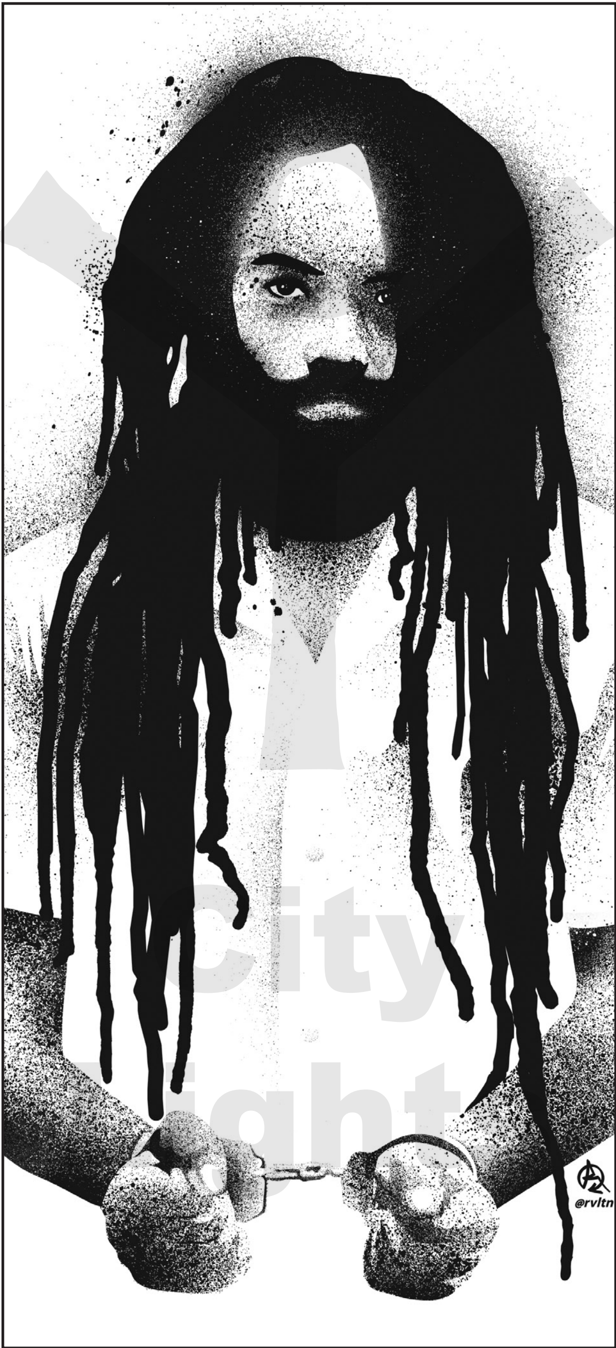
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WRITING ON THE WALL

SELECTED PRISON WRITINGS OF MUMIA ABU-JAMAL

Foreword by Cornel West

Edited by Johanna Fernández

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REVOLUTIONARY LOVE AND THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

By Cornel West

Based on conversations
with Johanna Fernández in September 2014

The first opportunity I had to stand publicly with my dear brother and comrade, the revolutionary Mumia Abu-Jamal, was in the 1990s at the Philadelphia gathering of the National Association of Black Journalists, when the organization was scheduled to take a vote on whether to support Mumia. At that meeting, I delivered an impassioned indictment of the refusal of Black journalists to support Mumia unequivocally. For Mumia is not just an outstanding writer and journalist, he is a living expression of the best of the Black prophetic tradition.

For many years, I had known of Mumia as someone who is a truth teller, a witness bearer, who exposes lies. In 1985, when the MOVE organization became known to the world after that vicious bombing ordered by Philadelphia's first Black mayor, Wilson Goode, I had already developed great respect for Mumia's journalism, including his writings on MOVE's travails with the power structure of the City of Brotherly Love.

Although I had not had the opportunity to interact with Mumia personally, he had been the subject of numerous discussions in the National Black United Front, to which I belonged alongside Reverend Herbert D. Daughtry and his House of the Lord Pentecostal Church in Brooklyn. Mumia was included in our meditations as one of the living figures in the Black community who is part of both our revolutionary and our prophetic traditions.

In the 1990s, the voice of Mumia Abu-Jamal emerges in a special context. On the one hand, that decade is a period of

reaction, because the class war against poor and working people is becoming more intense. Progressive movements are more dispersed and shattered than before, and the Black Freedom movement, under vicious attack, begins to lose its vitality. At this moment we begin to hear more from Mumia Abu-Jamal in the public sphere, a rare voice telling the truth from the vantage point of the wretched of the earth. Then he takes the next vital steps, offering a global analysis and calling for a local praxis.

