

‘Betwixt and between’: literacy, liminality, and the celling of Black girls

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In this article the author examines the lives of formerly incarcerated African American girls of ages 14–17 who participate in a playwriting and performance program in an urban southeastern American city and who consequently find themselves ‘betwixt and between’ incarcerated and liberated lives. Through interviews with formerly incarcerated girls in this program, participant observation, and student writing, this article contextualizes these girls’ experiences in a larger discourse of African American women writers and speakers being ‘celled’ throughout the history of the United States. Interviews with girls revealed narratives that challenge education research to examine these lives on the periphery with urgency.

Keywords: literacy; school-to-prison pipeline; gender; African American girls; urban education

In the twenty-first century the United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country. While 1 in 100 American adults are incarcerated, the numbers for Blacks and Latinos are even grimmer. According to the Pew Center on the States report (2008), 1 in 36 Latino males of ages 18 or older are incarcerated versus 1 in 15 African American males in the same age range. For Black men of ages 20–34, there are 1 in 9 incarcerated. With the numbers of incarcerated males far outnumbering incarcerated women, there are still great concerns about the growing female prison population. While 1 in 355 White women of ages 35–39 are incarcerated, 1 in 297 Latina women, and 1 in 100 Black women in the same age range are incarcerated. In fact women of color are experiencing a ‘global lockdown’ – that is, they are being incarcerated at disproportionate numbers compared to their White female peers (Sudbury 2005). This fixation with incarceration and building prisons has trickled down to America’s children as well. Recent studies examining ‘education’s prisoners’ (McGrew 2008) or the ‘celling’ of urban youth (Duncan 2000), posit that the rise in the incarceration of young people ‘was accompanied by the unraveling protections developed for children, along with the very concept of adolescence’ (McGrew 2008, 21). Among those who have been strategically extracted from childhood and adolescence and catapulted into the category of ‘adults’ are teen girls and more specifically girls of color.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of a collective of adjudicated girls – primarily African American of ages 14–17 – who participate in a theatre program, Girl Time, for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls in an urban

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southeastern American city. Girl Time, a program created by a woman-focused theatre company called Our Place, holds two-day workshops in regional youth detention centers (RYDCs) in which incarcerated girls are invited to write plays about their lives or other topics of their choice, learn ensemble-building techniques, and perform plays for their families, detention center staff, and other incarcerated youth. In the summer program, from which the data in this article are generated, Girl Time hires girls who have been released from RYDCs to participate in an intensive ensemble-building theatre program and perform in plays written in the detention center workshops. The data in this article are part of my larger study examining the literacy practices of Girl Time. In this article I will focus on four formerly incarcerated girls, Nia, Sanaa, Zoë, and Jada, and the tensions they experience living ‘betwixt and between’ or liminal lives. The narratives of these girls collectively demonstrate their efforts to use literate practices – that is, writing, reading, speaking, and performing – to move away from physical and symbolic imprisonment and toward imagining possibilities beyond incarceration. More specifically, my study seeks to understand how Nia, Sanaa, Zoë, and Jada use playwriting and performance to mediate tensions between the institutions that have detained them and the new lives they yearn to rebuild when they return to their families, communities, and schools. Ultimately, I argue that playwriting and performance help formerly incarcerated girls in their efforts to reconstruct their self-image as well as the way others see them. This study is guided by the following questions:

- What are the narratives of formerly incarcerated African American girls who participate in a playwriting and performance program? How do their narratives fit into a larger discourse of African American women writers and speakers who have been enslaved or imprisoned? What are the educational implications for these girls’ narratives?

First I offer a conceptual framework to help understand the intersections of literacy, liminality, and the ‘ceiling’ of Black girls. Here I argue in support of research that historicizes the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black girls in a larger analysis of Black literate lives. Next, I turn specifically to historiographies of African American women writers and speakers in the nineteenth century and the complexities they faced living lives ‘betwixt and between’ enslavement and freedom. I have chosen to situate these student artists’ voices in a larger discourse on African American women speakers because of their shared experiences with the public’s inability to view them in their full humanity. In both cases, these girls and women have found the courage to speak publicly about their experiences in spite of the public’s scrutiny and skepticism about their ethnicity, gender, and perceived ineptitude. I discuss the role of critical ethnography in my study and, finally, offer an analysis of the narratives of Girl Time student artists drawing from qualitative interview data.

Literacy and liberation: the paradox of Black literate lives

An effort to historicize the literacy practices of the student artists in my study – African American girls of ages 14–17 – in a larger discourse of African American literacy teaching and learning emerges from the effort to use a ‘sociocritical’ lens, that is ‘a historicizing literacy that promotes expansive learning through an understanding of one’s own history in ways that reframe and remediate the past so it can become a

resource for the present and future' (Gutierrez 2008, 179). Part of historicizing the work of student artists in this study is contextualizing the dynamic relationship between written and spoken words in the lives of Black Americans. While the 'great divide' debates in literacy research will not be fully explored here – that is, the contested terrain that examines orality and literacy as dichotomous – it must be underscored that reading, writing, speaking, and 'doing' constitute a continuum for Blacks in the context of the United States (Fisher 2004, 2009). Certainly, studies that examine the literate practices of the Black people during the nineteenth century, challenge scholars and historians to consider the 'unexpected sources' of literacy teaching and learning for Black people (McHenry 2002). I have argued that a dichotomous treatment of orality and literacy is misleading when examining Black literate lives and that a more useful framework would involve looking at the intersections of such practices and how they were used to support each other. Gallagher (2007) asserts that drama pedagogy is a 'middle ground' for debates in literacy research 'bringing theory and practice together in atypical ways' (157). For the girls in my study, the relationship between writing, reading, speaking and performance are critical – they use their words to invoke change in themselves and others.

According to Ladson-Billings (2005), the United States established the relationship and inextricable link between literacy and power early in its history by outlawing reading and writing for enslaved Africans. Ladson-Billings argues, 'literacy is deeply embedded in our ideas of humanity and citizenship; one must be human to be literate and literate to be a citizen' (135). Slave narratives and accounts have depicted the by any means necessary methods employed by enslaved Africans as they sought to obtain education, and thus literacy, in spite of the threat of maiming or death. However, once literacy was achieved, Black writers, readers, and speakers had to contend with a 'dreaded eloquence' of sorts (McHenry 2002); they understood they needed to be articulate, yet once they achieved this, they were also regarded with disdain. The literate practices of women were also a spectacle of sorts – their ability to articulate ideas, develop arguments, and challenge injustices did not go unchallenged. These liminal spaces were part of Black lives in the history of the United States and this is particularly true in the quest for literacy and education.

The notion of literacy being linked to one's citizenship is still an important theme in the twenty-first century and for African Americans in particular. One could argue that this is especially true of men, women and children who are or have been incarcerated or who have loved ones who are incarcerated. Their punishment is an omnipresent fog lurking wherever they go and serves as a modern-day scarlet letter. Yet the literature, poetry, prose, playwriting, and the political work of incarcerated poets, writers, and activists have become vehicles to bridge the voices of the incarcerated to people on the outside.

