruelly scourged for telling lies about white men.*

The next day this process of brutalization and dehumanization continued:

*The town patrols were commissioned too search colored people that lived outside of the city [“stop and frisk”], and the most shocking outrages were committed with perfect impunity. Every day for a fortnight, if I looked out, I saw horseman with some poor panting negro tied to their saddles, compelled by the lash to keep up with their speed, till they arrived at the jail yard. Those who had been whipped too unmercifully to walk were washed with brine, tossed into a cart, and carried to jail.*

The Fugitive Slave Law facilitated the capture of Harriet’s Outlaw, rebel brother Benjamin who had escaped after resisting a beating from his master.

*Benjamin had been imprisoned 3 weeks when my grandmother went to intercede for him with his master. He was immovable. He said Benjamin should serve as an example to the rest of his slaves; he should be kept in jail till he was subdued, or be sold if he got but one dollar for him. However, he afterwards relented in some degree. The chains were taken off, and we were allowed to visit him…Three months elapsed…One day he was heard to sing and laugh. This piece of indecorum was told to his master, and the overseer was ordered to re-chain him.*

The more oppression (Black dehumanization) changes, the more it stays the same––that is, the more “progress” we make, the more oppression refines itself and hides its destructive face. Dehumanizing processes such as these––the slave patrollers, the fugitive black-body hunters, the KKK, the lynchings, the racist local sheriffs of the Reconstruction betrayal, and the Jim Crow era––are the historical roots of the colonial occupation patrolling our communities, i.e. colonies, today––and they still kill us with “perfect impunity!” It’s *not* about “Black on Black crime,” it’s about the root cause of “Black on Black crime”; it’s *not* about “crime & punishment,” it’s about the main function of the police occupation of our communities being about the exercise of racial control; it’s *not* about “Serving and Protecting” the community, it’s about serving and protecting the existing social order—i.e. White male domination and Black subordination: patrolling for the new Nat Turners.

The mass incarceration of Black people was also set in motion during this Black genocidal period and thus institutionalized with the passage of the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution, which abolished one form of enslavement “except” as a punishment for crime:

*Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.*

Through the exception clause, one part of the old slave system re-formed into a new one––the prison industrial slave complex. Which means that as a prisoner (inmate) you are by law a slave (captive) of the State. The prison system also functions as a concentration camp––a technique of social control for an unwanted people who have been deemed obsolete and *dangerous* (from a fear of insurrection). Instead of mass extermination, political prisoners of war are silenced inside isolation torture-chambers and a phony “War on Drugs” is waged to put the rest of us unconscious rebels in cages under harsh conditions and longer sentences.

The last point on why Incarcerated Black Lives Matter is rooted in the devastating impact that the prison industrial slave complex is having on the Black family unit and wellbeing––and in extension Black *community* well-being. Young Black minds are being systematically destroyed (menticide)––scientifically maneuvered into a “criminal mindset.” You are not solely responsible for the predicament you find yourself in, in your prison cage, you didn’t build the prison you’re held hostage in; you didn’t create the ghetto with those invisible bars you were born in. Your “crimes” are born of the greater crime, White Society––you are only a microcosmic reflection of that. You were mentally murdered before you had a chance to grow, and you have been brainwashed to more likely go to a prison camp than to a college camp. There are 20,000 more Black males in Illinois prison camps than enrolled in the state’s public universities. The system engineered this: a social death—a design created to erect real social obstacles before Black males in order to prevent us from assuming our responsibilities to our families, our communities, and ourselves. The murder of Black persons (male or female) in the street by the racist armed forces (police), the social murder of a race (group) of people via criminalization, and the social murder of a Black person in the court room––is still a lynching by any other name.

Donald Trump––a racist con artist––attained power on the rising tides of Ethno (White) Nationalism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and of course ignorance. Donald Trump is filling his cabinet with White billionaires and bonafide racists and is thus setting the stage for and institutionalizing a fascist plutocracy; power magnifies the ideas of those who hold them. The fascist agenda for Black people is coded in the language of oppression––“law and order.” These are racist code words for the War that Donald Trump intends to wage against the Black community. Code words such as “stop and frisk,” “crime and violence,” and the vow by Trump to “dismantle the gangs” speaks to the *racist process* that will be utilized for the control, criminalization, surveillance, repression, and suppression of Black people in the inner cities. In a technologically advanced plutocracy, the masses of Black folk do not contribute to wealth protection or accumulation, so under the new fascist plutocratic regime Black obsolescence will be *dealt* *with*––the pendulum swing of oppression and demonization will be turned up. Black people, along with other oppressed groups, are at war, and self defense is a must! So, hell yeah Incarcerated Black Lives Matter––because duty calls us to the frontlines of resistance!

The B.L.M. Movement is out there in it! Where you at? Are you going to continue in your oppressor’s program? Are you to continue to be a slave behind these prison walls and barbed wired fences–––playing the sidelines––participating in your own oppression? Or, will you move to educate, to liberate––break out of the prison bars of your minds? It’s time to rattle these cages; it’s time we return to our communities and apply our organizational and intellectual talents to the People’s Army and put in the necessary work toward breaking the chains that are destroying our peoplehood, our humanity. If not now––when? Obama called the People who rose in Baltimore “thugs,” but we will build on the jewel that Martin Luther King Jr. left us from the gem of his mind:

*True equality, it said, will be resisted to the death. The so-called riots in a distorted and hysterical form were a* [*Black*] *response that said “inequality will now be resisted to the death*.*”*

Inequality (oppression) is still the order of the day. Black, Brown, and Red (indigenous/Native) and White radical people are on the move toward a protracted resistance against these oppressive, dehumanizing processes and systems that thrive off death and destruction. It’s time we move to de-program ourselves, decolonize (free) our minds and get with the People’s Program of Freedom and Resistance. It’s time to make way for the war path––our true responsibility. Or maybe you’re content with your Black body being used (exploited)––bid after bid––for the rest of your life as fuel for the racist concentration slave camps??? I leave you with the words of Outlaw Rebel Harriet Ann Jacobs as fire for your brain:

*“He that is willing to be a slave, let him be a slave.”*

Being classified as “sub-human” at the very foundation of this nation-state—for the sake of profit and production, for the sake of soothing the white conscience, for the sake of one the greatest crimes against humanity in the history of the world—is the bloody root, the bloody truth, of the devaluation and dehumanization of the black people in this racist pigmentocracy of America: white over all people of color.

Police terror and containment, lynching, and the mass incarceration of black bodies in America is *of* the same tree—the strange fruit—the same bloody root.

1. A pertinent quote from Ayi Kwei Armah, quoted by Sun Ra in a previous writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)