During this period, I was blessed to stand with Mumia in court in Philadelphia, where Judge Albert Sabo, the judge in his original trial, now presided over a Jim Crow appellate process in his case. I remember clearly that Judge Sabo walked into the courtroom with a rigid, bigoted disposition. In contrast, Mumia entered the courtroom with a smile that announced that he was unbroken and "*ona Move*." Mumia was stronger than we were. I walked out of there a freer Black man by seeing him. I walked out of there more dedicated, more full of conviction by seeing his conviction, his dedication and his love in the face of the lies coming at him.

It was not until Chris Hedges recently took Jim Cohen and me to the prison in Frackville, Pennsylvania, that I first spent time with Mumia face to face. That kind of meeting, which allowed human contact, was possible only because Mumia had been transferred from Death Row to the general prison population. I was deeply moved. When somebody has been through what Mumia has been through, you think they'd be down and out, downtrodden, just barely making it. But again, Mumia walked out with this smile, this tenacity, this style, this unbelievable determination and just sheer spirit.

It was clear to me that the John Coltranes, the Curtis Mayfields, the Charlie Birds, the Gil Scott Herons—all the cultural artists whose works articulate the struggle of our spiritual survival—were at work in the sparkle in his eyes. In the presence of that wonderful juxtaposition of ferocity and tenderness, I began to leap intellectually, to consider that

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there's David Walker in him. There's Harriet Tubman in him. There's Garvey in him, there's a whole lot of Malcolm X and Fanny Lou Hamer in him. What I witnessed was that Mumia Abu-Jamal is rooted in the Black tradition that produced him, that he is ready for battle. And steeped in this tradition, he has the organic ability to draw life into his own spirit from the social, political, existential and economic analyses that he has mastered. And for me, that is the mark of a prophetic figure in our tradition.

I've always said that he is the freest man on death row, and in mind, soul and spirit, he continues to be one of the freest men imprisoned in the early part of the 21st century.

Not many people could undergo what he underwent and still have what I call a militant tenderness, a subversive sweetness and a radical gentleness in his demeanor, in his voice, in his singing and in his writing. In place of bitterness, he radiates gentleness and tenderness.

The lack of bitterness in the face of oppression is a sign of spiritual mastery.

Young people today on the frontlines of organizing need the revolutionary love that Mumia Abu-Jamal has. They're also going to need the revolutionary memory, never forgetting the great freedom fighters, the Frederick Douglasses, the Ella Bakers, the Martins. And they're going to need revolutionary analysis. And all of it—the revolutionary love, revolutionary memory and revolutionary analysis—is at work in every page written by Mumia Abu-Jamal.

What the young folk might not have is the deep Black culture and history out of which brother Mumia emerges. Mumia is not just a great public intellectual, he is an old-school jazz man who has the elegance of what I call "earned self-togetherness." That's hard to get. That only happens in particular historical moments, like the period after World War II, when people steeped in a rich Black Southern culture move to the

urban centers, but they're still connected to deep roots of love and self-affirmation at the level of body and memory.

Young people today are not rooted in that experience. They're third-generation urban. They've grown up in a period of social breakdown, massive unemployment, a crack epidemic, obsession with commodification, and all of this presents them with difficult challenges. It's not a put-down of young people to say that.

But Mumia Abu-Jamal is part of that cultural continuum of struggle that shaped urban Black people between 1950 and about 1980. And the fact that he continues on with tremendous courage and vision and a sacrifice that is beyond description, all of that is a mighty tribute both to him and to the people, the culture and the traditions that produced him.

The Black prophetic tradition is the principled and creative response to being terrorized, traumatized and stigmatized. In the United States, the oppression of generations of Black families and communities is systemic. It has taken the form of white supremacism, enslavement, disenfranchisement, and the terrorism of the Jim Crow and Jane Crow justice system. Oppression is also meted out at the level of the individual. It can take the form of being hated and despised and spat upon. It can take the form of convincing us to hate ourselves, hate our bodies, hate the shape of our noses and lips and so forth. The Black prophetic tradition keeps track of these different forms of oppression. It responds with vision rooted in an analysis of the problem. It spurs praxis through organization and mobilization.

And sometimes it takes the form of an isolated voice, like that of the great David Walker. Sometimes it is a voice that goes back into the belly of the beast over and over again, like Harriet Tubman, to rescue Black life. Sometimes it's about creating a mass movement, as in the example of Marcus Garvey. Sometimes, as with the great W.E.B. Du Bois and

Paul Robeson, it articulates a global, international analysis, but always based in an understanding of American terror visited upon Black people.

The Black prophetic tradition refuses to view Black people's conditions simply as a Negro problem. It identifies these conditions as catastrophes visited on Black people by a system, and it responds with compassion and with a deep knowledge that our sacrifice serves a cause bigger than ourselves.

