Abolitionist Intimacies

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I dedicate this book to all incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. I wrote to honour all who have lost their lives in this country's carceral institutions and all who have lost their lives after release due to neglect, lack of resources, ongoing trauma, and systemic violence, including the criminalization of drugs.

I remember the words of a young incarcerated man who told me, "one way or another, we all will be released." May that release come through freedom, and may we continue to fight for liberation and a world where prisons no longer exist.

Destruction

A LOVE POEM

There's a statue of your rapist
Overlooks the square where people gather
And high up on the hill
There's a plaque
To the men who shot your father
And the knowledge of their deeds
It just pass through them like water
So another generation
Learns from them to rape your daughter

I heard you moved onto a street
Named for men who led the slaughter
And when you begged to take it down
They told you go sit in the corner
And they say their speech is sacred
And yours just never matters
So the boot heel of the past
Will crush your throat
Forever after

But if you go get the ropes
I'll bring the bulldozer
Because what we learned from our history
Is how quick their idols shatter
And they taught us how to wipe away
And end the day in laughter
Like your grandmother's grandmother whispered
Soon, dear, it will be over

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Introduction

Rememberings

When I tell the story of my introduction to prison abolition, I begin with reading Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (2018). Growing up, I always saw the thick covers of Wilde's collected works high up on the bookcase, and thus I understood the book as a symbol of adult reading and of the mysteries of adulthood. When I was around thirteen, we went to Trinidad to celebrate my grandmother's ninetieth birthday. Stuck in the family home, I found my aunt's copy of Frank Harris's biography of Oscar Wilde. Recognizing Wilde's name, and very conscious of reading something importantly mature, encountering Harris's excerpting of Wilde's "Ballad" had a particularly moving effect on me. I immediately memorized many of the verses, and when we returned home, I took my parents' book from the shelf and read the entire poem.

I liken the reading of Wilde's poem to a kind of reverse Narnia. Rather than stepping into the fantasy world from which children are ejected upon aging out, reading Wilde was my entrance into understanding what I keenly understood as serious issues. For the first time, I acutely recognized an accounting of injustice. I grew up in a family marked by colonization where, in my own mother's lifetime, Trinidad had become independent. Later, the works of Eric Williams, C.L.R. James, Claudia Cumberbatch Jones, and other Trinidadian writers and thinkers would influence me, but at this age I had only my mother's family stories of oppression and resistance, which I had yet to apply to a more global analysis of power. Similarly, while I had intimations of feminist analysis as a young girl, I had not yet developed a feminist framework and certainly had not yet encountered the works of Black feminist writers. Reading Wilde was an opening into the world of social justice, of clearly seeing a wrong and burning to right it. I often tell people I became an abolitionist at thirteen.

Around that year, we had to write an essay in social studies class, and while most other girls chose issues such as photoshopping in maga-

zines, I decided to write on women in prisons. This was in the nineties. Looking back, I can assume I was influenced by the dialogue sparked by the 1990 report by the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, *Creating Choices*; the public discourse around the strip-searching of the women at Kingston's Prison for Women, which would lead to the Arbour Report in 1996; and even the outrage about Karla Homolka and the perception that she was doing unfairly easy time inside women's federal prison. I heard these discussions on CBC Radio, which my mother listened to as she drove us to our various lessons and commitments. I remember going to the Elizabeth Fry Society in Winnipeg, where we lived, and asking them for resources about women and incarceration; I also remember their bafflement, questioning if I had a mother in prison. I also remember reading an article in *Maclean's* magazine, which I found at the library, that discussed mother-and-child options for women in prison, although I cannot trace the exact article now.

I recount this beginning place because contained in this story is the outline of the shape my work has taken in adult life. I do not think it was a coincidence that this awakening was prompted by my geographic location in Trinidad — on my mother's side of the family, a place of home and dislocation, of diaspora and identity, of longing and return. If I did not yet understand my place in the African diaspora, I understood in some way our position of exile — what Rinaldo Walcott terms the Black Canadian condition, "pre-occupied with elsewhere and seldom with here" (2003, 27) — embodied in my grandmother's joyous entry into our bedroom at the crack of dawn on the day of our arrival, singing hymns of praise. At the same time, our inactivity inside the house and the circumscribing of our freedom, which led to exploring the bookshelves in boredom, was tied to narratives of danger that limited our movements and delineated the supposed unsafety of a Black country in relation to the imagined safety of white Canada. I can return to this geographic placement and tie my reading of Wilde to the uncertainty of the hybrid identity of diasporic Africans and the associated search for meaning.

