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CONVERSATION AND COMMENTARY: AGAINST CARCERAL FEMINISMS,  
TOWARD ABOLITIONIST FUTURES

## The UnFree Echo, Toward Anti-Carceral Poetics: Poems and an Interview with Sean Avery Medlin

Sean Avery Medlin

Writer-in-Residence, Tempe Public Library, Tempe, Arizona, USA

This Conversation and Commentary forum features a curated collection of poetry by Sean Avery Medlin (they/them), a rapper, poet, organizer, and teaching artist based in Phoenix, Arizona. Their work integrates music, literature, and theater to question the limits of Black masculinity, media (mis)representation, and personal narrative. They strive for an authentic performance of self, in the hope that they will inspire others to examine their own identities. Lore/tta LeMaster first encountered Medlin at the Empty Space Theater in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University where they staged an iteration of “skinnyblk,” an original ensemble devised performance and rap album. Since then, their work has been featured in the *Tucson Poetry Festival*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Phoenix New Times*, and *Teen Vogue* among other places. At present, Medlin serves as the Writer-in-Residence at Tempe Public Library where they facilitate writing classes for the Arizona public.

**LIES (12/18/22)**

*the Devil's a lie & God's not God / have you ever seen a child  
make poetry behind bars? four adult full-time paid guards /  
my own fool self accepting checks to teach songs*

*& don't these youth know more about blues bruising throats /  
raping red-eyed & orange breaking bone than I /  
who brings poems into jail complex?*

*the Devil's a lie & God's not God / I would know I see cops  
nine millimeter straps erect like dogs / assault of freedom /  
the flesh pound's cost /*

what world God rote if there be such a being / my body  
is my church my body's escaping / I'm five dimensional  
in my daydreams / I cough a portal closes /  
I offer love another opens /

these children / our children / given pity & poison /  
told they're broken / told to obey or they'll be broken /  
homes schools cultures broken /  
sentences & punishments breaking in  
wills to live like side windows & backdoors

the children know & they have been knowing  
*the Devil's a lie & God's not God*

## **CHALCEDONY**

*i be tryna dig into our miseries & unearth chalcedony*  
the top porn search across this “country” is ebony  
the Twitter discourse reads post-racialness is eddying  
from dreaded hippies to yuppies whitefolk ain’t pretendin no mo  
*climbed mountains for the knives of nemesis & snatched the sheath*  
*my fist closed on smoke* they’re all war criminals  
why would you ask me to vote? another late night too high f%ck  
this sh!t freestyle poem the “state” kills us by electric volt  
  
single digit percentage of “state” population double digit  
percentage of “state” death row why recite the stats like we  
don’t know who i’m talking about *when i go above the valley*  
*i look down smog forms a thin silver film like mercury spilled*  
  
*clouds pooling what we can’t breathe* every way my people live  
somebody gross profits guess who? numbers aren’t matter  
we’re not fractions *our bodies are real* anti object alive alive  
*the sadness this world inflicts* won’t force us to hide  
  
*this World* won’t force us to hide

**PEN**

abducted children offered like lambs  
 sentenced to life in a chattel pen  
 where is the light in a human's eyes  
 when a camera flash captures hanging tree?

don't matter if you did the crime or not  
 the blacker the skin the more criminal  
 the lower the caste the more killable  
 the larger the mob the more memorable  
 boys and girls who are my reflection    kinfolk  
 cousins        fam    stuffed in cages like chickens  
 working in prisons for pennies    penances  
 powerful resolve to survive

<sup>1</sup>WE SURVIVED/WE WERE NEW IN OUR OWN EYES  
 this poem wants to be a scope's crosshair eye  
 our planet's biggest incarcerator fosters a radical "i"  
 occupying forces paid taxes arrest southsides

what happens when we run out of land to build walls?  
 can prisoners reclaim freedom from our empire's fall?  
 my niggas bodies decaying for naught! my niggas  
 unalive in a land fraught with blood & colonial fault  
 young poets praying for their day in court like

Dear Lord    please help this judge see my worth  
 centuries run ruby from rope    law        brand  
 Black lives vanishing clean like words off sand  
 our country says we aren't humankind            our scholars say  
 we can(not) be relational  
 & what kind of person locks other people away  
 inside pens?

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<sup>1</sup>Lyrics originally from "Windhoek" by billy woods ft. Mach-Hommy.