'Betwixt and between': a conceptual framework

What may appear to be an unlikely departure from the current crisis of incarcerated girls in the United States is a purposeful exploration in the experiences of Black women throughout history who have been silenced and policed in multiple ways including enslavement and incarceration. Indeed, the relationship between enslavement of Africans in America and the Prison Industrial Complex has been well-documented especially as prisons have become booming industries of cheap labor and jobs in rural areas throughout the United States (Davis 1981, 1998a, 1998b, 2003). In

a prophetic essay entitled 'The politics of prisons' that was published in a special issue of *The Black Scholar* dedicated to 'the Black prisoner', Wade (1971) asserted that issues around the incarceration of Black people 'will undoubtedly become the number one problem facing Black people in North America' (12). However, there are few, if any, studies that seek to examine incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black girls in the twenty-first century in a larger framework of Black women who were 'celled' in other ways. The 'usable pasts' of Black literate lives and Black women speakers and writers not too far removed from slavery, potentially offer insight for the 'possible lives' of adjudicated African American teen girls (Daniell and Mortenson 2007, 1).

Scholars have examined the social and political work of women writers and speakers who became public figures such as Sojourner Truth through their activism around antislavery movements, and in some cases through the quest for racial equality, religiosity, and literary ambition (Peterson 1995). According to Peterson, Truth experienced 'relative isolation' from different facets of the Black community including male leadership speaking and organizing around the abolition of slavery (1995, 24). However, Truth, in spite of the fact that she could not technically read or write, thought of herself as a 'doer of the word'. After taking her emancipation from enslavement into her own hands, Truth began a journey looking for a home where she could 'become a part of a communal society whose values are based on notions of collectivity and mutual sharing' (Peterson 1995, 26).

Under the peculiar institution, Black women were not only considered chattel but their bodies had become vessels of sexual violation, violence, and spectacle. In the periods of post-Emancipation and Reconstruction that followed the enslavement of Africans in the United States, Willis and Williams (2002) argue, Black people developed 'the desire to act rather than being acted upon, to be a subject rather than an object' (4). Black women and men had to fight to be seen as human beings instead of breeders. While this certainly is not a contest of who suffered more, here I choose to focus on the duality of Black women's struggle to be seen as human and worthy of being heard. According to Peterson, Black women speakers lived their lives in a state of liminality – that is, 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony' (Turner cited in Peterson 1995, 17). Much of who and what these women could become was determined by others which left little space, if any, for opportunities to forge their own identities and paths independent of stereotypes and characterizations. Perhaps even more difficult was the tenuous relationship between women like Sojourner Truth and their audiences who did not always accept them as knowledgeable and trustworthy.

In many ways the lives of the student artists in my study reflect Black women speakers and writers of the nineteenth century; they are 'betwixt and between' their incarcerated and liberated lives. Liminality, in the context of formerly incarcerated girls' lives is often 'a state of being neither here nor there – neither completely inside nor outside a given situation, structure or mindset' (Madison 2005, 158). Additionally, formerly incarcerated girls perform and move throughout the world with a particular kind of double-consciousness that acknowledges their new-found freedom while carrying the weight of being under the watchful and critical gaze of the institutions that once detained them, families who have doubted them, and a public who is increasingly suspicious of their intentions. In her study of the gender entrapment of incarcerated battered Black women, Richie (1996) examines how in many cases women are 'compelled to crime'. Richie contextualizes the crimes of Black women, and battered Black women in particular, in a larger discourse of what she refers to as 'gender entrapment' or the

notion that many of these women have limited options. According to Richie, the social positioning of many women creates a push-and-pull effect in their lives:

This predicament leaves them facing complicated ethical, moral, and practical dilemmas. The women feel pushed and pulled by their basic survival needs, their expectations of themselves, and others' requirements of them. (Richie 1996, 2)

The push/pull experienced by incarcerated Black women is even more pronounced among girls who are struggling with coming of age experiences and trying to sort through options as well as the glaring lack of them. Richie posits that the women in her study are often depicted as criminals rather than victims which is problematic given the abuse they have endured. Like the women in Richie's study, formerly incarcerated girls in my study are criminalized in a way that focuses on their individual crimes rather than the circumstances that are part and parcel of a legacy of an 'educational debt' the United States has incurred with indigenous and subaltern groups (Ladson-Billings 2006). Many of these girls wanted to fit in, so to speak, or as Richie offers 'they were trying desperately to exist in a social world that was determined to condemn them, only to be exiled from the broader society that failed to deliver promised opportunity and rewards' (Richie 1996, 5). Black women speakers and writers, according to Peterson, were often under similar scrutiny for having the audacity to speak publicly thus displaying the Black female body in ways the public found profane. My study in many ways seeks to understand the role of playwriting and performance in the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls who face a similar public critique.

In *Girl Time*, student artists are invited to speak boldly about their life experiences. Student artists in my study write and perform in plays written by their peers that often reflect their individual and 'shared truths' (Fisher 2007). During an intensive summer program, student artists work as an ensemble by learning acting and techniques, discussing issues raised in the plays, analyzing characters both familiar and different to them, and performing in a public theatre as well as in the institutions that once detained them. It is through the performances that student artists desire to have their stories told to their families, the detention center staff, and to the larger public. Research on Black women speakers, writers, and 'doers' of the word raises key questions that are relevant to the experiences of formerly incarcerated girls. For example, Peterson (1995) attempts to understand if Black women speakers in the early nineteenth century could escape the imprisonment of labels and dichotomies by asking:

...whether it is possible to imagine a scenario whereby the incarcerated could escape, and perhaps even return, the gaze of their wardens; undo the dominant culture's definition of such binary oppositions as order/disorder/ normal/abnormal, harmless/dangerous; break down those boundaries separating the one from the Other; and in the process create a space that they could call home. (8)

Formerly incarcerated girls negotiate the aforementioned dichotomies that have, in many cases, been chosen for them by the public often beginning in schools and communities. They also struggle between the public's clear division of good versus bad, innocent versus guilty, and child versus adult. Like their historical predecessors, these girls are choosing to be subject rather than object while seeking to 'escape, and perhaps even return, the gaze of their wardens' – to borrow Peterson's words – and both define and redefine themselves through playwriting and performing.

Methods

This study employs critical ethnography methods. Madison argues that critical ethnography ‘begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain’ (Madison 2005, 5). My first introduction to thinking about the plight of incarcerated children and African American girls in particular was attending a summer performance featuring formerly incarcerated girls (Fisher 2008). It was immediately evident to me that the voices of incarcerated girls were not only missing from some of the critical dialogue in literacy research but their lived experiences were not given consideration in the larger educational research community. I am always conscious of the fact that I am surrounded by a seemingly endless sea of Brown faces in the detention centers whenever I teach in the Girl Time workshops. Therefore my positionality is not neutral but grounded in raising consciousness about the incessant ceiling of Black and Brown children in particular. However, I am also aware that my lived experiences both converge and diverge with the girls in my study. Here I look to the work of Rhodessa Jones and Sean Reynolds, co-teachers in *The Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women in San Francisco*, who understand the thin line that distinguishes them from the incarcerated women they serve:

It is more the difference between the ‘privileged’ and the ‘underserved’, with us being part of that privileged African American class who – because of timing, luck, nerve, and education of a different sort – did not wind up in jail. (Sean Reynolds cited in Fraden 2001, 81).

