

ART AND SOCIAL ACTION

Stanton Heights

Intersections of Art and Science in an Era of Mass Incarceration

Norman Conti

I have the tremendous privilege of working among a collection of artists, activists, incarcerated men, police officers, professors, students, and writers. Some of us straddle multiple categories, but we all come together as fictive kin and chosen family. Without realizing it, we have always been tied together; our connective thread stretches back to American slavery, if not further, and can most easily be observed in the ongoing calamity of mass incarceration. These links and overlaps provide a framework for bearing witness to white supremacy as it plays out through the US justice system.

Finding a true starting point for these relationships is unlikely, so I began mapping our network within the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, or more specifically the local think tank that emerged from that larger program.¹ However, this cartography quickly evolved into a story of people who are bound for powerful interactions with law enforcement, the legal system, corrections, one another, and themselves. Whether engaged with a strange and terrible saga or a series of smaller projects, our goal is always to share these experiences in a manner that capitalizes on the academic depth and breadth of our ranks while also conveying that this is not simply the work that we do but rather engagement with one of the most severe social problems this nation has produced. As such, it is an experience that makes it difficult for participants to remain complicit with malignant authority.

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This work continually changes us, and by telling our stories, I hope to push readers to consider the wider totality of lived experiences included within them. Moreover, our group is working to build solutions that address the human suffering we have observed. The pages that follow offer a perspective, comprising many different perspectives, that is the foundation for a program designed to address the disconnection among the public, the police, and men in prison.

Surrender

My phone was ringing, and the caller ID announced that those nice people—the parents of the good cop, killed by a white supremacist—wanted to talk.

The good cop and backup had been dispatched to the home of the white supremacist's mother. A dispute had arisen regarding the white supremacist's dog urinating on her floor. It was, after all, her house, and who wants some dog urinating all over the floor?²

The good cop was greeted with one shotgun blast to the face and another to the chest. Never had a chance against white supremacy lying in wait, because white supremacists knew Obama was coming for their guns and were ready. Obama's plans would have been news to the good cop, who may never have experienced white supremacy as a threat. Backup must have seen the barrel flashes, got off a few shots to center mass, those bullets well received by the vest resisting their advance. The white supremacist's shotgun racked and fired until empty and discarded in favor of an AK-47-style assault rifle. This appearance of Dr. Kalashnikov left backup with little chance of faring any better than the good cop, dead at the threshold. Backup dead on the walkway.

Off-duty cop returning home from work, Code 3—officer down—always means back to work. Hit getting out of his SUV, the off-duty cop sat bleeding while the rest of the cops swarmed. SWAT traded over six hundred shots with the white supremacist, trying most desperately to save their fallen brothers. A former recruit from an academy class I had collected data on broke his leg jumping over a fence in the backyard. Trying to help, but didn't seem to get much credit for that. Why not? Too clumsy? Another officer got shot in his hand trying to pull the off-duty cop to safety. The off-duty cop lived nearby, and unfortunately he died right there, because safety is never an option vis-à-vis white supremacy.

In a phone call with a crisis specialist, the white supremacist explained that—as a result of blood loss from a leg wound and destruction of his AK, a most beloved weapon—it was time to stop:

“Hello sir . . . I don't want to end any more innocent officers' lives in the line of duty.”³

Stated so formally, but really it was just enough cowboys and Indians for one day. He was done; wanted them to come in and get him, attend to his injuries:

“Send someone in with a nice voice . . . and I’ll explain to them that we are basically done here for this evening.”

He said “evening.” Evening, when it wasn’t even afternoon yet.

The pop star activist wrote a song talking about shots ringing out early in the morning of April 4, but the Civil Rights leader was killed at 6:05 P.M.⁴ Would “early evening” have been that much less euphonious? The redheaded stranger called a song “Crazy” instead of “Stupid” for just that reason. Speaking of crazy and stupid, forty-one years later and it actually was early morning on April 4. The good cop, his backup, and the off-duty cop fell like Civil Rights leaders—white supremacy across space, time, and music.

The white supremacist couldn’t seem to understand why they weren’t coming to get him, didn’t see why it was such a big deal. For Christ’s sake, he could have been bleeding to death. Come on, cops, why aren’t you serving and protecting? He promises he won’t kill any more of you, white supremacist scout’s honor. Do your job and go get him, he’s dizzy, bleeding out maybe.

April 4, six years, two hours, and nineteen minutes later and an unarmed forklift operator, studying to be a massage therapist, had his civil rights violated when shot to death running away from an officer. As often happens in the rare occurrence that a police officer is charged for this type of shooting, the case was mistried when the jury failed to reach a unanimous decision about whether the officer had used unnecessary force as the forklift operator was running away from him. The officer had been in “total fear,” so the jury hung and lynching continued to evolve. Twelve months later and the officer changed his plea to guilty of second-degree murder and obstruction of justice. At the sentencing, the late forklift operator’s mother read a statement and told the offending officer that she forgave him. He mouthed “I’m sorry” to her. “I know,” she consoled.⁵ Two decades in prison, vilified and isolated even among his fellow captives; white supremacy is no blessing to any of us.

Back in Pittsburgh, the white supremacist chided the crisis specialist:

“You don’t have to make a federal case out of it, just come in here and get me.”

He already told you:

“Someone shot the AK and it is completely fucked.”

Three pistols and the shotgun remain, but enough is enough:

“I mean, I can still fight you guys if you want to.”

Kevlar vest on tight, plenty of ammunition, but with the leg wound and the cramped style of his semiautomatic assault rifle, it probably didn't seem like so much fun anymore. Now is a time for reason:

“I ain't worried about a nice voice. That was more a joke.”

Why can't they just understand that it—is—over? Do they question his sincerity? At a time like this? Without a doubt, the worst service and protection he could actually imagine:

“You know what's funny, officer? I was sitting here having this shoot-out with you guys and here a bill collector calls me. I tried to tell'm, I'm having a shoot-out with the police right now, you're probably not going to get shit out of me now.”

