Prison Futures

Sea // Fish

10/20/2026

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Introduction

Across Turtle Island the network of U.S. prisons stretch from edge to edge in a vast network. The proliferation of prisons across the occupied land gestures towards the racial ordering of the settler society's long project of of colonialism and coloniality. With the advent of European settlers on Abya Yala and Turtle Island two significant constituent elements emerged. That being the confluence of multiple modes of productions in unison around the accumulation of capital by European settlers, these modes took the form slavery, serfdom, and salaried labor. With this was the sociogenic imposition, codification, and reification of race as both a biological and hierarchical ordering (Quijano 2000: 216). This historical process of human ordering—in the productive and ideological forces—is the coloniality of power. Colonialism begets a global, and specifically trans-Atlantic consideration. With the transferring of capital to the European metropoles colonial projects and the coloniality of power cross germinate into local formulations of race, hence the local construals of race require global considerations (Pierre 2013: 1). I argue that people in prison utilize communication with the outside world to challenge their position as colonial subjects under global white supremacy, and in doing so exercise their agency as counter-normative spatial politics. To do so, I trace the writings of Kuwasi Balagoon and Malik Muhammad as they exercises agency under incarceration and counter the stability of inside/outside through action and communications.

Understanding and parsing the U.S. prison system requires attending to the colonial context they emerged in. The ethnic cleansing, genocide, and forced serfdom of Indigenous people of Turtle Island/Abya Yala by Europeans transformed the land into the Americas and in doing so capitalism emerged for the first time. Through the violent force of European settlers, the labor of all Others was aligned in the accumulation of capital (Quijano 2000: 219). The forced migration of Afrikan communities to the newly transfigured Americas as enslaved laborers produced, not only the commodities that made the European and settled metropoles wealthy but also, the bottom of stratified racial taxonomy to which Europeans became white, Indigenous peoples Indian, and Afrikan peoples Black (McKittrick 2013: 3; Quijano 2000: 219; Wynter 2003: 309). Intimately bound to the transformation of Afrikan peoples into a racialized as Black population on occupied Turtle Island is the colonial experience of Afrikan peoples in Afrika. Specifically, in the modes of production and the social formulations under European plantocracies. The economic production of "native labor" being that of agrarian serfdom for Afrikan peoples in Afrika racialized as native, African, and Black (Pierre 2013: 24, 40, 50), specifically recalls the modes of production of Afrikan people on Turtle Island post-emancipation as sharecroppers.

In Sylvia Wynter's "Black Metamorphosis", the transition out of plantation production to sharecropping is marked by this racial and geographic transformation. Wynter identifies that under capitalism, invented by European colonization of Turtle Island/Abya Yala, three zones of labor control existed that of the peripheral plantation economy, the semi-peripheral serfdom economy, and the wage labor economy exclusive to the core (151). It is thus that from the transition of enslavement to post-emancipation labor configurations to which the labor of Afrikan peoples on Turtle Island became native laborers in the colonial configuration shifting from peripheral to semi-peripheral (Ibid.). With this was Jim Crow, the indirect rule built on bifurcated legal constructions of apartheid, was the continuity of slave laws which reified the Black subject position as human Other (153–154). With the transition of Black labor as enslaved chattel labor to native labor the transition from human animal to human Other implicated the Black subject as

a contradictory human, one who was now minimally human, but whose labor must be devalued to maintain the coloniality of power (162–163).

This important historical transition of productive forces in the U.S. underscores the transition from Plantation Archipelago to the Archipelago of Human Others, in this is the Prison Archipelago (Wynter 2003: 321,329; Wynter 1970s: 372). Through the coloniality of power, the sharecropping mode of production encroached upon the status of human, dominated by Man as white bourgeoise, and thus access to value of human labor. But as Wynter described the Black subject position was implicated by Jim Crow, as indirect rule, to devalue the labor of Black sharecroppers. In doing so the Prison Archipelago's growing (in numbers of people) and expanding (across land) since emancipation, is constructed as poverty producers rather than capital producers (Wynter 2003: 329). It is through the social relationships developed by 300 years of plantation economy which would emerge with capitalism as global structures of labor and social organizations (Wynter 1970s: 390–391).