In poetry, with Wilde, I also found the language to express issues of injustice that now animate my own poetry. Even unconsciously, I can trace how Wilde's work has crept its way into mine; for example, I can match the rhythm and form of Wilde's "I know not whether Laws be right / Or whether Laws be wrong / All that we know who lie in gaol

/ Is that the wall is strong" (*Ballad,* V: 1-4) against my "I know a man who stabbed a man inside and got sent off to the SHU / But he says when somebody comes after you, then what else do you do?" I can also connect this immersion in political poetry to the figure of my mother's father, a calypso artist in Trinidad who once sang the lyrics "Class Legislation" and was threatened with sedition by the British government:

> Class legislation is the order of the land.
> We are ruled with an iron hand.
> Class legislation is the order of the land.
> We are ruled with an iron hand.
> Britain boasts of democracy,
> Brotherly love and fraternity,
> But British colonists have been ruled in perpetual misery
> *Sans humanité.* (Rohlehr 1972, 4)

I am minded of NourbeSe Philip's (2005) description of calypso as a political language:

> Calypso has the potential of bringing us out of that fugue state where we flee the reality of what has been and is still around us. Using the Caribbean demotic, vernacular or nation language, calypsonians have sung our hopes and our dreams, have sent up the stupidities of the colonial masters, and present day politicians; have poked fun at ourselves and bigged us up; reminding us to remember. (10)

The mixed family pride and frustration at my grandfather's legacy — both his creative genius and the limitations placed by a colonial state on his capacity to exercise that genius — made his language a conscious part of my heritage.

My older sister was my introduction to Black literature. In Grade 9, her English class had been assigned a project where they had to collect one hundred poems on a single theme. My sister chose poems by Black writers, and in my habit of secretly trespassing into her room and stealing her books, I first encountered the voices of the Black authors absented from our school curriculum. Living in a white neighbourhood

and attending white schools, we found Blackness on the pages: my sister, finding a copy of Angela Davis's *If They Come in the Morning* (1971) on my parents' shelves, photocopied the image of Davis from the cover and pasted it up in her room. My sister, often unknowing, was my first guide to Black feminist writing and thought.

I can also trace in my child self the roots of activist engagement that cannot be separated from my creative work, scholarship, or indeed from my life as a Black woman. The self that went to the Elizabeth Fry offices for more information on women's housing conditions is found now in the shared struggle for freedom and justice with those behind walls. As Fred Moten (2003) reminds us, thinking and writing within the Black post-modernist frame requires that we think and imagine otherwise. This means turning my gaze toward Black feminism as a method of seeing and being in the world that requires we engage in the canon from a place of lived pedagogy and praxis. As a researcher, scholar, poet, and activist, and as a Black woman, my life and therefore my work is interdisciplinary in nature. It requires border crossings, rememberings and recallings that begin and are informed by voices from the margins, or as described within Black feminist research, research and knowledge that come from the peripheries.

Living Abolitionist Intimacy

This book is indebted to the courage, generosity, and teachings of many incarcerated people. Some are named in these pages; some contributions are not visible but are no less valuable.

The field of prison and abolitionist studies in Canada, while growing, is still often reliant upon analyses, data, and theorizing by US-based academics, activists, and writers. Importantly, Joy James (2020) critiques the academic trajectory of abolitionist studies, which has increasingly located the project of abolition within institutions and away from grassroots organizing including victims of state violence. It's crucial to note that this work did not begin with the intention of presenting it as a book; rather, it has its roots in the urgency surrounding prison justice and the testimony and advocacy of prisoners who continue to speak about their experiences, challenge decisions in court, strike, organize, and resist. At the heart of the exploration of intimacy throughout this work is the ongoing, loving sharing of our lives and experiences between

those inside and me on the outside. I name this method *abolitionist intimacies.* Intimacy is both my subject and my research method. I engage ideas of intimacy and their practices through their relationship to state violence at carceral sites including prisons, policing, borders, as well as through purported care institutions such as hospitals and social work. State policing of intimacy through mechanisms such as the prison visit, strip search, and community access to prison is contrasted to the building of intimacy through relationships and organizing with people inside.

The structure of this book attempts to honour this process of living intimacy by refusing the idea that the "real" work only exists in theoretical writing or university spaces. The multiple genres of this book capture the context of what it is to do abolitionist work on a daily basis and what it means to build abolitionist praxis. I do not believe abolitionist work can be ethically done as a "research agenda," and neither does our witness-bearing or commitment to each other end when the computer is shut down and the essay has concluded. To try to speak the prison is to try to bring into words the unspeakable, that which has been deliberately rendered hidden and impenetrable to us on the outside. In my creative work, in poetry, I have tried over the years to speak *with* those inside, to share with their permission their stories and living conditions but also to try to do justice to the words of incarcerated people — to bring into poetry the resilience, courage, and generosity of those inside who share their worst moments in the hopes it might one day help someone else.

