

INTRODUCTION

Look at California

WELCOME TO LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles is the type of place where you can ride by buildings every day for years and have no idea what happens within those walls. It is the kind of city where something is not missed until it is torn down and replaced. This is not for a lack of curiosity, rather it is simply that in a place so vast, it is difficult to ever know the inner beauty of all the nooks and crannies. Having grown up in the region, I must have driven past the Southern California Library more than five hundred times without ever knowing its name, not knowing that one day, it would come to have one of the most profound impacts on how I think about and engage with the world.

Despite living in close proximity to the SCL as a child and adolescent, my first introduction to its work happened when I was far away from Los Angeles, living in Austin, Texas, and read a collection of essays titled *Without Fear ... Claiming Safe Communities without Sacrificing Ourselves: A Reader*. Published by SCL, the volume addressed the development and fight against the carceral state and its relationship to issues including education, housing, and the political economy. The framing of the carceral state as less a material site (such as prison) of physical violence or brutal extraction and more as a set of constant micro and

macro engagements against Black people and with state structures that animate the carceral state helped to reorient my understanding of carcerality and, specifically, the struggle against the carceral state. The archival records and contemporary strategies of anticarceral organizers reveal that the long struggle against the carceral state situates the vast nexus of prisons, courts, police officers, universities, prosecutors, social workers, financiers, probation officers, jails, public defenders, academics, detention centers, legislators, real estate developers, and the litany of other bureaucratic administrators and officials into a set of fraught relationships that are neither static nor omniscient. Similarly, the details of these relational engagements with Black communities are the lifeblood of the multifaceted violence that permeates throughout the carceral state. The liberation struggle against the carceral state has been situated in this relational manner in part because this is how Black people experience the carceral state—but also, it is an organizing strategy that has been tried and tested as effective against something that is seemingly everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Rather than set up an impossible task of shutting down every single prison “tomorrow,” organizing strategies have developed to locate critical nodes within the relational structure and expose the absurdity and fragility of these connections. Similar to *Without Fear*, this book frames the carceral state and liberation efforts against the carceral state as based upon a set of relationships that extend beyond the physical walls of a prison and into the daily lived experiences that affect nearly every aspect of Black life.

Little did I know that two years after I read *Without Fear* I would connect with key members of SCL and begin a project that would help me reconceptualize carcerality and forever change how I engage with just about everything in the world.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LIBRARY AND MARLEY

The Southern California Library is not a library in the typical sense. It is an archive that houses the collections of radical-left organizations

from the International Oil Workers Union to the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party. It is also a community hub. Founded in 1963 by Emil Freed, a labor organizer and communist agitator, SCL moved to its current location in South Central Los Angeles in the early 1970's. Under the care of Yusef Omowale and Michele Welsing, SCL continued to serve as a key meeting site for community organizations and developed a very specific and intentional relationship with the surrounding neighborhood. It is through this relationship that I came to understand SCL as a central part of the intellectual infrastructure throughout the many neighborhoods of Black Los Angeles. Attuned to the discrepancy between "what is thought to be" and "what is," SCL documents the lived experience of Black Los Angeles and the wide-ranging impact of the expansion of the carceral state for Black communities in the region. As the host of workshops, classes, seminars, and organizing sessions, SCL emerged as an intimate part of the regional communal struggle against the carceral state. Most importantly, SCL has developed into a space that has allowed people to just be. In a neighborhood where residents are constantly asked to fill out surveys and give the most detailed and highly confidential information for the most basic of services and/or as part of surveillance schemes, SCL has intentionally crafted a culture where people are allowed to be, even if it is for a fleeting moment, free. The creation of such an environment has engendered accountability for the space and the investment in a particular set of expectations that are based in mutual respect and honesty.

