Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation

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8 **LOSSES NOT TO BE PASSED ON**

Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s Portraits Rewriting (Ex-) Incarcerated Black Mothers

Atalie Gerhard

This essay analyzes how portraits from *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison* by Paula C. Johnson (2003) and photographs by Sara Bennett from her series *Life After Life in Prison* (2016) and *Spirit on the Inside* (2013) create opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated women to contribute their experiences to critiques of mass incarceration. The impressions that Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett gather testify to the lasting personal and collective impact of incarceration while articulating subversive perspectives through the faces of mothers whose life stories connect them to larger struggles against racism in the U.S. To allow this interpretation to emerge, they navigate both, stereotypes according to which certain women are disproportionately prone to criminal behaviors (“bad Black mothers”) as well as perspectives which sensationalize mothers’ suffering to the point of detaching it from systemic oppression (“mammies”). Instead, photographs from *Inner Lives*, *Life After Life in Prison*, and *Spirit on the Inside* highlight the creative and complex ways in which women reclaim their identities within their personal spaces where they perform crucial social functions.

Given their declared aspirations for their projects, Paula C. Johnson’s collection and Sara Bennett’s exhibitions relate to bell hooks’ call for searching for truly inclusive Feminist practices of empowerment at the margins of U.S. society, since they shed light on the particular significance of motherhood in and after prison. By delivering critiques through the testimonies of women, they display their subjects’ unique perspectives, which derive from a lack of privilege vis-à-vis fellow members of their society, according to bell hooks. In her book *From the Margins to the Center* (1984), bell hooks recounts her experience of how, in a women’s studies class at university, her white classmates condemned her for criticizing their oblivion to how women in her Southern working-class community supported each other as a model of Feminist
Empowerment.

Echoing bell hooks’ emphasis on the strategies already at the disposal of women to resist patriarchal oppression, both Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett reveal how their subjects negotiated their identities with the help of Black Feminist culture beyond the institution of the prison. Thereby, their criticism of the dehumanizing effects of incarceration supplements legal notions of freedom based in body-centered discourses that the women activate. Especially when they depict criminalized women who identify as mothers and/or perform maternal care, Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s photographs produce visions of resistance that cast prisons as obsolete when it comes to promoting personal rehabilitation and public security.

Paula C. Johnson lets the faces and voices of women who are legally prevented from educating their children and participating in society testify to both their ongoing struggles to resist domestic and institutional violence as well as to overcome isolation by practicing meaningful care within their surroundings. Combining legal research with personal interviews as a law professor, Paula C. Johnson explains in the introduction to Inner Lives that legal and workplace discrimination have targeted Black women since the abolition of slavery but that these practices have always been countered by women’s resistance against stereotypes and struggle for human rights.

Guided by her interviews with currently and formerly incarcerated women in the U.S. East, Midwest, South, and West, she decided to publish the portrait photographs that she took of them while recording their life stories for later transcription and editing with the real names that they gave. In her role as an advocate for (ex-) incarcerated women, she includes the story of Janneral Denson whom customs officers from Fort Lauderdale detained in 1997 for drug trafficking suspicions and urged to take laxatives despite her advanced pregnancy. The words of Janneral Denson’s congressional testimony demonstrate the negative consequences of racial profiling for an affected woman’s perception of her society,

