

Brown University Acquires the Papers of Mumia Abu-Jamal

Abu-Jamal, convicted of the 1981 murder of a police officer, became the face of the anti-death penalty movement and a widely published commentator on the prison system.



By Jennifer Schuessler

Aug. 24, 2022

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — For years, Mumia Abu-Jamal was the face of the anti-death penalty movement in the United States. A former Black Panther sentenced to death in the 1981 murder of a police officer, he became a best-selling author and commentator in the early 1990s, as “Free Mumia” became a staple of protests and T-shirts.

His prominence has faded since 2011, when after a series of appeals, the Philadelphia district attorney agreed to drop the death penalty. Abu-Jamal is currently serving a life sentence in a Pennsylvania prison. But now, the trove of paper he accumulated as one of America’s most famous prisoners has found a permanent home in a different kind of institution.

Brown University has acquired Abu-Jamal’s personal archive, more than 60 boxes of letters, notebooks, manuscripts, pamphlets, personal artifacts, books and other material. It had filled his cell on death row, before it was shipped a decade ago to the home of a scholar and friend, where it sat all but unseen.

Abu-Jamal’s archive will be held by the university’s John Hay Library, as part of its new Voices of Mass Incarceration collecting initiative, which is aimed at chronicling one of the most pervasive, hotly debated — and under-documented — aspects of American life.

“The carceral system touches millions of lives,” the library’s director, Amanda E. Strauss, said earlier this month, before offering a first glimpse at the archive. “And yet the historical archive has a scarcity of stories of incarcerated people.”



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Freedom and comrades throughout the United States and throughout the world. have an overdeveloped economy which is so infested with the need for health. Liberty and the pursuit of happiness has in its history become an

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Two centuries ago when the United States was a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the revolution which prevailed in the nation, and the institutions upon which its foundations were built, were such that they ensured the United States would remain a free society under circumstances which mean that for a substantial proportion of its citizens' lives in nations where there is a prison of poverty, and where happiness is enjoyed in the struggle to keep from crying.

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HUEY'S MESSAGE TO THE REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION PLENARY SESSION SEPTEMBER 5, 1970. PHILADELPHIA, PA.



THE PEOPLE AND THE PEOPLE ALONE WERE THE MOTIVE FORCE IN THE MAKING OF HISTORY OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION PLENARY SESSION!

INSIDE: FIVE YEAR OLD BLACK CHILD ATTACKED BY MANIAC HARVEY NOBLES MURDERED BY PIGS, BROOKLYN, N.Y. THE TOMBS, N. Y. REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

The archives voluminous printed material includes copies of *The Black Panther*, the organization's newspaper. Philip Keith for The New York Times

acquired “through a trust,” but said the university was not disclosing further details, including the purchase price.

The archive came to Brown almost by accident. In spring 2020, Murphy began recording an oral history with Johanna Fernández, a historian at Baruch College in Manhattan and a Brown alumna who had been involved in the student takeover of University Hall, as part of an ultimately successful campaign for need-blind admissions and greater minority recruiting.

Murphy, the archivist at the Pembroke Center, a feminist research center at Brown, was also interested in acquiring Fernández’s papers, which record both her own activism and her work as a prominent scholar of radical movements. (In 2014, Fernández sued the New York Police Department over access to millions of pages of surveillance files of the Black Panthers and others.)

After a few conversations, Fernández followed up with an unexpected message. “She said, ‘Oh, I should probably mention I also have this other archive,’” Murphy said. She was shocked to hear what it was, and called Strauss. “I almost fell out of my chair,” Strauss recalled.



Johanna Fernandez, a historian at Baruch College, had been storing Abu-Jamal's archive since he left death row in 2012. The watercolor of her at right is by Abu-Jamal. Philip Keith for The New York Times

Fernández, in an interview, said she first heard about Abu-Jamal as an undergraduate. “He was the Che Guevara of our time,” she said.

