

Essays from the Incarcerated

Reflections on mass
incarceration, Covid-19,
and rebellion against
police brutality

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CW: images of violence, descriptions of torture

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Using Protests As Arenas For Dialogue For The Emergence of Critical Consciousness

by Lacino Hamilton

The past 2 decades I have self-studied and prepared for human crises such as America is confronted with right now. Studied and prepared to participate in (1) fostering a broad and continuing dialogue to find more effective ways to challenge oppressive systems and promote social justice through education; (2) nudge the government and communities to respond differently to interpersonal harms/crimes; and (3) develop alternatives to existing public safety policies. And I am sidelined in prison. It is demoralizing.

There needs to be some immediate radical steps toward structural reform in order to demonstrate good faith efforts on the part of government. But those steps must be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of community agency and community capacities for working collaboratively with all stakeholders, e.g., activists, academics, and the grassroots, not a top-down approach.

Mayors, police chiefs, and politicians are saying all the right things when they are in front of a camera or microphone, but show no signs of reforming the root problem, lopsided power dynamics: the powerful ruling alliances between a few very large corporations and a class of mostly wealthy politicians, with hazy and ever shifting lines between the two groups.

Indeed, anyone in a position of power seems incapable or uninterested in talking about existing power dynamics. That is,

how the state began to define itself as the legitimate negotiator for resolving conflicts, crimes, and harms, and how the array of state-acceptable responses to them came to be treated as property, real estate that the state appropriated for itself.

There is nothing natural about the way police have an ever growing presence in our lives, some more than others. Little by little the community's communal competencies (the commons) to behave as relatives and neighbors when someone is in need, whether from harm-done or otherwise, was encroached upon with guns and muscle (the state), and forced to give up its share in taking care of itself.

In face of social problems, and it must be understood that all problems that affect human beings are social in nature, families and communities have been forced to rely on the competencies of an increasingly militarized police force, whose credentials have been certified by the state. Hence, families and communities in so many areas and venues have become increasingly like passive observers of what goes on in their own homes and neighborhoods. That is what protesters are saying needs to be reformed--families and communities should have a larger role, if not the determining role, in public policy suggestions, public policy making, and mechanisms to carry out public policies.

Mayors, police, and politicians seem to be saying just the opposite. That is, despite a lot of window dressing with public statements and half-measures which do not cost them much and appear to be designed to pacify protesters, America would be wise to ask why the people and groups that scream the loudest about government intrusion and overreach are now the loudest voices

proclaiming police, courts and prisons should never have decreased power or presence in our lives?

Furthermore, America would be wise to ask why those who disproportionately wield power are essentially saying that the alienating and disempowering effects of imposed, aggressive, warlike retributive conflict resolution practices should remain, just in a less odious form? No one who lives in America can any longer feel, if they ever did, that they should have to prove themselves "worthy" in order to gain human rights. Not civil rights, not even those rights guaranteed by the American Constitution, but rights as a human beings.

When it is asked why after NASCAR banned the Confederate flag at all its events, why after the NFL commissioner admitting he was wrong, why after dozens of corporations released public statements proclaiming their commitment to racial equality, and the pledging of hundreds of millions of dollars to social justice issues, why thousands of people continue to protest--and not in the nonviolent way of the earlier Civil Rights Movement--they betray their own alienation from the oppressed masses they espouse.

The fact that protests have continued after these symbolic gestures, and anything that does not begin to dismantle the disproportionate balance of power in this country needs to be understood as symbolic, is proof positive many people have begun to visualize a more people centered society. Those who see no way forward submit to their fate; it is those who see possibility for better who struggle to reach it.

Protests grew out of a desire on the part of families and communities interested in helping the human community regain its human dimensions, its relative status, specifically its problems solving competencies, and to regain the processes that foster both personal and collective development.

I have been asked what is the first radical immediate step toward structural reform? There is no one first step, there are many. One of those many is to stop defining social structural policing problems as personal failures and individual inadequacies rather than a matter of public policy. When far too many people experience similar police sponsored surveillance, harassment, abuse, and violence, officers caught on tape acting like the streets of America in a hot war zone can no longer be defined as bad apples, but constitute a social structural problem.

