

Ivory Towers and the Voice of the Voiceless
Analyzing the Writings of Mumia Abu-Jamal and his Academic Relevance
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“They don’t just want my death, they want my silence.”

These are the prophetic words of an American prisoner whose dreadlocked form is shackled to a complex of steel and barbed wire. Writing passionately from the confines of his cell, his pen does not stop. He has been imprisoned here for two and a half decades while his case and his writings permeate the globe, his writing hand incessantly pushing across page after page. Relegating him to death row has in fact amounted to putting the lips of this provocative writer to the megaphone, gaining him international notoriety. He is an African American. He is a writer. He is a revolutionary thinker. He is Mumia Abu-Jamal. For nearly twenty-five years this impassioned activist has published books and essays, written lectures to college students, and even given commencement speeches, all while behind bars. This “voice of the voiceless,” as a figure attached to many of today’s contemporary movements for social justice, is also a man of immense controversy but not so much for his politics as for the stigma of his conviction. Some qualify his circumstances as those of a political prisoner, others a cop killer. A great deal of discourse, popular and academic, surrounds Mumia and the peculiarities of his case, but what of his writing itself? What of his scathing critiques of the criminal justice system, U.S. foreign policy, and his enlightening reflections on prison life? Unfortunately, one would be hard-pressed to find a substantial amount of published academic criticism that offers any analysis of Mumia’s prose.

Many within the international community insist that Mumia is innocent. They contend that he was framed for the murder of a police officer because of his radically toned political writings and radio commentaries before he was convicted, in conjunction with his earlier involvement with the Black Panther Party and his association with the radical MOVE (not an

acronym) organization. Given this assertion, there would have to be something not only radical, but deeply talented and therefore powerful about Mumia's writing. Without having some element of sophistication, how could Mumia's words pose any kind of a real threat to the power structure, as Mumia-supporters seem to suggest? For this reason it is of immense importance for Mumia's writings to be seriously explored academically, acknowledged, and appreciated in their own right. Shining through Mumia's work is his literary departure from the more common interpretations of oppression which, in the absence of the prospect of physically freeing oneself from the forces of such oppression, would otherwise assume helplessness in the face of injustice. On the other hand, Mumia's words bring to life a notion of internal liberation in which one mentally transcends the repressive realities to nourish his own state of freedom amid all the draconian adversities of his dungeon milieu. This is not to suggest that this way of thinking is unique to Mumia, for one need only look as far as Malcolm X to find this cultivation of mental liberation in the prison context. However, in the case of Mumia this "emancipation from mental slavery" manifests in the realm of literature due to his unique style and mastery of the art of words. Both stylistic and contextual analyses of the writing of Mumia Abu-Jamal reveal the fundamental uniqueness of his voice that offers a sense of self-empowerment as opposed to a literal escape from the forces of oppression. This liberating notion with which Mumia writes also affords the whole culture of African American as well as radical literature this empowering device and demands for Mumia's intellectualism its rightful place in academia.

Before exploring the writings of Mumia, one must first become familiarized with the life that produced such writings. Having grown up in the projects of North Philadelphia, Mumia Abu-Jamal was no stranger to power's encroachments against the rights of poor Blacks in a city with one of the "worst reputations" regarding police misconduct in the United States (Human Rights Watch). As a teen living out racial strife in the early '70s, Mumia was the Minister of

Information for the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) at age fifteen and it has since been learned that the FBI kept a surveillance file on him since he was fourteen years old (Bisson 40-59, 62). After leaving the BPP, Mumia embarked on a career of journalism and reporting. As a radio commentator, at 25 he was “one of the top names in local radio” and was elected president of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists in 1980 (Mumia2000.org).

His commentaries were severely critical of systemic injustices subjugating poor minorities, and he made it a point to expose instances of police brutality. Mumia also reported stories sympathetic to the cause of the beleaguered MOVE family and readily wrote about the war being waged against them by the Philadelphia PD. For these reasons Mumia gained his reputation as “the voice of the voiceless.” In 1978, Philadelphia Mayor and former police chief Frank Rizzo, while being grilled at a press conference, implicated Mumia as being part of a “new breed” of journalists: “They [the people] believe what you write and what you say and it’s got to stop,” exploded Rizzo. “One day – and I hope it’s in my career – you’re going to have to be held responsible and accountable for what you do” (Mumia2000.org).

