Robin McGinty

A LABOR OF LIVINGNESS

Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women

Incarceration Nations Network

Collection Editor
BAZ DREISINGER

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

A LABOR OF LIVINGNESS

Robin McGinty

A LABOR OF LIVINGNESS

Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women

Incarceration Nations Network

Collection Editor

Baz Dreisinger

For my parents, Elaine and James McGinty, Jr.

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.

First published in 2026 by Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781917503846 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781917503860 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781917503853 (ePUB)

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 184547
Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com

Abstract

Anchored in the political subjectivity of formerly incarcerated Black women, *"A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women"* is a volume located at the intersections of carceral geographies and Black feminist thought and theory in consideration of a re/imagination of the "living prison" experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women. I offer the term "a labor of livingness" as a liberatory articulation of the 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*" began as a public-facing multivocal research project informed by 18 months of ethnographic research, including my own lived experience of imprisonment.

Working through the architectures of race, class, and gender underpinning Black women's routine debasement, dehumanization and dispossession, "*A Labor of Livingness*" employs a multidisciplinary approach which foregrounds the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Black women as a liberatory re/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 radical Black freedom struggle, "*A Labor of Livingness*"

offers a critical counter-narrative to the de-validation of currently and formerly incarcerated Black women's "living prison" experiences and carceral wisdoms. As such, the book argues that currently and formerly incarcerated Black women are not ancillary to discussions regarding the policies and practices of the carceral state, but are inextricably connected to the nation's political economy of carcerality, confinement, and custodial control as a continuity sustained by a historiography of anti-Black racism, and the permanencies of state-sanctioned violence/s.

Given the dearth of scholarship examining the political subjectivity of formerly incarcerated Black women and our epistemological production of carceral knowledges essential to our ongoing resistance to the re/enactment of imposed and gendered identities, "*A Labor of Livingness*" provides a critical intervention to the invisibility and erasure of presently and formerly incarcerated Black women's encounters with the nation's bevy of criminal legal and juridical systems. Unsettling the traditional racialized tropes which does the work of pathologizing Black women that are interwoven within the demeaning characterizations of Black women's criminality, "*A Labor of Livingness*" stands in contestation of the vilification of currently and formerly incarcerated Black women that have been historically used to justify and uphold the hegemonic processes of racialized punishment which animated the logic of the plantation, and it's latter-day incarnation—the prison. 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.

In sum, this book 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.

Keywords

racial capitalism, carceral geographies, prison industrial complex, Black feminism, survivance, anti-Black violence/s.

Acknowledgments

This book does not happen without the generosity and assistance of countless others, with only a fraction of whom I can name and thank here. "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" is a book project that enters the world/comes to fruition nearly three years after defending my PhD dissertation. Indeed, as a book project, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" not only happens late in life but reconsiders an episode in my life I had no interest in revisiting, nor any interest in writing about—my own imprisonment. If one had asked me some 30 years ago after my release from New York State's Taconic Correctional Facility in Westchester County as to whether I would be returning to that period of my life, the answer would have been a resounding "No!" At the time, it felt like it might be better to move on with my life under the pretense that my incarceration never happened. However, it did happen and here I am writing about it.

First off, I would like to express my deep appreciation to all 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 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-Coffie, Lorrayne Patterson, and Regina Jones, author of the spoken word piece "Who Are These Women?" which is included in this book. I would

also like to extend my appreciation to all the formerly incarcerated Black women who have contributed to this book project in numerous informal ways through ongoing discussions, as well as through their unrelenting advocacy and "justice work" on behalf of currently imprisoned Black women and girls. I have learned from each and every one of you—for which I remain truly grateful.

My PhD dissertation committee members (Earth and Environmental Sciences/Geography)—specifically my committee chair, Distinguished Professor Setha Low, along with my committee members Dr. Michelle Fine and Dr. Ruth Wilson Gilmore—there are simply no words adequate to communicate my unbridled admiration and tremendous respect I have for the three of you and your ongoing scholarship. Reminded of the old adage—*when the student is ready, the teacher shows up*—as well as to paraphrase Professor Gilmore—"PhD school" 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/committee members 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 for all of us. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Hester Eisenstein (Professor Emerita, Sociology and former Director of the Graduate Center's Center for The Study of Women and Society) who provided a point of entry as I began to delve more deeply into Black feminist thought and theory.