She got to know him in 2005, when she began visiting him and other prisoners on death row in Pennsylvania, where she was living. She has since made a documentary about his case, and edited a collection of his prison writings.

She began storing his archive in 2012, when he left death row. “They were pressuring him to get rid of everything in his cell,” she said. “He wanted to throw it all away. But as a historian, I understood the importance of papers.”

He mailed her boxes and boxes crammed with material, which filled her closet and other corners of her apartment. She looked through them, and included an interview with Abu-Jamal in “The Young Lords,” her award-winning 2020 history study of the Puerto Rican activist group, which was modeled after the Black Panthers. But otherwise, she said, the papers have not been seen or used by anyone.

6/25/97

AWAKENED 3:30 am

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BREAKFAST 4:15 am;

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NIGHTRIDE; LEFT Cyrus 5:35 am; (alone)

ARRIVED SCI-FRACKVILLE 10:35 am;

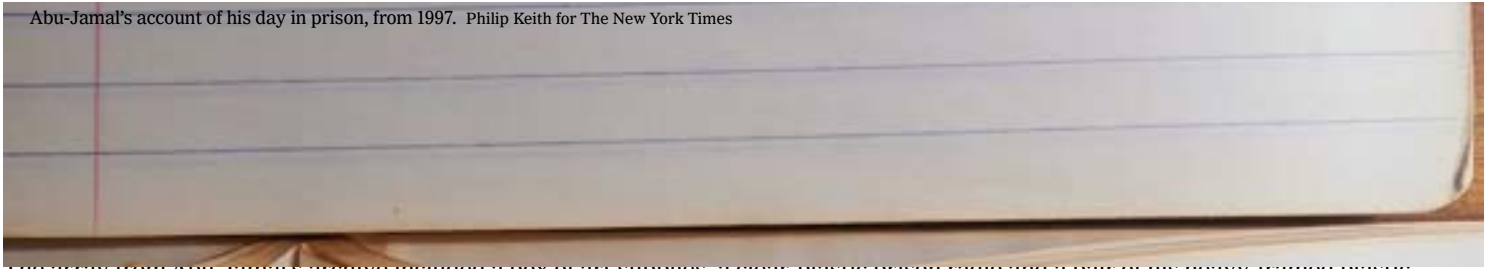
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ASKED TO FILL OUT PIN SLIP - GAVE JP, LIT, JOYCE, SUE +
ATTY'S N.Y. ✖

CH'D by DR. TRN approx. noon - PULSE - 88; ^{Temp} 97.6
BP 120/70; WT: 222 LBS - THOROUGH X'am
of EXTERNAL; EYES; NOSE; MOUTH; 4 LOBES of
LUNG; ^{UP} FR., ^{LOW} BK.; LEGS; STOMACH - EV'Taped]

Abu-Jamal's account of his day in prison, from 1997. Philip Keith for The New York Times



The array from Abu-Jamal's archive included a box of art supplies, a clear-plastic prison radio and a pair of his heavy-framed plastic aviator glasses. But the bulk of the collection is paper.

Much of it speaks to daily life in prison, like a price list for snacks, and correspondence from prison administrators on requests for reading material. "In a way, the archive is actually generated by the prison system," Murphy said.