When I began this study I believed and still believe that ‘ceiling’ – to borrow my colleague Garrett Duncan’s term – children was directly linked to a particular kind of injustice in the American public education system. In sum, the notion of the school-to-prison pipeline is becoming too much of a reality for Black and Latino youth and it is urgent that educational research responds. My role as a teaching artist in the RYDCs is just that – I am completely immersed in the process from leading and participating in ensemble-building activities, and assisting student artists in the writing process. By the time the student artists see me during the summer program they are familiar with me because more than likely I also worked with them in the detention center. For the purpose of this study, I kept ethnographic field notes during Girl Time workshops and programming, conducted qualitative interviews with teaching artists and student artists who participate in the summer program, and collected ethnographic video that follows the life of the plays and the student artists who bring the plays to life during the rehearsal process.

Participants

For the purpose of this article, I focus on four student artists, Nia, Sanaa, Zoë, and Jada whose narratives demonstrate the themes that emerged from the interview data. Nia, Sanaa, and Jada identified themselves as Black or African American and Zoë identified herself as ‘Afro-Mex’ in order to honor her African American and Mexican American heritage. While this brief discussion of ‘participants’ does not begin to do justice to the gifts, talents, and passion these student artists have, I include more descriptions of them as I present findings. While I do not focus on the team of teaching artists in this particular article who worked tirelessly with the girls, it bears noting that

this team of African American and European American women is known to clear their calendars to work for Girl Time even when it means forgoing more financially lucrative opportunities.

Sites

This study took place in a multi-service center that houses probation officers and counselors for youth who have been released from RYDCs and who are on probation or in need of resources such as job placement and GED preparation. Girl Time is the only program at the multi-service that is specifically for girls. There are two days when the Girl Time summer program meets at a theatre where the public performance takes place.

Data collection

Girl Time is organized in seasons which begin in August and end in May for the workshops held in the detention centers. The summer program in June supports girls who participated in the Girl Time detention center workshops. Critical data sources for my study include interviews with student artists in the Girl Time summer program, interviews with core teaching artists, ethnographic field notes from participant observation and ethnographic video. Additionally, I collect literacy artifacts such as scripts for plays written and performed by the girls. The stories that they share about their lives inside and outside serve as both testimony and evidence of the conditions of the juvenile justice systems, schools, and underserved communities. When student artists expressed how much they appreciated sharing their 'side of the story' with someone, I started to use a more oral history format for the first part of the interview.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded by themes. Research questions often corresponded to interview questions for the girls as well as to focused observations. Because I started the analysis process as I was collecting data, I realized student artists had become immersed in a discourse of personal failure or what I refer to as incarceration discourse. Incarceration discourse reifies stereotypes of crime, criminals, and punishment without considering historical, social, educational, and economic disparities that often led to criminal activity. When student artists use incarceration discourse, they typically offer oversimplified responses to their situation, 'I did something wrong and I got punished' and discussed their hopes for 'doing right' and 'changing my way' without an analysis or critique of the context of their crimes, an understanding of what 'doing right' meant, and how to actually enact it. Therefore, I had to change my questions in order to get the girls to critique their own experiences. During interviews, I started to ask student artists, 'What would need to change in the world so that you were able to do the things you want to do (school, work, write, pursue particular careers)?' Covington and Bloom (2003) cite a similar experience in their own research with incarcerated women. Covington and Bloom reposition the community as being a critical part of the change in the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women by positing, 'We need to create a community response to the issues that impact women's lives and increase their risk of incarceration' (13).

By asking what would need to change in their worlds, formerly incarcerated girls unveiled the tensions where they felt trapped, or betwixt and between their current lives and the lives they desired. By using a Grounded Theory analysis in the same way other scholars who have examined the lives of incarcerated women (Richie 1996). According to Strauss, ‘the goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior that is relevant and problematic for those involved’ (Strauss in Richie 1996, 27). Some of the themes that were generated from the interview data included:

- Playwriting and performance as identity (re)formation
- Playwriting and performance as troubling simplistic dichotomies (good/bad; wrong/right)
- Playwriting and performance as a mediator of the tensions between desire and current reality
- Playwriting and performance as a way to remember, reconstruct, and return to family, home, and community

Limitations

One of the biggest limitations in the study is that I am unable to interview girls about their participation in Girl Time workshops while they are still incarcerated because of institutional restrictions. However, I am able to ask them to reflect on that experience during the interviews that take place during the summer program. A second limitation is that Girl Time services many more girls during the detention center workshops (approximately 100) who do not participate in the summer program; therefore there are more perspectives and stories that will not be represented in this article. Most recently, Girl Time began servicing a third RYDC located in a rural community outside the city limits. This third location houses more White detainees; however they never follow up and participate in the summer program. While I am unsure as to precisely why the program is unable to attract some of these girls, I assume some of it is because of distance and also what I refer to as the ‘rearview mirror’ effect. During one of the RYDC performances, the father of a White student artist explained to his daughter and to us that he expected her to put the incarceration experience in the ‘rearview mirror’ and drive away from it until she could no longer see it. For many of the girls, the ‘rearview mirror’ effect was not always an option.

‘Make a story out of them’: Nia

Recognizing her charisma and potential to perform, Nia’s probation officer recommended her to participate in the Girl Time summer 2007 program. Arriving at the orientation meeting at the multi-service center early, Nia flashed a bright smile and punctuated all of her responses with ‘yes m’am’ and ‘no m’am’. Although the teaching artists introduced themselves by first names, Nia was fiercely determined to call everyone ‘m’am’ or put a ‘Ms.’ in front of their first names. Susie, the Girl Time program director, talked through the process of the summer program including the ensemble-building activities, intense rehearsals, and finally the public performance. ‘And...’, Susie announced with enthusiasm and in an effort to build anticipation, ‘we are going to take the performances back to the RYDC for the girls who are currently there’. ‘Noooooooooooooo m’am!’ Nia proclaimed – a response well understood since

she spent time detained in the same facility. ‘Well, I have to see’, Nia continued, ‘we’ll see’.

Nia had a style all her own. Her soft dark brown hair was plaited in the tiniest of braids and decidedly tossed in all directions. She always wore her signature fitted ‘wife beater’ tank top and loosely fitting jeans with elaborate adornments and stitching on the pockets and playfully along the seams. Nia often strolled into rehearsal carrying what the other girls referred to as ‘swagger’ or a confidence generally reserved for boys and men. Nia immediately established herself as a ‘female stud’ or a ‘female who likes females’. My first recollection of Nia ‘coming out’ to the group was during a conversation between her and three other student artists in the multi-service center lobby prior to rehearsal:

[Lisa (to Nia)]:	So are you – are you a female stud?
[Nia (with wide grin)]:	Yeah. I am.
[Tempest]:	Ugh. You like girls?!
[Nia]:	Yeah, I do.
[Lisa and Sanaa (to Tempest)]:	It’s not her fault. She did not choose that. It’s natural for her.
[Nia continued to smile in spite of Tempest’s obvious disapproval]	
[Tempest to Nia]:	Tell me something. How could you like girls for real?
[Nia]:	I just do!

