Ghastly Renderings: Carceral Literary Studies and the Intricacies of Space-Time

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As part of an anticipatory vision spanning more than three centuries, prison life writings represent the dialectics of struggle over temporality imposed by racial capitalism at least since the transatlantic slave trade, and in particular when enslaved people began writing back against their enslaved condition. In the writings of carceral witnesses today we can experience reverberations theorists call "hauntological" as the carceral witness, those who find themselves enmeshed in the architectures of incarceration, is both the embodiment of ghosts of America's past and a ghost of their identities which cast them in the prison space. Through a literary analysis of contemporary prison life writings, those considered to have a degree of "ordinariness," not written by a celebrity who has been exceptionalized, we can see racial capitalism's workings in plain view by some of the most impacted by cultural violence.

Hauntology and Intersubjectivity of Carceral Narratives

Though I will address the theory of history called hauntology more in depth below, in terms of narrative theory, intersubjectivity, the idea that our identities are part of and shaped by culture and other people, is a key to understanding how prison life writing is hauntological. You can never understand people except through their relationships with others and the society. It is intersubjective to say we are all connected to the past which created this future. Carceral witnesses are showing a type of disidentification with an accepted, linear, and hegemonic timeline and understanding of history, that is a neatly packaged "American History," and showing the fragmentation of this widely accepted story by sharing their own lives. Intersubjectivity is a concept which subverts carceral personal responsibility narratives across time and space.

Often in the narrative of "a crime" there is an understanding that one main actor, the accused, is the sole responsible party being asked to hold accountability. However, when we look at the formation of a story, especially in prison life writing, we realize there has been a lead up to any activity deemed criminal that includes whole families, communities, laws, society and culture. There is more to the act of calling yourself "I." People are not exactly individual actors, but are influenced by a variety of social factors, past and present. This idea of being connected to each other is spectral because it is social forces which influence individual actions. Lives always intersect, no one acts alone. There is always a looming influence, a presence, whether familial, institutional, governmental, ideological, which complicates a writer's "I."

Hauntological Theory and "Doing Time"

Hauntology is a way to discuss history as a spectral and temporal phenomenon which contributes to the literariness of prison life writing. Whatever action you take creates ghosts of actions you did not take. Though we can't fully apprehend the ghosts of racial capitalism through prison life writing we at least catch glimpses. One changed social condition, like a law, for instance, can alter the life of

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a person and future generations. I'd venture prison life writing has, what Mark Fisher calls: a "failure of the future" (16). I'm applying hauntology to say prison life writing contains echoes of peoples' lives throughout racial capitalism's history of forced labor and captivity which now manifests in the modern prison. When we say "doing time," what are the metaphysical and practical implications of such an experience? When describing "hauntology" the contested "coiner" of the word hauntology, Derrida, uses Hamlet's declaration "the time is out of joint" (13).[1] Shakespeare's wording incorporates the metaphor of the body having an element dislocated, a painful condition, to explain how there is a disjunction with the past, present, and future, or, the futures were created by an unjust past. Hauntology deals with the imagined social futures of people and all of the factors which create these futures. Constantly people are resisting futures created for them by racial capitalism's social conditions. For example, if a person was dealing with a trauma which led to their use of psychotropic drugs and future incarceration, there are many ghosts surrounding that person based on the ways society is structured. There is a ghost of who the person might have been if they never used the drugs. There is a ghost of who the person could have been if there was rehabilitation instead of punitive measures like the prison. There is a ghost of the person who would have been if the trauma never happened.

Hauntology explains the living condition of longing for a future that could have been. It applies to history itself: what if the Reconstruction Era wasn't sabotaged by the racial capitalist forces of white supremacy? What if, even further back, slavery never existed? There are futures now that would look much different on this continent. Though all of these futures exist in the ether as possibilities, they will be subdued by the sociocultural forces in play. More pointedly, what if more social programs were put in place, ala continuations of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, instead of carceral culture? Or more analogously, what if programs like the War on Poverty were always the go-to solution, instead of punitive carceral programs like the War on Drugs or the War on Terror? The War on Poverty fights a social condition leading to desperation. The War on Drugs fights people who are trying to survive racial capitalism by participating in a drug economy, an alternate economy, and punishes them, allowing for extraction of their labor even as they are attempting to be in charge of their own labor. The War on Terror uses xenophobia to limit the futures of migrants and extract labor from them, entrapping them with their dreams of economic and personal freedom. To oppose this, to create non-carceral futures, many facets of society would have to change, mainly the criminalization of poverty which causes much of what is currently written as "crime." One of the concepts that creates different future possibilities is the idea transformative justice advocates put forward: *"you are more than your past."* People in prisons are perpetually recreating futures from the act(s) of "crime" which cast them in the prison space. Carceral subjects are continually asked to relive their past during parole hearings, in everyday life as an excuse for further abuses from the state, through family communications, appeals and continuations, and, for some, in the media, so the nature of their lives also becomes spectral. Hauntology, ultimately, is the assertion that people do not exist outside of history, and, literarily, texts do not exist without other texts. This makes the nature of existence quite referential.

"Lingering Pastness" and "Being with the Other" as the De-reification of Carceral Culture's Individualistic Paradigm

There doesn't seem to be a better example of a story following a dialectics of struggle over racial capitalism's temporality than that of Terrance Sampson. Not only does this story stretch over several decades, the sociocultural issues surrounding his life of course stretch much longer, as we should recognize of all people, but Sampson's life story, when observed from his own writings and the writings detailing other observations from his life, is a picturesque telling of carcerality's spectral phenomenon. Sampson's creative nonfiction essay "Evolution of a Dreamer," in the collection *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America*, connects with intersubjectivity, and we start to see the idea

of harm having multiple victims–including the one who commits the harm. Written in the style of a redemption arc found in confessional traditions and contemporarily in self-help literature, Sampson's point of view certainly warrants a title "Evolution" since he was incarcerated most of his life. Venturing to make a broad and universalist statement: no person stays the same for the duration of their life. Taking up writing in his 30's with the intention of imparting wisdom from long-term incarceration, Sampson uses recognizable forms to subvert antipathy and reassert his presence and humanity after the erasure of the prison environment. By doing a reading of Sampson's essay along with archival supplements to aid in understanding, we catch a glimpse of prison life writings' "lingering pastness" and "being with the other," demonstrating its haunting dimensions (Venn).

