

We Free Political Prisoners to Free Ourselves

by Matt Meyer

A version of this talk was presented to a Scientific Soul Sessions/Urban Art Beat/Next Youth Coalition New Black Arts Movement teach-in on January 18, 2015. The theme of the day was “Know Your Rights; Know Your Roots,” and this was the featured culminating presentation. For more information, contact: <http://www.xspiritmental.com/>, and <http://www.scientificsoulsessions.com/>.

Remember Malcolm, who told us that “America” means “prison!”

Then remember Martin, perhaps the most famous person in the history of the USA, someone who is now beloved by the establishment, or at least apparently so, because of nonviolence, integration, Montgomery and Selma—though I would say that it’s a very selective love, because they choose not to mention the things they dislike so strongly about Martin: his book *Why We Can’t Wait*, his opposition to the Vietnam war, his militant resistance to racism, classism, and militarism in general. Here, after all, is a leader who was constantly in prison, and ultimately assassinated, because of his political activities and beliefs.

So when we talk about political prisoners in the USA, remember Malcolm: a social prisoner who became politicized (as so many others have); our own Black shining prince. And remember Martin: at many points in his life a US political prisoner in the more traditional sense, a resister of empire, a prisoner of empire.

And then we need to remember ourselves: building a stiff, new resistance movement, a new Black arts movement—which learns from the past as we build for our own unique moment in history.

Shortly before his assassination, Martin Luther King—who was no fuzzy-headed dreamer—had these often-overlooked words to say about the USA, its “justice” system, economic injustices, and race:

“It’s something like keeping a man in prison for many, many years, and suddenly discovering that he is not guilty for the crime which he was imprisoned. And then you just go up to him and say, ‘Now you’re free.’ But you don’t give him any bus fare to get to town. You don’t give him any money to get some clothes to put on his back. You don’t give him anything to get started in life again. . .

“This is what American did to the Black man . . . at [the] very moment [when] America, through an act of Congress, was giving away millions of acres of land in the West and the Mid-West, willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with a walk through the economic floor.”

One thing we must learn is that, as 21st century revolutionaries standing on the shoulders of past movements, we have inherited the right—indeed the responsibility and the necessity—to reject any pressure that we must choose between Martin and Malcolm. This is a false dichotomy which some would love to maintain, as if there really were exclusive alternatives such as violence versus nonviolence, integration versus separatism, domestic civil rights versus international human rights. No, that kind of counter-position must end now. 21st century revolutionary thought needs to start by refusing to choose between Martin and Malcolm. We must work pro-actively to incorporate the ideas and ideals of both giants into our daily practice: Malcolm and Martin, with a healthy dose of Ella Baker and untold others too.

What is this moment in history?

First, we must recognize that the USA is at an end of empire moment, watching as the beast thrashes about, discovering that it can no longer control the economic and political subjects it has accumulated over the centuries, people and places it is used to ruling both ideologically and militarily.

Second, it's a confusing and scary moment, as that thrashing of the imperialist beast means increased prison repression, increased police violence, increased patriarchal expressions, increased privatization and commodification of everything, increased war, increased poverty, increased injustice.

And then it's a glorious, self-determination moment, what we who have read Black Panther political prisoner Russell Maroon Shoatz's book *Maroon the Implacable* like to call a "Maroon moment," as the crisis gives birth to an opportunity—our opportunity—to build something new, something renewed, something which not only successfully escapes the confines of empire and injustice, but resists, challenges, and defies all of the multiple systems which generate that injustice.

We are Maroons because we dare to resist, dare to imagine something new, outside the confines of old empires, patriarchies, even outside the old left-wing rhetoric, to face a new reality of science, eco-socialism, soul, matriarchy, culture, a new reality of love and a respect for indigenous ways of living.

Let us look at this moment in history:

In 2014, the US ranked in the lowest 30 percent of the world's nations in terms of income inequality, with the top 1% of the richest Americans owning and controlling close to 50% of the world's wealth and resources.

Despite the increased use of drones throughout 2014, the US military continues to be stretched to the breaking point. It has over 150,000 troops stationed in approximately 150 countries across the globe, and suicide is the leading cause of death among members of the US Armed Forces.

Many powerful critics, decrying supposedly-failing US education and health systems, pose themselves as “the new civil rights reformers.” They spend billions of dollars to “fix” these problems by derailing community-based institutions, substituting privatized schools, hospitals and clinics. Despite strong evidence that these so-called reforms will do nothing except line the pockets of investors, and despite outcries from the top professionals in these fields, the push for privatization continues as the school-to-prison pipeline takes hold of more and more of our youth. Indeed, prisons have become the top US industry, benefiting almost every major US-based corporation with extremely cheap and highly controlled labor.

Should it be a surprise, then, that 2014 saw an unprecedented number of young men of African descent murdered at the hands of those dedicated “to serve and protect” the current unjust order? Should we be surprised that an increasing percentage of “men of color” are “becoming” (being turned into) criminals? Over the past ten years, in fact, more US citizens have lost their lives at the hands of a militarized domestic police force than were killed in combat in Iraq.

