

# Academia, Activism, and Imprisoned Intellectuals

Joy James

Reading prison writing must...demand a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature. — Barbara Harlow (1972), *Barred: Women, Writing, and Detention*.

The radical intellectual, struggling for her own place in an academy already under siege by market forces and political interference, may lack the stomach for engaging in external conflicts that are deemed “controversial” by the media projectors of the status quo; for even radical intellectuals must eat; and to eat means to affiliate with aggregates of intellectual organization and power (universities), if one wants to teach.... Nothing written in this essay will relieve the tension between one’s fear and one’s conscience, for nothing is more controversial in the American context than the state’s role in determining whether its purported citizens should live or die. — Mumia Abu-Jamal (2003), “Intellectuals and the Gallows.”

## Love and Rage

**I**N A RECENT LETTER ADDRESSING MY QUERIES ABOUT A TRADE BOOK BY ONE OF HIS former attorneys, death row author and intellectual Mumia Abu-Jamal succinctly signed his missive. Describing his emotional response to his former activist-attorney’s breach of trust and commodification of Abu-Jamal as a spectacle for the marketplace and the executioner-state, he closed: “Love and Rage — Mumia.”

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Love and rage initially seem paradoxical, coupled as oddities. They are assumed by some to appear in exclusive sites, as distinct and unrelated experiences and feelings. But they coexist, with a dynamic ability to metamorphose or shape-shift, one into the other. Love and rage are the impetus for much reflection, agonizing, action, and risk taking. They also seem to fuel considerable thoughtlessness and inactivity, either in abstract or maudlin sentiment or in pyrotechnic performance, and their respective sterility illuminates their shared characteristics. Love and rage constitute the organizing force behind this gathering coordinated during expanding wars. Love for community, freedom, and justice, for the incarcerated and for the “disappeared” — for those dying or surviving in war zones. To the extent that love for humanity leads to rage against injustice, we also must ask and answer: Where does rage lead us?

For now, we can remember that in our national context, love and rage led to resistance in antiracist, antiwar, and anti-gender/sexual violence movements. Resistance was met with further repression, in the context of the United States, aptly administered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its COINTELPRO or counterintelligence program.<sup>1</sup> These repressive government measures surveilled and destabilized the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), which was seeking to stop death squads funded by our tax dollars. COINTELPRO also violently dismantled radical groups and formations such as the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, the Puerto Rican independence movement, as well as various antiwar and anti-intervention militants.

The political prisoners currently contained in U.S. penal sites present us with difficult questions and challenges as critical thinkers and actors: What is our relationship to the “imprisoned intellectual”? Who or what is s/he? Who or what are *we* in relation to visionary, risk-taking struggle? That is, what is our relation to visionary struggles for justice that are neither consumed by rage nor performance radicalism, struggles not shrugged off as insurmountable, but embraced as worthy of theoretical and organizational commitments? Perhaps such struggles bring into question all vanguard sites and formations, whether academic or activist. Given that communication is likely just another way of speaking about ourselves, we might as well start responding to the queries by scrutinizing the site(s) we currently occupy.

### **Academic and Activist Markets**

Academia often prides itself on being a site in which love, rage, or their symbiotic relationship do not dare to assert themselves, to proclaim and set a standard for communication, community, intellectual inquiry, or ethical and political action. Remember Barbara Harlow’s quote above. So, neither love nor rage, just cool professionalism and scholarly competence rule here, although other tendencies or trajectories appear to raise the question (that many progressive

political prisoners struggle to answer) of what a democratic community, premised on compassion, liberation, and a truly just sharing of power, consists of.

Most do not answer that question by saying “academia.” The academy is not geared toward immediacy or urgency (or radical democracy), but seems dedicated to a construction of dispassionate objectivity, a discipline to detail, and painstaking rigor of sustained investigation and study. These obviously are not inherently negative traits. In fact, they are sorely needed in much of our social justice work. They are only part of intellectual development, though; activism as a complementary partner to academic productivity can mitigate against depictions of the incarcerated as “aliens,” vulnerable to dissection or dismissal. Here, especially, political prisoners as “imprisoned intellectuals” find themselves in peculiar situations. At the university, they can be encased in window displays — bartered and sold in the academic market as the objects of inquiry for studies in political resistance or pathology. Showcased in the scholarly text, trade book, Masters thesis, doctoral dissertation, a course, conference paper, or anthology, their currency accrues, but often only to be managed by others.

Much as love and rage can balance and converge, so, too, can academia and activism. Although generally disparaged in its radical forms in the academy, activism prides itself on love and rage, immediacy and responsiveness. It embraces these human responses to life and pain as much as academia might distance itself from them. Activism’s pride of place in this gathering, then, would be the claim to ethical and political responses to life and suffering, to confrontation with domination and control (or what Abu-Jamal described as the state’s determination of who lives or dies — on death row, in poverty, wars, and epidemics).