Sampson's story was one which encouraged me to search in news archives in particular to deal with the history of Sampson's life and its interconnectedness with the sociocultural landscape. Incarcerated people contend with outside forces like local and national politics which complicate their lives and subsequently their writings. A news story, especially with digital technology, can appear at any time, even after people have "moved on" and seek a new start. Sampson's case took place in Texas where he was tried as a 12 year old and sentenced to 30 years. I considered anyone potentially teaching these stories would see how unrealistic it would be to expect students to resist looking further into the authors' circumstances, especially cases which had been sensationalized like Sampson's. Sampson's case was more recent (early 1990s), which means internet searches will populate more results. Sampson has also written a number of self-published books which are available on online platforms. The multiplicity of archival information surrounding Sampson's case shows the spectral nature of being captive in America.

The main point of intersubjective contact is that Sampson's life is deeply intertwined with his murder victim's mother, Judy Dutcher, as I will emphasize further by pointing out recent journalism articles. Couze Venn explains, "The shared character of identity, the way in which we can think of ourself as a particular self only by reference to being-with-the-other, means that identity is always-already cultural." In terms of critical justices, this interconnectedness when dealing with harm is an element which gets us thinking of non-carceral solutions. In other words, the prison's occupants are not dealing with an individual pathology, but whole matrices of cultural actors.

Sampson's writing de-reifies carceral logic by showing the knowledge gaps created by the news sensationalism surrounding his case. His father's child abuse, for instance, is noticeably left out of published news items–news items which graphically describe any other aspect of Sampson's case. As any specialist in child development could attest, a 12 year old who acts out violently has been subject to violence themselves. Sampson's case was not pursued with any of these things in mind but politicized under Texas' new (circa 1989) pilot law which allowed children as young as 10 to be sentenced. These cases were routinely steered by coverage by the news and the families of the victims, which is how Sampson's case was handled. The case was further complicated because he was a young black child, treated like an adult, and the other child he murdered, his friend, classmate, and neighbor was a white girl. Historically in cases with black children they are treated like adults, whereas white children do not face these racialized identity cues, they are just seen as children. Many remember the cases of Trayvon Martin and Emmit Till as exemplifying white people's gaze of black children. This is an example of the historical forces which determine futures for vulnerable subjects and just one of the violent social projects of racial capitalism.

Sampson's case also demonstrates the carceral logic of sensationalized stories of "juvenile offenders" (as they are packaged and branded by the system) as analyzed by Nell Bernstein in her text *Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison*. Racial capitalism creates the perfect conditions for child abuse, and none of the conditions for a safe parenting experience, especially not economic resources. It has also become profitable to entrap young people in the carceral system. One of the undercurrents Bernstein has found concerning the callous lock up of many children who find themselves within these severe lives is what is sometimes termed the "million dollar block" defined as:

> ...pockets of immiseration where we spend that sum or more each year to lock up large proportions of the residents. Less remarked upon is our proclivity for churning out million dollar kids. On average we spend $88,000 per year to incarcerate a young person in a state facility–more than eight times the $10,652 we invest in her education. In many states the gap is even wider….The young people who rack up the million dollar tabs behind bars, and the many more we spend hundreds and thousands to incarcerate, generally get the message: that they are at once disposable and dangerous–worth little to cultivate but anything to contain. (Bernstein 5)

Sampson and others are not necessarily threatening in and of themselves; people who feel broken and in need of huge supports rarely are truly fearsome, but their cases carry financial incentives along with boosting political and cultural agendas. The transformation of the person when they enter into the system is carefully described by Sampson several times as well, including mention that in the first six months of his prison sentence he "witnessed a man killed"(Larson 98). Sampson entered the prison as a child, much of his identity was created around the prison. There's much discussion of the "prison street life" and witnessing violence and drug abuse in heavy concentration, unlike on the outside of the prison (Larson 98). The deadening social relations do mirror the outside, but they are more concentrated on the psyche because violence seems more palpable. Even if your crime had been a moment of despair, a psychotic break, mental health crisis, or the culmination of trauma, now you'd be forced to witness harsh violence in this place that was called a "corrections facility." Sampson was put in an environment where, instead of merely grappling with what he'd done, he would be growing up around exponentially more degradation and violence.

Sampson's outlook on his whole life changed once in the adult prison, and since he recalls "because of the circumstances surrounding my crime and the response from the public, I believed I would be in prison for the rest of my 30-year sentence. Resigned to my fate, I chose the fast life to make time fly" (Larson 98). By fast life Sampson means he adopted a violent persona in order to "run from the reality of pain, guilt, and shame that up until that time lived in the forefront of my mind"(Larson 98). As Sampson embraced the violence of the prison, on the outside his parents had begun a series of changes which allowed them to become more supportive of their child, despite remorse for earlier years. His parents came to visit often. It wasn't until a "deep cut" in his "left forearm that was about three inches wide" almost killed Sampson that he began a different type of existence within his prison environment where he could "share my testimony on the need for accountability, responsibility, and change with those who are lost in the same false sense of reality that I once lived in" (Larson 99-101). As we will see in other prison life writings, Sampson's near death experience was one of the incidentals of prison life. It is only by chance Sampson survived this experience, and only by chance that he began to recognize in order to further survive, he had to somehow stay away from conflicts and begin to think about how healing could still happen in the prison space. Even still: prisons are not designed to bring about this type of self-awareness. It is only by chance these types of ontological experiences come about when everything in a prison is designed to promote violence and death.