The very fact that I am here, speaking before you, points to the greatness of our country. But what I, and many other African Americans, have gone through, points to a great failure in our country. Conduct such as this is both illegal and Un-American, and, in the long run, can only serve to drive a wedge between you, the government, and the citizens of the country.
Although no picture of her appears, Janneral Denson’s story in *Inner Lives* inspires criticism of U.S. policing practices by invoking the trope of motherhood as an act of creating communal continuity that gains a subversive potential when threatened by institutional violence, in this case due to racial profiling and suspect detention. The narratives in *Inner Lives* argue for the mothers’ rights to inspire and care for their children despite their incarcerations as they represent their views to the outside population and promote empathy. The portraits aesthetically resist an institution that produces what Alexander G. Weheliye refers to as “racializing assemblages”. Alexander G. Weheliye employs this term in his book, *Habeas Viscus. Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014) to describe how the status of oppressed people in Western modernity is not determined by how their bodies are perceived by others alone, but most importantly, by the violence that they experience as a result. The effects of his shift of focus are that any one racialized group’s claims to the singularity of their suffering may be challenged as well as that oppressed people may unite across their differences based on their lived experiences. In the tradition of Black Feminism, he traces strategies of survival that racialized, gendered subjects develop under inhumane corporeal violence, and which I recognize as performed in Sara Bennett’s photographs documenting women’s lives following their releases from prison as well. Her projects advocate for public understanding for formerly incarcerated women. The photographs could suggest that the women transfer to their children a particular knowledge of U.S. society resulting from their experiences. This knowledge might evade verbal explication but results in lived resistance that shapes future generations. The complex ways in which formerly incarcerated women perform agency challenges post-Enlightenment notions of freedom, as in the case of the character Sethe from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) who kills her daughter so that she may escape slavery in spirit if not in body, but is haunted by the girl’s ghost in the future. By exhibiting photographs of mothers caring for their children in everyday settings, such as playing in the street and only alluding to their past incarcerations in captions, Sara Bennett destigmatizes this period of their lives and emphasizes their identities beyond the label of “ex-convict”. Reflecting on her work as a defense attorney for domestic abuse victims, Sara Bennett explains that she hopes her photographs will inspire judges to reconsider their sentencing practices. In the following citation from a *Huck Magazine* article on her work,
she discusses her own method of listening to the stories of women while trying to capture distinct aspects of their self-representations,

Before I bring out my camera, I talk to the women at length, listen to their stories, and hear what they’ve been through [...] One of my challenges is that the women talk to me so much that it’s hard for me to get a shot where they’re not mid-sentence.¹⁰

When the press advertises her exhibitions, journalists emphasize that Sara Bennett is a white defense attorney and that she hopes to challenge stereotypes through photography. However, she prefers to explain her choice of medium by citing the empathy that it produces,

So I hope my photos make the formerly incarcerated women relatable, and then your empathy for them sort of kicks in. That’s what I was trying to do in the re-entry project. I show people at work or socializing or with grandchildren or just interacting. I mean you can’t just help but feel the humanity in the women, and that’s what I was going for. I mean, even if they have struggles in their lives, which they do, there’s a lot of poverty and homelessness. But even with all of that, you can still feel their inner strength or their ability to overcome whatever is put in their way. I think those are the kinds of things that humanizes my subjects. It’s just like that saying that a photo is worth a thousand words; it’s really true.¹¹

Despite her efforts to improve public perceptions of the women she photographs, her description of them as essentially resilient could still marginalize them further, if viewers take their strength for granted rather than acknowledge their suffering. However, Susan Sontag warns that photographs of struggling civilians, albeit in warzones, can affirm colonial divides of power if they sensationalize suffering for the entertainment of First World audiences rather than raise awareness for the roots of violent conflicts.¹² Although her essay Regarding the Pain of Others (2003) deals with documentary war photography, I refer to it to reaffirm that even photographs advocating empathy can normalize the suffering of human subjects if they represent it in the form of depoliticized spectacles.¹³ As a white public defender, Sara Bennett is more privileged than the women she photographs and this could lead to intense emotional responses to their suffering that could prevent them from conveying resistance against the penal system in her photographs.

