

Summer 7-7-2022

## Social Justice Autobiography

Jeffrey McKee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/writingbeyondtheprison>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Africana Studies Commons](#), [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#), [Immigration Law Commons](#), [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McKee, Jeffrey, "Social Justice Autobiography" (2022). *Writing Beyond the Prison*. 24.  
<https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/writingbeyondtheprison/24>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writing Beyond the Prison by an authorized administrator of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact [mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu](mailto:mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu), [hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu](mailto:hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu).

What does social justice mean to me? Good question. No one has any control over the time, place, manner, or circumstances in which we enter this world. Once we arrive our views and opinions are formed and shaped by our surroundings and influences. As time progresses we gain more knowledge and different experiences change our views.

I was born, exactly ten years after John F. Kennedy was shot, in Portland, Oregon. I grew up in a middle-class suburb that was predominantly white. There was one Black family in the neighborhood. I remember my parents inviting them over for dinner and being sociable, but they never returned and appeared to keep to themselves. There were only two Black kids that went to my elementary/junior high. Although I did not hang out with them regularly, I considered them friends. There were probably several kids of the LGBTQ community, but none were open about it, nor did I personally care either way. I like to believe that I have always treated others based on their individual character and how they treated me. In reflection, we did play "smear the queer" (now called dodge ball) though I don't think at that age we really knew what it meant.

The year before Martin Luther King Day became a national holiday, I was in the seventh grade, my first year of junior high. That day, the majority of my classmates protested by refusing to go to class, storming the cafeteria, breaking tables, and causing minor destruction. The local TV station interviewed one of the students and asked, "Why are you guys protesting?" She replied, "Some guy died today." I have long believed that the media selects the most ignorant people for their news clips. I personally did not participate because, like most thirteen-year-olds, I could not see further than a few feet in front of myself and really did not know much about MLK or the movement.

In the 90s, there were two distinct experiences that made a deep impression on me. I was working for a short time in a supermarket. The gentleman who I believe was Croatian and spoke little English had the label from a mayonnaise jar and was pointing at it. I escorted him down the proper aisle with shelves stocked full of every type of mayonnaise and found his special brand. That gentleman grabbed hold of me with a large smile, hugged and kissed both cheeks, and said in broken English, "I love America!"

The second incident was substantially different. I was working at a mini mart near the Portland airport. A white gentleman with a very southern drawl said, in a conspiratorial tone, "You sure don't have many Black people out here, do you?" I replied we did (keep in mind I had never really been anywhere other than Oregon). He said, "No son. You don't understand." Well, that was true. Something I did not know until many years later was that the Oregon Constitution had language that prohibited Black Americans from living in the state unless they were slaves. I don't know if it's still there, but it was for the twenty-seven years I lived there.

It was not until I came to prison that I started becoming aware of true injustice. There were a few distinct incidents in my first two years. The only prison doctor, who I saw for a migraine headache, directed me to drop my pants for a physical. He conducted the exam by stroking my genitals. I learned that this had happened to several others, so often even the staff talked about it.

I and several others filed grievances. Those were not processed; rather they were thrown out and the incidents were suppressed. Ironically, years later the counselor who suppressed the incidents became a sex offender treatment therapist at another prison.

Shortly thereafter, I filed two grievances and a witness statement for a fellow prisoner over legal access and other issues. The immediate response was repetitive infractions (prison rule violations), segregations (the hole), and prison transfers. Since 2005, I have been transferred to seven of this state's prisons and two private prisons out of state and have seen the segregation at each. I have been transferred approximately eleven times with prohibited placement at entire institutions for unspecified safety and security concerns. These generally include segregations around the time of serving or litigating lawsuits against the prison and its staff. This is a very common practice for prisoners who speak out.<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago, I was helping a demographic of the male prison population obtain the right to wear makeup. One of the other factions said, "McKee you're a middle-aged pasty white straight guy. Why do you give a shit if they can wear makeup? DOC took our porn away." Do I care one way or the other if someone wears makeup? Not particularly. I do not care about having porn in prison either. What I do care about, and consider my responsibility, is the government oppressing our individual freedoms for no other reason than they can. We are prisoners. Our colors are khaki clothes and ID Green. If I allow the government to oppress one, I will allow them to oppress all.

