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## SELECTED ESSAYS FROM THE EMANCIPATION INITIATIVE

The Emancipation Initiative is a group of community members, students, and individuals directly impacted by the carceral system in Massachusetts that focuses on ending life without parole sentences and restoring voting rights in Massachusetts as well as establishing universal prisoner suffrage throughout the country. The UCLA Criminal Justice Law Review is proud to publish selected essays from The Emancipation Initiative to center lived experiences by those impacted by the current criminal justice system.

Kevin Shang and William Baker, Editor-in-Chiefs

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As a community of organizers and activists working inside and outside prison walls, we are hopeful that these pieces will shift and expand popular conceptions of “legal scholarship.” In the tradition of Critical Race Theory, these pieces center lived experiences and narratives as valuable knowledge sources. We are hopeful that these pieces solidify the need to move away from caging and incessant dehumanization as forms of “correction.” We would like to thank Amber Ashley James, Elly Kalfus, Tufayl (Jersey) Lane, Nicole Powell, and Derrick Washington for their arduous efforts in organizing and editing these pieces. We would also like to thank UCLA Law students Nicole Matsuda and Nicole Powell for specifically forming the partnership between the Emancipation Initiative and the UCLA Criminal Justice Law Review.

If you would like to get in touch with any of the authors who have chosen to share their contact information, we encourage you to do so. You can either write to them via their postal addresses (included at top of each piece), or online by forming a JPay or Corrlinks account, depending on what state they’re incarcerated in (JPay is used in New Jersey, Corrlinks in Massachusetts). After creating an account, add the author’s name and their ID #, and then add money to your account to pay for stamps. (Messages typically cost 25 cents per email).

In solidarity,  
The Emancipation Initiative

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### 1. Our Emancipation Initiative

By Derrick Washington, W89316  
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Our Emancipation Initiative (EI) began with us, the incarcerated population of Massachusetts in 2012 following a prison altercation between prison guards and the incarcerated population. My name is Derrick Washington and I'm currently incarcerated within the state's maximum security prison at Souza Baranowski Correctional Center (SBCC) in Massachusetts. We're locked inside our assigned cells for upwards of 21 hours a day here. EI is our liberation movement led and guided by incarcerated persons throughout Massachusetts Department Of Corrections (DOC) who've been on the front line fighting for freedom and human dignity since 2012.

Emancipator Newsletter/Law Journal project is an attempt to liberate our voices and communicate our experiences to empower all readers of our writings to get involved and become active in the dismantling of this malicious machine of enslavement. We aim to create a space for individual activists, groups and local community-based organizations to contribute to our Newsletter. Throughout our Newsletter you'll find incredible pieces from groups like The Black Response, out of Cambridge, Massachusetts, as well as writings from both incarcerated and formerly

incarcerated activists, like Leslie Credle, who are on the ground in our communities doing amazing things with reentry and housing.

As I currently write this intro piece from my assigned prison cell my mind volleys between ideas of representation. Our perpetual tug-of-war for human dignity within the Massachusetts DOC in company with an unshakable urge to be both humanized and recognized with citizenship rights is a constant battle EI has undertaken. Our day to day struggles are indicative of earlier struggles black and other original populations have wrangled with throughout antebellum life during chattel slavery which still occurs in 2022.

Our incarcerated EI team in tandem with outside activists actively organize in the State to raise awareness about the legal institution of slavery in Massachusetts and throughout America via incarceration. The shift in semantics of how slavery as incarceration is framed via the use of words like “incarceration,” “prisoner,” “inmate,” etc. does not negate the fact that the legal institution of slavery does continue to exist through the practical application of incarceration. Communicating incarcerated experiences through our Newsletter is important in that it provides a means for incarcerated populations to personally push back against false perceptions about who we are and what factors contributed to our physical unemancipated, slave condition of existence while simultaneously speaking truth to power.

Recent goals of EI have been centered around universal suffrage initiatives, ending sentencing practices of Life Without Parole (LWOP) and, promoting communal organizing projects. Thoughts concerning how our Newsletter will be received by readers, hesitation in regards to possibilities of administration attempting to sabotage our efforts or trying to block us from receiving physical issues of our Newsletter is always a thing of concern. However, our excitement to both be heard and humanize ourselves through our Newsletter writings far outweigh any obstacles we face in opting to tell our stories.

All in all, our EI Newsletter/UCLA law Journal collaboration is a relationship of triumph! We appreciate and invite all thoughts, opinions and overall feedback about our writings. In future issues, our aim is to include more statewide representation of activities and groups to familiarize other States about happenings in Massachusetts. Ultimately, we hope to build a national web of connectivity between interstate organizers and incarcerated activists to truly begin dismantling this wicked institution of slavery through incarceration. It is an honor!

## **2. History = Emancipation**

By W. Tufayl Lane, #000431587D

New Jersey Department of Corrections

“Mind is the master power that moulds and makes, and man is mind, and evermore he takes the tool of thought, and, shaping what he wills, Brings forth a thousand joys and thousand ills; -- He thinks in secret, and it comes to pass: Environment is but his looking glass.”

—As A Man Thinketh, James Allen

## 1. Empowerment and Identity

Curiosity. Determination. Anxiety. Trauma and fear. a few characteristics that fuel the oppressed. ideas are formed. movements are sparked. Both of which are sought in the midst of ones' oppression. striving to organize in a setting such as a prison is very difficult, much like it was in times of slavery. many of our ancestors could not read or write and would suffer grave punishment if they were found with reading and writing materials. some of them were subject to death as a result and their punishment was used to instill fear in others in bondage. like many who are incarcerated today, many can be subject to solitary confinement or be given charges that could potentially have a negative impact on their incarceration. it is safe to compare the condition of slavery to incarceration as we know it. prisons of america being eerily compared to the conditions of slavery isn't a new concept. many of the incarcerated freedom fighter of the past have continued to label the convict class "slaves" due to the racially motivated laws and imprisonment of black activists and supporters.