(Field notes 2007)

This exchange between Nia and her peers was something she had grown accustomed to as she would explain to me later. Lisa, Tempest’s big sister, and Sanaa were in some ways defending Nia by explaining to Tempest that Nia did not ‘choose’ her sexual orientation. Lisa, who was the youngest of the group and who never was incarcerated, did not seem to understand that explanation and wanted to hear directly from Nia. While Nia shrugged off Tempest’s line of questioning as if she were a pesky little sister, she did explain that she found most environments were more hostile towards her. Nia’s last sentence at an RYDC largely stemmed from her sexual orientation. She described the incident at school that led to her arrest and eventual detainment:

Well, I was at school one day and I was having some conflicts with this girl’s brother. He ended up finding out that she was ... gay and he thought that I had did it to her. But I wasn’t the one. She was like this before I even met her. We ended up having a few words and it was like me and three other people in the hallway talking to the girl and her brother came up and he said, ‘Don’t be talking to my sister’. He just tried to run up on me at first so I was like – I was telling the female to come get her brother or he was going to get hurt. One of the security guards came out of the classroom and I said that me and this dude just had a conflict and he took us to the office. But me not thinking I forgot I had a pocket knife on me. [The girl’s brother] ended up saying that I threatened to kill him. They ended up searching me and they found the knife in my back pocket. (Interview 2007)

In her study examining the lives of incarcerated Black lesbian youth, Richie (2005) demonstrates how many of these girls have been under attack in their school communities and neighborhoods. Richie argues that Black lesbian youth find themselves in the ‘precarious positions’ of having to ‘raise themselves up without allies, advocates, or analysis’ (76). Nia’s experiences can be contextualized in Richie’s analysis in many ways. Richie found that many Black lesbian youth in underserved communities carried weapons or aligned themselves with key figures (typically men) in the drug

trade in order to insure protection from homophobic predators. Some of these young girls found themselves trading ‘favors’ for their protections including dealing drugs and prostituting. In the aforementioned incident, Nia was accused by her friend’s brother of ‘turning his sister gay’. The school officials’ response was constructing Nia as this ‘knife-wielding’ criminal even though the pocket knife discovered in her pocket never entered the confrontation. Male security guards disregarded the fact that Nia was girl because Nia dressed like her male peers and was perceived as being tough enough to be handled the way male students would be handled.

‘Gender-neutral’ policies (Covington and Bloom 2003) in American corrections recall the plight of Black women pre- and post-Emancipation who were considered anomalies in the construction of femininity and womanhood. Peterson (1995) argued that the Black female body was ‘envisioned as public and exposed’ and ‘an uninhibited laboring body that was masculinized’ (Peterson 1995, 20). The fact that Nia did not subscribe to the heteronormative values that permeated the city in which this incident took place, made her the villain while the young man who confronted her became the victim. Nia’s experience is critical as the numbers of Black girls and women in jails and prison are increasing rapidly. It is no coincidence that these gender-neutral corrections policies – that is treating men and women exactly the same when it comes to crime and punishment – come at a time when poor women of color represent a majority of incarcerated women. As prisons continue to be booming industries where cheap labor is available, incarcerated poor women of color find themselves in similar captivity as their nineteenth-century predecessors. In Davis’ (1981) exploration of the ‘genderless’ lens through which enslaved Black women were viewed in the context of the United States, she observed:

When it was profitable to exploit [Black women] as if they were men, they were regarded in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles (Davis 1983, 6).

The same is true in jails and prisons where girls and women of color are not valued – especially if they are perceived as being ‘masculine’. At this point, Nia did not critique the incident at the school but she did think she was treated unfairly. The fact that the school officials went directly to the police rather than trying to resolve the conflict in house is just one of the many examples of how the school-to-prison pipeline works. Increasingly, schools are using police and law enforcement to handle issues that were at one time handled by the school (NAACP Legal and Educational Defense Fund n.d.).

For the summer 2007 program, Nia was casted in two major roles and one supporting role. One of her major roles was ‘Lil’ Rico’, a female stud who ‘came out’ to her mother about being gay. The play, entitled ‘The Ruby Show’, couched Lil’ Rico’s story in a television talk show theme. Nia explained why this role was so important to her:

When I was 14, I was staying at this group home. I already kind of figured that I was going to be different because of the way I was growing up and how I was attracted to females. I was never the type to look at a boy like that... The group home found out and called my mother and she called me and said, ‘What’s this about you supposed to be gay?’ We ended up talking and she asked me why she had to find out the hard way... [my mother said], ‘Well it’s not something I approve of but you are my daughter but I am going to get past it’. (Interview 2007)

The group home – which also embraced a heteronormative discourse – chose to ‘tell on’ Nia in a sense by calling her mother when they suspected she was gay. This incident launched a series of experiences in which Nia had to defend herself. In the play, Nia’s character, Lil’ Rico, and her mother have a confrontation. After reading a letter Lil’ Rico wrote to her girlfriend, ‘Mother’ confronts Lil’ Rico. During the confrontation, ‘Mother’ condemns Lil’ Rico’s sexual identity citing biblical references. When Lil’ Rico dares to talk back, ‘Mother’ slaps her prompting Lil’ Rico to move out. Lil’ Rico’s girlfriend, Ashley, gives her a place to stay and commits to helping her through this difficult situation with her mother. Everyone agrees to appear on ‘The Ruby Show’ where Ms. Ruby, the host, enjoys ‘bringing families together’. While the talk show theme was meant to add humor, the story was one that the girls appreciated and could relate to in many ways:

I’m playing Lil’ Rico and she’s a female stud lady and I do relate to her... I like the fact that Ashley [Lil’ Rico’s girlfriend] tried to come in as the partner in this relationship and help her partner out. (Interview 2007)

Returning to the RYDCs to perform these plays was initially difficult for Nia and one in which her status of being in a liminal state of incarceration and freedom was illuminated. Recall her immediate reaction when Susie announced the ensemble would return to the RYDC to perform. However, as promised, Nia gave it careful consideration. During our first interview in summer 2007, Nia explained her initial reaction:

[Nia]: When I first found out... I was very shocked because I said I wasn’t going back period. I wasn’t going to visit nobody... but when I heard that it’s helping them I was like okay I guess I could try to do this... I feel confident that I’m going to do a good job and that the youth are going to like it.

[Interviewer]: What does it mean to be able to perform for the people who work at the youth detention center?