From the living conditions to the social relations, prison is not designed to be a hopeful place. It was from here, though, from his own place of reconciliation, Sampson would try to heal from the violences he was subjected to–both in childhood and inside the prison. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this healing process was Sampson's continued encounters with his victim's mother, Dutcher. Dutcher remained the link between Sampson and escaping the prison. Each time she chose retaliation by influencing his parole hearings, for almost 30 years, and ensuring he would remain in the prison. Sampson and Dutcher create a surprising undercurrent demonstrating Venn's being with the other that shows the multiple sociocultural factors which determine carceral futures and how individual actors are merely tools of racial capitalism's social projects.

Racial capitalism's schematics make it seem as though we are all individual actors acting outside of time, space, and politics. The truth is we are always acting with others. When we pick retaliatory practices instead of healing ones we create timelines with no relief from pain. The article that helps create a clearer picture of Sampson's time arc with Dutcher and shows being with the other is called

"A murder victim's mother finds forgiveness after 27 years" dated August 21, 2020. The article's author, Jill Ryan, starts in with the basic elements of the event which precipitated Sampson's almost 30 year prison life, a visceral yet dry declaration that "In a suburb near Austin, Texas, a popular and athletic 13-year-old girl named Kelly Brumbelow was found dead in a pile of firewood. Her 12-year-old friend and neighbor Terrence Sampson had stabbed her 97 times in the head and face." A month before 1990, Sampson was playing basketball with his friend, Kelly, when her mother called her in to answer the phone. A small event like Kelly being called to the phone, though seemingly insignificant to many people, was triggering to Sampson because of his turbulent and violent childhood at home (as we can read in his self-narrative). He believed, at the time, his friend was abandoning him, so he,

> …went back into his house and dialed Kelly's number. She answered; no busy signal. But what he didn't know was that Kelly's 1989 phone had a call waiting, allowing her to hold one call while she answered another. Thinking she had lied, he said on the phone he had a surprise for her and she ran to his house. And that's where he killed her. (Ryan)

Ryan interviewed Sampson's social worker, Carolyn Esparza, at Giddings State School where he lived after his sentencing:

> …social services administrator Carolyn Esparza helped him realize and process what he had done. She remembers him telling her about that day in December 1989. "He said, 'And then I saw her running across the front window.' And I said to him, 'Terrence, she was running to your house,'" Esparza said, pointing out to Sampson, that only a friend would be excited enough to run over. "And he broke down," Esparza said. "He understood. She did like him. She cared about him. She was his friend … and the grief was just extraordinary." (Ryan)

The article continues after that to accomplish the full agenda of the piece, but does take a moment to also discuss major events of coercion Sampson endured at his young age when he was bribed by the assistant superintendent of Giddings State School to either agree to confirm a story they made up about Sampson that he said if he "got out, he would go and kill Kelly's mother and then everyone in Giddings' administration," or serve his remaining time there, five months, in isolation. Sampson said he felt frightened and did not understand the stakes that he could have been paroled at that point. Instead he was transferred to adult prison to serve the rest of his sentence when he was 18. Ryan also points out at that time, Texas was instituting new laws: "Texas became one of the first states in the country to implement determinate sentencing, known elsewhere as blended sentencing. Texas, now allowed children as young as 10 to face up to 30 years of probation or incarceration for certain crimes" (Ryan). Sampson's life was full of these crucial turning points where he is let down by people in charge and the path is more violence. He was let down by his parents, his community who sensationalized his case, the state of Texas which decided to impose harsher sentencing for children, and this superintendent who obviously had a "million dollar block" agenda.

At the pinnacle of her grief in 1991 Dutcher took her case to the legislative bodies and helped pass new laws: "One law extended the maximum determinate sentence by 10 years. Texas children as young as 10 can be tried under determinate sentencing, for certain crimes, and face up to 40 years"(Ryan). Dutcher adds that people have told her about child development reasons why her behavior toward Sampson was cruel:

> Some people think, 'Man, 40 years for a kid, they deserve a break. Their brain isn't fully functioning.' I've heard all of this. I've studied all of this. But anyone that can intentionally inflict that much damage, no one will ever be able to convince me that they don't know what they're doing. (Ryan)

Dutcher's unwavering commitment to ignoring the research on child development is certainly tied to the immense grief she carries, and her thoughts are a product of racial capitalism's carceral logics. A connection Sampson and Dutcher unwittingly shared was participating in a restorative justice program called Bridges to Life. Dutcher admits she became a facilitator of the restorative program for others over the years even while she was protesting every parole hearing for Sampson from

1995–2018 and even as "forgiveness" was a piece of the curriculum she was teaching to others. She apparently broke down at one of the facilitated sessions of Bridges to Life while teaching, finally admitting she was being hypocritical. Dutcher claims at the present day she has forgiven Sampson saying, "I finally was able to forgive him for this. I didn't do it for him"(Ryan). She claims she forgave so she could stop feeling like a hypocrite at meetings, but it doesn't seem like there is much hindsight or understanding of forgiveness itself or understanding of the peculiarities of how her daughter's case was used by the state to create cruel "tough on crime" policies to make more revenue from the imprisonment of traumatized children.

