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### Queer and Trans Prison Voices: A Podcast Archive on Prison Abolition

Josefine Ziebell

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

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QUEER AND TRANS PRISON VOICES:  
A PODCAST ARCHIVE ON PRISON ABOLITION

by

JOSEFINE ZIEBELL

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,  
The City University of New York

2022

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Queer and Trans Prison Voices: A Podcast Archive on Prison Abolition

by

Josefine Ziebell

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Justin Rogers-Cooper

Capstone Project Advisor

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Date

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## ABSTRACT

Queer and Trans Prison Voices: A Podcast Archive on Prison Abolition

by

Josefine Ziebell

Advisor: Justin Rogers-Cooper

This capstone project is located at the intersection of Critical Prison Studies, Gender Studies, Sound Studies, and American Studies. It highlights the importance of sonic modes of anti-carceral resistance by featuring the recorded voices of incarcerated people through the creation of a sonic archive of prison writings. By integrating that sonic archive into the podcast medium, this project functions as a digital archive for incarcerated voices, consisting of two tracks: a collection of short-spoken readings by queer and transgender incarcerated authors, and podcast-style interviews with activist scholars, organizations, and sound artists working towards prison abolition. In this paper, I establish my project as a sonic intervention into traditional modes of scholarship production by centering both the works and the voices of queer and trans incarcerated people. Additionally, I explore the operational intersection of voice and performance, and situate the recorded voices the incarcerated authors as sites of queer performance. Through an analysis that places this project in the context of the Black Radical Tradition within American Studies, I further position the queer performances of the incarcerated authors as important manifestations of Black radical and abolitionist practices. The project's website is published on CUNY Manifold:

<https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices>

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I would like to give a special thanks to my advisor Justin Rogers-Cooper for always being available to provide guidance, kindness, and encouragement throughout this process. Thanks to my dear friend and peer Samantha Lilienfeld for the dialogue, collective study, and support. I am extremely grateful for the grants I received from Elizabeth Macaulay, Executive Officer of the M.A. Program in Liberal Studies, and Matt Gold, Director of the M.A. Program in Digital Humanities, in order to make the recordings and their quality possible. A big thanks also goes to the project team of the American Prison Writing Archive for providing me with the necessary information to reach out to the incarcerated authors. And most importantly, I would like to thank the authors for trusting me with their work and lending their voices to this project.

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## DIGITAL MANIFEST

I. White Paper (PDF)

II. WARC File

- Archived version of the project website, captured from:

<https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices>

## A NOTE ON TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The software Adobe Audition was used to record and edit the podcast episodes and the recordings of the sonic archive. Adobe Audition is a digital audio editing and recording application available through a subscription to Adobe Creative Cloud. For the podcast music, I subscribed to Epidemic Sound, a royalty-free soundtrack providing startup. Additionally, I purchased the recording equipment Focusrite Scarlett Solo 3rd Generation and a 3.5mm to 1/4" audio stereo cable that connects the iPhone to the Focusrite interface so that I was able to record the audio of the phone calls with the incarcerated authors directly to the audio software. The audio editing engineer of the activist project Prison Radio helped me to clean the recordings of the sonic archive using the software Waves X-Noise and Izotope RX8. I created the website through CUNY Manifold, an open-source platform for scholarly publishing.

## Project Narrative

*Queer and Trans Prison Voices: A Podcast Archive on Prison Abolition* grew out of my interdisciplinary research at the intersection of Critical Prison Studies, Gender Studies, Sound Studies, and American Studies. This capstone project for the M.A. Program in Liberal Studies at the Graduate Center connects these different fields by using the shared methodology of a non-traditional and activist approach to scholarship, and centers a collaboration between non-academic and incarcerated thinkers. Through one of my core courses in American Studies, I became interested in interdisciplinary projects within critical prison research that explore sound and sonic forms, and wanted to create a collaborative project that highlights the importance of sonic modes of anti-carceral resistance. Therefore, this capstone project features the recorded voices of incarcerated people through a sonic collection of their written works.

In my coursework for the class “Using Archives in Social Justice Research,” I expanded my interest in research that examines the ways that archival practices have been transformed by the Digital Humanities, particularly through a focus on rethinking traditional constructions of the archive through the lens of digital technologies. The notion of archival activism was a recurring theme in the literature we read, conceptualizing the archive as a space for resistance.<sup>1</sup> An important form of archival activism is a community-centered and interdisciplinary approach to building archival projects, and it resonates in my creation of a digital space that amplifies written works of marginalized voices.

For my course project, I used the platform Omeka to create a collection of archival material from the open-source database of the American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College, which highlighted the use of prison writing as an important form of anti-prison activism. The

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<sup>1</sup> Cassie Findlay, “Archival Activism,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 44, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 155–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2016.1263964>.

research process of reading hundreds of essays by currently incarcerated people made me realize how rarely we hear the voices behind their written words. I sought to build on their writing by exploring the possibilities of expanding their textual voices through mediums of sound.

This capstone project advances the use of sound in anti-prison activism and scholarship, and builds on my research that positions prison writing as a primary form of expressing the experience of incarceration. My project emphasizes resistance from inside the prison as central to my scholarship, in part through the creation of a sonic archive of prison writings. By integrating that sonic archive into the podcast medium, my project adds to, and acts as, a digital archive for incarcerated voices. As such, the project has two tracks: a collection of spoken readings by queer and transgender prisoners, and podcast-style interviews with activist scholars, organizations and sound artists working towards prison abolition. The podcast medium acts as a dialogic mode of research dissemination, effectively making the prison abolitionist work and scholarship in the episodes accessible to the public, and opening the sonic archive to a broader audience.

The reason for focusing on queer and transgender people who are incarcerated was informed by another course project through the Digital Humanities program. For this assignment, I worked with data from the Prison Policy Initiative, a non-profit organization that produces research and publishes data visualization projects relating to the U.S. prison system. In their research library, they curate extensive research about LGBTQ+ issues in the criminal legal system, highlighting that queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people are an often-overlooked population.<sup>2</sup> Through my capstone project, I have created a resource to amplify their voices.

