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“A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women”

by

Robin McGinty

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Earth and Environmental Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

2022

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A Labor of Livingness: Oral  
Histories of Formerly  
Incarcerated Black Women

by

Robin McGinty

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in  
Earth and Environmental Sciences in satisfaction of the dissertation  
requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

“A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women”

by

Robin McGinty

Anchored in the political subjectivity of formerly incarcerated Black women, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” is a project situated at the intersections of Black geographies and Black Feminist thought that considers a re/imagination of the ‘living prison’ experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women. I offer the term “a labor of livingness” as the liberatory articulation and everyday practices of resistance to the prison as a site of ‘living death’ that is reflective of the carceral experiences of currently and formerly incarcerated Black women. Attentive to the prison as a repository of epistemological knowledge production, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” is a multivocal project informed by eighteen months of ethnographic research and my own experience of imprisonment.

Working through the architectures of race, class and gender underpinning Black women’s dehumanization and dispossession, this project employs a multidisciplinary approach which intentionally foregrounds the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women as a liberatory imaginative that provokes an interrogation of the racialized and gendered spatial formations of

the carceral state. In situating the ‘penal’ as a Black geography that is intimately bound up in the constellations of the Black freedom struggle, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” offers a critical counter-narrative to the de-validation of currently and formerly incarcerated Black women’s lived carceral experiences and understandings. As such, I argue that currently and formerly incarcerated Black women are not ancillary to discussions regarding the policies and practices of ‘mass incarceration’ but are inextricably connected to the nation’s political economy of carceral confinement and custodial control as a continuity sustained by the ecology of historical anti-Black racism, and its corresponding state-sanctioned violences.

Given the dearth of scholarship examining the political subjectivity of formerly incarcerated Black women and our epistemological production of carceral wisdoms essential to Black our ongoing resistance to the imposition of imposed and gendered identities, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” provides an intervention to the invisibility and erasure of presently and formerly incarcerated Black women’s encounters with multiple legal and juridical systems, along with the supporting infrastructures of dehumanization, dispossession and displacement. This work unsettles the traditional racialized tropes couched in the language of disparity, inequality and deficiencies---which is often centered and enmeshed in the all-too-familiar representations of Black women’s criminality---which in turn, has historically been used to justify and uphold the structures and systems of racialized punishment meted out by the nation’s criminal and juridical legal systems. Residing in the circuitous intersections of race, class and gender which shape and give form to a Black geography, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” engages and builds out McKittrick’s (2011) theoretical framing of a post-slave Black geography.

In negation of the penal as a topography of re/living Black death, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” purposely evokes the cultural vernacular of ‘living the penal’ as a continuity of Black place-making, which in turn, engenders a ‘labor of livingness’ as an unrelenting struggle in affirmation of Black humanness.

As a public-facing project, this dissertation posits the concept of a ‘labor of livingness’ as the archives of historical memory embodied in a storytelling praxis which maps the interlocking contours and intimacies of the carceral sphere as a gendered and racialized regime of governance that holds the contradictions and compelling possibilities of a radical ethos intrinsic to the notion of Black self-determination and place-making.

## **Dedication**

For my parents, Elaine and James McGinty.

For Rusti Miller-Hill, who passed away before “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” was completed.

For all future, currently and formerly incarcerated Black women, men and children across the nation.

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation does not happen without the generosity and assistance of countless others, which only a fraction of whom I can name and thank here. “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” is a project that happens not only late in life, but on a subject matter I had no interest in talking about and certainly no interest in writing about---formerly incarcerated Black women. If one had asked me some 25 years ago after own release from NYS’s Taconic Correctional Facility in Westchester County as to whether I would be revisiting that period of my life, the answer would have been a resounding no. At the time, it felt like it might be better to pretend it never happened---as an erasure of my own narrative. However, here I am.

First off, I would like to express my deep appreciation to all of the formerly incarcerated Black women who sat and trusted me enough to share their stories openly and honestly. And while not every narrative made it into the dissertation, all of the interviews informed the project in enormous and meaningful ways. Thank you all---Jocelyne Allrich, Tiheba Bain, Selina Fulford, Rusti Miller-Hill, Laurie Lunn, Dinah Ortiz, Mimi Pascual, Lorryne Patterson and Regina Jones, author of the spoken word piece “Who Are These Women?” I would also like to extend my appreciation to all the formerly incarcerated Black women who have contributed to this dissertation in informal ways through ongoing discussions, as well as through their unrelenting advocacy and activist work ‘on the ground’ on behalf of currently incarcerated women and girls---along with all of us who made back home. I have learned from each and every one of you through the years---and for that I remain truly grateful.

My professors---in particular my advisor Setha Low and my committee members---Michelle Fine and Ruth Wilson Gilmore---there are simply no words adequate enough to

communicate my absolute love and the tremendous respect I have for all three of you. Reminded of the old adage---*when the student is ready, the teacher shows up*---PhD school (as Ruthie Gilmore calls it) involved a steep learning curve for me. Which is to say, there were times when this student/me was neither ready, nor did I show-up in a way that was always fully present. However, my mentors (Setha, Michelle and Ruthie) exhibited an unwavering commitment to my intellectual growth and development, along with enormous patience in seeing me through what had been, arguably, a challenging process from time to time. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Hester Eisenstein (Professor Emerita, Sociology and former Director, Center for The Study of Women and Society) who first opened the door to my engagement in feminist thought and tradition, and Professor Monica Varsanyi (former Executive Officer/Earth and Environmental Science and recently appointed ‘interim’ Provost) who taught me about ‘academic’ expository writing---remembering a seminar she had taught (one of several I had taken with her) when she told me “Robin, I think you’ve hit your stride.”

To my amazing PhD colleagues/comrades/friends Erin Lilli, Sam Stein and Mae Miller--- your generosity, input and assistance, along with your encouragement were invaluable in getting “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” project done. To my geography PhD chums, Allison Guess, Zaire Simone-Thompkins and Delice Mugabo--- your friendship has meant a great deal, especially navigating the COVID pandemic in which we held bi-weekly check-ins via virtual chats. My work was also enabled by my dissertation group “JETERS” in which we shared our work, as well as our ‘bumps’ along the way---and the rich discussions that emerged which were a vital source of support. I would be remiss if I did not note the support of the Graduate Center’s Lina McClain (retired Earth and Environmental Science Assistant Program Officer), Anne Ellis (Special Assistant to the Assoc. Provost), Cheryl Neil

(retired Financial Aid officer), along with a host of others who comprise the CUNY Graduate Center community. I would also like to thank the Columbia University's Dr. Geraldine Downey and the Center for Justice for their support through the years, including being designated a Justice Research Fellow in 2015.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the late prison activist Eddie Ellis, and activist-scholar Kathy Boudin, a co-founder of the Columbia University Center for Justice---who transitioned on May Day 2022. It was Kathy whom I first approached about the possibility of attending grad school, trying to figure out the PhD piece. As it was, she was the only formerly incarcerated woman who I knew that held a PhD degree. Likewise, I was 'bugging out' about the cost, how would I be able to manage that---in other words, I knew next to nothing about PhD school---all I had was a desire. Kathy says, *'just get in---the rest will take of itself.'* Of course, as a non-believer it was difficult for me to wrap my brain around that---I was mostly incredulous as in *'c'mon already/are u kidding me?'* What Kathy was communicating to me was to 'trust the process'---turns out she was absolutely spot-on. We continued to collaborate through the years on various projects, including one that I remain incredibly proud of---The Justice Storytelling + Arts Lab in which I served as a curator and program curriculum developer in partnership with New York City's Department of Summer Youth Employment (SYEP).

What can I say about Eddie Ellis---how brilliant he was as a mentor? How incredibly dedicated and committed he was to our community of currently and formerly incarcerated persons? In honoring his memory and ongoing legacy I could go and on and it still wouldn't be enough. The same can be said for Kathy Boudin---I miss them both tremendously.

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## Prologue

“Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination.”

---Toni Morrison, “The Source of Self-Regard”

Twenty-five years later, I can’t even call what the weather was like that day—whether if it was raining, if the sun was shining or maybe something in between. Even so, there would be no one to greet me with any open arms, nor would there be a car waiting for me outside the prison filled with joyous family members to whisk me safely back home to New York City. It was a weekday, so everyone was working, and had no time to take off. Reflecting on that day, my memory of how I even made it home from New York’s Taconic Correctional Facility in Westchester County to the MTA’s Metro North Bedford Hills rail station is vague, prompting me to check in with a woman I had served time with at Taconic. After all these many years, we remain in contact after being locked up together at a site, which in the cadence and cultural vernacular of currently and formerly incarcerated Black folk is most often referred to as the ‘penal.’ Taking leave from a prison cell located in a prison dorm euphemistically known as the ‘condo,’ I was conscious of the possibility of this moment being the last time I would be walking up or down the familiar corridor. Whatever I might have accumulated, whether books, artwork, or anything else, I was leaving behind. I never even glanced back down the corridor for a final look, as superstition mingled with fear told me that stealing a backwards glimpse might trigger

some sort of last-minute administrative snafu that would send me right back to the cage. As it was, I had been notified two weeks earlier that I was about to be released. I had also been warned by a Black senior male correctional officer (CO) assigned to the law library that if I wanted to make it home, I needed to forego any legal assistance, including so-called prison infractions known as tier tickets I might have been rendering to the other women. *“Thirteen days and a wake-up”* is how the imprisoned mark time; rarely venturing from my cage during those intervening two weeks, I emerged only for meals and my work assignment.

From the day I arrived at Taconic, I had taken to heart what the women I would mark/do time with told me: *‘you only need to do this one time/you don’t have to come back here.’* Those words signified a secret collective knowledge I knew instinctively would prove crucial for me to be able to navigate and ‘live’ the penal for the length of my incarceration. The phrase *“you don’t have to come back here”* is an articulation bound up in the ethos of a subversive emancipatory imagining which Black women who are locked-up in cages, harbor and hold for one another as a collective source of strength and salvation. Simultaneously, the words conjure up and lays claim to a space beyond the walls of the prison which evokes a radical envisioning that offers hope and sanctuary as a life-preserving power woven into the cruel and precarious conditions of the prison itself. The prison, a repository of carceral wisdoms produced by the imprisoned Black women in what I term a ‘labor of livingness,’ presents the dichotomy of struggle and practice in opposition to the prison as a setting for living death. *“You only have to do this one time”* were the words that were offered to me, inmate number 94G1044 as a temporal balm to the despair and desolation that is vital to the penal as a historical geographical location of anti-Blackness, dehumanization and dispossession. In 1994, under the Rockefeller drug laws I was handed a mandatory, indeterminate state sentence of 2-4 years for felony drug possession. The NY State

Supreme Court judge adjudicating my case said his hands were tied, he could do nothing for me. Bail conditions would remain in place. The judge advised that I put my affairs in order and report back in several weeks. I was devastated. I told no one. I was too ashamed. I believed my life was over.

Escorted through the heavy metal gates encrusted with layers upon layers of palpable human misery, the CO and I made our way through the dank underground tunnels that connect Taconic and Bedford prisons to one another. In a matter of minutes, we arrived at a room adjoined to the facility's reception area, where I was processed for release. There I would exchange my official state-issued 'greens' I had worn during my imprisonment for regular 'street' clothes mailed to the prison by my family in preparation for my pending release. The switch of garments signified a 're-entering society,' cloaked as a 'conditional release' from a racialized exile and its requisite social death. "Re-entry" is the language used by the juridical and criminal legal system, an obfuscation that works to conceal the insistent and structural afterlives of the prison. Many have likened the afterlives of the penal as a '*run-on sentence that never ends*.' It was now 1995, I had served 6 months. I had been granted an early release from the penal shrouded under the guise of then Governor George Pataki's sentencing reform efforts. I had caught a break.

Attempting to address the convergence of the exponential growth of the New York state prison population, and the escalating economic costs of imprisoning so-called 'non-violent' drug offenders, the Pataki administration sought to appease both critics and the hardline supporters of the Rockefeller drug laws---which had been acknowledged as the most severe in the nation. However, it is necessary to view Pataki's 1990s sentencing reforms in the context of an expansion of prisons, as tied to the political economy of the contentious Rockefeller-era drug

statutes enacted in 1973. A critical driver of this explosive growth of the prison population was the criminalization and imprisonment of mostly Black and Latino low-level drug offenders, who would soon comprise a third of the overall New York state prison population. Indeed, as a 1998 New York Times article pointed out “*the number of nonviolent inmates in the state, many of them drug offenders sentenced under the Rockefeller era laws, increased steadily, to 33,865 from 8,297.*” (New York Times)

There were many who suggested for the sake of political expediency amid a fraught legislative landscape, Pataki’s decision to choose the path of an incremental workaround was prudent, rather than engage in what had already been deemed ‘dead-on-arrival’ any legislative schemes to mitigate the Rockefeller statutes. That said, it can be argued the Pataki administration’s reforms at best, functioned as a reconfiguration of a penal system already firmly in place, such that prison reform under the pretext of ‘sentencing reform,’ became a stand-in for prison expansion. As a demonstration of the racialized logic and elasticity of the state’s carceral reach, inclusive of the growth and development of other systems and forms of confinement, the Pataki administration’s rhetorical sleight of hand would suggest the administration was neither interested in rolling back, nor amending the Rockefeller drug laws. In much the same way, it can also be offered that the Pataki regime was wedded ideologically to the practice of the ‘changing same’ as a harbinger of things to come. The successful expansion of the prison serves as a reminder that high rates of incarceration were the result of political choice and policy decision, and not fate.

To place this all into perspective, consider that during Pataki’s time in office from 1995 through 2006, the New York prison and jail population rose steadily from approximately 50,000 people to a peak of nearly 75,000 in the year 2000. Striking also, because ‘crime’ was at an

historic low in New York, as it had been across the country according to any number of federal, state and municipal reports. As of this writing, the current population of people bound up in New York's criminal legal system is 230,000; this number includes New York's current prison population at 50,000, 96,000 on probation, 43,000 on parole, 27,000 in local jails, with the remainder spread across federal prison, youth facilities and involuntary detention. Although couched in the trope of returning NYS prisons to its "historical mission of confining mostly violent criminals," the Pataki regime's non-reform reforms would further serve to cement the already bleak reality of the savage impact on NYC's racialized poor and working-class Black and Latino communities engendered by the Rockefeller drug laws. (Prison Policy Initiative)

In 1979, stretching back nearly twenty years prior to the previously referenced 1998 New York Times article (ibid), a research project known as the 'seven neighborhoods study' was conducted by a group of incarcerated men known as the Green Haven Think Tank. According to the late prison scholar-activist Edwin 'Eddie' Ellis, founder of The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions at Medgar Evers College, as well as an original member of the Green Haven Think Tank, "the study was conducted to determine the racial and geographical demographics of people in prison in New York state, where they resided before prison and where they returned upon completion of their sentences. The study relies upon data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, New York State Board of Regents, New York State Department of Correctional Services, New York State Division of Parole, and New York City Police Department Reports of Crimes by precincts." (The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions)

The seven neighborhood study research findings concluded that nearly 80% of the New York state Black and Latino prison demographic, including so-called non-violent drug offenders were primarily drawn from seven specific neighborhoods across New York City: Harlem, the

Lower East Side in Manhattan, South/Central Bronx, Bedford Stuyvesant, Brownsville and East New York in Brooklyn and South Jamaica in Queens---the same neighborhoods most formerly incarcerated people would be returning to after doing time in the penal. Keynote was the study documented the intersectionality of race and prison populations relative to specific communities in New York City. The seven neighborhoods study formally known as “The Non-Traditional Approach to Criminal and Social Justice” had been remarkable in several ways, not the least of which was the project had been organized and conducted by researchers who were locked-up in New York State’s Green Haven prison. Likewise, the groundbreaking study can be viewed as remarking on the lives and personal histories of the imprisoned men themselves, whose own lives and carcerality functions as both the subject and object of their research.

Historically grounded in the radical tradition of prison activism writ-large, the seven neighborhoods study would serve as a critical intervention informed by the political subjectivity of the imprisoned researchers. Equally important, the project also managed to disrupt traditional academic notions of what constitutes ‘expert’ knowledge and its production and would serve in part, as a foundation for subsequent research projects, in particular the work by researchers Eric Cardora and Susan Tucker conducted on behalf of the Open Society Foundation during the early 2000s. While the initial neighborhoods cited have stretched beyond the original seven, the overall circumstances and material conditions had not changed much in 1994 when I was picked up and arrested by undercover police on a drug charge on the corner of Lexington Ave and 110<sup>th</sup> street in East Harlem.

All told, the Rockefeller-era drug laws would lay further waste to those same poor and working-class Black and Latino neighborhoods already reeling from entrenched and serial neglect, experienced as the violent geographies of the structural and systemic human, community

and socio-economic disinvestment which prominent prison abolitionist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore theorizes as “organized abandonment.” (Gilmore, 2015) It would take nearly four decades before the punitive Rockefeller drug laws would be completely dismantled in 2009, due in no small part, and spearheaded by the efforts of a multi-sector coalition campaign known as “Drop the Rock.” (Correctional Association of New York) However, the ensuing carnage wrought by the Rockefeller-era drug statutes, along with the devastating repercussions of anti-Black and brown policing interlocked with prison expansion had by then firmly taken hold intergenerationally, across the landscape of New York City’s Black and Latino communities. ‘Collateral consequences’ is the grammar of war; it is also part of a coded rhetoric employed to reference the aggregate human toll the structural and systemic policing of Black bodies inflicts upon Black communities throughout nation as both germane and integral to the marked expansion of the carceral state. Accordingly, the violence of anti-Black racism and policing can be conceptualized as the historical present of the ubiquitous slave patrols, germane to the capturing of Black bodies as the fodder which disproportionately fuels the prison industrial complex, and its reproduction in all of its various guises and nomenclatures.

With several notable exceptions, much of the national dialogue around ‘mass incarceration’ over the past quarter of a century or so, has been predominately focused on Black men which in practice has had the effect of flattening the discourse, serving to camouflage the challenges which Black women encountering the judicial and criminal legal system are faced with. The carceral wisdoms and the ‘living prison’ experiences of Black women, along with the complexities of those encounters had been largely obscured from a discussion already replete with coded racialized and gendered assumptions and rhetoric. Thus, it must be emphasized that currently and formerly incarcerated Black women are not ancillary to the discourse of so-called

‘mass incarceration’---we are inextricably connected to the hegemonic practices which undergird the political economy of trafficking in the imposition of racialized dispossession, disenfranchisement and displacement. Prisons are a reiteration of the spatiality and the cartographies of a Black geography intrinsic to the Black freedom struggle---in contestation to the conditions of what scholar Katherine McKittrick articulates as the American plantation past, its geographic present as continuity and future. In that the peculiar logic and constructs of freedom and unfreedom are mutually constitutive, this co-constitutive praxis is navigated by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women by way of the production of an explicit political subjectivity that attends to the ways of knowing the world---both inside and beyond the prison walls.

Having lived the penal and making it out of Taconic without any formal disciplinary incidents to speak of it would be meaningless and untruthful to say I emerged from the prison unscathed by what I had experienced and witnessed. Marked by a pernicious outside/in pain that I can only describe as unremorseful and unrelenting, incarceration and its unremitting afterlives for formerly incarcerated Black women is laden with historical stigma and a searing Black shame that is often rendered as mundane and unremarkable. By form and definition, prisons are sites of malignant cruelty and desecration; however, it might also be said the penal sits as a location of resistance where a raw humanity and livingness is enacted by incarcerated Black women which proffers a counter-narrative to the penal as a spatial articulation of dehumanization and living death.

Likewise, my scholarship and critical practices are animated by the living memory of my own imprisonment that remarks on the custodial arrangements and the intimate carceral conditions of confinement. As formerly incarcerated Black women, our individual stories and

collective memory represents a haunting touchpoint which shows up as the imprimatur of Black humanness that is tethered to the legacy of what Hartman posits as “making possibility out of dispossession.” Mindful of what the ‘old-timers’ had shared with me when I first stepped foot on prison grounds---"you don’t need to come back here” ---I passed through the gauntlet of metal gates on a March morning in 1995, leaving the penal the same way I arrived---an anonymous Black woman being transported in a dark blue NYS Department of Corrections van outfitted with heavily tinted windows where I could see out, but no one could see in. And though I was resolute the day the van dropped me off at MTA’s Bedford Hills railroad station determined that I would never again walk through the gates of a prison, I have returned to the prison many times in the intervening years since.