The connection between slavery, incarceration and African people in this country is hard to dismiss as not purposeful. the complete denial of humanity, the separation of family and suppression of knowledge is evident in the rules that govern many prisons. keeping those held in bondage away from information that could empower them is intentional. organizing against suppression and repression requires a sense of empowerment. people must see their circumstances as problematic. how can one change his/her condition if they don't feel like their condition is problematic?

When we at EI set out to create a platform like The Emancipator Newsletter, we understood that our circumstances were not a mistake. we also understood that we didn't have platform to speak for ourselves. we had to arm ourselves. arm ourselves with the most powerful tool in america. the pen. the same tool that instituted the laws that perpetuated slavery in america. the same tool that was used to sign the declaration of independence. the same tool that wrote the 13th amendment and other draconian laws that govern this country today. our focus has always been to use the tools of resistance. ironically the same tools used to dehumanize us in the media.

## 2. Slave Narratives

Organizing in prison is inherently necessary. it is a responsibility of those who are informed. When mainstream media outlets fail to report the horrors of the prisons, the mistreatment of those who rebel, who will take the responsibility of giving first-hand accounts of retribution? in times of slavery, illiterate and literate captives recognize the importance of telling the truth. mainstream media didn't print the horror stories of the conditions and treatment of captives while on plantations. in response to the lack there of, "Slave Narratives" were created. How could

these stories reach the masses enough to spark change? most captives believe that if their stories are told that this would in some way empower others to rebel as well as challenge the status quo that served to keep them in bondage.

“Slave Narratives” are defined as:

“Written autobiographies and oral testimonies by escaped or freed slaves.”

Dual purpose: (1) Publicizing the horrors of slavery (2) Proving the humanity of those in bondage/enslaved.

When sharing ideas about the progression of this organization, there was always a desire to provide our supporters with a raw and uncut glimpse into the lives of the incarcerated. much like the men and women before us who also joined the fight for liberty in the country, we too understand the value in our stories and experiences. enslaved people also felt the desire to highlight the gruesome treatment they experienced much like many of the passages we’ve collected as a team. Creating these documents not only gave readers a glimpse into the horrors of slavery, but it also highlighted the often disputed similarities of modern day incarceration.

Lisa Clayton Robinson said, “African American slaves were unique in the history of world slavery because they were the only enslaved people to produce a body of writing that testified to their experiences,” (Pgs. 1717-1718, *The Africana*).

### 3. Silenced

In December of 1865, congress ratified the 13th amendment stating that:

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

Thereby validating the claim that prison is in fact slavery. Mainly attributed to the conditions and treatment of those in bondage but also highlighting incarceration as being the only exception to the abolition of slavery in America. also important to note that the people who both forms of dehumanization impacts the most are of course African Americans. it is no shock that African Americans disproportionately populate today’s plantations. many of whom have already come from environments that were already discriminatory, dehumanizing, unjust and lacking the necessary resources needed for survival. that translated into increased criminality as well as the increase of black and brown imprisonment. like many prison rebellions of the 1960’s and 1970’s, we too recognized the similarities and refused to see them as separate entities. in fact, the motivation for our work stems from the example of our revolutionary heroes of the past. determined to demand the rights that we were promised. challenging those in power to live up to the laws they created is a must and most importantly it is our right to do so. The first amendment states it.

#### 4. Awareness

“There are still some blacks here who consider themselves criminals--but not many. Believe me, my friend, with the time and incentive the these brothers have to read, study, and think, you will find no class or category more aware, more embittered, desperate, or dedicated to the ultimate remedy--revolution. the most dedicated, the best of our kind...” -George Jackson, “Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson”

Motivated by the writings of George Jackson myself, I began a journey of self reflection as well as recognizing my place in this world. there is something to be said about the one who is exposed to knowledge of self. its freeing even in the grips of bondage. much like many of my ancestors who were not content with their circumstances, there was a fire that always burned inside of me. I was always in search of others who shared this sense of urgency. I was also in search of knowledge that helped me identify the disgust and anguish I felt at being held captive. the brothers who shared my desire to rid myself of the filth of imprisonment understood the responsibility we had being the few who knew.

like many of our predecessors, we utilized available spaces on the plantation to meet and share ideas on how we could use our radical and intellectual energy to create platforms of freedom. mostly in secret due to the punitive response we could receive by meeting unofficially. we would develop many forms of communication with the outside world with hopes that our series can enact engagement which would then spark movements and create a shared hate and disgust for imprisonment. through community engagement, we would educate supporters and empower them through our stories.

A central platform needed to be available where people can go to get the store of their enslaved relative or neighbor. Many of us faced the continued dehumanization and character defamation of mainstream media which formed a lasting distrust of the community and continued to spark the generation of a more tougher approach on crime. mainstream media never humanized us or saw the humanity in the people the government enslaved. we needed our own form of media. media that showed the humanity of its contributors, educated its readers, communicated with others activists and freedom fighters and most importantly offered solutions. the importance of our own media was not a new concept. we took example from previous publications like *The Liberator*, *The North Star*, *Arm The Spirit*, *Awakening the Dragon*, *Voices*.