Given the generic trope of "mass incarceration" as more of a catchphrase than anything else, my overall sense was that

"mass incarceration" was a characterization that had entered the American lexicon which in part, performed as an obfuscation that obscured more than it revealed. In America, often referred to as "incarceration nation" by those individuals and communities who have been disproportionally and irreparably harmed, mass incarceration seemed to be a phrase that was grounded less in theory, and more about the descriptive. The sheer banality of the term "mass incarceration" sublimates the scale of the carceral state and its political economy, as well as the violence/s of its hidden geographies. Nevertheless, the term in and of itself, has been useful in providing the basis for a variety of interventions that allowed for a deeper excavation of policing policy and practices, as well as the larger prison industrial complex.

While I had been ambivalent about sharing my own "living prison" experience beyond my immediate community of folks, many of whom have also experienced incarceration and imprisonment, I was also aware of the power and practice of self-disclosure through personal narratives would be critical in establishing what scholar Robin D.G. Kelly argues is a deliberate "critique of captivity." Motivated by the opportunity to center the political subjectivity of formerly incarcerated Black women as a methodology to interrogate the interweaving of the historic and contemporary Black diasporic memory, the narratives consider a broader foundational understanding of the dynamics of "policification," carcerality and its corresponding constellations of state-sponsored violence/s as experienced by Black women.

In addition to all the folks who comprise and make up the CUNY Graduate Center community, I would also like to express my appreciation to Columbia University's Dr. Geraldine Downey

and the team at the Columbia University Center for Justice for their support throughout the years, including being designated a Center for Justice Research Fellow in 2015. Most notably, I would also like to acknowledge the late prison activist Edwin "Eddie" Ellis, and the late scholar-activist Kathy Boudin, a co-founder of the Columbia University Center for Justice—who transitioned on May Day 2022. It was Kathy Boudin whom I first approached about the possibility of attending graduate school, along with trying to figure out how I would navigate the process. As it was, Kathy was the only formerly incarcerated woman whom I knew who held a PhD. Likewise, I was also "stressing out" about the possible cost of PhD school, and how I would manage financially. Truth be told, all I really had was a desire and maybe, a glint of an idea for a research project. Which, in hindsight, turned out to be a good thing in that my ignorance allowed me to be open and receptive to learning, as well as engaging in the search to find out what all I didn't know. Kathy said: "*Just get in—the rest will take of itself.*" Of course, as an ardent "non-believer" it was difficult for me to wrap my brain around Kathy's admonition as I was mostly incredulous in a typically native New Yorker sort of way: *C'mon already/gimme a break/are you kidding me?* What Kathy was communicating to me was to "trust the process"—which is also to say, she was right. Kathy Boudin and Cheryl "Missy" Wilkens, co-founders of the Columbia University Center for Justice and I would continue to dialogue and collaborate through the years on several projects, including one I remain incredibly proud of—The Justice Storytelling + Arts Lab—in which I participated as both a curator and a project curriculum developer.

What can I say about Eddie Ellis—how brilliant he was as a mentor? How incredibly dedicated and committed Eddie was to our community of currently and formerly incarcerated people? Or perhaps when he first proposed that I join his WBAI (99.5FM) weekly broadcast "*On The Count: The Prison and Criminal Justice Report*" as an editorial producer and how excited I was to be asked? In honoring his memory and living legacy I could go and on and it still wouldn't be enough. The same can be said for Kathy Boudin—I continue to miss them both tremendously.

So, a few things—at the time of this writing, my 2022 dissertation of the same title has been downloaded nearly 400 times. I'd be less than truthful, if I didn't express my complete surprise as in "*who could've known*?" Likewise, a "hats off" to my dear friend Kayhan Irani, a gifted visionary and remarkable artist, with whom I've collaborated with for over a decade on one project or another. "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" as a book project does not happen without Kayhan alerting me to David Parker, Co-Founder and Publisher of Lived Places Publishing (LPP) who agreed to publish "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women." I am deeply grateful to you both.