With the wealth of the U.S. settler project then, prisons as the continuation of plantation social relationships are a central facet to parsing the coloniality of the U.S., and global capitalism as interconnected by white supremacy (Pierre 2013: 4; Wynter 2003: 329). It is not enough to consider the hegemonic implications of global colonialism and coloniality, but to also consider the social forces which emerge in spite of them—not to be confused with romanticizing subaltern expressions of personhood. In Mbembe's "Necropolitics" the position of the slave exists in a paradoxical position. The slave is defined by, "…absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)" (Mbembe 2003: 21), yet

> Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another. (Ibid: 22.)
>
> This contradictory possibility of life in death world provides a look backwards and forwards to negotiate the Archipelago of Human Others, again with particular resonance with the Prison Archipelago. McKittrick's reading of Wynter's "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" does this looking back towards the plantation logics that engenders modern capitalism to understand Black life as well (McKittrick 2013: 11). In this is the site of the plot where Black life still occurred, the land enslaved Afrikan people used to grow yams, practice burial rights, and honor the Earth, thus creating and maintaining a rooted folk culture (McKittrick 2013: 10). This centers the global facets of colonialism, as Wynter highlights, the grave for seventeenth century enslaved Afrikans marked continuity, from Afrika through the middle passage and to Turtle Island/Abya Yala (Wynter 1970s: 86). While coloniality thus serves as Eurocentrism the history, continuity, and agency of Afrikan peoples is denied from both a rationalist and then a biological ontology (Quijano 2000: 221; Wynter 2003).

Now to turn forward as McKittrick does, the plantation logics that creates both the city and the prison also recasts Black life to negotiate the future outside of teleology of biology (McKittrick 2013: 14). That is to question how death worlds are made real (Ibid: 15). In doing so with attention

to the Prison Archipelago, the rearticulation of prison life is necessary, the practices of prison that which are life in spite of (social) death. It has been 500 years since capitalism was turned to the world, and 40 years of prison acceleration that need to be negotiated. One of these elements of prison-life are practices of letter writing as a mode of care work (Burton 2021: 5). Specifically letter writing acts as a mode of preserving "life, dignity, sociality, and political possibility within and against these layers of national, communal/familial, and embodied warfare" (Ibid.: 3). These layers of warfare emerges through the recognition that prisons are tools of antiBlack warfare upholding capitalism (Ibid.). Warfare then resonates with coloniality being used in this paper as the confluence of a hierarchy of labor regimes based on racial taxonomy. In this, the practice of letter writing is one act against this warfare and thus coloniality.

As I describe at length elsewhere, letters provide an interactive participation framework between people in and out of prisons. This is a critical practice of unsettling the overrepresentation of man in the prison archipelago scheme, through lettered interactions communities are able to strengthen projects which seek to abolition prison. Rather, these projects necessarily require these communications keeping in mind McKittrick's "Plantation Futures".

With the understanding that plantation futures require articulating Black-life on the plot and plantation, so to do prison futures require articulating Black-life in the jail and prison. While letters provide a look into this life, other practices require attention to understand the cosmology of prison-life, such as prison art, poetry, and music. The task then too, is to to understand the continuity in these practices with the plantation to, perhaps, unsettle the coloniality that Wynter discusses. In what follows I turn to the prison writings Kuwasi Balagoon and Malik Muhammad and their acts of resistance in prison to investigate how incarcerated people make the space of the prison unsettled.

The Precarity Of Space (Balagoon & Muhammad)

I first look towards Kuwasi Balagoon, an anarchist Black Panther and militant in the Black Liberation Army. I look towards their global solidarity in their abolitionist politics, and their stance-making against shallow solidarity. I then turn to Malik Muhammad, a George Floyd Uprising anarchist political prisoner, their grounding of international solidarity and resistance of the prison archipelago through their poem "Love is Resistance". I take their poem as a stance-making practice of decolonial and abolitionist agency, specifically recasting the poem with Muhammad's resistance to being ordered by the prison archipelago.

Balagoon, as well as the BLA and BPP at large, knew well the United States of America is a settler society engaged in genocidal warfare against the Indigenous and New Afrikan communities (Balagoon 2019, 164–165). In this Balagoon identified the unity of anti-imperialist struggle between New Afrikan peoples, Indigenous peoples of Abya Yala, the peoples of Angola, Mozambique, A'zania, and Palestine (Ibid.). Balagoon's clear identification of the U.S. prison system with the colonial strategies of violence used by settler projects such as South Africa and Israel directly connects the prison archipelago to the global orderings of white supremacy.

