

*Letter*

*To*

*Washington Heights*

*High School Students*

**By, Sundiata Acoli**

**January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000**

# Letter to Washington Heights High School Students (2000)

Hello Youngsters,

What's up? Que Paso? Your teacher, Ms. T., tells me that you all have a lot of questions about racism, police brutality, prisons, oppression and so forth. She asked me to write a letter to the class about it and run it down to you.

Well, I'm Black, so I know racism. I was a member of the Black Panther Party that fought against police brutality in the '60's/'70's, so I know about that. I've been in prison for the last 26 years, so I know prisons. And I've been oppressed all of my life and have fought against it all of my life, so you know I know about oppression.

Racism, police brutality, prisons and oppression are all connected. They all work together to keep people of color down in particular and poor down in general. Let's see how this operates.

## RACISM

What is racism? My dictionary says it's "the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others." Well, that sounds slick but it is a bunch of crap.

Racism is *not* about what a person *believes* about another race; it's about what a person, or race, *does* to another race. Beliefs are simply things in people's heads – their thoughts, ideas, opinions, etc. A person can believe or think anything they want and it won't hurt or help you in any way – as long as they don't do anything to you.

You can think or believe that Aisha is pretty. No problem, as long as you don't try to do anything, like kiss Aisha. That would be a problem... unless she wants to kiss you, too. If so, you and Aisha can then kiss with no problem because both of you want to and she consents (agrees by word or action) to kiss you.

But let's say Aisha doesn't want to be kissed by Goeffrey. Yet he throws her down and kisses her anyway. He likes it, kidnaps her, takes her home, names her "Beatee," beats her every night and locks her in the closet. He keeps her Half-naked and half-starved and only lets her out to clean

house, cook, or wash clothes. He never pays her a dime nor lets her go to school, nor does he teach her to read or write. And this goes on for 40 years until she no longer remembers her real name, or how she came to be in his house.

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At that point Geoffrey stops chaining "Beatee" in the closet, begins paying her \$1.00 a week for her work, and even lets her go outside to do his grocery shopping, laundry, and take his grandkids to the park. When his friends come over, he tells them that "Beatee" is a slut whom he found homeless on the streets at a young age, ragged, starving, barely human, unable to read and write, and hardly speaking English. He took her in, gave her a good home and raised her as best he could. She was happy, grateful and stayed on as his maid. His friends repeated his story to their friends and over time everyone came to believe it.

So one day you're bopping down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. At 72<sup>nd</sup> Street you see "Beatee" sitting in Central Park with Geoffrey's grandkids. You call out, "Yo, Sistah!" and she clutches her purse, grabs the kids and flees across the street to Geoffrey, who's waiting for the doorman to bring the limousine around.

You step up to Geoffrey and say, "Yo! Man, what's happening with her?" He repeats his story of "Beatee" that he's often told his friends. They stand around nodding in agreement. He ends saying, "I did the best I could do for her but she wasn't able to make something of herself like the White kids of this neighborhood did. I believe it's because she's Black and it accounts for the difference in her character or ability and the White kid's superiority to her."

You might believe his story unless you knew the true story of Aisha or remembered your grandparent's telling of her kidnapping and disappearance from the 'hood long ago. If so, you'd probably reply, "That's a bunch of crap! Being Black has nothing to do with it, nor do beliefs. Beatee's the way she is because of what you've done and are still doing to her."

Well, racism works the same way. It's not about what one race believes about another race, it's about what one race...(fill in the blank)...does to another race. When one race consistently, time and again, violates another race's will, consistently does that race harm, and consistently

uses force to take advantage of that race for the benefit of their won race – *that's racism*.

When you know the origin, or the true history, of a problem, you are much better able to understand it and come up with a solution to it. Millions of years ago the human race began in Afrika. They were Black people. Many years later some spread to other continents. Over time, the separation, different climates, inbreeding and other factors changed their appearance to the general racial and ethnic features we recognize today. 4

Afrika was the land of the Blacks, the East was the land of the Arabs and Asians, North Amerika was the land of the Reds, South America and the West were the land of the Browns, and Europe was the land of the Whites. On each continent great civilizations rose and fell, perhaps many times, with Afrika being the first and perhaps longest lasting great civilization. It reached its zenith, or highest stage, during the era of the Black dynasties in Egypt. They built the pyramids, discovered the elements of the arts and sciences, math, reading, writing, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, and engineering. Moreover, these same people founded, based on the laws of nature, those civil and religious systems which still govern the universe. Great civilizations also rose and fell in Timbuktu, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and other parts of Afrika.

