

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

Viviane Saleh-Hanna and Ashanti Omowali Alston

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

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

But walls are not sufficient to hide the obvious. Even a superficial glimpse at the US penal system reveals the horrors: there are more than 5 times as many black people in prison (per capita) in the US today than there were in South Africa at the end of Apartheid (Gottschalk, 2006). The majority of black college age men are in prison, while the majority of white college age men in the US are exactly where they should be—in college. More horrifically, “Black men ages twenty-five to twenty-nine are 7.6 times more likely to be in prison than White men of the same age group... . African Americans are 6.8 times as likely as Whites to be murdered, twice as likely to be robbed, and 2.1 times as likely to be raped or sexually assaulted” (Banks,

Eberhardt and Ross, 1177, 2006). In addition, black people continue to earn less than white people in this so-called ‘free’ market corporate economy. “A generation after the civil rights movement, African Americans remain segregated, and disadvantaged related to Whites with respect to employment, earnings and assets, educational achievement and attainment, and health and longevity” (ibid, 1184). All the things that the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army fought for have yet to be attained and established. And while the black community continues to struggle in this racist nation, black revolutionaries and freedom fighters continue to be held in prison or are in exile. Why? Because they fought back and refused to accept a life that was full of bloodshed, racist oppression and exploitation.

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

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

Political prisoners hold not only dreams but also deep secrets that we all know but do not want to embrace because of the responsibilities that come with consciousness. In this special issue of the JPP we record these ‘secrets’ and make them available to generations of people so that they may

know of the sacrifices still being made. Racism is not 'history'. Racism is what defines our lives in this US version of democracy: "Democracy is Demonstration of CRAZY" says Fela in his song *Teacher Don't Teach Me No Nonsense*. Fela, divine, sacred revolutionary Nigerian musician condemned euro-supremacist forms of governance. He understood that European Democracy does not serve Africans. The very existence of black political prisoners who are former members of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army re-enforces his understanding, and teaches us that Africans and people of African descent continue to be enslaved and colonized by European institutions, policies, prisons and economies.

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

In the 1960s, murderous US government intelligence forces, police forces and corporate backroom puppeteers (including their media) conspired to attack and dismantle the Black Panther Party. They didn't just assassinate Fred Hampton. They attempted to assassinate the image of a slave escaping from the plantation. Chances are that that slave, as Eldridge Cleaver told it, was running towards the end of the rainbow collecting knowledge, wisdom and a community of like-minded souls who were increasingly being convinced of the rightness of their humanity and of their desire for freedom and dignity. These forces assassinate and imprison; they pull strings that cause the loss of jobs and loss of homes, and they keep on discouraging the slaves from running away. They do this to maintain these conditions; to ensure that other slaves watching are scared. And yes, many are scared,

but we believe they are also hopeful. We want to be free, we must never forget that *we can* be free. And in attaining that freedom, we must keep on fighting. And we must emancipate ourselves from mental slavery and rid ourselves of our fears: fear of freedom, fear of our oppressors, fear of ourselves, and fear of our neighbors.

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

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

For black people in the 1960s, **Freedom Now** meant equality of law, opportunity, and access to effective mechanisms of social, political and economic power. The murders of Emmitt Till, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X, the fleeing of Robert Williams and the murder of the Prince of Peace, Martin Luther King Jr. were all breaking points for the black community. And before, in-between and after, there were countless little known and

unknown dreamers and allies murdered in body or in spirit. The Black Revolution in the US was necessary in the 1960s, just as is necessary today.

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

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

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

Who would believe these conditions in the United States—in the land of Democracy, of Opportunity, of Milk and Honey for all who can make it here, says the Statute of Liberty. In the 1960s, to declare it all propaganda was unbelievable, unimaginable and mostly, **not safe**. Yet the possibilities inspired. The international arena of revolutionary struggles provided exemplary evidence. Africans were fighting to end colonialism in Africa and we were fighting to end the internal colonies known as Black America.

We believed we *could* create a new kind of freedom as we banded together and made it through the Horrors unleashed upon us for our resistance efforts. Today, we *must* acknowledge that the horror and violence waged upon the black revolution has not left us.

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

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

J. Hoover Edgar, of FBI fascist infamy, was an extremist “pig”, yes. But

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

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

COINTELPRO changed the political environment. It changed how people perceived those individuals who fought for change. Police agents infiltrated the Panther Party and caused the leadership to abandon the struggle. We were placed in jail. We had to fight constantly to raise bail. Once the atmosphere changed, the support

that had been there initially disappeared. When I was finally convicted, there was nobody in court but the police, district attorneys, and the prosecutors. They were successful because there was no one in court for me. They believed the hype.

Dhoruba Bin-Wahad, 1996

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

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

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

In this issue we are also pleased to include those who represent the forces of martyred revolutionary, radical intellectual and Black Panther Party Field Marshal George Jackson. His impact on both the revolutionary struggles within the prisons and on the streets during the 1960’s and 1970’s (and to this day) provide us continuing strength. Also, we hear the voices of Hugo Pinell and Ruchell Magee, both of whom have been imprisoned for over 40

years. The current Political Prisoners, Robert “Seth” Hayes, Jalil Muntaqim, Sundiata Acoli and Veronza Bowers, like other Political Prisoners, continue to be victim to US Patriot Parole Boards that repeatedly deny them release. All have been imprisoned for over 30 years. Veronza Bowers in particular merits special mention as the sign of the times in what Dhoruba Bin-Wahad called “Democratic Fascism”. Veneer off, iron-fist refusal to release a prisoner who has technically “served” his total sentence, with the Federal Bureau of Prisons exercising its power to refuse release! This is now Year Two of an ILLEGAL holding of a free man! But what rights do we have that they are bound to respect when they make and break their own laws?

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

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

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

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