To make *Queer and Trans Prison Voices* publicly available, I decided to publish it on CUNY Manifold, an open-source platform for scholarly publishing.<sup>3</sup> This is the ideal home for my

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<sup>2</sup> “LGBT,” Prison Policy Initiative, accessed December 29, 2020, [www.prisonpolicy.org/research/lgbt/](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/lgbt/).

<sup>3</sup> “Manifold Scholarship,” Manifold Scholarship, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/>.

project because the platform is designed to foster collaborative discourse by providing the possibility to extend scholarly projects with interactive features and commenting tools. This project will be the first of its kind to be published on Manifold, expanding the platform's scope for collaborative activism and becoming a site for a vocal archive of queer and transgender incarcerated people. In addition to hosting the sound files and podcast episodes, the Manifold site also includes an annotated bibliography with links to other digital sound projects that focus on anti-prison and community activism.

In sum, the project site functions as a potential point of exchange for future students, scholars, and activists to augment over time, and aims to offer the possibility of collaboration going forward. In terms of use by future students in the MALS program, the site will be available for classes that address racialized mass incarceration, abolitionist scholarship, and American Studies.

### Sonic Archive of Prison Writings

For the project's sonic archive, I have collaborated with people who are currently incarcerated. To accomplish this, I have been working with the American Prison Writing Archive (APWA) at Hamilton College, which holds the largest collection to date of non-fiction writing by currently incarcerated Americans.<sup>4</sup> The APWA was created in 2014, evolving from a book project by scholar and APWA director Doran Larson. In *Fourth City: Essays from the Prisons in America*, Larson presents seventy essays written by incarcerated authors from twenty-seven states, positioning their work as central to his scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Since he continued to receive essays after the

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<sup>4</sup> "American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College," accessed October 17, 2020, <http://apw.dhinitiative.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> Doran Larson, *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

submission deadline for *Fourth City* had long passed, he decided to build the archive, which now holds over 3,300 essays.

As the basis for the sonic archive, I created a collection of archival material that amplifies voices of queer and transgender authors. In my initial search, I was only able to find ten essays where queer and transgender people write about their experience of incarceration. Through my collaboration with the APWA, I was able to locate and contact them. The project team of the APWA provided me with the Department Identification numbers (DIN) of the incarcerated authors, the facilities they are located in, and in some cases their legal names, since those differed from their chosen name used in the essays.

In preparation for my project, my research design and methodology need certification by CUNY's Institutional Review Board (IRB). For this process, my advisor and I completed the research compliance courses from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). Aside from being mandatory, the modules provided notable ethical injunctions for research projects that involve the participation of groups that are designated as vulnerable, which include prisoners. Two of the most important elements of these ethical requirements are the protection of participants from harm and the principle of informed consent. I had to follow the specific guidelines of the informed consent process, which meant in some cases receiving institutional consent from the state departments of corrections. This was particularly difficult to navigate since my project uses already published work, and therefore, fell outside the definition of original research as defined by the correctional departments, and as approved for most IRB applications. It is also worth noting that the broad guidelines of the ethical injunctions set by the IRB do not speak to specific forms of communication and challenges that arise when working with incarcerated people, which in this particular capstone project meant working with some of the most vulnerable people within the prison population.

For my project, the collaboration with the authors was most importantly a relationship building process that included navigating both emotional and structural obstacles. As the IRB application could not address the specific boundaries set by my project featuring the voices of already published work, it therefore put academic constraints on the participation, making it difficult at times to engage in a collaborative process. In two instances, the additional consent process through the state departments of corrections prohibited me from working with the authors after already having received their consent to participate. Although the IRB process is designed to reduce harm, in my case some of the boundaries were not conducive to sustaining relationships, and led to emotional challenges in my communication with the authors.

Initially, I reached out to six of the ten authors who at the time were still incarcerated in state prisons throughout the U.S. For my IRB application, I had created an introductory script that outlined my capstone project, which I sent along with the informed consent form to the facilities by mail. Additionally, I had to set up a prepaid account through two main companies that allow telephone communication with incarcerated people.<sup>6</sup> After a couple of weeks, I received written responses from all of the authors I contacted, and all wanted to collaborate with me on this project. By either handwritten mail or through the private online messaging service Jpay, I was able to schedule dates with three authors to do the recordings over the phone. As mentioned above, due to the IRB restrictions and regulations set by the correctional departments, I have not been able to do the recordings with the remaining three authors.

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<sup>6</sup> The two main private companies are Global Tel Link and Securus Technologies. Global Tel-Link controls approximately 50% and Securus 20% of the market. The online messaging service Jpay is owned by Securus. Prison and jails are partnering with these private companies, producing a profiting ecosystem of controlled communication. It can create a financial burden for relatives and loved ones. It has also catalyzed a process that reduces human contact through increased options of digital visitation, which has further been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. (see <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/>)

The authors who collaborated with me for this project are Mpingo Waridi Uhuru, Danny W. Cherry, and Jennifer Rose. Jennifer Rose is a white identified trans woman, journalist and writer who has published one essay with the APWA and has also written extensively on transgender rights, decarceration, and abolition for other prison writing platforms. Mpingo Waridi Uhuru is a Black trans woman, writer, singer, and poet who has published one essay with the APWA. She has written forty-five novels and five books of poetry. As she mentions in her introduction piece for the sonic archive, she uses “both the written and spoken word to encapsulate [her] life experiences.”<sup>7</sup> Danny W. Cherry is a Black queer writer and has published sixteen texts with the APWA, three of which they read for the recordings. In their introduction piece, they describe their writing as a form and expression of their activism as a queer person of color.<sup>8</sup> In this white paper, I will mostly refer to the work of Mpingo Waridi Uhuru and Danny W. Cherry, who were the major contributors.

My collaboration with the authors was a process that spanned multiple months with many conversations, in written and verbal form, both about the specific essays I selected from the APWA and the advocacy work they are doing in prison. By facilitating the opportunity to have the authors share their voices, I have supported and learned about their experiences and their activism. All of the authors already are involved in various advocacy work for their communities, which emphasizes the need to listen to and connect their voices and stories. In my many phone calls over the course of the project, the authors also shared other works they have written and published, and which they wanted to include in the archive as well. Our collaborations thus expanded the archive with these writings through the authors’ curation. Along with the essays from the APWA, these writings assemble a collection of work that brings together very personal pieces about the authors’

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<sup>7</sup> Mpingo Waridi Uhuru, *Introducing Myself*, 2022, Sonic Archive of Prison Writings, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource/introducing-myself>.