The Europeans, or Whites, are newcomers and the latest arrivals to civilization. Their rise began a few centuries before Christ through contact with and repeated invasions of Egypt from the north, often combined with Asian invasions. Afrika had beat back their invasions many times over the previous centuries, in addition to earlier and ongoing Asian invasions. At this time race had no bearing on slavery. Slaves were generally those prisoners captured during wars, which was how slavery began. Whites, Blacks, Browns, and Yellows were all made slaves, if captured. A slave or ex-slave could and often did, rise to the highest position in society.

Between invasions and during occupations, Europeans came to Afrika to study at its Egyptian universities. The Greeks, Plato and Aristotle, and other Whites spent many years studying under Afrikan priests at Alexandria's University to learn philosophy, art, science, and other aspects of Afrikan culture.

**Afrika was overthrown when it failed to beat back the circa 650 B.C.E. invasion of its crown jewel – Egypt, sitting at the northeast corner of the continent. Over time the Europeans looted the Egyptian temples, tombs, and libraries, carrying many of its books and other treasures back to Greece, Rome and other European centers, and burned the rest of the books along with the library to the ground. They used Christianity to unify Europeans under a single banner with a mandate to go out and conquer the world under the guise of spreading Christianity.**

**Europeans carried out further invasions along Afrika's northern seacoast, captured the seaport cities and thereby cut Afrikans off from the Mediterranean Sea, the world's trading center at that time. The invaders occupied the northern seacoast and drove Afrikans deeper into the interior where land was less fertile and they were less able to provide food and other basic necessities for life for large populations.**

**Afrika never fully recovered due to further invasions, this time mainly from the east as Arabs swept out of Asia and across northern Afrika, conquering in the name of Islam and displacing the European occupiers, but at the same time blocking Afrikans from its eastern seaports.**

**The Arabs made a practice of creating strong slave armies, both Black slave armies and White slave armies. The White slave armies were the Mamelukes. When stationed in Egypt, they revolted against their Arab masters in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, overthrew the government, and slaughtered so many Arabs, that it ended the enslavement of Whites from that day forward. Thereafter, Afrika became the only hunting grounds for slaves.**

**Now hemmed in from the north and the east, blocked from its commercial seaports, and pursued by both Europeans and Arabs, Afrikans fleeing enslavement were driven deeper into the center of the continent and broken up into smaller groups. The Arabs gained complete control of the Trans-Sahara trade routes which, combined with their control of the commercial seaports, gave them effective control over the economic life of Afrika, and therefore Afrika itself. Afrikans were now cut off from direct contact with Europe and Asia and access to its latest superior weapon – firearms. As such, they were never able to establish themselves or rebuild their society for**

long before warring invaders and slave hunters crashed down on their heads again, forcing them to flee once more deeper into the interior in a circular movement that ultimately kept them on the move for centuries. 6

In the meantime, Europeans rewrote history to hide the Afrikan origins of World Civilization. They claimed every previous Afrikan discovery as their own. They said that Afrikans were and always had been heathens and savages who gave nothing to the world, and that it was the Greeks and Romans who laid the foundation to White Western Civilization.

About 500 years ago Europeans found themselves cut off by Turks from the land route to East India and its trade goods. They began seeking a sea route to India. Thinking the world was flat, they hoped to sail around Afrika, keeping near to its coastline, to reach India. They wanted to avoid sailing too far out into the ocean for fear of dropping off the end of the Earth.

On each failed attempt to circle Afrika they sailed part of the way along its western coast, gave up, and went ashore to capture or invite Afrikans to return to Europe with them. From these captives or guests, the Europeans learned of navigation by the stars, which Afrikan caravans had used for centuries to cross the great Sahara and Sinai deserts, two vast seas of sand. They also learned of ancient Afrikan sailors who had sailed across the ocean to a distant land and back – which was probably why they took the Afrikans back to Europe in the first place. Columbus put it altogether – navigation by stars and known voyages to distant lands – to become one of the first Europeans to reach the Americas. Also, years earlier the Europeans had been introduced to fire crackers in China. They used the technique to make gunpowder and the gun – and it was on!

