

Mumia Abu-Jamal

**HAVE
BLACK LIVES
EVER
MATTERED?**

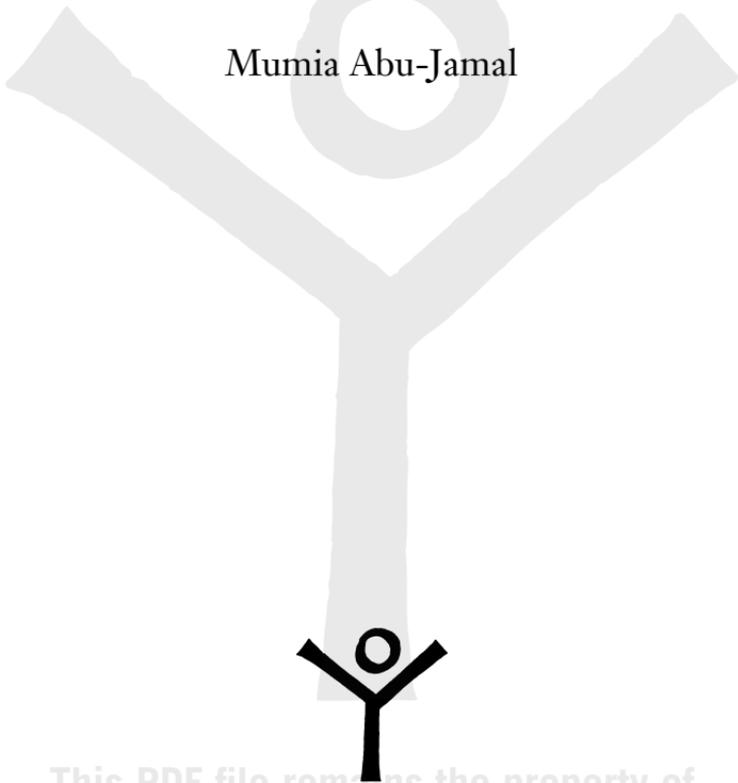
Prophet, critic, historian, witness . . . Mumia Abu-Jamal is one of the most insightful and consequential intellectuals of our era. These razor sharp reflections on racialized state violence in America are the fire and the memory our movements need right now.

—Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

HAVE BLACK LIVES EVER MATTERED?

Mumia Abu-Jamal



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HAVE BLACK LIVES EVER MATTERED?

An Introduction

Does the title of this work seem provocative? If so, then good. That's how it's intended to be. For if the question is provocative, then what of the answer? Is not the answer, no matter how damning, far more provocative? And yet, who dares answer in any way other than the negative?

There is an old axiom, especially among journalists and journalism professors, that “today’s newspapers are the first draft of history.” Like most axioms, they hold a kernel of truth, but there is more.

Here is another axiom: “History is written by the victors.”

The words printed here were not written by a victor, but by one who has seen and sensed what was happening on the other side of a prison wall, who seeks to convey those impressions with truth, and who has often done so several times a week.

In a sense, the impressions recorded in the pages ahead are a form of history—Black history—recorded during a particular passage of time. During this particular period we experienced the greatest economic disaster since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the cultural dominance of hip-hop, the nation’s fever over mass incarceration, the Obama

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presidency, the spread of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the unexpected onset of the Donald J. Trump era.

True history—what Howard Zinn called “the people’s history”—is the one that ordinary people create through their everyday struggles. And yet for Blacks, much that never makes it to the newspapers—or, if so, only in a distorted form—still leaves scars in the mind, evidence of traumas sustained from simply *existing* as a Black person in the United States of America.

The pages ahead reflect the people’s struggles in the invisible sectors of American society, sectors which, by a terrible necessity, are populated largely by Blacks, Latinos, immigrants, the incarcerated, and those with little income. The pages ahead are also, by equal necessity, reflections of insurgent, emergent, radical, and revolutionary aspiration, thinking, and living. For from oppression comes solidarity, resistance, rebellion, and change.

National movements like Black Lives Matter are manifestations of such solidarity and resistance, and give voice to the eruption of outrage, angst, hopes, and insurgent protest provoked by each new killing. That such a movement was brought into being by three young women of color—Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza—is telling, for throughout American history we have seen how the dedicated efforts of women of color have driven resistance networks and liberation movements. These determined sisters have both studied history and altered it, and continue to do so today.

The American nation-states began with Europeans brutally dominating and enslaving indigenous people. The lands seized in the “New World” were worked by so-called “Indians,” people whose lives did not matter to the white Europeans who, quite literally, worked the locals to death.