**UNTITLED (05/11/2022)**

*I yearn to feel fulfilled by what I do with my body beyond bedrest and basketball.*

When I walk into the detention center  
steel doors close behind me like eyes  
shutting for sleep. This is how I imagine  
the slam, booming and echoing down  
camera recorded halls.

The boys write poems how teeth fall  
from gums. The girls write poems before  
I start. Taking three deep breathes I park  
and think of *Jalen, Jaiden, Fiasia, Leroy*.

I miss them kids how Hip-Hop miss b-boys and  
b-girls—they looked at me like *how can we*  
*write poems when we can't be boys or girls*,  
fists behind their backs unfurl—dreams and goals  
bleed out here I try leading where few can meet me.

What do I offer anyway? A poem is another  
way to say something unsaid, to channel the living  
and dead, to release pain when our eyes  
blossom red. What I offer is a way to  
be read, heard, and remembered. Yes,  
it does require one to surrender.

**Who can consent to vulnerabilities, while living daily through isolation and unsafety?**

***FREEDOM CONTRAPUNTAL***

I am free	I am alive
they're not free	they're unalive
it's not fair	it's unfair
it's fairly fascist	they're fair game
for fahrenheit hunters	hot blood captured & sold
cold coin given to those monsters	monster fare as in cost
monsters fare well in empires	empires fumble fallacies fairly well
the price of dominance is downfall	empires warfare poorly against their poor
empires      farewell!	empires      au revoir!
empires      ta ta!	empires      adiós    chao    hasta nunca!
empires      adieu!	empires of fair skin      good riddance to you!

**Lore/tta LeMaster (LL):** What makes poetry abolitionist?

**Sean Avery Medlin (SAM):** Well, abolitionism seems to me like a paradigm, or a construct that shapes the way we perceive and act upon the world. So, poetry that follows the logic of abolition, the principles, the “spirit” so to speak, is abolitionist. I think of Assata Shakur—writer, poet, and Black Panther Revolutionary, or the poetic work of writer and dramatist Frank B. Wilderson III. The former devoted her life to Black Liberation, and the latter is known for his critiques of movements like abolition, for their insufficient analysis of the Black Condition. These writers are dedicated to the struggle of abolition outside of the poem.

Abolitionism is not abstract though; it is the undoing of prisons, borders, slave labor, human trafficking, and all the identification systems that allow these atrocities, i.e., race, class, gender, etc. Abolition is the end of systemic dehumanization and exploitation. Those are not small events; those endings would beget a new world, the birth of which would require upheaval and disruption on a magnificent scale. Poetry that is in service of these ideas, that seeks to literally or metaphysically incite resistance against all forms of enslavement, that is abolitionist poetry.

**LL:** How would you describe your process as a poet? Where do words begin and end—is there a beginning or an ending?

**SAM:** My process as a poet is very active. I like to move around as I write, or speak the lines out loud as they come to me. I often write within a moment of inspiration, but I have also had plenty of seasons in my life where writing was a scheduled, daily event. The more I grow as a poet and writer, the more I try to let go of controlling the arc of the work. I’m often working on narrative poetry, so chronological order tends to be where I start my first drafts. As I write and rewrite, I challenge myself, and the narrative I’m telling, as best as I can. At the end of the process, I want poetry that leaves the audience feeling something they remember more than knowing the story/stories within the poem. Finding a poem’s end can be difficult, and trusting my instincts, or learning from the skill of another writer’s craft, help guide me when making difficult artistic choices.

**LL:** What makes a good audience for poetry?

**SAM:** What makes a good audience for poetry, in my opinion, is an audience that wants to engage poetry. In late January 2024, I organized, hosted, and performed at a showcase of poets and musicians, here in Phoenix. What amazed me and my fellow performers was how much the crowd was actively listening. Listening to poetry doesn’t always mean silence. Reading poetry doesn’t even mean silence! When I read a poem I enjoy, I audibly “ooh” and “ahh” at what awes, moves, or inspires me. When I perform poetry, I want an audience that will respond to me, that will return the energy I put forth by the act of speaking poetry aloud. An audience that sighs, cheers, cries, snaps, and claps is exactly what I want from a poetry audience. The exchange between poet and audience should only be silent for the sake of processing the work. Otherwise, a good poetry audience to me is one that is present and responsive.