Europeans began kidnapping Afrikans and bringing them and European convicts to the Americas as indentured servants. At first they released both European and Afrikans upon completion of their servitude or sentence, but over time the slave owners passed laws that made Afrikans indentured, or enslaved, for life.

At the same time, colonial Whites waged war against the indigenous people of the Americas, the Indians, or Red race, and began killing them off with guns and blankets infected with small pox, in order to take possession of

their land. While massacring the Reds and enslaving the Blacks in the Americas, they turned their cannons on the Brown races in the Caribbean islands, killing most of the Taino of Puerto Rico and the other indigenous peoples of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, the Virgin Islands, Barbados, and other islands, so as to occupy and possess their land.

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Everywhere Whites went in the Americas, they made war on the indigenous Red and Brown races. Often those not killed or driven deeper into the forest were enslaved alongside the kidnapped Afrikans. Whites took control of the land of indigenous peoples, stole their crops, and forced them to dig for gold and grow sugar cane to make rum to sell in the colonies and Europe. In Europe they bought more ships which built up the ship industry, bought more guns and supplies to kidnap more Afrikans to bring to the Americas to sell as slaves to work on plantations to produce more tobacco, cotton, sugar, and rum, to sell to Europe. With the money earned they then brought more Europeans to the Americas to build up their population to fight the Red and Brown races and take more of their land. And this vicious circle continued for centuries.

Everywhere Whites went, they spread their racism by setting up the most vicious racial caste, or category, system the world had ever seen. All people were ranked by color – Whites at the top, then Yellow, Brown, red and Blacks at the bottom. They fanatically forbade any sexual relations between White women and men of other races. The rule did not, however, apply to White men having sexual relations with women of other races, which was in fact rape, since women of color had little or no say or choice in the matter. Sexual relations among races of color were mostly a matter of choice, preference, or cultural tradition – the Whites looked down on any woman having sexual relations with Black men.

Social relationships between Whites and other races were mostly forbidden. The only use most Whites had for other races was their labor, their land, and their women. Whites took first preference of anything they liked, and shunned anything they disliked. They lived on the best land, in the best houses, and ate the best food, wore the best clothes, and held all positions of authority,

importance, or ease. The positions of governor, legislator, businessman, skilled professional, shop owner, plantation owner, overseer, boss, and straw boss, as well as all other desirable jobs, were restricted to "Whites first."

If no Whites could be found for a choice job, it was given to the next racial level, the Asians, usually Chinese or East Indian, or the biracial offspring of a White man and an Asian woman, or Brown, or Red woman, and lastly, a Black woman. If none could be found still, then the next racial level, Brown, would be permitted or made to take the job, and so on down the line to the Black, who was always last to gain and first to pain.

The color caste system was brutally enforced by Europeans in all dealings with other races. They would kill, brutalize, enslave, or imprison anyone of color, or even Whites, who violated the rules for any reason. With this policy, Whites fought their way through the Americas in order to establish their power over all other races. The lowest White normally had more power and was treated better than the highest person of another race. All Whites were above the law with respect to other races. A drunken White tramp or rogue could murder the chief of another race and most Whites would band together to protect him and prevent him from being tried by the injured race. Rarely, if ever, would he even be brought to trial. People of color were generally treated as less than animals, and were bought and sold, worked, bred, and often housed like animals. They were forbidden to speak their own language, practice their culture, or worship their Gods. They were only permitted to do what Europeans wanted: submit, work and accept European ideals, culture, and Gods. And over the years many forgot their own language, history, culture, and how European culture came to be in their hands.