In his chilling portrait of the “American Holocaust,” historian David E. Stannard quotes from the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Franciscan friar who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his trek to “the Indies”:

Caring only for short-term material wealth that could be wrenched up from the earth, the Spanish overlords on Hispaniola removed their slaves to unfamiliar locales—“the roads to the mines were like anthills,” Las Casas recalled—deprived them of food, and forced them to work until they dropped. At the mines and fields in which they labored, the Indians were herded together under the supervision of Spanish overseers, known as *mineros* in the mines and *estancieros* on the plantations, who “treated the Indians with such rigor and inhumanity that they seemed the very ministers of Hell, driving them day and night with beatings, kicks, lashes and blows and calling them no sweeter names than dogs.”¹

So savage was the violence that the Europeans waged against the people of the indigenous nations, that before a century passed, approximately 60 to 80 million Native Americans had been killed.²

Indian lives simply did not matter to whites who arrived on their shores; what mattered to them was getting free land and cheap labor. By 1502 the Spanish were importing shackled Africans to replace the Indian communities they

had brutally decimated with abuse and disease. By 1619, the first Black laborers, known as indentured servants, arrived aboard Dutch ships at Jamestown, Virginia, an early English settlement. By 1650, the norm for Black people in the growing colonies would be a lifetime of enslavement.

For the next 200 years, Black lives mattered as little to whites as had those of the indigenous. From 1619 to the early 1800s, some 100 million people were transported in filth and chains from Africa to the Americas, with a relatively small number, nearly a million, being shipped to the plantations and fields of British North America. These dark-skinned Africans and their descendants slaved for generations in order to feed, house, serve, and enrich profit-obsessed white people. They wasted their lives to build a thriving economy that enriched their enslavers, but not themselves or their families.

These first Black Americans weren't considered enslaved workers; under British and American law, they were not even persons, but property, mere beasts of burden.

In the 1856 book *Stroud's Slave Laws: A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the United States of America*, George M. Stroud surveys the laws governing the impoverished lives of enslaved Blacks, and portrays white America as a place of unremitting cruelty and meanness. Stroud shows how the courts of the land, North and South, served the interests of the white enslavers, but was utterly ruthless when it came to the needs of the Blacks they enslaved. Among the cases that Stroud presents to crystallize his point are *Negro Flora vs. Joseph Graisberry* and *State vs. Mann*.

In the case of *Negro Flora vs. Joseph Graisberry*, Ms.

Flora, a Black woman enslaved in Pennsylvania, attempted to use the court system to sue for her freedom. In what Stroud calls a “mockery of justice,” the state’s highest court ruled that slavery did not violate the state constitution even though it states: “All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent and indefeasible [inexpugnable] rights, among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty.” Stroud, a Philadelphia attorney, noted with derision that the decision was rendered by a unanimous state supreme court.³

In the case of the *State vs. Mann* the decision reads:

The end [of slavery] is the profit of the master, his security, and the public safety. The subject is one doomed in his own person and his posterity to live without knowledge and without the capacity to make any thing his own, and to toil that another may reap the fruits. Such services can only be expected from one who has no will of his own; who surrenders his will in implicit obedience to that of another. The power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect. In the actual condition of things it must be so. There is no remedy. This discipline belongs to the state of slavery. They cannot be disunited without abrogating at once the rights of the master and absolving the slave of his subjection. It constitutes the curse of slavery to both the bond and free portions of the population; but it is inherited in the relation of master and slave.⁴

Some readers may object and ask: supreme court opinions from two states? How does that reflect the broad diversity of American legal opinion? Or: Isn't it unfair to cite to cases before the Civil War; before the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution?

While these objections have facial appeal, they do not stand scrutiny, for it remains a fact of legal life that most law is state law. Furthermore, most cases never make it to a state's supreme court.

Moreover, what changed after the U.S. Constitution was amended? In a word, little, for Southern states followed the bright, brief respite of Reconstruction with the dark night of Redemption, and proceeded, with the tacit acquiescence of the U.S. Supreme Court, to ignore the so-called "Reconstruction Amendments." This was accomplished first by attacking Black voting rights, then attacking Black voters and using state laws and state constitutions to outlaw Black voting.

If the U.S. Constitution was respected in the South, why did Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and company have to struggle for voting rights, or even need a voting rights law? Why was the Civil Rights Movement even waged? Because across America, Black lives, as with Black votes, didn't matter.