Mumia’s life was turned upside-down on a cold December night in 1981 when he intervened in an altercation between his brother and a police officer that left the police officer dead and Mumia critically wounded. While what actually transpired that night remains a mystery, what followed were concocted statements by the police about an alleged confession made by Mumia and a trial laden with glaring irregularities, such as police coercion of witnesses, Mumia being denied the right to represent himself, and the purging of Black jurors from the jury pool (Bisson 186). Mumia declined the opportunity to testify at his trial saying, “I want all of my rights, not some of them” (A Case for Reasonable Doubt?). Since then Mumia has been a resident on Pennsylvania’s death row while his case and his writings have gained international attention. Public figures including the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and

rap/rock group Rage Against the Machine have called for a new trial, and “World leaders as disparate as Pope John Paul II and Nelson Mandela have called for his release from prison” (Ebony). In 2001 the city council of Paris named Mumia an Honorary Citizen and organizations like Amnesty International and, more recently, the NAACP are demanding a new trial (Mumia2000.org).

Nevertheless, Mumia remains on death row and has spent the last twenty-five years engaged in legal battles in appellate courts, fighting back against the censorship of his work and state threats on his life – Mumia has twice come within 24 hours of his execution before it was stayed as a result of massive outpourings of public pressure on his behalf. Mumia has become an international symbol for many of today’s left-leaning, anti-imperialist movements and a symbol of the American institution of capital punishment. There are few, if any, incarcerated Americans as outspoken and influential as Mumia. Yet, Mumia seems to lament over this:

... Sometimes I want to shout out, “I am not a symbol. I am a man!” But on this my fabled “voice” falters. I am no more, no less than a man, a human fighting for his breath in a shifting sea of codified hatred. As I seek a safe shore, a harbor, I am buffeted by swells that threaten to drown out my very existence... For me the “law” is not a refuge but a ravenous great whale circling ever closer, seeking its prey. (Jamal xi)

Dark and colorful in the same breath, Mumia’s language has captivated millions worldwide even through the thick steel-reinforced prison walls of death row that Mumia calls hell. So eloquent are his words that former Black Panther sister Assata Shakur was moved to comment, “The first time I heard a tape of one of Mumia’s radio broadcasts, it was the first time I fully understood why the United States government was so intent on putting him to death” (Shakur).

Perhaps nowhere else is there such an in-depth examination of Mumia’s writing as in the introduction to his first published work while in prison, *Live From Death Row*. Joy James,

professor of Africana studies at Brown University, asserts that this book “established [Mumia] internationally as an intellectual” (James). Written by author John Edgar Wideman, this introduction finds something interesting about the style of Mumia’s narrative prose and provides a very rare analysis of Mumia’s writings in the context of African American literature.

Wideman’s essay ventures a critical look at Mumia’s writing and juxtaposes its innovativeness to many of the traditional forms of contemporary African American writing. Wideman asserts the latter as having assumed the central formula of the traditional slave narratives; he calls these “neoslave narratives,” from which Mumia’s writings constitute an imperative departure.

Wideman defines the neoslave narrative as following the form of action concerned with “moving from one world to another. The actor is a single individual [who] undergoes his or her rite of passage... [from] South to north, rural to urban, black environment (plantation) to white environment (everywhere)...” (Jamal xxix). In the contemporary realm, Wideman points out that when one applies modern examples to these dichotomies – “ghetto to middle class, ignorance to education, unskilled to professional, despised gangster to enlightened spokespersons” – the persistence of this formula in African American writing is revealed (Jamal xxix). Wideman seems to cast doubt upon this narrative formula and even goes so far as to charge this stylistic approach with being complicit to the oppressive designs of the existing system, encouraging the reader to take comfort in the status quo rather than challenge it:

They [the readers] experience the chill and thrill of being an outsider. In the safety of an armchair, readers can root for the crafty slave as the slave pits himself against an outrageously evil system that legitimizes human bondage. Readers can ignore for a charmed moment their reliance on the same system to pay for the book, the armchair.
(Jamal xxx-xxi)

It is this way of viewing Black lives that “at best ignores, at worst reinforces, an apartheid status

quo” (Jamal xxi).

However, Wideman sees that Mumia’s writing represents a pivotal exit from this model; Mumia sizes up his situational reality as a Black man and a prisoner but he resists accepting the restraints of limitation and difference that these labels imply:

... [H]e does not identify freedom with release from prison, does not confuse freedom with what his jailers can give or take away...relinquish[es] to no person or group the power to define him. His destiny, his manhood, is not attached to some desperate, one-way urge to cross over to a region controlled or possessed by others. (Jamal xxxii)

In this sense, Mumia’s writing maintains self-empowerment amid social injustice: “What he is, who he can become, results from his daily struggle to construct an identity wherever his circumstances place him” (Jamal xxxiv).