When discussing how it felt to be incarcerated as a child Sampson details in "Evolution of a Dreamer,"

> I was confused about a lot of things: Why had I done what I had done? Why didn't my parents love me? Why didn't my mother show me any affection? Why was my father so cruel to me? What had I become? I had many questions, but no way to find answers. I was just simply lost. I spent most of my time in a state of confusion and fear. I was a twelve year old kid trying to figure things out, and I really had no help because I was looked upon with disdain by everyone from the very beginning. Although I didn't know exactly what people's intentions were around me, I knew they didn't wish me well, and that went with authority figures as well as my youthful fellow prisoners. (Larson 96)

It's hard not to see a flippant disregard for children in American culture in Sampson's story. Kiese Laymon, in "I Am a Big Black Man Who Will Never Own a Gun Because I Know I Would Use It," describes the philosophy of racial capitalism when it comes to children, arguing "there has never been a time in this country's history when American grown folk have refused to murder children." From child abuse in a home filled with its own traumas, guilt from the harm he caused as a result, and the massive trauma called the prison industrial complex, Sampson followed the carceral trajectories racial capitalism cultivates so well. Sampson used violence because he knew violence. His parents knew violence, and intergenerational trauma is tangible. Sampson's prison life writing and accompanying archival news pieces is a representation of this phenomenon, a way to really see how racial capitalism's carcerality traumatizes children, many of whom become adults forever imprisoned in one way or another; there were various violent social and political forces which pushed him forward into a carceral future. Those factors included his parent's violent coping mechanisms to deal with daily life in a violent society, the way white society eerily sees black children as taking on adult characteristics, Sampson's victim's mother latching on to white society's violent coping mechanisms to deal with the death of her child–including being tokenized to pass new and violent laws concerning children, and the violence Sampson faced inside the prison ecosystem.

The trajectory of children in racial capitalism seems doomed since racial capitalism provides all the best precursors for child abuse. When children react violently to these social conditions and give into the inertia of the carceral trajectory they are providing more capital accumulation and fuel to both the projects of eugenics and ghettoization. By being removed from their communities, children who are entrapped by carcerality remove valuable community resources: themselves. Children are seen as a hope for the future, and when they are removed it is like cutting life from the landscape.

In terms of hauntings and narrative of prison life writings, Sampson also raises questions of voice. If we've seen Sampson, like others, use the style of the confession, self-help, redemption narrative, his story spread across archives, news sites, even in therapy communities of restorative justice, then we have an expanded sense of intertextuality and intersubjectivity. Sampson's voice not only takes on multiple forms, but it also permeates in places where he is absent. Just like the story told to the jury in a court, it is the ghost that we continue to speak about who is subjected to the temporal projections of the prison. The body of the subject functions as an incidental, an appendage attached to the apparition of a story. Sampson's title,"Evolution of a Dreamer," for his *Fourth City* essay, then, is appropriate to the disembodied phenomenon; Sampson's dreamer as phantasmagorical spirit enduring spectacle, their story projected across timelines and mediums. Though "dreamer" is supposed to endear us to the redemption confessional common in prison life writing, its functions are far exceeded.

Child Abuse, Child Separation, and the Carceral Hauntology of Stolen Time

In Taisie Baldwin's themes from her transcribed story for *Inside this Place Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons*, in particular chasing safety and fragmentation of time, we can see how racial capitalism creates all the conditions necessary for child abuse, especially economic insecurity and lack of community support. Baldwin deals with the criminal charge of stealing through forgery in her story. Yet, racial capitalism's forced labor paradigm should leave readers wondering how much was stolen from Baldwin: in her childhood and beyond. Baldwin's family was constantly chasing security through their migrant work, but, like many others, they just kept uprooting, traveling, never finding any safe place where they would have resources for survival for very long. This feeling of never being safe, constant movement is a type of point of view Baldwin developed over her life, even through the stationary space of the prison where her daughter was taken from her and put in the foster system. These stolen moments and fragmented timelines define Baldwin's story here, but they also connect her to the prison life writing genre and all the people who've traversed the prison space.

The featured heading of the first section of Baldwin's transcribed story in *Inside This Place* is "Flashes of Places I've Been In"(Levi 163). Baldwin relates,"My childhood, in my mind, is not chronological. It's flashy"(Levi 163). Baldwin's family memories are fragmented because they moved enough places that Baldwin attended up to "thirty three different schools"(Levi 164). When every place has the same architectures, chain stores, prefabricated houses, it sends the message that anyone could move at any time and nothing will be sacrificed. This is an illusion which undermines community, history, and feelings of safety.

Baldwin's family could not stay in one place because of the nature of migrant work being precarious and floating. This left Baldwin to deal with the psychic stresses of constantly adapting to new precarious environments with, it seems, new dangers, which she was not protected from. It is pointless to blame her family who was just trying to survive the work itself. A lifestyle so precarious is not limited to migrant workers, but it is not hard to see this type of lifestyle would make a child feel unsafe. With the addition of an abusive uncle, this childhood for Baldwin was filled with unresolved trauma like a bomb that could explode at any moment. Heartbreakingly, too, it's hard not to feel like Baldwin's childhood was taken away by the sociocultural pressures of survival which constantly uprooted her.

The other subheadings of Baldwin's chapter in *Inside This Place,* in addition to "Flashes of Places I've Been In," are: "Two Days After I Met Him, I Moved In With Him," "I Always Held My Head High," "My Parents Made Big Promises," "I Forgot That I Was a Prisoner, I Was a Mother," "When She Turns 18, I'll Be There." Comparatively, Baldwin's narrative is rather short, thus less subheadings than other chapters. However, in the text itself, the fragmentation representative of Baldwin's real life shows a narrative choppiness that sets a certain tone which makes a type of rhythm: *move, move again, change schools, go to the juvenile home, move, move again, get taken here, new school, meet someone, cut wrists, move here, meet man, get pregnant, go to jail, go to prison, give birth, give up baby…*on the surface it seems like notes on a life, which it is, but it's also one jarring circumstance after another with no break.

The other striking thing about Baldwin's narrative, from a literary perspective, is that in the brief biographical blurb above her story it tells readers "Taisie's narrative has been edited from interviews conducted by Voice of Witness and a previous testimony, in which she describes medicals [sic] runs to the hospital and programs available to pregnant women in prison"(Levi 163). It's hard to determine how the story was edited from this "previous testimony," but perhaps she added to a previous iteration of some parts of her story for Levi and Waldman. This rhetorical process of adaptation, oddly, reminds of the fragmentation Baldwin is describing as taking place in her life. Yet it seems this irony may be lost on the editors who have collaged her words from previous testimony into a larger work.

