

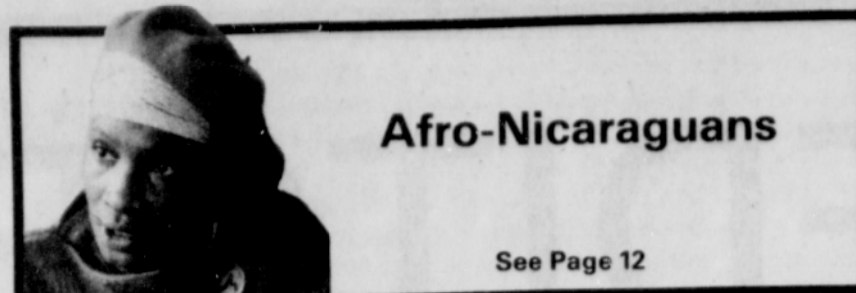
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# PORTLAND OBSERVER

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November 18, 1987

Vol. XVIII, No. 1

## Black Prisoners Speak Out

Part II of II

by Nyewusi Askari

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** On October 23, 1987, the Portland Observer Newspaper received a letter from Oregon State Penitentiary inmate John D. Leftridge II. The letter requested an interview. The interview, it said, was needed in order to give the Black community "a detailed scenario of illegal activities and wrong-doings at OSP."

On Nov. 6, 1987, after some lengthy discussions, the Observer granted the interview.

Years ago, when the Black community charged that the Oregon criminal justice system was sending a disproportionate number of Blacks to prison, state administrators reacted less than favorably. Some officials rumored that the community didn't know what it was talking about and should leave prison matters alone. When the community suggested that racial discrimination might be a significant cause, it was accused of distortion. Now, it appears that the community was right after all.

Evidence of racial discrimination has emerged in a study commissioned by The State Criminal Justice Council. The evidence strongly suggests that a disproportionate number of Black prisoners are receiving more severe penalties and are serving longer prison sentences than white. According to the study, these prisoners are given poor ratings when they are sentenced. A poor rating strongly indicates that a prisoner is likely to continue to commit crimes and is considered a worse or high-risk offender. After receiving this type of classification, the prisoner is given a longer sentence to serve.

The study, conducted by The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (for the Oregon Criminal Justice Council), found that in 1984, of the 1,398 prisoners who were released from state prisons, 1,094 were white — only 171 were Black. More astounding was the fact that although Blacks make up only 1.4 percent of Oregon's population, Black prisoners make up 12 percent of the prison population. In 1983, Oregon ranked fifth among prisons in the nation that had high incarceration rates for Blacks.

According to inmates Leftridge III, Gaines and Armas, the practice of racial discrimination in the criminal justice system is alive and well.

"Is it because we are Black that this practice continues? We're trying to convince ourselves that, in 1987, this way of thinking don't exist, but the evidence is all around us! For example, it was obvious to all of the Black prisoners here that the guy they had in job assignments was of that material. He's been removed since I filed a lawsuit," Leftridge said.

Gaines added, "Any position you find around here (OSP), even down in the laundry, there is discrimination. It's clearly segregated. We have a new warden, and it is my personal belief that the man is trying to do the right thing, but he's been undermined by the good ol' boy system. He might order something to be done, but he can't be here twenty-four hours a day. It appears to many of us Black prisoners that Michael Franke (Director of Corrections) and Scott McAlister (Assistant Attorney General) run the whole thing. There is disparity in the application of good time for minorities, disparity in job assignments, and disparity in housing."

Last year, Black prisoners charged that Oregon State Penitentiary was not hiring sufficient numbers of Blacks for inmate clerks' jobs, and that several prison guards had participated in racial name-calling.

Al Chandler, Director of Classification, said that the Uhuru Sa Sa Club a while back had raised concerns that Black prisoners were not getting a fair shake in the prison industries. "We went through and did a calculation and



"Any position you find around here, even down in the laundry, there is discrimination. It's clearly segregated," according to George A. Gaines

(c). With Gaines are John D. Leftridge (l) and Julian R. Armos (r).  
Photo by Richard J. Brown

found that some Blacks were not receiving jobs of certain types. We are presently attempting to resolve that situation."