Many of these publications are no longer allowed in prisons because of its content. Rules were created specifically to prevent prisoners from telling the horrific stories and experiences of being in bondage. n Massachusetts, 103 CMR 131.10(1-12) specifically subsection 10 states: “Inmates are prohibited from calling for or participating in a news conference or on a talk show. In addition, inmates are prohibited from making 3-way calls to engage in news media interviews of any kind.” this

discriminatory rule continues to alienate the captive and prohibits them from sharing their story. it allows the story to be told from one perspective: the perspective of the reader not the captive. if found to violate this rule, one would be subject to solitary confinement for a number of days. creating The Emancipator defied this rule. While distributing the newspaper throughout Massachusetts prisons, it was eventually denied access. The goal of the Emancipator was to be the lifeblood to prison organizing, locally and nationally as well as a platform for information sharing. men and women in bondage must have a place where they could feel human even if its just a few lines in an article in a newsletter. The Emancipator is that place.

striving to create change and abolish all forms of slavery needs a platform to empower others to join this work. it must also continue to keep those already in the fight to continue to fight. the fight will not stop as long as captives are held in bondage. we will always strive for liberty from the chains that keep us stagnating physically. our words can penetrate stall walls and brick columns. they can never be contained and held captive. communities must continue to support avenues of expression especially from those most impacted by suppression and repression. the Incarcerated.

“Being born a slave in a captive society and never experiencing any objective basis for expectation had the effect of preparing me for the progressively traumatic misfortunes that lead so many blackmen to the prison gate. I was prepared for prison. it required only minor psychic adjustments.” - George Jackson, “Soledad Brother” 1970

in the struggle,  
W. Tufayl Lane

### **3. Experience as an incarcerated person in Mass**

By Kevin Seme, W113456  
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Hello, my name is Keven Seme. I'm 25 years old and I have been incarcerated since a week after my 19th birthday. I got arrested and charged with murder in the first degree. I plead guilty in October of 2019. I plead guilty because my attorney induced and provoked me into pleading guilty. He told me I will lose at trial, spend the rest of my life in prison, and have no way of getting out. I told him I did not do the crime and I'm innocent of these charges, his response was it doesn't matter if you're innocent you will die in prison. He also told me my only chance of going home is to plea guilty to second degree murder, get good time, and then see parole. So I plead guilty even though I did not want to plea to something I did not do.



My experiences as an incarcerated person in Massachusetts throughout this COVID pandemic has been an ordeal. That is something I have to overcome because if I don't it will be easy to fall into bad habits like not reading, not working out, not educating myself, and not trying to be better myself. It's been a mental battle most of the time during COVID. When the pandemic first started we could only come out for 20 minutes a day, we couldn't see our loved ones, and I saw people around me get sick then die.

At times it was traumatic being behind these walls. I like being very optimistic by seeing the opportunity in every difficulty but at times it was hard to do that. Negative thoughts would slip into my mind and I would think things like "am I going to get COVID and die like my neighbors." I was in an environment where COVID hit hard (Shirley Medium) and people around me were either leaving in a wheelchair or on a stretcher. At one point we had to stay in our cells for six days straight, and to this day I don't know why. They said for our safety but who really knows. We were being treated as if we had done something wrong; we were being victimized over something we had no control over.

When we tried to speak up about the neglect of the Department of Corrections (DOC), we as prisoners were threatened with violence. At the height of the pandemic, the DOC was doing things that we knew weren't right. For example, while I was in Shirley Medium block C1 we were given the COVID test for the first time. Majority of the block reported that they were having symptoms and health complications, some were even taken to the health unit, but the space was limited so most were taken to solitary confinement. Back in C1, all of us took COVID tests. Before we got our results, the correctional officers (CO's) came into the block and demanded we move cells. They wanted us to move into cells with other prisoners who we knew had symptoms and were sick. We told them that it was safer to stay where we were until the results came back, but they didn't care. The CO's came into the block and used violent force to move those who didn't want to move into a cell with sick prisoners. I was written up because I had no symptoms and wasn't sick and I refused to move into a cell with somebody who was sick, and later tested positive while I tested negative. We were victimized for trying to stay safe, we were attacked for trying to speak up about our right to be protected from COVID, and people died because our voices weren't taken seriously or heard, especially the voices of those prisoners who were crying out for help because the sickness was excruciating and later passed.

I was a witness to so much mistreatment, as well as a victim of mistreatment by the DOC. I'm fighting to prove my innocence and I'm fighting against the cruelty of the DOC everyday. I refuse to let these circumstances keep me from growing into that strong, positive, productive, intellectual, and great man that I am becoming. I keep myself educated by diving into books that will help me become successful while I'm in this prison and when I come home. I also surround myself with positive individuals who I can learn from in order to become successful and who are

helping me unlock the motivation, ambition, and confidence to pursue an education, and to strive for greatness everyday.

#### **4. My Ordeal In Massachusetts DOC Throughout The Pandemic**

By Errol Powell, W107779  
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When the pandemic first began, I wasn't sure what to think. When it finally swept through the States it made me think of all my loved ones and how they would fare against uncertainty.

Then the COVID-19 spread within the prison where I was held (MCI Norfolk). At that point I could only think about myself. Before I get into my ordeal, I just want to say I'm a Muslim man and to me the only thing I could think about was that these might be my last days, and there are sins that I did not want to go before God with my own uncertainty.

