

The Autobiography of Tiyo Attallah Salah-El

New York: iUniverse (2006), 154 pp.

Reviewed by Mechthild Nagel

I am writing this book review as a friend, as somebody who has recently come into Tiyo's life. I am one of his many American and international friends who marvel at Tiyo's capacity to reach out and to make the prison walls disappear psychically and symbolically. Tiyo's sense of friendship is indeed fiercely loyal. I am not much of a letter writer but in the course of these past six years, we have managed to stay in fairly regular contact, and I was able to perhaps average one letter for his three to four letters a month. I was pleased that Robert Cox, an archivist with the W.E.B. du Bois library of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, contacted Tiyo's friends and persuaded us to hand over our volumes of letters to the archive. We can now rest assured that his legacy will live on, as one of thousands of U.S. citizens who remain incarcerated for life, and as one who has used the prison as a schoolhouse to further his own incessant quest for knowledge.

Tiyo's recollections are more than personal. They are a much needed, stirring-the-conscience type of analysis as a response to the ongoing prison crisis in the United States in the 21st century. His text follows the best of slave narratives, in particular, radical slave narratives.¹ Such stories and analyses break with the familiar script of writing oneself into freedom through education and of associating the "escape" from prison with real freedom. Tiyo's writing is quite different, although he takes his educational path - earned under tremendously difficult circumstances in prison - very seriously. Growing up as a child in Jim Crow suburban Pennsylvania as David Jones, Tiyo had a relatively happy childhood. He was one of only two black youths in his high school and became something of a sports star, if not a local legend, and received a diploma, even though, as he acknowledges, he lacked an interest in academic work (p. 2). Tiyo takes full responsibility for his youthful life path of wrong choices, even when he makes it clear that he was set up by his own kin in a drug bust and eventually indicted for a murder which he not commit. Due to the murder charge, he ended up as a lifer in SCI Dallas, Pennsylvania.

There are at least three major areas of transformation mentioned in his autobiography:

- Education: From "the fast life" of drugs and mob violence, Tiyo literally reinvented himself into a disciplined, published scholar (earning a B.A. and an M.A. in Political Science while imprisoned), and a tireless teacher of music who recently has undertaken to impart GED skills to his eager pupils - 60 in all and growing. Tiyo has published several articles on the value of education in academic journals, including "Attaining Education in Prison Equals Prisoner Power".² "A Call for the Abolition of Prisons" (2004) was published in the JPP issue focused upon "prisoners and the production of knowledge", and reprinted widely.³
- Faith: Tiyo had a Methodist upbringing, converted to the Moorish Science Temple of America, and finally joined the Quakers while imprisoned at SCI Dallas. Becoming a Muslim also prompted a name change - Tiyo Attallah Salah-El. On his religious conversion, Tiyo wittily notes: "Being a Quaker in prison is not something I'd

recommend for the faint of heart” (p. 87). Faced with ignorant assumptions that a black man could not possibly become a Quaker, Tiyo again set on his own path of defiance, especially when criticized about joining an organization that started the prison experiment in the United States. Chapter 12, “Brief Overview of Prisons in Pennsylvania”, is a good rejoinder to his sceptics, and his self-education on the history of prisons explains why he eventually started to identify with the abolitionist cause, which the Quakers now champion as well⁴ (p. 94). His research led to probably his greatest political endeavour, organizing “The Coalition for the Abolition of Prisons, INC.”, which did not exactly endear him to the “powers that be”.

- Politics: After high school Tiyo enlisted in the army and was sent to Korea for three years; he returned with a shrapnel injury after his tank hit a mine. During another soldier’s funeral service, he had a political conversion and vowed that he would never “enter any military service or support any war efforts of the United States” (p. 25). If one could use one word to characterize his personality, I would choose brazenness, which leads him to take risks, such as forming an anti-prison organization. Tiyo was an irritation to many correctional authorities early on. In a particular daring move, while being a prisoner on remand, he decided to organize the jail and actually had a sizeable number of prisoners sign a union card. Yet, predictably the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board ruled against the Prisoners’ Labor Union and eventually the case was terminated at the State Supreme Court level. Being found guilty of murder, Tiyo was sent to Huntingdon state prison where he was classified as “a dangerous political prisoner” and placed in the “Hole” (p. 63). Shortly thereafter in 1977, he was sent to SCI Dallas where he still is caged. Being ever the optimist, Tiyo writes:

It became clear I had crossed onto the forbidden path of politics and power of the wealthy and would begin paying the price that most poor people pay who become ‘uppity’ and dare take on the powerful and the rich. However, as bad as things seemed to be I was still alive and able to think and survive (p. 63-4).

One of my favorite passages in the book gives the reader a glimpse not only into Tiyo’s long search for the right answers for our prison crisis, but also into some of the unusual studies undertaken which transformed him into an ardent abolitionist. In Chapter 14, “Some Reasons to Consider Abolition,” Tiyo writes:

I did not become an abolitionist over night. It took years of reading, studying, and asking lots of questions. Having teachers, such as Monty Neill and Howard Zinn, leading me into new fields of study was the key factor which in turn was indeed a blessing. Reading the works of Marx, Homer, Cervantes—looking at the powerful paintings of Picasso, Chico Mendes, African, Native American and Mexican art—listening to the powerful and beautiful music of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Bach, Liszt, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Bartok, Schumann, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and other musicians and artists, all played a part in my development. My imagination soared. I gained an international perspective regarding politics and prisons. I became a dialectical dreamer with my brain reeling with visions

and dreams of a radically new society founded on a total transformation in human relationships and the abolition of prisons (p. 100).

Our appreciation of the text, and the life of a prison writer/abolitionist is enhanced if we note that Tiyo wrote the book under trying circumstances. He was harassed by guards intent on destroying his typewriter and his work. Not surprisingly, the author has not seen a copy of his published work. Tiyo's autobiography thus joins the venerable tradition of prison writers (such as Kenyan playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o) who see their work smuggled out, at times even on toilet paper.⁵ I would recommend this book to anybody interested in the tradition of the African-American experience in resisting slavery (in particular in Pennsylvania) and to prison critics, interested in joining the global struggle for transformative justice.

Endnotes

- ¹ Franklin, H.B. (1989) Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist, New York: Oxford Press.
- ² Salah-El, Tiyo Attallah (1992) "Attaining Education in Prison Equals Prisoner Power", The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, Volume 4:1, p. 45-52.
- ³ Salah-El, Tiyo Attallah (2004) "A Call for the Abolition of Prisons", The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, Volume 13. Also reprinted in J. James, ed. (2005) The New Abolitionists, Albany: State University of New York Press; M. Nagel and S. Asumah, eds. (2007) Prisons and Punishment: Reconsidering Global Penalty, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
- ⁴ Editor's Note: Ruth Morris, co-founder of "The International Conference on Penal Abolition (Toronto, 1983) and a staunch Quaker, worked closely with "Society of Friends" groups across Canada. Her seminal work on abolitionism includes: Penal Abolition: The Practical Choice (1995, Toronto: CSPI) and Stories of Transformative Justice (2000, Toronto: CSPI). Ruth was also a member of the Editorial Board of The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons from its inception (1988) until her death on September 17, 2001. See L. Elliott, "Editor's Dedication", Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, Volume 12 (2003).
- ⁵ Brook, Peter (2003) "Prison Samizdat of British Conscientious Objectors in the First World War", The Journal of Prisoners On Prisons, Volume 12 (2003).

About the Reviewer

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