All this was done by Whites to other races for 400 years by force of arms, cannons, whips, chains, the Navy, militia, police, White citizens, lynchings, beatings, slavery, prisons, guile and trickery in order to force other races to submit, work, idolize European culture, and be afraid to resist or practice their own culture, so that a White elite could rule and grow rich, and Whites in general could live well off the free and cheap labor of people of color and the poor. That's racism and the foundation of White

**supremacy. Its purpose is to maintain power over people of color and the poor for the benefit of White elites and their cohorts.**

**That was then, what about now? Does racism still exist? Does White supremacy still exist? Yes, but after 500 years it's gotten slicker and changed somewhat so that it's harder to see or detect.**

**During the era of chattel, or physical, slavery, all white persons held authority over people of color. But people of color and anti-slavery Whites resisted. Eventually, slavery became too costly in terms of lives and money, and resulted in the Civil War which brought an end to chattel slavery. The color caste system simply switched to enslaving people of color and the poor through low pay, sharecropper wages, peonage, and later, segregation laws enacted for the purpose of keeping people of color in their places.**

**Following World War II, the U.S. became the world's leader, but the majority of the world's people were people of color. Most were engaged in armed and unarmed struggles for independence from European colonialism or control. The U.S. knew it couldn't sell its racist form of government, economics, and trade to the world as long as it had segregation codes against people of color at home. Moreover, the bad publicity from people of color and anti-racist Whites' growing resistance to segregation in the U.S. was hurting its world image. Colonized people worldwide were turning toward the non-racist socialist form of government as preached by the Soviet Union, North Korea, North Vietnam, Cuba, etc.**

**The Europeans were losing lives in doomed colonial wars. Growing Soviet trade was eating into U.S. sales abroad, plus segregation prevented many White businessmen in the hotel, restaurant, nightclub, school, university, and other trades from selling to the growing populations of color at home. Segregation had become too costly in lives and image as a result of the Civil Rights movement. Once again, the U.S. color caste system switched its image by taking all the segregation codes off the law books, but it never in fact, fully desegregated the country. It couldn't because the color caste system is the core of its governing and economic structure. It can't change the structure without giving up its goal of**

**maintaining worldwide white power and control over people of color and the poor. It can only change its image each time resistance becomes too costly to continue in its old form.**

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**The European color caste system is still in effect today throughout the Americas and worldwide. During colonial times White invaders slaughtered many of the indigenous Red and Brown races in the Americas. Many of the surviving peoples are the result of inbreeding with both the White invaders and the imported Afrikan slaves. The complexion of citizens, range from White all the way to Black. Yet even today most of the positions of authority, wealth, or prestige in these countries still follow the old color caste pattern. The Presidents, upper classes, and skilled professionals are almost always its Whiter citizens, who have European features. Their first invaders or colonizers were from Portugal or Spain, which is why these countries speak Spanish and Portuguese today. Later came the British, Dutch, French, Belgians and Danish. They colonized those Third World countries that speak English, French or Dutch, today.**

**The White citizens of these countries still discriminate and look down on their own indigenous Brown races, who are usually called Indians. They also discriminate against their darker citizens who carry Afrikan blood. These are hush-hush topics throughout these countries, and wherever this sort of discrimination exists, because it shows that the old European color caste system is still alive and thriving. It's only been modified to make it more presentable and harder to see, but the core of the system and its function, remain the same.**

**So, what's a system? It's like a machine, except it's a network of people, places and things all working together according to a plan that's designed to produce certain results. A system enables a person to work in it by simply carrying out one's role, without having to know the whole plan. We, people of color and the poor, live in a system designed to produce certain results, although we neither designed it nor set it up.**

**The European invaders set up this color caste system we live under. They designed and used it to keep themselves in power and control over us, people of color and the poor, so that a rich, White elite could keep using us to make**

fortunes for themselves and their supporters and a prosperous life for themselves, in general. //

When you maintain or keep control over someone or something, that's called *domination*. And when you use or take advantage of someone, that's known as *exploitation*. The European invaders set up a system that dominates and exploits other races and the poor for the benefit of the White elite and its supporters. That's a racist system.

The children of the invaders, a rich White elite, still maintain that system, only it's been changed a little over the centuries to blind people to its true function. When a system is used to do something, that makes it *systematic*. So, finally, what is racism? *It's the systematic domination and exploitation of one race by another race for their own benefit.*

Once you look at racism in that light, you understand it and how it works, and you know it's not *beliefs*, but a *practice*, something that's *done* by one race to another. You also know it's not done because of "beliefs" or wrong ideas," but because one race benefits from dominating and exploiting another race. And last, you understand that racism is not some random or incidental encounter, but a system set up long ago by the White invaders who made it a cornerstone of their government and economics. They passed it on to their children who maintained its core, the color caste system, but changed its outer appearance each time resistance blocked it from continuing in its earlier form – thus it has come down to our times.