Activism is as multidimensional in its appearances as the academy; as academia’s alter ego, or problematic twin, it also reflects the best and worst tendencies of the marketplace. When structured by the market, activism is not inherently infused with responsible behavior or compassion. In its push for productivity — more rallies, demos, conferences, meetings — it can lose sight of effective strategies, community, and the importance of young activists exercising decision-making power. To value one’s *presence*, i.e., just showing up for work, class, or demonstrations, over one’s *preparedness* to fully participate in transformational acts is a feature of the crass market (where volume or quantity of a product register more than quality or utility). Likewise, expectations for unquestioning obedience to managerial elites — whether radical instructor or organizer — are also features of the market found in activism and academia.

Thus, beyond confronting the social crises and military and ideological wars enacted by the state, we are disturbed, destabilized, and therefore challenged by the commodification of our own educational sites and political movements. The marketplace — as the dominant metaphor and construct — influences our consciousness and regulates our lives to shape both academia and activism. Conformity and compliance, rebellion and resistance, are often channeled through

and structured by markets that turn intellect and action into objects for trade and barter in competition for status and acquisition, while making our ideals (freedom and justice) and their representatives (prisoners of resistance) into commodities.

Through books, videos, and CDs, political representations are purchased and circulated with the intent of creating greater demand not only for the “product,” but also for social justice, release campaigns, opposition to expanding police and military powers, and executions and state violence. For the imprisoned, the possibility of release, or at least remembrance, mitigates their social death in prison (or physical death, as in the cases of MOVE’s Merle Africa and former Black Panther Albert Nuh Washington). Academics and activists use the market to highlight the human rights abuses and conditions of the imprisoned, the 2.5 million people locked in U.S. penal institutions, and the perpetuation of torture and slavery through the Thirteenth Amendment.

The irony is that commodification is another form of containment. Although Harlow advocates the “activist counterapproach” to consumption, not all activism provides an alternative. Some of it re-inscribes the competition, opportunism, disciplinary mechanisms, and demands for institutional loyalty that characterize the marketplace. Activism or activists, like academia and academics, have their own forms of commerce. At their weakest and most problematic points, they share, in their respective sites, careerism, appropriation, and the assertion of “authoritative” voices.

For instance, the “political prisoner-as-icon” can be deployed to minimize or silence external and internal critiques. Editors, translators, and advocates can wield iconic power as surrogates (and in surreal fashion use that proxy against the incarcerated themselves). The structural position that the non-incarcerated possess, a quite valuable commodity, permits the appropriation of voice and new forms of dependencies. Perhaps, the imprisoned use self-censorship not only as a shield against their guards (as Marilyn Buck describes in *On Self-Censorship*), but also as armor against their allies. Political prisoners have strategies to counter “free” progressives, given that in the social death of the prisoner rebel, the state is not the only entity that has the ability to capitalize on or cannibalize captive bodies. If indeed the political prisoner or imprisoned intellectual can be either “freed” or frozen in academic and/or activist discourse and productivity, then it is essential that academics-activists, students-scholars, directly communicate with political prisoners, as openly as possible given the structural disparities.

### **Conclusion: Conference (or Classroom) as Community**

There are many opportunities to break from consumerism, performance, and spectacle to build community. We approached the prison conference as a “mall” — a place to “hang out” and to encounter performance and spectacle through visceral accounts of racism, war, resistance, violence, and loss. Alternatively, we can approach the gathering as “community” — both potential and real. The

gathering was organized on our need for each other. We are interdependent as academics and activists, and/or hybrids in effecting peace and social change. We choose to dispense with various forms of academic and activist elitism, diva protocol, and disciplinary claims to either intellectual or revolutionary authenticity. I hope that with grace and humor we can acknowledge our strengths and limitations. In the spirit of inquiry undisciplined by a market-driven academy or commodity activism, we work with love and rage.

As academics and activists, we share a desire for learning, for encounters that lead to greater ethical and political agency, a passion for freedom (for some, a passion so relentless that it mirrors the risks of imprisoned dissidents). Daily, more political resisters and prisoners emerge in opposition to U.S. wars, mass detentions and deportations, and diminished civil liberties. The conference afforded an opportunity to engage in dialogue on shared leadership and political analyses that confront state violence, as well as to discuss and learn about the contributions and contradictions of political prisoners. We can learn from and build upon their calls to intellect, emotion, and efficacy, ranging from Abu-Jamal's signature on "love and rage" to slain intellectual-warrior George Jackson's (1972) reflection in *Blood in My Eye*: "As a slave, the social phenomenon that engages my whole consciousness is, of course, revolution." "Revolution," Jackson continued, "should be love-inspired."

## NOTE

1. For information on FBI COINTELPRO illegalities, see Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression* (Boston, South End Press, 2002, revised edition); and Ernesto Vigil, *Crusade for Justice* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

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