As a teen, Baldwin was in "a juvenile home, a lock-up" for three years (Levi 166). When Baldwin became an adult she was in a relationship with a man named Billy who she used to write "bad checks"

with. Eventually she was caught doing this forgery and this is what eventually set her up to be incarcerated. The idea of "writing bad checks" is laughable considering the atmosphere of predatory lending, the invisible world of "credit" and "credit scores" designed to keep people borrowing and paying excessive interest on those bad faith loans. Baldwin's "bad checks" are a direct opposition of the debt based entrapment Wang describes, and therefore Baldwin had to be punished for her lack of reverence to the banks who extract from the public. Debt-based extraction is "legal"; it is only when ordinary people try to do these tricks with money that it becomes "criminal."

At the time of incarceration Baldwin was 20 years old, 39 days pregnant, and a type 1 diabetic which made her a high risk pregnancy. As she was coming into the prison environment they asked Baldwin to decide right away if she wanted to get an abortion. Baldwin describes being chained, regularly strip searched, all the other pregnant women she was being held with, and her surprise there were so many other pregnant women in prison. When she was about to give birth, the state told her they were unable to locate the child's father and therefore her parental rights would be taken away along with her child. Here, again, Baldwin is forced to deal with more theft in her life, first her childhood, then her own child. During the birth Baldwin experienced joy; she was able to keep some incidental x-ray pictures of her child in lieu of actually being able to care for her since she was already trying to prepare for the time she would be stipped of her parental rights. She was unable to breast feed, not because of anything medical, but because of the pressures of the environment and the anticipation of her child being taken away. Baldwin was unable to sleep for fear of losing time with her daughter, routinely in chains, verbally abused by staff. This was just a common sight for "corrections staff"–they didn't feel "prisoners" should be parents anyway, even though the idea of a prisoner is socially constructed.

The entire scenario of Baldwin's birthing experience has a long history of documentation in prison life writing and has become one of the many staples of the genre. It is a reflection of racial capitalism's threats towards pregnant people and parents, the threat of suffering and separation. As Dorothy Roberts exposes in *Killing the Black Body* the struggle for reproductive rights reaches further than the option to have a safe abortion and Taisie Baldwin's story is a testament to that–it has to do with the lack of opportunities to become a "safe parent" as well (Roberts 299-300). Baldwin's story is striking in her point of view as a pregnant, birthing, and postpartum person in prison and her historical connection to others who have given birth while incarcerated. There is a ghost story there of the stolen relationships between parents and their children. The state would rather separate children from their families than provide restorative/rehabilitative services to parents and communities because these practices are more profitable and help maintain a fearful culture where parents feel pressure to conform to a life of labor or lose the opportunity for family.

As fictionally featured in the television series *Atlanta,* an episode in the third season deals with a foster family murder after a white family began adopting displaced Black children in order to pay the rent ("Three Slaps"), which is based on a real foster family murder, The Hart family. A foster setting is not always the "saving grace" people may assume it is. In Baldwin's story, the family who adopted her daughter, Elaine, used religion as a justification to keep Baldwin from reconciliation efforts and erase Elaine's connection to any identity development related to her mother. But in Baldwin's story, the "I" of telling is not just Baldwin, again, it is all the families who have to deal with a carceral pregnancy experience. It is a part of the legacy of America's family separation.

Baldwin's concluding few paragraphs are some of the most vexing of all because of the situation of incarceration itself, but also the common rhetorical devices in *Inside This Place*, specifically the conclusions. The final words are concerning Baldwin's terminated parental rights and her daughter's placement with a foster family. The family lied to her with a promise to allow her to see her daughter after release saying they only made the promise because they thought Baldwin would never get out [of prison] (Levi 174). In response to this betrayal of trust and upon reflecting on expectations for the future Baldwin says,"When Elaine turns eighteen, I'm showing up. I just want her to know that I love

her, and that I've tried to be there for her. I know I can't do it until then, but when she turns eighteen I'll be there"(Levi 174). Statistically, because of her status as an incarcerated person, a lot could happen from the time she was writing, 2011, to the time, in the narrative and reality, when Elaine "turns eighteen." Though I have not been made privy to any recent information on Baldwin (was not available in public domain), I wonder if her resolve was unfounded and she was again disappointed? At thirteen Baldwin's mom also gave her custody rights to the state after many years of abuse and neglect, so the system intervention continued generationally with Baldwin's daughter (Levi 165). This type of urgent narrative denouement is another characteristic of prison life writing–a rush to carry the tradition of the popular fairy tale moral-at-the-end-of the story. The larger reality of Baldwin's story is intertextual, carried from generations of past, and carried into the future–a story which we can anticipate as well as estimate based on previous stories–unless sociocultural intervention is mapped. In a perverted sense, readers, Baldwin's imagined audience, are not looking for a sense of ease, a point of departure from the spectacle. In this way, prison life writing, in memoirs like Baldwin's, have a sharp disconnect between the told story and the underlying discourse.

To look further into the discourse, a reading needs to be performed which is in line with history. Baldwin's experience is part of a long arc of the division of vulnerable families.

Baldwin's narrative represents a legacy and a philosophy of racial capitalism which keeps people traumatized and desperate, having to move from one exploitative space to the next. This is beneficial for the capitalist class because it breaks apart any trajectory towards community or reconciliation. It also denies the ties people share, the idea of blood memory, and props up the adoption industry which rewards families who encourage and perpetuate stereotypes about where adoptees "come from," which is to say they demonize the birth parents for sociocultural factors they cannot control. These stereotypes are not just "pure statement of fact," but a shield over the process of family separation causing rupture and objectification.