Now with having to deal with that in my brain, I'm trapped in a cell with eight other incarcerated folks who shared only one bathroom. I did not receive any answers from the administration on what their plans were. Instead of dealing with us with mercy and understanding, they treated the pandemic as an opportunity to further punish us by keeping us away from our loved ones, cutting off our communication, and dehumanizing us further than what they were already doing.

They made it seem like we were the ones infecting the world when in reality, the COs were infecting us with their beliefs that we are expendable, and not worth the air that we breathed. What mattered to the COs is that they could continue oppressing us and making money.

To this day I still feel anxious when I realize that I can be treated with such disregard, and that maybe in a future prison emergency the administration would not hesitate to forfeit my life when I become too much to maintain. That is how I feel and that is what I believe. I feel like whenever prisoners become too much to maintain by the administration, the administration will kill us and dispose of us.

#### **5. Department of Corruption**

By Justin Rodriguez, W106509  
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I am labeled and identified as many things: "criminal," "inmate," "convict," W106509, along with countless other names and titles. However, I have refused to allow myself to identify with any label as such. I have been incarcerated for over nine years, and it's not until recently that I have started to feel the accumulated effects of this incarceration.

Undergoing added hardships throughout the process these last few years has taken even more of a toll on me. I lost both my brother and my grandfather to COVID-19. In several populations I underwent quarantines which was similar to time spent in segregation. This went on for about two years. There was no real access to recreational time, jobs, programs, or education throughout this time, which meant no pay that some of us rely on, no earned good-time, and no liberation from the struggles that live behind this locked door. Throughout this time “corrections” has come from my own efforts despite all the struggles and obstacles they’ve added on. *I know I deserve a second chance.* This department has done nothing to “correct” anything for me, or my family. This has been life everyday, and every year, along with finding ways to cope with this unnatural way of living life. Especially through these times.

I have been educated on the school-to-prison pipeline, the prison industrial complex, and the prison experience itself firsthand. Through these life experiences, I realize that I contribute more to being a part of their system than I do if I was spearheading my own conditions of true freedom. That is corruption. Granted, my mistake was a grave mistake; I have paid that debt with my life when they decided to take fifteen years of it from me and call it “justice.” There is also a ten year open probation sentence for me to serve afterwards on charges that carry up to life. There is also a disconnect somewhere because this was a charge with no loss of life, I had just turned 20, and it had been my first indictment and incarceration ever. In a zero-tolerance system my second chance came at an extremely high cost. From the beginning there has never been any justice for myself, or my family. When I pledged allegiance to America in school every day, ending with “justice for all” sounded better than my reality has ever looked. This corrupted system of things is designed to generate more for what “serves” their own than what it gives back to truly “protect” its people. The protection should be from its’ own claws and teeth. This system, as well as the Department of Corrections needs its own Department of Corrections. Maybe after such reform we could instill hope in our people, rather than turn our backs on them because of personal judgements and differences between one another. Until then, our system it is going to stay corrupted and broken.

## **6. Hello World**

By Ivan Hodge, W89572  
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Hello World,

My name is Ivan, I am a 35 year old black male from the city of Boston and I have been incarcerated for almost 17 years now and have spent almost 15 years of the 17 in a level 6 maximum facility prison. Why is that you may ask?

Well, it is not because I am some big time gang leading shot caller or a violent character who deserves to be here. No, it is simply due to a multitude of frivolous discriminatory policies, along with arbitrary decisions made by those with the authority over my physical being. These discriminatory policies and arbitrary decisions are the reason why countless amounts of prisoners are serving these long stints of time warehoused in a maximum security prison. At the end of the day it all boils down to money. The Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center receives a whopping \$63,000 + for each prisoner so the more prisoners they can keep in that facility, the more funds can be in their pockets. The Massachusetts Department of Corrections (DOC) has no oversight committee. Without a governing oversight body the DOC can brutalize, dehumanize, and discriminate against incarcerated citizens all while misappropriating taxpayer dollars that are allocated to feed and rehabilitate.

In 2012 I was placed on a status called "Level A." This status is based on the security risks presented by the prisoner, and is applied when prisoners do something extreme like assault multiple staff members, commit institutional homicides, escape, or attempt to escape. In 2012, Level A status was updated and revamped with troubling verbiage. Level A now included 'unauthorized possession of items or material likely to be used in an escape (cell phones/paraphernalia).' When a prisoner is placed on Level A status they have to remain in the maximum facility indefinitely. I was caught passing a fishing line. A fishing line is a bed sheet, battery pin and a piece of laundry bag. This device is utilized to navigate throughout the prison toiletry system to retrieve what the prison deems as contraband while in segregation. It was considered to be material likely to be used in an escape. Even though the prison security noted what the device was for (retrieving contraband such as commissary food, radios, razors etc.) I was placed on Level A status for five years, and was given seven points which lasts up to ten years on my classification report. As a prisoner who is incarcerated for a crime that involves a loss of life I am automatically given 6 points that will stay with me for the remainder of my sentence.

That is one of the discriminatory policies that I alluded to earlier in this piece.  $7+6=13$ . In order for a prisoner to be classed to a lower custody facility, they have to have under 12 points. A prisoner sometimes has to wait 12 to 18 months before their points drop depending on the severity of their last offense. There are 365 days in a year, sometimes 366, so one incident could set an individual back for an entire year or longer.

My experience as a black male incarcerated during COVID-19 was exactly what I had expected it to be, the same ole same ole. Being in a maximum facility for so long readied me for the months of 20+ hour day lockdowns that we spent on quarantine status. I was at NCCI Gardner when COVID-19 first struck. We went months without being infected until the prison administrators decided to move contaminated prisoners

throughout the facility, intentionally spreading the virus. This effort was an attempt to keep the prisoners who filed for medical parole from being released. It was a risk, but once again it is all money motivated: the more prisoners released, the less money in their pockets. Since there is no watchdog group, there is no concern for consequences.