The white supremacist told this story to a crisis specialist, but it was wasted, he just didn't seem to get it; maybe it was a matter of timing. He asked the crisis specialist if it might make more sense to just blow his brains out instead of waiting for the cops to come in and get him. After all, it had been taking an absurdly long time and so much hassle just to get them into the house. Binary choice, as he saw it:

“I'm either going to take my life or go to jail for the rest of it. . . . I'm just going to end up biting niggers' dicks off and fighting for my life for the rest of my life.”

To a white supremacist, prison means “fighting for his life” and “biting . . . dicks off.” He probably saw that on HBO. Yep, they were going to want the white supremacist to suck their big black dicks, he was sure of it. Oh, but he'd show them. He wasn't going to be their bitch. He was going to bite their dicks off. Only on the show, it was a white supremacist dismembered.

That's exactly what he told the crisis specialist: while thoroughly absurd, this is no exaggeration. A lifetime of “fighting . . . and biting,” or putting his family through all the pain and suffering of losing him. August 1, forty-two years, eight months and two days earlier, the clock-tower shooter named like a writer had spared his mother and wife all pain of his actions.⁶ The clock-tower shooter had planned everything out and packed a lunch. But the white supremacist was improvising and doing stand-up in his last stand. He surely recognized suicide was the coward's way out, taking the crisis specialist's implicit advice to “fight for his life and bite . . . dicks off” instead. But how many times can that trick really work? I mean, fool me once . . .

Memorial

My caller ID was telling me that those nice people were on the phone. The nice man reminded me of my uncle Ange. “Ange-a-loooooo,” my father would call him. Angelo, Italian for angel. Ange, gone ten years. Gone just before my first son was born. Visited him in the hospital. He was wearing an oxygen mask with a green elastic band around his head and only wanted to go home.

I’d wake up weeks later and see my wife with that same mask on. Was she going to die of lung cancer, too? No, but the baby was making trouble inside her. His heart rate and such, fluctuating wildly. The doctor figured he was squeezing the umbilical cord and throwing off the sensors they had screwed into the top of his head.

At Ange’s funeral, I saw my cousin Matthew put his hand on his father’s casket. Sooner or later, that was going to be me, a father without a father. Watching my father walk to the front of the church, having to really work to get his foot up over the step, just made it worse. His eulogy included a poem about the clock of life being wound just once. I thought it was a poor choice, redundant for a funeral. Then, looking for sympathy, my cousin Scott leaned over and complained about needing a cigarette. Our uncle had died of lung cancer, we were sitting at his funeral, and Scott wanted a cigarette; maybe my father knew these people better than me.

The nice people had been emailing back and forth with me earlier that day. I had come up with big plans since becoming chair of the college committee to honor the memory of their son, the good cop, a liberal arts alumnus. I had big plans, but maybe those plans were too much a part of my own agenda. No more simple lunches where plaques are bestowed on graduating seniors in recognition of outstanding volunteer work. No, that wasn’t good enough, too much plaque build-up on campus. Gotta do more, do better, cultivate change. I mean, the good cop had given his life. Left his parents, sisters, nieces, nephews, and fiancée grieving. He had made the ultimate sacrifice, and they were paying a much higher price. A lunch and a plaque would not do. We could do better.

The good cop was a hero. From all accounts an ideal police officer and wonderful person. He sounds like everything I wish I could be. Jumping up kicking his heels together as he walked out the door to work. His mother would ask, “What’s wrong with you?” Loving her son above all, but never understanding how anyone could be so happy about going to work. The good cop was six weeks younger than I was. His mother lived just an hour down the road from my mother. Both pregnant with each of us, while my eventual mother-in-law was also pregnant with my wife. We all went to college at the same time. Ten minutes down the street from one another, but never met. Never will. My loss, but his friend assures me that the beloved good cop would have been the first to sign on to my big plans for a paradigm shift in how police officers are trained in this

country. I am told that would have been right up his alley. Doubly my loss, need all the accomplices we can find.

The good cop's first name was the same as the middle name that I had made it a point to never use. Never met him, but now I can't get away, I should probably make something out of that, maybe craft a legacy event befitting the memory of the good cop, my lost accomplice. Bring together our most progressive chief of police with our excellent young man—a young man who had been unarmed, African American, and shot by a police officer.⁷ The chief had moved to our town and was going to make everyone feel better. Started a ruckus on social media by posing with a sign: I resolve to challenge racism@work #endwhitesilence. Hero and villain all at once with a pose. For New Year's Eve, he resolved to use knowledge about implicit bias to stop police from shooting so many young African American men. Implicit bias is a way to address racism without having to feel too guilty about it. One of those *love the sinner hate the sin* cons—spinning the usual politics from politics as usual.

Old Mill neighborhoods were turning into Park Slope (Brooklyn), and the technologists moving into those neighborhoods would differ from the mill workers. Mill workers would tolerate as many shootings of young African American men as necessary; technologists would be less understanding. People in those up-and-coming neighborhoods would tolerate the shooting of young African American men only under very specific conditions. Like craft cocktails and artisan cheese, everything has to be just so. No, not like the jumbo and mayonnaise sandwiches with French fries on top that the mill workers would wolf down. Jumbo, that's just a bunch of bologna from Isley's Market.

Progressive

I was happy to speak with those nice people, parents of the good cop, but they were not so happy with me. The nice man who reminded me of my Uncle Ange called me “Mr. Conti” in a tense voice. “Mr. Conti, my wife and I have been talking and we don't want our son's name associated with your event.” “Your event,” but it wasn't supposed to be *my* event—my agenda, but not *my* event. It was his son's event, wasn't it, no?

For the nice man, our excellent young man is a threat, our excellent young man and “his supporters” are against the police. For him, some of those supporters are against everything. From his perspective, an event with the names of both the beloved good cop and our excellent young man was not going to be about common ground, it would be an attack on the police; brothers and sisters to his son, a good cop. He could not have his son's name—his own name—associated with something like that. He just knew the media would twist it into something that would hurt all of the surviving cops, his adopted children.