From her family's precarious status as migrant labors, to unresolved sexual abuse, abusive relationships, violence, and having her own daughter taken away, Baldwin has been in many situations where her safety was compromised and she felt powerless. Most of all, she has experienced the temporal condition of lost time–both in and out of prison. Carceral subjects deal with an immense sense of loss. It is important to note this profound feeling of stolen time is replicated in forced labor and captivity. It is part of the violent and deadening social relations of racial capitalism. Even if Baldwin could work through the traumas of her childhood, could therapy really repair the carceral state having taken so much from her? The next section deals with the idea of fighting for the right to dignity inside the prison, an idea which can seem futile when therapeutic modalities, which are already scarce, will only insist on personal responsibility instead of social change initiatives.

The Beneficial Resistance of Predecessors and History of Others as Part of Prison Life Writings' "I"

Inside the prison ecosystem, there have always been people who resist violent and deadening social relationships. Transformation is typically incidental and hard won within the prison space. Prisoners have fought for things as fundamental as proper hygiene, so we can assume therapy, or healing modalities in general, are considered a type of luxury, especially since they can help upend the prison. In Dean Faiello's creative nonfiction essay, "Impermanence," featured also in *Fourth City*, he details the history of his encounters with the therapy facilitating groups Cephas, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Alternatives to Violence. One of the spectral areas of Faiello's essay is the mention of the Attica Uprisings of 1971, protests carried out by incarcerated men who became educated in legal rights and various pertinent theories who fought for dignity concerning poor living conditions, insufficiently trained and staffed infirmaries, racist treatment and religious discrimination among other grievances related to institutional norms. These protests also allowed people like Faiello to have access to therapy in prison (Larson 80). Through looking at Faiello's braided essay containing

information of his own life and its intersection with therapeutic modalities, along with some archival information from Prison Life Magazine, we can reflect on the possibility of transformation within prison. In working through these circumstances and the lessons Faiello has learned, we will come up against questions of the narrative "I" of prison life writing. Faiello's self-conscious writing seems to be a result of the years of therapy, within the groups mentioned above, including a creative writing class, and he has developed a sense of accountability to others and himself. Though another question we might have to grapple with through reading Faiello is: how much of the therapeutic resources of the prison put the onus on the individual and not the larger society for the actions which led to the prison?

To begin, the title of Faiello's work comes from some of the principles he has learned from receiving therapy in the prison and becoming a facilitator of therapy for other incarcerated people. The specific quote the title refers to is in a moment in the narrative when he is exploring his feelings about being excluded from therapy activities for an extended period because he was labeled a "rat" by his peers (a moniker which would make Faiello hated and deemed untrustworthy). He recalls his thoughts at the time:

> But as the anger slowly subsided, my own words came back to me–advice I often gave out while teaching my orientation class to guys just arriving. "It's all about change. Embrace it, don't fight it. Nothing is permanent." (Larson 84)

He discusses how even the clothes he has on are not permanent, they are state issued. He cites Viktor Frankl, famous Holocaust survivor, "The last of human freedoms is the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances"(Larson 84). These remarks are in line with the confessional redemption narrative of penance in the prison writing genre. Here, glaringly when citing Frankl, we are discussing circumstances of extreme austerity, in every way, and telling people, in a prison, a feel-good truism, that if you adjust your individual mindset to "change," you will be able to "go with the flow" easily. Faiello deals with not just "change" but an extremely stressful set of living conditions within the prison. Surely, people cannot be expected to rely on the panacea of "Impermanence" through their dehumanization. Yet, Faiello is signaling this is exactly what gets people through prison, and, technically: that seems accurate. He's explaining how someone can make it through dehumanization, and this is certainly a learned skill.

A site of conflict for readers, the positioning of the author as "a murderer" speaking about therapy may obscure clear lines they have developed due to carceral logics about who is deserving of life let alone forgiveness. It seems almost quintessentially American to decide the right to life, so for a reader to engage with Faiello's work, especially when his "crime" is accessible, searchable, judgeable, can be an exercise in recognizing this, what I'm calling, right to life reflex. How could Faiello talk about dignity or modalities of care when he has taken this right away from someone? Narratively, this is what readers must suspend for even a basic level of engagement with Faiello's work. Therefore, the first characteristic of prison life writings' "I" is tied up with the sensibility of the reader to allow the "I." The "I," then, has the function of a type of, what I'll call, "permissible humanity." Yet, in the same beat, we know, ultimately as readers it is not up to us as the subject and author continues writing. In this continuation, the writing becomes a radical act of insisting humanity and survival. The author, in this case Faiello, refuses the game of respectability and continues existing in front of our eyes defiantly.

Faiello is writing from New York, a notation atop his essay in *Fourth City*, and he mentions a group called "Cephas," which "was started in Attica in 1971, right after the riot there" (Larson 80). Through stories like Faiello's, we see the prison is only ever incidentally a place where transformation occurs. Fighting for dignity inside the prison has a long, fraught history, and the wins of these resistances ebbs and flows in terms of prisoners' search for human rights. This struggle expands prison writers' use of "I" towards a collective, time-crossing struggle.

We can see from looking into Faiello's case he has caused immense harm; a woman died from Faiello's inexperience in medical procedures, an area he asked to be trusted with and claimed to have

credentials in. Faiello discusses his willingness to seek therapy in prison which resists the atrophy of the prison ecosystem. It is not encouraged for incarcerated people to work through their traumas, yet many of them attempt to do this, even with limited resources. Beyond this: would any therapy sufficiently address the sociocultural elements of Faiello's case? It leaves me doubly curious: would someone not read the story of Faiello and consider that being "credentialed" in society is so difficult, and so much economic security hinges on this, would it be so impossible to think people like Faiello might feign being credentialed in order to escape wage labor? Could people not empathize with this point? Most commonly therapy will take a "personal responsibility" approach and ignore the sociocultural forces of someone's harm.