I return to the penal as a living reminder to the imprisoned Black women that they have not been forgotten, in much the same way a formerly incarcerated Black woman named Antionette Etienne had returned to Taconic to remind me of the same. Antionette’s returning to Taconic CF all those many years ago provided a glimmer of what writer Junot Diaz has described as radical hope. Radical hope continues to stand in affirmation of my own labors of livingness as a practice of meaning-making which dignifies a life’s journey in the wake of what we, the formerly incarcerated and imprisoned Black women remember. Given the unevenness of the way history shapes and saturates the present and future, it is the radiant constellation of a Black radical hope as a labor of Black livingness which fosters a deep awareness of our interconnectivity to the world, making possible the liberatory imaginative of a ‘*world beyond the prison.*’ Indeed, Diaz reminds us that “radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes the survival of the end of your world possible.” (Diaz, J

2016). It is that same radical hope which allows us to remember that as currently and formerly incarcerated Black women, we have already survived the end of our world.

## **Introduction: “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women”**

“Struggle has been a part of my life and my community since the beginning. I am never far from struggle, never far from applauding it, talking about it, and making sure we never forget that struggle has been a part of humanity.”

---Nikki Finney, “So I Became a Witness”

### **“Labors of Livingness”**

In its simple eloquence, the poet Nikki Finney’s testimony underscores how struggle serves as both the driver and backdrop to what can be understood as an epistemological sense of knowing and attending to the world by those historically dispossessed and displaced. In its own way, Finney’s remarks encompass the aesthetic of ‘bearing witness’ which signifies a radical pedagogy and praxis of resistance as the personal-collective liberatory imaginative of Black self-making rooted in the archives of Black historical memory. “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” is both a public-facing, as well as a community-based work deeply bound up in the historicity of the Black freedom struggle which upends and, in many ways, eschews periodization---instead intentionally focusing on the landscapes of a past, present and future anchored in continuity and discontinuity in which to explore the political subjectivity of formerly incarcerated Black women. My dissertation opens a portal unto the complexities of the ‘living prison’ experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women within a subjective context which does not necessitate any one particular meaning, nor a representation of any one thing---which is neither to suggest, nor infer our stories aren’t worth

telling. To the contrary, the stories are simply too complex and intricate to ever mean and/or merely present a single idea or thing. Accordingly, I am suggesting the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women tenders a provocation of several things at once, reflecting a temporal spatiality illustrative of the many threads running through the constellations of historical violences perpetrated against Black women. Deriving from the carceral insights of formerly incarcerated Black women, this project is generated from what can be understood as Black indigenous circuits of knowledges as schemas of refusal produced within and against the prison. In dialogue, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” deliberately sets out to acknowledge and build on the work of a multitude of Black women scholars, including Katherine McKittrick, et al., as well as the myriad of other critical thinkers and community-based researchers whose work has laid the foundation for this project. This dissertation purposely speaks to the multi-faceted racialized and gendered dynamics at play regarding the legacies of spatialized anti-Black violences and the interconnectivity to state-sanctioned Black dehumanization, dispossession, and displacement in the United States.

“A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” requires us to contemplate a recognition of the prison as a Black geography as a conceptualization that gives way to a ‘black sense of place’ constituted in part, by the opposition and resistance to the prison itself. It is this intertwining locus birthed from the Black radical imaginative, that takes shape as the ‘living prison’ experiences that provides depth to the capacious oral histories of formerly imprisoned Black women whose lives have borne witness to the genealogy of carceral subjugation in the United States. “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” locates the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women within the historical Black freedom struggle as residing with/in and with/out the prison. As a

distinct form of dehumanization, dispossession and displacement generated from the raced and gendered spatial formations of the American carceral sphere, I argue the practices of resistance by currently and formerly incarcerated Black women are rooted in an ethos of Black humanness and personhood, and its intrinsic/intimate production of insurgent knowledges as astute carceral wisdoms forged in resistance to the nation's barbaric structures and institutional apparatuses of carcerality that gorge on Black bodies. Oral history as tradition and praxis are Black indigenous articulations encompassing a 'blues' epistemology that can be understood as foundational to the ways in which many Black people have known the world, sustained by an intergenerational interconnectivity that stands as an attestation which draws inspiration from the struggles, dreams and possibilities of futures past. It is worth noting Black vernacular storytelling lives as an arc which maps and preserves the passing on of memories inextricably tied to the geographic expansiveness of the Black diaspora, fugitivity, and exile. As scholar Imani Perry posits "Stories are neither fact nor fiction. They're greater than that — they are allegories, philosophical treatises and fables that hold the potential to entertain, reveal and instruct." (Perry 2021)

As it is, the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women provide a powerful catalyst of remembrance, along with an insistence on the recognition of Black humanness which pose a contradiction to the spectacle of unremitting/state-sanctioned/extrajudicial/Black death which McKittrick argues as being repeatedly cast as the sole arbiter of Black life. Indeed, the stories offered by formerly incarcerated Black women reminds us that cartographies of meaning in discussion of freedom and unfreedom are fraught/never fixed and always negotiated. In contesting what is habitually portrayed and communicated as the banality of isolated, episodic violence, inclusive of its biocentric foundations and corresponding juridical codifications, the stories of formerly incarcerated Black women illuminate the systemic and structural anti-Black

violences innate to the carceral state. Grounded in the socioeconomic constructions of dispossession and displacement that are part and parcel of the nation's regimes of governance, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" brings into sharper focus the scale of the structural and systemic savagery of the prison, and its historic spatiality. To be clear, my dissertation does not distinguish between prisons or jails---cages are cages---both literally and figuratively/visible and in/visible. Which is to say the 'living prison' experiences of the currently and formerly imprisoned does not differentiate between the 'either/or' but recognizes and understands the material incantations of the 'changing same' and its incessant replication, as the 'both/and'. That said, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women can be imagined as the threads of continuities and ruptures that escape time, as illustrative of the logic of the normalization of anti-Black violences that are summarily dismissed as error and aberration.

Situated within the killing fields engendered by anti-Black violences and recurrent Black death, McKittrick's "Plantation Futures" invokes the living remains of enslaved Black women, men and children interred at the New York African Burial Ground in lower Manhattan that suggests 'deadness' is not necessarily about memorialization as a post-mortem, nor a 'finality,' per se, but instead maps the continuities of Black 'livingness.' (McKittrick 2013) Locating the spatiality of the African Burial Ground in conjunction with writer Gerald Vizenor's theoretical concept of Native Indigenous survivance via a lens that refutes the violent constructions of absence and erasure, a Black survivance imaginative extends as well as expands Vizenor's meditation on Indigenous survivance. (Vizenor 2008) Rather than a response cloaked in victimry and survival tethered to societies structured in dominance, Vizenor's provocative take on survivance presumes a standpoint that functions as an indigenous worldview in which the

‘afterlives’ of a people and its culture are an active presence. In much the same way, the living remains of those interred at the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan can be envisioned as also that which preserves, informs and nourishes the vitality of Black indigenous ways of knowing the world. Thus, Black survivance can also be viewed as a multi-dimensional schema which fosters regeneration and renewal by way of resistance which evokes the sacred and gives expression to the labors of Black livingness as the praxis of Black pasts, presents and futures. Indeed, it is the living remains of the once enslaved humans interred in the African Burial Ground which bear witness and exist as the timeless, hushed whispers which embody the storylines of a Black radical survivance infused with a vibrancy that defies time and space.

For more than a half century, U.S. has embarked on a domestic policy that has resulted in re/making its judicial and criminal legal systems more expansive, explicitly racialized and its requisite carceral punishment more punitive. It is well documented the United States incarcerates more human beings than any other nation on earth, estimated anywhere between 2.3 and 2.5 million people---despite being less than 5 per cent of the world’s entire population, the United States holds 25 per cent of the globe’s prisoners. Which is to say, one out of every five prisoners in the world are incarcerated in the United States. Located and grounded in a pernicious form of *‘locking people out by locking them in,’* the project of mass incarceration can be acknowledged as the actualization of America’s ‘exceptionalism’ writ large. This over-reliance on what is commonly known as mass incarceration as a rendering of raced and uneven geographies of disenfranchisement by way of criminalization broadly defined, does not include the nearly four million people across the nation who are under some form of carceral supervision and custodial control---which consists of an additional 3.6 million people on probation, as well as another 840,000 people on parole. (Prison Policy Initiative 2022)

Notwithstanding, these figures include humans beings who are caged up/in/under the pretext of pre-trial detention, immigration detention, juvenile detention facilities and/or some form of residential placement, as well as so-called diversion and ‘alternatives to incarceration’ programs, and other types of custodial arrangements vis-à-vis the carceral state. Likewise, nearly 77 million people in the United States have a criminal record, and 113 million have a family member who has been to prison or jail. And while Black people comprise only 13 per cent of the nation’s population, 40 per cent of the United States prison population are Black and who are also the recipients of harsher sentencing, including life without parole, as well as being incarcerated and sentenced to death. Research has also found Black people account for a disproportionately high percentage of in-prison deaths, making up 41% of all deaths in New York State that has been critiqued as creating 'a new death penalty.' (Columbia University Center for Justice 2021)

In consideration of scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s contention that “racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,” it should also be noted that 62.9% of Black people have an incarcerated immediate family member, 52.6% have an extended family member who is incarcerated, 23.8% have 3 or more family members who are incarcerated, as well as 11.9% having a family member incarcerated for 10 years or more. (Gilmore 2007) (Brennan Center 2017) Further research reveals women’s incarceration rates have grown at twice the rate of men’s incarceration over the past few decades, with most women imprisoned for either a non-violent drug or property offense. Likewise, 80% of imprisoned women are mothers and 60% have a child under the age of 18. Similarly, research also indicates Black women are imprisoned

at twice the rate of white women, coupled with the fact 1 in 18 Black women face the likelihood of imprisonment. (The Sentencing Project 2020)

Conceived in large part from the living memory of formerly incarcerated Black women, including my own, I am particularly drawn to the idea of examining the prison as a remaking of place which is not only entrenched in resistance to the penal, but also as a space that enacts a Black geography. Unpacking the geographies of Black resistance as foundational to Black placemaking and space are the labors of livingness encapsulated in a blues-inflected cadence which mirrors the vernacular of the penal in dialogue with the contemporary, Black urban streetscape complete with its syncopated time signature that begs the ask “can I live?” If, as McKittrick contends “Black geographies are conceptualized as mutually constitutive of broader geographic processes,” the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women allow us to grapple with the analytical possibilities which arise from the stories themselves. (McKittrick Antipode 2021)

Accordingly, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” is a critical elaboration on the dialogical aesthetic of ‘laboring to live’ rather than laboring to death/in every which way/and the other/ that offers a nod to the allegorical, and one that borrows liberally from McKittrick’s “Plantation Futures” as a theoretical and conceptual touchstone. McKittrick asserts a black sense of place is mutually constitutive by the heterogeneous spatial practices of space annihilation and its dimensionalities that are innate to the violent machinations and contradictions of anti-Black racism which keep Black bodies in place, out of place and placeless all at once as that which produces a Black sense of place. Situating the plantation and its political economy, logic, and materiality as the theorization of pasts, presents and futures, the plantation economy serves as a locus of Blackness and racial

encounter which McKittrick articulates as “the knotted diasporic tenets of coloniality, dehumanization, and resistance; this is a place wherein the violence of displacement and bondage, produced within a plantation economy, extends and is given a geographic future.” (McKittrick 2013)

Turning to Sarah Haley’s *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, as an example of the lineage of racialized Black female identities, Haley does the work of excavating a relational framework constituted by a particular construction, depiction, and representational imageries of imprisoned Black women by way of the pernicious negation of Black women’s humanness and personhood. Haley posits the shaping of the social and cultural perceptions of how Georgia’s imprisoned Black women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were viewed relied in large part, on the insidious renderings of black women as pickaninnies, imbecilic, promiscuous, gender deviant, et al., which in turn stood as the justification and rationale for the criminalization and imprisonment of Black women. As key to the formation of a ‘prisoner class’ and its consequent commodification, the imprisonment of Black men and women was essential to guaranteeing a population whose labor would be critical to the development of Georgia’s post-bellum economy. Central to these racialized representations was the spectacle of Black women’s bodies consigned to the chain gang, which were bound to Georgia’s racialized hierarchies and gendered identities which placed race at the center of labor management. In conversation, the narratives of the formerly incarcerated Black women encapsulate a substantiation of ‘the production of difference’ critical to maintaining specific national and cultural narratives which continue to structure the discourses regarding the nation’s juridical and criminal legal system. As a defining feature in determining value, human and otherwise, the production of differentiation are the through-lines that persist in cementing the raced and

imposed identities which generate and magnify distinct socio-political tropes as foundational to the manufacturing of Black women's dispossession through their debasement. (Haley 2016)

The depictions of the Black women Haley cite in her work can also be measured in discussion with Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* in which Hartman employs the power of the archive, along with the aesthetics of Black storytelling for engaging the intimacy of the spatiality of the socio/community infrastructures as geographies of containment which demarcated the lives of so-called 'wayward' young Black women. Amidst the brisk and burgeoning urban backdrop of New York and Philadelphia at the turn of the century, Hartman presents a multi-dimensional portrayal of young Black women effecting agency and practices of self-making as the embodiments of the everyday resistance and refusal as a counter-narrative in contestation to the impositions of racialized and gendered identities. Hartman does the work of recasting these 'errant' young Black women as the purveyors of a Black radical imagination--- and its insistence on the making of possibility out of dispossession. (Hartman 2019) In much the same manner, my dissertation draws on the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women who have also been deemed the 'wayward' and whose lives reflect the historical present, as well as an unequivocal proximity to the past. Often accused of being the source and cause of our own problems, it should be noted the contentious language of '*enduring*' and '*surviving*' the prison in dialogue with the racialized liberal tokenism of '*resiliency*' functions as an enunciation which tacitly reifies the logic inherent to Black women's imprisonment. It follows then, that such language embodies the antagonisms and contradictions inherent to the discourses used in legitimizing the violent hegemony of carcerality and its political economy as regimes of cruelty tethered to the hierarchies of being and racial subjugation.

By way of a reflective/backward glance at the foregrounding of contemporary futures and its intersectionality with emancipatory Black feminist thought and consciousness, the Combahee River Collective's searing 1977 declaration "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" demonstrates a political subjectivity that articulates a theory of liberation whose cultural relevance lives in a Black feminist abolitionist impulse. (Combahee River Collective Statement 1977) As an intervention, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" elevates and brings to the fore the 'living prison' experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women that unsettles the narratives of the custodial conditions of anti-Black dehumanization and degradation, while simultaneously conjuring up and laying claim to a space of possibilities beyond carcerality and imprisonment. In imagining a different world, in which Black women are 'free' obliges us to envision what an abolitionist future could look and might feel like.

## **Prisons: A Black Geography**

“Such breadth belies the common view that prisons sit on the edge—at the margins of social spaces, economic regions, political territories, and fights for rights. *This apparent marginality is a trick of perspective, because, as every geographer knows, edges are also interfaces.* For example, even while borders highlight the distinction between places, they also connect places into relationships with each other and with noncontiguous places. So too with prisons.”

---Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "The Golden Gulag"

At core, prisons are the edifices of carcerality, looming as both a spatial and temporal fix that enact the scenes of political and social subjugation of people across the United States. By and large, these people are disproportionately Black. Likewise, the carceral conditions of captivity of Black bodies have always been augmented by the regalia of shackles and chains that recall the living history of the Black Atlantic---which as Hartman reminds us---it was the Atlantic that served as the birth canal of the ‘human commodity.’ (Hartman 2007) The penal and its allegorical ‘doors of no return’ which can be traced from Goree to Rikers Island are borne from the peculiar logic of the plantation economy and its latter-day logistics and machinations which re/inscribes the pernicious forms of punishments in such a way that the prison and its structural afterlives signify a run-on sentence that in truth, never ends. Put differently, it is the brutality effected by societies structured in domination and power since time immemorial which continues to provide form and thus, gives life to Black resistance.

To be clear, while most people who have been incarcerated will at some point be released from prison, it is the dynamic of the prison’s abiding afterlives which traverse time and space

that results in a quasi-re/imposition of specific custodial arrangements and conditions/incapacitation made worse. It is precisely this material reality which prompts us to contemplate and re-conceptualize the conventional understanding of carcerality and its spatial reach as a continuum, rather than a thing that is fixed or ‘static.’ This in turn, fosters a reconsideration which situates the prison and its afterlives as constitutive of a Black geography that can be imagined as illustrative of Gilmore’s observation regarding ‘edges and interfaces’ in which the edges and interfaces of time live beyond the ephemeral and the noncontiguous.

As a theoretical meditation on the socio-spatial politics of a Black geography ingrained in spatialized anti-Black violences, McKittrick’s “On Plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place” argues prisons map and mirror the sights, spatiality, and the critical cartographies of a historic Black freedom struggle in contestation of the American plantation past, and its geographic present, as continuity and future. Accordingly, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women present a re-examination of the prison as a location that embodies and is enjoined to a set of complex reformulations and reconfigurations of the prison by the imprisoned Black women themselves. While simultaneously interrogating the standards that determine which knowledges are valued and legitimized as the ways in which to know the world, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” expounds on McKittrick’s theorization of prisons as engendering Black place-making. McKittrick asserts “the complexities of black geographies—shaped by histories of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, contemporary practices of racism, and resistances to white supremacy—shed light on how slave and post slave struggles in the Americas form a unique sense of place. Rather than simply identifying black suffering and naming racism (and opposition to it) as the sole conceptual schemas through which to ‘understand’ or ‘know’ blackness or race, it is emphasized that a black

sense of place, black histories and communities are not only integral to production of space, but also the analytical interconnectedness of race, practices of domination and geography undoubtedly put pressure on how we presently study and assess racial violence.” (McKittrick 2011) (ibid)

Invoking a framework in which a “a black sense of place draws attention to the longstanding links between blackness and geography brings into focus the ways in which racial violences (concrete and epistemic actions and structural patterns intended [to] harm, kill, or coerce a particular grouping of people) shape, but do not wholly define black worlds,” McKittrick provides a mode of conceptualization as a theoretical template in which to ‘read’ the ‘living prison’ narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women. In positioning the prison as a metaphorical site of the plantation, its political economy, logic and materiality as the re/conceptualization of pasts, presents and futures, the prison serves as a loci of blackness and racial encounter which McKittrick presents as “the knotted diasporic tenets of coloniality, dehumanization, and resistance; this is a place wherein the violence of displacement and bondage, produced within a plantation economy, extends and is given a geographic future.” (ibid) Which is to say, the plantation economy as existed in the 17th century up the through the 19<sup>th</sup> century served as a prefiguration of the latter-day prison and accordingly, its reconfiguration vis-à-vis the spatial arrangements of the prison economy.

## **Placing Myself in The Research**

“A theoretical guidepost of Black feminist theory is the notion that in research and representations of Black women, their experience should be at the center of the analysis. The authenticity of interpretation is enhanced when scholars and activists can link “what one thinks” about something to “what one does” about it. Standpoint epistemology assumes that knowledge that is generated by people who are closer to the experience they are analyzing will be more accurate than knowledge generated by researchers who claim to be objective or impartial because of their distance from the object of study.”

---Beth Richie, “Arrested Justice”

Tracing out my personal trajectory and praxis, I could not have known my own experience of ‘living prison’ would someday become foundational to my work as an interdisciplinary scholar-activist and a Black creative whose pedagogy and critical practice are shaped and animated across multiple methodologies and form. Beth Richie’s insistence on standpoint epistemology serves as the ballast, which anchors the excavation and the mining of my own remembrances of living prison. Building on Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins prescient remarks on “the need to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity in producing scholarship,” it is through the optic of my own journey along with my community activism and engagement as a formerly incarcerated Black woman, which provides an unbounded geography of perspective as the researcher of my own reality. (Collins-Hill 1990)

As a Black woman raised in a New York City neighborhood known as East Harlem, though perhaps even more familiar as “El Barrio” or Spanish Harlem by long-time residents, my neighborhood was mostly comprised of poor and working-class Black, Puerto-Rican, and West Indian families. Though often ensconced in the racialized ossuary of the marginalized and dispossessed, the barrio encompasses a geography which Black feminist scholar and educator bell hooks deftly observes is “much more than a site of deprivation [...] it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.” (hooks 1989) In my mind’s eye/even now, the barrio of my youth recalls a rich *mélange* of diasporic culture and narratives, miles of New York City public housing projects stretched alongside rows of uneven tenement buildings amidst crowded neighborhood blocks pulsating with the cadence and syncopated rhythm of Santeria psalms, botanicas and houses of worship, colliding lives, and collusions of spirits. Fueled by the daily toils and labors of living, El Barrio signified a semblance of radical hope, coupled with the aspirational for the neighborhood’s many inhabitants---much like the grace notes of the gospel hinting at the promise of freedom and a dignified existence for the right now and the forever hereafter.