Within a seventeen month period, I found myself being violently attacked twice by DOC employees. This was not the first time I was subjected to this type of egregious conduct, but it was my first in an unprovoked scenario. On January 10th, 2020 there was a physical altercation between multiple prisoners and correctional staff. I was not involved. I was ordered to lock in my assigned cell as was every other prisoner. A few hours later, I watched countless Black and Latinx prisoners be roughed up and extracted from their cells. When it was time for them to get me, I prepared myself, bracing for the inescapable impact that was to befall upon me. They were at my door accosting me orders to get the F#¢% on the floor or they'll shoot the f#c% out of me. I was pummeled by 3 COs who were all saying stop resisting even when I wasn't. I was shackled and handcuffed then brought to the prison's main hallway with the remaining prisoners who were left on my unit. some were bloodied, bruised, and requesting medical attention. We were all forced to kneel on our knees on the prison's hard surface for three hours. My knees are in severe pain everyday since then. We were threatened that if we didn't kneel we would be f\*¢€#d up, shot, and bit by the k-9 dogs that they had circling us. On June 23, 2021 I was once again physically assaulted, this time however was way worse. This happened during a random strip search when I was on my way to work. I was grabbed by my neck, slammed to the ground, held down and repeatedly punched in my face. My face was so swollen it looked as if I had a huge orange on my face. If that wasn't bad enough, I was poked in my eye, sprayed with chemical agents in my face and testicle area all while being choked, which is illegal. I was sent to two different hospitals for separate procedures. After I was brutalized by these angry white correctional officers, I was given a disciplinary report for assaulting two correctional officers and was found guilty! Despite the video surveillance proving my evidence, I was found guilty and sent back to the level 6 maximum security prison. That should have never happened, but there is no one to hold them accountable.

The penal system in Massachusetts is designed to mentally break individuals. It is absolute psychological warfare and completely contradicts its mission statement. Most of my peers are uneducated, blind, and sunken in despair. Our only support systems are under constant attack and are being chipped away piece by piece. We are denied opportunities to improve ourselves through rehabilitation programs. Most of us black and brown individuals are constantly being mislabeled as gang members to justify the prison administration's excuses that we are a threat to the

safety and security of the institution. In contrast, our white prison peers are given most of the best jobs and programs.

I would be remiss if I did not address the lack of professionalism in every department within this facility. This is especially acute in the inadequate mental health services, and the medical department. I haven't spoken with my clinician in over a month, and I have not had my blood pressure medication in 6 days now. This is becoming a dangerous pattern of neglect and deliberate indifference, but once again with no governing body, there is no accountability.

Imagine being in a pressure cooker environment that offers little to no incentives, little to no opportunities, in a cell for 20+ hours a day, where there is no one to call on for assistance, and no one is held accountable for their violence. America WE HAVE TO DO BETTER!

## **7. A Cell to A Soul**

Reprinted from *Emancipator* Issue #2 (June 2020)

By Hon: Rickey McGee, Rig: Allah Fu-Quan

I struggle with the struggle, it feels as if I'm building a psychological cage around my thoughts as I continue to devote my collective energies to dismantle this physical one. These prison walls have obstructed my view of the very world which has legislated the criminalization of my skin, and the barbed wire fences which lie slightly below them no longer have the menacing appearance which had initially shocked my senses when they first met my naked eye.

What does this say about me? What is this saying about us? The prison cell has been my escape. The very space designed to despirit my ambition has been methodically tailored to liberate the very part of me that adversity itself has historically attempted to quell. In the jungle one learns how to live off the very things that others have died from, and this has been my experience in the grave. Solitude provides me with the isolation that I need to listen to the many anxieties that vibrate through my bones as the body utilized by my mind remains entombed. Being attentive to the most compromised parts of myself has invoked a determination in me to never allow for anything outside of my head to dictate the very inclinations within it. I had to listen before I could reasonably establish a constructive devotion to learn about the particular institutions that were fashioned to obstruct my development.

Why are there so many onlookers standing around casually as I am being lynched? Am I really hearing the utters of "hold your head" by the many who had once shared the same social space as me when there is a noose placed on the neck that keeps it stationary? Days have turned into decades, and dreams have been replaced by the nightmares which have agitated our capacity to see them as clearly as the obstacles that reject their fruition. I am asked to be normal in an environment where there is not a semblance of rationality associated with it's construction. How can

my masculinity be explored when my role has been reduced to a circus lion? Am I an inmate because the majority who are fixtures on the quad have sadly associated themselves to this emblem of ridicule? Or am I who I say I am? A glimpse into the glass placed at a sound location on the door will expose anyone to the books, articles, position pieces, and motivational images placed in every corner of the prison cell that I momentarily place my belongings. It is here where the world is examined, where it is diagnosed, where it is challenged, where it is defined. This is where I shrill in disappointment, laugh when the smiles can no longer suppress the amusement felt after a level of stillness is magnified, and cry whenever the impact of another loss in my life is conceptualized in context to a particular moment in my present. This is where I live, I learn, I loathe, and consistently muzzle my lust!