Should we be surprised that 2014 saw continued degradation of the earth, as fossil fuels and fracking do their part to destroy our planet? The US government spends close to 19 billion dollars to subsidize this destruction, at the same time that it cannot find money to assist in the health, education, housing, or the well-being of its own citizens.

But let us also remember:

- 2014 saw the largest global demonstration against the climate crisis in history, right here in New York City.
- 2014 saw a tremendous resurgence world-wide in massive radical campaigns, demonstrations, uprisings, and popular revolutions—with a common grassroots commitment to the idea that the current order must give way to something new and better. “Black Lives Matter” was transformed into “All Lives Matter” as inter-generational, multi-racial, multi-tendency mobilizations sprang up across the US, continuing and even overshadowing the “Occupy” momentum of several years back.
- 2014 also saw the release of no fewer than 19 US political prisoners, those symbols of resistance past and present who give all the hours and days of their lives in a steadfast commitment to the better world we need to build.

Let us look at the why and the who of it:

When movements rise up to call for and make revolution the system tries to shut them up and shut us down. Murder is the easiest form: that’s why Malcolm and Martin were killed, why the US Federal Bureau of Investigation vowed to never let another “Black Messiah” rise up to lead the masses to new revolutionary peaks, why the Black Panther Party had to be destroyed, why illegal counter-intelligence programs have been

strengthened—even if the exact structure originally called “COINTELPRO” no longer formally or officially still exists.

And it’s also why those who couldn’t be killed—or drugged into submission, or paid off by jobs which tied them into the system’s survival, or made crazy by the madness of everything that surrounds us—are still held as political prisoners today. These are leaders and activists from past movement uprisings and revolutionary moments—kept in prison as a warning to others, in an attempt to send the message that resistance is futile.

For every hour, every day that these revolutionary fighters remain in jail, that today’s movements forget to make our imprisoned and exiled leaders a priority, we subconsciously help the system to reinforce that message.

But: Russell Maroon Shoatz proves to us that resistance is not futile!

After over 20 years in torturous solitary confinement, we helped free him from 23-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week shackles in 2014. We also helped bring forth and spread his thunderous voice, proclaiming that the movements of today and tomorrow will surely learn from yesterday’s mistakes. Maroon’s analysis of his own time and ours rings with a sharp clarity, with the message that we can build a resistance that defies the confines of brittle prison bars and narrow, sectarian thinking.

Lynne Stewart proves to us that resistance is not futile!

This people’s lawyer, this militant grandmother jailed because she refused to buckle under the pressure of a post-9/11 “consensus” by disrespecting Muslims and distancing herself from her own client, kept in jail despite a deadly cancer diagnosis until her supporters said “No More!” Lynne walked out of prison in January 2014, and—in between cancer treatments—continues to speak out, demonstrate, and defy all aspects of capitalist, racist, patriarchy.

Sekou Odinga proves to us that resistance is not futile!

This militant member of the Black Panthers, soldier of the Black Liberation Army, father and grandfather who withstood 33 years behind bars, 33 years behind enemy lines in the true belly of the beast, walked free just weeks ago—spirit undeterred, political focus undiminished, militancy undiluted.

As we work to **free them all**, we understand that we are also working to further the end of empire, and to free ourselves from this rotten system which oppresses us all!

2015 must be a year to rebuild!

We must ready ourselves for the release of Sundiata Acoli, Panther icon and revolutionary leader who has spent an impossible 44 years in jail! As a leading mathematician, and early computer-scientist/astronomer, Sundiata should be preparing to

retire with a comfortable pension, perhaps receiving a “Presidential Medal of Freedom” from some New-African President of a State of Justice. From these not-so United States, however, he receives no honors, is barely able to make the preparations necessary for his release from prison. We must make sure that 2015 is the year of his release, into an ocean of love and support, of respect and solidarity, befitting someone who has very literally given his whole life to the people, for the power of the people, for us.

We must ready ourselves for the release of Oscar Lopez Rivera, last of the Puerto Rican freedom fighters jailed for the thought crime of “seditious conspiracy.” The US denies that it holds any colonies—just as it denies that it has political prisoners or that racism is still a problem in Obama’s America. And yet Oscar still languishes simply because he refused to leave his fellow independentista prisoners behind. After over 30 years, now is the time to make sure the call for his release resonates here on US soil—as it is already echoed by every sector and every ideological grouping on the island of Puerto Rico, from left to right, from anarcho-communist to Catholic Archbishop. Join us in Manhattan on May 30th to tell the world that all of New York agrees: **It’s time to bring Oscar home!**

We must ready ourselves to bring Maroon home too, as well as Mumia, and all the rest. At the same time we must ready ourselves to become more effective Maroons: to overcome our past mistakes and sectarian over-simplifications; to overcome ego and our striving not only to be the best, but to be praised for being the best; to fuse our passion and our pain, our energy and our experience, our culture and our criticisms—into a soulful new formation, filled with new leaders, yet without the pitfalls of cultism.

We must make 2015 a year to rebuild, as our new movements become the rallying space for people to unite.

Because we, the people are ready to be free; because we understand that: **When we free political prisoners, we free ourselves!**