This facet of Mumia’s prose is central to his originality as a writer. Within the parameters of this literary formula, Mumia becomes spiritually enabled, capable of finding beauty and hope in the gloomiest, loneliest place on earth. Exemplary of this is a passage in his second book, *Death Blossoms*, in which Mumia relates a story of another prisoner on death row who discovers a spider building her web beneath his sink. This prisoner spent hours upon hours watching the spider build her web, then capture and consume her prey. She was something of amazement and beauty. Mumia observes:

[The spider] was vital company in a cell constructed to maximize human loneliness – a site designed to kill the mind – the spider was a source of friendship and wonder. In a concrete tomb erected to smother men to death, she was a tiny, marvelous reflection of life. She brightened a man’s day and made it meaningful. Nature amid the unnatural.
(Jamal 79-80)

Similarly, Mumia watches the majestic splendor of a thunderstorm from his prison window while

he awaits execution on Phase II of death row and, when the omnipresent fluorescent lights all along the block and outside the perimeter flicker and finally die, Mumia writes:

...There I sat in the darkness, with less than a month to live, yet I felt better than any other night I had spent on Phase II... Why? Then it dawned on me, like bright writing etched in my brain...Watching the veins of nature pulse through the night sea of air, making – if only for milliseconds – daylight over the hills, I felt renewed. How puny man seems before this divine dance! I saw, then, that though human powers sought to strangle and poison me and those around me, they were powerless. I saw that there is a Power that makes man’s power pale. It is the power of Love; the power of God; the power of Life. I felt it surging through every pore. Nature’s power prevails over the manmade, and I felt, that night, that I would prevail. I would overcome the State’s efforts to silence and kill me. (Jamal 31)

Indeed, Wideman is not the only one to notice this self-empowering aspect of Mumia’s writing. In the preface to *Death Blossoms*, Julia Wright qualifies Mumia’s narratives as “an escape from prison into the liberated territory of the mind, a pacing not of the cage but of the psyche, a jogging not in the pen but in the open space Mumia calls ‘reaching beyond.’” She writes, “We are privileged that he takes us with him on a liberating tour of his own freedom” (Jamal xvii-xviii). This is akin to youth worker Jennifer Thaney’s assessment in her book review of *Death Blossoms* that Mumia’s voice provides “a window into a mind that dares to see beyond the bleakness of death row” (Thaney). This phenomenon of Mumia’s work is telling of his own resilience not solely as a writer but also as a human being. His intellectual curiosity and persevering disposition are the means by which he achieves the end of psychological transcendence; it allows him to remain sound in the mind and thus his wisdom pervades beyond the boundaries of his prison. In his first videotaped interview from prison, in 1997, Mumia

articulated this outlook, remarking, “I believe that freedom, all true freedom exists within the mind and only in the mind,” and that, given the acknowledgement of this truth, “one can be free in even the most restrictive prison on earth” (A Case for Reasonable Doubt?). This vision of self-empowerment does not suggest that one must accept the problems presented by an oppressive system. To the contrary, it is in this unrelenting grip on freedom —where a physical escape from oppression is more or less impossible, that one cannot leave and subsequently ignore the oppressions being committed—that one is forced to confront the injustices in the sense that one is obliged to grapple with repressive forces in his or her own creative manner. Viewing Mumia’s work in this light illuminates reasons why, as Wideman opines, “Mumia Abu-Jamal's essays question matters left untouched by most of the popular stories of black lives decorating bookstores today. And therein lies much of the power, the urgency, of his writing” (Jamal xxxi).

Perhaps some cannot get past Mumia’s status as a prisoner to even explore his work. This might explain, though does not justify, why Mumia is largely absent from the sphere of academics. However, with such a significant contribution to Black literature and particularly his influence on radical thought, is not the work of Mumia validated in its academic relevance? Some argue that there is indeed an exigency to study Mumia’s writing. Still, studies of Mumia’s writings usually explore what his case teaches us about the nature of the criminal justice system. They do not offer a critical analysis of his writing. In the winter of 1999 there was a small movement on both coasts by educators in Oakland, California and New York City to make Mumia’s case a topic in schools (A Call for Educational Activities). Similarly, Professor Mark M. Taylor of Princeton University is leading the efforts of a new organization called Academics for Mumia Abu-Jamal (AMAJ) “to educate all those around us about the evidence relating to Mumia’s case...especially in the academic community...” (Academics for Mumia Abu-Jamal). While these aspects of the movement in support of Mumia are crucial in gaining his freedom,

one still cannot help but wonder about the comparably fewer efforts to bring Mumia's work into the spotlight to be judged for their academic significance.