Faiello was dealing with many intersecting sociocultural issues which culminated in the harm he caused. He discusses the patriarchal violences of his father who he realized he was emulating. He was diagnosed with HIV during a time when Americans were still reeling from the political atmosphere which did nothing to prevent its spread, and instead blamed the disease on being homosexual instead of mobilizing in the time of a crisis to provide medical intervention. This is just a portion of the sociocultural pressures Faiello was navigating. Therapy, at least, seems like it could be a doorway to healing, in some type of way, at least to resist the degradation of the prison environment.

According to his writing, Faiello is strongly committed to the therapy group Cephas, which seems to be localized in New York State and not widely written about. It appears since the publication of Faiello's narrative, Cephas has been absorbed into a 501(c)3 organization called Peaceprints of WNY, which is known as a housing re-entry program offering transitional housing to those who've just been release from prison in the Western New York region ("Peaceprints of WNY"). Faiello details the transmutation of anger in Cephas therapy sessions, where he had to be with others, as Venn highlights in the theory of intersubjectivity, with his first story discussing how one of his peers was so mad at his co-workers because he claimed they moved his writing desk he was using to appeal his case. Faiello says they all "listened, gave feedback, talked about the consequences of his [intended] choices," in this case he wanted to beat up the coworkers. By the end of the therapy session Faiello says the guy was "laughing and joking" still angry but with no intention of violence (Larson 79). Faiello talks about the patience of the counselors, the fact that they are volunteers, and that most of them had been doing this work for over 20 years (Larson 80). They also had access to meditation courses at the time, though Faiello discusses the tenuous status of instructors of these courses as they may move or cease volunteering (Larson 80). The stark change of environment from isolation and bars to "light and airy with windows on three sides" when they go to the sessions was a break from the deadening prison environment (Larson 80). They discussed everything from trauma, medical conditions, PTSD, thoughts of revenge or violence, and they build a sense of camaraderie in this group that is also wildly different from the development of the group in prison itself with the company of each other, the staff, and years of pain and anger.

Faiello shares an insight of his "first, and only, prison fight" and explains he blacked out while fighting, "my brain had stopped" (Larson 81). His insights are pervasive, but this one stands out concerning the benefits of therapy:

> I looked around the room at the fifteen guys seated in the circle, wondering how many of them had no idea where their anger came from. Like a fog, it constantly surrounded them, poisoning all who encountered it. I was just beginning to look at my own anger issues through my writing. I had spent over twenty years medicating myself rather than confront my pain. I guzzled vodka and blew coke up my nose until I forgot who I was, forgot the anxiety that pervaded every cell of my body. I was frightened of my feelings, of my anger, of the anger I inherited from my father. (Larson 81)

Through Cephas, Alcoholics Anonymous, and meditation classes, Faiello came to a place where he shared with his peers his feelings on his father's abusive behavior and his own mistakes including stealing his mother's painkillers as she died of cancer, his once hidden HIV status, and all the lying he'd done. He reflects "exposing secrets took away their power"(Larson 83). Faiello smartly juxta-

poses the ambivalence of the prison staff versus the caring, consistency, and gentle accountability of the therapy groups. Again, this therapy had the effect of being a type of confessional style, and likely ignored the sociocultural factors leading to Faiello's harm. However, the therapy seemed to help Faiello maintain his sense of humanity since he was being in community with other people who were grappling with the harm they caused and practicing a different type of social relationship. Often this experience is better than the alternative: nothing at all. To revisit the suspension of the right to life reflex I discussed above, it may occur to readers that Faiello does not deserve anything at all. His victim would get nothing else, so why should Faiello. Yet, if there is to be transformation of the society in general, this reflex stifles possibility, collapses possibilities into foreclosed futures. Faiello remarks in the final sentences of his essay:

> I practice mindfulness–being present in the moment, accepting what is. I try not to label events as either good or bad. I try to accept them as they are, without judgment. (Larson 85)

Though it is a way of dealing with the constant stress of dehumanization, mindfulness can never hope to approach the revolutionary consciousness needed to imagine a world where the violence of capitalism is addressed and the prison space is not completely filled with traumatized people. To do that, you actually need to stay angry, bothered, and tuned in to all the details. Yet, as we read Faiello, on some level we have to practice what he has told us and suspend the types of conditioned judgment which would make us consider him only "good" or "bad."

Literarily, Faiello also makes reference to the text *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee in the early paragraphs before spending most of the essay detailing the treatment he receives from the guards and his experience in therapy. Faiello writes, "I'd rather sit on my cell and read. J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* sat on my steel locker" (Larson 79). This is a self-conscious move for Faiello, considering Coetzee has written a key illustration promoting understanding the psyche of people who commit harm. It seems Faiello, like many who are incarcerated, uses literature as part of his attempts to repair harm and connect with similar stories across time and space. Though this self-consciousness is decidedly forward-facing, Faiello demonstrates interest in taking accountability and repair, but it is clear how hard incarcerated people have to fight for this type of rehabilitation. Faiello also explodes the idea of the American, solipsistic framework by making his essay referential, contributing to the intersubjectivity of prison life writings' "I." Yet as with all prison life writing, our readership has to provide a type of discursive vulnerability to jump into archives, references, and help the author deal with the intertextuality on the tips of their fingers. In particular for essays which are directly written by the carceral witness themselves in contrast to those which are transcribed and somewhat molded into a container. With accusations of performativity and self-consciousness, questioning the "I" and its American individualist myths, we also must recognize the role of the prisoner in society is already to be part of a spectacle, a performance, no longer a human in the eyes of the state, a projection.