I reassured him that it would be no such thing, pleaded a case based on love

and common sense. Explained that I'd spent seventeen years with, for, and near the police. Seventeen years of reading and writing and fieldwork and writing and data and writing and revising and rewriting and rejection and revision and analysis, collaboration and friendship and caring. Don't they get it? Can't they see? I had gone to the award lunch the year before. Met them and their son's friend. Listened to their stories. Saw their tears and how the nice man put his arm around his wife to comfort her. Powerful stuff, all too much. I had come directly from prison. Spent the morning with my friends and colleagues, a think tank that included six men serving time and doing life with me.

Later, along with those guys, I would participate in a writing workshop, brought to us by the kind-faced woman from a prison play. Though her character had been held in a concentration camp, her own personal prison was something more, you could see that in her eyes. The kind-faced woman handed out a piece to all of the men sitting at her table. Its author took a bunch of stuff from his life and assigned numbers to all of it. Number of this, number of that; seemed simple, but it was something more. She asked us to write our own pieces like the numbers thing. Rarely one to pass up an opportunity to show off, I wrote:

THIS, THAT, AND 1/3

Number of big ass fans in this room: 1. There is one big ass fan in this room. I know because I almost tripped over the motherfucker when I was making room for one of my friends.

Number of mission statements posted on the wall in this room: 1. Number of times that mission statement is printed out in English: 2; en Español: dos.

With full force and proper direction, could the big ass fan blow that mission statement off the wall? What do you think the chances of that might be? 50/50 maybe? What are the chances it could blow all those words around like autumn leaves?

Number of fire alarms in this room: 1. Number of clocks in this room: 1. Number of panic buttons: 1. Number of ventilator shafts, too small for a grown man to crawl through in this room: 1. Number of TV/DVD/VCRs on mobile carts in this room: 2. Number of computers in this room: 3. Number of computers that are actually plugged in, in this room: 0. Number of individual tables in this room: 8. Number of tables made from other tables united in this room: 1. Number of windows in this room: 2—one inside and one outside. Number of cabinets filled with “read to your child program” supplies: 1.

Number of boxes of Spanish books in this room, 1—that I know of, but what do I know about this room? I wonder if that big ass fan, the fan that looks like a wind machine for an old movie back before CGI, I

wonder if that big ass fan could blow all of the words from those Spanish books into that one mission statement. What are the chances that all those linguistic options could form their own mission statement? What if that big ass fan used boxed-up old text to write a mission statement that would change everything?

I'm talking about some Jerry Ma-Fuck'n-Guire mission statement shit. Ten commandments jumping out of a burning bush. But not commandments, a mission statement as holy text, transforming all who read it—*Babel 17* style. Problem is, it'd be en Español and I wouldn't be able to read it. Maybe somebody would translate.

The revolution starts right here, thanks to the sharpened blades of that big ass fan that almost knocked me on my ass. The pen and the sword all in one—mighty fine.

Number of “no smoking” signs in this room: 1. Quit smoking, Khalifa, you know that shit ain't no good for a young man like yourself—lungs may still be developing. But what if that lit cigarette is a burning bush for our magical mission statement to jump out of? The magical mystery tour is coming to take you away, coming to take you away. I guess Khalifa can keep smoking, but not in this room 'cause he might start a fire.

Number of friends in this room: 7. Number of times awed in this room: every time. Number of times odd in this room: all the time. Number of chances in this room: on par with national debt. Number of people I admire in this room: oh shit, maybe I'm just a big ass fan.

I was happy to write about Khalifa, maybe even wanted to make him feel good. Of course he read his piece first and looked directly at me as he listed as “2” the number of organizations that he had been proud to be a member of, “The NAACP and the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice,” the second one a group we had founded together. We would argue sometimes, but I was always humbled by his presence, so two years later when he died suddenly, I wrote:

BUSSA EMANCIPATION STATUE

Oh man, Khalifa fooled'm good this time. Outfoxed them and lamm'n just past the horizon among that vanguard that can only be seen by the most righteous of freedom fighters.

You thought he was dead, didn't you? You did, well, take a minute and think like Khalifa. Is your mind free? Free indeed? Well then, did you see a body? Even if you had, you know that brother could hold his breath all got damn day just out of spite. Pardon my taking of the Lord's name in vain, but I am not yet the holy man that Khalifa was to become.

But on the real, you know, “keep’n it 100,” that shit was a conspiracy he’d been lay’n out for years. At the center of it, just him and the ancestors, sort’n it out in those rap sessions. I mean what do you think they were talking about? Plot’n, that’s what they were doing.

Khalifa did all he could to wise us up on that tip, but we weren’t quite at his level and couldn’t peep what he was say’n. When he caught that life sentence, he said, “Shit, they don’t know me if they think they can keep me in here for life. One way or another, I mean if they don’t wanna let me outta here, then I’m gonna have to escape.”

And escape he did—D.O.C. you later—right in plain sight. Hep C, liver cancer, two heart attacks, that was just his flair for the dramatic, you know how Khalifa always was. Then, they think he’s dead, shoot, that’s what he wants them to think, had been planning it for years. Probably started when he saw that movie about a guy digging his way out of prison with a teeny tiny hammer that he was supposed to be carving chess pieces with. Guy was playing chess with an institution as his board, but Khalifa don’t play, so his moves were beyond the game. The guy in the movie was smuggling little bits of dirt in the cuffs of his pants and dropping them at yard time. Mr. Diggs flipped all that and started moving little bits of himself out of the prison. Letters, visits, dialogues, lectures and initiatives in the hearts of his beloved and unwitting accomplices. He loved us, but couldn’t risk giving away all of the details. Learned to be cagy in all those foster homes, detention centers, jails and prisons. Used us like marks, the way that cop from the old days—the one with the pearl-handled pistols and the extra-long billy club—used him to sell dope. He moved product for that cowboy, then moved himself as a product through us.