Then as is now, instead of by name, one is designated by a New York State-issued identification number (NYSID) as a racialized marker of what one is and is not. In 1994 my NYSID number was 94G1044, signifying that I was the one thousandth and forty-fourth female prisoner entering the New York State prison system that year. Arriving at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester County bound up in cast iron foot shackles connected by a heavy chain to forged steel handcuffs, what I remember most was the ‘shuffle’ as movement, in place of a once unrestrained stride and red swollen wrists from the chaffing of the too tight steel handcuffs against my wrist bones. While I can barely conjure up any of the faces of the ten or

twelve other Black women who boarded the ‘bus’ that early morning, I do recall us being tethered to each other by another much longer chain, mirroring the old sepia images of chain gangs of imprisoned Black men and Black women in the South. Truth be told, it was almost a relief to be leaving the barracoons of the penal island where time collapses and the cruel, malevolent rituals of violence are normalized.

At Rikers, time seemed suspended in such a way that there didn’t seem to be a difference between day or night, as it all ran together---punctuated only by the consistent buzzing and clanging of the iron gates. What I recall most vividly about Rikers were the mostly Black and brown women who were in various stages of pain--sometimes it was the bone deep dope sick pain from withdrawal, other times, it was the pain of a woman being separated from and losing her children to ‘the system’ ostensibly because of her incarceration or perhaps, the pain of familiarity, having cycled in and out/back and forth from Rikers too many times to count. Oftentimes, it was just the pain of sitting at Rikers for years on end unable to make bail, or maybe being steeped in the illusion of taking your case to trial/though the ritual of a trial, for all intents and purposes, could be said to have already taken place. Perhaps it was the pain of just giving in and ‘takin’ a plea’ in order to hear the judge murmur “time served.” Still for others, it was the pain of giving birth to another Black child while shackled to a cold steel table.

Mostly, it was the pain of whatever nameless pain a Black woman enters Rikers with multiplied and magnified from time immemorial/unbeknownst to oneself. And no matter how much medication a woman might manage to obtain from the infirmary and/or buy off another imprisoned woman, the pain is historical and so deep-seated that it cannot be medicated, prayed, slept, or wished away because the pain has always been there. It is the sort of dull

unspeakable pain which festers and boils over with incarceration, borne out of the inescapable realization that one's Black woman existence is at best, fraught with precarity and always subject to the whim of the nation/state. It is the pain of being locked behind thick iron bars caged up like an animal, peering out at all the other reckless/errant/wayward/disobedient/unruly Black girls and women who are locked up just like me, having also been 'caught out there' as the modern-day coda/remix of the 'wrong time/wrong place.' Then as is now, the world is gripped by the ravages of a global pandemic---HIV/AIDS then, COVID-19 now---rampantly raging unabated through the penal with a death rate from COVID-19 inside the walls at more than twice that of the overall U.S. population. (Prison Policy Initiative 2022) Despite the brutal conditions inside, I learned that in/between the spaces of these overcrowded places of despair, desolation, and living death is where the imprisoned Black women share their carceral acumen and wisdoms while whispering silently to one another '*I'm not going to let you die*' that emerges from a deep well of care in which we keep each other safe the best way we know how.

As additive research and praxis, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" is the production of scholarship deeply rooted in Ritchie's unsparing demand in which "the notion that in research and representations of Black women, their experience should be at the center of the analysis" in contribution to the contemporary discourse that has been christened as 'mass incarceration.' (Richie 2012) Thus, the geographies of carcerality and imprisonment in its raced and uncompromising American variation, provides shape and gives form to the oral histories of formerly imprisoned Black women in ways that map the profound elements and invocations of the plantation economy, its residue and components of differentiation and counter-distinctions not at the periphery, but at center. The narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women exist as both the grammar and text which

signifies the breadth of an historical arc connecting the echoing reverberations of the plantation economy and its foreboding afterlives to our experience of the world as currently and formerly incarcerated Black women.

## **Methods, Approach and Organization**

“As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, the politics of location necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision.”

---bell hooks

“A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” is an interdisciplinary project which pulls together an assemblage of methodologies spanning across multiple disciplines, along with extensive readings in both Geography and in particular, Black Feminist thought. This dissertation is primarily grounded in three kinds of scholarship: traditional academic writing, public facing work for the general public to learn more about a/re-seeing/re-vision who is and what happens behind bars, and for the communities of all people presently incarcerated and those formerly incarcerated. As a project, my dissertation developed from what began as an informal auto ethnographic project several years back entitled “Tales of Cast-Iron Skillets and Hierarchies of Being” which reflected on three generations of Black women---myself, my mother and my grandmother and the cast-iron skillets that were passed down between us/from generation to generation. Opening with a conversation between my mother and myself not long home after having been released from prison, I was about to scrub one of her favorite cast-iron skillets when she scolded me noting that I had clearly forgotten that you don’t scrub cast-iron frying pans, you just wipe them down. The reason being is black cast-iron skillets ‘season’ over time, and are the primary tools used in Black sustenance that draw from the curated and shared memories of Black people ‘seasoned’ across time and space.

During my proposal defense, Dr. Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggested the possibility of expanding on the ideas of the earlier project as a dissertation. The reference to cast-iron skillet enacts the metaphor in homage to the enslaved blacksmiths and artisans who forged and fashioned the cast iron pots and pans under the yoke of the custodial conditions of the plantation, amid their own labors of livingness. In dialogue, this dissertation explicitly explores themes of self-making as radical lifework which have been seasoned by time and circumstance by formerly incarcerated Black women, in consideration of our political subjectivity arising from the historical and contemporary landscapes of carcerality, and its geography of racialized dehumanization, dispossession and displacement. Driven and shaped by the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women as subversive narratives fueled by insurgent knowledges, the subtext of the stories can be imagined as a ‘telling’ of sorts, which carries the inherited weight of almost an entire history of Black people’s longing for freedoms only imagined and dreamt about/as seemingly always elusive/existing just slight of our grasp.

My orientation for this dissertation is one mostly of deep curiosity and wanting to understand and make some sense of my own experiences of ‘living prison.’ To that end, I’ve been painstakingly devoted to the themes of this dissertation, having spent years exploring, studying, stitching, and gluing together bits and pieces of my scholarship along the way. That said, I do not profess to operate under any constraints of a supposed scientific objectivity or neutrality, as it is a heuristic methodology and strategy which guides and braces this project. Recalling scholar Paul Gilroy’s remarks during his visit to the CUNY Graduate Center in celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publishing of his seminal work “The Black Atlantic,” the celebrated scholar held forth on *‘raciousness, unbound existences and community.’* As a newly arrived entrant into the world of academia, I remember listening intently as Gilroy

implored the audience, consisting of mostly graduate students, to ‘*write about what you want to read about.*’ Heeding Gilroy’s sage advisement and committing his words to memory would seed the nourishment required for this dissertation. Similarly, sitting in a colloquium convened by my doctoral program one March afternoon in which Katherine McKittrick was the guest lecturer, I listened deeply/immersing myself in the lyricism of McKittrick’s theoretical concepts, when I was able to hear ‘*how I wanted to write about/what I wanted to read about.*’ It was then that I began imagining the outlines of what a possible dissertation project could look like.

In a conversation with Gilroy, the late Toni Morrison spoke of her desire to “develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black,” not because of an author’s race or because of its themes, but because of “something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together – the sentences, the structure, texture and tone.” She [Morrison] envisioned a strategy of writing stemming from the cultural traditions of a race. Across her novels she realizes this aim with nods to jazz, blues, folklore and the folk.” (Guardian 2019) Morrison’s remarks can be considered as a Black methodology, which embodies Black vernacular culture to unpack and address issues shackled to the imposition of a raced and gendered Black identity. In much the same way, the late scholar Clyde Woods conceptualized and developed a ‘blues’ geography as a method to understand Black spatiality by placing the cultural, social and political movements of people often considered at the ‘margins,’ as the focus of his thesis. (Woods 2017) Indeed, as the late writer Ralph Ellison reminds us “the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” (Ellison 2002)

“A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” is inherently about troubling the waters of dominant understandings of traditional notions of *who* produces knowledge, but also *how* knowledge is created and produced, as well as *for whom*, and the *why* in contestation to the ideology of subjugated knowledges. Thus, it is the epistemes of the living prison rituals of formerly incarcerated Black women represented through our oral histories that simultaneously functions as both an individual and a shared/collective history that stretches and extends the boundaries of traditional forms of scientific inquiry and the production of knowledge. My theoretical approach draws from the Black radical tradition rooted in the pedagogy of the historical Black freedom struggle in the United States. Whereas, in contemplating the scale and spatiality of the penal, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women contextualize what can be imagined as the hauntings of a historical present in resistance to the structural and systemic brutality of carcerality and its afterlives as everyday practice. As a conceptual and methodological framework, the oral histories of formally incarcerated Black women are imbued with a blues sensibility that posits a Black vernacular culture and approach as a co-creative process that allows the amplification of first-person narratives as a mode of articulation critical to this dissertation.

Situating the narratives of formerly imprisoned Black women as core to the geographies of the radical Black freedom struggle offers an intervention that binds the living archive of memory as a Black methodology, in its manner of complexity and ambiguity. And while oral accounts are open and imperfect in the sense of what is being expressed through the remembered and forgotten, the narratives suggest an integrative approach that excavates the compelling multi-dimensionality of the experience of ‘living prison’ that works through the architecture of Black women’s personhood and our labors of livingness. Invariably, and like most stories, there is

always something larger to glean and process about our personal/collective struggles that speak to the efforts to maintain our humanity in the everyday/recurrent circumstances which unceasingly threaten the very existence of all Black folks across the nation.

That said, this dissertation is largely informed by and comprised of ethnographic research, including 8 individual interviews with formerly incarcerated Black women which took place at various locations in New York City in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown. All the participants spoke on the record per CUNY IRB protocol with regard to informed consent, with interviews ranging anywhere between 45 to 90 minutes. Additionally, I have had numerous informal conversations with the many currently and formerly incarcerated people I've cultivated relationships with over the years, as well with a loose 'cohort' of colleagues and peers who may not have personally experienced incarceration, but whose individual and collective projects, campaigns and organizing efforts revolving around issues of de/carceration and prison abolition I have been privileged to be connected to in some form or another. Several of the interviewees I knew and/or had been acquainted with through my previous work as an editorial producer with New York City's WBAI FM 99.5's "On The Count: The Prison and Criminal Justice Report" weekly broadcast. I was also able to successfully recruit participants through an email I sent out via the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls listserv, of which I am a member.

The dissertation is comprised of three empirical chapters, each focusing on a specific individual narrative. Each chapter holds the contradictions and possibilities that can be said to shape formerly incarcerated Black women's carceral struggles as illustrative of a distinct political subjectivity and is attentive to how those struggles are translated and reconfigured by each

woman. The concluding chapter is an integrated summary of my findings, including common themes which emerged across the narratives.

With the interweaving of my own experience of ‘living prison,’ the expectation is the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women affords a point of entry to interrogate and critically reflect on the political economy of carcerality and the nation’s historical reliance on the interlocking juridical and criminal legal regimes that have always functioned as a driver of the production of the temporal and spatial dimensions of Black women’s dehumanization, dispossession and displacement. Curating the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women is also about convergence as a discontinuity regarding traditional modes of thinking and organizing knowledge; thereby, interrogating the standards by which knowledges are valued and legitimized. Likewise, if geography is how we ‘*write*’ and ‘*picture*’ our world imbued by the circumstances and conditions which shape the places and spaces we inhabit, it is to be argued this holds especially true for the currently and formerly incarcerated Black women that engages a re-rendering of our stories as a counter-narrative in contestation of our invisibility and erasure, as well as the subjugation of our knowledges.

In foregrounding the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women, my scholarship attends to the historical presence of the prison and its structural afterlives, and the material forces and relations that produce the strategies of resistance embedded in formerly incarcerated Black women’s ontological knowledge constituted by and against the conditions of racial and gendered subjugation. Gathering the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women also take up the work of interrogating the contradictions entangled in the nuanced social reproductions of the nation’s own memories obscured as the origin stories rooted in the milieu of racial capitalism and its then-burgeoning plantation economy. Whereas the narratives can likewise be understood

as unsettling the discourse of modernity chained to the nation's kinship to the violences of enslavement and carcerality inherent to the historicization of state-sanctioned Black dehumanization, dispossession, and displacement.

Lastly, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" can likewise be located precisely in the late prison-scholar Edwin 'Eddie' Ellis's prescient observation many years back [paraphrasing]: "led by the efforts of currently and formerly incarcerated men and women, over the next thirty years, hundreds of prison scholars, teachers and activists will be released from prisons around the country. Though unknown to each other, they are a critical mass that presents an opportunity to build a brain trust that will give intellectual legitimacy to a new voice."

“Some women wait for themselves

Around the next corner

And call the empty spot peace

But the opposite of living

Is only not living

And the stars do not care.

Some women wait for something

To change and nothing

Does change

So they change

Themselves.”

---Audre Lorde, “Stations” (excerpt)

## **Chapter One: Russelle Miller-Hill**

“It's crazy cause I've been anticipating this interview for like a week. Ever since we talked, it was like, what is she going to ask me? What information can I give? You know, in my head I'm thinking I don't have a lot to share. But sitting here, sitting right now in this moment, I realized that I have so much to share it's scary. It's scary because I didn't wake up and say “okay, today I'm going to prison.” You know, I did not wake up and say I wanted to be a drug addict. Like I didn't wake up and say, I want to give my kids to the system.”

---‘Rusti’ Miller-Hill/91G1505

## **Rusti**

I became a mother at 15, so instead of the normal quote unquote life or trajectory in life, that stopped at 15 and I became a mother. I got pregnant at 15 years old. My mother put my daughter in my arms and said, “happy sweet 16, you're now a mother.” So instead of me being able to step into the role of a parent to my child, she almost became my sister in the household because my mother was the parent. And so never really understanding who I was, you know, because there was always that blurred line of like, I had to ask permission to go out, to stay out late. You know, I had to ask permission, can you watch her while I go here? The rule was that's your child, take her with you. So, I had to figure shit out quick, and I was still in high school, so I dropped out of high school, went to night school, got my GED, got my first job, and did some training programs. I grew up in Throggs Neck in the Bronx, in a two-parent household, and we lived in the projects. I had a younger sister. We all lived in a two-bedroom apartment. And so, there was the crib, and the bunk beds broke down in twin beds, and so we all became sisters. Me, my sister, and my daughter became sisters who were raised under my mother because I didn't know nothing about being a mother. So my mother was teaching me, and parenting me at the same time. To this day, my daughter calls my mother, mommy. She calls her mommy, that's mommy. She knows I'm mom, but that's mommy because she lived with my mother until she was 16 years old.

When I went to prison, me and my daughter had already moved out of the house. She had to be seven, yeah, maybe seven when we moved out. So her formative years was right there under mommy. So whatever parenting, good, bad, ugly or indifferent was provided to her by my mother's hands because I wasn't allowed to parent. I could interject, but the final say was my mother, cause we was in her house and that's the way it went. As I said, my mother had the final

word. My mother would say "I don't care how grown you think you are, you ain't true grown." And so eventually it got to the point where I was like, okay, I need to go. To fully step into this role, I need to figure it out. And I wasn't ready. I moved out of my mother's house because I was in a relationship with a man who was not a man, who was still learning how to be a man. And because I felt so strongly about my independence that when things got really, really bad, I never went back home to my mother's house. And so my daughter became subjected to some conditions that weren't the best, At one point, we lived in a shelter, all of that. So my daughter was with me, I took her with me when I moved to Monte Avenue in the Bronx. We lived in a basement apartment; my partner introduced me to freebasing and crack cocaine; I was working in the bank full time employed and thinking I really had my shit together.

In a matter of a year I was strung out on crack and pregnant with my son. I lost everything. I did a robbery. Actually, it was a trick's house, I had climbed in through the window cause he was sleep and wouldn't answer the door. And so I just went through the window not thinking that I was doing a crime. I knew he was in there, and I needed some money. So I went through the window, somebody saw me going through the window and called the cops. I took some DVDs out first, and then came back the second time. The first time was so I could get a little 'hit.' When I finished smoking, I said 'okay, I'm going back and get some more.' When the neighbor saw me come back the second time, she called the cops and they arrested me. My daughter was 13. I got arrested and she didn't see me again for three years. She was 13, and her and my son Christian was in the house. And so I got arrested and I went to Rikers Island. That was my first introduction into the criminal justice system. I had never been arrested, nothing.

While I was at Rikers, I found out that I was pregnant with twins. I was in Rikers for about a year. Every time I would go to court, my mother would be in the courtroom. My mother

would say to me, are you ready to leave him? This was all new to me and she knew I didn't know what the hell was going on. But I would say no, I want to go back home to my apartment. And my mother was saying, if you leave him, we had a house at the time that was in the family and she was like, I'll give you the house. You take the kids and move into the house; you just need to leave him alone. Anyway, I stayed in jail for a year, and one day I went to court and my mother just happened not to be there. And the judge asked my partner, do you have a place to take her? The judge said if you have a place to take her, I will release her into your custody. And Fred said yes and then pulled out a set of keys. So the judge said I will release her into your custody. By then my belly was big as I was eight months, seven months pregnant. The judge gave me time served and let me go home. I was also given five years' probation. And so I went home, back to our apartment. By then my daughter was back at home with my mom and my son went with her to my mom. Eventually I gave birth to twin boys, and then we were homeless.

How I remember it, we were living downtown on 34th street in this big hotel. And then something happened, and I got arrested again. And so the five years' probation from my previous case turned into three years jail time. My sons went; well, my mom took the twins for a little while. But she couldn't handle them. I don't know what happened to Fred, my partner. I don't know where he went while I was incarcerated. I think I was like 30 when I caught a bid. Very old for most people, cause most people seemed to have been younger than me when they got caught up in the system. Let me just circle back. That's what was killing my mother. She was like, all these years you've been on the straight and narrow, you know? But for me, my life was like a square trying to fit into a circle. I just wanted to belong. I just, you know, I wanted to be a part of what was happening. I felt like the outsider, I had a kid at 16 and the baby's father lived upstairs. He didn't want nothing to do with me. Me and his sisters were best friends. He lived right there.

But my daughter had no father. Anyway, I violated probation and was sent to prison for three years. So from that situation, I went to back to Rikers and then I went up to Albion. It was 1991. I was scared to death. I remember the morning that they came and got us at five o'clock in the morning from Rikers Island. We had just had commissary like two days before. I had a bunch of shit in my locker. It was like 10 of us. So we were frantically giving away stuff, cause you can't take nothing with you. Can't take nothing with you but the Bible. And so I remember sitting down in the cell, you know, writing down people's numbers and names and I still have the Bible 'til today. So, I wrote people's names and stuff in the back of the Bible, and I remember shouting across the dorm, take my stuff, you know, so-and-so, this is for you, just make sure you write my family and tell them I'm going upstate. I've kept it all these years. I have to go home and find it, but I have it.

I remember that bus ride and being shackled to a young lady; hands in front, legs shackled. It was three of us on the bench, inside the bus. I was at the window and there was two other people. So at least I was at the window, you know, but I remember the city just flashing by. You know, places and things I could recognize. You know, like project buildings, places I had been in and all of that. And then it turned from that to cows and trees and green grass and more cows; it was crazy. I was like, where the fuck are we going? And we had left at like five o'clock in the morning and by the time we got to Albion...wait, did we go to Bedford? I think we went to Bedford first. Well, Bedford is reception, right? So yes, we went to Bedford first. Actually, the ride coming from Rikers to Bedford wasn't that long. But the ride from Bedford to Albion...oh my god. I stayed in Bedford for maybe six months, if that long. But long enough for me to become involved in ACE (AIDS Counseling and Education program, organized and facilitated by the imprisoned women inside NYS Bedford and Taconic CFs).

## *Living Prison*

I became involved in ACE to get educated. I'm living with the virus and at the time, I was coming out of the denial, and I really didn't understand what was happening. It was all kind of new and fresh and I was scared. And so ACE seemed like a safe place for me. I spent a lot of the time just learning about the disease and what it was and how to manage it. I listened to the women who were part of ACE; they talked to me about learning how to live with the virus and the value of taking medication and all of that. But I also learned about the stigma and discrimination. You know, they also cautioned me to be careful about who you share your status with. So then, I left from Bedford and went up to Albion. And that was the city turning into green grass and cows, the whole nine. Stepping off that bus at Albion was crazy. You're dressed in 'greens,' and everybody looks the same. They gave me this number and told me I had to remember this number because that's how people would identify me. My number was 91G1505. I can't forget that number, even today. It's like 25 years later, and I still know that number. But that was the moment that I found myself, because having to give up my name for a number made me want to know who I was even more.

I remember the chaos of living in the prison dorm and the loud noises, and I remember thinking how the hell did I get here? Who am I? You know, what is it that I want to do with my life? So I had to begin to do the work on who I was, and to really learn that I have value. That I was much more than a number and a green uniform, you know? And then I had to deal with the reality of living with my disease, because really at that time women were dying. They were dying fast. They were being diagnosed and dying. And in that environment, I watched correctional officers put women in wheelbarrows because they didn't want to touch them and

wheel them to over to medical. And those women would go in and never came back, you know? And so that really made me take stock in and invest in myself.