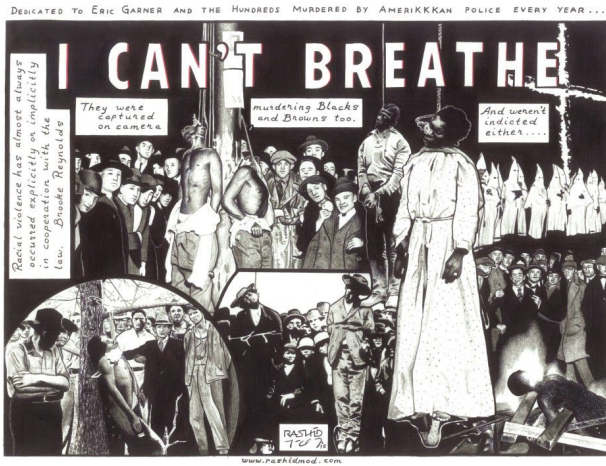
This means that while holding individuals accountable for their actions is always necessary, and always should be, accountability also means groups and institutions responsible for the relational contexts within which people make their choices to harm others, must be held accountable also.

This shared accountability provides important context for increased dialogue on the priority of stakeholders from all sectors of society, and particularly the oppressed black masses, to become involved in political discussions and the taboo work of challenging capitalism and social-structural violence. Doing so will enable America to overcome the contradiction between helping people adjust to the status quo of structural injustice, of which racism, classism, and gender inequality are major themes, and the human rights imperative to confront injustice and oppression.

History of recent revolutions reveal that fundamental reforms toward structurally just societies are unlikely to come about through protest and demonstrations alone. Rather, such change seems to require lengthy processes aimed at overcoming forces that maintain and reproduce established, unjust, and oppressive societies and cultures.

Accordingly, protesters pursuit of structural change ought to begin/continue devising and implementing strategies aimed at facilitating the emergence and spreading of status quo challenging critical consciousness that could gradually induce appropriate changes in people's actions, interactions, and social relations, and in the resulting institutional systems of America.

We Can't Breathe: On the Lynching of George Floyd



By Kevin “Rashid” Johnson

On May 24, 2020, a crowd of onlookers witnessed the slow death by asphyxiation of a handcuffed Black man in Minneapolis. This was a public lynching.

Only, unlike in times past, this crowd didn't cheer, but instead pleaded over and over for the cop who murdered George Floyd, to let him breathe; to take his knee off his neck and let him up. Several times onlookers tried to physically intervene, only to be themselves threatened with pig violence.

Also, unlike days of old, this murder was filmed for the world to also witness. And Minneapolis exploded! Thousands poured into the streets in protest.

Until just a few years ago, the world and Amerika at large denied that Black and Brown people in Amerika were routinely murdered by the cops.

The advent of cellphone technology and social media enabled everyday people to force a world in denial to bear witness to the reality of our lives under racist imperialist occupation. Proportionally, more of us are murdered today by cops than were killed by lynch mobs during the Jim Crow era. And just like during Jim Crow, our killers are protected by a system that closes ranks to villainize the victims and portray our abusers as well-intended arbiters of justice. They've even crafted language to recast these killings as benign and something other than murder. Instead of calling it what it is, they've coined the euphemism, "police involved shootings."

What they are is a continuation of lynching. The cops have always participated in this sort of violence. They've never been a source of service or protection in our communities.

Black and Brown people have always been corralled into marginalized spaces of American society where we've lived a suffocated existence. We were suffocated to death by everyday Americans at the instigation and participation of their elites, political leaders and often the cops, when we were hung from trees.

The lynching by suffocation of George Floyd, like that of Eric Garner in 2014, as they protested over and over "I can't breathe!", is but a continuation of the same in a racist capitalist society that must be fundamentally overturned. We'll never be able to breathe free until it is!

Dare to Struggle Dare to Win!
All Power to the People!

As I Wake Up

By Stacey Dyer

As I wake up on a normal prison day, the first thing I usually see is bricks. The concrete is a cold reminder of what my reality is and has been for the past 18 years, and will continue to be for God knows how long. My name is Stacey Dyer, and I am serving a sentence of life without parole in the largest women's prison in the world.