It was through this struggle, and at the library, that I met Marley, who along with SCL is the primary driver of the book. I had heard a great deal about Marley and his comrades from Yusef and Michele in the weeks leading up to our meeting. Marley, who was born in 1992 and was 16 years old when we first met, had come into SCL looking to learn, but importantly, he was looking to organize within his community. Nineteen ninety-two is a critical year in Black Los Angeles as it marks the Los Angeles Rebellion and the coalescence of a unified radical politics that made strident structural demands upon the city through mass

mobilization. Raised within such a political awakening, Marley and his peers were well attuned to the viciousness of the carceral apparatus as well as the power of organizing and political education. Yusef and Michele instantly realized the charismatic leadership style that effortlessly poured out of Marley. On a consistent basis he was bringing more and more of his peers into conversations with Yusef, Michele, and Raquel. We first met at a political education course that I facilitated at SCL. The course was structured on the explosion of prisons that happened in California during the 1970s and through the late 1990s. Marley was a participant in the course, and it is fair to say that we did not get off to the best start. While Marley is naturally gregarious and has boundless amounts of energy, that was not the case during our first set of engagements. Marley often recalls his first impression of me as a mix of disdain and dismissiveness. As he has stated to me on several occasions, his first thought was, “Who is this tall, light-skin dude, walking in here, going to tell me about my neighborhood?” The course was six weeks long. During that time we engaged in difficult conversations, and I quickly realized that if I did not have Marley’s respect, then I was going to lose the class. What I also learned was that Marley and his peers valued radical honesty and mutual accountability. They would push the conversation in a manner that would cut through the “niceties” and conventions of polite conversation. Having grown up in a context where every aspect of the state (such as school, health care, social work, housing) had overpromised and underdelivered, they knew honesty to be in short supply. Thus, they demanded radical honesty of each other, and likewise, it was demanded of me. It was after this threshold was passed that my relationship with Marley began to change. Marley and his comrades utilized SCL as an intellectual and social space that coalesced into a symbiotic bond that was built upon respect, love, and care.

Born and raised in the neighborhood surrounding SCL, Marley embodies both the spirit of Black freedom and the angst of Black vulnerability within the carceral state. A young organizer of extreme talent, he represents the tensions, contradictions, and desires of Black men

who are raised within a regime defined by particular forms of gendered, racialized, and sexualized violence. Yet, what Marley and many of his peers possessed was a boundless capacity to care and nurture each other, regardless of the complete absence of any state support aside from that which defined their lives as illegible and criminal and at odds with the social mores of a proper, respectable citizen and thus in need of constant surveillance and reform. There was an unwavering capacity to love in the midst of a truly repugnant carceral apparatus that was built and maintained upon repression, violence, and general containment. This means Marley and his peers had a capacity to love despite being subjected to forms of state violence where children were forcibly removed from their families under the guise of parental negligence, where families undertook herculean efforts to secure modest forms of housing, where going hungry was commonplace within much of the neighborhood. For Marley and his peers, the policies and edicts of the carceral regime made the struggle to obtain the basics of life not an exceptional reality, but the norm.

It was within this particular social milieu that Marley and his friends and family organized, laughed, and supported each other. It was also here that they mourned, fought, and dealt with the seemingly impossible odds of being Black. Being Black in a place that was predicated upon an intense disdain and hatred for expressions of Blackness that expanded beyond particular forms of servility and docility that were prescribed by the carceral state. Such a limited framework of Blackness did not square with the traditions that Marley and his comrades adhered to. Rather than accept this framework, they resisted and articulated ways of being that flew in the face of a set of pitiful options.

It is within this space that I present just a portion of what is the life of Marley. Situated as various snapshots of Marley, to explore Marley's life is to explore the life of Blackness in Southern California. The focus on Marley in this manner provides an opportunity to understand the multifaceted nature of Black life in Southern California through a specific instance. My hope is that the nuanced and complicated facets of

his life and the importance of the Southern California Library to Black people in South Central Los Angeles register to a community living in the midst of an ongoing struggle.

FRAMING AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

At the risk of sounding old, the structure of the book forms a record collection. Each chapter is an album, and each album details one aspect of the carceral state apparatus across an A side and B side. Located within a genealogical practice where Black music is the embodiment of political struggle, joy, love, hurt, and creativity, music is the thematic undercurrent that animates the multifaceted nuance of the Black lived experience across time and space. As articulated by Shana Redmond and Clyde Woods, Black music is a key interlocuter that informs intellectual traditions across generations and is central to processes of memory and cultural assertions that affirm Black political thought (Redmond 2013; Woods 2017). Within such a framework, Black music serves as the cultural analog that gives breadth to the dynamisms that are at the vortex between the daily lived experiences and historical knowledge production of Black life. Mapped along such terrain, the book utilizes music as a conduit to frame and situate the complexity of Black intellectual thought.