This cell, its stench, its limited dimensions could never replicate the sanctuary that a home epitomizes. It was erected to mutate determination into defeat, heroism into trepidation. I've witnessed it kill hopes, alter identities, curtail vision. I experienced it shape the contours of one's perception of the world. I've seen its face! I've inventoried the landscape of today from the darkest of spaces. I envision the day of freedom with lewd eyes. I crave the opportunity that so many have undervalued, that worldly distractions have prevented them from meaningfully retaining. I desire to hurt without it being associated with oppression, love without it being referred to the struggle, and to elevate beyond the yoke perpetuated from years of generational incarceration. I can't imagine life without harassment, stares without them being a cohort to a level of suspicion, courts without injustice. One day I will breathe again.

## **8. Reflections From Necropolis: Is the First Amendment Dead in Prison?**

Reprinted from Emancipator Issue #2 (June 2020)

By J. Jabir Pope

More than four score and seven years ago, a group of guys, known as the forefathers, invaded this land escaping from oppression. In the spirit of never again, to that end they put together a set of governing rules that they called The Constitution. Shortly thereafter, they sought to tweak/amend it. The very first of these amendments states, as follows: Congress shall make no laws to prohibit free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of peaceful assembly, and the right to peacefully protest for wrongs done to the people.

Over the years, this right has come under attack from a variety of different directions that include lower courts, prison officials, and even corporate bosses. So, the question is: Is the First Amendment dead in prison? I pose this question because I am a prisoner in Massachusetts. I am also a father and a citizen. Among my talents/gifts, I am a singer/songwriter, poet, published author, film producer, and radio talk show host. I have used this skill set up until recently from behind prison walls, until

the Department in its infinite wisdom decided to punish me for the same. Placed me in the whole, stripped me of my institutional source of income, my personal space, and the loss of considerable personal property. All of this, because I dared to speak to my community by phone.

The late-great Dr. King on the eve of his murder, as a part of his final speech, said the following: “All I’m saying is America be what you say you are on paper. Now, If I lived in China or Russia, or some other totalitarian country, then maybe I can understand the violation of basic freedoms because they have not committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read about the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read about the freedom of the press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of this country was the right to protest for rights.”

At the kangaroo court that stripped me of the gifts mentioned above, I borrowed these few words from Dr. King to remind the Department of Corrections that they were located, not in China, Russia, or some other totalitarian country, but right here in the United States of America. The question before us now is have we indeed become a totalitarian country? As I said at the outset, the Constitution is clear with mandatory language. How the Department of Corrections, lower courts, or even corporate bosses can make policies, regulations, rules, etc. that override the Constitution is beyond me. For those that would take the position that this is an acceptable practice, then you should know that that invites others to bring forth and initiate their own rules, regulations, and practices. Either we are all going to follow the rules/laws or none of us should be required to. So, as a citizen and a fan of the First Amendment, I intend to follow the lead of the Constitution. And unless I am shouting, “Fire!” in a crowded movie theater, then I am convinced that all of my First Amendment rights are intact.

## **9. Law, Power and Concepts of ‘Punishment & Crime’**

By Derrick Washington

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It is 2022 and as of yet I have not in my 37 years had an opportunity to participate in any of the political processes that select and elect officials who make laws which governed my lived environments. I’ve nonetheless felt every physical tug of law, policy and regulation made by lawmakers and enforced through government facilitators (police) throughout my entire life. A life time of political disfranchisement illuminates the fact I live in a democratic society that in no way reflects my imagination. It doesn’t reflect my imagination because I am one out of 2.3 million others who’ve been stamped with a pariah like brand, ubiquitously stigmatized as a criminal who exist outside the organs of citizenship.

Since my incarceration 17 years ago shortly after my twentieth birthday I’ve thought deeply about government. Growing up, all I understood



government to be was a bunch of old white men working against ‘us.’ That child-like perception of government was not far off and has not shifted much since my childhood years. What later solidified that perception was when government took my mother from me as a teenager. They sent her to state prison for being present during a robbery that she did not commit. The residual effects of my mother’s incarceration ripped my family apart in ways that reverberated throughout the lives of me and my siblings in ways I could’ve never imagined.

Over the years I’ve come to envision government as a living being having a body, brain, conscience and all of its encompassing organs. I see the brain as being the legislature in that it would decide for the body when to walk, where to walk and even teach it how to walk if it so happens to not walk properly or have some sort of limp or drag. I imagined the body of this living being to be the Executive branch who takes orders from the brain. So, if the brain commands the body to throw a punch the body enforces that command without question. I figured without a living body to support this brain it’ll quickly become vegetable like. However, I realized that the brain and body can at times be impulsive, incongruent and in instances move haphazardly which is when I understood that the conscience of such body must be synonymous with the Judiciary branch. The Judiciary branch is sort of like an umpire and makes sure that decisions are being carried out fair and correct. Therefore the conscience will check the body when it begins to grow stubborn or begin making callous decisions because the conscience is governed by its principles which does not change but can only be amended (Constitution). Most importantly though, I came to the conclusion that the very cells that make up this organism of a body coincide with the very people who make up a society and are afforded the citizenship rights of said government of such society as inseparable constituent parts of the whole.

Questions concerning law and government often occupy the minds of those held under the power of it. Rules and powers of law are what govern societies. Prisons are places that keep persons who are said to have violated law[s]. Legislators are elected officials who create laws. Throughout my explorations of researching whatever materials I could find within the limited selections of a prison library, I’ve come to learn about the structure and history of American government. I discovered that American government is technically described as a democratic-republic form of government. Essentially meaning a novel mode of government which is governed by the people but executed through their elected officials hence, an American experiment. Persons accused of acting or behaving in any capacity outside the rule of law governing the structures of American society are designated as criminal, often even prior to a formal conviction, and are sanctioned to a permanent status of inferiority.