He said he’d gone crazy and come back so many times that he started carrying breadcrumbs in his pocket to mark the path. Maybe that was where he got the idea, then told us the story as a wink to let us know what he was up to.

Took me until the funeral to start getting hip. The urn got me suspicious. How could anyone really know for sure if that was him in there? Na mean? Not physically the biggest guy, but there was so much to him that I had to be skeptical. Then we drove up to SCI Albion, the most recent plantation of his transfer. Our group walked in and right there at the gate, on this cart like the ones at Home Depot, all of Khalifa’s belongings. A footlocker, a bunch of cardboard boxes with his name and inmate number sealed with packing tape and one dictionary peeking out of a handle hole. One of the boxes even had his inmate photo ID picture on it. Suckers were supposed to see that as a coincidence, even though he died weeks earlier and his stuff just happened to be waiting

to greet us at the gate. Uh huh. Coming to meet, in his honor, with the new think tank he had helped to form: The New Destiny Think Tank for Restorative Justice. That name seemed like a contradiction to me. Destiny is destiny, how can it be new? The group he formed with us is the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice. “Elsinore Bennu,” now that is a strong name. A haunted castle from the European literary canon combined with an Egyptian precursor to the phoenix, burning up and rising again.

But that was the hookup, ya dig? Albion is that haunted castle where Khalifa was finally able to catch fire and rise into a new destiny. Malakki will miss his sly sense of humor the most, probably because he was the only one smart enough to get in on the joke. When we were first trying to think of logo symbols for our think tank, Khalifa talked about a statue of a slave with broken chains that might be down there in Cuba or somewhere nearby. I bet that’s where he’ll be waiting for us once we figure it all out.

Malakki and Khalifa were cellies up at Albion. Maybe it was the stress of the transfer after they closed down the only urban prison in the state and moved him to the Middle of Nowhere, Pennsylvania, that kicked Malakki’s MS into higher gear. Even as he got weaker, Khalifa was hesitant to let anyone else push his friend’s wheelchair. Malakki’s contributions are so genius we call him professor. Even Khalifa, the elder and now ancestor, saw him as “the sharpest cat in here” and teacher to us all. He’s been doing his best since we met to bring me up to his level. Saw my potential and has simply refused to let any bit of it go unrealized. Criticizing an earlier draft of this very piece he commented:

You already know how I feel about the “N” word used in this context but I know who you wrote this for and since they probably speak like this behind closed doors, I understand what is taking place.

Did he think I wrote this for “white” people? Does he think language like that is common in our tribal dialect? I disagreed and tried to reassure him that most folks don’t talk like that. The “N” word for African American, the “F” word for gay men, the “R” word for the mentally challenged—those of us in well-established or even up-and-coming neighborhoods simply do not say those words. However, they all still go without saying. Fortunately, this nuance was lost on him:

About the “N” word—and this has nothing to do with the actual words of [the white supremacist]. His hate and ignorance should be documented, as is. But I disagree about how you disagree with me disagreeing with

you, because no matter how vicious the negative sobriquets of other oppressed people, the “N” word is not just used against us, it is enforced.

How can you compare the “f” word, “r” word etc. to the entire denigration of a continent, and the bellicose animosity for ANYONE who mildly even reflects the color marked for shame? There was a system of oppression lasting hundreds of years by a bevy of countries with martial power to enforce their systems of oppression in thought, word, and deed who didn’t seem to agree on anything except that we should be subjugated.

As far as America in comparison to Amerikkka; there was no systematic enslavement of those deemed “faggot” or mass lynchings followed by celebrations of those considered “retards.” After 245 years of chattel slavery (from the Mayflower Compact of 1620 to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865) and 100 years of second class citizenship (until the Civil Rights bill) America sought to erase the stain of its original sin. But there is still this fetish of racism, this racial jujū, that Amerikkka can’t seem to shake.

And how can we remove the spit of determined bias from the cream of U.S. law engineered by the founding slavers? Because even now, when someone is handcuffed in the back of a police car to face the bureaucratic morass cloaked in not just a double standard, but a jingoistic fervor that even acts of congress couldn’t subdue, if she is gay, mentally handicapped and black, which word holds the weight.

Unfortunately, that word, the “N” word, now belongs to us and if we choose to use it or not, it’s our business. So-called whites don’t get to use it, ever, and so what if this is a bias—deal with it like we deal with the countless biases against us.

Nothing is as ugly coming from you, or respected coming from me as that word. And as long as I live, I continue to witness highly educated whites searching to find and invent excuses to use it. And that cuts far deeper than a poor, ignorant soul screaming, “Go back to Africa!” when he cannot even tell me where so-called white people came from: I’m not talking about “Europe,” I’m talking about the fact that in the early Pleistocene when early man hit the scene, there were no so-called white folks and after the Wurm glaciation (the last ice age) so-called whites appeared. Where did y’all come from? Do you know?

Penning from the miasmatic death of a prison cell in the midst of a lockdown, I feel like a penny compared to a Porsche as far as your current living conditions. I see your support for us as more than a blessing, it is an act of war against Amerikkka. The only hope we have is people like you standing up for America to make it strong against Amerikkka. You are a strong and mighty soldier in this cause and without those like you,

we have not much hope. Even Douglass and Garrison had disagreements but they stood side-by-side in the trenches. I pray our relationship endures to supersede and surpass theirs because our war has many fronts. Professor Norm, I love your ghost but I highly disagree with you, nigga.⁸

Sobriquets, Pleistocene, Wurm glaciation, miasmic death? See what I mean about the genius professor, taking time away from his sentence to educate me? I stand corrected and you saw two sets of ellipses where a word that I cannot own once stood.

Malakki started out on death row, five years in a box talking into a ventilator shaft. Poppa on the other side. Poppa a global phenomenon, speaker of truth, righteous teacher, and convicted cop killer. Cop named like a writer.⁹ Poppa mentored my friend the genius professor, smarter than so many tenured faculty beyond prison walls. Poppa helped mold him into the great man he is today.