To live as an abolitionist, to live in the world we want to build requires us to live differently (to echo Mariame Kaba), to change literally everything, including challenging our own thinking and even our language itself (Kaba 2021).

Abolition is a collective act, and so my book is intertwined with community in the long struggle for freedom that we continue to fight every day and that has continued even as this book was being written. I explore the personal and communal commitments that work toward building an abolitionist ethic based in a principled commitment to collective care. These modes of thinking emerge from a long history of Black feminist theorizing (Brand 1990; Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000; hooks 2000; Lorde 1984). I use a theoretical lens of prison studies, autoethnography, decolonial studies, Black feminism, and Indigenous knowledges as well as activist praxis informed by my location in African Nova Scotia.

The sections of the work, in creative conversation with each other,

anchor the scholarly work of prison studies not only in the university but in a rich tradition of collective resistance, speaking back, and refusal lived and felt from the words of hip hop artists, to murals for victims of police shootings, to marches and vigils, to community gardens that reclaim former prison space from developers (as in the former site of the Prison for Women in Kingston), and in the relationships built and shared as we struggle together in all of these spaces. Taken together, the sections of this work also recognize that the fight against prisons is also a fight against militarization, houselessness and poverty, gendered expectations and patriarchy, and all forms of confinement and control.

In this way, the form of this work tries to capture what it is to live in freedom alongside those without and what is asked of us as we try to turn those keys and break down those walls forever.

Notes on Prison

On knowledge

Sometimes I'll be talking to D. and I'll say something, and he'll say, You're bang on. Sometimes I say something, and he says, Where did you get that? A textbook?

On mothers

My mother was telling me to forgive myself because she thinks that I feel like I'm a bad person just because I've let her down and my brothers and sisters. Yeah, yeah, I play the blame game for sure. But I've learned to forgive myself. — *B.*

I drive D.'s mother to visit him. It's a four-and-a-half-hour drive. She hasn't seen him in over three years. Last time she visited, she hit on the scanner. She offered to let them strip-search her so she could go in to see her son, but they refused. She was banned from visiting for over a year. She tried to appeal the ruling, but the prison gets to decide. She tells me this driving up to the prison. When we get there, she starts shaking she is so nervous. People tell me the scanner hits for gasoline, for hand sanitizer, for road salt. We are warned not to use the sanitizer in the bathroom at the McDonald's in the nearest town. D.'s mother shakes the whole time we go through the detector, then the scanner, then the dog. When we get inside, D. comes in and they let him into the room with two remote controls in his pocket even though they searched him before he came in. We all break up laughing.

At A.'s sentencing, the crown reads a report from the psychiatrist he saw when he was a teenager. She asked for the report when he got in trouble as a youth, trying to get him help. Now they use it in court to suggest he doesn't have a good relationship with his mother, that she lied when she said they were close. They use her love for her son and her desperation against them both.

S. tells me his mother gave him up for adoption because his dad was Black. She kept his siblings. He used to see her on the street and beg her to let him come home but she never let him. S. says when he was in

foster homes, he used to act bad so they'd have to send him home. He says he can't stand to be alone now; he always needs people around. He thinks that's why he gets into trouble.

There's a poster in the visiting area. It's a picture of a baby in a diaper and pills. The message is that using your baby to smuggle drugs into the prison is child abuse.

L.'s mother loses her job because the police charge her with being an accessory. She ran outside to break up the fight and he ran away. There's a warrant out for him country wide, and he's in hiding. She says the police watch her all day and night. They charge her to try to make him give himself up. Private owners buy the housing she lives in and her rent goes from $200 to over $900. Her youngest son tells his elementary school teacher he wants to kill himself. Then her nephew gets arrested too. I come to see her and find her collapsed on the steps and drive her to the hospital. She needs lawyers for everyone, including herself.

T. is his mother's youngest. When he gets high, he steals from her. She doesn't know what to do to deal with his addiction. Sometimes she tries to lock him in the house, gives him whiskey to take the edge down. When he's high, he steals cars. He goes to his father's house and threatens him. T.'s mother promises to testify about his father's abuse in court. Sometimes she won't take his calls, but in the end she always does. T. always tells me he's doing good, he's okay, but he gets on the phone with his mother and cries. One time he drinks hand sanitizer and falls down and hits his head.

When A. is in reception, he bunks with a guy charged with rape. The guy tells A. he's guilty, but he can't tell his mother. He's scared she would kill herself. So, he pretends to her he never did it.

I'm waiting to visit at Burnside and the couple waiting tells me their daughter is allergic to shellfish. Her food in jail got contaminated, and she got rushed to the hospital and nearly died. She was there four days, and they only found out when she got back to the jail and called them.

W.'s mother emails my work. Her son is severely mentally ill, she says. He wrote a letter threatening to kill me. He threatened to kill her and

her husband. He is dangerous. She had to press charges. I hope someone got in touch with you and let you know, she writes.

