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An interview with Orisanmi Burton

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10–12 minutes

In Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt *(2023), his book on the “long history” of the Attica Uprising, social anthropologist Orisanmi Burton describes the American prison system as “war.” In “Consciousness Molded or the Re-identification of Torture” (2010), written from Asqalan prison, Walid Daqqa draws similar parallels, not just showing how prisons are a form of warfare, but explicitly connecting them to the broader Zionist war against Palestine and the Palestinian people. “Modern oppression is hidden,” wrote Daqqa. “It is a shapeless oppression, indefinable by a single picture. It is composed of hundreds of small isolated actions and thousands of details, none of which appears as a tool of torture, unless the whole picture and the logic underlying the system are understood.”*

As this interview was being edited, Burton withdrew Tip of the Spear *from consideration for the Pauli Murray Book Prize, which is offered by the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS). In a public statement, he reiterated the demands of an open letter published by Hammer & Hope urging AAIHS to*

explicitly endorse the Palestinian liberation struggle and refuse funding from the Dan David Foundation, an organ of Zionist soft power headquartered at Tel Aviv University. “I do not want to be recognized by an academic association that is unable to positively respond to this modest call for solidarity, transparency, accountability and humanity,” wrote Burton, “and it is for these reasons that I reject your nomination.”

New York War Crimes: Could you say more about Zionist prisons as a form of warfare, both within Daqqa’s text and more generally?

Orisanmi Burton: Palestinian thinkers have always talked about their condition under Zionist colonialism as a form of incarceration already, right? So just to be Palestinian under colonization, occupation, different forms of separation, enclosure, the checkpoints, the barriers, the boundaries — that whole apparatus actually forces us to think differently about what prisons are and where they are.

By the time Daqqa actually ends up in a physical prison, it’s clear to him that it’s just an intensified form of the kind of captivity that he had been under in the so-called “free world,” which is why he engaged in the kinds of politics that he engaged in. And this is very similar to what people like Malcolm X and Queen Mother Moore were saying in the 1960s. You know, I think it was “Message to the Grassroots” (1963) where Malcolm just off the cuff says, don’t be surprised when I tell you that I have been to prison. You were born in prison. You’re still in prison. You just don’t know it, right?

So, on both ends, these thinkers are taking the idea of the

prison seriously. It’s not as some place where people go when they're sort of taken out of circulation, but rather it’s the paradigm for how the world works and how power works under colonialism.

NYWC: Per the article’s title, Daqqa specifically discusses Zionist prisons as a form of psychological warfare, in addition to physical attacks like beatings and sleep deprivation. Why does Daqqa argue that “consciousness remolding” is the primary aim of Zionist prisons, and how does this relate to the forms of psychological warfare waged against prisoners during the Attica uprising?

Burton: There are differences here between the kinds of internal colonialism that Black people are subjected to and the kinds of settler colonialism that Palestinians are subjected to. In our case, historically, we were needed, the ruling authority kind of needed us for different reasons, right? They needed us for labor. They also needed us psychologically. And so the goal then was to preserve the body, but to break the spirit, to destroy the inside, to destroy the will, to destroy the desire for independence, to destroy the imagination. To turn us into something else that served their needs. That’s the kind of genocide that Black people have been subjected to here. Queen Mother Moore talks about that in the beginning of the book. Imam Jamil Al-Amin, H. Rap Brown, writes about this in *Die Nigger Die!*, his autobiography.

In the context of Palestine, I think [the Zionists] need Palestinians, but in a different kind of way: They serve psychologically as an external enemy that helps create

ethnonational cohesion. They’re the enemy that’s always surrounding Israel, right? This idea of Israel, and that constant fearmongering, helps to create internal solidarity which otherwise may not exist. At the same time, Palestinians are also targeted for elimination, because that's how settler colonialism works.