[Nia]: It lets them know that I’m out doing the right thing that I’m not making bad decisions and it also lets them know that they won’t be seeing me no more... Most of them was telling me, ‘I’m not going to see you back in here, right?’ And I said, ‘Not unless I’m working here’. I’m sure they will be proud of me because I’m coming back to share a message and not for trouble. (Interview, 2007)

Nia’s desire to demonstrate she was ‘doing the right thing’ to a community who doubted her abilities was a major impetus for her participation. Returning to the RYDC as an actor and as part of an ensemble allowed her to show a side of herself that her peers and RYDC personnel may not otherwise been able to see. Nia’s determination to stay away from the RYDC as an inmate was evident in all she did. She worked long hours at a fast-food restaurant and insisted she return to a traditional school after she served her time because she believed the schools in the facility were inadequate. The program maintained contact with Nia during the fall and winter. She attended plays such as a production of Toni Morrison’s ‘The Bluest Eye’ with the group. However, by spring her phone number was disconnected and the teaching artists were distraught when it was time for the summer 2008 program and there was no way to contact Nia. On the first day of the summer 2008 program, Nia strolled in about an hour late. All smiles, she announced, ‘buses run slow on Sundays’, jumped in the circle and was on time every subsequent day. When we were finally able to talk

to Nia privately, she shared that she was arrested again for another school-related incident and was shipped to a facility in a rural location. Her family was unable to visit her because of their lack of transportation. Nia also lost her job and was expelled from school. During our second interview in the summer of 2008, Nia talked about how she worried about being ‘jinxed’ in some ways after returning to the facility to perform:

It was kind of interesting being inside of there without actually being inside of there... When I saw the [junior correctional officers] I knew I was doing a good deed... I kind of got on the silly side. It was a good experience... I thought they might have jinxed me to go back to jail... After I leave a facility I never want to go back. It made me shaky. (Interview 2008)

Being inside ‘without actually being inside’ during the Girl Time performances was tenuous for Nia and many of the student artists. Nia was, in fact, betwixt and between incarceration and freedom in a space that felt vulnerable, tentative, and easily swayed in either direction. Nia’s hesitation and fear of being ‘jinxed’ indicated her conscious effort not to flaunt her freedom because she did not want to find herself being there again as a detainee. In some ways Nia’s notion of being ‘jinxed’ underscores the vulnerability many youth face once they have been in the system. I found that many girls are not entirely sure of how to avoid being incarcerated again because the circumstances that led to their incarceration were often vague to begin with making this liminal space both real and imagined. Many girls, like Nia, are also very uncertain of the juvenile justice process. When recounting their experiences in court they often do not know the titles of all of the people present who are making decisions about their futures. Most girls report that they are not allowed to speak during their hearings. Nia kept referencing ‘that man’ who was presenting her as a hardened criminal; however she did not know his name or title. What Nia did understand was, ‘I just knew he was against me. He wasn’t for me’. I was able to ascertain that she was talking about the prosecuting attorney. This level of disenfranchisement coupled with the fact that many youth are not allowed to speak at their hearings certainly supports the sense of helplessness conveyed in Nia’s construction of being ‘jinxed’. Nia further explained her concern:

When you leave, you’re not supposed to take nothing with you... like [phone] numbers. I don’t talk people’s numbers. Jinxing. I feel like if I go back there I might just end up back there. (Interview 2008)

For Nia, she believed the junior correctional officers (JCOs) supported her. She looked forward to reuniting with them in order to show them she was ‘doing good’. Nia said she was consistently told by the JCOs, ‘[You] could do something else’. However, the same JCOs also commented, ‘Look at you! You look like a girl now!’ when she returned to perform. Nia was self-conscious about the fact that she had to return to the RYDC as an inmate between the summer 2007 and summer 2008 programs. In this second incident, Nia had an army knife in her pocket that was only discovered when a male security guard searched her because she was in the hallway after the bell rang. Like the first incident, Nia was searched by male guards without any woman present or other school personnel. However, this time the guard sprayed mace in her face. Nia did not know the names of these ‘security guards’, never spoke to a school administrator, and had to plead to call her mother. This second incarceration experience came as a surprise to Nia who explained, ‘I really didn’t see that

coming'. The notion of being jinxed was real for Nia. While one could easily reprimand Nia for carrying a pocket knife, it might prove more instructive to learn why she felt she needed it. Nia said she 'forgot' it was in her pocket because they were in her work pants and she traveled home on public transportation late at night after work. Nia was aware that this second experience would place her under heavier scrutiny and one of her primary concerns was how others constructed her image. Ultimately Nia saw the performance as a way to prove the naysayers wrong:

Some folks try to down me cause my sexuality [and think] I might not be nothing. 'Cause of the charges that I have they might not accept me at a job but I don't believe it. I really don't. I feel like I got to make a story out of them – you know – I don't want to make them say 'I told you so'. (Interview 2008)

Nia had a strong desire to 'make a story' out of people or prove people were wrong for placing her in a particular box. This was especially true because of the second arrest and detainment. Nia felt compelled to prove herself at home, school, and at work. Performing in the plays was one way she could demonstrate that she was deserving of another opportunity. She recast herself as a girl exercising agency and ability to make important decisions regarding her future.

'Out in the open world': Sanaa

Sanaa was not only a participant in the Girl Time summer program but her play, 'Ride or Die', that she wrote while incarcerated was featured in the public performance. Sanaa was 15 years old at the time of our interview and had a dream to be a criminal lawyer. Sanaa always wore her smart, stylish glasses at the tip of her nose, and her hair in perfect braids with a playful streak of cherry red. For the most part Sanaa was quiet and to herself but forged an alliance with Nia. According to Sanaa, her first incarceration experience occurred when she was 13. Sanaa said the first facility she was sent to felt like a 'family'. According to Sanaa, the JCOs at this particular facility in which she was detained were 'like mothers' and she liked the fact that 'the bread was soft'. When Sanaa violated her probation, she was shipped to the city RYDC where things were not as comfortable. Sanaa reflected on the first time she got 'in trouble':

Really how it started I was getting in trouble a lot at school because I wanted to be this big bully person. At first my mama didn't have a lot of discipline with us but when she did it made me mad. So I would go outside and be with friends and boyfriends. The first thing was driving a stolen car. My boyfriend stole the car and I took the blame trying to feel like I was doing something at the time. I was on probation that has a lot of rules and I wasn't following the rules. (Interview 2007)

This ordeal led to a series of interactions with law enforcement because once Sanaa was in 'the system', minor infractions became major. Most violations were for running away from group homes. Sanaa and her siblings had been placed at different homes. The siblings were determined to be together and would plan to run away and meet at various locations. When Sanaa participated in the Girl Time RYDC workshop she explained later that it was possibly the eighth time she had been 'locked up' and it was for the longest time period. Sanaa compared her participation in the Girl Time RYDC workshop to experiencing the 'open world':

It was kind of interestin'. Usually in jail you don't feel like you free so [writing plays and performing] made me feel free and it made me want to be out in the open world and not be locked up again... We split up in sections and they told us to pick out the name of our play and write whatever we want... When y'all left I realized we were just feelin' free and I thought I want to be out where I can feel free in my life all the time. (Interview 2007)