So I left my friends and colleagues where they always were and headed for the campus I usually avoid, just in time for lunch. From sitting with my friend the genius professor, student of the global phenomenon, speaker of truth, righteous teacher, and convicted cop killer to a lunch in honor of the beloved good cop killed in the line of duty by a white supremacist.

So much to digest. How could I get from there to here? If they had understood exactly where I had come from, who I had been with, and how much I loved them, would they have been able to stomach my presence? I felt nauseous.

I contacted Poppa and told him I was a friend of Malakki, and we started communicating. I mailed him a draft of this piece and he found the whole situation to be “revelatory of the madcap, maddening world(s) we are in.” He went on:

As I thought of the good cop’s dad’s objections, it sounded of the deep unrelenting fear that permeates American consciousness, not fear of the Other, so much as it smells of fear of contagion—contact with the damned is damning, for we must keep our heroes pure, white, unsullied, or else—? Or else—what? It began with fear; the perverse, nutty fear of (heza “Secret Muslim”—named Hussein!) Obama, who’ll take our guns! Doya know a white friend of mine on a Row told me he overheard a C/O say the exact same thing as your white supremacist? Fear begat violence, and kept a father from seeing his son desecralized by having his name used in a prison ceremony—one held to honor him. That same crazed fear of “loss of whiteness” empowered a racist demagogue, and set the stage for the election of the Un-Obama—Herr Trump. Madness. But, as John Facenda users say: “That’s the way it is.”

I conceded to the nice man calling me “Mr. Conti,” I’d do whatever he wanted. Of course I would strike the name of the good cop, his son, his name, just my

middle name, from the event—even though it would have been right up his alley. Pushy though I may be, my sons were building Legos upstairs, how could I push another man living the worst of nightmares? Emailed our most progressive police chief. Reminded him about the event and explained that our excellent young man would be there as well and he appreciated this news. Shared his appreciation by chastising me for misleading him. Pointed out that I had invited him to an award ceremony in honor of the good cop and had made no mention of our excellent young man, who may or may not have assaulted police officers and is currently bringing a lawsuit against the city. Scolded me for putting him in a bad position and explained that he would be thrilled to work with our excellent young man once the case was settled, but for now he would not be attending my event. Again with the “my event,” so perhaps that’s what it actually was. You see, I bring people together. I bring them together and make things happen between them. People who would not normally ever be together, I turn them inside out and inspire change. I was going to do just that with our most progressive police chief and our excellent young man. Our excellent young man had been mobilized a few years earlier. Mobilized by the police officer’s bullet in his spine, in his shoulder, in his arm, in his abdomen. Mobilized more than paralyzed—despite the wheelchair.

Touch his skin and you can actually feel some of the bullets inside him. My wife may have giggled nervously when she touched those stigmata, though she insists she did not. Feeling those nubs, she knew she was born again on the other side of a mirror. Involuntary. I know she can still feel those bullets lodged in our excellent young man. Through his mobilization he remains lodged in her heart, mind, and spirit. I’ve lifted his chair. Onto a stage, up steps, over our back stoop, and into the kitchen. Even pushed him up some hills while I was at it. Can always feel that chair, shifting the burden for a moment or two.

Justice

A police officer panicked and shot him. The other cops thought that he might be the other young man, a gang member that they had met with a similar name. The other young man, but with a driver’s license, vehicle registration, and proof of insurance that all said he was our excellent young man. The officer said he saw a suspicious bulge in his pants, claimed that he was dragged by the car, was afraid that our excellent young man might push him out of the moving vehicle, and feared for the safety of the other cops. These are the standard multiple-choice answers for questions that come up after cops shoot Black kids. They are justifications for each of the policies that he and his partners had violated when they pulled our excellent young man over, harassed and shot him, then refused to provide basic first aid while the ambulance was on the way.

Meanwhile, our excellent young man was intubated, chained to a hospital

bed, like the Black Panther cofounder, waiting for surgeries to keep him alive with his mother camped out in the lobby, because the police would not let her see him without a court order. Three days later, charges were filed against our excellent young man for aggravated assault on the police officers who terrorized and shot him. It would be almost two years before he was acquitted at trial. Since then he's been working on a civil rights suit against the officer who shot him.

The police department's review of the shooting described each of the policy violations that those officers committed and resulted in remedial training for those officers. However, the report also said that our excellent young man should have gotten out of the car when the police ordered him to. That part of the report did not seem to remember all of the policy violations or understand how they might result in him being too scared to move. The standard multiple-choice answers don't fit with a question about why a kid with nothing to hide might be afraid to get out of his car when the cops tell him to. That question rarely gets asked.

So why would a good kid refuse to get out of his car after receiving a legitimate order to do so from a sworn police officer? Probably because that officer had squandered his legitimacy in the harassment of an innocent young man. The officer believed that the man who had quickly and respectfully presented him with his driver's license, proof of insurance, and vehicle registration might not actually be our excellent young man but instead the other young man—a young man with a history of criminal gang involvement. This shadow of a doubt led the officer and his partner to call a fellow officer to the scene who had previously seen the other young man knocked out in a hospital bed after being shot by still another young man. At this point, our excellent young man was getting more and more frightened and repeatedly tried to explain to the officers that he was, in fact, who he claimed to be. He asked an officer if he could just receive a ticket and be on his way because he was in between family gatherings at his uncle's and grandmother's homes. The officer replied, "Fuck you, you're talking to the cops!"