Back when the slavery of Blacks was taking place in the Old South, it was next to a crime for slaves from one plantation to communicate acts of resistance to another plantation. It is against prison rules to correspond with other prisoners to attempt, aid, or organize a group demonstration, work stoppage, or hunger strike. Each facility will reject any communication that suggests such.<sup>2</sup> Although prisoners still pay taxes, they do not have the right to vote in all but two states (Maine/Vermont). The 13th Amendment still requires slavery in the terms of servitude. In theory, our only voice is through the courts, but between the retaliatory obstruction of the ability to present claims and the courts' unwillingness to intervene, this is a fallacy.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, in late December 2020, the U.S. imposed sanctions on China. Why? Because they suppress "freedom of expression."

The prisons keep us divided and pacified, or more accurately, we allow them. It is a rule violation to gamble or possess gambling paraphernalia.<sup>4</sup> But every institution and unit has a gambling table using state supplied cards. Only when prisoners begin physically fighting over the game does the prison enforce the rule for those specific individuals. They allow a certain amount of drugs and tobacco in. They keep us fighting each other through racial gangs or our crimes. A prisoner once said to me, "Sergeant Richardson's cool. He told me which house was

---

<sup>1</sup> Kane y. Winn 319 F. Supp. 2d 162, 166-206 (1st Cir. 2004); Silva v. Di Vittorio, 658 F.3d 1090, 1095 (9th Cir. 2010); James E. Robertson "One of the Dirty Secrets of American Corrections Retaliation, Surplus Power, and Whistleblowing Inmates," 42 U. Mich. J.L reform 611 (2009) <https://repository.law.umico.edu/mjlr/v0142/iss3/4>

<sup>2</sup> Policy 450 100 Att. 1 #1, 9, 16, 20, 25 27 available at [www.doc.wa.gov/policies](http://www.doc.wa.gov/policies); Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 137-25-030(1) (650) (651) (652) (682) (746)

<sup>3</sup> McKee v. Wash. Dept of Corr., Division III Court of Appeals No. 378705.Appellants opening Brief should be available by June 30, 2021 at [www.Courts.wa.gov](http://www.Courts.wa.gov)

<sup>4</sup> WAC 137-25-030(1) (559)

telling on us." The person actually believed the sergeant was doing him a favor. More than likely the person had just pissed off the sergeant, probably by filing a grievance. That sergeant expected the one to fight the other, thereby both going to the hole and leaving the unit.

From the moment I stepped on the chain bus from jail to prison, the guards told us we used to be able to smoke until a prisoner filed a lawsuit. At every orientation at each prison I have been at, there is always at least one staff that tells us we lost some privilege because some prisoner grieved it. We can get away with a lot in prison, including murder, and the prison will look the other way. But as soon as you start speaking out about the inhumane treatment and violations of the limited rights you have, the full force of prison abuse is taken until it either crushes your spirit or convinces those around you to not follow your lead.

What does social justice mean to me? It's a feel-good term for an ugly problem. The same as changing prisoner to incarcerated individual, guard to correctional officer, Warden to Superintendent, and prison to Department of Corrections. It's a feel-good name for the same ugly pig. Freedom is not free. It is a never-ending fight. Until prisoners realize they are slaves of the state, and their power lies in unity through peacefully withholding their slave labor and demanding basic human treatment, social justice is just another fancy name for an unchanged problem.<sup>5</sup>

Genre: autobiography, essay

Tags: Gender; LGBTQ+ rights; Activism/Protest; Prison Life; Law; Immigration; Reform; Slavery; Social Justice; Race

---

<sup>5</sup> "A Call to End Slavery," Summer 2020 Newsletter; "The Dismal State of Affairs of Food Service In Washington Prisons," Winter 2021 Newsletter. Available at [www.correctionaloversightgroup.org/Newsletter](http://www.correctionaloversightgroup.org/Newsletter)