

# Letter from San Quentin Death Row: Fighting The Oppressor

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*Hunger strikes and other acts of rebellion convey images of prison as a place of defiance. But a large proportion of the inmate population “refuse to even raise an ink pen to write about the oppressor and this oppressive system of death that has us all imprisoned, and is trying to execute us.” Instead, they fight each other.*

This essay speaks to one of the many forms of oppression.

As an African American who is committed to fighting, and ending oppression, no matter where it happens, or who it happens to, I have to speak the truth. And my truth is what I have witnessed and personally experienced here in San Quentin Prison on Death Row since 1985.

I find myself in a real life-and-death situation here on Death Row, where hate, and for certain people, *self-hatred*, is an ongoing situation. Of course, this is not true concerning all the death row inmates, and I would be lying if I said that it was.

But what I am writing about happens enough to deserves attention.

Here, in this institution, as well as in all other modern day plantations there are only two types of people. They are the Oppressors and Oppressed! I am an oppressed person, and in truth, all the other inmates within these walls are Oppressed, even if some of them don't think that they are, or aren't aware that they are.

There are certain inmates, who instead of uniting as one strong oppressed people in order to make all of our lives more peaceful and better, would rather (and in fact do) raise their fists in violence than raise their voice. They speak words of disrespect towards other oppressed inmates for whatever reason, (even if that reason is a made-up one), in order to hate and start trouble and keep madness going among us. Yet, these very same inmates refuse to raise their voice to the oppressor. They refuse to even raise an ink pen to write about the oppressor and this oppressive system of death that has us all imprisoned, and is trying to execute us—this system that is made to destroy us mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and every other type of way that it can before it murders us physically.

Whether these inmates do this consciously or unconsciously isn't known by me or other inmates who also see this and shake their heads in disbelief like I do. What we do know however is this truth: The oppressor and his supporters love for this to happen, and they love to see it happen. They want and need to keep us oppressed people fighting each other. The good old game of divide and conquer is one of their most effective tools. These so

called Brothers who are doing the oppressors' work for them claim to know all about this game of divide and conquer, yet they still keep participating in this game to the detriment of we who are oppressed!

In 1964, the late Malcolm X stated to a crowd of people in Harlem that, "If you aren't careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing"! He further stated, "The Oppressor is fighting you in the morning, fighting you at noon, fighting you at night, and fighting you all in between, and you still think it's wrong to fight them back! Why?"

This is exactly what is going on within this and other modern day plantations to one degree or another. I must also ask "Why?" As I and other inmates continue to do our part in this historical struggle for our collective human rights we do so consciously, and we refuse to do the oppressors' work for him!

They want and need to keep us oppressed people fighting each other."

Though I and others are forced to live in such a place against our will doesn't mean that we have given up or given in. It doesn't mean that we will let the oppressor make us turn on each other in a negative way. We will continue to work to end all of our collective oppression as best we can.

Those inmates who choose to work against us and for the oppressor either don't know, or don't care that they are being misused by the oppressor. As the late Bantu Steven Biko, who is the father of Black Consciousness in South Africa, once said: "The most powerful weapon of the oppressor is the minds of the oppressed!"

Many of us on these modern day plantations refuse to give our minds or our spirits to these wholesale oppressors. Those that do, "That's their bad." Only in acknowledging what is going on, can some of us avoid this trap that is easy to fall into here behind enemy lines.

In Struggle and Solidarity from Death Row at San Quentin Prison,

**Kevin Cooper** is still on San Quentin's death row despite being innocent. Learn more about his case at <http://www.savekevincooper.org/>.

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