The playwriting and performance process, in the case of Sanaa, was a vehicle to transport her to a free space she did not believe was possible in jail. Once Sanaa experienced this moment of freedom she was determined to achieve it within the confines of the RYDC and beyond. Comparing the experience of writing and performing to 'the open world', Sanaa was able to re-imagine what her life could be like given the new language she was acquiring through theatre. Sanaa co-authored a play entitled 'Ride or Die' which explored a theme found in many plays produced during the workshop. Sanaa explained that 'ride or die' typically refers to a woman being a man's 'sidekick' even if it meant engaging in illegal activities. Sanaa believed that she and most of her peers found themselves in 'ride or die' situations; however at the end of her play the 'ride or die chick' – or a woman who would do anything for her man – took a stance and chose to not be a willing participant. Sanaa's play was one of the biggest declarations of independence witnessed by Girl Time teachers. The final line of the play spoken by the female protagonist, 'I was down for the ride but not for the die', left the audiences in the public theatre and the RYDCs cheering and shouting. Sanaa seemed to be more convinced than any other student artist that her ability to write and share her story was more powerful than judgment or stereotypes. Sanaa was very weary of people who 'judged' her and her peer group. This judgment, according to Sanaa, was often abused because she believed to be critical of others were often flawed:

A lot of people think just because you locked up you can't do this or that but it's not the end of the world... They got more potential than most of the people out in the open world... [performing] made me feel like okay I'm [going] to show these people that I'm not just this person who ain't going to be nobody... Don't judge people 'cause you never know what they future going to be like... Some people can be Mr. and Mrs. Goodie Two Shoes and they could become the worst people in the world... Most of the time it be about these celebrities killin' they wife and children or whatever... [performing] felt like I'm giving people something else so they can't judge me. (Interview 2007)

Playwriting was not only a way for Sanaa to change the script of lived experiences but also to show others that she was more than the sum of her time served at the RYDCs. Sanaa was particularly interested in sending the message to the junior correctional officers and her fellow peers that they could imagine the possibilities of girls beyond their temporary detainment:

[Performing at the RYDC] made me feel really good because some of [the JCOs] look at the girls the way others do, 'She ain't goin' to be nothing'. [Performing for peers] was really interesting because the girls were looking like, 'Wow, this is real funny'. Probably in their mind they were thinking, 'If they can do it, I can do it'. (Interview 2008)

In his study of 'stereotype threat', Steele (1997) argues that young people often adopt the characteristics and practices of the images others project on them. Like Nia, Sanaa hoped to escape from others' low expectations of her and emerging with a sense of accomplishment. Both student artists talked about their need to be around 'positive people' who believed in them mirroring responses in other studies that have asked

incarcerated women what kinds of resources they would need to live lives beyond crime (Covington and Bloom 2003). Sanaa was particularly focused on her relationship with her grandmother who had temporary custody of Sanaa and two of her siblings until her mother was able to maintain some stability. Sanaa explained, 'Well, like I live with my grandma now but when I first lived with her I had a feeling that she thought when I was first getting in trouble that I wasn't going to be nothing'. Rather than submitting to this belief, Sanaa planned to change her grandmother's perceptions of her and one way she did this was through literate practices. Sanaa believed that writing kept her 'out of trouble' and that others, like her grandmother, associated reading and writing with progress especially when she chose to stay home and write in her journal instead of hanging out:

[My grandma] comes in my room and she sees me doing something positive... I like when she talks to me and I can talk to her loudly and clearly... It's actually like I'm trying to prove things to people who doubted me in my earlier life. (Interview 2007)

In some ways Sanaa saw writing and performing as a way to reconstruct her image in the world and reintroduce herself to her grandmother. Sanaa's observations echoed Ladson-Billings' aforementioned argument that literacy and citizenship were inextricably linked. Sanaa played in two other plays during the summer 2007 program. In 'A Reflected Life', Sanaa was casted as the reflection of a woman named Clementine who was overcoming drug addiction. As Clementine's reflection, Sanaa personified the push/pull continuum: 'I am the reflection and the reflection is Clementine but it's her conscious like the good angel and she's trying to make her see that what she's doing is not making anything any better...' (Interview 2007). In her second role, Sanaa played a talk-show host named Ms. Ruby in the aforementioned 'The Ruby Show'. As Ms. Ruby, Sanaa had the job of clearing communication between Lil' Rico (played by the aforementioned Nia) and Lil' Rico's mother who was angry when she told her she was gay. Sanaa saw some of herself in both of these roles she played:

Well in the 'Reflection', actually my grandma and my great grandma was my reflection because I was doing crazy stuff and after a while I would break down and my grandma would [ask] me, 'What is this doing for you?' In 'The Ruby Show', I like for families to be happy... and in my family I would like to see my sisters and brothers and [they] want me to believe in them and support them. (Interview, 2007)

Embedded in Sanaa's reflections of her relationship with her grandmother and great grandmother was the link between writing, speaking, and being positive. Literacy in some sense would neutralize any lingering doubts others had about her that stemmed from her incarceration. Sanaa used her scripts and characters to mediate some of the tensions unfolding in her own family which served to be as powerful as writing and rewriting characters in her play 'Ride or Die'. The writing and the performing were part of a continuum and both experiences helped Sanaa consider multiple perspectives to the same story.

'I can cry with her': Zoë

Trying to find a time to interview Zoë prior to rehearsal was difficult. She had a summer job babysitting in the mornings for one of her neighbors and cared for another neighbor's chickens but she made the time. Zoë was 16 at the time of our interview

during the summer 2008 program and entering tenth grade in the fall. Proudly, ‘Afro-Mex’, Zoë’s dream was to create a clothing line for her ‘body type’ which she believed was unique to her African American and Mexican American heritage. She shared that she loved language arts (‘That’s where I open up and wake up’), and to write poetry and music (‘Sometimes I’ll sit there and just write but how I would write it [was] in story form’). I felt as if I knew Zoë well by the time she joined the summer program because I was the teaching artist assigned to her table during the playwriting workshop in an RYDC workshop. Zoë and her fellow playwright co-authored a play entitled, ‘To Bully or not to Bully’ that was featured in the summer 2008 program. In this play, a bully realizes that she and the person she has been terrorizing have more in common than realized:

‘To Bully or not to Bully’ was so important to me because before I was at the RYDC, I went to a school that had a lot of [bullying]. I wanted to show people that you don’t have to fight all the time... you may have more in common than you think. (Interview, 2008)

What I did not remember, and what Zoë reminded me during the interview was that she had to go to court the morning of the second day of the workshop in the RYDC. Zoë returned to the workshop with the knowledge she had to serve a one-year sentence away from family, friends, and school. RYDCs are already difficult spaces for girls. In Ayers’ (1997) study of incarcerated youth, he noted the inmate count at one juvenile facility had 804 boys and 34 girls. While the numbers at the RYDCs Girl Time serves are significantly lower than that, the girls are always outnumbered. For Zoë, who was ‘in an adult like relationship and engaged with an adult like crime’ (Ayers 1997, 113), to have endured court in the morning where she had no voice, return to a primarily male facility where that voice continued to be compromised, and desire to finish the work she started on her play embodied perseverance and resistance:

[Interviewer]: What did you keep with you from [the RYDC workshop]?
 [Zoë]: I wish that y’all could have come back but I knew it was only a one-time thing. I carried that I had to be positive because I remember one time coming to practice I just came back from court and you showed me that we still had work to do... and just to know I could accomplish the play even though I still had more time to do... Because I knew that without me that everything probably would have been messed up because you probably would have had to find another person... and I made a commitment to you guys.