<sup>8</sup> Danny W. Cherry, *And She Has Arrived: Her Formal Introduction*, 2022, Sonic Archive of Prison Writings, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource/her-formal-introduction>.

experience of incarceration, as well as works of artistic expression such as poetry reflecting on their lives and stories.

Through the APWA, I was connected to the audio editing engineer of the Prison Radio, an activist project that publishes commentary by political prisoners.<sup>9</sup> They helped me both with the technical setup that records the audio of the phone call directly to the audio software, and also with the editing of the completed recordings. I scheduled multiple sessions to do the recordings since phone calls are limited to fifteen minutes, which meant that some pieces of writing were recorded over a number of days, sometimes even weeks. Before every recording, I made sure to communicate to the authors that they could take as many breaks as they needed, and if they wanted to start over, that they could do so at any time during their reading.

During the recording sessions, I found myself listening not only to the voices of the authors, but also to their sonic environment, noticing the ways that the rhythms of their voices disrupt the carceral soundscape in the background. Conversely, the authors' voices are interrupted multiple times during their readings by an automated voice reminding us that the phone call is subject to monitoring and recording. After these automated interruptions, which occur at predictable intervals, sometimes audibly changing the speed of the authors' voices right before they occur, the authors would begin with the part of the sentence that was interrupted, and resume the flow of their reading.

It is important to note that the listening process I experienced during the recording sessions is not reflected in the published recordings of the sonic archive. The audio editing engineer of the Prison Radio edits the recordings to make the quality of the authors' voices clearer than the usual low signal the phone call allows. This editing process also requires a cleaning of the audio that

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<sup>9</sup> "Prison Radio," accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.prisonradio.org/>.

reduces some of the background noises. In addition, the automated voice is cut out of the recordings, a decision that was made collaboratively with the authors. As mentioned above, these interruptions function as a reminder of surveilling the content of the phone call, and disrupt the authors' reading flow. Further, the volume of the automated voice exceeds the volume of the authors' voices, which audibly enhances the interruption.

There is a tension between my listening experience during the recording sessions and the production of the recordings, in that the process of producing the best possible recording is altering, and in some ways disfiguring, the conditions of creation. Further, the alteration and clarification through the technology is what the authors desired, but it also conceals some context; the noises we removed are politically significant. Thus, the production of clarity is dependent upon an erasure of (political) noise and interruption, and is, therefore, a political production.

As such, there are two distinct stages involved in the creation of the recordings: the production-moment and the post-production. The production-moment refers to my process of listening in the context of noise and interruption, which requires listening that is actively engaged in the construction of ensuring that another's voice is present. This is what I will call *critical listening*. Critical listening is the act of providing an intimate space for another's voice within a context of disruption. This is reflected in my listening experience throughout the recording sessions. I consider the post-production, which is a technical clarification and amplification of the recorded voice, to be a production of enhanced vocality and performance. This production also constitutes, in some sense, the production of the queer and trans incarcerated voices of color. It is also, in another sense, of equal political significance to the context of noise and critical listening.

Further, it is worth stressing that the creation and publication of the recordings require various components of digital technology such as digital recording software, digital production technology, and digital distribution technology. In other words, an entire ecosystem of digital

technology is necessary to ensure that the queer and trans voices of color are audible to us; to hear their voices requires a digital intervention that would be prohibitively expensive and time consuming for mass production. Not only is digital technology costly and unavailable to the prisoner and the listener, but the production of the published recording also involves multiple people, along with an investment of time and digital expertise. Thus, to democratize the ability to listen to the queer and trans incarcerated voices of color, it is necessary to democratize digital knowledge and technology, as well as to socialize the costs and labor associated with digital production. In this sense, the digital is an essential adjunct to a larger public understanding and engagement with incarcerated queer and transgender people.

### Interdisciplinary Research and Methodology

The interdisciplinary field of Critical Prison Studies has emerged from activist research resulting in large part from American Studies scholars, with a growing abolitionist corpus at its center. Prison abolitionist scholarship examines the ideological scaffolding of the prison system and tracks the growth of the prison population as a consequence of political decisions as well as economic choices.<sup>10</sup> A crucial aspect of the field is anti-prison activism—coming from within as well as outside of the prison—that identifies the institution of the prison both as a site of oppression and resistance.<sup>11</sup> As American Studies scholar Micol Seigel highlights in “Critical Prison Studies: Review of a Field,” there is a strong focus on collaborating with incarcerated and nonacademic thinkers in order to create activist scholarship that restructures hierarchies of theoretical

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<sup>10</sup> Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy. Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Dan Berger, *The Struggle Within: Prisons, Political Prisoners, and Mass Movements in the United States* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014).

knowledge.<sup>12</sup> As outlined above, my project adopts these central tenets of the field by centering theories developed by people who are currently incarcerated.

The methodology of Critical Prison Studies has coincided with a growing interdisciplinary interest in analyzing sound and sonic forms. Scholarship at the intersection of Sound Studies and Critical Prison Studies investigates the ways in which prisoners actively shape and navigate their sonic environments, foregrounding their sonic modes of anti-carceral resistance. Abolitionist scholars such as Emma K. Russell and Bree Carlton examine sound as a modality of activism, and argue that sonic protest strategies within and outside of prison produce counter-carceral spaces that disrupt the spatial control of the prison. For instance, they cite protest noise, rhythm and music, and radio technologies as sonic means used to cross spatial boundaries and shape the carceral space through tactical use of sound.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, I consider the recordings in the sonic archive of prison writings as a production of counter-carceral spaces in which the incarcerated authors articulate and perform resistance to their sonic environment.

Other works that argue for a move away from considering the prison environment as dominated only by prison authorities point to the concept of acoustical agency, both as an integral part of understanding confinement and as a form of resistance.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on first-handwritten accounts, Sound Studies scholar Tom Rice describes the complexity of prison soundscapes from prisoners' perspectives, highlighting their acoustical agency. He cites the practice of prisoners

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<sup>12</sup> Micol Seigel, "Critical Prison Studies: Review of a Field," *American Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2018): 123–137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2018.0007>.