Anyway, I had a high school diploma, and I had some work experience. So, I'm sitting down in front of the prison counselor, and we went through a list of jobs that I could possibly qualify for within the prison. I went from the kitchen to working as a teacher's aide. Then I became a counselor in resource education. After that, I became a counselor with the prison's AIDS education program. And that's where I learned to build on who I was, and what I needed to do to increase my self-esteem and to understand what my worth was. So prison was transformative for me in that way. Because maybe if I would've never done those years in the penal, I mean, who was gonna be able to rescue Rusti Miller-Hill? I never would have thought that I, Rusti Miller-Hill would wind up in prison because of the background and lifestyle that I came from. You know, drugs and prison weren't part of the picture. So even the comprehension of what the rest of my life would look like was not clear to me. I always wanted to go to college. I wanted to go to college and you know, become somebody. Not a prisoner or an inmate. That wasn't what it was supposed to be. And so prison time was transformative, and I used it for exactly what I needed it to be. I went back to a time in my life before I stopped believing, and had abandoned than all my beliefs and values. I remember asking, how could I be restored back to myself at this time and in this place?

What does it mean to be locked up? Oh my God, isolation, fear, loneliness, and in my case, an invention of a new person. Because in order to survive in that environment, you have to become something else. You have to tuck who you are inside and then become something else in order to live. Like, I never stopped being me, but I had to put on like a coat of armor. I had to put that on mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually in order to survive. You know, the first six

months was the hardest. Just being in that environment. I remember calling home and telling my mother where I was and saying, don't come up here. This is not a place for you to be. We can communicate through letters and packages and whatnot. So I never got a visit the whole three years that I was there. Assimilating to the environment, you sit back, you observe, you watch. You pick up bits and pieces of the knowledge, what you need to know in order to navigate that environment. I never got a ticket, never got in trouble. I think I had one fight or argument, but what I did do was to adapt to this family type situation where there was a mother, father, uh, sisters. I never had a physical relationship, but I cared about somebody really deeply.

So you assimilate to the lifestyle in the environment in which you are in. And so everything that you know from the outside could, well put it this way, you can't live outside and inside at the same time. So that means that everything that you know about home, it's put into a box. That lifestyle that you had at home, you know, everybody says, oh, I was so and so in the street. But it don't mean nothing there inside cause we all got greens on, we all got a number and we all got time. So who you were on the street don't mean shit. But who you are, why you are there becomes everything, because that is the world in which you're living in. So I couldn't live with the hope of, that eventually one day somebody is going to come visit me. And I had to shut that life down for the time that I was there and be fully present in the life that was happening every day while incarcerated. And it was just like that because that was what the environment called for.

My fear wasn't about being physically harmed, I think the fear was more about people finding out about my HIV status and being isolated. That was where the fear came from. And once I became a part of the AIDS program that fear sort of eliminated itself and smoothed itself out. And then I became the loudest person on in the prison about my HIV status because I went

from a place of denial to acceptance to understanding that I have a role to play as a peer educator. My role is to educate you and to teach you. And so that sort of calmed my own inhibitions. And so I sort of moved into a place of comfortability. You know, being present in that moment and attuned to what was happening, I needed to stay on alert, you know? But you need to be present in order to deal with whatever other stuff is going on. So, at any time you could be the cause of someone else's anger, you know? So when I say having to live in that environment, you can't straddle that line, straddled that between city life and prison life, No, you let it go. You put it down. In your quiet moments when you alone is when you read your letters and you make your calls home and all of that. You try to parent from prison, you know, like what did you do today, how was your day, blah, blah, blah, trying to be present in your children's lives as you go. But it doesn't help when nobody knows where you are.

I remember the day my daughter found out that I had been in prison for all that time, and she said, 'I knew all along.' She said she was "just waiting for y'all to tell me." She had heard my mother have conversations. She saw her brothers being taken into foster care, so she knew something was wrong. She saw me being put in handcuffs; you know what I'm saying? She wasn't stupid. But I guess the shame that I brought on to my family by going to prison and being incarcerated was just too much for them to even discuss in a positive manner, or in a holistic manner. It was more like how can she do this to us? You know, you're destroying the family, blah, blah, blah. But my survival was not pinned to that. While I was incarcerated, my survival was pinned to being present in my situation. But the 'bid' itself was transformative because I grew from a little girl into a woman. I say that because anything prior to that, the relationships, the drugs, the stealing, all of that was where my addiction took me; the result of the situations in which I found myself in. But it was not necessarily indicative of the life I desired to live. And so

I realized that and begin to work on who I was, what I wanted out of life and created a plan for myself. I wanted to be a mother. I wanted to work, and I wanted to continue my education.

Those were the three things that I wanted. I wasn't worried about a relationship or anything like that. I just wanted a semblance of the life that I had created in my head for myself. And I wrote it down how I was going to do this.

## *Conditions of Confinement*

During the time I was incarcerated and because of my HIV status, my family applied for medical clemency at the urging of a woman I had met at Rikers Island. Her name was Shirley, and she was the HIV counselor. She was really good, and we remained friends even after I came home. She had been trying to get me out of prison and have me brought home because the medical care in the facility at the time was not up to par. The penal was just learning about HIV. So like I said previously, there was a lot of discrimination and stuff. And so we filed for medical clemency. My godfather was the Director of Prison Ministries, and he wrote a letter on my behalf. So we submitted it with the TRP (Temporary Release Program) application right before I went to the parole board. Anyway, it wasn't granted, but I was granted furloughs from Albion. Well here's the thing, you have to be halfway through your sentence. So with the little bit of time I had left, I was brought downstate to Bayview Correctional facility in New York City. I spent the remainder of my time there and I would go home on Fridays and come back on Sundays, a status similar to work release. It was more so that I could get to my doctor because I had gotten sick while I was in Albion. They gave me the wrong medication. I had an allergic reaction and I spent maybe two weeks in the infirmary. It was crazy, you know what I mean?

There were no infectious specialists there, on site. It was a general practitioner. You know, they didn't really give you any medical checkups, they didn't do blood work, or any of those sorts of things. And so, my quality of health was compromised and because of that, they brought me downstate so that I could go and get care, which was good. But had that not happened I could have, I really think that at some point I could've become really, really ill. So it was the idea of really trying not to freak out, you know? Knowing that my life and my own mortality is in question because in the 1990s HIV and women were really something new. There

was only AZT and another medication I forget. There was no combination therapy like we have now. You know, two pills and you're good. No, this was seven pills a day at one time, three times a day. It was difficult being sick and having your body learn to adjust to the medication. Then you're not eating properly. So all of that together and trying to figure out how do I restore myself to my full self and identify, and who I am and who I'm not. So all of those ingredients created this idea of me becoming an HIV educator.

I took parenting classes, everything because I was trying to figure out how to parent or learn how to parent. I wanted to step back into my daughter's life, I also wanted to find my son Christian and my twin boys because by then my three sons had been placed into foster care. My mother placed them into foster care because she couldn't handle all the kids. She said that she didn't have enough space for them, and she was really angry at my partner because he was nowhere to be found. Like my kids didn't have their father to come in and say, okay, I'll take the kids. That didn't happen again. Another bad relationship resulting in children left without parents. Both mother and father. I remember one day being called to my counselor's office before coming down to Bayview, and the counselors saying to me that my parental rights have been terminated. While I was in Rikers, they'd bring the kids to see me. They would come, we would spend time together and we had a relationship.

Once I went upstate, that stopped. But prior to that, the foster care agency and ACS (NYC Administration for Children's Services) had an obligation to bring the boys to see me. It was supposed to be for as long as I was in New York State. They were supposed to bring the kids to see me. So it was the notion of my rights being terminated because there was no contact 18 out of 22 months; not because I was negligent, there was no contact because they refused to bring them upstate to Albion. I was in contact with the foster mother who the boys had been placed

with, so when I would write to her and even call, she would give me reports on the phone on how the boys were doing. She was an older woman and couldn't travel, and it's a challenge because I'm in Albion, near the Canadian border seven hours, eight hours away from New York City. She was also not in the best of health, so she couldn't bring the boys to see me. So even though I wrote letters and tried to maintain contact 18 out of 22 months, the court ruled that I didn't do a good job of that, and they terminated my rights because I was incarcerated. The counselor, a guy, told me we're going to court tomorrow and then asked me, if we give you your kids back today, what could you do for them today? That question stays with me today.

Now I'm sitting in a state prison, not a jail. I'm sitting in a state prison by the Canadian border. I have no public assistance. I have no housing. I don't have a partner. I have nothing, no means of taking care of them or myself. And you ask me what can I do for my kids? At the time the only thing I could think of was for them to stay where they were because that was safe. The kids knew her, they had been with her for a year or so. So it didn't make sense to even say or do something else. Because I didn't have information, I didn't know what my rights were. I didn't understand the system. Because nobody explains that to you while you're incarcerated. I said okay fine, no problem. And that was it. That was 25 years ago, and I still have not seen my three sons. I never saw my sons again. They were 13 months and a year old at the time. And so that's the casualty, one of the casualties of not being educated. But at the same time, being in a prison that is so far away from home, it does not allow you to maintain visits. But it's also about not knowing how to navigate the system. So it circles back to how do you live that line between surviving and living in the environment that you're in and being able to hang on to that life that you had prior. So once the termination of my parental rights happened it really became like, okay, what is it that I have left?

My mother had taken my rights temporarily regarding my daughter, she said I'll give you back the rights to your daughter. Which she did a year after I got released. I knew I couldn't go back to that lifestyle I had prior to incarceration because it yielded me nothing. It took everything away. And so I had to figure out how to create a life that was going to make me whole and healthy, but that would also bring me back to the things that I love. I needed to become the woman that I am presently. So that meant having a skill, and having my child returned to me. Because the boys, they were gone and there was nothing I could do about in that moment. So it became just about my daughter, getting a job and having a place to live. And so coming down to Bayview allowed me to get my health together. Once that was straight, I was good. I'm in DMV (NYS Department of Motor Vehicles) program at Bayview. Bayview had a program that allowed her to come on the bus by herself to visit me. They would go pick her up and drop her back off after the visits. So, I was rebuilding my relationship with her. And I'm coming home on the weekends for my medical-related issues, but I also get time to spend with her, and my family. They needed that consistency. Because you know all the talking that I did about this new person and my new life didn't mean nothing. I had talked about going into treatment many times trying to kick my crack habit before I got arrested and. So of course, there were doubts because nobody believed me; there was no reason to. And so I learned that I needed to be consistent. I did my time, got a temporary release, and I got parole.

*Pickin' Up The Broken*

I went from Bayview Correctional facility to Parkside. Parkside (since closed) was located in Harlem across the street from Mount Morris Park (renamed Marcus Garvey Park) and that's where I was released from. One of the correctional officers at Parkside had a connection to a community service program. I became a part of the community service program and worked at Women-in-Need. I went to work and received a small stipend. At Women-in-Need I went from a community service person to a per-diem person, and then to working full time. I was blessed that I was able to transition right into a job, and I lived in the Harlem's YMCA for six months. I didn't want to go back home because I knew that I needed to learn how to live with me on the outside. You know, most people say, oh, I went to jail, I found God and I'm a whole new person.

Me---I went to jail and I grew up. That's basically what happened. I grew up, I realized that if I was going to be a mother that I needed to be a real woman. And what that meant, I had no idea. I didn't know what that meant, but I also didn't need the version that my mother was feeding to me. I needed to learn my own version of who I wanted to be. And that's it. If nothing else, I've learned that I am resilient, that I can get through anything. That I am more than what you see physically or on the outside. That I am capable of moving beyond the stereotype. You know, they say once you go to jail, you always go to jail. Nah, I went to prison one time. I went to jail a couple times prior to going upstate, but all it took was that one time upstate. I'm not bragging or anything because I think it was my determination and my resolve not to return to that hell. That encapsulates who I am, my resiliency and my resolve.

So gathering these interviews, these oral histories, it will be interesting to see what emerges. Yeah, it is emotional, you know, to think back to that time. Like, I don't, I no longer have my mother. But before she died, she had kept my clothes and she used to wear those state-

issued loafers. She loved them damn shoes. And I was like, why are you wearing them? And she had my greens (prison garb) until we cleaned out her house. When she passed away three years ago, I threw them away. She kept them in the trunk. I never knew that. Why she kept them I don't know. I think she kept those items because it reminded her of a period in my life when there was nothing she could do. My mother, she used to carry a lot of guilt because the boys got lost in the system. And it's so funny, because I reconnected with my father, I hadn't seen him in like 27 years. And so, we're at the funeral, at my mom's funeral, three years ago, and we reconnected.

Last year (2018) he invited me to come to his house in Atlanta. And so I went down to Atlanta, I spent the week with him, and we just talked. He told me that my mother had called him to ask him if he could take the boys, you know? So for all this time, when I thought that she was, you know, very malicious in the way she gave them back to the system. I thought she gave them away to the system because she couldn't take care of them. I now know that she called around to different family members to ask them if they would be willing to take my kids until I came home from prison. My mother never told me that. I never knew that. And so just recently, I have forgiven her for that act because in my mind I always felt like you hated the man I was with, so you gave away my kids and let the system take my kids and that she didn't fight for them. My father and mother had been divorced since I was three. So I knew he wasn't lying when he said that my mother had called him about the boys and asked me if he would take them. I was like, what? My father told me a bunch of stuff that I didn't even know about my mom, you know what I'm saying? So she loved me in spite of all the things that I might've thought while I was incarcerated, like that I disappointed her or that I wasn't good enough.

She loved me. And I remember her saying to me, that I was better than I was before I came home. You know, after all the things that I've accomplished in my life since I've come home from prison, she was there every step of the way. Every conference, she was there, and I just remember her always saying 'you're better.' She said God gave me another chance, so I know the impact that my incarceration had on her. You know, it was her inability to save me from such a journey or an experience that I guess no mother wants for their kid. But to know that in reality, in the end, I really wasn't a disappointment. As well as the realization of just how much she really loved me. So that means a lot, you know? So anything that I do now, I do because I know that I can, that I'm worthy, that I have something to offer and that not once do I have to hesitate to think about who I am, because I know who I am. And so thank you. Thank you, Robin.

(This interview has been edited for clarity.)

## **Making Meaning**

As life would have it, there would not be a follow-up interview with Rusti. We last spoke on May 14, 2020, about arranging an additional meet-up to further trace-out a few subjects, as well as resuming our discussion regarding the prison bible she had held onto as a living artifact of her incarceration. Less than a year after conducting our initial interview in 2019 and five months after we last spoke, Rusti Miller-Hill passed away on August 20, 2020.

Rusti and I first encountered each other in 2005 or maybe, 2006 at the Women in Prison Project (WIPP) convenings held at the Correctional Association's offices in Harlem. Operating under the umbrella of Correctional Association of New York, the Women in Prison Project was created in 1991 in large part, as a response to the overwhelming numbers of women being imprisoned in New York State. In 1846, the New York State Legislature granted the Correctional Association of New York the authority to inspect and monitor New York State prisons and report back the findings to the legislature. In further carrying out the Correctional Association's monitoring correctional facilities which housed women, disproportionately Black and brown, in New York State, the Project was committed to making the criminal legal system more responsive to the specific needs and rights of women, as well as addressing prison conditions, and the dearth of services for women returning to their communities after imprisonment. Likewise, the Project was also instrumental in spearheading and serving as the prime coordinator for the Coalition for Women Prisoners (CWP), a statewide alliance of several thousand people, including formerly incarcerated men and women, their families and allies.

When viewed through the prism of carceral geographies and its hidden eco-systems, Miller-Hill's riveting account of losing her children while she was incarcerated is illustrative of how agencies such as NYC's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) extend the carceral

geographies of extraction. That is to say, Black communities designated as ‘underserved’ are in fact, landscapes rooted in the commodification of the human---dead or alive---in which the inhabitants of these neighborhoods serve as both the human capital, as well as the necessary units of labor which not only undergirds prisons and jail facilities---but also, by extension agencies such as ACS along the lines of racial and class prerogatives. The sharply delineated raciousness and gendered imaginary of ripping Black newborns from the arms of their Black mothers shortly after these women have given birth, ostensibly through contemporary mandated drug-testing protocols administered without consent, giving birth while shackled, parenting while imprisoned, or the termination of parental rights while incarcerated are the ecologies of carcerality.

The legal theoretician Dorothy Roberts writes “A longstanding narrative has convinced the public that the child welfare system is a flawed but benevolent social service program that strengthens families and rescues children from abusive homes. Most people think of the child welfare system and the criminal punishment system as distinct parts of government. Or so goes the official story. In reality, the child welfare system operates surprisingly like its criminal counterpart. It is a \$30 billion apparatus that monitors, controls and punishes families in the same Black communities systematically subjugated by police and prisons. It is more accurate to call it a family policing system. (In These Times, “How the Child Welfare System Is Silently Destroying Black Families” Roberts, Dorothy, May 24, 2022)

Roberts attributes the origins of the child welfare system and its current-day manifestation “to the enslavement of Black people and the routine forced separation of families at the auction block or whenever the enslaver thought it was beneficial to their interests. There was no concept that Black people had family rights. They had no autonomy over their families.” In other words, any children Black women had given birth to were not theirs to keep.

Roberts asserts “After slavery ended, courts determined that Black parents were negligent and ordered their children to be indentured to former enslavers. In thousands and thousands of cases, Black children were forced back into work under the supervision of the very white men who had enslaved them. It’s really eerie how those court-ordered indentures prelude today’s court-ordered taking of Black children from their parents on grounds that their parents are neglecting them. In both cases, the so-called neglect stems from structural racism and the disadvantages that Black parents have in raising children because of lack of employment, education, and housing—disadvantages imposed upon Black families by a racial-capitalist nation.” (Dissent Magazine “The Carceral Logic of Child Welfare” April 1, 2022)

Miller-Hill’s lived experience illuminates the violence of the hidden carceral geographies of dispossession and displacement produced by the carceral state, and the devastating impact, particularly on currently and formerly incarcerated Black women and their children. At the height of the nation’s drug war in the late 1980s on through the late 1990s, supported by manufactured tropes fueled in part by a host of mainstream-media outlets, there was seemingly no other story more sensationalized than that of the headline-grabbing articles focused on purported ‘crack babies’---whom were nearly/always Black. Similarly, the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI), as well as a growing cohort of other research groups and individuals engaged in assessing the criminal legal system and mass incarceration were tracking a sharp increase in the number of women, a majority of whom were Black and poor, whom upon becoming ensnared in the criminal legal system, were subsequently sent to prison largely for drug or drug-related offences.

While often interrogated as a convergence which works to obscure the sedulous processes of the administrative apparatus of the nation’s draconian ‘war on drugs’ and the onset of ‘mass

incarceration,’ might be better understood as co-constitutive. The continuity of the nation’s criminal punishment stratagems and processes---the criminalization of drug users, including mandatory sentencing for non-violent drug-related felonies effectively unleashed a rash of disparate and deleterious harms across urban Black communities---perhaps none more so than the nefarious impacts on poor and working-class Black women and their children.

Likewise, family regulation systems such as New York City’s ACS, previously known as the Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW) continue to oversee the forced removal of a significant number of Black children from poor and low-income families from their homes. These children are largely funneled into ‘foster care’ systems run by a litany of ‘service providers’ and non-profit agencies that are forms of ‘public-private partnerships’ and ‘non-profit governance,’ and is the evidence of an increasing reliance on a market-based social policy. The scale and spectacle of Black children being subjected to the cruelty of displacement, and the accompanying trauma of being violently separated from their families and community emanates from the slave trade that once flourished in the United States.

In 2000 Miller-Hill founded Brandon House, a Tier 1 transitional housing program. The mission of Brandon’s House was to provide temporary supportive housing and services to formerly incarcerated women, particularly those living with and or diagnosed with HIV/AIDS whose community of origin was Harlem. In addition to being homeless and navigating the logistics of ‘reentry,’ many of the women though not all, had histories of trauma, substance use, along with co-occurring mental health-related issues. As a designated Tier 1 30-day temporary housing program, Brandon’s House was charged with conducting a comprehensive needs assessment, in addition to providing intensive case management which would include referral for

permanent housing, medical and mental health care follow-up, along with ongoing support with parole mandates and stipulations regarding the conditions of release.

Deeply committed to fighting for service delivery models and support systems which would adequately assist formerly incarcerated Black women upon their release from the penal, Miller-Hill would draw upon her lived understanding and carceral wisdoms, as well as having been informed by her experience working with a litany of non-profit human service providers in New York City. In imagining a world in which the articulation ‘*those closest to the problem are closest to the solution*’ stands as a credo oft-cited by a variety of criminal justice reform groups and community-based activists alike clamoring to be heard, Miller-Hill’s vision in founding Brandon’s House preceded what has since become a collective rallying cry demanding the presence of those communities and individuals most harmed by the criminal legal system and related policies to be included in the dialogue.

