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Article abstract

Matana Roberts is a saxophonist, composer, and artist. In this open letter—and call to action—she describes the intergenerational trauma that has resulted from the history of white supremacy and police violence against persons of African descent, and reminds us how race and racism are intimately linked to health in myriad ways.

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untitled

Matana Roberts

June 4th, 2020

Dear Comrade,

I have not slept for days

This is a ramble; there will probably be typos, and I am not sorry.

I am just sharing. It is literal, but it may not be exactly linear. And it is long.

And again, I am not sorry.

Over the years, I've joined protests, I've held fundraising concerts for victims' families, I've spearheaded town hall style public talks, and have also been involved in different areas of artists coming together to fight against police violence over the years.

I repeat, over the years . . .

I grew up w/ a grandmother that never used the word “cop.” It was always “pig.” I wasn't allowed to say it, but I understood, from someone who grew up in the south pre civil rights, why she did: legacy.

And so, I'll be straight w/ you. As I look at my country today, I feel terrorized at a cellular level not by riots or looting, but by unnecessary sanctioned state violence, corroborated by the same legacy she abhorred.

Outside of my *Coin Coin* work, I also make work that deals w/ police violence. I just finished a commission less than 2 weeks ago about the 1991 L.A. riots as connected to the horrendous murder of Ahmaud Arbery, based around the writings of Sylvia Wynter.

I make records and work that reminds us of past injustices because, from my vantage point, we have a very eerie amnesia problem that sits at the root of pretty much every struggle to date. Our “leaders” are yelling about looting right now, but who really taught us that? The founding fathers of America were mass looters. Culture looters, anti-humanitarian vultures of the worse kind, for profit, prestige, legacy. Using pillage, rape, rampage, and collective genocide as tools for their own “liberation” and domination.

From what I have seen in the last few days, there are people—actual American citizens—who don't get it? You know what the average age at which a Black American child is exposed to the police state? Four. Did you know that about 1 in 1000 Black boys/men in America can expect to die by police action? A risk that is almost 3 times higher than for white boys/men? And do not get me started on the safety of Black women. If Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, or Layleen Polanco had survived, I'm certain they would have a lot to say on this.

My 1st exposure to the back of a police car happened when I was around 7. I had done something kid-silly on a dare, and there was no reason for the cop to put me in there, other than to make sure I knew early, my place, in a society that continues not to value the legacy of

citizens whose bloodlines were part of an original global looting schema.

I remember screaming my head off, trying to avoid getting put in the back of that car. I remember a few concerned citizens shouting at the officer as he tried to put me in the car. Somehow, he got me in there. To this day, I do not remember how exactly he got me in there. I do remember the look of the cage-like wall that separated me and him in that car, though. It was less than a 5-minute ride; he could have walked me home or called my parents and waited w/ me for a pickup, as I knew my home phone number by heart. I do not remember getting out of that car. I only really remember finally seeing my parents and my grandmother, seeing a look of suspicion in their eyes, feeling a stiffness in the air in that cop's presence, that I would eventually come to learn was never about me. It was about a history.

Every now and then I receive an email from a kind supporter asking me why I left social media, or at least put it on pause. I try to speak of universals that any person should understand: algorithms, digital overload, "like culture" distraction. Brown face / sometimes forced weak white masking just to cope in a creative field that still seems to have its own corners of oppressive rhetoric, I find troubling. But what I have not said is that I mainly left because of the violence porn revolving around Black bodies in supposed white spaces and the ways in which I sometimes felt like a digital social justice mule being used as a cardboard prop up for a cultural insecurity that is not mine. It would sometimes take me weeks to release the visual trauma of a headline or yet another video of a Black citizen being terrorized for just being free.

Digital scrolls were not made to affirm me (or you, really). They are made to exploit, antagonize, distract, and shame. Justice in America, from what I can see right now, revolves purely around profit not purpose. Constant exploitation, not compassionate humanitarian aid.