The template of an album provides an archetype that positions the ethnographic narrative in conversation and dialogue with the historical renderings derived from the archival collections housed at the Southern California Library. The beauty of an album is the interplay between the A side and the B side. The A side is very often constructed with songs that speak to emotive sentiments that tap into visceral capacities such as love, hurt, and exhilaration. B sides are very often constructed with a more mediative sensibility and are intended to be sat with as a means to digest the complexity of arrangements and the risks that artists take on a project. With this template in mind, the album format functions as the ideal model to situate the articulation of Black thought and cultural making.

Following this structure, each album focuses on an institutional site that maps the jagged terrain of the fight against the carceral state and details how carcerality has become imbricated within several key structures of state governance. Marley's lived experiences on the A side of the album animate the connections between carcerality and housing, non-profits, health care, and education, while on the B side, a multifaceted engagement with the Southern California Library documents the many layers of the carceral state and the long fight against carcerality in the state of California. The A side of each album is ethnographic in that it details a particular set of lived experiences that coalesce around the struggle within and against the carceral state. The core of the ethnography is informed by a series of recorded conversations, field notes, interviewer-written narratives, and multiplatform social media engagement. The B sides of the albums offer a deeper dive into the history and context that informs the lived experience of Marley and also animates the intellectual life and organizing work taking place at the Southern California Library. Importantly, the archival documents utilized in the B sides were curated through the steadfast work of the Southern California Library as critical texts in the formal and informal political education process that was central to organizing efforts against the carceral state.

Music is the background to this story, a constant presence during my engagement with Marley and the Southern California Library. During our many journeys throughout Southern California, Marley and I were always listening to or talking about music. As an informal policy, SCL always had music playing and holds a fairly extensive music archival collection. The "throwback" to the days of records is an intentional effort to build a cohesive set of chapters that are in dialogue with each other. From the opportunities I've had to form solid friendships with musicians, I've found that a common thread amongst them all is an immense fondness for the album construction process. Each selection on a record needed to be placed in a very specific location in order to achieve the desired goal of building a cohesive project that followed a particular theme or vision. In that same vein, *Joy and Pain: A Story of Black Life and*

Liberation in Five Albums is built as a set of albums—or chapters—that collectively demonstrate the relational organizational structure of the carceral state and, importantly, organizing efforts against the carceral state.

While music is the overlay to the framing of the book, the true inspiration for the structure comes from two sources that have been foundational to my understanding of Black life in the United States: *We Charge Genocide* by the Civil Rights Congress and the *Parable* series by Octavia Butler.

Akin to the cohesive building of a record on a set of albums, *We Charge Genocide* is a collection of chapters such that, while each is damning on its own, the collective weight of the petition brings to bear the overwhelming nature of genocidal violence. In 1951 the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) published *We Charge Genocide* as a petition to the United Nations. Edited by William L. Patterson, the CRC asserted “that the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against and long the target of violence, suffer from genocide as the result of the consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government” (Patterson, 1951, xi). *We Charge Genocide* painstakingly documented the multifaceted nature of genocidal violence levied against Black people in the United States. Attending to matters of economic, social, political, educational, and legal oppression, the petition presented voluminous evidence of genocidal acts that the United States condoned and perpetuated against Black people. The petition exposed the United States as not a bastion of freedom and democracy. In an international arena, it presented a country whose core values were indebted to traditions of racial exploitation and violence.

Over seventy years later, many of the founding tenets of the *We Charge Genocide* petition hold true. So much so that several community organizations around the country have recently adopted the framework of the petition as a centerpiece to their organizing platforms and campaigns. In the wake of the expansion of the carceral state as the most ubiquitous formation of state terror, the framework of *We Charge Genocide* is a most appropriate model to understand the multifaceted nature

of the carceral regime upon Black life. While carcerality is usually associated with the physical site of the prison, the logics of carcerality bleed through all parts of state function: education, health care, welfare, social services, and public housing, to name a few.

The core mission of this book is to provide an intimate look into how the carceral state makes Black life precarious. Focusing on housing, education, health care, the nonprofit sector, and juvenile detention facilities, the aim is to depict the overwhelming nature of Black precarity in the twenty-first century. However, precarity does not define Black existence; thus, this book's core mission is also to describe the social visions of Black life that are immersed in radical freedom: being free of the carceral state, free of violence, free to dream, free to live in laughter and joy. What is also clear is that there is not just one way to attain such freedom, nor does freedom come easily. It requires listening to those whose existence has been marked as illegible and taking seriously the demands of those people whose vision of the world has been labeled as idealistic or far-fetched.