[Interviewer]: It sounds like you also made a commitment to yourself.
 (Interview 2008)

Like their historical predecessors, the girls in my study believed they had work to do and stories to tell in spite of the uncertainty of their futures. The fact that the girls’ futures were unknown was not enough to deter them from completing the process of telling their stories and presenting these stories to their peers and some naysayers. Children detained in regional youth detention centers are betwixt and between because of the nature of the facility. While serving time at these centers many of our student artists await hearings where they would learn their fate. Some girls got to go home while others got transferred to long-term detention centers, group homes, drug-rehabilitation facilities, and/or foster care. Emotions are torn because home can be where some of their complications began or because they return to their homes,

school, and communities still lacking the resources needed to live healthy and fulfilled lives. The notion of home is also challenged during this time because most girls would rather be home than any of the aforementioned possibilities. Zoë had run away from home because she could not access drugs. It was during this time she met a man who became both her boyfriend and supplier:

Well I got incarcerated for drugs. It was 14 grams of cocaine and I was holding it for my boyfriend – so-called boyfriend and he left me there with all of the drugs on me. I was hysterical. I was crying and I couldn't stop crying... It was horrible and I was sad and when I got into [the RYDC] that's when it really hit me that [I am] really locked up and [I] don't know how long and [my] mother [is] not answering the phone. (Interview 2008)

When Zoë and her boyfriend were caught with drugs in his car at a gas station they were both handcuffed and placed in the patrol car. Zoë recounted that her boyfriend asked to speak with the police officers and after the discussion they removed his handcuffs and let him go. According to Zoë, 'He walked away and didn't even look back once'. Much like Sanaa's characterization of the 'ride or die chick' who was between independence and dependence from/on a man, Zoë found herself assuming responsibility for the drugs in the car. When Zoë was cast in a play entitled 'Sky, Lead the Way', she believed she had a lot in common with her character, 'Crystal', who was struggling with depression as she tried to figure out where she belonged:

[Zoë]: I kind of feel where Crystal comes from because she's depressed and lonely because I was depressed... I can feel the same emotions she's feeling. When she cries I can cry with her because I know how it feels.

[Interviewer]: Why do you think that play is going to be important to perform in the RYDCs and for the public?

[Zoë]: I can show [people] how teen girls are and what we go through on a daily basis and how we try to find our way home but it can be hard sometimes.

(Interview 2008)

Finding a way home, physically and symbolically was a critical part of the playwriting and performance process. Rehearsal was essentially practice for real life (Boal 1979, 1995, 2006). In this way, the liminal space of incarceration helped girls think about the next steps in their lives. In a movement against personalizing failures of incarcerated Black women, Richie (1996) asks how society and communities create conditions in which women are pushed and pulled or between 'threatening circumstances' (Richie 1996, 1). Rather than constructing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls and women as rebels, Richie asserts, 'For some women... non-conformity within mainstream is not a privileged position or viable option' (3). Richie's analysis portrays girls like Zoë in their full humanity. The notion of fitting in was as important as standing out or being 'more than meets the eye' – to borrow Zoë's words. Zoë's participation in an ensemble gave her an opportunity to do both.

'See the whole picture': Jada's story

A mother of a nine-month-old toddler during our first interview in the 2007 summer, Jada was most proud of her son. 'He's the perfect little baby. He's not a bad baby. He smiles, giggles, and eats', she explained to me with a beaming smile. Jada always offered encouraging words for the ensemble the first summer we met. The first time

I saw Jada frustrated was a day she could not find a babysitter and had to bring her son to Girl Time at the multi-service center. Jada's son was not happy about the unfamiliar place as well as the strange people and cried for what seemed an eternity. One by one teaching artists, female probation officers, and other staff members took turns holding Jada's son, rocking him, singing, and cooing. Finally one of the teaching artists gave Jada her baby sling and he happily stayed close to his mother throughout rehearsal. Jada was 16 at the time of our first interview. Because Jada had a great deal of experience with Girl Time she had a lot to say about performing the stories of her peers:

This is one of my talents... I can act out real life stories that happened to other people and put it in another way or a fun way so people could understand that those stories happened. (Interview 2007)

In some ways, art imitated life for Jada whose main role in the summer 2007 program was a play entitled 'True Life'. Jada played a young woman who was trying to find a 'home':

[My character] is a girl who isn't getting along with her dad and she ran away from home and went to stay with a pimp. [My character] is trying to figure out different ways to get home... That's why I don't want to put myself in those situations. (Interview 2007)

Home was often a complicated place to define for student artists. Jada's parents were loving and helped her raise her son. Like many parents, Jada's mother did not have the resources to move her family out of the neighborhood that Jada believed impacted its residents negatively. When I learned where Jada lived I recalled how every time I drove through this particular area there were masses of people standing outside at almost every hour. About a block away from the housing project where Jada and her family lived was a main thoroughfare known for drug activity and prostitution. Girl Time held an after-school program for middle-school girls around the corner from where Jada lived, and had to end the classes early so the girls would not have to walk through some of the evening traffic. Jada described her neighborhood:

My neighborhood is not a good place to be... it's bound to be some trouble when you come outside and you don't want to be in the house all day. It's horrible. [Girl Time] helps me come out of the neighborhood and have a new experience with new girls. (Interview 2007)

Jada's observation that there was trouble right outside her door combined with the understanding that one could not be expected to stay indoors all day was reflected in many of the student artists' narratives. And while Girl Time provided an alternative setting for Jada for a brief period in the summer, it simply was not enough. Jada was critical of the oversimplification that she and her peers knew what they were 'supposed to do' or that they needed to do 'the right thing'. Jada troubled the notion of doing 'right' by asserting the realities of being surrounded by 'wrong'. When Jada participated in the summer 2008 program she was the mother of two sons. Like her interview during the summer 2007 program, Jada focused on environment but this time she offered more analysis. Jada urged others who lived lives that contrasted to hers to 'see the whole picture'. This 'whole picture' for Jada challenged the notion of home and community while illuminating the paradox that formerly incarcerated girls face:

[Jada]: In my environment, in my neighborhood there's not a lot of good things going on. A lot of people say you have choice but it's also your environment. If you are around it and see stuff everyday then you start doing things you see. It might start small like smoking weed... being [in *Girl Time*] brings me away from all that hoodness, the drama with the police. I love [*Girl Time*]... it brings me to a whole another environment.

[Interviewer]: What would have to change in the world around you to do the 'right thing?'

[Jada]: It's about the environment... Even if you stay in that environment you can go to other places... Why not get away from it?... sometimes you get sick of looking at people. I've been there for 17 years and the same people are doing the same things. Some 43 years old staying with their moms... this is something to look forward to.