The officer in question repeatedly denied saying this, and the other two officers at the scene supported his claim. The veracity of his denial could have been easily ascertained had he been wearing the wireless microphone that accompanied the dashboard camera that recorded the incident. On the witness stand, this officer testified that he wished he had been wearing the microphone as required of him by his department's rules and regulations. It's worth noting that neither of the two remaining officers had microphones on, either. Obviously, voice recordings would be incredibly valuable for understanding what really happened during that traffic stop. While the microphones had been left in the officers' cars, one was still able to pick up the officer's voice as he yelled, "Fuck you, you're talking to the cops!" The doors to the car were all closed with the windows up and the officer was twenty feet away, so the recording had to be

enhanced and analyzed by one of the leading forensics experts in the world, but after that anyone could hear what the officer said. Having a police officer curse at you is not a violation of your civil rights, but it is a violation of departmental policy and for a young African American man would have to indicate the probability of a beating upon exiting his vehicle.

A homicide detective who had been charged with investigating the criminal incident where deadly force was used against a citizen by a police officer took the stand during the civil trial. In an earlier deposition, he had testified that police officers do not lie. In court that day, he changed his story. “Some police lie” and “everybody lies sometimes” was his new truth, the whole truth, and nothing like the truth. Our excellent young man’s attorney played the “police officers don’t lie” audio, and on cross-examination the defense attorney helped the detective to explain that after giving the sworn deposition, recorded in the video, and then going over the transcript with the defense team, he filed a document revising his assertion of police righteousness. Then he went on to describe the audio recording of the officer yelling “Fuck you, you’re talking to the cops” as inaudible. Police don’t lie, but some police lie and everybody lies sometimes. Our excellent young man’s attorney then asked the detective if he regretted not having an opportunity to review the dashcam video of the incident before filing the charges of aggravated assault on a police officer. One of the defense attorneys mouthed “Oh my God” to herself as he explained that there was no need to see the video because he had statements from the three sworn officers involved in the incident about what had occurred. She looked to be in some sort of pain as cop after cop continued to make things worse for her clients with their attempts to protect them.

I put my head down with my hand over my eyes, confronted by what may have been the most recent in a series of otherwise good men in a profession that, at the very least, should be honorable and at times heroic. It was heartbreaking because the initial and ongoing harms of even the paralysis and underlying racism might be forgiven if it weren’t for this continued aggression. After the shooting, the police tore through the young man’s car searching for something that could be used to justify what they had done: shoot first and find justifications later. Drugs or a gun, but no such contraband could be found, so they had to rely on lie after lie in the hope of telling a story about an officer in total fear for his life. Lie and rely, rely on more lies, but the video tells a different story, short-circuiting the spiral of lies that the officer told moving forward in total fear. Shackled to a hospital bed, like the revolutionary cofounder, as a machine helped him breathe, our excellent young man was awaiting trial while all the cops just kept lying, because once you’re in it, there you are.

I had been sharing secret information with our excellent young man. I could go behind enemy lines, where he is unwelcome. Work with cops, build alliances, become friends, and eventually change things. Had heard that the cop that shot

him was a good guy. A really good guy. A really good guy who wouldn't have wanted any of this and struggled with it. Shared this info with our excellent young man, because it makes for a much better story. Too easy to paint the other side as monsters, as a literary device humanity can complicate things. Our excellent young man nodded and said maybe. I was too stupid to read him, see that he was swallowing down my college professor bullshit without response. He was the one who would sit in court while cops eye-fucked him as they did everything in their power to obfuscate the truth.

Concluding another day of cops outright lying or at the very least playing dumb, in accordance with their education, I walked up to our excellent young man and apologized. My eyes were filling up: "I'm sorry for what they did to you. I'm sorry for how they have treated you after. I'm sorry for what they keep doing to you." He thanked me as his eyes were filling up, and I turned sharply and walked the fuck out of there before things got any more real. After all, I can walk: walk into the courtroom, walk up to our excellent young man, then walk the fuck on out. I can walk just like those lying cops who bring shame to what should be an honorable profession, like the defense attorneys who sit there calculating the fortunes they will continue to accumulate in trial after trial, appeals and all the rest.

I can walk just like the good folks walking by the courthouse in their black and gold jerseys. One Friday, the Steelers were set to play Chicago, and people were undeniably more concerned with the mediocre team that "we" would face on Sunday than with the civil rights case based on race and policing that was happening right there in the building they were walking by. Then in a series of bad moves, missteps, and poor execution reminiscent of how they manage to lose so many entirely winnable games, the Steelers failed at public relations in a most spectacular fashion. Attention shifted to protests in the NFL, and I was certain that the case would at least enter the dialogue. All eyes shifted to the convergence of our three rivers because the team decided to stay in the locker room during the national anthem. Innovative, when you consider that the only choice until that moment was to either take a knee to protest the killing of unarmed Black men by the police or stand, stand by in a profession where 70 percent of your coworkers are African American men. The Steelers are one of the most popular teams in one of the most popular sports in world, taking fire from all sides—the president, the "No More" patriots burning their jerseys, and a resistance who demanded only more. This convergence would surely sweep up our excellent young man, raising his profile, making his case the national story that we needed it to be. Except that it did not: everybody just kept talking their talk, walking right by our excellent young man fighting for justice like he wasn't even there. Even the inside linebacker from the Steelers who crossed paths with him on campus at a college game the day before he stayed in the locker room. Our excellent young man wondered if the inside linebacker knew who he was.

Did he think about him when deciding whether to stay in the locker room, take a knee or not? Weeks later he'd be hurt in a game and end up in a room next to the one our excellent young man had been held in, during his incarceration in the spinal cord injury unit.

The jury could not reach a unanimous decision about whether or not any of the five bullets that the officer had fired into the young man's torso at point-blank range were a violation of his civil rights. Another mistrial with a hung jury, as lynching evolves. Feeling his pain, a literary giant and mutual friend emailed him. It was around 9 A.M. in France when our mutual friend sent him a piece he had written about the lie of race, the concomitant disconnection, and the death of Nat Turner on November 11, 1831—181 years to the day before our excellent young man was shot. Three A.M. in Pittsburgh, but our excellent young man was awake, squared off against the phantoms that will not allow him to rest, because shooting him hadn't suppressed a slave rebellion: it was pushing us toward that revolution Khalifa had been working for. Just like back in his boxing days, but he's tired. Our mutual friend appears between rounds like a corner man. Offers a piece titled "Expectation," and our excellent young man is back on his feet delivering a series of jabs, hooks, uppercuts, dancing around that ring like the greatest of all time:

BLACK TRUTH

I am a little frustrated by the verdict but not surprised. The judge instructed the jury to come up with a decision based on the totality of the circumstances, a preponderance of the evidence, and to challenge the credibility of any witness based on the truthfulness of their testimony. Well, the officers and their experts were brutally beaten in court as they swore under oath, misleading the jury. Each time they lied they were impeached as my lawyers brought up statements that they made in the past. Shameful, jurors cried, people cried, and I knew that they would be most favorable to me. It was a blowout.