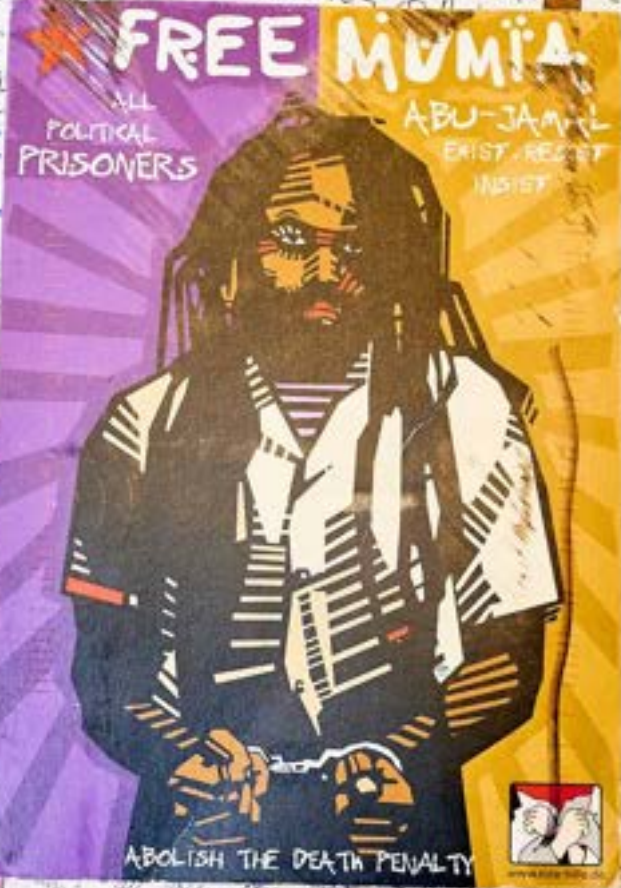


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#AM 8335
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301 Morea Rd
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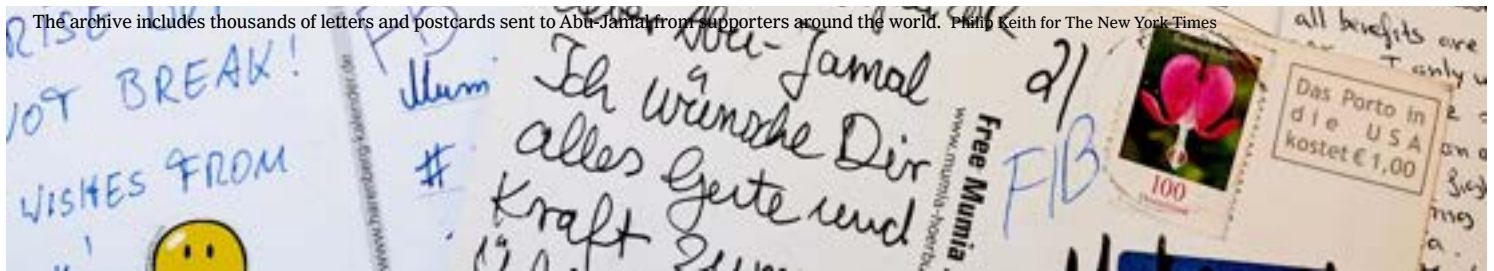


MOVIE
LONG LIVE



Dear Mumia
We are here at a solidarity party f
de Hilfe (an organisation which
with political repressions). We the
Mumia Coalition Berlin are
organising a Post Office to
rite to prisoners. And that is
that I actually do. Hopefully you
much more post cards today
reetings from Gregor, too.
Power to the People
Kool

Mumia Abu-Jamal
#AM 8335
S.C.I. Mahany
301 Morea Rd,
Frackville, Pa
17932
Hi! My name
Spain but
from Berlin.
place the Tat
case you can
a prisoners
you can see



“I have poured over your writings and have tried to use them as a guide for my own transformation,” Shakur wrote. “And now I want to make a contribution and, along with you and others, advocate for a better world.”



Handwritten sheet music for “Vampire Nation,” an original song by Abu-Jamal. Philip Keith for The New York Times

There was handwritten sheet music for original songs by Abu-Jamal, with titles like “Panther Walk” and “Vampire Nation.” Murphy also offered a brief glimpse of what she described as one of the archive’s “rarest items”: a long, philosophical manuscript mailed to Abu-Jamal in the early 1980s by John Africa, the founder of MOVE, who was killed in the 1985 firebombing.

The curators would not allow that item to be photographed. They said the library is still working out any privacy-related restrictions, but expected most of the archive to be processed and open for research in about a year — very fast by archival standards.

Murphy said the collection is historically important, however one views Abu-Jamal.

The prison system, and the experience of those inside it, Murphy said, “is a massive piece of American history.”