(Interview 2008)

Another aspect of 'seeing the whole picture' for Jada was reconsidering the lives of incarcerated girls. Like Sanaa, Jada urged people on the outside looking to refrain from judgment. Jada searched for the '*hows*' and the '*whys*' of her peers' stories:

I really don't think a lot of the girls should be locked up because some of the stuff they do – it's just not worth it. I mean some girls may need – may need to be talked to or some of them do stuff for love or they do stuff to get attention and all this because they don't have it. Then when they do it all of a sudden they are criminals. 'Oh well, she need to be locked up because she did this'. Talk to them. See what's going on or try to see the whole picture before you just go, 'Well you're a criminal, you deserve to be locked up and here's your record. This is what you did and it is what it is'. I don't think that's right. A lot of people in the big jails – I don't think a lot of people – now some people need to be there but a lot I think that they need a second chance. When I was in there I hated it. It's just so small and you just in a box. You in there when they say you can be in there. You eat a snack when they say eat a snack. You eat when they say you eat and it's not somewhere you want to be. (Interview 2008)

At the time of the second interview, Jada fully realized the ramifications of the labels she received after getting a 'record' even though it had been three years since she was incarcerated. Jada's analysis echoed Richie's argument that women who are criminalized are often depicted as the criminals. The interview with Jada moved into a discussion about alternatives to incarceration:

A lot of people – some kids be in [jail] because oh, they mom put them out and they get charged for runaway or their parents abused them or somebody abused them and they run out and the police lock them up, 'Well, you should be at home'. But my step dad [is] abusing me, so now what? Now I'm out here and I'm scared to go home but you're telling me I deserve to be in jail because I ran away? Go see about them. Go see about my step dad. But you don't want to do that, you want to take me to jail and wait for court to come around. And then when judge decides – 'cause you can't say anything in court – when the judge decides one day you a criminal and you get charged with this so this is on my record now because of some stuff that somebody should have did something about. I'm a little kid. I'm a minor. I'm whatever. Help me. Don't lock me up for it. A lot of people don't deserve to be just locked up for some of the small stuff they do. 'Cause everybody makes mistakes. (Interview 2008)

Jada's discussion of alternatives, 'talk to them', and 'see what's going on', was a movement from incarceration discourse toward a critique of the 'celling' of her peers. Jada revealed the true crime – youth are living in unacceptable conditions all over the

world yet are continuously censored, policed, and celled when they resist such conditions. Ultimately Jada believed that her peers needed someone to talk to rather than someone to judge them. According to Jada, many of the girls she met in the RYDCs needed a forum where they could live beyond labels because once they were branded ‘criminals’, ‘runaways’, ‘prostitutes’, they were ‘stuck with that label’. In many ways Jada’s participation and subsequent non-participation in the summer 2008 program embodied many of the urgent concerns she flagged during her interview. Two days after the interview, Jada walked away from the program after an entire week of struggling to find a safe place to live. Jada’s departure, perhaps one of the most telling examples of the liminality that formerly incarcerated girls experience, was an unsettling and potent reminder of how – in the midst of forging a free space – the physical and symbolic imprisonment still existed in the lives of student artists. In a study of theatre and drama classrooms in urban public North American high schools, Gallagher (2007) asks, ‘If we are raced, classed, gendered in particular ways, and entangled in certain configurations of power/powerlessness, how do we move beyond limiting conceptions of ourselves and others...’ (Gallagher 2007, 85). Trying to find resources for Jada was excruciatingly painful for the teaching artists and the only solutions offered by probation officers and case workers was for her to return to the ‘system’. Translation: Jada could be placed in a group home and foster care most likely without her children since she was under the age of 18. This option was another ‘celling’ of sorts for both Jada and her children. Jada, like the characters she and her peers played, were searching for a place to call ‘home’. And while Jada was learning to name injustices, the price of that knowledge was costly mentally and physically. The more Jada participated, the more critical she became of the world she had to return to. Placing Jada’s narrative last in this study is not a coincidence. Jada challenged Girl Time to consider what might take place once girls left the program and what can happen when they leave one liminal space only to find themselves in another.

Finding a way ‘home’: discussion

Much like the lives of formerly incarcerated girls, there is no tidy resolution or clever way to conclude the story. And perhaps if there is a ‘moral’ in this case, it is not intended for the youth who have been admonished for unacceptable behavior (in spite of unacceptable conditions under which many live their lives), but rather for scholars who are unearthing the racing, classing, and gendering of youth in school and in out-of-school contexts. The final scene will be determined by juvenile justice systems and certainly schools who readily usher Black and Brown children through the school-to-prison pipeline. Nia, Sanaa, Zoë, and Jada provide wisdom in their narratives that have implications for teachers and teaching. As these girls negotiated between two different worlds – one that fostered creativity, imagination, and freedom and one that diminished all of these with one slam of a gate – they used their writing, speaking, and performing to navigate their way out of labels and stereotypes. Meiners (2007) examines American societies’ preoccupations with such dichotomies and how they get normalized in schools:

Schools are one legitimate site where meanings about the child are reified... If schools naturalize these constructs, family and child, which are in fact artificial categories, integral to maintain state functions of white supremacy and patriarchy, the state also requires mechanisms to maintain and enforce these constructs. (137)

The potential of schools and the power they have to cease the sorting of children cannot be undermined. Schools can still be the safety nets that urban youth need and deserve. On a panel for the Behind the Cycle: Integrative Approaches to Criminal Justice Reform Summit in December 2008, the manager for the Campaign for Black Male Achievement, Shawn Dove, explained that, if the American public education system was an election battleground, then schools represented the ‘swing states’. This metaphor could not be more accurate. Schools that serve Nia, Sanaa, Zoë, Jada and their peers do not have enough outlets for writing, performance, and challenging youth/juvenile justice, yet the drama classroom could be a critical space for urban youth:

The drama classroom is a construction site designed for desire, bodies, and voices to speak. The space of performance invites urban youth, so fiercely cast as dangerous and fixed, to engage in performances of self that are ‘incomplete fiction, with profound moments of discovery, resonance and truth’. (Fine 2007, xi)

Nia, Sanaa, Zoë, and Jada needed a space where they can share their stories and in some instances, rewrite them as well. Playwriting invites dialogue and problem-solving; multiple perspectives must be considered when creating characters and mapping scenes that mirror lived experiences. For participants in Girl Time workshops, this process was often their first opportunity to write their own stories and their interviews were the first time someone listened to their ‘side of the story’. Performing their words was as important as the writing process itself. Performance engaged incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls as well as their audience in their possibilities. In a ‘performance of possibilities’, Madison (2005) asserts:

...the possible suggests a movement culminating in creation and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of merging the text with the world, of critically traversing the margin and center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces. (172)

The drama classroom can be a terrain of ‘traversing the margin’ in an era of zero-tolerance policies and increased policing of children in schools. Ultimately, the girls in my study, much like their historical predecessors yearned for ‘home’ – a home in school, a home in the program, a home in their communities. However, Peterson’s historiography of Black women writers forewarns that ‘home is never neutral or safe’ and is also ‘subject to change’ especially when lives are in flux. For Nia, Sanaa, Zoë, and Jada, this is particularly true and the ‘home’ they desired was not only a physical place but also a metaphorical space where they could fit in, define themselves (and in some cases redefine themselves) on their terms while moving their lives from the periphery of liminality to a place where they are central to the story and central to the future. As ‘doers of the word’, student artists ‘wrote from positions of marginality, from social, psychological and geographic sites that were peripheral to the dominate culture and, very often, to their own’ (Peterson 1995, 6–7). Through playwriting and performance as well as through the processes which bridge the two, student artists used their stories to explore their past, present and future lives and the contexts for those lives.

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