In closing, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" was birthed in large part, from the work of the brilliant scholar Katherine McKittrick, whose work continues to serve as a foundation to my own scholarship. Given my background as a multidisciplinary scholar and cultural theorist, I was inspired by her searing intellect, along with the provocative lyricism of her work—which empowered me to find my own voice within the socio-cultural context of the

academy. In consideration of McKittrick's critical scholarship, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" offers the remarkable testimonies of resistance and self-determination, the poetics of Black survivance and placemaking as a re/imagining of the living "afterlives" of captive and formerly enslaved Black women. The traces of which can be found embedded in the narratives of current and formerly incarcerated Black women's "living prison" experiences which enacts a radical juxtaposition that traverses the landscapes of both the old and new expressions of "freedom" and "unfreedom". This is exemplified by an incident several years back, when sitting in a seminar a classmate of mine leaned over and whispered to me: "*you know Harriet Tubman was a geographer, right?*"

This observation is emblematic of what the late scholar Cedric J. Robinson posits as "a usable past" vis-à-vis the Black radical tradition, which Robinson offers as a contextualization that remarks on the cultural foundations of our collective liberatory futures. In tandem, we can draw a direct line from the historic policies and practices which undergirded the American plantation economy as both prescient and a harbinger of the nation's penitentiaries in which the savagery of dehumanization and deprivation are essential components in the pernicious applications of racialized and gendered subjugation as experienced in the present moment. However, just as the plantations were geographic sites of Black resistance grounded in the abolitionist impulse, the same can be said for the nation's vast network of penitentiaries—also sites of a vociferous resistance that conjures up the not-so-distant past. Thus, the historic genealogy of captivity and carcerality

is the continuity which maintains, as well as reifies the constraints and conditions of Black "livingness" in the twenty-first century.

"A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" is a deeply personal offering as well as a celebration of Black communal storytelling. Equally significant, the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women function as an aesthetic of Black women's self-expression as a mosaic of resistance and survivance that intentionally evokes the nuance and the complexities of being "*caught between a rock and a hard place.*" As an early-career scholar late to academia, as well as in the "*second half-century*" of my own life—my livingness has been marked by a deep well of life-learning, along with a myriad of experiences, professional and otherwise—however, not so late that the vexing issues we continue to confront have been vanquished, nor relegated to the proverbial 'historical dustbin'. As Gilmore points out, "*thinking systemically about society and space*" has afforded me both the privilege and good fortune to be a part of a community of scholars, creatives, and activists who have guided and supported me throughout this latest life chapter.

That said, the narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women insist on a recognition of the fullness of our humanity despite the conditions and circumstances we have so often found ourselves in. As a homage that builds upon the extant freedom dreams of our ancestors—may our memories continue to be our blessings.

Robin McGinty

Harlem, New York

November 2025

Contents

Learning Objectives

- **Learning objective (1)**: To develop a critical understanding of key terms and conceptual frameworks—race, place, space, and gender. To decode and think theoretically through a geographical lens of study the political economies of race, place, space, and gender as key territorialized aspects of racial capitalism. The purpose of which provides an explanation of how social systems are constructed and utilized in justification of uneven relationships of power constituted by the "production of difference."
- **Learning objective (2)**: To examine Black feminist thought and theory as a distinct polity grounded in an "intersectional" analysis, and why it continues to matter. To identify and evaluate the multiple ways in which the pedagogy and practices of "policing" impacts the private, public and civic sphere relative to predominately poor and working-class Black women.
- **Learning objective (3)**: To trace-out the historical ideology which undergirded the nation's "slave patrols," as a foundational template for the development of modern policing. Identify the rationales and the interconnectivity of policing, civic and criminal legal systems, and carcerality, including their historical foundations and ideological underpinnings. To identify and analyze the multiple ways in which the carceral state through its geographic footprint, including its ideology and articulation of "law and order," shape and form social, economic and political spaces.

- **Learning objective (4)**: To critically examine the nation's "plantation pasts" as the harbinger of "prison futures" as both the afterlife of the plantation economy and a cartography of Black struggle. Positing the dialectics of "freedom" and "unfreedom," as being mutually constitutive, in which both the plantation and the prison are sites of historical resistance and abolitionism. McKittrick offers such as a "Black geography" which forms a "*unique sense of place*"—while correspondingly contextualizing "resistance" as also labor struggles that hold significant implications for understanding the roots of racial capitalism.
- **Learning objective (5)**: To interrogate the convergence of racial capitalism and the political economy of the U.S. prison industrial complex. Keeping in mind scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore's contention that the geographies of policing race, place as well as space are "*territorial aspects of racial capitalism as political economic geographies and are like all geographies, are real—although neither uniform nor fixed*" provides a critical lens in which to understand the historiography, resulting in the contemporary patterns and scale of policing and carcerality in our nation.