This book also borrows inspiration and a framework from Octavia Butler's books *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Written in the 1990s and set in the 2020s near Los Angeles, the *Parable* series follows the life of a young woman, Lauren Oya Olamina, whose gift of hyperempathy allows her to feel all of the raw emotions associated with life on the brink in a dystopic future where society is collapsing. The *Parable* series is loosely broken into a format that can perhaps best be described as narrative and vision. The narrative takes the reader along the perilous journey that Lauren and the burgeoning Earthseed community endure, while the visions relay bits of wisdom and experience learned through a trying time.

Utilizing Butler's framework, *Joy and Pain* can also be read along the narrative/vision schematic. The A side is ethnographic and follows Marley and the journey that unfolds as he makes his way through a society that is immersed in and indebted to multiple forms of violence. This B side draws on archival collections, Coalition Against Police

Abuse (CAPA) and the Urban Policy Research Institute (UPRI), housed at SCL, to recount the history of a time and place. The archival work presented on the B sides reanimate the ethnography on the A sides, together providing a foundational political impetus that governed much of Black life in the neighborhood. As in the visions in Butler's *Parable* series, the archives are both historical and prophetic, functioning as guideposts and harbingers of disaster to be unleashed by a state apparatus governed by the logics of carcerality.

ARCHIVE AND ETHNOGRAPHY AS GENERATIVE THEORY

It is at the locus of the A side and the B side that the visionary aspects of Black struggle and world-making undo time boundaries of past and present. The CAPA and UPRI archives reveal the painstaking detail that radical-based organizations undertook in order to strategize against forces that encroached upon Black life. There are thousands of pages of state-based documents ranging from policy briefs and internal memos to detailed plans of real estate development that sought to remove Black people from their neighborhoods. It is evident in culling through these archives that study and planning was key to much of the work that had to be done in order to fight against the carceral state. A major component of the study process was having a constantly informed sense of the “goings-on” within the relational structure of the carceral state. While so much attention is paid to the policing apparatus of the carceral state, a core question that was asked by organizations such as CAPA was, what forces put the police into motion? Such a question required a multifaceted response in order to understand nuanced characteristics of the relational aspect of the carceral state. As a result of this robust approach to study, these organizations collected as much information about the state processes as they could in order to understand the mechanizations that fueled carceral-based relationships.

As stated and restated to me several times by Yusef Omowale and Michele Welsing, political education and study were and continue to be the critical junctures of organizing efforts against the carceral state. In this vein, the work of Marley and of organizations that used the library space was in conversation with a genealogical tradition that rigorously approached study as a foundational component in organizing against the carceral state. Utilized via workshops, organizing sessions, and political education courses, the archives that are detailed in the vision section represent the knowledge passed down from community organizations, lifelong residents, and community scholars who sought to create new ways of being. Marley and his fellow organizers utilized the archives on a consistent basis to inform their organizing strategies and political orientation to manifestations of carceral state power. By drawing on the archives of the Coalition Against Police Abuse and the Urban Policy Research Institute, the B side should also be read as providing needed context to the social, political, and economic milieus that set the stage for Marley and his comrades to organize with each other and against carcerality and its many manifestations and interlocutors.

The result of the interplay between the two sides is the generation of sets of theories that are informed by a specific Black intellectual praxis. This praxis in turn is temporally situated in the past, present, and future and should be understood as the primary and dynamic foundation of liberation struggles, social movements, and acts of insurgency against the liquidating violence that emanates from the many dimensions of carcerality.

MODELS OF THE ARCHIVE

There is a rich body of scholarship that details the interplay amongst archives and power. Two texts that have been very influential in the structuring of this book are Avery Gordon's *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins* and Deborah Thomas's *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair*. Gordon's text provided a

model to engage with material that was relational to each other, but did not fit into neat, preassigned categories. In addition, Gordon is very clear that radical archival formations do not belong to any one person, but rather are home to a tawdry collective whose desire is to construct social arrangements that value life rather than logics of gross exploitation. Deborah Thomas's *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation* was very helpful in thinking through experimental ways of designing the interplay between ethnography and the historical archive. In this beautifully structured book, Thomas effortlessly transitions between multimodal ethnographic narratives pertaining to the tension between sovereignty and violence in Jamaica and the historical record that she labels as "Interludes" that provide the historic basis of said tension.