<sup>13</sup> Emma K. Russell and Bree Carlton, "Counter-Carceral Acoustemologies: Sound, Permeability and Feminist Protest at the Prison Boundary," *Theoretical Criminology* 24, no. 2 (2018): 296–313, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480618769862>.

<sup>14</sup> Katie Hemsworth, "'Feeling the Range': Emotional Geographies of Sound in Prisons," *Emotion, Space and Society* 20 (2016): 90–97, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2016.05.004>; Tom Rice, "Sounds Inside: Prison, Prisoners and Acoustical Agency," *Sound Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 6–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2016.1214455>.

drawing on sound-making to communicate and alert other inmates to imminent danger as an important form of activism.<sup>15</sup>

My project further engages with acoustical agency by stressing the recorded voices and vocal performances of the incarcerated authors as sonic modes of anti-carceral resistance. Central to my interpretation of the recorded voice is Zeynep Bulut's notion of the voice as "an assemblage of 'fleshed' sounds," which suggests that the human voice is a form of bodily sound production.<sup>16</sup> By situating the voice as an interior space that extends bodily sounds to the outside, Bulut identifies the voice as a spatial project:

As a 'fleshed' sound, or as sounds of a particular flesh, voice bridges self and the other, and facilitates a kind of oscillation between them. The phenomenon of the voice suggests pure interiority. Its existence seems like a mystery, but indeed, the very existence of a particular voice comes into being with exteriority. Voice engages a relation, a liquid conversation between one and the other. The sounds of the voice make this conversation fluid and enigmatic. Functioning like the filter of various bodily sounds, voice becomes the 'house' of the sounds.<sup>17</sup>

Bulut explores the operational intersection of voice and performance, theorizing the everyday voice as a performative space in which the act of speaking and *using* the voice to perform oneself as an agent. Thus, the voice and performance are not opposing phenomena, but are in dialectical relation to each other, offering the potential for the voice to be a powerful medium that, as my project illustrates, can function as a "vocalization of resistance."<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, artist-researcher Yvon Bonenfant has focused on the phenomenon of voice as a vibro-tactile performance, that is, the ways vocal sounds create vibratory fields, and therefore can

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<sup>15</sup> Rice, "Sounds Inside," 7.

<sup>16</sup> Zeynep Bulut, "Theorizing Voice in Performance: György Ligeti's 'Aventures,'" *Perspectives of New Music* 48, no. 1 (2010): 44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23076407>. For readers interested in the analysis of the phenomenon of voice in the study of sound: Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd edition (State University of New York Press, 2007). See also: *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies (JIVS)* <https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-of-interdisciplinary-voice-studies>.

<sup>17</sup> Bulut, "Theorizing Voice in Performance," 46.

<sup>18</sup> Bulut, 55.

be understood as a form of touch. He argues that through the touch of vocal vibrations, the voice becomes “a form of social touch that can activate reactions in bodies.”<sup>19</sup> Bonenfant is specifically interested in the idea and manifestation of queer voices, and as such, reading the voice itself as a queer phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> He introduces the concept of a queer vocal timbre to describe the dynamic sounds of desire in the voice that also operate as a ‘reaching out’ to other bodies/listeners.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the queer voice creates sentiments and desires between strangers via vocal textures of emotion and affect, which, as Bonenfant emphasizes, is also the way that the queer voice works performance.

Building on the notion of the vibro-tactile performance and the queer potential of the (recorded) voice, I situate the recorded voices of the incarcerated authors as sites of queer performance, in that the voice and process provide intimacy, depth, emotion, and power, thus adding new dimensions to the words on the page. Here, it is important to understand the queer voice in the context of the male prison in part because the authors’ voices can be associated with femme vocal qualities in what can be defined as a male gendered space. As I have argued in the previous section, the authors’ vocal performances disrupt the carceral soundscape, both in the production moment (through the rhythm of their voices), and in the post-production of the recording (through enhanced vocality). In other words, the incarcerated queer and trans voices of color are speaking against a soundscape of gendered noises, thus vocalizing resistance as

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<sup>19</sup> Yvon Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” *Performance Research* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2010.527210>. Bonenfant builds on Steve Conner’s concept of “the vocalic body:” Steven Connor, “What I Say Goes,” in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 74.

<sup>21</sup> Bonenfant, 76-77. See also: Airek Beauchamp, “Live Through This: Sonic Affect, Queerness, and the Trembling Body,” *Sounding Out!* (blog), 2015, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/09/14/sonic-tremblings-sound-affect-queer-body/>.

part/expressed through queer performance, which in the context of my project is made possible through the use of digital technology.

The queer voice, then, also operates in what musicologist Freya Jarman-Ivens describes as a “third space” between the bodies of the speaker and listener. This space activates a process of negotiating a relationship to the voice on the part of the listener, and offers a “rich site for the emergence of queer spaces.”<sup>22</sup> She argues that the queer potential of the voice—that is, creating an intimate aural experience for the listener—is most visceral through audible technologies. Here, she emphasizes the critical role of technologies that are involved in the recording and production of sonic material for the amplification of queer spaces opened up by the recorded voice.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, I suggest that the authors’ vocal performances express and articulate Jarman-Iven’s queer third space which is produced in relation with, and experienced through, my critical listening during the recording session. The queer third space is further amplified in the published recording through post-production technologies that create an intensified listening experience, allowing for listeners to be drawn into the authors’ performances and, as such, the intimacy of their voices.

Writing on the intersection of queer studies and performance studies, artist-researcher Ernst van der Wal examines the ways that queer practices are negotiated through the voice, sound, and bodily performances, further describing the queer potential of the human voice as “its ability to destabilise and question conceptions of what the gendered, sexualised and/or raced body *is supposed* to sound like.”<sup>24</sup> By citing the field of Black Performance Studies as a praxis to examine the multisensory experience of blackness, van der Wal highlights the importance of black

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<sup>22</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), vii, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Jarman-Ivens, 21; See also: Alexa Woloshyn, “ELECTROACOUSTIC VOICES: SOUNDS QUEER, AND WHY IT MATTERS,” *Tempo* 71, no. 280 (April 2017): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000092>.