It's impossible to read any of Mumia's texts without seeing profound visions of freedom, not just for Black folks, but for everybody. Mumia's outlook always includes all the wretched of the earth, no matter what color or country or gender or sexual orientation. Mumia Abu-Jamal's voice is always on the side of those who are fighting against domination, and that is one the highest functions of Black prophetic activity.

We've got rich traditions in the Dominican Republic, rich traditions in Jamaica, rich traditions in Barbados and so forth. But the African American experience is distinct. It's the experience of existing within the most powerful empire in the history of the world, dealing with empire's in-your-face violence and hatred, while still talking seriously about revolutionary love, revolutionary memory, revolutionary analysis. Our truth tellers like brother Mumia pay a tremendous price for their courage, actions and speech.

Many of our precious everyday people pay a tremendous price, too, whether they're part of the movement or not. But the ones who say, "Let's shatter the sleepwalking. Let's awaken the people. Let's expose the lies. Let's courageously bear witness"—those are on the way to the cross, or torment at the hands of the FBI or CIA or DHS. That's just the way things operate in America. We've seen it over and over again, from the repression suffered by the abolitionists through to Garvey and Martin and Malcolm, right up to today. Fanny Lou was viciously attacked and under surveillance. Numerous attempts were made to marginalize Ella Baker. Vicki Garvin and Paul

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Robeson were under house arrest for almost a decade. Du Bois was handcuffed when he was 83 years old in February 1951. We can go on and on and on, up to the current moment.

In Black journalism, probably the greatest figure before Mumia Abu-Jamal was Ida B. Wells-Barnett, an American whose level of courage we lack the language to describe. She had a bounty on her head when she was run out of Memphis, Tennessee. She went to T. Thomas Fortune's *New York Globe* newspaper, which embraced her. Then her supporters had to get her out of the country to England, because her life was threatened after three of her friends had been lynched in Memphis.

The risk-all level of courage she demonstrated by writing about American terrorism in the South, particularly the subject of lynchings—something that Booker T. Washington and Du Bois failed to highlight—is rarely seen today among journalists of any stripe. She was also the first Black journalist to write for a white newspaper when she published in the *Chicago Tribune*, a historically important crossing of the color line.

Ida B. Wells was a great crusader for justice, and a radical reformer. Mumia Abu-Jamal, however, is not a reformer: he's a revolutionary. And he's not writing for pay or tenure. He's writing for the people. That means that he's actually engaging in a completely unfettered analysis of systems of domination—capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and so forth—and calling for a new world that requires fundamental transformation, a revolutionary transformation of the status quo. See, Ida, whom we love deeply, didn't go that far. But Mumia Abu-Jamal does. He builds on Ida B. Wells and others.

A profound crisis of Black professionals becomes apparent when you look critically, the way Mumia does, at Black intellectuals and Black elected officials within America's power structure today. We could say that there has been a *reniggerization* of the Black professional class. They've got money, position,

power, but most of them are scared, intimidated and afraid. That's what niggerization does to Black people: *keeps . . . us . . . afraid*.

Mumia Abu-Jamal is one of the most deniggerized Black people alive today. He looks terror in the face. He keeps fighting, keeps swinging, keeps writing, keeps loving. Even when he was on death row all those years, Mumia Abu-Jamal was not afraid. T. Thomas Fortune was not afraid. Ida B. Wells was not afraid. Most of our Black professionals, journalists, those in the academy and so forth, *are* scared. Their career, their position, their access to power—they've succumbed to all the trappings and paraphernalia of status. But thank God we've got a new generation of young people emerging, and Ferguson is just one sign of it. There are entire communities of people who are definitely not afraid. They've had enough.

The challenge going forward will be learning from Mumia Abu-Jamal and others about how to take your rage and transform it into righteous indignation, how to combine it with a subversive memory, personal integrity and moral tenacity, and then direct it against the indignities of daily injustice and structures of domination. If you don't have the memory and a sense of history, you're not going to have the vision you need. If you don't have integrity, people are going to buy off your movement, and if you don't have tenacity, you're going to run out of gas. So you aren't going to be a long-distance runner like brother Mumia, whose voice and writings instill us, year after year, with all we need to run long, to run together, to run with love, which is what it takes to win.

Love is the dominant force that allows us to sustain ourselves and to resist forces of domination. Given the ubiquitous commodification in society, where everything and everybody seems to be up for sale, if you don't have a deep love, you'll sell out. I'm talking about love for the people, which Mumia Abu-Jamal embodies—a profound, revolutionary, community-building

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love. A love that sees the business-as-usual suffering, impoverishment, war and dehumanization as a call to rise up.

If Mumia could hold on and voice that call for all these years inside the nightmare and never cave in, then we have no excuses for ever caving in, giving up or selling out when it comes to the sacred needs of the everyday people we should be willing to live and die for. Mumia is a special brother, and his writings are a wake-up call. He is a voice from our prophetic tradition, speaking to us here, now, lovingly, urgently. Black man, old-school jazz man, freedom fighter, revolutionary—his presence, his voice, his words are the writing on the wall.