The earlier living-being analogy is important in order to understand that those who’re systematically disenfranchised, relegated to

penal structures and institutions of incarceration exist outside the human body of government. An individuals positioning outside that body categorizes you as a slave in orbit of that body that's subject to the whims of overseers governing the designated prison institution you're being held in. Not to nix my words, incarcerated persons are held as enslaved persons of the State referencing the United States Constitution's Thirteenth Amendment stating "[n]either slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, SHALL EXIST within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" wholly legitimizing a legal function of slavery through a system of criminal 'justice.' Society's transmutation from slavery to incarceration via criminal conviction transcends any protective shield of citizenship. The United State's Fourteenth Amendment which is a harbinger for protections of citizenship opens by stating "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, ARE CITIZENS of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

Citizenship affords a degree of power. Power can be seen as an ability to act or not act given the margins which constrain an individuals capacity to control their circumstances. As a friend once echoed to me "when one becomes marginalized they essentially become just that, trapped within margins." Mentally wrestling through concepts of power and marginalization allowed me to identify long term, eviscerating affects that penal structures have on entire communities and constituent individuals who make up those communities. These disenfranchised communities exist as satellites of government as they become criminalized, marginalized and ultimately uprooted, torn down then gentrified. Punishment precedes any charge of criminality as a result of abject conditions and lack of representation. As residents fall deeper and deeper into these margins of restrictions, opportunities to prosper and escape such conditional margins grow increasingly limited creating conditions of abject disparateness within said margins.

Disparate youth who've been punished as a result of their race, class and geographical placement who were born disfranchised are the environments that I've grown all too familiar with throughout my 37 years on this earth. These are spaces in which survive or suffer becomes rule. Laws that govern the body politick we circumscribe become antagonistic to our survival compelling us disparate youth to opt ways of an outlaw. Again, what is a law? The Black's Law Dictionary tells me it is "[t]he regime that orders human activity through systematic application of the force of politically organized society..." so, if I exist in a disenfranchised community fully governed by this regime which exist outside the margins of my access leaving me without privileges and immunities or protections of said regime then, the living body of government having power over my lived environment essentially becomes my sole oppressor? In fact the power of law would work only to keep me within the margins of restraint influencing a deviant behavior of

lawlessness in order to transcend beyond those margins in a struggle to gain acceptance for entry into this regime hence, impoverished little black and brown kids in pursuit of an American dream literally by any means available.

Survive or suffer entails drug distribution, robbery, arms dealing or whatever market that your disenfranchised community can draw revenue from despite the legality of it. Ugly trades of activity become attractive for survival to transcend beyond margins. The dynamic of survival largely seen as criminality proves salient given that quality education, meaningful employment, positive mentorship and other gainful opportunities only exist outside of margins your community has access to. Therefore, in a scramble to escape beyond margins of restraint absent either an innate talent, natural intellect or intrinsic drive to rise above the tumult, most will inevitably get tangled within the barbed wire of survival developing drug habits, engage in internecine territorial disputes, grow hopeless and/or fall victim to circumstance resulting in prison and death.

Prisons are institutional margins built for disenfranchised bodies of disparate youth. Prison is the penultimate margin within the margin. Death is the ultimate margin.

The purpose of exploring ideas of Law, Power and Concepts of 'Punishment and Crime' is to first identify that in America disadvantaged populations are often punished prior to formally being individually branded as criminal therefore acknowledging that a birth to prison pipeline exist prior to conception. Finally, our Emancipation Initiative is our North Star where individual actors, whoever you may be, can take initiative to address whatever inequities you identify in your community, neighborhood, City or State and put forth an initiative to address the harms in order to bring about an absolute emancipation for all people snuffed out by margins of oppression. Our newsletter will serve to host all activists groups, individual actors, allied movements and organizations who are aligned in our freedom struggle to dismantle this machine and redistribute axis's of power.

## **10. The Black Response Cambridge**

Special Issue for the Emancipation Project

By Stephanie Guirand, Virginia Cuello, Nubian Meehan and Dara Bayer for The Black Response Cambridge

After the murder of George Floyd by an on duty Minneapolis police officer, there was international uproar over documentation of state-sanctioned violence. White Americans, frustrated with a decade of documented state-violence against Black and Brown people, converged to have a serious public conversation about systemic changes to the criminal justice system.

The Black Response was formed in reaction to local conversations regarding the development of a new alternative public safety program in Cambridge, MA. The Black Response is an organization made up of an ad hoc group of young Black current and former residents of Cambridge

concerned with punitive practices like policing in our city. Our aim is to uplift Black and Brown communities in Cambridge. The Black Response is working toward the development and implementation of the Cambridge Holistic Emergency Alternative Response Team (HEART), an alternative public safety program with a mobile crisis response team, wrap-around aftercare, and a proactive community cohesion team.

We are now approaching two years since the murder of George Floyd, and the sheen of potential profound transformation is wearing off around the country. The video that outraged the nation is being buried under fears of world war and the United States' military involvement—the US being the police of the 'free world'. Meanwhile in Cambridge, there is a perception that the City is a progressive utopia with a humane police force that serves and protects all residents equally. Yet, the Cambridge police still arrest and incarcerate individuals. Incarceration is harm. A criminal label is harm. Cambridge is not exempt from the structures and practices of white supremacy that extinguish Black life in a multitude of ways. Though there may not be many documented instances of blatant physical violence perpetrated by the police in Cambridge, there are still examples of police harm here: Gates, 2009; Harvard Student, 2018; young man with deceased parent, 2020. These interactions may seem like isolated incidents, but there are many untold stories of harmful encounters between low-income Black residents and the Cambridge police.