<sup>24</sup> Ernst van der Wal, “The Fire in the Voice,” *Whatever* 2, no. 1 (2019): 105, <https://doi.org/10.13131/2611-657X.whatever.v2i1.28>.

performance as a means to express resistance, and to articulate “the experience and vocalization of blackness *as queer*.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, having situated the incarcerated voices as a site of queer performance, queer (as a methodology and process) further relates to the *practice* of speaking their voices of color to an audience. As the author Danny W. Cherry describes in the recordings of their pieces “The Queer Language-Bender Binding Purgatory” and “The Unbreakable Queen,” expressing their queerness through ritual performance is central to their resistance against the conditions of the prison environment.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Mpingo Waridi Uhuru emphasizes in the recording of her piece “I am From” that the meaning of her name, which is “black rose discovering freedom,” reflects both the expression of her gender identity and practice of her everyday resistance.<sup>27</sup> As such, one of the key connecting fields to negotiate the interface in this capstone project between Sound Studies, Critical Prison Studies and American Studies, and I would also argue Queer and Trans Studies, is the field of Black Performance Studies.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, an essential element in the field of Sound Studies is the expansion of the boundaries of traditional scholarship to include sound, and to establish new methods radically different from text-based modes of knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Scholars in the Digital Humanities argue that conversing with Sound Studies may potentially change the text-centric cultures of communication

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<sup>25</sup> van der Wal, 103.

<sup>26</sup> Danny W. Cherry, *The Queer Language-Bender Binding Purgatory*, 2022, Sonic Archive of Prison Writings, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource/queer-language>; Danny W. Cherry, *The Unbreakable Queen*, 2022, Sonic Archive of Prison Writings, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource/the-unbreakable-queen>.

<sup>27</sup> Mpingo Waridi Uhuru, *I Am From*, 2022, Sonic Archive of Prison Writings, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource/i-am-from>.

<sup>28</sup> For readers interested in Black Performance Studies: Soyica Colbert, “Introduction: On Black Performance,” *African American Review* 45, no. 3 (2012): 275–76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2012.0061>; E. Patrick Johnson, “Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006), 446–63; E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Bull, *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies*, 1st Edition (New York: Routledge, 2019).

in the humanities into more experimental scholarship inclusive of diverse knowledge.<sup>30</sup> The emerging field of Digital Sound Studies offers opportunities to transform the model for academic production by moving towards collaborative and multimodal projects that target broader audiences, and that incorporate new voices, such as the voices of those who are incarcerated. Working to expand sonic scholarship through the digital medium, the *Sounding Out!* Editorial Collective, for instance, has specifically focused on building a cohesive digital community.<sup>31</sup> Through a variety of collaborative projects, the Editorial Collective has illustrated the importance of Digital Humanities methods, particularly the use of audio technologies, in creating sonic knowledge for the purpose of advancing the sonic experience.<sup>32</sup> For example, through publishing a monthly podcast that is deliberately unstructured, in broadcasts from radio style to digital sound art installation, *Sounding Out!* has explored scholarship as medium of sound.

Similarly, my methodology uses podcasting both as a sonic mode of interdisciplinary research dissemination and a wide-ranging means of scholarly communication.<sup>33</sup> It advances the role of podcasts within the intersection of Sound Studies and Critical Prison Studies by using the digital medium to bring prison abolitionist scholarship in dialogue with collaborative sound projects. It thereby connects these fields through praxis, creating a methodology that can be applied to other disciplines and interdisciplinary research, and that is intended to produce new modes of collaborative and creative scholarship.

Another online collection of sonic scholarship that seeks to expand the boundaries of traditional scholarship to include sound and audio more creatively in scholarly settings is

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Caton Lingold, Darren Mueller, and Whitney Anne Trettien, eds., *Digital Sound Studies* (London: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>31</sup> "Sounding Out!," *Sounding Out!* pushing sound studies into the red since 2009, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/>.

<sup>32</sup> "Sounding Out Index," *Sounding Out!* (blog), July 13, 2016, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/1-alpha-title/>.

<sup>33</sup> Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry, eds., *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

*Provoke!*.<sup>34</sup> Within its collection, the project “We are your Neighbors” publishes recordings produced by prisoners at the Richmond City Jail in Virginia to share the carceral soundscape for the broader community, and to draw attention to the sonic subjectivities of incarcerated people.<sup>35</sup> Contributors installed a recording studio inside the jail that the inmates can use during a weekly community-based arts workshop. They address the multisensory chaos inside of overcrowded prisons, and argue that oppositional expressions through sound can create powerful and intimate narratives. This speaks to my focus in that it examines how sound, in the form of recorded voices, serves as a (queer) method of prisoner activism that can transcend prison walls.

Within this discourse there are research projects investigating sonic archives that feature the voices and sound environments of incarcerated people; these voices effectively reimagine our understanding of the archive by making us *listen*.<sup>36</sup> The archival documentary project *Public Secrets* from 2008 by scholar and artist Sharon Daniel, for instance, consists of a collection of recorded in-depth conversations with incarcerated women from the Central California Women's Facility, the largest female correctional facility in the United States. *Public Secrets* illustrates the power of the recorded voice, and functions as a multivocal narrative that links individual interviews to structural injustices. Through a layering of the voices of the incarcerated women and the framing of their stories within academic and legal discourses, the project creates a public record of their experiences.<sup>37</sup> *Queer and Trans Prison Voices* is both an addition to such sonic archives and is in conversation with such multimodal projects. At the same time, my project's sonic archive of prison

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<sup>34</sup> “Provoke! Digital Sound Studies,” Provoke! Digital Sound Studies, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://soundboxproject.com/index.html>.

<sup>35</sup> “We Are Your Neighbors: Dialogues Across the Wall of Silence,” Provoke! Digital Sound Studies, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://soundboxproject.com/project-neighbors.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Poppy de Souza, “Sonic Archives of Breathlessness,” *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 5686–5704; Jonathan W. Stone, “Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings,” *Enculturation. A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>37</sup> Sharon Daniel, “Public Secrets,” Sharon Daniel, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://sharondaniel.net/#publicsecrets>.

writings not only features a collective of incarcerated voices, but a sonic collection of their written works as well.