LOSSES NOT TO BE PASSED ON
However, Sara Bennett’s dedication to defending accused women and her usage of documentary photography to humanize her subjects, materialize in a photograph such as the one of the ex-incarcerated Tracy with her grandson Joshia. The scene invites a reading of Tracy’s care practices as resistance against her stigmatization within the criminal justice system. Among Sara Bennett’s photographs of Tracy’s reintegration into society, this photograph highlights the healing power that she could derive from her love for Joshia. According to Celeste-Marie Bernier, domestic life historically constituted a site of creative resistance for women, as in her example of the enslaved artist Harriet Powers, who told Biblical stories of liberation with the help of her handmade quilts. While Tracy’s loving embrace in Sara Bennett’s photograph could suggest that domesticity can be empowering, this scene’s limited focus on the common theme of family could normalize Tracy’s past incarceration as meaningless. In this sense, Rebecca Wanzo criticizes how stereotypes of Black women’s suffering as common lead to a view of violence against them as meaningless. In the case of Sara Bennett’s photograph, the relatability of Tracy’s love for Joshia should not overshadow the context of rehabilitation in the eyes of viewers who should not accept her marginalization as common.

So far, I have argued that Paula C. Johnson as well as Sara Bennett criticize incarceration by emphasizing the personal lives of women in an age of mass incarceration. The women’s self-expressions in photographs, edited narratives, and captions underline the impact of incarceration on families as they call for empathy. Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s representations of
their subjects perform multiple strategies that I connect to Black Feminism, intersectionality, and identity politics which manifest visually. While Sara Bennett asks judges to reconsider how they sentence women in light of their personal living conditions, Paula C. Johnson’s book lets her interviewees testify to the roots of incarceration within their lives as they face their viewers. Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s projects must counter stereotypes of incarcerated women and avoid sensationalist tropes while placing the faces and bodies of their subjects at the center of their critiques. With regard to a photograph such as the one of Tracy with Joshia, for example, this means neither emphasizing her suffering as a grandmother who was separated from her family over her past stigmatization as an incarcerated woman nor vice versa. Therefore, the challenge and opportunity of projects like Sara Bennett’s is to celebrate women’s survival despite incarceration without universalizing their experiences or catering to stereotypes of “criminally deviant” womanhood. On the one hand, it is impossible to mistake the intentions of Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett, since they add edited narratives and captions, respectively. On the other hand, their reliance on photographs suggests that they aim to provide evidence of their subjects’ identities as part of their critiques of mass incarceration. In this sense, Paula C. Johnson explains that photography has historically served women’s cultural resistance in the past. As an example, she refers to Renée Cox’s nude self-portrait, *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (1996). She argues that because of the hope and pride that this photograph communicates by associating a Black woman’s body with divinity, it provoked threats by then-mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani to defund the Brooklyn Museum of Art that exhibited it in 2001. According to Paula C. Johnson, Rudy Giuliani’s attempt at censorship affirms the culturally transgressive potential of celebratory representations of Black women that are rare but also important in terms of promoting positive self-images for them. When Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett emphasize the faces and bodies of (ex-) incarcerated women alongside their edited narratives or statements in captions, respectively, they symbolically perform the legal principle of *habeas corpus*. In the U.S. Constitution, *habeas corpus* demands a fair trial for accused subjects. Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett imply that their subjects deserve unbiased and empathetic sentencing. By using black-and-white instead of multicolor settings, their photographs could aesthetically allude to racialized disparities that underwrite discrimination, as discussed by Alexander G. Weheliye. In the following, I will bear this notion in mind while I analyze selected representations.
Paula C. Johnson’s Inner Lives (2003): Through the Mirror of Black Motherhood