Foreword

Before you fall in love with "labors of livingness," I invite you to sit on a bench with me and bear wit(h)ness.

There is no reason that Robin McGinty and Rüymesa Öztürk should be sitting alongside each other on this park bench of my forward, except each is a brilliant social analyst and stunning narrator of life inside the U.S. carceral archipelago, swollen these days by a massive infusion of funds, private prison greed, state violence, white nationalist fascism, all cooked up to amass/warehouse those most vulnerable. Women of color caught in a relentless trans-historic rhythm of racialized carceral logics, they have been targeted for the presumed "war on drugs" (then for Robin) and the war on pro-Palestinian political speech (now for Rüymesa). With soft yet dangerous tongues, in the language of Gloria Anzaldua, they each write, and together synchronize, stories borne in hell. They conjure for readers the warm embrace of solidarities among women, and tongues of many dialects behind bars. They force us to bear wit(h)ness to what Robin has called the "labors of livingness" taken up by women—usually of color—for generations, in prison and in the "afterlife," always under assault or precarious threat.

Dr. Robin Mc Ginty in this volume, a gifted geographer of carceral spaces, human desires, and the freedom dreams of Black women behind and beyond bars, writes with breezy prose laced with Black feminist theory, always reminding us of the afterlife, always

sketching with care the homes crafted by Black women for self and others. I have sat beside Robin in spaces of joy and despair, in the university and at protests, in struggle and at her dissertation defense, comforted by her gravely laughter and soft words, as she invites us to bear wit(h)ness. And now you are invited, too.

Robin and Rüymesa each and both offer unsettling counter-narratives to strip away the racist, sexist, vile tropes tossed at incarcerated women—across decades—and even more so to enflesh and place delicately on paper the dignity, humanity, love, and collective aching that endures behind bars in facilities "for women". Rüyesma Öztürk, you will remember, is the young Turkish, Muslim doctoral student at Tufts University, a Fulbright scholar, on the phone with her mother as she traveled to break the fast; kidnapped off the streets of Massachusetts by masked and unidentified agents of ICE in 2025, presumably because she co-authored an Op-Ed for *The Tufts Daily* newspaper speaking to the genocide in Gaza, calling for divestment. In her brief Vanity Fair essay, "*Even God Cannot Hear Us Here*: What I witnessed inside an ICE women's prison," (July 17, 2025), an auto-ethnography published in the tradition of prison memoir, Öztürk pens a stunning, breathtaking, enraging account of beauty, love, and sadism she encountered within a newly swollen tentacle of the carceral state—the ICE detention center.

Incarcerated in southern Louisiana for 45 days, she chronicles her harrowing experience. In a severely overcrowded cell, early on she recognizes the deep humanity percolating in hell:

> "My cellmates noticed how tired I looked and came over to help…'You can store your clothes under the bed…

> and push it to create a small shelf for some of your belongings'. … Over the next six and a half weeks I found myself immersed daily in the love, beauty, resilience and compassion of these women. We each found ourselves trapped in our own individual nightmares, but we found comfort and relief in one another, and we shared the burden and pain by listening to each other." Provoking the obligation to write, to make public the brutality of state violence, Rüymesa introduces us to "an Armenian woman I consider an aunt" who "asked me every time I saw her, 'Rümeysa, please write about us. Please let the world hear our story.'" With this essay, she explains, "I am keeping my promise Auntie."

Reading this passage, I (Michelle) flashed back with full-body swirl of affects as we worked together, from 1998–2001, seven women incarcerated at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility and seven women from CUNY, crafting a participatory research project, led by the wisdom of the women inside, documenting the impact of college in prison on the women, their children, the prison environment, and post-release outcomes (see *Changings Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum Security Prison for Women*, Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Roberts, Smart, Upegi (2003) Participatory action research: From within and beyond prison bars. In P. Camic, J. Rhodes, and L. Yardley (eds) Qualitative research in psychology: expanding perspectives in methodology and design, 173–198. American Psychological Association).

We sat together, across four years, every other week and then once a month, at a round wooden table covered in smuggled

oranges and buttery cookies, strawberries, and research documents, in the make-shift basement college office in the prison. Only on the train ride home did those of us from CUNY admit (with embarrassment) our surprise at the beauty, wisdom, love, kinship, and trust nourished among the women who had been locked up together for years, sometimes decades—Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Donna Hylton, Migdalia Martinez, Cheryl "Missy" Wilkins, and Pamela Smart. Holidays were particularly devastating—Christmas, birthdays, Yom Kippur, as were funerals, surgeries, elementary/middle/high school graduations, and births—missed on the outside.