Of course, Mumia is not the only African American intellectual to be barred from the ivory towers. What this points to is a kind of institutionalized racism that is still very much alive in the academic world as it is in many other areas of national life. It may be that both Mumia's Blackness and his conviction are what account for his exclusion from academia. The art of literary criticism is essentially what determines a writer's place in the academic community; given this, literary critic Joyce A. Joyce believes that it is the poststructuralist methodology in literary criticism which is responsible for the academic exclusion of Black intellectual writing as it is this methodology that holds sway in the gate keeping process of academia. In Joyce's exchange with her colleagues Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates Jr., she remarks, "They [Baker and Gates] do not understand that Black political involvement can be achieved even in the ivory towers of academia as well as on the streets..." Furthermore, Joyce writes:

...the particular dilemma is that the reason Black literature has not received the benefits of close analyses lies in the inferior status given to Black Americans and anything we produce... [P]oststructuralist methodology imposes a strategy upon Black literature from the outside while a direct relationship exists between Euro-American literature and its criticism. (Joyce)

The criteria used in classical literary criticism emerges out of a Eurocentric cultural perspective, which is arguably out of touch with many of the cultural components of African American literature.

Perhaps Mumia's radicalism is another reason his work is barred from the academic arena; he has written that "High poverty signals capitalism triumphant" (Jamal). He once evoked Mao Tse-Tung's observation that "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" (A Case for

Reasonable Doubt?). It is telling that Mumia's notoriety in the U.S. is largely, if not entirely, limited to the American Left. His radical critiques and their influence on the thinking of leftist political life in America is testimony to Mumia's academic relevance, specifically in the area of political literature. Yet his anti-imperial treatises remain all but ignored by the academic community. Mumia's arsenal of historical analogies, which are illuminating in their rendering of the true nature of U.S. imperialism, draw parallels that academics would be wise to consider in their studies on American foreign policy:

In the earliest days of the American republic, when a tight, nervous knot of men (for they were *all* men) met in Philadelphia in the late 1770s, they had before them two examples that drew their admiration, and emerged as models of what form of government this new nation would adopt: Rome and Britain... The point is that two examples loomed large in the American mind at the very beginning: both were global empires... In ancient Rome, the Senate and the Emperors kept Rome engaged in endless wars on the frontier, to keep the Army away from ideas of seizing control of the lush, wealthy city. For ancient Romans, anyone who wasn't Roman was seen as a "barbarian." The current term of art is "terrorist." The U.S. Empire bombs thousands, doesn't bother to count the dead, and yet lashes out at retail bombers as "terrorists." The media, enjoying the spoils of Empire (good ratings), joins the fun by praising the wisdom and goodness of the Emperor and his troops. Those who question this martial wisdom are denounced as traitors and run from their businesses or professions. Yet, we are assured, this is a War to bring Democracy to "Other People." America is drunk on the wine of Empire, and like Rome, cannot see the precipice that looms before it; the pride that cometh before the fall. (Jamal)

When President George W. Bush ceaselessly spews the rhetoric of "spreading democracy," Mumia calls to mind the lamentations of Calgacus, a Caledonian whose British tribe was under

the threat of Roman invasion: “Robbery, butchery, rapine they call empire by euphemisms, and when they produce a wasteland, they call it peace” (Jamal).

The fact of the matter is that Mumia’s writing is at the center of the controversy; even those who maintain that Mumia is guilty cannot deny that his global prominence is due in large part to his radical prose which magnifies the world’s interest in his case. Mumia’s writing also accentuates what his personal circumstances teach us about the nature of the American legal system and the prison-industrial complex. Interestingly, Mumia’s writings on criminal justice have been seen fit enough to appear in the realm of academics. In 1991 one of Mumia’s essays was published in the Yale Law Journal, and his writing voice was still distinct: “States that have not slain in a generation now ready their machinery: generators whine, poison liquids are mixed, and gases are measured and readied” (www.terrybisson.com). As a result of student organizing efforts and campaigns, Mumia has delivered taped commencement speeches for graduating classes at Evergreen State College, Antioch College, UC Santa Cruz, and Occidental College (Latner).