Paula C. Johnson places portrait photographs of her interviewees ahead of their edited narratives in her book *Inner Lives*. Eighty-eight percent of her (ex-) incarcerated interviewees are mothers and seventy percent experienced physical and sexual abuse before their incarcerations. During her interviews, she photographed the women in their institutions or homes in the way they styled themselves—this could explain their comfortable poses and their direct gazes into her camera. The minimalistic accessorizing of Rae Ann, who drapes glasses over her shirt, DonAlda’s tiny ear hoops, or Mamie’s tight curls could represent minor acts of resistance against institutional structures designed to produce conformity. Although their uniforms with tags remind viewers of their incarcerations, the women perform agency in their interactions with the camera and in their fashion choices. In contrast to the institutional limits to self-expression that shape the incarcerated women’s identity performances, the ex-incarcerated women appear confident as they wear shell jewelry (Ida P. McCray) or surround themselves with awards and photographs (Donna Hubbard Spearman), to mention a few examples. The postures of the ex-incarcerated activists Ida P. McCray and Donna Hubbard Spearman are also more relaxed and their smiles are broader. As they directly face the camera in their homes, they express a willingness to represent their survival.
While Hortense J. Spillers warns that motherhood can only provide insights into womanhood but not define it, the struggles of Paula C. Johnson’s interviewees against stereotypes could already represent their maternal legacies. In her edited narrative in *Inner Lives*, DonAlda reveals she is her children’s only surviving parent after defending herself against their violent father—her act of shooting him in self-defense is the reason for her incarceration which she struggled to accept at first. In her photograph, she seems to pursue visibility as she turns toward the camera in front of a blurred wire fence. Hortense J. Spillers criticizes how Black mothers are exclusively identified with biological reproduction but not with personal legacies in the footsteps of slavery, under which women were sexually exploited with economic motives. By facing the camera alone while their children are mentioned in their edited narratives, Paula C. Johnson’s interviewees, including DonAlda, could resist such simplistic definitions of their roles as mothers. According to Hortense J. Spillers, the racist refusal to recognize institutionally contained women as human and as mothers legitimated their rape and exploitation. However, Paula C. Johnson’s portrait photographs of the women’s faces omit the trope of corporeal exploitation. By choosing how much of their bodies to reveal to the lens, both the incarcerated Marilyn, whose eyes peep out under her fringe, or the released Bettie Gibson, whose broad smile reveals her partially broken teeth, control viewers’ perceptions of their unique lives. Paula C. Johnson’s portrait photographs also contrast the function of mugshots. Mugshots constitute the photographic genre that is most commonly associated with incarceration following in the footsteps of Orientalizing ethnographic headshots, since both styles attempt to produce knowledge about a group based on standardized representations of its members. Paula C. Johnson’s portrait photographs of incarcerated women may subversively allude to this genre by emphasizing the women’s faces and partially representing them in standardized uniforms with tags. However, the women’s free choice on how to pose contrasts the principle of standardization. Thus, the women perform agency despite institutional containment when they determine their own visual representation to outside society.

Women’s performances of agency constitute resistance against racist stereotypes of passivity, especially with regard to motherhood. Such racist stereotypes permeate the Moynihan report from 1965 that falsely attributed high incarceration rates to an absence of strict fathers within disenfranchised woman-led families. With regard to the forced absence of mothers due to incarceration, Donna Hubbard Spearman narrates in *Inner Lives* that she aims
to help mothers pursue emotional connections with their children despite their physical separation,

I realized at that point that a large part of what I had to do when I got out was to work with making the process of motherhood easier to deal with during incarceration. This is where our organization’s parenting program comes from. During my pregnancy, I talked to many women who were incarcerated about their experiences with their children. I actually took notes and I took all those experiences and put it into our program once I was released. We have a parenting program that directly addresses the challenges that incarcerated women face as mothers, and helps them to remain parents in spite of the incarceration. What I realized, as an addict myself, is that parenting wasn’t presence, it’s participation. Even when I was present in my children’s lives, I didn’t participate. For most of us, just before our prison sentence that was true.36

The activist Ida P. McCray is another interviewee in Inner Lives who aims to prevent familial disintegration by helping incarcerated women receive visits from their children through her organization, Families with a Future.37 In her edited narrative, Ida P. McCray narrates that her own son delivered her to the police for air piracy during a fight but has since become her “ally”.38 In her photograph, her shell necklace could reflect nostalgia for the solidarity that

she narrates about having experienced as a single mother during her time in Cuba. Her narrated struggles while negotiating with the mothers’ penal institutions and the children’s orphanages or foster homes reveal how the criminal justice system prevents incarcerated women from exercising their maternal rights.