According to Ron Martin, Minority Specialist for OSP, "You see, one of the problems is the clerks. As of right now we have ten industry inmate clerks, all white, and there are various reasons for that. I had a meeting with three industrial officials a couple of weeks ago, and we are working together to solve the problem. The main problem is the lack of minority inmates with the skills needed to be clerks, or those that have the skills don't want the job. Right now I have three people who've come forth wanting the job. John Leftridge is one of them. It's not always the fact that they don't hire them, sometimes it's the fact that they can't find the inmates with the skills or the desire for that kind of position."

State correctional officials have said that the Department of Corrections is attempting to fulfill its affirmative action goal of hiring minority staff members in proportion to the number of minority inmates. Currently, the minority staff at Oregon State Penitentiary number 14. Among that number are two sergeants and two corporals.

A 1986 investigation verified Black prisoners' complaints of racial name-calling by prison guards. They were reprimanded by Superintendent Fred Mass.

Aware of the negative image many Black prisoners have in the Black community, a move is underway to implement a culture-history program.

Gaines explained: "We are attempting to catch the young Brothers when they walk through the gates. We try to inform them of what this place is, and how it will destroy them if they don't get involved with some kind of education of the mind. We want them to learn about their proud and glorious history. We emphasize community responsibility and the need to contribute to our neighborhoods instead of always taking. Many of us were never taught Black history. We were never told anything about Black culture. So we existed half of our lives not knowing who we were. We didn't know that we had any reason to be other than what we were. We're trying to change that now. There are a lot of young Black men here, and if we don't help them now, they are going to come back to the community prepared to do nothing but destroy."

Black prisoners and prison officials agree that more support services are needed in the Black community. The absence of such services, including work release centers and half-way houses, often forces the Black prisoner back into a life of crime once he/she has been released.

Three hours after this interview started, it ended. By that time, my senses had returned to my brain; and as photographer Richard Brown and I walked away from the prison, I took on lasting glance — a painful glance — a glance that reminded me of a song I had sung during the theatrical production of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom": "If I had my way, I would tear this ol' building down..."

## Dr. Marable Speaks in Portland

Edited by Nyewusi Askari

Last week, Dr. Manning Marable journeyed to Portland, Oregon, and shared his provocative insights with an enthusiastic congregation. The Observer is proud to present excerpts from that presentation.

Dr. Marable is Chairperson of the Black Studies Department, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. His syndicated column, "Along the Color Line", appears in over 140 newspapers internationally and is a regular feature in the Portland Observer.

"I'm going to talk today about the contradiction between political liberation and economic freedom. Both are related in a fundamental way to this whole process of trying to critique the status of the Black freedom struggle in this country: where we find ourselves in the 1980's; how we see ourselves against the panorama of political struggle and economic struggle, not only in this country, but throughout the African diaspora — throughout the Third World.

The Black student today, the Hispanic student, the progressive white student, is at the center of both political and economic revolution. These are revolutions for social justice and for peace. These are revolutions that have as a part of the visions the pursuit of human quality and social justice. Whether we know it or not, we're all part of these unfinished revolutions. And we can see them abroad in Central America. We see them in the Philippines. We see them in South Korea. And perhaps more fundamentally, we see political and economic struggles for social change and social justice unfolding over the last few years in South Africa.



Dr. Manning Marable

Photo by Richard J. Brown

And as we think of South Africa, we think of Bishop TuTu, Winnie Mandela, Nelson Mandela and millions of other oppressed South Africans who are crying out for political rights and economic transformation. Do we hear their cries? Do we stand with them or against them in this struggle? And do we also recognize that the contradictions they face for political change and economic transformation are similar to the kinds of problems confronting African-American people here in the United States?

One of the most important processes in social change comes from a positive self-awareness: an awareness of self, and here I mean collective self; of our communities; of ourselves within our communities; a sense of our heritage; and a positive sense of our tradition of struggle. Collective self-awareness is essential in understanding the processes of history. Who we are is defined by how we came to be under such economic and political constraints. Any person who is contemptuous of his or her own history cannot create a new history. If we want to devise a method to critique economic and political realities, we must approach that process through the prisms of our own history, through the prism of our own struggle.

Why is this so important?

Let me give you two examples. Story number one: A year ago, I gave a lecture on Martin Luther King's birthday at Brown University. And very much like the Martin Luther King celebrations that are held throughout the country, when I was asked to speak at Brown that evening, I was also asked to speak at a high school earlier that afternoon. It was a very large auditorium. A large portrait of Martin Luther King was hanging on the wall.

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