If you've never seen the inside of a prison, the best way I can describe it is blue and grey. From the concrete floors and walls to the bricks and metal bunks and lockers... it's all cold and grey. Everywhere you go in a prison, you end up standing in a line. On the way to chow, you see a long stream of blue, many inmates lined up in their state issued clothing- all blue. Many times I look up to the blue sky to see outside of prison. I tell myself I can leave anytime I want if I just look up past the razor wires. Still, it's a lot of blue and grey, two of the saddest colors that reflect the sadness in the next inmates eyes. We crave to see color in here. If a nurse or counselor wears a colorful outfit, our eyes tend to zoom in on it to enjoy the colors for a moment. One thing about Chowchilla, it has the most beautiful skies. When we were free, we may not have paid much attention to the sky. Today I've learned to ignore the razor wire and focus on the skies. I've learned to look away from the bricks as I wake up and focus on the collage of photos of my family and loved ones I have taped up under the bunks above me. I sometimes lay here and imagine being in those photos with them. My daily attitude depends on

what I choose to focus on, so I focus on what I have instead of what I don't have.

My prison cell has four double bunks and holds up to eight women in one cell. We have a shower, toilet, and two sinks in the cell that we share. The shower has a door on it with a large space at the top and bottom of the door, only to cover the mid section. The bathroom door is the same. Just as there are eight beds, there are eight metal lockers about six feet tall. All this in one cell makes it a tight squeeze.

This prison is made up of "fours." There are four yards with four units on each yard. Each unit has four wings with four rooms on each side of the wing. This prison is built to house over 4,000 women. We are no longer overpopulated, as we once were housing almost 5,000 women, with bunks in the day rooms and gym.

Being a LWOP is really hard in this place. I have to choose if I want to be hopeful and positive or condemned and negative. I've decided that anything is possible if I believe in it. Believe it or not, it is actually harder to be hopeful. It's easier to go with the negative flow of the prison. You get more respect and leniency when you are destructive. No one wants to see you do the right thing or change for the better because that means you will be rising above them or leaving "the scene." People become jealous when you do good things. The resistance is hard and the journey is tough, but it makes me tougher in the end.

It's hard to watch people who are not doing much time, take their freedom and life for granted. I've experienced people who have mocked me and rubbed it in my face that I would die here and never go home. I have watched the same people parole and come right back to prison numerous times. They hate the shame of facing me when they come back, still I lend a helping

hand and try to guide them in the right direction so they don't keep coming back. I don't understand how people don't learn from their own mistakes. I've done my best to learn from mine.

The hardest part about being a LWOP is watching my family suffer, especially my children. My children were small toddlers when I came to prison and are now young adults that I watched grow up through pictures and a visiting room. They suffered the most, with feelings of abandonment, depression, anger, and frustration of not having a "normal" life with their mother. The best I can do for them is show them I've changed and do everything possible to go home to them. I tell them it's not their fault and that I love them as much as possible. I have to say they are really smart, brilliant, creative, determined, and inspiring young adults, despite what they have endured. I have been one of the lucky ones whose family has continued to believe in me no matter how many years go by. They give me encouragement and motivation to never quit.

For anyone who is listening, I would like to share with you what has kept me strong in here for the past 18 years. No matter where you are, in a concrete prison or a personal prison in the free world, I believe the driving force to resilience is gratitude. Gratitude has changed my entire perspective of life and gives me the ability to see the good in everyone and everything. Don't wait until it's too late to appreciate the small things. Take your time to enjoy everything you have and do. Stop to smell the roses. Once you haven't seen the beautiful colors of a single flower in many years, you will miss it. Enjoy the night stars and the sunrise. Enjoy the smells of restaurant food and perfumes. Enjoy the sound of cars honking, children laughing or waves crashing. Enjoy pets, open doors, and the ability to have privacy when you need it the most. Wave or smile at your neighbors, give others

the right of way on the road and feel the breeze that kisses your skin on a beautiful day. Most of all be forgiving of those you love and hug them every chance you get because you never know what's in the cards for any of you. Be grateful for the little you have, because it is much more than what someone else has. Be grateful and take the time for the little things, because you never know how huge those little things are until you no longer have them

Peter "Pitt" Mukuria