In support of her 2013 Soros Justice Fellow application, Miller-Hill would further elaborate on her long-term vision:

“As a formerly incarcerated African American woman living with AIDS for more than twenty years, I understand the importance of connecting to healthcare upon release. It is vitally important to not only the individual’s health, but the community’s health outcomes as well. Recognizing correctional healthcare as the tipping point of healthcare reform and the new health home models of care, our project will connect to and follow up with individuals released from correctional institutional settings and collect data about their access and retention to health care in the community in which they reside. The intention is to build a coalition of consumers and providers committed to the success of linking and retaining individuals to care.”

Roberta Meyers-Douglass, Vice President of State Strategy & Reentry at The Legal Action Center (LAC), where she also directs the National Helping Individuals Reenter through Employment (H.I.R.E.) Network, LAC’s national project to improve employment and other

opportunities for people with arrest and conviction records recalls partnering with Rusti in the creation of Brandon's House, undergirded by the intention of being the 'inside to outside' connection Miller-Hill desired in which "no formerly incarcerated Black woman ever released from imprisonment would return to their respective communities without a clue on where they would lay their heads and what supports would be in place as they worked in rebuilding their lives." In acknowledgement, Meyers-Douglass went on to state:

"Rusti's heart had tentacles that reached far into jail and prison cells holding women captive across New York State. She never stopped thinking about ways to be a solution to the problems faced by women, particularly Black women, from physical, mental, and emotional abuse, trauma, neglect, addiction, or other chronic health conditions to homelessness, unemployment, and punishment by the legal, as well as family regulation systems. She believed every woman must have adequate support while navigating the myriad of challenges they faced when returning to their families and communities that often no longer wanted them there. She understood what it took to overcome and achieve one's greatest potential because she lived that experience every day until her last day on this earth."

“They ask me to remember

But they want me to remember

Their memories

And I keep remembering

Mine.”

---Lucille Clifton, “Why some people be mad me sometimes”

## Chapter Two: Selina Fulford

“One time we came home from school and there was a police raid going on in my house. We had no idea that what was happening was actually a drug raid going on in our apartment. Me and my brother, we were so upset because the police were in our room. Me and my brother used to share a room and they were in our room tearing up all our stuff, just taking out everything out the drawers and dumping it. I think I was in maybe the sixth grade. And so anyway, I seen my mom and my stepfather get arrested. The lady next door took me and my brother and sister into her apartment and she told the cops ‘I’m gonna keep them here with me, and I’ll call their grandmother.’ And so that’s what kept us from going into the system. My grandmother came over to New Jersey, because she was still living here in the city, and went and bailed my mother out. And it’s so crazy because it’s like a cycle, because when I first got arrested, I called my grandmother and of course she came to bail me out. So I’m like, the same old cycle, like, how long is this gonna go on?”

---Selina Fulford/98G0032

## Selina

I was born and raised in Harlem. Well, I was actually born in the Bronx. My mother went to the Bronx to visit one of her sisters who was living in the Bronx, and she went into labor. And so I was actually born in the old Lincoln Hospital, but I grew up on 108th street. And then my mother moved to East Orange, New Jersey around the beginning of my junior high school years. She moved to New Jersey, because she got married to a fellow who became my stepfather, but who was also a drug dealer. I grew up with parents who were from those sixties era, the heroin era. And so they were caught up in that. Of course, as a kid I didn't really know that then.

So like I was saying before, when we were talking, I was in high school, and I wound up getting pregnant in the 12th grade. I went all the way to the 12th grade, and I dropped out . So anyway, I had the baby, and I got my first job, which was at McDonald's. I don't know what happened, but I wound up leaving McDonald's. It had something to do with the baby. I don't know, maybe I didn't have a babysitter. Anyway, I had to go and get on welfare. So I said, okay, I don't want to repeat this same pattern that my parents, cause my mother was on welfare and I didn't want to repeat that same process. So I decided to go to the library. I got the GED book, took it out, brought it home, and I studied the book. And then I went and took the test, and I passed. So I got my GED and applied to City College, and I was accepted. At that time, I think I was living around 140st and Amsterdam, somewhere in that area and I had said I'm going to go to that college (CCNY) one of these days. I wanted to make a life, a good life for myself. I actually wanted to go to Columbia because like I said, I grew up on 108<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park West. And I used to go to PS 165 which was on 109th or 110th somewhere not far from Columbia. And so as a kid, me and my brother, we used to play in the big yard which was a grassy area in Columbia. That was like our backyard.

Anyway I had me a studio apartment not far from City College on 141st and Amsterdam, and it was just me and my son. I was on welfare, and I had already done 2 years at City College. Then I got a letter from welfare stating they found out that I was actually enrolled in a four-year college and that is not allowed. You cannot collect welfare and food stamps and go to a four-year college. So they called me into the office. So I went to the welfare office, and they said, look, you can do a trade school, or you can do or do a program and work for your check, but you cannot go to a four-year college. I was done; I was devastated. I was in the SEEK (Percy E. Sutton Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge) program at the time, and I told my counselor. I said, listen, I gotta quit. The counselor is like, oh no. And then I told all my professors, and they were like, what? I told them I have to quit because it's just me. I'm a single mother and I have a baby and the welfare is threatening to cut me off. What am I gonna do? I had nothing. I have to quit. I'll have to take a leave of absence, but I told myself I'll come back. I had to do what I had to do. So I took a leave of absence with the intentions of going back. Anyway, it took me 30 years to get back, you know what I mean? Because now I'm out there in the streets; I was doing the welfare work program and of course, you know, I was barely surviving.

And then I met this man who introduced me to the street life. He was making a lot of money. He said, listen, don't worry, I will take care of you and your son. He took care of us very well and he taught me how to do the stuff that he was doing to get money. Which was forgery and credit cards and all that kind of stuff. And so I started doing that; the money was good and that was it. I was off to the races, and then of course, living that type of life, the drugs come in. So of course, I got involved with drugs and my addiction just got out of hand. I always managed to keep a job though. When I think about it, I always had little jobs here and there; but when you get so deep into addiction, at some point you can't work anymore. And I couldn't do what I was

doing to make all that money, like going in the bank and pretending I was so and so. You can't go in the bank if you've been out getting high all night. You know what I mean? You can't walk in the bank and say I'm Susan Rosenberg. No lucid, real person does that.

So I had to leave that alone; I couldn't do that anymore. So I started running in and out of Macy's and doing all that kind of stuff. And that was my introduction to the prison. But actually it was just jail, but I was still going in and out. I mean, it wasn't enough to say, okay, I need to stop because of my kid. But my kid was secure and with my family. So I would just go in and out of Rikers like it was a short break, a vacation, like an opportunity to rest, get my thoughts together. What I learned in Rikers Island was do another crime or do the same crime in a different way. Like somebody would ask me what you'd get busted for? And it was like 'oh no girl, you shouldn't have did it that way.' A lot of people that go to jail can barely read or write. And so they need to get into GED programs, but if you go to jail and you already have your high school diploma and even a little bit of college, there's nothing for you to do. I didn't really need school because I had two years of college under my belt. So anyway, I just kept going in and out; and of course, my drug addiction got worse and worse and worse. And so I finally started selling drugs. Like I was in college, you took me out of college, you put me back on the street and said make it the best way you can. And so that's what I did. I made it the best way that I could. And before you know it, I was able to have my money to do what I liked to do. I was smoking (crack) like a Navajo Indian. That is until the police kicked the door in and took me to jail. The couple of times that I got arrested for credit cards and all that stuff, I always managed to just get probation.

So when I got arrested for the drug charges, all those probations I had violated were taken into account, because I never went back to the probation officer. So the court was like, okay, so now you're going to do time for that and for this. I wound up getting two and a half years to four.

That was my first state bid, and I didn't do much time. But for me, it was two and a half years too much.

*Albion: Far Beyond*

So first of all, we took the little, short ride to Bedford from Rikers. So I was like, oh, this is upstate. I thought that was the extent of where I was going to be, right there. I was like, oh, this is nothing. I was only a few minutes from the city thinking this ain't going to be too bad. I thought to myself, I could do this thing right here. That is until I got on that bus and went to Albion. And that's when my whole world crashed in. That's also when I learned why they call Albion 'far beyond.' Anyway, it seemed like the end of the world to me, Albion is like up there on the borderline with Canada. I know because the bus ride was actually 9 and a half hours. It was a good 9 hours. When you include the times when the bus drivers stop to go get burgers; you know, to get their food and stuff. And so the awakening for me was when they put those chains around my ankles and the chain that's goes up around your waist and your hands, and fits too tight, you know? I almost felt like I was on a chain gang. I felt like I was going back into time; yes, like the tv show 'Roots.' Yeah, it felt like 'Roots.' It's like slavery. I was like, oh my God, because I got these chains on and I'm just straight up riding in this bus for hours and hours and hours. And the further we got away I was like, oh my God. Like my family is not going to be able to get to me. Nobody's going to be able to help me. Where are these people taking us? In chains? Me, I wouldn't have been surprised if they stopped the bus and said get out like if we was in the middle of the cotton field. I wouldn't have been surprised because that's what I thought. That I had died and woke up in another time. It was just horrible, absolutely horrible.

And I remember sitting on that bus saying, I wonder what I'm gonna do if I have to go to the bathroom. Cause just the thought of having to go to the bathroom with all these chains on, what am I going to do? And so they take you, walk you to the back of the bus, and then when you get to the bathroom, they take the chain off and you go to the bathroom. Then you come

back out the bathroom and they pull your pants back up and they put the chain back on. You go back to your seat. I tried to hold it; I held my pee for like at least seven hours, six hours. I refused to go to the bathroom. And then when I couldn't hold it no more, I got up and went to the bathroom. It was horrible. Being locked up, I mean, you know, it's like you just lose everything. Well, for one thing it meant that I was away from my son. I was away from my family. I had never in my whole life been away from my family, even with all the stuff that I did in the street, whatever. I mean, my family was always there. I could reach out and put my hands on them, even though I might not go to their house the whole year. And so being up there, it was just scary because you're with all white people, the officers, the whole white supremacy structure thing really becomes a reality. It was just scary cause I was like, wow, these people have my life, they're in control of my whole being right now. I can't speak, I can't do anything, these people are in control of my whole entire life, my freedom. That for me, was hard. And so, that's what bothered me the most when I got upstate. What also bothered me was all these women around me...

You see, when I first went upstate, my son was no longer a baby. My son was about, he had to be maybe 18. You know, he was grown. So when I got upstate, what I remember was the first couple of nights was all these women crying, and they would be crying about their kids. It was also the group of us that went up on the bus together, and some of them had like a lot of time, like eight years and nine years cause you can do up to 10 years at Albion. But anything over 10 years, you stay at Bedford. So they were just crying, crying about their babies, cause a lot of women left babies in the streets. And so they just cried, and cried. And I was like, I can't take this. These women wouldn't stop crying. And they used to just cry "my babies, my babies." I was like, oh God, how is it that they are doing this to women? Why are they jailing women, and

breaking up families like this? Like a lot of the women was there for nonsense. Either they were there because they were victims of abuse, or they were just there because they got caught up in the drug game scenario. I used to say to myself how is this about correction and rehabilitation when you just dehumanizing people? You know what I mean? You're dehumanizing people, you're isolating people from their families, mothers from their children, strip searching and all that. How is that going to make a better person? You know, to me it just didn't make sense. So that experience was kind of rough for me.

When I first came to prison, what I noticed while sitting back just watching and looking at the whole prison scene, is that women take on the role of, well, they build families within the prison. So when I got there, I'm sitting around observing how these women just built these whole little groups of families. And you know, the women looked out for each other and took care of each other. I think that's how women are able to survive the whole prison life, because they take on this sense of a family thing. And so the sisters are looking out, and maybe the older woman that's been in the prison for a while, they call her mom. She makes sure everybody eats, and so they build these little family structures and then that's how they get through it. Building family structures. I believe it's that and religion. So for me, you know, just sitting in prison and that's the one thing that I can say is good about prison, because when you out here in the world, it's just constant running, traffic, people talking, phones ringing. You know, got to go here and to do this, doing that, it's just so much. But when you go to prison and when its lights out and you're in that cell, then it's quiet. You and your own thoughts. And for me it was like my higher power had a chance to talk to me, reach out to me and I had listened to him because I believed that he was with me the whole time. And that's why I'm not dead now today. Cause the things that I was doing, I should've been dead. And so when you're in prison, you can hear your soul. And so that's

what gave me the opportunity to look towards my higher power for some answers. So for me, it is Allah who is God, the creator. Because Allah was the only one that I was able to turn to make sense of what was happening and get some answers. At first, I felt like, wow, is this what my life is going to end up as? And then after few months contemplating and praying, I started feeling like it's gonna be all right. You know what I mean? So for me, grabbing on to a spiritual connection freed me. It gave me a freedom, because when I think back on it, I was locked up when I was in the street, I was locked up in my own craziness. And so that spirituality piece gave me freedom.

### *Care, Custody and Control*

Now what I don't like about prison is that it's mandated work. Everybody must work. So they told me to report to the kitchen. So when I walked into the kitchen, they had pots that was as tall as I was, and I said to myself, I can't do pots. I had a hernia. So somebody said to me, well listen, go to the doctor and you can get out of doing this. I was like, okay, that's what I'm getting ready to do. I'm going to see the doctor. So I went to the infirmary the next day. I had a hernia that was the size of a golf ball in my groin area. It was pretty big. And when they saw that they were like, oh my God, you can't work. So they immediately wrote these papers up. So I went back to the kitchen with these papers. The officer says okay, go back to your house area. So then they said, well you have to have surgery. But I didn't want to have surgery up there because I was afraid because of all the books and stuff that I had read, you know, with the syphilis tests and Tuskegee. All the stuff I had read on the medical industry, and how they use black people as test rats, like guinea pigs. I was afraid. I'm all the way up here and these people are gonna put me on the anesthesia and I don't know what they might do. Anyway, they put it to me like this: either you're going to have the surgery or you gotta work, and you can't work. So you're gonna wind up in lock if you don't agree to do the surgery. Yes. So lock is confinement, solitary confinement. Anyway, they took me out of the prison that day.

The van came and picked me up, and took me to the hospital. I was handcuffed and I remember I had to strip; they took the handcuffs off and after I stripped, they put the handcuffs back on. When they took me into the operating room with a hospital gown on and handcuffed. I remember going into the operating room and they had me handcuffed to the gurney. So I was handcuffed to the gurney when I had surgery. So when I came out after the surgery, they give you about 20 minutes to recover and then they say, get up and go get dressed. They put you back

in the van--- bumpity bumpity all the way back to the prison in handcuffs, shackled with a cut from here to there, stitches and all that. They took me back to Albion.

So now I'm in the prison infirmary when I got another rude awakening because all these young girls were walking around like they had just been cut. So, I was like, well what you in here for? Most said they had had a hysterectomy. And then the second question, what happened? Why did you have the hysterectomy? They said I had cancer. They said I had to have a hysterectomy; it must have been about like 10 women in there. All young Black women. It was like, I thought I was watching a movie. I was like, what? Let's see when I went to prison, I think I might've been in my thirties. So I guess they probably didn't see no reason to take out my uterus, cause they probably felt she ain't having no more babies. But these were all young Black girls; these women had to be in their twenties. So when we're talking about a stolen generation obviously, that's what it was. I mean, I don't know what else would you call it. But I still couldn't believe it. So the whole time I spent in the infirmary, which was maybe three months, I'm like, what the hell is going on? So I started questioning all these women, but I was afraid. I said, something needs to be done about this. I needed to keep this on the DL ("down low") because I was afraid and I'm like, if people get a wind that I'm trying to investigate what they're doing to these Black girls up here, they'll kill me up here. Might not never hear from me again. So I was just questioning, that's all. And yeah, all the girls reported that 'they said I had cancer.' It just was unbelievable.

How is it that 10 young Black girls said they was fine before they came up here. Because I asked before you came up here were you sick with anything? And they all said no. And so they came up here to Albion and they had a fucking GYN examination and afterwards, they told them, oh you got cancer, you need a hysterectomy. Like all these women had these

hysterectomies. I could not believe it. I was like, oh God, what are they doing to Black women up here? What did they do? I'm saying, you guys gotta be kidding me, right? I mean, it wasn't like it was 30 or 40, 50-year-old women that this was happening to. These were all young Black girls having a hysterectomy. I couldn't believe it. I was like, oh my God, I have to get out of here. Yeah. I had to get out of here. I mean, you know, like that's when I decided that this, I can't do this anymore. I have got to change my life because these people are trying to kill us as a people. Like I'm actually living, witnessing a form of genocide, you know what I mean? I almost felt like as if I had left my body and like I'm up there looking down at me and this whole reality that I'm living in. Black genocide for real. And so I felt like, you know, if I didn't get myself together, I was gonna die.

When I left Albion, I came down to Taconic and I was back down to the world. I was assigned to a job in the nursery. It was my job to take care of the babies while the mothers were doing their programs; for me to go to nursery and work with the babies, that made me feel so much better. Though of course, that was another trauma, because eventually they had to separate (mother and child) cause they was only keeping the babies I think, for like a year. And then you had to send your baby home and if they didn't have no home to send the baby to, then your baby was going into the system. You know what I mean? So that part was kind of hard. I think that the six months that I was there, most of the women were fortunate and had family that came and took their babies. But to just disconnect from their babies, you know, they went into the whole cry thing. I was like, here we go with the crying again. I see these mothers being separated from their children, and that has an effect on me. I mean I was actually crying too because I had got attached to the babies, you know what I mean? So I would be crying too; me, the mothers and the babies. I still have a picture at home now with me holding one of the babies. So yeah, that

was my job. And then I was a volunteer in the visiting room because I worked in the nursery. They gave me that job. They didn't pay me for that, I was just a volunteer. They had like a little play area for children so the parent can visit with their family. I'd say the two top paying jobs was the nursery and of course, the law library. Those are the two top paying jobs in the prison.

Well, I learned about unity from the women. And I learned a sense of we were all in this together and so we had to have each other's back and we had to look out for one another. Because it was like us against them. And so we had to stick together. You know what I mean? That's the one thing that we did have in there. Yeah, we had unity in there because we didn't have a choice. There was no other choice, in order for us to survive. Like you can't rely on the system. This system ain't really helping me, and I learned that in prison. Like the whole system is not designed to help me, help us. It can't be. How is it helping me, you know what I mean? Like why, why am I not able to go to college while I'm here in prison? Why? Because at that time the college programs were gone in prison. So, you know, if you really want to help me, you will help me get a college education. Like the jobs that they had in prison, the women were making benches. So when you get released do you want to put that in your resume? I know how to make a bench, chairs and signs. But like, they don't prepare you at all to come home and to be able to make a living for yourself.

## *Breakin' the Chains*

While I was at Taconic, I completed the CASAT (Comprehensive Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment) program and then I came home on work release to Parkchester, a work-release facility. The PO (parole officer) said Parkchester was closing. So when Parkchester closed, they moved us all to Bayview which was another work-release facility downtown. But when I got down to Bayview, I messed around, and caught a dirty urine. I was working at some little fast-food restaurant. Anyway, I went back to my hood and of course, back to what I know. I tried to stay clean for as long as I could. But I eventually I picked up. At Bayview, when your urine comes up dirty, you go to lock. I was in lock for almost 60 days waiting for the bus to go back to Albion to finish my time. So, I went back up to Albion. I think I stayed about maybe six, seven months and I came back down, this time on parole. I made my parole board and so I came back down for good.

When I got out of prison, I lucked up, one of my roomies, cellmates or whatever you want to call them got out a year before I did. She was actually a schoolteacher and it had been her first time being in prison. She was a Black woman, had an apartment and everything, and then she fell in love with this guy who was a drug dealer. She moved him into her apartment, and he started selling drugs out of her apartment. And so when the police raided, she wound up catching a bid and going upstate. She came home a year before I did, and she got a job working in the shelter system. So when I came home a year later and because we stayed in contact, she got me a job in the shelter system. I had been there for maybe five or six years, and I learned to do every job in the building. If the plumber called out, I'd be the plumber. If the nurse was out, I knew about Medicaid. But I couldn't get a promotion because I didn't have a college degree.

So a girl on my job said to me I want to bring you to a community meeting so you can learn about this organization, College and Community Fellowship (CCF). So I said okay, I'll go with you one day. So I went and I walked into this room, and there was this big round table with all these Black women sitting around the table. It was a couple of white women, some Hispanics, but the majority were Black women. So sitting around the table, they went around the table introducing themselves; this one was a director and this one was a project manager, and so on. And I was like, wow all these women got these big titles and stuff and they're formerly incarcerated. They were successful, and you could tell they were making money. I was like, I don't know what these women are doing, but whatever they're doing, I'm getting ready to jump on this bandwagon! I was just so proud of them. And so I joined CCF, and I went back to college, and I got my bachelor's. And then I went on like a crazy person and got a masters. Then I got a second masters, and a third.