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Introduction

By Johanna Fernández

Two years ago, the *New York Times* featured an illustrated article on the discovery of a manuscript penned by hand in a dank, 19th-century cell by a black prisoner, Austin Reed. The memoir elicited great interest among contemporary historians, activists, scholars of African American literature, and the general public. The Yale professor who is editing the manuscript celebrated its "lyrical quality" and the singularity of Reed's message in the American canon. But Reed's text is also significant because it forms part of a body of searing black prisoners' narratives on freedom that destabilize, through their humanism, the demonization reserved for the "black outlaw" in U.S. history. Reed's writing exemplifies what Cornel West calls the black prophetic voice in American history—a voice committed to illuminating the truth about black oppression and its systemic causes, and to advancing the project of true justice and freedom.

Because they speak uncomfortable truths, black prophetic voices of living men and women are vilified or swept under the rug by those who, in West's words, are "well-adjusted to injustice." This hard reality has defined the lives of those we celebrate today, from Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass to Angela Davis and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In our lifetime, one American, not unlike Austin Reed, articulates today's uncomfortable truths. His voice reveals the centrality of black oppression to the project of American capitalism and empire, the unbridled racism of the U.S. justice system, the immediate and rippling horrors of war, the unfinished project of American democracy, and the possibilities of a liberated society not just for black people at home, but for everyone, everywhere. This living black writer enriches the black

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prophetic tradition and our social prospects, giving ordinary people a sense of their own power and inspiring those on the margins of society to stand up and fight. From the solitude of a harsh prison cell, not unlike the one in which Austin Reed penned his memoir 150 years ago, this brave and selfless man has dedicated thousands of hours to articulating a rich and resonant message of social redemption.

This man is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Since his incarceration 33 years ago, Mumia has authored seven unique books and recorded thousands of incisive and eloquent radio commentaries. His critically acclaimed bestseller, *Live From Death Row*, humanized death row from the inside and exposed its racist character. As a revolutionary, his study, literacy, and fostering of connections among people confronting injustice the world over are relentless, even as the powers that be conspire to censor his message and criminalize his speech.

A former Black Panther and imprisoned radio journalist, Mumia Abu-Jamal was framed by the Philadelphia police, railroaded in the courts, and wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death for the 1981 killing of Daniel Faulkner, a white Philadelphia police officer. In the 1990s, Mumia Abu-Jamal came dangerously close to execution, first on August 17, 1995, and again on December 2, 1999. Had it not been for the mass international movement that mobilized in the streets to save his life, we would know less of the quiet power behind the person that the world knows simply as Mumia.

Mumia's thoughtful and humane voice shatters the official narrative of him as monster and unrepentant cop-killer. As politicians and pundits paint the incarcerated as ruthless and worthless, Mumia counters with sober political critiques and a warm message of human connection and caring that call into question the assumptions and apparatus that have imprisoned not just him, but the more than two million other mostly black and brown people in our nation's sprawling prison system.

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Today, in this moment of renewed upsurge against racist state violence, his voice is more dangerous than ever.

The most powerful police organization in the world, the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), is the entity that has steadily sought his execution, marshaling legal actions, lobbying the Department of Corrections and the courts, and undertaking coordinated and aggressive media campaigns that instill public fear. In October 2014, when the FOP failed to prevent Mumia from giving a pre-recorded commencement speech at his alma mater, Goddard College, the Pennsylvania State legislature passed a vindictive gag law, the Revictimization Relief Act. The unconstitutional law threatens to dramatically curtail the free speech of all Pennsylvania prisoners and sue those who help amplify their voices under the pretext that such speech produces "mental anguish" among crime victims and their families. The Abolitionist Law Project and the ACLU have each filed challenges; their plaintiffs include prisoners, university professors, journalists, newspapers, and advocacy groups.

The FOP knows that the widespread discovery of Mumia's case and messages, both written and spoken, by today's generation of young black and brown activists undermines their credibility, existence, and very purpose. The sharp political analysis and valiant history of a former generation of black radicals—a significant number of whom are political prisoners today—could threaten the entire criminal justice system, and the *system itself*. The Black Lives Matter movement that has sprung to life in response to the rampant murder of young black and Latino men and women by police from Oakland to Ferguson to New York City and North Charleston makes the injustices of Mumia's case all the more apparent, and his eventual freedom all the more likely.