Days after closing arguments I was nervous. What is taking them so long to come up with the verdict? I thought to myself they must be stuck on the numbers, I knew we had them beat. Questions came about excessive force. They didn't understand that particular instruction; I'm confused. A question came about a warning. Was Derbish supposed to give me time to respond to a warning, if there was a warning before he fired shots? The judge responded to the jury that it was their discretion.

My anxiety heightened. Did these jurors sit through the same case I did, we did, and my family did. Absolutely not! They were only able to see the evidence through a white lens. A lens that would only lead them to be most favorable to two white men. Sympathizing with the fact that

a black kid dared to stand up, exposing their lies. The verdict came. Not a win, not a loss but a message. A message that screamed loudly: How dare you challenge white supremacy? The mayor had compassion for all parties involved. With his false equivalency, Trump-level rhetoric. How could he say that the officers, their families, my family and I endured tragic circumstances?

As if he wasn't aware that while these officers were promoted to detectives, I battled depression, shortened life expectancy, no bowel or bladder function and a host of other issues. How could this progressive white liberal say such a thing? White supremacy. Mhm, unbelievable. I sit thinking about the many leaders not speaking up, playing the sideline, spectators as I sit strategizing on my next moves.

Twenty-four-years-young fighting since I was nineteen. No, fighting all my life against a system designed to destroy me. They want me to be Emmett Till. Face brutalized for the world to see, showing black America they are God. How did I get here? The same reason my public school education damn near failed me. It is the same reason I was pulled over, the same reason I was shot, the same reason I was charged, the same reason I was publicly ridiculed, the same reason this jury could not rule in my favor and the same reason [Mayor] Peduto made his statement, white supremacy. Again, America wins, proving that a white lie will always prevail over a black truth. In all of the madness, I continue to fight. Giving my life to the struggle just as so many before me. Expecting death, dying for the cause with the spirit of Nat Turner.

As I write this, I could only think about the sin of color. The many struggles, pains, and traumas. However, that sin is bittersweet. For without this sin and the many pains associated with it would I know my purpose? I know people who haven't experienced this pain, they don't know the cost of this sin, but they also don't know purpose or meaning. They're just living life not knowing passion. Adding no value to the world just living. If purpose comes at the expense of pain, I'd still take it. The process from nothing to something, from caterpillar to butterfly, from coal to diamond isn't comfortable. In fact, it's an arduous process, but it is worth it.

The more pain I endure, the stronger I get. The more the city disrespects and disregards my life the more powerful I become. My only wish is to be an ordinary twenty-four-year-old, but their ignorance is turning me into a superhero. Not in a self-serving way but as the underdog doing what so many are afraid of I feel their pride, optimism, and hope. The type of hope that one can only gain from a superhero.

I enjoyed your piece. Just like you, I expect white supremacy to be precisely what it is and I will use my words to fight it even if I die like Nat

Turner. I expect to die again with him, Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Fred Hampton, and many others—for the sin of color.¹⁰

No matter the next trial's outcome or any number of appeals or even a settlement, that officer's bullet will remain in his spine. The officer says he was concerned that our excellent young man might have a weapon, but really he was afraid because Blackness is a weapon. A weapon always carried that is—most often—used against the carrier. Used to justify treating our excellent young man like everything less than what he is, like a criminal. But what if our excellent young man can load that bullet from his spine into the weapon of his Blackness and use it to fight for freedom, justice, and equality? A bullet that cannot be fired, in a weapon that should never have been a weapon at all. Powerful arms for someone paralyzed and mobilized all at the same time. Unlike most Black males gunned down by police officers, our excellent young man survived to tell his story. He is most certainly the voice of the voiceless, and his story is the story that mostly goes untold. Equipped with his story, fortified by love, compassion, and understanding, he is attempting to transform himself into a weapon that can stop a cop from seeing people like him as criminals, prevent the panic that made one shoot him.

Unfortunately, the potential power of this weapon also creates panic in the people who we expected to support him. Leaders in his own community first avoided him because of the initial criminal charges, then later began to see our excellent young man as a challenge to their positions, power, and funding streams. Rather than engaging with him and working as mentors, some leaders have actively tried to hold him back.

Common Ground

This part of the story was supposed to be an epic conclusion: a big reveal, where I illuminate the connections between the good cop and our excellent young man, pay off the title by explaining that Stanton Heights is the neighborhood where those three cops fell to white supremacy two years, seven months, one week, and a mile or six minutes down the street from where our excellent young man would be shot by those other cops. Since the first line about the phone ringing, I was setting you up for the disclosure where I explain that, back in his middle school days, our excellent young man had this mean neighbor who would call the police on him damn near every time he went outside. The good cop would roll up, smile, make everything okay, and act like he didn't notice the smell of our excellent young man's older cousins smoking weed behind the garage. Treated our excellent young man well, when other cops might have tried to make things tough for him.

I was going to follow that revelation with the fact that, back then in middle

school and all the way through high school, our excellent young man was good friends with the off-duty cop's daughter, whom he had dropped off on the way to the shooting. Our excellent young man and the off-duty cop's daughter rode the bus together, played together, so just like the good cop, the off-duty cop would have known that our excellent young man was not the other young man. I was going to highlight those connections and make the point that had it not been for the white supremacist, two cops who knew our excellent young man would have been around and maybe one of them could have saved him from being misidentified as a threat. If those cops hadn't died, maybe the cops in Stanton Heights would have been less paranoid and not so trigger-happy. Shift the blame back to the white supremacist and his delusions, away from the cops, myself, and the rest of us. Locate white supremacy in one sick person, like a kid driving a car into a crowd of protestors, or a president, rather than owning it as part of who we are.