Racism is so systematic today that the majority of Whites no longer have to be personally racist toward people of color. And racism will continue no matter how many people of color become part of the system. Racism is ingrained in its very core. No matter who operates it, the mere operation of the system itself ensures that people of color and the poor will continue to be dominated and exploited by a White elite and their supporters.

So what is this racist system called? It's called capitalism – and it's maintained by a rich White elite who own the giant corporations. These giant corporations control the government. The government controls us, people of color and the poor, for the benefit of the elite White capitalists, their supporters and Whites in general. The capitalists benefit from their corporations, making

billions and trillions of dollars off people of color and the poor. Whites in general benefit from their White status, 12 which gives them first preference to the best positions, businesses, jobs, homes, schools, hospitals, and all the other things that provide them with a better life than other races. That, in a nutshell, is racism.

## **Police Brutality**

The term "Police Brutality," as used today, is actually incorrect. It should be called, "Police Murder and Brutality," since killings by the police are usually dumped into the brutality category.

Police Brutality is the use of undue force by the police. It refers to the slapping around, hurting, beating, choking, injuring, shooting, tasing, wounding and/or assaulting of someone unnecessarily. In strictly legal terms, an assault occurs anytime someone needlessly puts anyone in fear of life or limb. They don't have to be touched. It is enough that they are put in fear, such as having someone pull a gun or knife on them. That alone is legal grounds for an assault charge.

The point is that the many needless "stop and frisks" carried out by police in communities of color are actually assaults. They instill fear of the police into the people who live there. That's one reason the police do it. These uncalled for police assaults can also be classified as police brutality.

The police rarely or never conduct such "stop and frisk" tactics or "Crime Unit Sweeps" in White communities. Likewise, they rarely shoot and kill White youths. Yet they are quick to shoot and kill youths of color. In almost every case it's a White policeman killing a youth of color. Why is that?

The police are part of the system. They're a branch of government. The city policeman's job is to protect and defend the city. The state police, or troopers, defend the state, while federal police, FBI, etc., defend the U.S. federal government.

The police are part of the same color caste system that's designed to keep the White elite in power. To do that, they must keep people of color in particular, in fear and in their place so that they won't challenge White authority, the

system's authority, or the government's authority, which in essence are one and the same.

The standard way to spread fear among a people is to appear crazy or berserk, by shooting, killing and brutalizing them for no apparent rhyme or reason. The police, usually White, randomly shoot, kill and brutalize "suspects" of color to spread fear throughout their communities. 13

The *other* reason police constantly "stop and frisk" youth of color is that this tactic is designed to seek out and destroy the rebellious ones of our communities. Any youth who gets "uppity" during these stops is considered rebellious. Often, a pretext is found to brutalize or arrest them, give them a record early in life, and eventually, send them to prison.

Sending so many youths of color to prison makes it easier for the police to control the 'hood. Young people are quicker to fight and quicker to defend their communities. By sending them off to prison, the police have less resistance and communities of color are left more or less defenseless. Moreover, youth in prison can't produce babies, thus cutting down on the population growth of people of color. It allows Whites to remain the majority of the U.S. population for a little longer.

The police do inside the country, what the CIA and armed forces do abroad, although the distinction between them is blurred. The U.S. military treats Afrikans, Asians and South Americans in their countries the same as the police treat people of color and the poor in their communities. The police will continue to ride roughshod over people in the 'hood until its youths form organizations to defend themselves and their communities from police murder and brutality. The Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Black Liberation Army (BLA) were two such organizations that did this in the sixties and seventies.

Defending the community from police murder, brutality and terror, will make the government rein in the police, give the Civilian Review Boards teeth to ensure that killer cops are sentenced the same as people of color and the poor who commit murder, and pass laws that require the police to live in the cities in which they work.