—

Writing on the Wall is the first comprehensive selection of

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Mumia's short prison commentaries. The volume covers the entire span of time from his arrest in 1981 to the present. On December 8, 1981, while moonlighting as a cabdriver, the Philadelphia radio journalist witnessed through his rearview mirror an altercation between a police officer and a car with two men, one of whom he soon recognized as his brother, Billy Cook. Mumia stopped his car and ran through a parking lot to aid his brother. In the sequence of events that followed, a police officer, Daniel Faulkner, was shot and killed. Mumia was found semi-conscious, slumped nearby with a bullet from Officer Faulkner's gun in his stomach. A gun belonging to Mumia, which he had recently acquired because he had been held up while driving the cab, was allegedly found nearby. At the crime scene, Mumia was brutally beaten by police, held in a police vehicle for 30 minutes, beaten some more, and eventually driven to the entrance of the Jefferson Hospital emergency room, where he was thrown on the sidewalk. Before long he was charged with first-degree murder and railroaded in a capital trial. A discussion of the legal case and its violations can be found in the appendix of this volume.

The earliest of Mumia's writings, from the period immediately following his hospitalization and transfer to a local jail, reflect on social injustice broadly as well as the personal abuse he suffered—his bullet wound and beating to the edge of death by the police, his hospitalization, and his wrongful conviction for the murder of Officer Faulkner.

> I have finally been able to read press accounts of the incident that left me near death, a policeman dead, and me charged with his murder. It is nightmarish that my brother and I should be in this foul predicament, particularly since my main accusers, the police, were my attackers as well. My true crime seems to have been my survival of their assaults, for we were the victims that night.

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Delivered at trial by Mumia during allocution, a right to speak that is afforded to defendants after conviction and before sentencing, this statement of July 1982 proclaims his innocence:

> I am innocent of these charges that I have been tried for, despite the connivance of Judge Sabo, Prosecutor McGill and Tony Jackson to deny me my so-called "right" to represent myself, to assistance of my choice, to personally select a jury of my peers, to cross-examine witnesses, and to make both opening and closing arguments. I am innocent despite what you 12 people think, and the truth shall set me free!

Soon after his trial, Mumia begins to write with less frequency about himself, his case and his innocence. It's as if his own unexpected clash with the state has made him a tribune for every youth, adult, family and community of color forced to endure similar abuses as a fact of everyday life. In the early 1990s, supporters published this statement and the seven essays that follow it here in a pamphlet titled *Survival Is Still a Crime*. Written between early 1982 and 1989, these pieces read like quiet explosions. Social justice activists used the pamphlet to help build the movement to free Mumia.

In these initial writings we feel the passion of a younger, militant Black Panther who, steeped in the literature and history of revolutionary struggle, is eager to share his insights with readers. The Panthers argued that, at core, American racism had never been about exclusion or discrimination alone, but rather about the systematic superexploitation and control of black America to advance the interlocking interests of capitalism and empire. Black people had more in common, the Panthers argued, with other oppressed people of the world, such as the Vietnamese, and with oppressed white workers (however misguided by racist ideology) than with the growing

ranks of black elected officials who were beginning to manage urban centers.

Mumia's life as a writer, radio journalist and political commentator had begun in the late 1960s, when at age 15 he started writing for the Black Panther Party newspaper in Philadelphia. In 1972, he discovered radio journalism at Goddard College, and by the late 1970s he had become a respected, award-winning voice among Philadelphia's radio broadcasters. He worked for local and national black radio stations, for the city's National Public Radio affiliate, and for the national station's acclaimed signature program *All Things Considered*. In 1981, he became president of the local chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Yet despite having been lauded by *Philadelphia Magazine* as "one to watch" for his talents as a radio journalist, Mumia was fired from a number of local radio stations. Among them were WWDB and WPEN, where he refused to submit to administrative directives to discontinue his on-air challenges to the city's notoriously brutal police department and to the escalating harassment of a local black radical group, the MOVE organization.[1]

MOVE was a Philadelphia-based group of black people committed to a radical vision of cooperative, healthy and environmentally conscious living. Its members took the surname Africa, reasoning that it was "the original homeland of all mankind." In the words of Mumia's biographer, Terry Bisson, its members were "controversial, confrontational, belligerent and profane, calling their detractors 'motherfuckers' and 'niggers,' while pointing out that the real obscenity is the system that allows racism, exploitation, and injustice to flourish." While the comparable white communes of the period retreated to rural areas and were rarely targeted by the state, MOVE had developed anti-establishment politics defined by the violent state repression visited upon black, urban social movements of the 1960s and '70s.

The organization figures prominently in Mumia's writings and in his political worldview for many reasons. Long before his arrest, the plight of MOVE engaged him as a microcosm of state treatment of black people historically. MOVE's honesty and commitment to a combination of personal, spiritual and political uplift—as well as its open denunciation of American capitalism, which preyed on every aspect of human life and the environment—inspired him. Mumia was perhaps the only Philadelphia journalist who covered the organization's ongoing conflict with the police in a way that gave voice to MOVE members' perspectives and grievances. It was this that cost him his job with mainstream radio stations, and later, his own trial proceedings were prejudiced by his coverage, association with and sympathy for MOVE.