Clearly, many other historical Black figures have realized the notion of attaining freedom within the mind and, for his part, Mumia has championed this message in the form of literature. One can find the stirrings for such self-empowerment in his writings on socioeconomic injustices: “It must come from the poor, a rebellion of the spirit that reaffirms their intrinsic human worth, based upon who they are rather than what they possess” (Jamal 206). In his oppositional writings on American foreign policy, he is never satisfied with simply extending his criticisms against the system. There is always an implicit call to action in his words. It is a call which instructs us to affirm our own freedom within, to resist what he holds as lies and propaganda from invading our otherwise liberated psyches; this is the facet of self-empowerment which impels one to challenge rather than submit. Sometimes this call to action is not so subtle:

If people really want peace, if they want to transform this infernal addiction to war that drives every administration, then they must begin to organize, to deeply transform this political order... That really means the end of the strategy of the lesser-evil in American politics. It means seeing both major parties as traitors to democracy, as wards of the same corporate interests who want...war without end. It means change; in a word: revolution. It means that or it means nothing. (Dispatches from Death Row)

About the reality of American empire, Mumia writes:

There is something quite quaint and frankly disturbing to hear Americans speak of their nation as a democracy. America, given its richness, its diversity and its complexity, is many things but a democracy it ain't. This is especially so if one considers the true imperial nature of the modern American nation-state... For perhaps the first time in almost a century, leading voices of the elite and the corporate press admit as much. In the pages of the Business Journal, the Wall Street Journal, one finds scattered references to the imperial nature of the U.S. empire...When I hear nativist propagandists speak of the U.S. as the birthplace of freedom...I am compelled to ask, how can the birthplace of freedom be built on slavery, the very antithesis of freedom – the heart of un-freedom? (Dispatches from Death Row)

Mumia's rhetoric employs radically political language. This is how his self-empowering example is applied through literary expression, often in political terms. The Black community as well as the academic community could learn a great deal from Mumia's essays. His outlook of self-empowerment is integral to both Black consciousness and contemporary political movements for radical change.

While it may be that Black and radical intellectuals have traditionally been forced to work outside of the walls of academia, is there any reason not to challenge such a tradition,

whether particularly in Mumia's case or anyone else's? Mumia's international status makes his writings one example that could be utilized as a vehicle to break the tradition of African American and dissident exclusion from the academic world. While Mumia reserves the right to define himself, the rest of the world is left to define him by his words since writing has been the theme of his life. In other words, he is what he writes. Mumia has constructed an identity grounded in his ideals which are best defined through his own prose. This means that in order to understand Mumia we need to study his work.

To reiterate, analyses of Mumia's writing are revelatory of a powerful element of self-empowerment which proves to be a pervasive characteristic of his literature and it is this notion of internal freedom that is unique to the literary experience of the African American and revolutionary writing cultures; this uniqueness places Mumia in the same camp with the many other Black and radical intellectuals whose works are deprived of academic recognition. Mumia's expressive essays can be an effective educational tool because, put quite simply, his words are brilliant. Even more astounding is that Mumia can nurture this sense of mental liberation in an institution whose function is to debilitate the mind and the spiritual resilience necessary for asserting an internal form of freedom. His words throw an interesting perspective on the world as he writes from a unique place, a place where most captives often struggle to keep their thoughts sanely grounded, let alone articulate those thoughts in prolific sentences. There are plenty of statistics and studies that can paint for us cold, impersonal pictures of prison life on death rows in America, but rare is the opportunity to delve into the mind of an incarcerated person and to be captured by the pattern of words woven by that mind. Perhaps it is through his writing that Mumia retains sanity – it is therapy for him and education for us. Yet, if the writing is bereft of academic recognition, how many of *us* can be educated by it? That our exposure to Mumia's prose is thwarted is the very injustice that those fighting for Mumia's freedom are

struggling against; this injustice must be confronted in the academic realm with the same vigor that it has been politically challenged in the streets. It is imperative that we initiate academic awareness of Black intellectualism and radical thought in defiance of tradition. Moreover, if we are to challenge this tendency of barring African American and radical intellectualism from the ivory towers, Mumia is, at least presently, one of the best contemporary figures through which we can forge that struggle.

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