I think the reason why I got all those master's degrees is because I was trying to erase the stigma of being formerly incarcerated. Like I hated that. I hate filling out applications. Have you ever been arrested? Do you have any felonies? Then I said, you know what, I need to get me a master's and then I would go on a job interview, and they would hit me with that again. I'm like, okay I need another master's. Now this time I'm going to a job interview, and I say this is not going to come up. And it came up again. So I just kept getting all these degrees because I was trying to hide behind those degrees and hide from that stigma of being formerly incarcerated. I think that the world needs to know that I started out with a dream and my dream was deferred, not by my choice. You understand? Because I had dreams, I had aspirations, and like I take ownership for what I did, but I don't take ownership for you kicking me out of college because I wasn't allowed to collect welfare and take care of myself and my son and better myself at the

same time. That's what proved to me that the system was designed not to help me. If it was designed to help me, they would've said 'Oh, this is wonderful. You have college, great; so, you'll be off welfare. You'll be able to get you a good job.' It's like oh no, you're going to get out of college, graduate and we're not going to be able to use you anymore. You know what I mean? So the world needs to know that I did have a dream.

I take ownership of the things I did that caused me to go to prison. I take ownership for that. I don't take ownership for the fact that you filled my neighborhood with all these drugs. Where did the drugs come from? Cause I don't know. Nobody in Harlem has enough money to ship some heroin or cocaine from Peru or Columbia or anything like that. Nobody has that kind of money. Where did these drugs come from and how did it all just get dumped into my neighborhood? And why is it that back in the 60s, when the Black power movement was up and running, all of a sudden there was this influx of heroin into the community, which destroyed my parents. My mother wound up dying of AIDS. My father, an intravenous drug user also had medical-related issues. He died from diabetes, but his diabetes I think, was related to his whole lifestyle. And so it's like a generational thing. This is generational. So my parents were victims of the heroin epidemic, and my generation, me and my brother and my sister, well not my sister, cause she never got caught up in the drug thing, but we became victims of the crack epidemic.

You know, it pisses me off because now the drugs have moved their way into the white neighborhoods, and now all of a sudden, it's a health crisis. You know, we were suffering all these years from all these drug epidemics. We were criminals, we were drug addicts. I remember when I first went to court and I asked the judge, could I please be sent to a drug program? He said, 'absolutely not...you are a career criminal, and you are going to prison.' Oh, he was real nasty. I'm like, wow unbelievable. And now it's a big health crisis and they got these white kids

od'ing all over the place. And you can call 311 and you can get help. You can get free this and that. But when we were strung out, it was okay. There was no help. You know what I mean? And so I'm just trying to stay focused on the younger generation. Cause I feel now that society, well I'm 60, so I feel like people in my generation, they've already ruined our lives. And so now the focus is on the youth. And so I just feel like I need to do something to prevent them from going down the same roads that we went down. I am the only one in my entire family who has a master's degree, I have one cousin who has a bachelor's degree she was actually the one who I followed after she was going to City College. She was in the Black Panthers. As a young person I also wanted to be like my older cousin, who is now deceased. So yeah, I am now the only college person in the family, but its looking up now because my grandson graduated from a two-year college and my granddaughter is about to go next year to a Black college which I am super excited about. Maybe I can now say that I broke the chain.

(This interview has been edited for clarity.)

## Generations

As narrative, the carceral wisdoms emerging from Selina Fulford's remembrances are not only embedded in a distinct political subjectivity in opposition to the routinized violences of the carceral state, but also one in which Fulford offers the nuance of a plain-spoken vernacular that deconstructs the prison as a never-ending scene of terror and subjugation. As a model of resistance and self-determination---which in and of itself, constitutes a political act, Selina Fulford's storytelling reflects the extent to which formerly incarcerated Black women are agents in their own collective and personal liberatory processes. As a defiant rejoinder to the ways in which the yoke of freedom and unfreedoms circumscribes and shape the lives of presently and formerly imprisoned Black women, yet do not wholly define us, formerly incarcerated Black women persist and remain committed to self-making embedded in the unshakable belief in self-determination as a conceptualization imbued with the spirit of creating possibilities out of dispossession. In a nod to what the late scholar Cedric Robinson characterized as a 'usable past,' the stories that Black women hold and carry forward are laden with the historical legacy of slavery, along with the toxic alchemy of racialized and gendered hierarchies. Put differently, Selina Fulford maps a politic of Black struggle and perseverance, within the existing framework of the carceral state and its interlocking systems that engenders the shattering of Black lives in which the precarity of Black existence is habitually enshrined and always re/enforced. It follows then, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women such as Selina Fulford offer a critical gaze in critique of the prison through the prism of its 'before' and 'after' lives, that presents an unflinching portrait of the nation's sustained reliance on the hegemony of anti-Black racism, and the sheer barbarism of Black dehumanization relative to the penal and its infrastructure.

One of Fulford's earliest memories as a young Black child was returning home from school one day, and experiencing the trauma and anguish of a police raid that is taking place in her family's apartment. Fulford describes the police ransacking the bedroom she shared with her younger brother, all the while bearing witness to the harrowing scene of her mother and stepfather bound and handcuffed, and then being dragged off and away. A next-door neighbor intervenes and informs the police that she will keep and care for the couple's kids until the children's grandmother can travel from Harlem to gather them up. That day, thanks to the neighbor who had telephoned their grandmother, Fulford along with her sister and younger brother, narrowly escapes 'going into the system' themselves. The terror of the day remains etched in Fulford's memory and has never been forgotten. As the interlocutor of her own carceral experiences, Fulford's compelling recollections traces out her encounters with the penal and the re/enactments of carceral violences that has informed her living experiences, as well as that of her family.

Fulford's telling in its own way, can be also imagined as a gesture to the scholar Saidiya Hartman's introduction to her 1997 *Scenes of Subjection* in which she remarks on the contradictions in representing "uncertain lines between witness and spectator." Hartman opens with the recalling of Frederick Douglass's introduction to slavery as witnessing the savage beating of his Aunt Hester, which Hartman likens to "one of the most well-known scenes of torture in the literature of slavery." Fulford's introduction to the penal as seen through the eyes of a little Black girl when her parents are taken away by the police might also be said to be the invocation of the 'shocking and terrible,' in a manner not dissimilar regarding the quotidian cruelty of both events. Douglass's experience as a young boy some several centuries back, and Fulford's experience nearly fifty years ago can be viewed as a re/iteration of the changing same

and the brutal perpetuation of punishment. While Fulford offers scant detail on the actual occurrence that took place in her life nearly fifty years back, the utter pain and cruelty of the event is evident by what isn't recalled and thus, left unspoken during the interview.

Becoming pregnant in her last year of high school, Fulford describes a laborious odyssey intrinsic to her efforts to make a life for herself and her child while navigating the challenges of single Black motherhood. Fulford recounts in unsparing detail of being pushed out of The City College of New York, a senior college in the CUNY system, ostensibly because it was prohibited to attend a four-year college and collect welfare benefits, her eventual lapse into drug addiction sustained by underground economies and criminalized activities, the cycling in and out of New York City's Rikers Island and finally, Fulford's subsequent felony conviction and imprisonment at Albion Correctional Facility located in the state of New York's Orleans County, not far from the US/Canadian border.

In delivering a gripping description of the harrowing bus ride to Albion prison, Fulford not only reveals her fear but also conjures up the terrifying imaginative of enslavement and its latter-day expressions when she shares "Albion is like up there on the borderline with Canada. I know because the bus ride was actually 9 and a half hours. It was a good 9 hours. And so the awakening for me was when they put those chains around my ankles and the chain that's goes up around your waist and your hands, and fits too tight, you know? I almost felt like I was on a chain gang. I felt like I was going back into time; yes, like the tv show 'Roots.' Yeah, it felt like 'Roots.' It's like slavery. I was like, oh my God, because I got these chains on and I'm just straight up riding in this bus for hours and hours and hours. And the further we got away I was like, oh my God. Like my family is not going to be able to get to me. Nobody's going to be able to help me. Where are these people taking us? In chains? Me, I wouldn't have been surprised if

they stopped the bus and said get out like if we was in the middle of the cotton field. I wouldn't have been surprised because that's what I thought. That I had died and woke up in another time.”

Fulford is remarking on the stark racial disparities that exist between incarcerated Black people and the largely white communities in the mostly rural counties outside the prison's walls. Taking note of Hartman's remark regarding the “the sheer irrepresentability of terror,” Fulford's chilling account stands as the visceral expression of a multi-dimensional landscape of temporal violences that seemingly transcend both time and space. However, at its most fundamental, Fulford's narrative exposes a carceral ecology grounded in the intricate and timeless geographies of violences, and its reproduction as a vicious continuity that is subject to an infinity of reconfigurations and reconstitutions that do not ameliorate the conditions of carceral confinement, but rather intensifies the raw exercise of its state-sanctioned power. Establishing the centrality of violence of the ‘penal’ and its attendant punishments as an expansive metaphor, Fulford renders the penal as a location of a peculiar and deliberate cruelty that emanates from the continual regurgitations of the plantation economy's spatiality and logic.

## *Freedom Ain't Free*

A recurring theme that emerges across several of the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women is a stated desire to further one's formal education by applying to and enrolling in academic institutions with the intention of obtaining a college degree. All have expressed a variety of reasons for doing so; however, this desire can be situated in the living history of formerly enslaved Black people's self-awareness intertwined with a nascent recognition that to fully exercise their newly won freedom after emancipation, many felt it would be necessary to be formally educated. Formerly enslaved Black people reasoned that in order to wholly realize the radical potentiality of freedom tethered to the values of Black self-worth and dignity, literacy would play a key role in the context of negating the dehumanization, and recriminations which Black communities faced then, and continue to experience now. Prior to the end of the Civil War, it had been a criminal offense to teach enslaved Black people to read or write. Thus, while the struggle to organize and establish schools in free Black communities after the Civil War was at best, a daunting enterprise, many formerly enslaved Black people held that educational achievement could similarly assist in providing a possible pathway towards improving their economic conditions and circumstances. This fundamental belief in education stands as a politic of resistance positing a continuity which informs both the mindset and the political consciousness of many currently and formerly incarcerated Black people today.

How this enduring legacy continues to play out and shape the lives of formerly incarcerated members of the Black community, notwithstanding formerly incarcerated Black women, is articulated by Fulford when describing her initial encounter with College and Community Fellowship (CCF), a non-profit organization located in New York City that was established in 2000 with a specific focus on women directly impacted by the criminal legal

system. CCF's core approach has been consistently driven by the idea that access to higher education, providing community support, promoting civic engagement, and engaging in public advocacy efforts to eliminate barriers to opportunity, economic and otherwise, for currently and formerly incarcerated women is integral to exercising full citizenship as a liberatory vision. Having recently stepped down as CCF executive director, Vivian Nixon, and her lived experience as a formerly incarcerated Black woman, epitomized the vision and mission of CCF. Over the years, in partnership with other community-based organizations and non-profit agencies under the banner of the Education from the Inside Out Coalition (EIO), CCF has taken the lead in several advocacy campaigns including the fight for the reinstatement of Pell Grants on the federal level and the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) within New York State for incarcerated individuals to whom access was banned in 1994 and 1995, and which has continued to unduly impact imprisoned Black people. CCF was also at the forefront of supporting the New York Fair Access to Education Act, S.00969 and A.03363 that sought to 'ban the box' from admissions applications that prohibit institutions of higher education, both public and private, from using criminal history information with regard to admissions decisions. It is of no small measure that equal access to educational opportunity has always been at the forefront of the radical Black freedom struggle since time immemorial, in which the origin story can be traced back nearly 400 years which has taken shape in one form or another, including a litany of historic litigation. In her telling, Fulford recalls when,

“a girl on my job said to me I want to bring you to a community meeting so you can learn about this organization, College and Community Fellowship. So I said okay, I'll go with you one day. So I went and I walked into this room, and there was this big round table with all these Black women sitting around the table. It was a couple of white women, some Hispanics, but the majority were Black women. So sitting around the table, they went around the table introducing themselves; this one was a director and this one was a project manager, and so on. And I was like, wow all these women got these big titles and stuff and they're formerly incarcerated. They were successful, and you could

tell they were making money. I was like, I don't know what these women are doing, but whatever they're doing, I'm getting ready to jump on this bandwagon! I was just so proud of them.

And so I joined CCF, and I went back to college, and I got my bachelor's. And then I went on like a crazy person and got a masters. Then I got a second masters, and a third. I think the reason why I got all those master's degrees is because I was trying to erase the stigma of being formerly incarcerated. Like I hated that. I hate filling out applications. Have you ever been arrested? Do you have any felonies? Then I said, you know what, I need to get me a master's and then I would go on a job interview, and they would hit me with that again. I'm like, okay I need another master's. Now this time I'm going to a job interview, and I say this is not going to come up. And it came up again. So I just kept getting all these degrees because I was trying to hide behind those degrees and hide from that stigma of being formerly incarcerated.”

Fulford’s account reflects the Black community’s explicit commitment to formal education grounded in a liberatory pedagogy and its radical practice which not only serves to mitigate, but one that can be read as a struggle to extricate the internalization of the shame of being a formerly incarcerated Black woman. Shame is umbilically tethered to the historical materiality of stigma that supports and undergirds all manners of Black dehumanization, dispossession and displacement, and is enmeshed in the condemnation of Blackness and its trajectories. As formerly incarcerated Black women who have been shaped as much by gender as by race stands at the nexus of an intersectionality analysis, decoding shame and stigma allows for a more capacious appreciation of the challenges Fulford expresses in her narrative. Circling back to the late Lucille Clifton, the truth-telling narratives of Selina Fulford and other formerly incarcerated Black women like myself are the extensions of Clifton’s invitation to us all:

won't you celebrate with me

what i have shaped into

a kind of life? i had no model.

born in babylon

both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.

(Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me" from *Book of Light*. Copyright © 1993)

“Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? Just so’s you’re sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter.”

---Toni Cade Bambara

### **Chapter Three: Laurie Lunn**

“I am not my crimes. I was not born to be a misfit. Somewhere along the lines, stuff happened to me, and society forgot about me. We do recover, and we are just as great as any other person that they say never had a criminal history. We strive harder. We achieve 10 times more because we have to; because society, even though we are out of the system, is constantly watching to see what we do next. Once you get your mind set right and you know, you starting to climb up that ladder, we don't stop because we're always being watched. And whatever I do...well, I'm not just doing it for me, I'm doing it for the 10 or so other women that's gonna come behind me.”

---Laurie Lunn

## Laurie

So I will say to you that I was raised by a mom with mental illness, undiagnosed and untreated. She was somewhat, I guess if you looked at it from the outside you would say promiscuous. But I think growing up now and looking back at the way she was, I would say she was looking for love in all the wrong places. She just happened to make babies with everybody that she chose to love. So it's six of us. Well, it was six of us. One of us passed away, a few years back. My mother and her mom are originally from the West Indies, and they came up here like most immigrants to find a better way and to accomplish bigger things. But my mom, for some reason, she never could get a grip on that. I don't think my mom ever worked a legal job a day in her life, but she was fly. I don't know how she did it. Growing up and I'm watching her go through changes, I never thought how it would affect me growing up. But you have some children who skate through some of the dysfunctions of a family, and they do well. Then you have some who might've needed a little bit more. And so somewhere along the line, either they gonna repeat the cycle, and get some bumps along the road. I guess I was the child that might've needed a little bit more.

Me---I got a lot of bumps along the way. A lot of things happened to me when I was under my mom's care. And I'm quite sure it didn't just start when I came up to this country as a child. I believe some of that extended from when she left me in the West Indies with a great uncle who she knew had a fetish for young girls. He's been touching all the women that came through the family from when they were little. Some of that traveled over because when I was a young girl, my oldest sister had this boyfriend. I don't even think my sister really liked this guy. At the time he was 19, and I was only 8 or 9. He was 19 and he was already a pedophile. So,

there's no age piece. No, he was already a pedophile, and he was already doing things to me sexually. He put a lot of fear in me, and I also didn't have a lot of trust in my mom because she was very abusive to me. I didn't think she'd be the one that I should tell what was going on because I never thought she'd believe me. She used to beat me a lot. Like I said, my mother had six kids with six different men. And for some reason I think somewhere along the line, whatever happened with her and my dad, must've been terrible for her. Mostly because I was the one that she really took a lot of anger out on.

Now my grandmother, she was the rock of the family. She knew my mom had mental illness, so she took care of my mom. Like even through all the men, the baby daddies, the kids, my grandmother was the sole support of the house. I don't know if my mom even knew really who she was. But basically, we all grew up under the same roof, though some of us came up here separately. Some of us were still in the West Indies when some of us came up. But I would say by the time I was 11 years old, we were all up here. So my whole family had actually come to New York to live. My grandmother sent for me. So when I came here, my mother was already married to another man and with her being married to this man, I was treated and spoken to like I was the side-cast. You know, like an outcast never quite fitting in. I remember that so clearly; not quite belonging. I'm able to identify what it is now, but I already knew even as a child that I didn't belong. I think that's what made my grandmother take more notice to me, which pissed my mother off even more and caused a lot more beatings for me. But anyway, everybody kind of like moved along. It's like you come to New York, you're going to go to school, you're going to do the right thing, and you're just gonna maintain until you're able to do for yourself.

A lot of that things happened to me under my mom's guidance. She had a husband, yes, but she also had a desire for more. She never did drugs, never smoked cigarettes, never drank.

But she had the behavior of an addict, but her addiction was 'more.' Everything for her was more, so, to get that she had what we call the other men, so-called uncles. Everybody that came through the house was the uncle. Some of those uncles did some very unkind things to me. And my mom, she was, you know, I wouldn't say she was in denial of it, but if she had to acknowledge it, then that would stop her show. So it was easy for her to put the blinders on and say something was wrong with me. She took me to all kinds of psychiatrists. Doctors told her that I was a promiscuous little girl and that my estrogen level must be too high. I began spending a lot of time outside the house; I was out of my house a lot. There was a point where I spent more nights out with my friend's family than in my own home.

*Freedom Is a Secret*

So, at 15 years old, of course I got pregnant. By the time I was 16, I was a mom. My grandmother's wishes for me were to not leave school. So back then they had this program, it was a pilot, one of the first programs they ever created for teen moms to complete school in a safe environment, as a way to support the mother and the baby. So I went there, and the lady told me, I don't think you need to stay in here for a long time. I think you should try to get your GED. She said just go get the GED; I think you can pass it. I was 15 when she told me this. Back then, you didn't need to be a certain age to take the GED. If you can pass it, you get your diploma. I signed up, and she filed the papers for me because I was pregnant. Anyway, I took the test and I passed. I got my diploma in March, and in June I had my baby. So I did exactly what my grandmother had asked me, to finish school before that baby came. And I did. I was working for a while, but you know, young mom, with just a GED, not even a high school diploma. It was hard.

So my grandmother said, why don't you go back to school? I applied for college, and I was accepted into Medgar Evers (CUNY). But back then, they didn't have the accommodations, such as childcare in the schools and all that. It was extremely hard. My mom, she thought I should get on welfare for the money. HRA said if you find childcare, we'll give you a little extra. Back then, they weren't paying people to actually watch your kid, but if you told them that you had a reliable source, they'd give you a little extra money. So they did. And I was giving my mom the money, but every night she would complain "Oh, he's getting too active. I can't take this." He's a year and a half now so he's moving around, he's a kid. Like what do you want him to be, dead? So it didn't work out because I was trying to work during the day for the little bit of

hours, try to get the little bit of HRA help, for the food stamps and the Medicaid. Now the department is called the Human Resources Administration, but it was known as 'welfare,' back in the day.

So, here I am trying to take this kid with me to night school. He's active, so when the class is raising their hand, my son is raising his little hand because he wants to answer. After a while the professor was like, this is a bit too much and we don't think we can tolerate much more. So, another dream deferred. I was forced to drop out of school. For my mom, it was fine. It was so ironic to me because she wanted education for the boys, but I never saw her push education so much for the women in the family. It was more like you need to know how to cook and clean. Because if you don't, nobody's ever going to want you. My mom wasn't one of those huggy, kissy moms. For example, I love birthdays, Merry Christmases, and all that. I didn't see a whole lot of that growing up. And so of course, when I had the first opportunity to break wild, I want berserk. I had to have my first child and finding the hardship of it. Anyway, we lived in a four-story house and my grandmother had the top floor. She loved me unconditionally. When I tell you this woman loved the ground I walked on, she was like, well you stay upstairs with me. And when you leave out this house, you go through the top exit. Don't go downstairs to the first floor. If your mother don't see you, maybe she won't even remember you're here now. How ironic for your grandmother to tell you that, but it worked.

