

**Sarah Ross**

## **AFTERWORD**

The struggle for human rights must begin with the struggle to be human. This simple fact might seem too obvious to acknowledge given the prevalence of rhetorical statements like “we all bleed the same blood” or “we’re in this together.” Yet settler colonialism and white supremacy are maintained through social practices—codes, laws, language and images—that suspend the humanness of many. As writers, artists and cultural producers, our role is to both reveal and undermine those practices as we build new imaginaries that refuse to compromise humanness, no matter the race, creed, gender, sexuality, ability, economic or geographical status of the human. For me, the following examples act as a north star. They map an art and discourse that both demands rights and also lays bare the often administrative forms of racist state violence.

In 1855, the state of Missouri tried and sentenced to death an enslaved woman for murder. Her name was Celia. Since the age of 14 she had been raped and abused by the white man who owned her, Robert Newsome, who she killed. In court, her claim of self-defense was denied based on the premise that she was enslaved, and therefore had “no self to defend.” Celia’s story framed a 2014 exhibition curated by Rachel Caidor and Mariame Kaba titled *No Selves To Defend*, featuring art and archival materials of criminalized survivors of violence. The exhibition served as a fundraiser for Marissa Alexander’s defense, a Black woman sentenced to 20 years in prison for firing a warning shot after her husband attacked and threatened to kill her. Artists, including Billy Dee, Bianca Diaz, Molly Crabapple, and Micah Bazant, made portraits of Celia, Marissa, Joanne Little, Cece McDonald, Lena Baker, Inez Garcia, and other women who live in the dangerous intersection of being women of color who demand their right to live.<sup>1</sup>

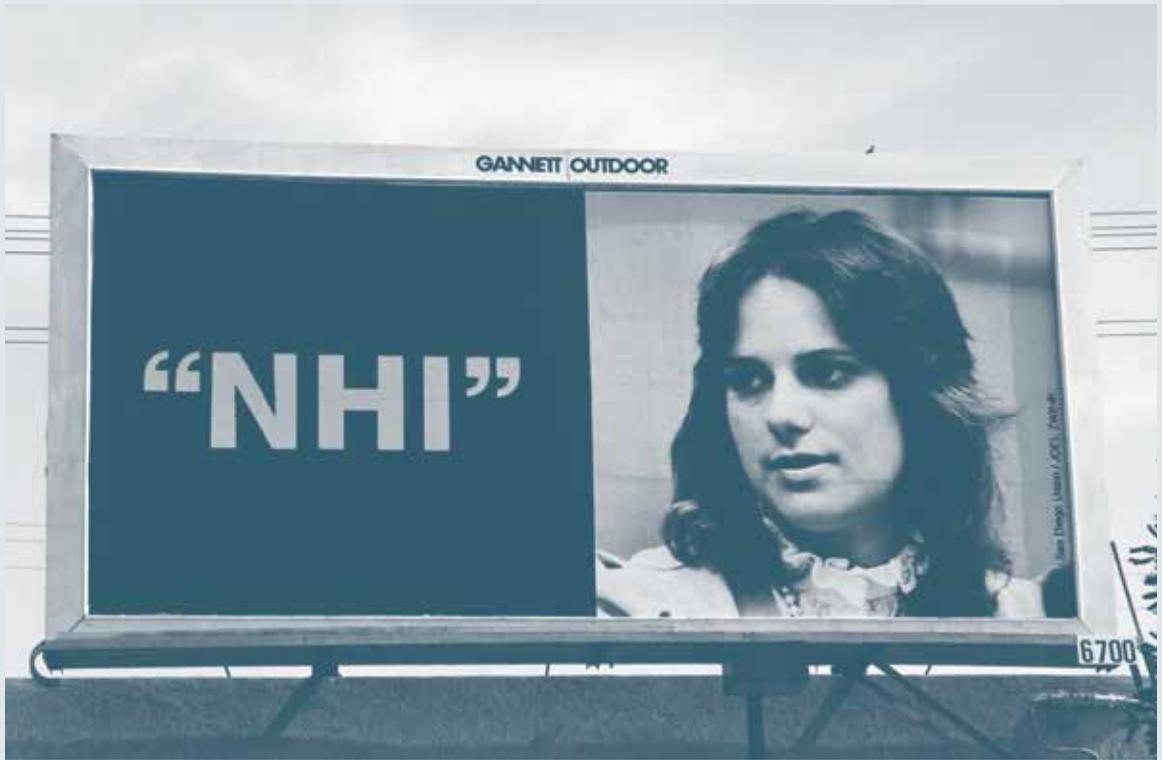
More than a century after Celia’s death sentence, Elmore Nickleberry, a sanitation worker and protester, participated in the 1968 Memphis sanitation



strike, which famously used the slogan “I Am a Man.” Poignantly Nickleberry said, “*I knew I was a man... I just wanted a job to feed my family*” [emphasis mine].<sup>2</sup> The black and white posters held by sanitation workers stated something that was evident—the workers are men—yet in a nation with deep investments in white supremacy and settler colonialism, their rights as men (or humans) were systematically denied. As Nickleberry states the obvious of his humanness, it is not left there. Not only is he a man but he is a man with political and economic rights, articulated in the march itself.