I was going to tell you that all of these magical connections were inspirations for Police Training Inside-Out, our program that brings police officers and recruits together with incarcerated men for a course on criminal justice policy that pulls down the walls between them, one brick at a time. Impart heartwarming stories from our initial attempts when homicide detectives, academy training specialists, and patrol officers shared a palpable fear as they prepared to come together in our dialogic space. Tell you about all of the ties we uncovered: my man Big O, he used to train at the same martial arts spot as Tim from the academy, back when Detective Harry was investigating one of his homies for murder. Peg, she started out patrolling the Hill District and knew all the same hood legends that Fly had come up after. She even saw that cowboy with the pearl-handled pistols use his extra-long billy club on some corner boys. Shawn recognized Colleen immediately: he had paid close attention to the case of the stick-up kid who ran her over with his car after robbing a drug dealer. Shawn had once been a drug dealer who killed a stick-up kid who robbed him. Sat in court shocked watching the street code disintegrate as the guys from his victim's gang testified against him. Felt a camaraderie with a cop who was the victim of the type of perpetrator who originally victimized him. Appreciated her mistreatment by her department and the legal system as the stick-up kid got off light. Some prefer "survivor" to "victim," but I'm not sure any of that factors in here; maybe they are both survivors of our justice system.

I would have saved the best for last and hit you with how at the graduation ceremony in the prison auditorium all of the cops and convicts were taking turns reading their reflections on the experience when Peg realized she had forgotten her glasses. Embarrassed in front of all the brass she ran over to Khalifa, "Quick, give me those cheaters!" Before he even knew what was going on, she had snatched them off his face and ran back to the podium to read her piece. Khalifa smiled his sly smile and could not help but laugh his ass off; free indeed.

He had seen his parents beaten brutally by the police as a little boy, but here he was with Peg, treating one another like family; free indeed.

Those are good stories about the common ground we've been working to establish, worth telling, but I asked our excellent young man to read this piece and his reaction changed things. He had read and heard me read the first half of this piece, the part about the good cop, a few times in the past year or so. He liked it and liked the idea of trying to find common ground with the nice people and the police, but that was before the trial. Before all of the lying, before our most progressive former chief of police was deposed about the damning internal report on the shooting. Our most progressive chief of police claimed that he never received the report, then after one of his command officers testified that she had given it to him, he remembered that he must have misplaced it. Unfortunately, he had forgotten where he misplaced it.

Our excellent young man is tired of trying to build bridges between two completely different worlds, the cops and the community; tired of collaborating with the past because it means he has to keep reliving what happened to him. Now he's more interested in trying to create strong leaders, because he hasn't seen any here. He laughed hard when he read the part about "swallowing down my college professor bullshit." Educating me just like Malakki, making it clear that I'd need to figure exactly where the fuck I was before orienting anyone toward common ground. Our excellent young man is not our excellent young man at all, he is his own man. He remembers the silver Infiniti he was shot in and the black Infiniti that the other young man crashed and died in when the police were chasing him. That's his common ground and it seems to go on forever like a black infinity.

NOTES

1. Inside-Out is devoted to teaching university courses in correctional settings. These courses include traditional college students as well as an equivalent number of students selected from prison populations. The destigmatization of incarcerated people is the key to the experiential process. Courses begin with a discussion of labels and a mandate that negative terms (e.g., "inmate") be exchanged for "inside student"—while the rest of the class is referred to as "outside students." Starting with this relabeling, participants begin to realize that neither group can be reduced to the one-dimensional image that they had previously assumed. As students interact over the course of a semester, incarcerated men and women no longer appear as the misfits and monsters presented in popular culture but rather as people with lives and families beyond prison walls, while college students become something more than children of privilege incapable of understanding why people succumb to the culture of street crime. In time, initial changes in how the two groups see each other affect how group members see themselves, their futures, and their potential impact on society. For more on Inside-Out, please visit <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>.

2. See Michael Fuoco and Jerome L. Sherman, "Officers Killed, Wounded in Stanton Heights Standoff," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 4, 2009, <http://old.post-gazette.com/pg/09094/960660-100.stm>.

3. WTAE-TV Pittsburgh, “Raw Audio: Poplawski Surrenders to Police Negotiator,” YouTube video, June 22, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcji7rBzKIU>.
4. U2, “Pride (In the Name of Love),” *The Unforgettable Fire* (Universal Music Publishing Group, 1984).
5. See Alan Blinder, “Michael Slager, Officer in Walter Scott Shooting, Gets 20-Year Sentence,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/07/us/michael-slager-sentence-walter-scott.html>.
6. See Joan Neuberger, “Charles Joseph Whitman, 1941–1966,” Behind the Tower, n.d., <http://behindthetower.org/charles-joseph-whitman>.
7. See Rebecca Addison, “Pittsburgh City Paper’s Pittsburgher of the Year: Leon Ford,” *Pittsburgh City Paper*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/pittsburgh-city-papers-pittsburgher-of-the-year-leon-ford/Content?oid=5869339>; Michael A. Fuoco, “Mayor Supports Chief McLay’s Embrace of Anti-racism Message,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 3, 2015, <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2015/01/04/Mayor-supports-Chief-McLay-s-embrace-of-anti-racism-message/stories/201501030134>.
8. Malakki (Ralph Bolden), untitled, reprinted with permission.
9. History.com, “December 9, 1981: Policeman Daniel Faulkner Found Dead,” August 21, 2018, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/policeman-daniel-faulkner-found-dead>.
10. Leon Ford, “Black Truth,” 2017, reprinted with permission.

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