



UNLOCKING *Democracy*

IN THIS ISSUE

The Right To Vote

Stories of incarcerated voices fighting to end disenfranchisement

Black Immunity

A Poem by Amos Don celebrates Black resilience, critiquing oppression while emphasizing strength, freedom, and self-expression

Empowering Progress

Organizations paving the way for a better future in reentry and restorative justice

Leaders Shaping The Future

Leaders inspiring action, driving change, and cultivating collaboration

“ A ballot is like a bullet. You don't throw your ballots until you see a target, and if that target is not within your reach, keep your ballot in your pocket. ”

—Malcolm X

a letter from the editor

Peace,

Empowering Descendant Communities to Unlock Democracy is proud to introduce our very first edition, **Unlocking Democracy** “NewZine.”

Our mission at EDC is to address the systemic inequities that permeates throughout Black, Caribbean and Indigenous communities behind bars. The exclusion of incarcerated voters undermines political power and decreases voter turnout within Black, Caribbean and Indigenous communities nationwide.

Unlocking Democracy’s purpose is to share the incredible work we are doing but more importantly advocate for the people caught in the struggle, and who are oppressed and civically dead due to de jure voting laws which prevent people from having a voice. This is the platform where voices could be heard and not silenced. And as a formerly incarcerated person I wanted to make sure people behind bars have a space to share their beautiful voices. In this edition, voices from behind the wall will explain their story of disenfranchisement.

EDC is going to continue to work to end felony disenfranchisement in Massachusetts and continue to create a space where those most impacted by systemic inequities have a voice. Therefore we hope that the people love this work and reach out to how to get involved with our mission.

IN SOLIDARITY,
Hamza, Editor



Dan Henson/Getty Images

Acknowledgements

*To our powerful people from behind the wall, thank you to the amazing scholarly voices and victors for making this edition possible, without y'all this could not come into existence which is why I extremely emphasis and heighten the voices behind the walls. And to the incredible partners- **African American Coalition Committee, Democracy Behind Bars Coalition, Healing Our Land Inc. and The Mindich Program In Engaged Scholarship**-in the struggle for standing against the tide of injustice. Lastly, I want to acknowledge and thank my friend, Jac, who helped me tremendously on this NewZine without his expertise in digital layout design this amazing piece could not be created.*

And to the readers thanks for picking this piece up and indulging in the conversation to end felony disenfranchisement and supporting the people tangled in the web of the carceral system and criminal legal system. Peace.

Reflection On Voting Pre-Incarceration



MAURICE "TWIN" SKILLMAN

I grew up in Trenton, New Jersey, a city mostly populated by African Americans, many of them living with unstable families, economic troubles, poor schooling and traumatic events were part of these families, including mine.

It was 2008 and I had the opportunity to express my moral sentiment by the right to vote. This idea was the deep subtext of my life. We had Obama, America's first Black president-my family and I voted for him.

It was personal, knowing how much my vote was much needed for Obama to represent Black people. Reflecting back, I believed my one vote was much more significant to his presidency. Not thinking about the other tens of millions of people who voted. I felt my vote mattered the most.

I sometimes think there might never be another African American president of the United States, the Obama's was enormous and held symbolic power draw from the membership in Hip-Hop's foundational generation. Being Black, being smart and cool. Whereas whiteness in America is a different symbol-a badge of advantages.

So it's closely connected to race because of the much higher rates of imprisonment of African Americans than whites. It's laws that prohibit people of color who have been convicted of felonies from voting, it only targets certain groups of people, particularly people of color. It's a link to disenfranchisement to race creating a lower tier of citizenship.

I believe in civic obligation and I see voting as a strong duty that comes from membership in a community.

The Right to Vote: A Principle of Democracy and Public Safety



RAY-RAY COLON

The SJC is the sole institution that determines the constitutionality of all rights and privileges of the Commonwealth's citizens. Even the rights and privileges voted on by the citizens themselves. Consequently, the vote, back in 2000, to forbid those convicted of felonies from voting should be deemed unconstitutional today. It seems to be highly contradictory, if not hypocritical, for the SJC to authoritatively state that the Massachusetts Constitution "forbids the creation of second-class citizens" on one end of the spectrum, only to turn a blind eye on the other end.

Contemporary standards of decency deserve equitable legal standards from our high court. As the SJC observes: "The Massachusetts Constitution was never meant to create dogma that adopts inflexible views of one time to deny lawful rights to those who live in another"- Goodridge, *supra* at 350 n. 6.