I was in my grandmother's apartment for maybe two years before me and my mother crossed paths and actually said words to each other, because she never came up and I never went down. By the time I was 19, I was pregnant with my second child from another father. And I started to see a little bit of my mom's cycle in me. I said, okay, well maybe this is just a phase, it's not something that's going to be my life. I'm not going to be like my mom. So, I had my

second child by a Panamanian guy, who wound up getting deported. I was basically living off him just before he got deported. And so, I was forced once again to go and seek refuge with my grandmother. She always took me in. I stayed with my grandmother for about maybe eight months. And then I left my grandmother's house, and I went to a battered women's shelter. My youngest son's father at the time, he was quite abusive. I did have papers on him, so it was easy for me to get into a domestic violence shelter. Though at that time, they used to call it a battered women's shelter. So I lived there for a while until they found me an apartment. I would say I went through the system really fast; I don't think I was in that system for more than six months, before I got a really nice apartment. As a matter of fact, the apartment was right here on 97th, between Amsterdam and Columbus, right up the block. Really nice apartment, a two-bedroom. And then, I started working at the same battered women's shelter for a stipend. I was still able to receive HRA benefits while I worked for the stipend at the shelter. But in the interim of all that, I had my first taste of cocaine.

It was like being free, out from under the guidance of my grandmother, and not having a man to worry about. With no one watching over me, I became overwhelmed with the kids, trying to put them in school, go to this job and do all these things to be this responsible adult person. So you could kind of say I basically tested out life by trial and error, but I was still a child. But the maturity that I needed, I had to learn quick because I'm now a mother of two. But inside I'm still that 15-year-old girl, because I never learned to grow up from that point moving forward. So, of course, you know, when I did my first shot of cocaine, I was off to the races. I found freedom. Or so I thought; I never had anything that didn't make me feel bad about situations, worry about situations. I lost myself by the time my two oldest sons were 10 and 7. I had to call the aunt for my first son's father and beg her to come pick them kids up. I just couldn't do it with the kids. I

thought that was a good move. It was for the kids because it saved them from the system. But it wasn't so good for me, because this new freedom of not being responsible, I went crazy.

Eventually I started entertaining people in my house. One of the people that I bought into my home was working for a heroin dealer. So when they called him to come pick this up, drop this off or whatever, they knew exactly where he was. But he was also using, and he didn't tell them; so he was screwing up. Because I was smoking crack at the time, it was so easy for the guy to say she did it, she messed up. So, anyway they set my apartment on fire with me in it. I don't know how, but I miraculously got out of that one. The intensity of the blaze blew out all the windows because we had windows from one end of the apartment to the other. I don't know how I got out of there, but I got out and I guess I was running. I must've been running for the next, maybe 10 years. Because in between all of that, I made five other kids, each with different fathers. So you see the family dynamics repeating itself, but in another way.

I started going to jail in 1999; the first time I ever got arrested. So in 1999, I got introduced to the criminal justice system, the judicial system. In order to support my habit, I started stealing out of high-end stores. I stole because there were just certain things I wouldn't do for drugs. I was 'stuck up' in that way. I still had a little pride. I don't know, go figure. And people, well men, they get tired of that. Like, girl, you ain't nobody. So when I got hit, it was like six months here, six months there; you know, eight months, a year or whatever. So most of that time was spent in Rikers. I've never done state time. I was always on Rikers Island. So from 1999 up until 2012, my life has been like a rollercoaster.

## *Jailin'*

The first time I [stepped onto Rikers] was so numb. Right? All I wanted to do was sleep. I slept. I swear to you I slept my whole bid away. The first time I got arrested they only gave me four months. Wait, no, not even four months. Maybe, 90 days. So for 90 days I slept in. When I woke up, they were telling me it was time to go. You see, I was the kind of user that I didn't sleep until sleep came and made me sleep. So I could go 10 days straight just running, running, running. But when I did finally drop, I dropped, and I would not wake up for days. So going to jail, I guess I should have had a certain level of fear, right? I think I was more afraid to get locked up so I couldn't get high, than I was to be locked up. Cause now it's like, oh my god, 60 days and I can't use drugs. I'm not going to be able to do this. But you conform. I slept the whole bid away. So I was cycling in and out of Rikers for nearly, what did we say, 10, 12 years. It was my inability to love myself and my lack of self-esteem that kept me jailing. It was how I saw myself, the way I viewed me. This is what I deserved. My mom always used to tell me I was no good, you know? So I guess Rikers is where no good people end up.

But I never had that fear of going in there and somebody was gonna harm me or whatever. I was more afraid of the guards, the male guards, because I still had a little cuteness to me. I still was a little polished. I hadn't totally lost it yet. My fear really was the guards because I see what they do in there. There were certain guards that would go around, and they would leave the light on you while you slept. You would realize in your sleep, oh my god, my leg is out. Maybe you just had on panties and a bra, and they're watching you through the window. Or maybe they would, you know, say sly remarks to you. Or sometimes they would get to the point where if they thought that you were naive enough, they would threaten you with something so that you can meet them somewhere to have sex with them. Or give them a blow job or

something. So, I just always felt creeped out by some of the guards, you know? But then it got to be a point when I wasn't so tired anymore and I didn't sleep my whole bid away. And now I'm more on point and I'm watching because I felt unsafe. So that's when you start learning how to jail. And by that, I mean you know once you're in there doing these bids, you know you're coming out. So basically, you're not changing nothing; because you know you're going to end up right back there. I already had that in my mind. Like I did not go to jail to get reformed because there was, is no reform in jail. When you're doing those little, short bids, they don't care whether you change or not. The last thing the CO says to you on your way out the door is "I'll see you again. You'll be back." And in my mind, I knew I would be [back] because I wasn't changing nothing. And if nothing changes, nothing changes, right?

Yeah. You have to put yourself in a mindset, right? Without the drugs where you still know and don't care, and nothing touches you emotionally. At least you think so anyway. It's like this wall that you learn to put up when you keep going in and out of the system, because if you don't, you'll lose your mind. And I didn't want to go crazy in the system. But I was right there, that close to losing my mind, you know? I learned to accept each and every sentence that I got, by going to Rikers with the mindset that this was not going to be forever. A lot of times I copped out to stuff that I didn't do because I was scared what would happen to me if I didn't. My self-esteem wasn't high enough to imagine or even say I was worth something better. So it was easy for me to take sentences that I know I shouldn't have been taken. But I was frightened because I never wanted to go upstate. Everything about jail is made to put a woman lower than when she came in. Jail makes you feel less than say, when you entered. I mean, it's just the way you're treated inside Rikers. I didn't want to ask the COs for nothing; that's why I used to buy my own stuff. Once, they even stopped selling sanitary napkins in commissary. So there were no sanitary

napkins. There were days when you would go to commissary, and they didn't even have the stuff for you to shave with. Women are in there, and while you're there you want to keep your hygiene up. Some days they didn't have even toothpaste in commissary. Those are necessities you couldn't get, and sometimes that went on for weeks.

But to make a long story short, I learned to adapt. I learned that this was my life now. I was no longer living in that cushy house with my grandma. I was no longer able to perpetrate a fraud. This was my life, jail. Each and every time I went in jail, I adapted to the situation. And even though it tore me down spiritually, mentally, and emotionally just a little bit more each time, I held on to this sense of hope still left in me that told me this was not going to be my life forever. I never went around talking about I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that. I was not one of those people to tell you all these wonderful things I was going to do when I came home from jail, because something inside of me didn't feel like I deserved any wonderful things. But even still, there was a little bit of hope that this could not be what God put me on this earth for. Something had to change in my life. I don't know, I was getting high, but I was miserable. Like the first time I ever got high in my entire life, was probably the best time I've ever had. And then after that, it was no more fun. Cause after that it was work, work, work. I worked harder for drugs than I did for my own life. One time, in 2001 I had been up for so long, I went into like a drug induced type of delirium. I was crossing the street. I didn't see the car, and I wound up getting hit. I flew up, came down. I could actually see me looking down at me and I could hear people saying she's dead. But for some reason, I survived.

One time when I got out of jail, I stayed out in the street for about four months, and I was doing okay. I wasn't using or anything, and I was able to put together a good 4 months clean. But you know what, going away from the substance but not dealing with the trauma, eventually the

trauma comes up, hits you square dead in the face and you feel naked all over again. So, I started using again. In 2012, I went on a run for about maybe eight months. Anyway, I was staying in this guy's apartment, and I was sitting there, I'll never forget, May 28<sup>th</sup>. I was sitting there waiting for the dealer to come through, cause I had just cashed my check. Now when I hit the house in the morning, it looked quiet to me, and it was quiet for that moment. But because of the traffic, people in and out, the apartment had been brought to the attention of the cops. In other words, the cops were watching the apartment. So when I called the dealer, the cops came right behind him and pushed in the door. There were no drugs in the house, right? But it was a crack house, so it looked like a crack house. There was empty crack bags, broken stems and stuff like that. Anyway, the cops took the dealer and me together. We get to court and I'm thinking I'm going home. I know I'm going home. The court-lawyer says to me, "you know it's not looking really good for you. You've got two or three other people who said that you came there for the purposes of selling narcotics." Now that might've been the first time that I was scared. the lawyer explained to me that with my rap sheet, this was not going to be a six-month bid for me. He said they're (the prosecutors) are talking about a federal offense, they're talking about federal time, they're talking about crossing state lines. And then he kept saying to me like, do you understand me?

A part of me was still saying that's not going to happen to me cause the owner of the apartment, he's around somewhere. All he has to do is show his face in court; and he's going to tell the judge what I already told them. But I didn't know that he had already taken a plea. The lawyer says they're talking theoretically about state time, but the Feds feel it's a narcotic thing, and they say it was part of a whole roundup in the projects. The lawyer says to me the building where you were was the last building, they said they needed to clean up. I told that lawyer, I may

not know too much of nothing, but one thing I do know is I didn't do none of those things. I told him to check my rap sheet. I got locked up a lot of times for stealing out of stores, but I ain't never got locked up for no narcotics. I said to him, do me a favor, find out. He said you're not going home, but I will find out how much your bail is. I think first they said something like a crazy number, like \$15,000. I'm scratching my head now because I'm bugging out. I'm thinking like if that's the case, how much do I have to pay? So I said to the lawyer ask for a bail reduction. It took them 43 days, 42 days, I think maybe like 40 days to get me a bail reduction. So I stayed 40 days in jail.

## *Freedom Dreams*

For the first time ever going into Rikers Island, I went in there conscious of the notion of how degrading Rikers was, and how being incarcerated can affect people; especially women, our self-esteem and values. At some point during those 40 days, I said to myself, I will not let this system define who I am. Something has to give. It began with me acknowledging that I don't have no damn control over nothing in my life. Nothing. So, when I finally got the bail reduction, I still needed to come up with \$1,000. But during those 40 days, another check came for me. I was thinking that I could make bail cause the check was maybe \$750, plus the money the cops took from me when I was arrested. The lawyer asked if I had a voucher for the money. And of course, I didn't have a voucher. The lawyer was like, no voucher, no money. So my man told me, don't worry, I'm gonna put up the rest of the money. So it took them four days after the bail reduction, even though he was there that same day at the courthouse with the money, when they released me.

I was released under the care and custody of probation. I'm not even sentenced, and I was already doing probation. How does that work? Like probation is supposed to start to after sentencing; like either you giving me probation or you're not. In the interim of all that, they still had me come in to court every month. So, I was back in court every month, and seeing a probation officer every Tuesday. Now this went on for almost two years. So, after two years the lawyer says to me, listen Laurie, they're tired of playing games. And like I said before I didn't do these things. So that burnt me to my soul. So I just kept fighting. But after two years, the lawyer said, if you take this to trial, I'm already telling you, I'm not even suggesting, I'm telling you, if you take this to trial, you're going upstate. The lawyer says, look, two years you've been home, you've been drug free. You went back to school. At that time, I had gotten my recovery coach

license. I started work as a peer advocate. My life did a full circle. My family started coming back in my life. I was re-united with my children. He said to me, do you want to give all that up because you don't want to admit to selling drugs. That's fucking stupid. He told me, he says, you're going to lose all that. You're not going to go to work when you go upstate doing what you're doing now. You're not going to get that kind of money doing what you're doing now. You're going to lose everything and on top of that, you now going to be charged with the felony. Don't be stupid. He tells me over and over, he just kept saying that word to me. I'm already feeling stupid. I'm already a low life in my mind. I'm already feeling a sense of I don't deserve any of this, and that I don't deserve nothing better still. And he keeps telling me 'don't be stupid.' I said 'okay'.

And so I 'copped out' after two years of going back and forth to court, cause he told me I didn't have a win in hell. Some lawyer I had, huh? During that time I was also going to therapy. I was starting to feel like a human being again, but I still had a sense of self -doubt. There was still some doubt there. So I started really dealing with my issues, started really attacking and hitting them face on without being medicated. I'm not bipolar. I'm not none of those things. I was not on any mental meds. I was an addict. This was the first time in my life that I had to deal with who I was and all the things I've been through, the molestations, the sexual abuse, the physical abuse. Because almost all the men that I ever had beat me. I have all the scars in the world to prove it. I dealt with all that for the first time in my life. Face forward, family issues, mother issues, my children issues, all those things came in one body. I had had no sense of belonging, never quite fit in any place. The only place I ever felt quite at home at until I got my life together, was in a crack house.

So I worked on myself in those four years that I was doing the court, and then the two and a half years I did on probation. Probation was what I got, as part of the deal I took. Okay, so once I pleaded out, they told me the deal was since you've been going to probation all this time, they would count those two years towards the five-year probation. However, if in the next three years you get in trouble over anything, the probation deal will be null and void. And the original sentence of two-to-four we offered will also be voided. The judge, I need to tell you I will never forget that white man, his name was Jackson, and he said I'm going to give you four to eight (years). And then he says, and I'm gonna make sure you do every bit of them eight years because I've seen your kind before. That's what he told me. I don't know. I didn't know what he meant when he said that he 'had seen my kind before'. Who says that? What does that mean? What is that to say when you say 'you seen my kind'? He don't even know me. He never got to know me. It wasn't like the man pulled me in his back room and had a talk with me in his chambers. He didn't know me no more than he knew the paperwork that was sitting in front of him. Because if he would have read that shit, he would've known the case was bullshit.

But on the real, I did have an idea of what he was trying to say; we're all alike in their eyes. What I did learn in jail is once you've been sentenced, it's the judge and others like him who feel it's up to them to keep society safe from 'my kind.' And once you been locked up, you are now deemed unacceptable in society. And I then started to understand that society has placed me in a place so they can keep an eye on me, know where I'm at all times, because oh my God, if they should just let me out in society, who knows what I do out here? Afterall, I'm nothing but a crack addict. What I decided was I was not going to ever let that define me, because I'm just as good as everybody else. Maybe even better because you know what? Life experiences has taught me to be kind, to be human, have consideration, appreciation and humbleness.

I won't say I don't have regrets. Because of course nobody should ever have to live the life that I lived. Well, what I will say is because of my bad choices, I've learned some really great stuff and I've met some really great people along the way. You know what I mean? And I use that opportunity because through my job, I was able to link up with a great group of coworkers who encouraged me to go back to school. They said you just got too much on the cap (\*you're too intelligent) just to be a recovery coach. Go get your CASAC (\*Credentialled Alcohol Substance Abuse Counselor license). So I went back to school and got my CASAC-T. And then they were like, don't stop, go back to school and get your doggone bachelors. What's wrong with you? All the things in my life that I ever wanted to accomplish that a girl might, a girl living in the financial bracket that I was growing up should have had before. And believe me, I'm struggling like hell. I'm taking out loans all over the place to go back and stay in school. I go to SUNY Empire State College trying to get my...no, not trying, getting my bachelor's in Human Services. Um, maybe in the next three years I should be completed because I've already gotten some credits with the CASAC and all that. I'm able to see how my experiences, and how I needed them to do the things that I do for people that I work with today.

People are struggling, just like how I once struggled. I needed those experiences to be able to serve people who are going through the same shit I went through. It's so ironic to me that what broke me is now what makes me; because if I was not as relatable to the clients that I serve, they would look at me like they look at every other counselor on the staff. Yeah, okay. Whatever. When I tell you my clients relate to me and I'm relatable to them because of my experiences it's because when I speak, it's like that old EF Hutton commercial, they listen. I give them hope. I give them a sense of purpose that they never had because they see it living proof in front of their face that a person like me can accomplish the things that we accomplish. Being free

from shame and guilt of not being all the things everyone expected you to be for them, and I expected for myself. Freedom is being able to truly embrace your flaws and forgive yourself for all the self-loathing, self-hate and disappointments. Freedom is me being able to be self-aware and accepting of every inch of me.

In the past freedom meant breaking away from a dysfunctional family with a mother with undiagnosed and untreated mental health who was both verbal and physically abusive. What I didn't know at the time is I took all the hurt and pain with me, leading me to endure even more pain and abuse by the hands of others based on decisions made from a hurt person's perspective. It was the exchange of one torment and replacing it with another. With each of my 7 pregnancies I again thought each child would bring me a happiness I've been longing for. I mean babies are supposed to be a blessing, right? Well, for me it exasperated my anxiety and increased my self-doubt which in turn left me more insecure and uncertain of both my future and theirs. Combine that with substance use, it was a disaster for all of us. Freedom isn't free. Freedom comes with a price, and for me it was abandoning the comfort of chaos in exchange for the discomfort of change. Like I said there will always be a price to pay, in my case it was losing my children. But freedom also gave me choices; I learned self-love and self-forgiveness. And in turn, I was able to find the true meaning of freedom. We all have a story, it's what I do with mine that sets me free.

I am not my crimes. I was not born to be a misfit. Somewhere along the lines, stuff happened to me, and society forgot about me. We do recover, and we are just as great as any other person that they say never had a criminal history. We strive harder. We achieve 10 times more because we have to; because society, even though we are out of the system, is constantly watching to see what we do next. Once you get your mind set right and you know, you starting to climb up that ladder, we don't stop because we're always being watched. And whatever I

do...well, I'm not just doing it for me, I'm also doing it for the 10 or so other women that's gonna come behind me. Hopefully, the world will give them a chance, an opportunity because they've seen what I done. They may just say, this one did it, maybe this other one can do it. Maybe, just maybe those 10 other women might just go right down our alley and follow us. So no, I do it not just for me, I do it for the women that's coming behind me because I believe we all can be successful in our own right, if given ample opportunity. I don't want to choke up, but you already know.

(This interview has been edited for clarity.)

## Paradigms of Self-Regard

So much more than a string of episodic anecdotes, Laurie Lunn provides an expansive narrative recounting her immigration as a young Black girl from the Caribbean to live in Brooklyn, to her decades-long crack addiction and its indefatigable hold that results in Lunn's cycling in and out of incarceration over the course of nearly 15 years. Lunn chronicles the turbulence and the persistent chaos in exacting detail of a life defined by a procession of violences and traumas. Posited in specific and concrete terms that makes explicit the references of 'living the prison,' Lunn unpacks a complex trove of memories laden with freedom dreams as the lived experiences of a formerly incarcerated Black woman's life-long yearning to 'belong' as a labor of livingness which in due course, gives way to a radical re/birth enjoined to newfound possibilities anchored in a pedagogy of hope.

A vortex of unrelenting struggle and strife, Lunn's narrative can be read as a text which de/scribes and is re/presentative of her truth as lived understandings---which is to say, Lunn's recollections are not interpretations, but are located in a blues-inflected epistemology. Providing a chronicle of her lived experiences, Lunn's remembrances excavate and maps the memories that are shared with both her mother (now diagnosed with dementia), and those of her late grandmother who passed away some twenty-odd years ago. Memories, that in particular recall unspoken secrets of sexual molestation and its violence suffered by Lunn as a young girl at the hands of an uncle, as well as similar acts committed by others outside the immediate family. This is not a telling out of the ordinary or that which can be characterized as an outlier, nor is it to suggest the commonplace. Rather, it is more about the shared and silent secrets Black women hold and do not necessarily talk openly about or even amongst each other that are tethered to a peculiar type of guilt and the internalization of a 'bone black' shame. Lunn's narrative is a

reflection illustrating the passage of time does not ameliorate the violence itself, nor the destructive power of secrets and the scars that are the side-effects of historical pain and trauma. Lunn's recollections recount cross-generational and interpersonal violence and the role of memory that can be situated in the idea of 'it is what it was' in which the same had happened before, and before that---in ways that transgress time. Metaphorically speaking, Lunn's narrative can be imagined as the never spoken tales of our Black mothers, and those of their mothers that defy spatiality in which periodization is negated. These are the painful secrets that bestow a distinctive knowingness which acts as the archives of memory that give shape to our lives as Black women, but do not solely define us.

