



**JENA AND THE JUDGMENT OF HISTORY:  
ISSUES OF JUSTICE AND STRUGGLE**  
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Say what you want about the Sixties, about the leaders, the organizations and the heroic and hard-struggling masses who made these years of yearning and fighting for freedom possible, they remain an unerasable reference for critical issues of historical and current concern. That's why when we talk of the liberation of Haiti, the right of return and rebuilding in New Orleans, resistance to genocide in Darfur, the halt of communal and cultural erasure in Nubia, and the current pursuit of justice in Jena, we unavoidably and almost automatically bring up the Sixties. And somewhere in the midst of our musing, conversations and concerns about race, power, oppression and injustice, we remember and reaffirm the need to rebuild the Movement.

Some of us may say we need to rebuild the Civil Rights Movement, but those who resist such revisions of history, know it is the Black Freedom Movement we must rebuild. For it is the Black Freedom Movement as a whole—both its Civil Rights phase (1955-1965) and its Black Power phase (1965-1975) which gave form, foundation and expansive meaning to these decisive decades in U.S. and human history, which we sum up as the Sixties. Indeed, we use the Sixties not only to extract models of excellence and achievement in struggle, but also as a measure and judgment of how far from its pre-Sixties racist savagery this country has come. It is in this context that the events in Jena have become a judgment of history, i.e., an exposure and indictment of the continuing racism and White supremacy in and of U.S. society.

The struggle in Jena, then, is not only about the case of the Jena Six—Mychal Bell, Robert Bailey, Jr., Theo Shaw, Carwin Jones, Bryant Purvis, and Jesse Beard. Jena

is also a raw-nerve reminder that race, racism and racialization are real in spite of old and new books suggesting their decline and early death. And in spite of the religious-like longing of liberals for an end of race, and the deconstructionists intellectualized illusions about the fluidity of our identity and the real and imagined diversity among us, White people can actually see us, and seeing us, regularly suppress us on the basis of this thing called “race.”

Jena as a current site of the judgment of history is a statement about the brutish nature and spirit-breaking needs of White supremacy, even on a local level. It is about the enduring illusions of White racial superiority and the need to kill, conquer and crush to make others accept and concede it. Whiteness as a social reality is based on domination, deprivation and degradation of others. It is racial dominance encoded as law, lived as religion and enforced thru violence. Its law is the right and interests of the ruling race/class camouflaged as a sacred code enshrining Whites' “right” to degrade our life-conditions, limit our life-chances, and as the Jena D.A. reminded us, to “end (our) lives with a stroke of a pen.” As a daily practice, Whiteness as supremacy requires a White-dominated school with a White tree, a White-dominated town with a White judge, jury and prosecutor, and a White way to do justice called Jim Crow.

It is in this context that Blacks have to ask permission to sit under a “White” tree at school, that they are charged with theft for disarming a menacing White boy with a shot gun in a public place, that a D.A. can, with impunity, make a public threat on the life of Black children, and that an interracial school fight provoked by anti-Black language results in pampering and butt-patting for the

Whites and expulsions, arrests, and adult felony charges, including attempted murder for Black teens.

The struggle in Jena and the judgment of history it yields are rich in lessons of life and struggle. First, we must pay rightful homage to the courageous and determined six Black families in Jena who would not be terrorized into silence or submission and who did not despair or bow down in the midst of media silence and the delayed response of major civil rights organizations. It is their resistance and resilience that opened the eyes and ears of the country and the world and brought the tens of thousands to Jena in the pursuit of justice.

Second, there is clearly praise for the radio talk-show hosts, the blogs, websites and social networking sites of independent media who helped raise the issue and call the masses of people to action. Praise also goes to the thousands of students who raised up and reaffirmed the African legacy of student activism. Furthermore, the lessons of history teach us that this spontaneous loosely organized-project has not the stuff, stamina or staying power out of which movements are made. Thus, if rebuilding the Movement is to become a serious practice, then, increased political education, mobilization and organization are in order. We must certainly celebrate victory along the way, i.e., the reduction of the charges and huge rallies in defense of the Jena Six. But there is no easy walk or way to freedom, and as Cabral teaches, we must “mask no diffi-

culties, tell no lies and claim no easy victories.”

Moreover, we must reject attempts to convince us that ethnic or communal self-concealment or self-erasure is in our best interests, and self-consciously reaffirm our identity as a community. We must, with dignity, determination and defiance, reaffirm our right and responsibility to exist as a people, to maintain and expand the ancient and ongoing legacy left by our ancestors, and to forge a future for coming generations founded in freedom, rooted in justice, secured in peace, and supportive of maximum human flourishing.

Finally, we must remember that we are our own liberators and no matter how numerous or sincere our allies are, we must be the vanguard and rearguard of our own struggle. Already, the crowds have picked up, packed up and gone, but the problem of Jena and the judgment of history remain. So here we stand in the midst of society’s suicide cocktail of savage white supremacy and self-congratulating and mesmerizing media, consoling itself with exaggerated claims of class over race, the decline and disappearance of race, more interracial dating and less howls, shrieks and white sheets at full moon. And we must, for ourselves, our history and the future, resume and intensify the long and difficult struggle to possess freedom in the fullest sense, not in the clauses and amendments of the Constitution, but in the daily practice and promise of life everywhere and all the time.

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