It should be noted that back in 2000, the nation was still in the midst of mass incarceration. Mass incarceration will be remembered by history as another act of racial othering that lawmakers justified under the guise of public safety. This raises the second point, public safety is better served if felons regain the right to vote.

Public safety looked different under mass incarceration than it does under prison reform today. The language of the two policies gives a glimpse into how the incarcerated population is viewed. Under mass incarceration, incarcerated individuals were referred to as offenders, convicts, inmates, etc. Prison reform, to the contrary, attempts to recognize a person's humanity.

The DOC now refers to its incarcerated as incarcerated individuals, although, someone should tell the interim commissioner that the mission statement still says, offenders. Nonetheless, there is an attempt to recognize people as people.

Recognition is the first aspect, treatment is another. Prison reform policies focus on substance abuse, mental health, juvenile brain development, emerging adults, family reunification, reentry services, higher education, medical parole, commutations etc. while none of these services are perfect, more services and opportunities are offered to incarcerated individuals under prison reform policies than under mass incarceration.

This new approach reflects today's public safety whether one agrees with it or not. Over the last three years, former Commissioner. Carol Micci, undersecretary of Public Safety, Andrew Peck, have had multiple meetings with incarcerated individuals at MCI-Norfolk. They recognize the importance of incarcerated individuals' voices being heard.

Now is the time for our voices to be heard with the vote. More than half of the DOC incarcerated population are Black and Brown men and women. Many of us never casted a vote as free citizens.

In fact, many of us never viewed ourselves as citizens. Since up to 95% of incarcerated individuals will return to their communities one day, public safety is best served by a returning citizen who is civically engaged. A returning citizen who is civically engaged is an asset to his or her community—especially, a community of color.

When Black and Brown children see their parents, aunts, uncles, or grandparents return to society and exercise their right to vote—an exercise that will have begun while incarcerated—those children will learn to do the same. The more children of color grow up viewing themselves as citizens, exercising their right to vote, the better off democracy and public safety are served.

The right to vote is a principle of democracy and public safety because it is important to the preservation of the nation's values. A government by the people, for the people must include the people who are paying their debts to society for their wrong decisions. The Massachusetts Constitution is older than the United States Constitution. Massachusetts has always been a leading state in this country. It is time to once again lead and restore the principle of democracy and public safety by returning to felons their right to vote.



I was unconstitutionally Disenfranchised in Jail



Corey "Al Ameen" Patterson

In 2008, I witnessed our nation elect its first Black President from a Nashua Street [Suffolk County Jail] Jail cell in Boston. Through the glass window on my cell door I stared across the unit where the TV was mounted to the wall, anxiously waiting for the race to be called. As fate would have it, the Associated Press declared Barack Obama our next President. Admittedly I was amped. I know my neighbors heard me yelling, "Word! Yeah! That's wassup!" But something else happened that I'll never forget—the entire unit I was on erupted in celebration. It was as if the city won another championship ring. Men were hollering, banging and kicking their cell doors. After my outbursts came to an end, I just stood there in between my reality and expectations, eyes fixed on the television screen, released to be a witness to this moment in history.

I was genuinely excited when Obama won, but I'm genuinely bothered whenever I think about his election. Here's what I know now, that I didn't know then—as pretrial detainees we were all eligible voters, yet none of us were given the opportunity to cast a ballot in an election we all obviously felt deeply connected to. But this is not an isolated problem. In Massachusetts, in every election, close to 9,000, mostly Black and Latino, incarcerated eligible voters (people incarcerated pretrial, for misdemeanors or civilly committed) are purposefully (X) uninformed of their right to vote and in some cases they are illegally denied absentee ballots or these ballot (X) rejected. This long standing practice has come to be known as jail-based "de facto" disenfranchisement.

Once a victim of de facto disenfranchisement and now a casualty of de jure felony disenfranchisement, I share this experience with nearly all the men incarcerated in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. We know all too well the humiliating sting that comes with being denied suffrage. That's why, in 2018, when given the opportunity to propose legislation to members of the Massachusetts Black and Latino Legislative Caucus, my colleagues and I in the African American Coalition Committee (AACC) based in MCI-Norfolk-the largest correctional facility in Massachusetts-prioritized expanding democracy even if not directly for ourselves. We realized that jail-based disenfranchisement was a statewide problem in desperate need of a legislative solution.