Rüymesa continues: "Eid al-Fitr passed and I struggled to celebrate. A Catholic friend told me, 'Even God cannot hear us here.' She prayed night and day just the same. I asked her if it was God who could not hear us or if it was *people like me before this experience, who either know nothing about the immigration detention system or prefer to ignore or forget about it*"

I feel that soft nudge in my belly to push against the structured ignorance embodied by most of us reading this forward. We can no longer say we didn't know.

Rüymesa continues: "The day before my bail hearing in early May I shared with a few of my friends that I felt like I might be released. That night I tucked a short letter for them to find under my bed, expressing gratitude to each... for being the wonderful people they are: compassionate, kind, and remarkable individual despite the countless challenges... they held onto their dignity and humanity while making a conscious choice to be caring and loving… I learned from them that even in the most inhumane

conditions, human dignity cannot be stripped away from human beings unless they decide to give up. I learn from these strong women what solidarity looks like."

Dr. Robin McGinty and Ms. Öztürk write with the ink of obligation to bear wit(h)ness, to pierce what Charles Mills would call epistemologies of ignorance, to reverse what Diana Taylor would call percepticide, to jump start a national nervous system that is being anesthesized with rising fascisms. In this volume, Robin awakens us to the economics, racialized indignities, structural violence, and state sponsored fascism of the carceral archipelago that ensnares us all, as it penetrates the minds, bodies and souls of women under state capture.

****

Rüymesa and Robin live worlds apart—and yet, in a genre of abolitionist synchrony, they write across geographies and biographies, through the aching that echoes in the cold punishing maze of carcerality; they pen the irrepressible desire to build/dream/conjure worlds not yet; they invite us to witness the labors of livingness—a stunning phrase—and the sweet taste of solidarities. They know we are ignorant, and delicately they commit to stripping us of our blinders.

Robin McGinty has authored a brilliant book, "A Labor of Livingness: Oral Histories of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women" that speaks, at once, a very specific intimate story of women behind bars and also unravels a poignantly global story of confinement and joy; racialized state violence and care; the moans of despair held by a circle of women in very dark places. Drawing on the "afterlife of slavery" for Black women, written in the "plain

spoken eloquence of Black vernacular," stitching intergenerational ghosts and ancestors through a Black cultural iconography, weaving thoughts of servitude, surveillance and liberatory freedom dreams, we meet women from the inside, dreaming of the outside, haunted by the brutal herstories of life in Black America, anchored by Black mothers' cast iron skillets, making lives of meaning and passion. McGinty performs a jazz set of political economy, radical geography, Black feminist thought and the lives of everyday women who have paid too high a price for gendered racial capitalism—and yet they laugh, craft chosen families, make art, curate freedom dreams.

Robin writes so that we who are not now/not yet captured by the state, may know the brutality in the marrow and the sweet strands of desire that flicker behind the bars, in communities of strangers, women of all bodies/tongues/biographies, who gather in the fires of racist authoritarian regimes, and sing. In the epilogue, Robin recalls her late mother's admonition, "You should know better." That is Robin's gift to us, gently but unapologetically.

This volume is a brilliant critique, a call for abolition and a cautionary tale that the desire for freedom/joy/solidarity cannot be extinguished even by the brutality of state violence. It is a call to us who may not (yet) know better, but now we do.

Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor Critical Psychology

The Graduate Center, CUNY

Visiting Professor, University of South Africa

July 2025

Anzaldua, G. (1987) *Border/lands: La Frontera*. Aunt Lute Press.

Fine, M., Torre, M.E., Boudin, K., Bowen, I., Clark, J., Hylton, D., Martinez, M., Missy, Roberts, R., Smart, P. and Upegui, D. (2003) Changings Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum Security Prison for Women, Participatory action research: From within and beyond prison bars. In P. Camic, J. Rhodes and L. Yardley (eds) *Qualitative research in psychology: expanding perspectives in methodology and design,* 173-198. American Psychological Association

Mills, C. (1987) *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press.

Öztürk, R. (2025) "Even God Can Not Hear Us" *Vanity Fair*. July 17.

Taylor, J. (1997) *Disappearing acts: Spectacles of gender and nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War*. Duke University Press.

Part 1