Global solidarity in this formulation is thus not only a recognition of parallel imperialist projects, but of their direct strategic material relationships. This global information exchange, evident with U.S. police forces training with Israeli police, engenders a critique of the modes in which imperial projects require each other to constitute global coloniality. To this, I am informed

by the study of stance-making and the work of Makihara and Rodriguez, specifically their use of politics and power, "We propose to think about power and politics as two forms of agency that coexist and depend on each other. Power depends on the anticipation of a disruption of the boundaries of social acceptability. Politics depends on the transgression of boundaries sustained by power" (Makihara and Rodriguez 2025, 7). Prison abolition as decolonial politics, in the Makihara and Rodriquez formulation of politics, requires cutting across such global scales. That is prison abolition is, not only the bottom of a chain in coloniality, but rather the site of a global struggle because of this positioning. Towards this, I move to the Panther 21's Open Letter to the Weather Underground, of which Balagoon coauthored. This letter provides a stance taken by Balagoon that enacts which both politics and power.

Solidarity outside of prison walls is a contested practice. The agency of people in prison cannot be reduced to the accepted agency of their outside connections, especially in the ways these outside connections do not challenge normative spatial arrangement. To clarify, solidarity is not a powerful stance in itself. In the letter the Panther 21—although only authored by a handful of the 21, including Balagoon—described their disappointment of solidarity action during the 1970 New York Jail Uprisings; the letter specifically critiqued the lack of insurgent and militant action needed to meet the abolitionist demands of the uprisings (Panther 21 1971; Burton 2023, 47). The solidarity of the Weather Underground to the Panther 21 was not powerful, in that the cohesion of an anti-normative social relationship was not produced. The Panther's letter to the Weather Underground is both a political and powerful stance to their white left comrades. The message, "Because if you and your 'youth nation' don't keep the pressure up—not only with mass demonstrations—but also with military action—then—basically—as you state—'Black and third world people' are forced by necessity to go 'up against Amerikan Imperialism alone.' In that event—we say to your 'youth nation'—if they can not be of aid to us—then keep them out of the way!" (Panther 21 1971). The political transgression of this statement is evident on the stance of the Weather Underground's solidarity. The Panther's stance of "Black and third world" draws a spatial connection between their struggle in occupied Turtle Island and global colonial ordering. The stance taken by the Panthers is thus powerful, bringing together the Archipelago of Human Others in opposition to the U.S..

Another stance in this quotation is the Panther's critique lack of militant action with the jail uprisings destabilizing the Weather Underground's solidarity. This is both political and powerful, it is political in its critique of what constitutes solidarity. The "… then keep them out of the way!" transgresses the supposed validity of the Weather Underground's solidarity. It also acts a powerful rhetorical move by taking the stance that what is need is "military action". This is powerful as it tends to the boundary of what solidarity means, establishing a (counter)normative basis of social cohesion for the Panthers.

Before the letter was written, during the uprisings, some community began moving towards more militant tactics. Indeed, as Orisanmi Burton recounts, "Yet, toward the end of the rebellion, urban guerrilla military actions showed signs of developing. According to the New York Times, as state actors were preparing to recapture the BHD, the police were harassed by an estimated three thousand people who gathered on rooftops adjacent to the jail and pelted them with rocks and bottles. The police responded by shooting at them, heightening the possibility of a more generalized insurgency" (Burton 2023, 47–48). The active participation of the three thousand people, spurred to action because of the uprisings marked a cohesive force towards destabilizing the Prison Archipelago. The limited participation in guerrilla warfare by outside community and

the ending of the New York Jail uprisings in 1970, is significant in a broader mode of agentive power, moving towards the normative colonial ordering of the state and the reproduction of the prison as colonial periphery. It is also significant in what the (counter)normative cohesion was able to do to destabilize the prison itself. The three thousand protesters refused to separate the prison, and the people in the prison, from themselves and the world outside of the prison.

Particularly usefully in continuing the discussion of the Prison Archipelago is Silverstein's analysis of Whorf and Anderson. As Silverstein notes, "Whorf's point is that the cultural concepts of 'space' and of 'time' are just that: cultural concepts. For Whorf they emerged in the dialectic sociohistorical process between, on the one hand, language used (to its users) rationally and rationalizably as a way of representing the universe and of reasoning about it, and on the other hand, the universe of phenomena so represented" (Silverstein 2000, 104). Therein the stability in Anderson's "we" of Imagined Communities collapses this dialectic positioning language standardization as homogeneous and "reality" (Ibid., 126). The critical purpose of this reading here, then, is that "space" is dialectic, and weaving in, Deere, Quijano, and Wynter this dialectic conception of "space" is informed by coloniality. That is, coloniality's spatial ordering takes the dialectic racialized space for reality. In considering this, the stability of inside/outside of prison becomes an important spatial arrangement. As seen then, the Balagoon and the other authors of the letter run a counter current to the hegemonic standard space, by not only actively taking over the jails, but also calling out the refusal to destabilize the space of the jail by their outside comrades.