Needless to say, MOVE became a priority target for harassment by Philadelphia law enforcement. Mumia writes with indignation after each act of violence committed by the authorities, such as when police trampled a MOVE baby to death, carried out a military-style siege and destruction of a residential MOVE house, or, on May 13, 1985, firebombed a neighborhood to ashes. On that day, the black mayor of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, in collaboration with the fire and police departments, had a military-grade aerial firebomb dropped on the MOVE house. The bombing killed 11 people—five children and six adults—and burned down 61 homes, destroying the entire African American neighborhood of Powelton Village. Mumia writes:

> People mark time by events held in common, and shared moments of joy and sorrow. Cities, although artificial, non-organic bodies, mark time similarly. Paris is known today as the "City of Light," but the dark shadow of the Nazi Occupation is still within the memory of the living. . . . Yes, cities hold memories, locked in the minds and souls of its inhabitants.

> . . . Paris had its Occupation, Beirut its Sabra and Shatila, and Philadelphia its MOVE bombing.

Against this backdrop, Mumia's writings about MOVE and respect for its leader, John Africa, whom he salutes at the end of many of his public presentations, are profound acts of solidarity. In 1986, in the immediate aftermath of both the bombing of the MOVE house in Philadelphia[2] and of his own calvary in the courts, Mumia writes with indignation about one of the major themes in this volume—liberation from oppression through political education and collective struggle from below:

> When will these dismal days of our mind-rending pain, our oppression, our accustomed place on the bottom rung of the human family, end? When will our tomorrows brighten? It will come from ourselves, not from this system. Our tomorrows will become brighter when we scrub the graffiti of lies from our minds, when we open our eyes to the truths that this very system is built not on "freedom, justice and brotherhood" but on slavery, oppression and genocide.

For the first 28 years of his incarceration, Mumia was on death row, isolated for 22 hours a day in a prison cell the size of a small bathroom. During this time he was denied all forms of human contact and twice came within days of being executed. Despite these harrowing conditions, Mumia read voraciously and continued to write prolifically. In fact, the equanimity he gained through the daily ritual of writing probably saved him from the worst consequences of devastating isolation and living with a date to die.

But writing was more than a therapeutic exercise. In prison Mumia disciplined his prose, using his solitary time to develop into a writer of great literary power. Throughout these years

he offered analyses of major developments in American society and world politics, with emphasis on the varied contemporary manifestations of racism and inequality; the changing character of work; the growth of class stratification and land dispossession under 20th- and 21st-century capitalism; the causes of war; and the persistence of colonial structures of oppression in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the post-colonial era.

Although most of Mumia's commentaries are political in nature and address the structural causes and historical roots of social problems, his writing is devoid of dogmatic political lines. Nuanced humanism and fierce solidarity pulse through his writing about the vulnerability and resistance of the most disadvantaged, elevating his work from journalism to literature. "Who will sing of the wonder, the terror, the beauty, and the madness of Black life in this new century?" he asks in one of his commentaries. His essays are those songs—"redemption songs," to use Bob Marley's expression.

Writing on the Wall is heir to three historical currents of freedom literature arising from the nation's well of black experience with both oppression and resistance. First, the searing narratives of black prisoners offer a compelling counter-narrative on freedom and disprove by example the ruthless demonization of the black outlaw in the United States.[3] Second, the black radical tradition, which seeks to understand and redress the root causes of social, economic and political inequity. Third, the black prophetic voice in American history, as Cornel West elaborates in the preface to this volume.

For centuries, black voices have responded to the nation's callous indifference to the suffering of oppressed people with calls for rebellion. From the abolitionist petitions written by Prince Hall as the United States was declaring its independence to David Walker's *Appeal*, which called on enslaved black persons to rebel against their white enslavers; from the anti-lynching journalism of Ida B. Wells-Barnett to the calls for self-defense by black journalists writing in the *Crusader* and the

Black Panther, black voices of conscience have risen up against the atrocities of racism and a racially exclusionary democracy organized at its inception to serve the interests of land-owning white men. At every juncture in American history, the struggle for freedom embodied in these black voices has pried open the narrow boundaries of U.S. democracy. It has compelled society to afford its hallowed freedoms not just to those liberated from their enslavers and their descendants, but to those who have been historically positioned outside of both citizenship and full personhood—among them immigrants, women, Native Americans, the impoverished, and, increasingly, Asian Americans and Arab Americans.

Contributing to this great tradition, Mumia posits that we can break free from our oppressive system. But he cautions that justice and equality can be achieved only through the fundamental transformation of society, and that such a transformation can occur only through a democratic culture involving full bottom-up participation of ordinary people and communities.