Currently, Massachusetts has no system in place across its 14 counties to ensure incarcerated voters have equal-or any-access to casting ballots. These eligible voters think they have lost their right to vote, often because they've been told as much by corrections officers. For so long, this system failure has fostered a culture of disenfranchisement that extends beyond the wall, as incarcerated citizens are released from prison or jail with the belief or fear that they have permanently lost the right to vote.



Black Immunity



Amos Don

This White dress is formal-
Instead of cone tops,
The dances are intimate with disenfranchisement-
But here, we are black feathered crows
Intimate with soaring above and beyond adversity,
Black Immunity-
My able condition to resist inequality's disease,
Keep the privilege-
My prerogative runs with the nature,
Imagine telling birds can't sing-
Depriving my ears to hear
The sweet melody of nature's founded law,
Having no trees for them to land an opinion-
Im expressing this with freedom
Under Black Immunity jurisdiction,
Less!
Your still celebrating Billy's Holiday, strange fruit!
And three-fifth makes me ineligibly good to market U.S. freedom-
What about Savanna?
Where Haitian freedom fighters
Wiped away the thought of tears losing Georgia-
African American's blood watering service
On both sides of Civil War's history,
Nevertheless, I'm just Black Immunity
Brought equality into a world of trees to express an opinion (Voting)
Naturally like birds that sings.



From **My Blue Days Sound Like Blue Jays**
Available on Amazon

Empowering Progress

Organizations Making a Difference

African American Coalition Committee

Peace People,

My honorable name is William Ragland. But my righteous name is 7even Cipher Divine. Today I am the chairman of the AACC (African American Coalition Committee) an organization that was started in 1972 off the heels of the Attica riots in 1971. We were first called the BRC, the Black Rights Committee. AACC is here to help elevate the Black and Brown people in the Norfolk community.

The AACC has worked with many individuals, politicians included. We met with the Black Caucus from Washington state, and the ADA of Boston and state reps as well. In fact, State Rep. Russell Holmes meets with the AACC every first Saturday of the month and has been doing so for approximately 6 years now.

In closing our goals are to uplift the Black and Brown people who are incarcerated not only at Norfolk but abroad. I exit as I entered with the u-n-i-vers-al (universal) language of P.E.A.C.E.

Proper Education Always Correct Errors
Positive Energy Activates Constant Elevation

Warmest Regards,
7even (W. Ragland)



AACC's Achievements

9 Departments

- 1 Management
- 2 Education
- 3 Edutainment
- 4 Legal
- 5 Civic engagement
- 6 Community outreach
- 7 Community engagement
- 8 Secretary
- 9 Defense

8 Subcommittees

- 1 Harriet Tubman Project
- 2 We Are Joint Venture
- 3 CRT (Conflict Resolution Team)
- 4 Parole Workshop
- 5 Hour of Power
- 6 Tutoring GED/Hiset and College
- 7 Way of Life
- 8 Bob Heard Book Club

3 bills passed*

- 1 Jail Based Voting
- 2 Commission on Structural Racism
- 3 Free phone calls, emails and zoom visits (video visits and calls)

** In the State House to date.*

5 Current Initiatives

- 1 Ending Felony Disenfranchisement
- 2 Furloughs
- 3 Parole reform
- 4 Family reunification
- 5 Returning DOC to Health and Human Services

District 10



District 10 was created by a group of Haitians at MCI-Norfolk. Department 10 is the original 10th governmental branch created in Haiti. It was created to show recognition and acknowledgment to the Haitians that even though they left the island, always sent money back to the island to support their fellow Haitians.

Off of Department 10 we created District 10 to emulate the love extended to Haitians upon arrival in an carceral setting. We provide hygiene and food along with helping new arrivals get into the right programs that they need to be successful. Also providing our help for legal aid. We have outside organizers that help keep us up to date with outside situations. And we also have made presentations to state representatives like Erika Uytendaele, and senators such as Ed Markey and even in front of congress such as Ayanna Pressley. Our goal is to be there to help our Haitian people with equal rights and equal opportunity.

The Harriet Tubman Project



The Harriet Tubman Project, inspired from the abolitionist activism of Harriet Tubman, is a group committed to fashioning efforts designed to not only dismember, but to dismantle institutions known to foster systemic inequities within the criminal legal system.

Participants who enroll in the Harriet Tubman Project are given two primary obligations that one can never relinquish themselves from:

1. That they remain fixated in establishing a dedicated to pull others into this work
2. To advocate for the release of 3 or more who remain incarcerated when they are released

Our embodiment of these aims will validate that the legacy of "Moses" did not die on March 10th, 1913 and the actions of the Harriet Tubman Project will remain true to the unwavering devotion she induced into the struggle.