Communities of color have been pleading for such changes for quite some time. The changes would decrease police abuse of people of color and the poor, although not eliminate it. The latter could only be accomplished by changing the structure and nature of the system altogether. 14

## Prisons

Prisons are also part of the system, or government. Just as there are city, state, and federal police, there are city prisons, called jails, as well as state and federal prisons. The police serve the government by arresting people. The prisons serve by holding, punishing, and making money on those convicted. The latest trend is the move toward private prisons owned by corporations, which make fortunes off the slave labor of prisoners. Private ownership also helps the government hide its hand in the back door move to re-enslave people of color through mass imprisonment.

There are currently almost two million people in prison, the majority of whom are Black. People of color make up over 80% of the prison population. Does that mean Whites commit fewer crimes than others? No, it simply means that the government and police concentrate on arresting and sending people of color to prison, while letting most Whites go free or on probation for similar violations.

Prisons are brutal places. They serve the same purpose as brutal police acts. They spread fear, keep the poor and communities of color submissive and afraid to resist for fear of imprisonment. Once imprisoned, the intent is to break the prisoners, just as in days of slavery, so as to return them to the streets, old, broken, and willing informants on their communities.

Prisons are racist. Most are located deep in rural White communities, far from the 'hood. They provide jobs and a better life for poor rural Whites. It keeps them solid defenders of government policies regardless of how these policies wreak havoc upon communities of color and other poor Whites.

After segregation was outlawed, prisons began employing more people of color. Most of those accepted such jobs did so to better their own lives and are staunch

defenders of government policies. Their positions in the prisons include wardens, captains, guards, and everything in between. But that doesn't change the racist function of prisons. Like the police, prisons are a major arm of government control. It doesn't matter how many people of color work in the prisons; in fact the staff could be all Black and prisons would still be racist. They remain an arm of the government, a color-caste system whose basic structure and function remain unchanged. That function is to maintain a White elite and their cohorts in power, over people of color and the poor.

Private corporations are investing in prisons in droves to reap fortunes off its cheap slave labor. This gives corporations additional motives to have the government step up even further the mass arrest and imprisonment of people of color, and give them even longer sentences to create a greater supply of slave labor on which to amass even greater fortunes. The time has long since arrived where prisoners have no choice but to go on nationwide strike to break this vicious cycle. All prisoners have to do is to "do nothing," lay down and refuse to work. The government will react harshly, but in the end, it and the corporations will have to withdraw their siege on our communities, both inside and out.

## Oppression

According to my dictionary, to "oppress" is to *"keep down by severe and unjust use of force or authority."* That is a good description of the system we live under. It keeps people of color and the poor down by severe and unjust use of force and authority. It's unjust because it's racist and exploitative. It's kept in place by unjust force of the police, prisons, and the armed forces. Despite all the sweet talk of freedom, democracy, equality, free enterprise and so forth, when you look behind the mask, it is all based on the unjust use of force and authority.

The rulers, the White elite owners of the giant corporations, set policies that will make them trillions of dollars. The government uses its authority to carry out the policies. The police at home and the Armed Forces abroad use force on anyone or any country that won't fall in line with the dictated policies. That's what the recent protest

**demonstrations against the WTO (World Trade Organization) in Seattle, Washington, and elsewhere, were all about.**

**People of color are kept down, or oppressed, as a race. That's racial oppression. Poor Whites are oppressed because they do manual labor; that's class oppression. Women have historically been oppressed because they are female; that's sexual oppression. There are many other forms of oppression.**

**Naked forms of oppression, such as police murder and brutality, or the National Guard patrolling the streets during a rebellion, are easy to see. Other forms of oppression may be just as harsh and longer lasting, but are harder to see. The latter category includes racism, poverty, low pay, bad housing, schools and hospitals, as well as drugs and diseases, particularly genocidal ones such as AIDS today, or the small pox infected blankets given to the Native Americans during colonial times which killed many, many more indigenous people than all the cavalry battles, combined.**

**History shows that this racist, capitalist system cannot be reformed, or adjusted, to make it work for all people. When resistance gets too costly, it only changes its methods, then it continues down the same path – the unbridled pursuit of riches through world domination of people of color and the poor.**

**The entire system must be destroyed. It has failed humanity miserably. And even now it's rushing headlong down the path of world destruction. The greatest fight that young people can take today is the fight to save yourself, your people, other oppressed people and the World itself. You do that by fighting to destroy this racist, capitalist system.**

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