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It was in the community of Philadelphia and its people that Mumia found his revolutionary perspectives. In the 1960s and ’70s, the criminalization and repression of black protesters in Philadelphia was directed by a police commissioner turned mayor, Frank Rizzo, who made a name for himself as the tough sheriff in town. It was Rizzo who ordered a raid on the Panthers’ office during which members were forced to undress and line up on the street clad only in their underwear. It was in this climate that local police, in collaboration with federal agents, compiled an 800-page surveillance file on Mumia between 1968 and 1981.

Mumia’s incarceration coincided with the dark conservative era of the Reagan-Bush era, when many veteran activists from the 1960s became demoralized about the possibilities

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for change or were coopted into mainstream institutions. Ironically, Mumia's death row imprisonment, where concrete reminders of the state's repressive character were a daily reality, preserved and enlarged his revolutionary perspective.

Many of Mumia's commentaries offered humanistic descriptions of the prisoners he observed around him, as well as those on the outside who were dedicating their lives to justice. Among the many he honors are the sole adult survivor of the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia, Ramona Africa; Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Huey P. Newton; and Attorney William Kunstler. It is also in this period that Mumia's first book, *Live From Death Row*, is published and becomes a critically acclaimed best-seller.

In prison, the writing process was arduous. For the first 18 years of his isolation on death row, Mumia did not have access to a typewriter. With careful attention to penmanship, he wrote his commentaries longhand, in tightly compressed block letters, pressing firmly on two blank sheets separated by carbon paper. Mumia's literary agent, Frances Goldin, often recalls the big lump on Mumia's hand during those days—a quarter-inch callus produced by the ritual exercise of writing with a clenched grip on his pen.

Mumia mailed both copies of each new commentary to volunteers, who then typed his texts. Like a message in a bottle, these commentaries, once transcribed, were then passed on by hand or mailed and reproduced within movement circles. The tireless women who transcribed Mumia's work consistently include the late Susan Burnett (the wife of Ali Bey Hassan of the Black Panther 21) and Sister Marpessa Kupendua. Today, Sister Fatirah Aziz, also known as Litestar01, receives Mumia's commentaries for transcription and distributes them via email and other online outlets. In the early years of his incarceration, activists in the movement to free Mumia, especially MOVE members, hand delivered the commentaries to community newspapers. The *Philadelphia Tribune* and the African American

weekly newspaper *Scoop USA*, published in Philadelphia and edited by R. Sonny Driver, were among the first to print Mumia's prison writings.

During the first decade of his incarceration, more than 20 newspapers published his commentaries, including the *Voice of Detroit*; the *Democrat* in Green County, North Carolina; the *San Francisco Bay View*; and the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. By the 1990s that number had more than doubled, and with the advent of the Internet, the international Free Mumia movement was among the first to use online methods to raise his profile, educate international audiences on the violations in his case, and distribute his writings to a broad readership.

In the late 1980s Mumia went back to his beloved radio broadcasting. He had first been recognized for his radio journalism in 1981, when he won Columbia University's coveted Edward Howard Armstrong Prize in broadcasting for his report on Pope John Paul's visit to Philadelphia. In 1988, Mumia began broadcasting meditations on the meaning of freedom via a portable telephone delivered twice a week to his death row cell. Since 1992, Noelle Hanrahan has systematically recorded and distributed a majority of these to radio stations around the world through the nonprofit Prison Radio Project. From this period forward, Mumia's commentaries reflect his shift to radio and a consistently shorter format.

Radio was the single most important influence on his writing style: "When you're doing radio and are under the gun of the clock, you have to focus and concretize your message succinctly and evocatively. The goal is always to paint a picture that captures the listener." Recording for radio broadcast also demanded a broadening of his subject matter, so Mumia began to write about the major political events and flashpoints occurring in American society and world politics, as seen in this volume.

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Mumia Abu-Jamal's prolific body of work is anchored in the understanding that the trafficking and enslavement in North and South America of 10 million Africans financed Western European colonies and the industrial revolution that brought capitalism to maturity. The study of international systems of oppression, and their impact domestically and abroad, frame his perspective. From Mumia's point of view, the historical experience of bondage continues to be manifested in the cruel, violent and repressive role of the state today: systems of oppression operative since the nation accommodated enslavers remain intact, even if recast. Prisons, Mumia writes, are just "steel-and-brick slave ships," and the impunity with which police violence is perpetrated in black communities is just the most current form of lynching. But "the cops are not the problem," writes Mumia:

> They are the symptom of a total systemic disease. One that sacrifices the poor, the Mexican, the African American and the powerless to the system. It is in this context, then, that one must examine the rising incidence and severity of cop violence. Why do we speak of "police brutality"? Why not call it what it is? It is *police terrorism*. And the state is not a solution to the problem; indeed, it is the problem.