This analysis becomes further useful in interpreting the modes of agency in prison as they relate to and communicate with currently non incarcerated people, specifically in the context of U.S. settler history. In Deere referencing Tiffany Lethabo King, this is similar to the "shoal" that is, "The shoal is the space just offshore where land and water meet, where the smooth flows of colonial seafaring encounter obstacles and resistance…" (Deere 2025, 85) and from King, "In a temporal sense, the shoal is also the location that offers a moment to reassemble the self as an amphibious and terrestrial subjectivity… A place and time of liminality where one becomes an ecotone, a space of transition between distinct ecological systems and states" (King 2019, 9). The shoal is also the meeting of water and land, which in the Americas represents the meeting of Blackness with Indignity (the European ships of the slave trade and the land dispossession of Indigenous peoples). This meeting engenders the archipelago of resistance (Deere 2025, 85).

The prison too, figures in to the shoal, the boats of the middle passage taken on the configured racialized grid of disposed Indigenous land. The figure of the prisoner is then not only serving time, but also serving space. It cannot be forgotten that Balgoon found their conflict in colonialism and in solidarity with land dispossession of Indigenous people (Balagoon 2019,170). Balagoon's sharp rhetoric as politics in the open letter demonstrates the rocky terrain of the shoal. This is important as the unstable solidarity of the Weather Underground does not approach the shoal, and Balagoon's decolonial militancy, in this way it is the Weather Underground who served space by reproducing the distance of the overrepresented man from the prison. While Balagoon's decolonial and abolitionist stance marked the limits of white comrades to challenge the colonial space as Balagoon was in active conflict, I now turn to a recent example of decolonial and abolitionist spatial reconfiguration.

Malik Muhammad is a Black and Palestinian political prisoner in the U.S.. On Valentine's Day 2026 Muhammad called in to an open mic poetry event. They recited the poem "Love is Resistance" (Figure 1.), both the poem and the audio recording are preserved on their website.

The poem traces a visit by Malik's partner to them in prison and the political agency of love. As Muhammad says, "We sing the whole visit through, the pigs looked confused. 'Is this love?' They wouldn't assume. The state takes love, locks those ones love up, and throws away the key. With it, their humanity." (Muhammad 2026). To Muhammad, acts of love are political by transgressing against the colonial ordering of the human in prison. Muhammad's politics of love also transgress the spatial arrangement of the prison archipelago. As they said, "The state takes love, locks those ones love up, and throws away the key" (Ibid.). Their love moreover demonstrates the dialectical process of space Silverstein theorizes. The normative space of the prison is contingent upon the separation of the Black colonial subject from modernity, but Muhammad's love offers a counter-current or folk-conception, that love can still take place in spite of the prison. This agentive love is thus a semiotic opening towards abolition.

Muhammad's poem too goes further, the opening of the poem traces the recent release of Palestinian hostages from Israeli prisons, and the denial of allowing Palestinian love. Similarly, Muhammad demonstrates the love that exists between Black people in prison through sharing. The coloniality of global white supremacy denies relationality of love, as Muhammad's first words demonstrate, "Under oppressive conditions, love is resistance as joyousness is not permitted" (Ibid.). The stance Muhammad takes with this line, and the two following, is globally political, in that the love of Palestinians and Black people in prison denaturalizes the death worlds spatial arrangement of coloniality.

Furthermore, Muhammad's refrain of "it's distracting" is a stance that flips the words of the CO on to them. Muhammad's distractions go from the CO interrupting the visit, to the CO pacing, to them being a CO, and to the prison itself. The stance Muhammad takes is political, while the COs original, "'Can you guys just talk to each other? Your singing is a distraction,' she says", is powerful. The CO puts forward a normative stance to position Muhammad and their partner's love as transgressing the boundary and needing to be worked back to maintain the prison's space as loveless and lacking humanity. Muhammad pushing back is political in that they refuse to give in to the boundary as set up, instead remarking how the COs position is itself transgressive. Muhammad's poem unsettled the stability of the prison as a space in which no humanity can be, instead their agency counter's this engendering a space of in spite of the prison.