In creating a project that is accessible through a collaborative and open-source platform, my capstone project also engages public digital humanities practices that, as Sheila Brennan has noted, engage with communities outside of the academy for digital humanities scholarship.<sup>38</sup> Through my collaboration with incarcerated people, my project illustrates that their stories of lived incarceration cannot stay hidden behind the walls of prisons, and need to be included in the scholarship. In this sense, it also speaks to what Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein describe as “A DH That Matters,” and one that “contribute[s] significantly to a larger technically and historically informed resistance [...] by creating platforms that amplify the voices of the most in need of being heard.”<sup>39</sup> The author Mpingo Waridi Uhuru both addresses this need and articulates her resistance when she says, “I am a voice crying out from the depths of this degradation.”<sup>40</sup> In the recording of her essay “Safety and Security,” which draws attention to the structural violence that trans women experience in male facilities, she emphasizes that “my voice is a single note in the chorus of survivors that cry out with indignation.”<sup>41</sup>

The purpose of Sound Studies, and my intervention into Critical Prison Studies and Black Performance Studies as part of Sound Studies, is to not only include sound in scholarship, and thereby advance sonic modes of scholarship production. My sonic intervention demonstrates that the queer and trans incarcerated voices of color are part of, and literally speaking and performing through, the project in ways that go beyond traditional conceptions of scholarship, as when Danny

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<sup>38</sup> Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold, “A DH That Matters,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 386.

<sup>39</sup> Sheila A. Brennan, “Public First,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), xi.

<sup>40</sup> Mpingo Waridi Uhuru, *Safety and Security*, 2022, Sonic Archive of Prison Writings, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource/safety-and-security>.

<sup>41</sup> Waridi Uhuru, *Safety and Security*.

W. Cherry says: “ I snapped my fingers, and sat down on my mat; That was one for the girls, and she had arrived.”<sup>42</sup> In both Critical Prison Studies and American Studies, incarcerated people speak through the text but not always in the sense that readers *hear* their voices and their writing. On the contrary, my capstone project changes the mode in which scholarship is experienced and understood, and therefore, refashions the purpose and perception of scholarship and scholarly work by including both the works and the voices of queer and trans incarcerated people. Together with the authors, we collectively amplify Mpingo Waridi Uhuru’s “desire for [their] words to spark a sense of indignation in the hearts and minds of all who read [and hear] them.”<sup>43</sup>

### Podcast Series

The podcast episodes address themes central to my interdisciplinary research, and are divided into two different parts: ‘The Case for (Prison) Abolition’ and ‘Building the Archive.’ The main narrative thread throughout the series is centered around abolition as praxis, in which I further situate the scholarship that I am producing in collaboration with the authors as a collective and creative practice. The first part features three episodes. For episode one and two, I invited activist scholars to discuss the critiques of prisons as sites of racialized and gendered state violence. In the third episode, I talked to representatives of activist organizations about their organizations’ work for queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming communities. The second part is a three-part episode that features interviews with two sound artists, and includes a reflective analysis of the project’s sonic archive of prison writings. Through a narration that connects the individual interviews, the episodes build on each other and thereby link theory with methodology and practice.

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<sup>42</sup> Cherry, *The Queer Language-Bender Binding Purgatory*.

<sup>43</sup> Waridi Uhuru, *Safety and Security*.

Episode one serves as an introduction to my research focus and to the scholarship that informs my capstone project. I wanted to introduce the podcast audience to some of the work by U.S. historians that investigates what histories of gender and sexuality tell us about the carceral state. Therefore, I talked to Jen Manion, who is a professor of history and sexuality, and Women's and Gender Studies, at Amherst College.<sup>44</sup> The main argument discussed in this episode is that racialized gender and sexual normativity function as central logics of the carceral state and power.

Episode two builds on the conversation of the previous one by focusing on prison abolitionist scholarship. For this section, I interviewed the 2020-2021 president of the American Studies Association and abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodriguez. He discusses the importance of a collective and creative abolitionist praxis, and further stresses the need for centering queer and trans voices in the field of Critical Prison Studies, which he argues should become *Abolitionist* Prison Studies. This episode positions scholarly work on abolition in dialogue with actual abolitionist praxis, which, as Rodriguez emphasizes in our conversation and elsewhere, is grounded in a black radical tradition, as well as a black feminist, queer, and trans radical praxis.<sup>45</sup> This episode further situates the queer performances of the incarcerated authors as an abolitionist practice, and therefore, exemplifies their sonic modes of anti-carceral resistance.

Episode three builds on the scholarly discourse on abolition by introducing the podcast audience to the work of abolitionist organizations Black and Pink National and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. In the interviews, activists Dominique Morgan and Kimberly Mckenzie discuss the ways that an abolitionist framework informs the advocacy work and community organizing they do

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<sup>44</sup> Jen Manion, *Liberty's Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Dylan Rodriguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review*, Development in the Law - Prison Abolition, 132 (2019): 1575–1611.

for queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people.<sup>46</sup> This episode particularly emphasizes the idea of creative modes of knowledge production through collaborations with incarcerated people, which, as discussed above, is a main component of the interdisciplinary fields of Critical Prison Studies and Sound Studies.

The second part of the series focuses on the archival process of my project, and reflects on the need to bring the prison writing to the podcast medium. It explains the methodology I developed in dialogue both with the scholarship of my interdisciplinary research and other digital sound projects. In this final three-part episode, I am in conversation with activist scholars and sound artists Sharon Daniel and Liz Canfield about their projects *Public Secrets* and “We are Your Neighbors.” Here, I discuss the collective and creative practices of our projects, and examine the ways in which these relate to an abolitionist praxis. In the final part of this episode, I reflect on my collaboration with the incarcerated authors, and describe the process of creating the recordings. It includes an analysis of the authors’ voices and features some of the unedited recording material to discuss the concepts I raise within my interdisciplinary research. Therefore, this part also functions as an introduction to the sonic archive itself.