Drop LWOP



Life sentence without the possibility of parole (LWOP) are gaining criticism as America's silent death penalty. Now there is a permeating sense that the political soil is fertile for meaningful change. A regional campaign has now formed which provides all people serving LWOP with a platform to express our remorse, accountability, and transformation in order to promote redemption through legislation. This movement is called: Drop LWOP New England.

Our mission at Drop LWOP New England is to humanize individuals serving LWOP by discrediting the negative labels, stigmas, and stereotypes that society depends on to justify our perpetual imprisonment. Check us out online at droplwopnewengland.org

TUDO DJUNTO'



Bringing Black Unity to Our Community

TUDO DJUNTO' is a grassroots organization which originated at MCI-Norfolk in 2014. It was started by a group of Cabo Verdeans who realized the harm caused to their families and communities by their irresponsible behavior. We are currently in our infancy but we have a lot to tackle, and we hope to grow into an entity that can help change the plight of the youth in our neighborhoods. Our goal is to end Black on Black violence, we have to provide the youth with the tools and means they need to stay out of the cycle of violence that we help to contribute too.

Our vision for TUDO DJUNTO' is to achieve a level of community within our membership and our community as a whole. We come from different neighborhoods, who for years were with violence towards one another. Today with the guidance of TUDO DJUNTO' we now empower one another, we encourage each other to share, to learn from one another. We have now developed this relationship over time steeped in love, commitment, and trust. Some of the things we never had for one another. This has been a major breakthrough. For all the great things you wish to achieve for yourself...you should also want the same for your brother. And today we are all brothers!

Leaders Shaping The Future



Ricky "Fuquan" McGee
President/Principal Founder

The Harriet Tubman Project

"Nothing will change until we change ourselves."

Allah Fu-Quan, honorably known as Rickey McGee, is a Roxbury native. Well known for his leadership as an organizer, educator, and crisis manager in the Massachusetts Correctional Institutions. He has served in many leadership capacities throughout the last 26 years of his wrongful incarceration including chairman of the African American Coalition Committee, before becoming the founder of The Harriet Tubman Project; a legal advocacy class for incarcerated men. Fu-Quan has dedicated his life studying law, with the goal of dismantling the structural racism that engineers and exploits our most marginalized communities.

Through his leadership, Fu-Quan has mentored and assisted in the rehabilitation of many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men. His mission is to show his community that positive education always corrects error. Most importantly, freedom begins in our mindset, and nothing will change until we change ourselves.



Jacqueline Fonseca
Co-Executive Director of HTP

The Harriet Tubman Project

Jacqueline “Jacqui” Fonseca is a dedicated entrepreneur, passionate social advocate, and committed community organizer. As the Co-Executive Director of The Harriet Tubman Project, Intake Coordinator at The New England Innocence Project, and Real Estate Specialist in her hometown of Boston, MA; Jacqui leverages her background in criminal justice and sociology to advocate for wrongfully incarcerated individuals while organizing to dismantle structural racism in the criminal legal system.

Jacqui's extensive knowledge of community resources positions her as a valuable resource for marginalized families. Jacqui's lifelong mission is to foster equitable opportunities for all, even if it means creating them ourselves.

“Be the change you want to see”



Steven “Farooq” Quinlan
Co-Founder/Program Director

Drop LWOP New England

Steven "Farooq" Quinlan has been a long-standing example of positive leadership at Massachusetts Correctional Institution Norfolk (MCI-Norfolk). For 15 years, he has served his incarcerated community through his leadership in various programs, groups, and committees. He currently sits on the Lifer's Group Inc. Board of Directors; co-founded the Lifer's Group Advocacy and Political Engagement Committee (APEC); and is the Co-founder/Program Director of Drop LWOP New England - a 501c(3) non-profit organization focused on restoring hope to incarcerated individuals serving Life Without Parole (LWOP) and other extreme sentences through legislative advocacy and community engagement.

UNLOCK OUR POWER HOUR

Empowering Descendant Communities to Unlock Democracy

Join us for the 2025 kickoff Unlock Our Power Hour session to discuss how incarceration and the legacy of slavery impact our community's voting rights and what you can do about it.

Refreshments will be served.

WHERE

**Center For Teen Empowerment
130 Warren St., Roxbury, MA 02119**

DATE

**Saturday,
February 22, 2025**

TIME

**1:00
to 3:00 PM**