"Doing Time": Cumulative Disadvantage and the Continuity of the Carceral Subject

As Olúf[4]mi O. Táíwò suggests in *Rethinking Reparations,* there is a cumulative "advantage and disadvantage," a studied pattern recognition determining that people are likely to hop on a studied trajectory of life. Once someone encounters any element of the carceral system, this places them on a path of disadvantage by design. Taiwo remarks,"These are absolute disadvantages, the social effects would apply no matter whether the pool of incarcerated persons shrank, grew, or changed composition. The research on cumulative advantage and disadvantage has been used to study topics as varied as the juvenile justice system, racial disparities in aging-related health outcomes, and subprime lending in housing markets" (28). A consummate example of Taiwo's cumulative disadvantage pattern can be found in the creative nonfiction of Julius Kimya Humphrey Sr.'s, "The Shaping of a Convict" found in *Fourth City*. Out of every close reading I've done of prison life

writing, Humphrey has the most advanced articulation of racial capitalism's carceral logics, and his reading of his own life absolutely exposes and de-reifies the prison. Humphrey's writings show that carceral subjects are not created, as if from dust, but they are part of a continuation of histories which preternaturally uphold the prison.

He starts by centering one major event in his formative years, when his father shot his mother rendering her disabled in need of a wheelchair. Additionally, Humphrey sketches his trajectory in a cumulative disadvantage, haunted by the past in several ways. To begin, the event itself, Humphrey describes as, "In a jealous rage, my father shot my mother several times one night at a club, leaving her paralyzed with two options: she could either lie in her bed or sit in her wheelchair"(Larson 54). This happened in Stockton, CA when Humphrey was 4 years old in 1961. He possesses a hyper-awareness of the pressures his father faced, relating to the audience his father "was born in 1912 or 1914 in the Deep South, at a time when Black men were still being brutally murdered for looking at white women. I can imagine anger rooted in his heart long before he met my mother"(Larson 54). His understanding of his father's rage rooted in racism helps him perform a reparative reading on this major event that altered the trajectory of his life. This idea of beginning the narrative from before he was self-possessed is part of the spectral literariness of prison life writing. One life as part of a timeline in media res is a more accurate way to understand prison life writing and carceral subjects in general, but also, more universally, to understand ourselves.

The social failure of racism and lack of support for the disabled was part of his mother's struggle while trying to raise Humphrey; his mother was indigenous, "Miwok Indian, born on the reservation near Angels Camp, California in 1921," connecting him to both the indigenous and Black community (Larson 54). He recalls the racism he and his siblings experienced from his own mother's family because the siblings were Black. Humphrey describes foster care intervention, which was mixed: some abusive situations and some caring. One of the foster placements was with family members on the reservation who were harsh and abusive, likely due to the racism Humphrey describes. A Black family adopted Humphrey, which was largely positive, and this family stayed in his life. His mother eventually came back for the kids and was limited to supporting them through sex work because of her disability. Humphrey pinpoints his experiences in about the first 10 years of his life as his reason to use drugs and deal with early trauma.

The striking part of Humphrey's insights are his refusal to excuse the sociocultural elements of his and his parents' stories. He also subverts this type of false shock mainly white publics invoke. He says, "yes, this shaped a 'convict' and I'm not surprised"(Larson 56). This type of uncanny automatism, characteristic of prison life writing, an eerie hauntological feature, holds a certain power through the flippant surrender Humphrey conveys. He recognizes the anti-Black racism he, his siblings, and his father experienced. His understanding of the historical place of reservations also rationalizes and intellectualizes the ill-treatment he dealt with. Humphrey understood there were few options except a drug or sex economy for someone disabled like his mother if they decided they wanted to support their own family and not give them up for the state or other relatives. Humphrey's vulnerability to the violent social relations, whether the disturbing unseen histories of his parents, or the wraiths who passed through Humphrey's home to extract what they could from his mother for the family's survival, was keenly understood as a process which set him up to become the perfect carceral subject. Not because he is inherently "bad," not for some true predisposition, but because he deals with so much unseen that is refused by policy and minimized by dominant culture. Humphrey is an example of how traumatized people are willfully exploited. Through all of this, it'd be hard to think of Humphrey's text as anything but ironic. It's my impression Humphrey has a distinct knowing he doesn't belong in the prison and that prison has merely become a way of ordering a failed society.

While talking about the traumatic experiences he had in his formative years, and ongoing struggles with addiction, Humphrey displays high levels of self-awareness. He says on the outside he was so ruled by his addictions he felt more free inside the prison. What he's learned from analyzing the

sociocultural forces around him is he can count on being thrown into "the system" if nothing else, so this is what he does.

> But after everything I had been through, prison was right where I wanted to be. I was who I wanted to be; I was a convict. Everything that had happened in my life up to that point, beginning with the night my father shot my mother, shaped me more and more each day into a convict. (Larson 58)

These sentences capture the ghastliness of prison life writing. A repeating history, a known trajectory, a predictable past and future–yet one which seems inescapable. It's clear Humphrey sees the only way to escape the life he feels people who grow up like him have is to just give in to the inertia: go to prison. Humphrey's story shows "doing time" is not just an inside prison phenomenon; it is outside the prison where people are doing time by trying to navigate the many systems which subjugate and oppress. All the time vulnerable people are incurring the psychic damage from racial capitalism's violence. It is hard to know what is less violent: life on the outside or prison. Humphrey's understanding of time and history reminds of Phillip Larkin's famous "They fuck you up your mum and dad"[2] in that a life story is not just something that begins with the start of a life. Lifetimes are bound up with histories of many others. In this way, a biography has no beginning or end.

As Venn says, "we exist as embodied entities coupled to the material world" and this tether connects us to others, even through time, history, and erasure. Reginald Dwayne Betts has these lines from his poem "Ghazal" that elucidates this concept:

> From inside a cell, the night sky isn't the measure—
> that's why it's prison's vastness your eyes reflect after prison.
>
> My lover don't believe in my sadness. She says whisky,
> not time, is what left me wrecked after prison. (2)

Even the night sky seems like it is not as vast as the prison ecosystem both physically and temporally, spanning lifetimes, connecting carceral witnesses to the legacies of all the people considered "surplus" who were stashed inside the prison, made an example of, robbed of their time.

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Notes

[1] Act 1, Scene 5 when Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father.
[2] "This Be The Verse"

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