However, obviously, there’s also this long tradition of Palestinian resistance — like, just getting rid of them isn’t that easy, right? And different tactics have been used throughout time. What’s so important about Daqqa is that he's targeting these more subtle mechanisms which are less identifiable immediately as violent modes of subjection. So he’s not talking about assassination, but we know that happened. He's not talking about the brutal forms of torture, although we know that happened. He’s talking about the subtle ways that Zionist prisoncrats have tried to destroy the Palestinian nationalist consciousness, to destroy the idea of a Palestinian, to destroy the idea of a unified Palestinian people.

In general, I think that’s the role that psychological warfare plays in these different contexts.

NYWC: Daqqa shows that one function of Zionist psychological torture was to break up forms of collective organizing within the Palestinian captives movement. As he points out, this was not an impulsive or one-off response, but a top-down strategy from Zionist politicians like Yaacov Ganot, former head of the “Israel” Prison Service. Daqqa ends his article by arguing that, as of 2010, at least, this strategy was unfortunately effective. He writes: “I point at this

helplessness not in order to disgrace the fighters, or to castigate them. My purpose is to give objective proof to the extent of Israeli control over the prisoners through the whole system.” What do you think made this strategy so effective, and how does it compare to the attempts to break prisoner solidarity during Attica and in the present?

Burton: The goal is to create a class structure within the prison that fractures people’s interest, that makes people believe they have divergent interests. See, the problem with incarceration is that, in many ways, it can neutralize already existing class differences, right? If you take all these people, you put them in a cage, and suddenly everyone’s brutalized, everyone has an interest in propelling, right? Sure. The way that power and authority works most effectively is via divide and conquer, obviously. It’s the oldest imperial technique, and the way you do it is by channeling people into divergent paths.

So part of what Daqqa talks about is the use of giving different people different privileges, encouraging people to think about themselves as individuals to pursue their own individual interests, as opposed to thinking collectively. And again, the way that this is enacted is not necessarily through terror and repression; it’s through these more soft modes of power.

I try to lay this out in the fifth chapter of *Tip of the Spear*, which describes how prison reforms were doled out in unequal ways, and how, in certain prisons, some people were given more punishments or privileges than others. This structure overall was designed to encourage people in the really brutal prisons

to behave themselves with the hope of one day moving to a nicer one, and vice versa, to encourage people who were in the nicer prisons to stay in line or else be sent somewhere worse. So it’s a tiered structure which discourages everyone from thinking about the collective and encourages people to think more in terms of their own personal investment.

And of course, there’s no judgment on my end. I get it. That’s why this system is so effective: It creates a structure that doesn't necessarily require strict enforcement. Instead, it sort of starts to work on its own as people are conditioned in a certain kind of way. And this is what [Daqqa] is talking about. This is how the consciousness is molded. There’s no one you can point to who is directing everything. It’s how the system is organized.

NYWC: Daqqa describes the tension between Palestinian captives having a modicum of dignity and material stability while in prison, and how that is weaponized against them as a pacifying measure. How have similar strategies been deployed in a US prison context? I’m thinking of the moments in your book where you describe the role of e.g. TV or candy being deployed as rewards. During the Attica uprising, in contrast, the rebels pushed back against their squalid material conditions, but as a means of political struggle, versus an end in and of itself or as part of a “human rights”-based framework. Could you talk about how that happened, and what the consequences were?

Burton: Political prisoner Martin Sostre wrote a really sharp

essay about this contradiction called “The New Prisoner.” On the one hand, he wants everyone to live with dignity. On the other hand, the intensity of the repression in prisons creates the context for politicization.

That’s the contradiction — and the state recognized it as well. So, in order to diminish and weaken the ability of people like Sostre to politicize those inside, they had to actually improve the prison’s material conditions. After Attica, one of the primary groups demanding better prison conditions was actually the Prison Guards Union; they knew that if prison conditions improved, their working conditions would improve and they would be at less risk.

All of this is explicitly outlined and mapped out in various counterinsurgency manuals about counterrevolutionary warfare. They talk about the need to improve material conditions just enough so that people don’t rebel, but not too much so that we actually have to redistribute wealth. This is the lens through which we need to understand prison reform after 1970, essentially.