### Practicing American Studies

As part of my capstone project, I place Critical Prison Studies in the context of the Black Radical Tradition, which is already a main current of contemporary American Studies. One of the most vital strands of Black Radical Tradition scholarship appears in the recent collection *Futures of*

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<sup>46</sup> Dean Spade, “‘It’s War in Here:’ A Report on the Treatment of Transgender and Intersex People in New York State Men’s Prisons” (Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2007), <https://srlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WarinHere042007.pdf>; Jason Lydon et al., “Coming Out Of Concrete Closets: A Report on Black & Pink’s National LGBTQ Prisoner Survey” (Black& Pink, 2015), <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/23129/23129.pdf>.

*Black Radicalism*, edited by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin.<sup>47</sup> This collection of essays meditates on the power and legacy of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.<sup>48</sup> In this collection, George Lipsitz reminds us “about the role of expressive culture in Black survival, humanity and democracy,”<sup>49</sup> and, among other authors in the collection, locates Black artistic creations and practices as sites of resistance and transformation. While Lipsitz does not specifically speak to the role of incarcerated expressive culture, his notion of the expressive culture of Black survival can be productively situated within the sonic archive of my project. In this way, my project amplifies the Black Radical Tradition, which is, according to Shana Redmond and Kwame Phillips, also “brilliantly displayed and imagined and practiced anew through sound.”<sup>50</sup>

Abolitionist practice is at the heart of my project. This is reflected in the production of the recordings published in the sonic archive of prison writings. In the introduction to *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Johnson and Lubin identify abolition as both the “destruction of racial regimes and racial capitalism,” thus formulating abolition within a transnational context, but also as the production of Black radicalism.<sup>51</sup> Further, by describing Black radicalism as a practice that demands and articulates collective liberation, Johnson and Lubin conclude that “Black freedom is freedom for all,”<sup>52</sup> echoing Black feminist Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s version of freedom, one that is “bound up with the project of human liberation and social transformation.”<sup>53</sup> My project

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<sup>47</sup> Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds., *Futures of Black Radicalism* (Verso Books, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> George Lipsitz, “What Is This Black in the Black Radical Tradition?,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (Verso Books, 2017), 114.

<sup>50</sup> Shana L. Redmond and Kwame M. Phillips, “‘The People Who Keep on Going’: A Listening Party, Vol. I,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (Verso Books, 2017), 206.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson and Lubin, *Futures of Black Radicalism*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson and Lubin, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation,” in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 194.

illustrates how the collective processes that are central to a Black radical and abolitionist practice require including the voices of incarcerated people. Indeed, Johnson, Lubin, and Taylor suggest that forming interracial communities and solidarities is important to their vision of anti-capitalism. In terms of my capstone project, through my curation the recordings in the sonic archive form a collective of voices that brings together the stories of multiple incarcerated authors who are otherwise isolated from each other. This collective process includes my positionality as an international student/scholar who identifies as white, and who collaborates with incarcerated Black queer and transgender people. In this sense, the implicit interracial (and transnational) solidarities in my project mobilizes the Black Radical Tradition's notion that "Black Freedom is Freedom for all."

This project situates incarcerated authors as agents of empowerment, and offers those authors an opportunity to voice their identities and experiences as part of an abolitionist practice. As Ruth Gilmore Wilson contends in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, abolitionist practices are practices of abolition geography that she describes as "a way of studying, and doing political organizing, being here in the world, and of worlding ourselves."<sup>54</sup> In this way, my project is its own form of political organizing; the incarcerated authors are each "worlding" themselves through their writing, and thus producing worlds, or as Gilmore writes, "imagin[ing] *home*" in a dehumanizing space. My collaboration, then, brings these worlds outside of the world of the prison through the medium of sound. Here, Gilmore's idea of "mak[ing] freedom provisionally" as an act and process of W.E.B. DuBois' abolition democracy, and therefore, an abolitionist practice,<sup>55</sup> is useful for theorizing the incarcerated authors' queer performances in the recordings as creations of

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<sup>54</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 238.

<sup>55</sup> Gilmore, 238.

provisional spaces of freedom. As Black queer and trans subjects, the prison environment systematically denies them their ability and agency to assert themselves; thus, asserting their gender in a space that polices gender as part of the terms of incarceration is itself a part of the “ontological totality”<sup>56</sup> of abolition democracy. As such, the recordings provide a space that enhances their gendered resistance as part of an abolitionist practice.

My project also positions the incarcerated authors against the logic of human sacrifice, which Gilmore argues is central to the ways the carceral system is organized.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, I develop Gilmore’s claim by examining the role of queer and trans bodies within that organizing principle of human sacrifice. Following this logic, it is not just bodies of color that are sacrificed, but gender non-conforming bodies of color—bodies which are even more targeted for sacrifice.<sup>58</sup> It is important to draw attention to Gilmore’s particular definition of race (and racism) here, as “group-differentiation to premature death,” which then—if we understand race in dialectical tension to gender—also situates gendered bodies as a “group differentiation to premature death.”<sup>59</sup> Gilmore links her definition of racism to that organizing principle of human sacrifice, when she points to “racial capitalism and the role of criminalization in it,” stressing that “capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, her definition of racism can account for other forms of embodied and social inequalities, including the ways that trans and gender non-conforming persons become targets for criminalization and sacrifice. I intend my project to speak and write against that disposability.

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<sup>56</sup> Gilmore, 231.

<sup>57</sup> Gilmore, 236.

<sup>58</sup> Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, eds., *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, Expanded Second Edition (Chico: AK Press, 2015); Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law*, 2nd edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” 240.

<sup>60</sup> Gilmore, 229, 240. See also: Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076>.