The powerful words “I Am a Man” have been reprinted and remixed by artists and activists since the 1968 march. In 2012, they were used in a campaign for the rights of people in solitary confinement. Friends and family of incarcerated people in a group called Tamms Year Ten (named to highlight the 10 years that people languished in solitary confinement at Tamms supermax prison) marched to the headquarters of the AFSCME union that represented prison guards, with signs saying, “My Brother is a Man,” “My Uncle is a Man” and “I Am A Mom.”<sup>3</sup>

In the 1990s, artists and scholars made seminal works based on the



acronym NHI, a police term meaning “no humans involved” and used to refer to the deaths of marginalized people. Artists Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco, Scott Kessler, Carla Kirkwood, and Louis Hock created a series of public art projects, including two billboards featuring Donna Gentile with the letters NHI to bring attention to 45 women murdered in San Diego between 1985-1992. Gentile, a sex worker and police informant, was found brutally murdered after testifying against two police officers in San Diego. The deaths of other women were either caused by police involvement, or investigations of their deaths were mishandled or ignored by police. Portraits of all the women who were murdered were featured in a store front gallery that hosted discussions, events, and a performance of *Many Women Involved* by Kirkwood. While the term NHI was disputed by police at the time of the art projects, the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper quoted an officer saying, “These were misdemeanor murders, biker women and hookers ... we’d call them NHI’s—no humans involved.” A gallery book in the exhibition recorded an officer who wrote she “had been trained to disregard the humanity of victims from the darker side of life.”<sup>4</sup> While the “darker side” surely was supposed to be a metaphor, it also

reveals the wrenching truths of life lived in the long shadow of slavery and removal. Indeed, it is our darker sisters and brothers who are the targets of both state abandonment and state violence.

After the acquittal of police officers in the Rodney King beating in 1992, Sylvia Wynter wrote an influential essay titled “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues.” It again refers to and expands on the use of NHI by police “to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner-city ghettos.” Wynter suggests an “archipelago of Human Otherness” to describe the colonial present in which “Human Otherness can no longer be defined in terms of the interned Mad, the interned ‘Indian,’ the enslaved ‘Negro’ in which it had been earlier defined.” Today, the archipelago is “... comprised of the jobless, the homeless, the poor, the systemically made jobless and criminalized.”<sup>5</sup> For Wynter, human otherness is historically knitted in biocentric terms, meaning that the status of human is most certainly a racialized one. To articulate humanness is a constant praxis of counteracting that single metric of human—that of the white, middle class male.

I reflect on these artists and scholars as the heated summer of 2020 comes to a close and the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmad Aubrey, Dijon Kizzee, Miguel Vega, and the 780 other people killed by police this year (as of September) are still being protested in the streets. Artists, scholars, and poets return again and again to the prophetic words of Wynter, Franz Fanon, James Baldwin, and others as Black and Brown people are recast as dangerous, the violent ending of their short lives are justified as the outcome of their own making. In this context, which is not new, Christina Sharpe’s book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* asks us to think about the possibilities of cultural work to “be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known and lived un/imaginable lives.” In beautiful and wrenching chapters Sharpe unravels poetry, film, and photos to examine the ways artists both reproduce and resist the violent spectacles of Black death and non-humanness. She says, “At stake is not recognizing antiblackness as total climate. At stake, too, is not recognizing an insistent Black visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non / being.”<sup>6</sup>

With these examples—just a few of many—I want to tune us in to the “Black visualsonic resistance.” What these images, words, and sounds tell us is that the struggle for human rights is first fought with the struggle to be human. That is to say, in the U.S., at all levels of the judicial system (a system that informs the behavior and policies of civil society), some of us are just

not seen as human. In these examples, and throughout this book, we are confronted with the painful (and shameful) structures that render people non-human and also, the reverberations of resistance, beauty, and demands that say and enact: I have rights, I am human. The essays, poetry, and art shared here build on the history of Celia, Elmore Nickleberry, Carla Kirkwood and collaborators, Tamms Year Ten, Sylvia Wynter, Christina Sharpe, Mariame Kaba, Rachel Caidor, and others whose resistance emphatically embodies the ideal of human rights and also exposes the genocidal practices of the state who denies humanness. They show us that true, universal, and inalienable human rights are enacted often against the will of the state and they build a prefigurative formation that demands our freedom today and tomorrow.

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- 1 Mariame Kaba, “No Selves to Defend: The Legacy of Criminalizing Self-Defense and Survival,” No Selves to Defend, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://noselves2defend.wordpress.com/>.
  - 2 “Stone Stories: Elmore Nickleberry,” Stone Stories, Studio Gang, accessed September 20, 2020, <https://studiogang.com/project/stone-stories>.
  - 3 Laurie Jo Reynolds and Stephen F. Eisenman, “Tamms is Torture: The Campaign to Close an Illinois Supermax Prison,” Creative Time Reports, Creative Time, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://creativetimereports.org/2013/05/06/tamms-is-torture-campaign-close-illinois-supermax-prison-solitary-confinement/>.
  - 4 Elizabeth Sisco, “Forum: Women Who Kill” in *Critical Condition: Women on the Edge of Violence*, ed. Amy Scholder (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1993), 42-47.
  - 5 Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337, doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.
  - 6 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 21-22.