We at The Black Response know that low-income African-descended residents are under-represented in discussions of policing in Cambridge because of their economic and social position in the city. We often ask community members to consider this:

Why do we encourage poor and other marginalized individuals to use the police to resolve their conflicts, when anything they do or say can and will be used against them in a court of law? Meanwhile, wealthy people have lawyers and therapists to mediate their conflicts. Lawyers and therapists are protected by patient-client privilege. This is class bias enshrined in law. HEART seeks to be an alternative public safety program that serves presently un- and underserved populations by including their voices, perspectives, and opinions in the development of HEART's program and services. In addition to those in crisis, HEART also serves those who are the victims of calls from communities who may use the police but are not targeted by them. We're enacting change by building a well-resourced and police-free alternative option for public safety that meets the immediate needs of people in conflict and crisis, at their time of need. (*Theories of Change*, Cambridge HEART, 2021)

Missing from conversations about the need for alternatives in Cambridge, and elsewhere, is a real consideration for who these programs should serve. That is, who isn't served by the existing public safety program. Our arguments isolate and name the following underserved communities:

- Unhoused communities
- Undocumented communities
- Those who work in informal economies (drug dealers, sex workers, other under-the-table jobs, etc.)
- Formerly incarcerated individuals
- And their loved ones

The Black Response also notes that missing from this conversation is *what does underserved mean?* We have a complex terrain to navigate around that. The Black Response is an abolitionist organization. However, in order to develop HEART, we have had to collaborate with organizations that are not. HEART is a compromise, it reflects a series of concessions made by the organizations and community members who took part in its development. Each organization would define “underserved” differently. As for The Black Response, underserved simply means access to support and resources to feel and be safe. For example, unhoused community members often do not feel safe when turning to police for their safety. They are underserved by policing as the primary institution to uphold public safety.

Interpersonal violence within Black communities, often referred to as “black-on-black” crime, is treated as something to be erased rather than addressed. For example, city officials are calling a summit this summer to address gun violence. Community organizations are not invited. The inevitable outcome will be to ramp-up police patrol (presence?) in those neighborhoods. With more police will come more arrests. This will obviously lead to more people in the system with fewer options for legal representation and less access to public resources. Politicians have the power to under-allocate necessary resources to communities. Then, they design laws that designate criminalization. They ramp-up police presence in certain neighborhoods. The police arrest people, labeling them criminals. And once someone is deemed a criminal they are ineligible for a multitude of resources. In short, our society makes criminals and then punishes them for being criminals.

The Black Response understands our work to be a hyper-local part of a grander global movement. We are focused on the national abolition movement which has three strands of the discourse: 1) defund, 2) unbundling, and 3) alternatives. **Defund initiatives** are rooted in the approach of removing resources from systems that cause harm (for example, BDS). **Unbundling initiatives** are rooted in the approach of removing power and responsibility. **Alternative initiatives** are rooted in giving people other options that address the root causes of harm. The abolition movement and transformative justice movements are calling for addressing the *root* causes of harm, while addressing present harms. If we dig deep enough, the roots of all systemic harm lead back to colonization. Decolonizing means digging through to the root causes of global harms. There are some key scholars who are engaging in public discourse on abolition.

Cambridge HEART works toward creating a city free of carceral systems where cycles of violence are replaced with practices of care, healing, transformative accountability, and community self-determination. In that vein, we want to reassert our commitment to ending punitive practices, which includes incarceration. Holding that as a foundational principle, we recognize that the work we do is in solidarity with incarcerated individuals. We recognize the experience of incarceration to be unjust and harmful. We believe in transformative justice. We work to address the root causes of harm.

## 11. Closing the Revolving Door by Leslie Credle

*“Ultimately, the denial of housing is used to punish and criminalize people of color. The consequences for those excluded can be devastating!”*

*“We’re breaking down barriers!”* Leslie Credle, Founder and Executive Director of Justice 4 Housing (J4H), is committed to advocating for the abolishment of discriminatory federal, state and local housing policies that continue to oppress and place barriers that exclude incarcerated and justice-involved people from equitable housing.

Parental incarceration is the number one reason children are separated from parents and placed in foster care. Eighty percent of children end up aging out of foster care and become incarcerated as adults, within the first year of leaving the foster care system; and it doubles the second year.

This is not a silo issue; our community does not start and stop at the prison gates. We are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, governed by timing and our voices. Now is the time to end the continuation of this corrupt and ugly system perpetuated by systems of power, who have no intentions of righteousness and fairness; and no direct understanding of the level of hardship and economic destruction placed on Black communities and black families.

We are working to end incarceration of women and girls in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

At the community level Justice 4 Housing enhances community engagement, an essential component of public safety, and allows FIP to become role models and community peer leaders through training and mentorship, building neighborhood cohesion and political power.

Creating homeownership opportunities for Black and Latino, formerly incarcerated people returning to their home communities re-invests wealth back into Boston’s Urban neighborhoods, stabilizing against gentrification. J4H addresses wealth disparities and transforms neighborhoods, creating generational wealth that will remain in BIPOC communities, helping close Boston’s racial wealth gaps and creating stronger family units.

In summary, Justice 4 Housing serves individuals, stabilizes families, and re-invests in communities. It envisions a new, replicable, peer and community-led model for re-entry that most effectively meets the needs of Justice-Involved Individuals and their families.