Directly following the release of "Love is Resistance" Muhammad began fasting for Ramadan. During the days that followed the Correctional Officers at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution limited access to quality food for adults fasting during the Holy Month (Malik Speaks 2026). They were consequently placed in solitary and then, without a trace, shipped across the archipelago to South Carolina. For over a two week period no one could find Muhammad's location, neither their direct supports nor loved ones. Muhammad's resistance puts their poem into material. That is the resistance to comply with the department of corrections which works to disfigure Muhammad into a human pathologized by the condition of incarcerated. By resisting capture into this genre of human, Muhammad reinstates their humanity and their Islam, putting into material their conception of "distracting". That this pathologized humanity will not distract Muhammad from their humanity on their own terms. Again to flip the distraction, Muhammad will not give into the state's violent distractions that seek to make them into something that is not yet human or in capacity of love. (Malik Muhammad has since been found, transferred to South Carolina. Still resisting the prison archipelago that attempts to control them, and make their humanity conditional.)

Connecting Balagoon and Muhammad is not only the lineage of militant political action, and Black anarchism, but also their attacking of the spatial organization of the Prison Archipelago itself. Their international and decolonial perspective resides in the lineage of the Black Radical Tradition drawing from Malcolm X, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Huey P. Newton, Assata Shakur, ad infinitum. Focusing on Balagoon and Muhammad is to focus on their global stance as they formulated their acts of agency as they communicate with the outside a world, a world they seek to abolition by removing the inside world.

While these two examples emerge out of distinct actions, they both demonstrate the agentive character of the prisoner by denaturalizing the normatively of space that makes up the Prison Archipelago and thus modernity. Through these actions the human exceeds the capture, exceeding the prisoner as genre. Again to return to their global perspective, Balagoon and Muhammad's powerful stances on international solidarity, engenders that the Prison Futures, the world to be, in spite of prisons is one in which the Archipelago of Human Others comes together, renegotiating the very notion of space itself.

Figure 1.
"Love Is Resistance" by Malik Muhammad

Under oppressive conditions, love is resistance as joyousness is not permitted. Like Palestinian hostages being released, but their families told not to celebrate or be joyful; like blacks showing unity, working out in solidarity, or sharing things in prison–food, or hygiene, or shoes. Even emphasized in the visiting room, as one of my partners came to see me, their grin bright and gleamy. Dreamy blue grey eyes, as we wrapped in each other's arms for the first time without glass between. "Brief embrace and kiss at the beginning and end of visiting!" The pigs scream. A not so gentle reminder that minus the glass, the state remains between. Never mind it, as we sit gazing into our eyes, hands locked in a tight grip. Lovely to be sitting here with you, we sing, "ceilings," our Lizzy McAlpine track we duet. We sing the whole visit through, the pigs looked confused. "Is this love?" They wouldn't assume. The state takes love, locks those ones love up, and throws away the key. With it, their humanity. So what's with this purity of enjoyment? And what's with the singing? They're having too much fun. "Can you guys just talk to each other? Your singing is a distraction," she says. Distracting who? And how? I'm confused. But I'm sorry, can you not interrupt my visit? You're a distraction. Can you not pace across this visiting room? It's distracting. Can you quit your job? 'Cause it's distracting. Can you tear down this prison? 'Cause it's distracting. Never mind that too, our love continues. So does our singing. "Can you guys quiet down?" "No," I flatly refuse. The laughter, the joy, the love we exude. This time together we use. Singing, talking. Talking politics, Chicago shit, and rocket ships. And love. Tearing to shreds the pigs and the state within earshot of–which we know you hate. And we'll sing our rebel songs and laugh loud the whole day long. It's our love, it's our joy. It's a statement of resistance as much as fact, and pure too. So we'll sing our rebel songs, for us to sing them loud and we'll sing them proud, sing them long and we'll sing them strong, 'til all the women and children are free, 'til every cage is empty, my love. 'Cause sometimes the most radical act is to love. Recklessly and hopelessly, helplessly, irresponsibly. Throwing caution to the wind, 'cause love is scornful of cowardice. To love cautiously is a coward's act. 'Love knows but one master, and that is the passion that makes the heart beat faster and faster.'

Audio File: malikspeaks.noblogs.org

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