**LL:** This might be getting REAL theoretical, but I think it is worth asking: is such an audience an abolitionist audience or an audience primed for abolition? My bigger question regards whether poetry speaks into abolition in such a way that it might make an audience move ... toward abolition, beginning with response.

**SAM:** Yes, I think that poetry can be the propaganda of abolition so to speak, two of the literary and performance arts branches of an abolitionist culture, and in that way, it can reproduce abolitionism within a connected audience. I think that, that sort of process is so ultimately theoretical at this point, because our entire arts monoculture (commercial and academic) is anti-abolitionism, and an audience would need much more long-term exposure to pro-abolitionist art for it to have that kind of effect in my opinion.

**LL:** Will you please reflect on the formatting of your collection? What do the solid bars represent, for example? What about the order of the works in this collection?

**SAM:** The poems I've submitted for this journal forum almost all arise from an eight-month gig I had teaching poetry inside Durango Juvenile Detention Facility near the Southside of Phoenix. It was a difficult excursion for me as a teacher, because I had not previously taught inside a carceral institution before. I cannot distill that experience down in this answer, or even in the poems that accompany this interview, but it did profoundly change me.

The backslashes found in one poem, *LIES*, are used as pause indicators, no different from what a comma would represent in a poem. The backslashes are more commonly used to indicate line breaks in song lyrics, and I use them often in my poetic work. Other poems like *CHALCEDONY* and *PEN* rely on the audience's understanding of rhythm and line breaks, as they refuse to employ end-stopped lines that are not direct questions to the reader.

In *UNTITLED*, two long bars of black highlighter replace what was originally the poem's beginning and ending lines. I redacted those two lines for many reasons, but the leading intention was to create two literal walls on the page, representative of the gates I entered month in and month out to teach poetry inside the detention center, the gates that my students could not follow me through. *FREEDOM CONTRAPUNTAL* is written in the contrapuntal form, meaning that the poem is read three ways, down the left column, down the right column, and then again from left to right.

The poems published in this forum are ordered by my good friend and collaborator, Ashley Thomas. She is a dramaturg, poet, and playwright whom I trust with my friendship, and yes, my dearest, deepest poems.

**LL:** What does it feel like to write poetry? What does it feel like to perform poetry?

**SAM:** Writing poetry feels like ... ugh, what a tough question this is! Writing poetry usually feels like a release for me, an expression waiting to be untethered from my interiority, or like a firework I did not expect but was pleasantly surprised by. In certain seasons of my life writing poetry has felt like a chore, or contractual work, which in many ways, it has been both. At my most creative, the act of producing poetry is a process I carve out time and space for, and it serves as a kind of meditation, reflection, or even prayer. It is a spiritual experience, even when I feel forced to create by deadlines or contracts. I also take numerous breaks from writing throughout the year to prevent myself from burning out.

Performing poetry feels like ... telling your secrets in a room of people you cannot see. It is always a risk, because even if you know the folks in the room, you can never know what their responses will be. Despite this feeling of precarity, I absolutely love performing poetry because the act of writing is so important to me, and because I

thoroughly enjoy performance. Whether musical, theatrical, athletic, or poetic, I have always loved to perform and watch performances. This does not mean I'm an extrovert, or an actor, or that I love to perform anytime, anywhere. But something about performing sets my heart aflame, plain and simple.

**LL:** What inspires you?

**SAM:** What inspires me the most is music, without a doubt. Specifically Hip-Hop music. I always say that every rap song is a poem, but not every poem is a rap song. Hip-Hop music taught me poetics first, from the similes and metaphors used in rappers' bodacious rhymes, to the precise imagery and narratives of the American inner city and Black American experience. Without Hip-Hop music, my poetics would manifest very differently. It is safe to say that the Black musical traditions of any era would have inspired me to write, knowing that jazz was essential to both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. However, I wasn't born in the jazz era, the soul era, or even the brief era of disco. I was born in 1993, in the middle of Hip-Hop's supposed "golden age", the last period in time where major corporations (such as music labels and radio companies) did not have full control over Hip-Hop's presentation and marketing. Some of the first poets I ever heard perform were featured on Hip-Hop albums, poets like Ursula Rucker, J. Ivy, and Malik Yusef. The music of my generation, and of generations to come, is primarily what drives me to record and publish my experiences, musings, and theories, in hopes that I can inspire someone as deeply as the artists I look up to.