Gilmore further defines the relationship between the economy of incarceration to racial capitalism, and she argues that what is “extracted from the extracted [body] is the resource of life—time.”<sup>61</sup> She understands incarcerated bodies as places that “criminalization [...] transforms into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold.”<sup>62</sup> Within the framework of my project, it is important to expand her analysis through a focus on incarcerated queer and trans bodies, who are subject to another kind of surplus extraction. Additionally, it is productive to read Gilmore’s idea of the economy of incarceration as the extraction of time from bodies alongside the concept of gratuitous violence in Jackie Wang’s work *Carceral Capitalism*. Through a discussion of Ella Mayers and W.E.B. Du Bois, Wang explains gratuitous forms of state violence as expressions of sadism, and further draws attention to the sadistic pleasure that, as she emphasizes, particularly state agents derive from “dominating, brutalizing, and killing black people.”<sup>63</sup> In the context of my project, it is important to understand that the incarcerated queer and transgender people, and especially trans women of color, are susceptible to that kind of gratuitous (state) violence—which, as Critical Prison Studies scholarship and the authors of my project emphasize, take structural forms of sexual violence.<sup>64</sup> While Wang focuses on sadism to analyze gratuitous violence and anti-black racism as opposed to privileging economic interpretations, I argue that the sadism she identifies functions *within* a racial capitalist framework. By linking Gilmore’s description of the economy of incarceration to Wang’s discussion of sadism, we can think of sadism as the extraction of perverse *value* from bodies, and by extension, situate sadism as a feature of surplus extraction.

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<sup>61</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” 227.

<sup>62</sup> Gilmore, 227.

<sup>63</sup> Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Los Angeles: semiotext(e), 2018), 91. See also: Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete*, 60–83.

<sup>64</sup> Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock, *Queer (in)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012); Stanley and Smith, *Captive Genders*, 269–300; Spade, *Normal Life*, 47; Waridi Uhuru, *Safety and Security*.

Nikhil Pal Singh's intervention in *Futures of Black Radicalism* propels this thinking. In particular, he revisits the Marxist concept of "so-called" primitive accumulation with implications for this line of argument.<sup>65</sup> When Singh writes that "'appropriation of accumulated unpaid work,' [which is] [e]mbodied in the figure of the slave, the migrant worker, the household worker, the chronically unemployed, and others like them, [...] encompasses both privatized and publically sanctioned coercion,"<sup>66</sup> he suggests that racial capitalism is extracting surplus value *from* bodies. Building on his analysis, we might situate the prison and incarcerated Black queer and trans bodies as sites of surplus exploitation that Singh, among others, would recognize as "primitive accumulation," or "plunder."<sup>67</sup> When we further think about the relationship of the incarcerated gendered Black body to state violence, we might also understand sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence as a form of surplus extraction. Within the context of racial capitalism, the extraction of surplus value from incarcerated bodies comes, in part, from sexual violence.

In a context of a strictly segregated sexual environment like the prison, queer but specifically transgender people are the most targeted for sexual violence as they express and affirm gender difference while still being in a sex-segregated environment—and therefore, making them more valuable for sexual surplus extraction. What we understand from queer interventions, but also queer racial capitalist interventions, is that sex work is a form of capitalist labor in that it involves exchange value and a commodification of human activity and bodies.<sup>68</sup> From a racial capitalist lens, bodies have value, and as such, produce value from sexual acts with coerced subjects—value extracted without compensation and without consent. Rather than being seen as purely disposable,

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<sup>65</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, "On Race, Violence, and 'So-Called Primitive Accumulation,'" in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (Verso Books, 2017), 39.

<sup>66</sup> Singh, 55.

<sup>67</sup> Singh, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* (Verso Books, 2014); Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell, "Service Work, Sex Work, and the 'Prostitute Imaginary,'" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (July 1, 2021): 493–514, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-9154870>.

the incarcerated persons' body becomes valuable in part to capital because it is sexually available to other workers and to the state. Therefore, I argue that when we think about the structural issue of sexual violence against the incarcerated gendered Black body, in addition to examining the relationship between race and capital, we have to consider the relationship of sex to capital and the prison. As such, through a Black radical lens we can start to understand the structure and paradigm of the continuous sexual coercion and sexual violence against incarcerated queer and transgender people of color.

As my project illustrates, some of the emphasis and textures in frameworks for understanding carceral (and racial) capitalism shift when we center queer and transgender people, and in particular queer and transgender people of color. Where Wang, among others, highlights the economic and political forces to incarceration as functions of social control for capitalism, we might read her work in conversation with Critical Prison Studies that emphasizes interventions on gender categorization, gender identity, sexual violence, and the policing of queer and transgender people of color.<sup>69</sup> While these works draw attention to policing and incarceration as methods of *gender control* and situate sexual violence both as a key role in maintaining that control and a function of power that is taking sexualized forms, my intervention here situates sexualized forms of power as expressions of racial capitalism and primitive accumulation. Understanding this addresses the structural dimension of sexual violence against queer and transgender people.

I intend my analysis to point toward the field of the Black Radical Tradition within American Studies, and to advance the Critical Prison Studies scholarship that argues that abolitionism must be anti-capitalist. As such, my intervention suggests that future work needs to

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<sup>69</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*; Stanley and Smith, *Captive Genders*; Eric A. Stanley, Dean Spade, and Queer (In)justice, "Queering Prison Abolition, Now?," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2012): 115–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2012.0003>.

continue to integrate the Black Radical Tradition in American Studies with its focus on racial capitalism along with its anti-capitalist framework of abolitionism. I believe such interventions advance American Studies as an interdisciplinary field and positions the incarcerated authors of my project alongside the intellectuals of the Black Radical Tradition. Through situating the Black queer performances of the incarcerated authors as important manifestations of Black radical and abolitionist practices, my intervention further links abolition to the politics of gender and sexuality, and emphasizes queer and trans resistance as an abolitionist project.

### Continuation of the Project

As outlined on the website, I am hopeful that this project will continue to evolve after its formal submission as a capstone project to the M.A. Program in Liberal Studies. With the help of my advisor and the CUNY Manifold team, I plan to promote the project within the Liberal Studies and Digital Humanities programs at the Graduate Center. I imagine the site to be a resource for other students and scholars, used both for research purposes or as a model for other capstone projects that engage with collaborative and creative modes of scholarship production. Through my collaboration with the American Prison Writing Archive, a printed version of the project website will be shared with incarcerated people in prisoner-support newsletters. This will include transcriptions of the podcast episodes and of the works by the authors. I will also work with the abolitionist organizations featured in the podcast episodes to distribute the website and its transcribed content to the organizations' incarcerated communities through newsletters and correspondences. My collaboration with the authors will hopefully continue with the aim to expand the sonic archive of prison writings, and to potentially develop it into an independent archival and exhibition project.

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