M. is designated a dangerous offender. There's no phone calls the first six weeks of reception, so A. gets M. to tell his mother to text me, let me know he's okay. M. spends half an hour on the phone with me, telling me how to send boxes, what the quicker PO box is, the best way to ship a TV. Mothers do this for their children in prison. They love even the dangerous ones.

On requests

Akon, "Locked Up." Styles P, "Send a Kite." There is a whole catalogue of songs about being in prison. Why do they request so much hip hop people say, but who else is telling these stories or speaking to these experiences. Wait until you have a friend or child or lover in prison, then listen to "Send a Kite."

Some of the requests on July 4: Joey Stylez, "Indian Outlaw." AR-Ab, "Goon Story." Young Buck, "Gun Walk." Kevin Gates, "Hard For." Jadakiss, "What If Remix."

May 9: Lil Wayne, "Burn." 50 Cent, "High All the Time." Quake Matthews, "Picket Fence." Travis Porter, "Lose Your Mind." Chief Keef, "I Don't Like." 2Pac, "Thugz Mansion."

March 14: Lil Wayne and 2 Chainz, "Bounce." 2Pac, "Unstoppable." Lil Durk, "Ain't Did Shit." Rich Homie Quan, "They Don't Know." Lil Boosie, "Like a Man." Kevin Gates, "Wish I Had It."

They wait the week and call asking for songs. Maybe these are the songs echoing in their head all week. Maybe they're spur-of-the-moment requests. Usually, the caller takes requests from the whole range. Songs come with dedications and shout-outs. When you can't ask for anything all week, hearing a song you want makes a difference.

This is how we show our love.

There's a lockdown and some of the guys get out and call the local radio station. We've been locked up for weeks, they say. We don't have showers and they took all our mattresses and blankets. Listeners call in and tell

them they don't deserve showers; they deserve to be locked up. Y. calls them back and says, your listeners are all rednecks. Then the captain comes in the background and makes them get off the phone, and they block the number to the station.

Sometimes I listen to the radio in the car — not community radio, commercial radio — and I hear requests from Burnside. I know the names and the dedications. I know the songs.

I hear Lil Wayne is sent to the hole for being caught with an iPod. Lil Boosie gets out and doesn't know what Instagram is. I. says the songs they request are old and tired and we need to play up-to-date songs, just so they aren't frozen in time.

I'm locked up, they won't let me out. No, they won't let me out. I'm locked up, won't let me out.

On students

I used to teach in a program that was all Black people. I love those students so deeply. At Christmas, I write them a poem with all their names, to speak to them about how brave they are, how I see them, how much they've overcome.

Two of my students, R. and N., are arrested and charged with murder. I saw R. the weekend before, he talked to me about swimming in the river. R. wrote me essays about the monetary system and Africans and Christianity.

After I leave that job, I am teaching in a university and there is an adjustment curve. Students come to my office crying because they got a bad grade, or they had a breakup. I remember sheriffs coming to the door, students in court, students in shelters, students with bruises on their faces, students who never sat with their back to the door, students who got out and had panic attacks in malls.

We make contact again over the radio and he asks for articles, sends letters with questions about books. He talks about his search for knowledge, writes about taking university courses.

When I taught in that program, we believed education was the key to

unlock futures. And O. went to prison, B. went to prison. And A. was wanted on a warrant and ran for months, and N. talked to me on the radio from jail, and sometimes I feel everyone I taught all inexorably end up at the same point. Sometimes it's hard not to despair — why we do this at all.

But R. writes about keeping his mind positive, about reading and learning. I remember we always said learning is lifelong, even life-sentences long.

We always pictured what we taught them taking them into programs, schools, careers. Lying at night in your bunk, keeping your mind positive, reading everything you can get your hands on — that's not a failure.

R. asks me, do I still have the poem I wrote about them. Can I send it, please.

On connectivity

A.'s mother gets her home phone number blocked for doing a three-way to his father. Then they block her new number because she clicked over to the other line during a call.

Calls from Burnside are $1.20 per minute plus service fees, so $25.00 of calls costs $32.00. From Cape Breton and Pictou, it's $7.00. Most people don't have that kind of money.

People are always asking me to send texts. Most of the texts are, can you put money on his phone. Sometimes girlfriends text me, I missed his call. Once in a while women text, tell him don't ever contact me again.

Prisoners can send mail, but it costs money for envelopes, papers, pens. The pens are designed so people can't make weapons out of them. Everyone complains they don't write properly and run out of ink if you don't hold them upright.

Positive family interaction has been identified by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) as one of the prime factors in the successful reintegration of offenders.

"Family is one of the dynamic factors that CSC has identified as contribut-