Indebted to experimental and collective models established by Gordon and Thomas, the goal of *Joy and Pain* is to pivot away from a conventional formal theorization of the archive or an analysis of lived experience through ethnographic engagement. Rather, in a very intentional manner, the theorization and framing of Black life and the carceral state emanate from Marley, SCL, and a collective read of the CAPA and Urban Policy Research Institute archives. Within such a paradigm, the citational practices draw directly from the archival material and ethnographical narratives and are done in a manner that reflects back upon the contributions of the collective struggle lobbied against carceral state.

UNFINISHED WORK

The stories and archival histories documented in this book are more than ten years in the making. Through this time, I have shared moments of celebration as well as moments of sheer agony with Marley, SCL, and the surrounding community. It is of note that during this time period there were many public-facing movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and other nonprofit/state-partnered campaigns that gained popular attention. Quite striking, many of these movements (and perhaps most notably BLM) did not gain traction within many Black communities in

Los Angeles. One of the most consistent and poignant articulations of why many of these initiatives failed to mobilize the masses of Black Los Angeles was a differential set of politics with regard to the carceral state. While nonprofit campaigns and Los Angeles-based BLM organizing primarily framed the carceral state as mortal acts of police violence against Black subjects and primarily engaged with the formal political system, the conceptualization of carcerality for many within Black Los Angeles communities was informed by carceral state violence being animated throughout the many tentacles of the state apparatus (such as schools, housing, health care, and everyday forms of violence). As Marley told me on one occasion, “I am more likely to die because of diabetes or heart disease or something like that than to be killed by the police. But I am more likely to die of diabetes or heart disease because of the police. When they shut down a hospital or a clinic and that money then is transferred over to build up a much bigger police precinct which needs more police officers, that means trouble.” The trouble was less about the police causing imminent physical violence than about the mounting causes of premature death—most notably, the myriad of treatable health ailments and calamities such as heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes. Further, there was an immediate connection made of the lack of housing, draconian punitive formations of public education, and complete void of health care to the rampant buildup of the carceral state. As articulated through a lack of participation and voiced critique, the core political strategies of many state-based and nonprofit-driven campaigns did not resonate with the lived experience of Black Angelenos and thus did not configure into sustained political knowledge.

As a means to document the political knowledge of the neighborhood, the book is intentionally void of my analysis of particular situations and instead presents narratives that give life to the voice and intellectual life of a collective process that was constantly working through the multiple positions that people held. The forging of the collective process was an arduous task that demanded, as Yusef once told me, “the constant struggle to be clear on what we had to offer, from our

different positions, do the work to try and get to a place where we could share and articulate that, and that we are all implicated by and have responsibilities to undo, these violences of the carceral state.”

I am aware that it is impossible to completely remove yourself from a story you tell, and, to that end, my place in the story is to mark a distinction from the day-to-day lived reality of Marley and his peers. Although I was born and raised throughout the area, their reality is not my lived reality. To an extent, my relationship with SCL helped to bridge that divide, but the divide itself exists. From a young age Marley grew accustomed to various agents of the state masked as patron saints who inevitably made life quite miserable for him and his family. Simply stated, you would be a fool to go through life as Marley and trust anyone who did not understand the core tenets of their struggle.

Casting a wide view over the past ten-plus years, the basis of Marley’s skepticism was located in the relational nature of how the carceral state sought to forge relationships among people. According to the governing social script, someone in my station in life was cast as the mentor/savior in relation to Marley’s wayward lived experiences. However, neither Marley nor his peers wanted any of these type-cast roles, and had a rather stern rebuke of the carceral state’s attempts to situate their lives as illegible/inconsequential. Thus, the result was not only a rational distancing from people such as myself, but also an exposure to the contradictions of a set of politics that sought to separate charismatic and key members of Black communities from their neighborhoods and families. The exposure of such tensions places into question the very assumptions that are at the heart of much state-based (often foundation- and nonprofit-driven) reform work that reproduces harm back to Black communities through a castigation of Black knowledge formation, cultural production, and social visions as illegible, violent, and criminal. Through rigorous study, in-depth conversations, and many tense moments, what has formed over the years is a level of mutual respect, trust, and admiration for a commitment to the work that is yet to be completed.