Like other imprisoned dissidents such as Antonio Gramsci, Sacco and Vanzetti, Eugene Debs, Malcolm X and George L. Jackson, Mumia commits to articulating the voices of millions. He presents not just a black counter-narrative to the prevailing formulations of white supremacy, but a redemptive script that strives to achieve a society in which social domination, violence and indignity are both unconscionable and impossible.

Regarding the impact of globalization, he declares that the United States uses "the illusion of 'free trade' to crowbar into local and national economies." His commentaries docu-

ment the ways in which ordinary working people organize to protect themselves from capitalism's relentless incursions. He also aims to increase public solidarity with social movements around the world. In the spirit of "an injury to one is an injury to all," he addresses crises in Palestine, Egypt, Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Iraq, Afghanistan and Canada, and does so with the same sense of urgency he applies to events in Ferguson. To help bring foreign matters into focus here at home, he often makes connections to U.S. political philosophy and doctrine. So, for example, to give a better understanding of programs to help the poor in Venezuela, he discusses them through the lens of Thomas Paine. "What would he think," asks Mumia, "about an America that tried, unsuccessfully, to spark a coup in Venezuela several years ago, because oil companies and money men didn't want that country to spend its national wealth on the nation's poor? Would he find in Señor Presidente Chávez, and his struggle to empower the poor, an enemy or an ally?"

Mumia's voice has offered enduring resistance to the forces of globalized violence. When the photos of orange-uniformed prisoners from the U.S.-controlled Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad spread around the world, Mumia was among the first critics to note that the dehumanizing treatment of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib had its awful precedents in prisons and police stations across the United States. In 2004 he wrote: "The roots of Guantánamo, of Abu Ghraib, of Bagram Air Force Base, of U.S. secret torture chambers operating all around the world, are deep in American life, and its long war against Black life and liberation."

Ironically, Mumia's transfer in 2012 from death row to the general prison population came with new revelations about the national crisis of imprisonment. He had believed he knew its contours, yet when he was able to see and physically mix with the multitudes of men warehoused in the nation's prisons, he realized that the general population was profoundly different

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from that of death row. He was especially struck and troubled by the number of elderly prisoners who walk with canes or are in wheelchairs, and by the many others who look like children. "I thought I had read and mastered all there is to know about prisons," he writes. "I've been humbled. . . . Now, I regularly go back and rethink and reread what I thought I knew."

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Permeating all the decades of his writing from prison is Mumia's profound identification with people in the throes of personal or collective struggle. While watching CNN's Don Lemon interview five young black men about the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, Mumia had to fight to hold back tears when he heard each man identifying himself as Michael Brown —the unarmed black youth gunned down in the street by a Ferguson police officer. Such solidarity rooted in love courses through the selections in *Writing on the Wall*. Solidarity with the downtrodden, the dispossessed, the deported, the imprisoned and the impoverished elevates the writing not only from journalism to literature, but from literature to the prophetic.

In his essay *The Meaning of Ferguson*, Mumia quotes Vladimir Illich Lenin, the Russian revolutionary: "There are decades when nothing happens, there are weeks when decades happen." Mumia then describes how government repression has sown the seeds of a deeper rebellion and a deeper understanding of the relations of power. "The government responded with the tools and weapons of war," writes Mumia. "They attacked them as if Ferguson were Fallujah, in Iraq." In struggle, the people of Ferguson "learned the wages of black protest . . . the limits of their so-called 'leaders,' who called for 'peace' and 'calm' while armed troops trained submachine guns and sniper rifles on unarmed men, women and children." He concludes his ode to the heirs of the black radical tradition with a call to build independent, radical organizations: "Ferguson

may prove a wake-up call. A call for youth to build social, radical, revolutionary movements for change."

Although the state has relentlessly persecuted Mumia for over 33 years, painting him as a hardened and hateful killer, his voice is without bitterness. His resilience shows the ability of the human spirit to withstand the worst that this system can do to a person. He enables us to read the writing on the wall—to believe that the days of this system are numbered, and that another world is possible. Like Nelson Mandela, Mumia defies his captors by preserving his integrity and compassion in the face of the hateful repression orchestrated against him. Nowhere is this contrast more apparent than the moment when his death sentence was found unconstitutional. Immediately after his transfer to the general prison population, he wrote a letter to the men and women he was leaving behind on the row:

> I write to tell you all—even those I've never met—that I love you, for we have shared something exceedingly rare. I have shared tears and laughter with you, that the world will neither know nor see. . . . But, Brothers and Sisters of the Row, I write not of death, but of life. . . . Love fiercely. Learn a new thing. . . . Keep your mind alive. Keep your heart alive. Laugh! . . . No matter what the world says of you, see the best in each other and radiate love to each other.

Love and solidarity define Mumia's writings and life behind bars. His voice is defiant and transgressive, yet measured and rational, and always resonating with hope. This book is offered in the spirit of Mumia's uncompromising commitment to love, justice, community and the highest aspirations of humanity.