I pledge allegiance to the Flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under god, indivisible, with liberty and justice for: SOME.

I have tried to toe the lines of love and compassion online, not for the sake of being some example, but for the sake of protecting myself from daily microaggressions I experience as a being thickly connected to the African diaspora anywhere I am in the world. I travel the world and have felt grateful for the right to do so, but I do not do it w/o a thick layer of hyper-vigilance. (A term, I might add, that I learned from my therapist, because for me it was just every day American living, it didn't really have a name, and it was how I was taught to survive.) Not understanding the role of what gets passed down from a trauma history. And though I can now access therapy, self-care, all sorts of tools to liberate my spirit, there is not a single woman or man that came before me, in my bloodline, who had these same privileges. Numerous traumas internalized, passed down via social cues, not even on purpose half the time.

I have not had a year of my life go by without feeling the sting of racism. I have never ever in my life felt safe in America. Not once. Which is a shocking thing to admit, because I know history. I oft compare my safety to what I know my grandmothers went through. But think about that? If you truly know history, what kind of logic is that? It's taken me years to understand that the safety bar is incredibly low . . .

I have become somewhat impervious/numb to it bc it's such a regular part of my life. I don't want to give it attention, but I also don't want to internalize it. But there-in lies the rub. It is impossible not to internalize insidious modes of white supremacy in a country that still values ideals of whiteness and white profit domination more than it actually values Black and Brown lives.

This a ramble, and I am not sorry.

I am traumatized today.

We also are in the midst of a global pandemic, yeah? Ppl have been stressed to the max for weeks, but this pandemic is also showing the large holes of socio-economic disparity in the American healthcare system. It is devastating African American communities at an alarming rate. And bc of the virus, we are also in a moment where we have to find new ways to organize and strategize that protect us too. I believe it is possible. It is a watershed moment of the century really.

My grandmother is on the cover of chapter 4 [of the *Coin Coin* series of recordings] to remind you that you have inherent rights as a citizen: USE THEM. Remember that they were hard-won, hard-fought for, and—if you are American—sealed in blood, cotton, whips, chains, lynchings, and lost dreams. We have a president who is using bona fide Klan language to communicate to his citizens, and it is absolutely unacceptable.

So, at this point, I do not care what you do. Stay smart, just do not let them take those rights away. For me, American history demands better.

And, as paraphrased from an email sent to me by a friend:

We want to go birding, we want to go jogging, we want to relax in the comfort of our own homes, we want our children treated like children, we want to know we can ask for help after being in a car crash, we want to have a cellphone that's not mistaken for a weapon, we want to be able to leave a party to get to safety w/o issue, we want to be able to play loud music, we want to be able to sell CDs on the street if we feel like it, we want to be able to know we can sleep in peace, we want to be able to walk from the corner store w/o a problem, we want to be able to go to church, we want to be able to walk home, we want to be able to hold a hairbrush while leaving our own bachelor parties, we want to know we can party on New Year's, we want to know we can get a normal traffic ticket, we want to be able to lawfully carry a weapon, we want to be able to break down on a public road with car problems, we want to know we can breathe, and we want to know we can protest. WE WANT TO KNOW WE CAN BE ARRESTED WITHOUT THE FEAR OF BEING MURDERED.

Is that really too much to ask in 21st century America?

Have we truly dumbed down this much, to an embarrassing racist low?

The American system is broken, they say, but I say the system is actually working as originally set. It doesn't need to be fixed. It needs to be completely rewritten and updated for the time. It is still stuck somewhere that allowed bona fide state-sanctioned, land-owning terrorists (re: slave masters) to create the wording for the laws of the land. The time we are in now, I don't think they could have ever imagined. . . Let's correct their wrongs.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to

abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Regardless, I send you a rage-filled love today. I am proud of those of you who get it and are ushering in the new wave for the ones that don't. At this point, we need to drag them along by any means necessary, until they do. WE ARE SICK OF THIS SHIT. CARRY ON.

Yours in creativity,

Matana