Or did they?

During Reconstruction, Blacks were elected to state and national legislative bodies. They sat on juries and served as government officials. Perhaps more potently, Black political figures shepherded into existence free public schools and public works, and advanced women's rights. The new

public schools, open to Black and white children, brought literacy to millions for whom it might otherwise not have been possible.

Of course, white reaction took the form of denigration of Black politicians, perhaps best seen in the propaganda film for white supremacy *Birth of a Nation*, which has the distinction of being the first motion picture to be shown in the White House. President Woodrow Wilson described the film as “like writing history with lightning.” “My only regret,” said Wilson, “is that it is all too terribly true.”

The beginning of the 20th century was marked by horrific racist mob attacks on Blacks from the rural South, who in many cases were newcomers to America’s major cities. Black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois called the period “Red Summer” for the sheer volume of Black blood shed.

An American Congress had indeed passed the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, but they were blatantly ignored in dozens of states where the torture and terrorism of bullwhips, lynch rope, and arson were practiced with greater consistency than were the lofty promises of the amended Constitution. Yes, in theory the U.S. Constitution protected the rights of Black Americans to vote. But Southern states responded by producing a plethora of new laws to suppress Black voting, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses—laws that denied the right of voting to anyone whose grandfather hadn’t voted!

Have Black votes ever mattered?

Well, they certainly have seemed important enough to suppress and steal.

The naked denial of constitutional rights for perhaps

a century lasted until the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements demanded change.

Meanwhile, millions of Black people voted with their feet when they left the South for states in the North and West, including Pennsylvania, Illinois, Kansas, and California.

This exodus became known as the Great Migration, one of the biggest population shifts of the 20th century. Black Americans fled the ephemeral Southern comforts for the reasons people have emigrated since time immemorial: to escape the acute meanness of racial tyranny; to escape terrorist violence; to flee from economic exploitation; to seek lives of freedom and dignity; and to bless their children with hopes of better lives.

Historian James R. Grossman writes of the new period for Black life in America:

For the first time in American history, the nation's basic industries offered production jobs to African Americans. From New York, Boston, and Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, Chicago, Detroit, and to a lesser extent, Los Angeles, factory gates opened.

Work in railroad yards, steel mills, food-processing plants, garment shops, and other industries paid wages far beyond what was available in the rural or urban South. But it was more than the money that attracted black Southerners north. These jobs also represented portals into the industrial economy. These opportunities promised a new basis for claims to full citizenship—a promise

that a previous generation of black Southerners had envisioned in the possibility of landownership.⁵

For these Americans, the North was the Promised Land, and they did not see the thorns amidst the roses. They never dreamed that the new gleaming mega-cities would become traps as oppressive as the ramshackle huts and shacks they fled from back home.

They went North and West because their Black lives mattered.

But where once whites killed and terrorized from beneath a KKK hood, now they now did so openly from behind a little badge. And while it may seem like a leap to associate the historical white terrorism of the South with the impunity with which police kill in Black communities today, it is really not so great of a leap because both demonstrate a purpose of containment, repression, and the diminution of Black hope, Black aspirations, and Black life.

Indeed, the late Dr. Huey P. Newton, a cofounder of the Black Panther Party, in a 1967-era interview, likened the relations between police and Blacks in the United States as one of antagonism similar to that between the U.S. Army and the enemy population in Vietnam:

In America, Black people are treated very much as the Vietnamese people, or any other colonized people. . . for the brutalizing police in our community occupy our area, our community as a foreign troop occupies territory. And the police are . . . in our community not to promote our welfare, for

our security or safety; they're there to contain us, to brutalize us and murder us, because their orders are to do so. And just like the soldiers in Vietnam have their orders to destroy the Vietnamese people. The police in our community couldn't possibly be there to protect our property, because we own no property. They couldn't possibly be there to see that we receive due process of law, for the simple reason that the police themselves deny us the due process of law. And so it's very apparent that they [are] only in our community, not for our security, but for the security of the business owners in the community, and only to see that the status quo is kept intact.⁶

Dr. Huey P. Newton was quite clear in revealing what mattered to police and the power structure they serve. Black lives did not matter to them in the mid-1960s, and they seem not to matter to them today. When Black men, women, and children gathered in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, to protest the police killing of Mike Brown, they were met by a phalanx of militarized forces, armed with weapons of war. What has really changed? Did things improve under Barack Obama? How do you think things are going to go under Donald Trump?

Have Black lives ever mattered?

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