In offering up a testimony remarking on the deep intersectionality of the multiple violence which many Black women and girls encounter, Lunn's memories provide a critical context in a way that illuminates what the scholar Imani Perry terms as a 'fictive kinship' with other currently and formerly incarcerated Black women whom by their own telling, have also been subjected to such violence. As Lunn recalls, "I was more afraid of the guards, the male guards, because I still had a little cuteness to me. I still was a little polished. I hadn't totally lost it yet. My fear really was the guards because I see what they do in there. There were certain guards that would go around, and they would leave the light on you while you slept. You would realize in your sleep, oh my god, my leg is out. Maybe you just had on panties and a bra, and they're watching you through the window. Or maybe they would, you know, say sly remarks to you. Or sometimes they would get to the point where if they thought that you were naive enough, they would threaten you with something so that you can meet them somewhere to have sex with them. Or give them a blow job or something." The interweaving of sexual and interpersonal violence,

along with its distinctive terror both within and outside the cages of the penal reflect the scenes endemic to Black women's racialized and gendered subjugation.

Still a defining determinant that drives mass incarceration and imprisonment, the more than half-century of the nation's political and economic project of the so-called "war on drugs" and its overcriminalization of drug use and possession continues to wreak havoc in urban poor and working-class Black communities through-out the United States. I would argue none more so than the disparate impact on the lives of Black women trapped in poverty and immiseration, and the outsized consequences of such marked by a gauntlet of extreme penalties and punishments. In reflection of her past circumstances and conditions of precarity bound up in her struggle with long-term addiction, Lunn's substance use can be best described in the vernacular of the street---'*living to use and using to live.*' And as Lunn herself notes "there will always be a price to pay, in my case it was losing my children." Put differently, it stands to reason that in her own way Lunn was protecting her children the best way she knew how by turning them over to family members, as a preventive measure to forestall any possibilities of her children becoming wards of the state and thus, losing all seven to New York's child welfare system. As a carceral response and intervention rooted in the logic of punishment, the loss of one's children to '*the system*' is seen and experienced by presently and formerly incarcerated Black women as functioning as a particularly violent and insidious form of Black dehumanization and dispossession. It is the immeasurable 'loss' of one's children that is forever mourned and attached to a guilt in which there can be no reprieve, nor findings of innocence. Accompanied by an anguish difficult to describe by those who've experienced this loss, it has been characterized as a lasting bereavement that one never fully emerges from.

Mining the interiority of Lunn's labors of livingness conjures up a portal onto the lives of other currently and formerly incarcerated Black women, including my own in which our shared experiences and stories are often diminished and overlooked, which in turn works to obscure and render our narratives as insignificant and inconsequential. Unnervingly lucid in its depiction of pathos and pain, Lunn's narrative is so aggressively honest and raw that it feels disturbing and uncomfortable. At core, Lunn's narrative is that of a formerly incarcerated Black woman reflecting on her life, and the radical labors of Black livingness. That said, Lunn can no more tell the story of having "*made it to the other side*" that evokes the temporal joy harbored in the intonations of traditional Black gospel music, than without the telling of the pain that lays right alongside it. Indeed, it is the blue note variations signifying the notion and rituals of a 'blessed and redemptive pain'---akin to being deformed and informed/all at the same time/kind of Black pain. Lunn's exhortations can be imagined as the renditions of the soulful inhaled/exhaled/transformational pain intrinsic to the blues sensibility. In conceptualizing Lunn's narrative as an invite to journey with her as she unflinchingly confronts the harshest parts of her life, Lunn demands that we see and consider her whole Black woman human beingness, unadorned, in full.

By her own assertion, Lunn's multi-layered narrative of her life's journey had been largely defined by the pain of shame and self-loathing. Lunn's attestation necessitates a reading via a framework requiring attention to a continuum which enables and structures the caging of Black women as lived pasts, presents and futures at once. Which is to say, it is in the looking back from the present and the juxtaposition of looking forward that excavates the co-constitutive quagmires of statutory freedoms and unfreedoms that make up the myriad of constellations which 'police' the lives of presently and formerly incarcerated Black women. By default, and

never far from the surface is the nation's historiography of racialized and gendered hierarchies that are always in/at play through which Lunn's story can be deciphered and furthered understood.

*If Black Women Were Free...*

“It has nothing to do with not wanting to be a feminist,” but it is crucial for Black women to hold on to this very special tradition that we have, exemplified by Harriet Tubman, where you free yourself and you go back and you free other people.”

---Alice Walker

Taking up Alice Walker’s characterization of Tubman, in line with thinking through Lunn’s oral history and how the extraordinary lives of these two Black women show up in the world offers an expansive read of the living afterlives of the plantation and the prison as terrains of ongoing struggle and resistance. And while a lived experience of enslavement or incarceration does not, by itself, represent a radical politics, or posits a uniformity of thought or expression, the personal life stories of Tubman and Lunn are an interwoven recognition of the vibrant multi-articulations of a Black freedom struggle and its spatiality in the United States. Likewise, it’s also about how Black freedom struggles can be interrogated and understood not just from an individual, but also from a community perspective grounded in a radical liberatory politic that continues to speak to the needs, hopes and aspirations of Black people for themselves and by definition, for the nation-at-large. As a significant and compelling convergence, Walker provides the framework that offers a meditation on Black women, tradition, freedom and collective humanity.

Lunn’s oral history grapples with her struggle for ‘freedom’ in its numerous forms which was initially borne out of a rebellious desperation to escape the violences and volatility of her mother’s household. From that point on, freedom proves to be elusive and takes on various

guises at the different moments in Lunn's life, including drug addiction. Rooted in a truthfulness that remarks on fugitivity, Lunn's story is also a tale of self-efficacy and practice borne from her own unrelenting labors of a Black livingness.

Having navigated her own fraught and arduous path to 'freedom' and the negotiation of self-definition, Lunn says "In the past freedom meant breaking away from a dysfunctional family with a mother with undiagnosed and untreated mental health who was both verbal and physically abusive. Freedom isn't free. Freedom comes with a price, and for me it was abandoning the comfort of chaos in exchange for the discomfort of change. Like I said there will always be a price to pay, in my case it was losing my children. But freedom also gave me choices; I learned self-love and self-forgiveness. And in turn, I was able to find the true meaning of freedom. We all have a story, it's what I do with mine that sets me free. And whatever I do...well, I'm not just doing it for me, I'm also doing it for the 10 or so other women that's gonna come behind me. Hopefully, the world will give them a chance, an opportunity because they've seen what I done. They may just say, this one did it, maybe this other one can do it. So no, I do it not just for me, I do it for the women that's coming behind me because I believe we all can be successful in our own right, if given ample opportunity. I don't want to choke up, but you already know."

Circling back to Perry's remarks on 'fictive kinship,' it can be imagined that Lunn shares a fictive kinship with Tubman reflecting what I have previously referred to as 'memories of futures pasts.' In conversation with Walker's framework "where you free yourself and you go back and you free other people," Lunn recognizes the materiality of freedom is as elusive as its search. As a personal narrative, Lunn crafts a sense of self that emerges in response to the conditions of debasement and devalorization, which displays an ethos that stands as

fundamentally human. Consequentially, Lunn's story engenders a recognition for the breadth and depth of her humanity that is borne from a freedom previously only dreamt about.

The year 2022 marks the forty-fifth anniversary of the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement. Formed in 1974, the Combahee Collective was named in reverence, as well as to honor Harriet Tubman for leading 150 Black Union soldiers in 1863 on a raid on the Combahee River in South Carolina that subsequently freed more 750 enslaved people. Co-founded by Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith and her sister Barbara Smith, the Collective established a politic deeply rooted in a Black feminist framework and context with the insistence on foregrounding an intersectional analysis based in the material experiences of Black women under the strictures of capitalism. The Collective's statement was unabashedly radical and prescient in its declaration of the necessity of cohering and working across race, class, gender, and sexual orientation structures as keynote to an emancipatory politic to the benefit of all. Placing emphasis on the multiple and interlocking oppressions that Black women face, the Collective also underscored the contributions of queer Black feminists to the Black liberation struggle, as well as to the expansion of 'feminism' overall. Holding fast to the conviction of Black feminism as pedagogy and practice, the principles of the Combahee Collective Statement are summated in the oft quoted "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."

Dreaming and envisioning an altogether different world not as it is, but as it could be entails the kind of transformational change that finds its genesis in the personal. As a gesture to the Combahee River Statement, it is a world that Laurie Lunn, along with the many other presently and formerly incarcerated Black women continue to imagine and struggle for.

## Who Are These Women?

The ones I sit next to in the mess hall/dining on state cuisine with.

The ones who as I/count their existence in days/weeks/years.

The ones who may have taken a life/of one too young to defend its own/or maybe kept themselves from death in self-defense.

The ones who I shower with/exchanging tidbits about visits/with our families/children and lovers.

The ones who robbed to feed their drug habit/perhaps to feed their children.

The ones I sit next to in the bathroom/listening to them sigh in disgust/because someone is smoking in the bathroom/and I blow smoke rings.

The ones whom violence became a way of life/raising themselves up in the streets.

Because the community forgot/it takes a village to raise a child.

The ones who I hear cry after being hit at the Board/cause they already been down ten years or more.

The ones who come and share my purple circle/and drop a request in my god box.

The ones who taught me to love myself/cause if I don't nobody else will.

The ones whose shoulders I have leaned on/when the time was doing me---and who leaned on me/when the time got to be too much for them.

----Regina Jones/04G019

## **Conclusion: Carceral Geographies**

“Indeed, black matters are spatial matters.”

---Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (2006)

Theoretically, “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” serves as an interpretive lens which contemplates the contemporary geographies of carcerality---specifically the prison and its afterlives---transforming not only what we know about the ‘living prison’ experiences of Black women, but also providing potent insights into the spatiality and ecosystems of carceral exclusion. The mass incarceration of Black women and girls in the U.S. is not a nascent occurrence. As personal narratives, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women offer a remarkable telling that provide stark testimonials on the re-iterations and the ever-shifting arrangements of Black dispossession and displacement as the continuities of geographies of subjugation and punishment. Accordingly, the requisite regimes of the criminal legal and juridical structures and systems which codify Black loss and premature death are foundational to anti-Black violences and which are used to ‘manage’ Black people writ large. Stemming from the production of imposed and racialized identities drawn from and interwoven with the historiography of the Black Atlantic, it can be argued the Black Atlantic prefigures what would eventually metastasize as the nation’s contemporary carceral state.

As an interdisciplinary and public-facing work employing personal narrative and experience, the chronicles of formerly incarcerated Black women examine how the violent social constructions of racialized hierarchy are foundational in justification of gendered and racialized

difference, and its normalization. In other words, given the longstanding necessity of Blackness to the construction of the nation as a modern state, it is difficult to engage the genealogy of Black carceral geographies in the contemporary United States without a spatial imagining of the slave routes along the west coast of Africa. The enactment of the prison and its afterlives as a Black geography also necessitates a tracing back, for example, to the ubiquitous slave codes and slave patrols, chain gangs and convict leasing, and Jim Crow segregation, et al, which allows for an understanding of the contemporary manifestations of why and how policing and punishment takes place in a nation dependent on structures of caste and carcerality. In contemplation of the archives of Black remembrance that juxtaposes the notion of a past as anticipating the various incarnations of the carceral landscapes and its geographies of exclusion, a historiographic portal presents a method to further interrogate the unceasing, complex replications of carceral geographies that can also be understood as the ‘mapping’ of Blackness. Relative to what McKittrick theorizes as the plantation economy and its spatiality, it is neither unusual, nor inconsequential that several of the formerly Black incarcerated women interviewed for this project invoke the imaginary of slavery as a powerful metaphor for ‘living prison.’ This contextualization also remarks upon the transference of the intergenerational harms and socio-economic damage embedded in the ‘living memory’ of slavery as an indelible marker seared upon generations of Black people---most of whom are themselves, though not exclusively, the living descendants of the enslaved Africans. Thus, the envisioning of ‘freedom’ by currently and formerly incarcerated Black women emerges in conversation with ‘unfreedom’ and its attendant contradictions inherent to structures of caste and hierarchies of being.

Given the nation’s relentless/centuries-old campaigns to destabilize and extinguish the livingness of Black communities, including the time-worn policies of criminalizing largely poor

and working-class Black people in one form or another---the intertwining of the mass caging of Black people---i.e. ‘mass incarceration’---ushers in yet another reconfiguration and re-tooling of the revanchist post-slave society in the U.S. That said, the notion of reclaiming one’s own narrative power opens up the compelling possibilities of different ways of looking, as well as thinking more capaciously about the meaning of/and what/and how to read the histories of the United States. Black memory as the historical archive of Black freedom struggles and its collective resistance to political oppression and economic subjugation is rich and abundant, while also disrupting the imposition of narrow confines of discourse which discourages critical analyses. In much the same way, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women permit engagement in an enriched discourse that links the implications of the past and its breadth to what is occurring in our present moments. Correspondingly, the praxis of transgressive resistance by incarcerated Black women inside the prison and formerly incarcerated Black women outside the prison are also geographies of abolition which speak to freedom, mirrors the nation’s plantation past traced through the remembrance of the Black enslaved and formerly enslaved ancestors organizing and politically transforming themselves both prior to and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Provoking a critical reflection on the prison as a Black geography, the ‘living prison’ experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women transform not only what we know about the policing and prosecution of Black women, but insists on a recognition of the issues Black women and girls face. While noting the stories in “A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women” are individual narratives, taken together the stories offer up a captivating heterogeneity of accounts (not a single story) which chronicles the inherent violences

tethered to the carceral state adds up as powerful critique of the spatiality of carceral geographies, as more than the mere anecdotal.

Curating the narratives of the women as the archives of memory which shaped and provided form to this project required both a personal remembrance and reflection regarding my own labors of livingness as a formerly incarcerated Black woman. The realization and recognition that my lived experience is bound up in the historicity of a collective Black struggle summoned a critical re-thinking of my own political imagination and analyses. At the same time, the powerful storytelling by the women awakened my memory of the almost forgotten ethos of mutual aid care that is found in the prison, and which had been central to my surviving the penal. As a space where I had least anticipated to find community, the political practice of mutual aid and care in the penal served the necessary nourishment for many of us who have served time. As a politic of resistance, mutual aid and care that exists in the prison attends to the daily institutional rituals of punishment and subjugation, and its incessant visceral and cumulative psychological toll.

The oral histories of the formerly incarcerated Black women involved in this project are multi-vocal in nature, in that the recollections are comprised of many voices, past and present and future that influences the singular ‘one.’ In recalling their individual lives and experiences, the stories of the women contain the voices and perspectives for example, of a deceased grandmother, of children never known, as well as those of mothers and fathers and extended kinfolk. At core, the sharing of their personal stories performs the act of communicating the lived history of others which offers insight into Black lives, love, loss, pain and struggle as well as cautionary tales which can be imagined as almost mimicking the construct of proverbs. Needless to say, the narratives of the formerly incarcerated Black women speak to the gospel and the faith,

psalms of redemption, as well as to the blurred lines of the secular and profane. The attentive reader will note the common threads in the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women as a nod to parallels and patterns that point towards something akin to a redemptive pain of which something of value has been created, and that which is fundamentally human.

At the heart of the narratives of the women, however, lies a deep understanding that decodes a Black past and present as forms of disquisition relative to the continuities of carceral practices as the re-subordination of Black bodies already representationally chained and shackled---though the circumstances and conditions of such neither contains, nor diminishes the dignity of a Black livingness and its enduring humanity when everything else has been lost. As the practices of Black oral history have traditionally served as the primary means for preserving our own memories, the memories themselves are the notations that underscore the seminal impact of slavery on the country's formation, and on ourselves. Indeed, Black oral histories document the nation's history and culture which articulate the spatiality, scale and scope of anti-Black violences and the continuities of a racialized caste system in which Black people---especially Black women---have always occupied the bottom rung. In evoking the liberating aesthetic of storytelling, Black oral histories are enjoined in a powerful way to Black place-making and its geographic imagination.

In continuity, as well as being imbued with an affirmative politic of self-making, ingenuity, and commitment, the 'work' of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women posits an epistemological architecture deeply rooted in the Black vernacular culture of '*making something out of nothing*' as an historical embodiment of 'freedom-making.' Thus, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women are self-portraits which function in much the same way as Cudjoe Lewis's narrative in Zora Neal Hurston's "Barracoon: The Story of The

Last Black Cargo” (2018), offering credence to the contention that the labors of a Black ‘livingness’ and the American experience as mutually constitutive. As currently and formerly incarcerated Black women, it is precisely because of our historic and present social location tethered to our knowledge formation and production, that brings with it an experiential insight and analyses of the hegemonic political, institutional, and affective ideology integral to racialized and gendered geographies. That is to say, freedom becomes less of a theoretical/ephemeral concept---but rather a material reality grounded in the liberatory practices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women as both a personal and collective pursuit that harbors our humanity, dignity and hope. Firmly situated in the Black radical imagination, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women’s practices of freedom-making are not only the expressions of creating possibility out of dispossession, but are also about grappling with its historic ravages engendered by the attendant institutions of power grounded in the hegemony of anti-Blackness, and racial capitalism.

Rather than a mere conceptualization, the narratives of the formerly incarcerated Black women articulate mutual aid and care inside and outside the confines of the prison as a political practice whose genealogy is rooted in a radical revisioning of the world which imagines a Black livingness beyond the cages of the penal. As a political practice of resistance, mutual aid and care confronts the killing fields of the prison’s plantation past, present and futures which come laden with its history of the deprivation of rights, dehumanization and degradation. However, mutual care and aid is borne not only from necessity, but speaks to an intrinsic human dignity which can be understood as the inheritance bequeathed by enslaved people to presently and formerly Black incarcerated people. That is to say, the significance mutual aid and care as a

politic affords Black people the capacity to sustain our visions of freedom even under the most formidable of conditions.

As a Black methodology, oral history gives rise to new and innovative work on the representations and understandings of the past, present and future worlds which we all straddle, as a meditation on what once was and the potentiality of what could be. For those of us who have lived the prison in which our futures had already been foretold and foreclosed, and who have experienced the state-sanctioned violence of the benumbing spectacle of being caged up like animals, the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women posit a politic of resistance which maps the labors of livingness in which Black humanity is affirmed.

“A system cannot fail those it was never designed to protect” ---a quote often attributed to the late scholar-activist W.E.B. DuBois, points to the vast array of public systems fanged to capture the women and their kin, steal their futures are also reminders that these systems ultimately fail---as the dreams and desires of the women slip through, jump the barbed wire, shimmy between bars, and soar beyond the concrete walls of the prisons. In endeavoring to repossess and tell their own stories which entails powerful counter-narratives, formerly incarcerated Black women shift the prevailing accounts of incarceration in ways that highlight and unsettles the banality of the systemic violences produced by the institutional and structural agendas of the carceral state to which the public---and perhaps even those of us who have been subjected to egregious carceral harms, have seemingly become inured to. Given the spatiality and political economy of the prison industrial complex, reclaiming and the telling of our own stories is no small matter.

## **Ecologies of Carcerality**

Though often interrogated as a convergence which works to obscure the sedulous processes of the administrative apparatus of the nation's draconian 'war on drugs' and the onset of 'mass incarceration,' the ostensible drug war and mass caging might be better understood as co-constitutive. The continuity of the nation's criminal punishment stratagems and processes---the criminalization of drug users for example, including mandatory sentencing for non-violent drug-related felonies effectively unleashed a rash of disparate and deleterious harms across urban Black communities---perhaps none more so than the nefarious impacts on poor and working-class Black women and their children. Given the necessity for a far broader intersectional dialogue with regard to carceral geographies, including a wider breadth of lived experience articulated by those impacted directly and indirectly by the network of systems tied to carcerality, currently and formerly incarcerated Black women along with their children in particular, illuminate the violence of hidden carceral geographies of dispossession and displacement produced by the carceral state.

With few exceptions, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" as a dissertation project had always been imagined as an intervention that would intentionally draw on the brilliance of Black women scholars, educators, activists, poets, thinkers and creatives whose bodies of work as a whole, are racial in theme and treatment. The work produced by this group of border-crossing thinkers, represents a range of disciplines imbued with a specific political subjectivity and analysis which speaks to the breadth of Black matters and the dialectics of post-slavery carceral geographies, and notions of freedom and unfreedom, Black dispossession and acts of Black survival since time immemorial. In addition to acknowledging the multiple forms of Black knowledge—including spatial knowledge---this project's

foregrounding of the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women seeks to advance the analysis of the spatially extended cultural and gendered politics relative to the prison and its afterlives---along with an examination of the origins and conditions of the carceral ecologies of exclusion as the hideous vestiges and systemic reconfigurations of the political economy of Black subjugation.

In a 2022 interview with the on-line platform Jezebel, Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserted that, “freedom and liberation are a physical, tangible place—they’re material conditions, not platitudes and niceties from ultra-rich politicians. The age-old question, of course, is how we get to that physical place. Freedom is a place means we combine resources, ingenuity, and commitment to produce the conditions in which life is precious for all.” Gilmore goes on to state “So, no matter the struggle, freedom is happening somewhere. Through different forces and relations to power, the people are constantly figuring out how to shift, how to build, how to consolidate the capacity for people to flourish, to mobilize our communities, and stay in motion until satisfied.”

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