Ida P. McCray narrates that before her own incarceration for her involvement with Black Liberationist movements, she received more solidarity as a single mother in Cuba than in the U.S., where single mothers are socially marginalized.

Both Ida McCray’s photograph and her edited narrative hold the mirror to the society that marginalized her further by incarcerating her. Her representation rewrites her experiences as a mother before, during, and after incarceration as critical sites of knowledge formation. By representing herself in her photograph as well as her experiences and activism in her edited narrative, Ida P. McCray underlines the political relevance of her engagement with the issue of motherhood for her community.

Paula C. Johnson prevents any stereotypical perceptions of her interviewees as either “Jezebels” or “mammies” and instead emphasizes their forced separation from their children as a loss by depicting them in their portrait.
photographs without their children. In this sense, Madina V. Tlostanova recognizes women’s corporeal experiences as sources of knowledge about, for example, racial inequality in the U.S. At this point, I would like to emphasize that the racist stereotypes legitimating inequality in the U.S. often target women’s motherhood practices. According to Carla Rice, four types of Black women exist in the racialized imagery derived from the time of slavery: the hypersexualized “breeder”, the disenfranchised bad mother who abuses her children, the desexualized mammy who is allegedly content to sacrifice herself for her oppressors, and the highly moral superwoman who is selflessly dedicated to her work.

Judy, and their mother Renay resists such stereotypes while visualizing their separation. Firstly, there is a photograph of each sister and their aunt alone, secondly, there is a group photograph on the next page and thirdly, there is a portrait photograph from a slightly elevated angle of Renay alone. Although Renay is wearing her prisoner’s uniform with a tag, her graceful posture with her hands folded in her lap, her hair neatly pulled back, and her slight smile are more reminiscent of a James Van der Zee portrait photograph of a bourgeois family than of the social marginalization of incarcerated mothers.

Since incarcerated mothers have historically experienced the impact of racist and sexist stereotypes, they may also be aware of how the trope of the “welfare queen” could harm them. According to Anita Hill, the trope of the “welfare queen” emerged in the 1960s to stigmatize disenfranchised single mothers and was famously invoked by then-candidate Ronald Reagan during his 1976 presidential campaign with the effect of mobilizing bias against women receiving public welfare. Dorothy Roberts criticizes how this rhetoric resurfaced in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 that advocated the reproductive policing and punitive incarceration of single mothers on welfare while targeting their familial care practices as public threats. In contrast, many of Paula C. Johnson’s interviewees in Inner Lives defend how they cared for their relatives before their incarcerations. In her edited narrative, Karen Michelle Blakney, for example, narrates about not regretting refusing to snitch on her sister after she was arrested for cooking crack cocaine for undercover police officers. Karen Michelle Blackney further implies criticism of the criminal justice system when she narrates that instead of mandatory rehabilitation programs, her faith helped her overcome addiction. Her narrated adherence to personal values emphasizes her agency and prevents any perceptions of her as passive. In her photograph, her smiling appearance with her hair pulled back, her
sleek shirt, and her shiny watch could symbolically allude to her success in life with the help of her personal resources.

Stephanie Walker and Anne Worrall note that incarcerated women often pursue agency by learning about the legal system on their own terms. In *Inner Lives*, DonAlda’s edited narrative describes how she bonds over shared knowledge about incarceration with one of her daughters outside despite their physical separation,

Both of my daughters have been to jail. One daughter was there for disturbing the peace. She was in a fight somewhere and they arrested her. Just recently, my other daughter went to school with a utility knife in her purse. She says she carries it—we live in a bad neighborhood—she carries it in her purse at night, and she forgot to take it out at school and it beeped the metal detector. They took her to jail, so she’s been to court. She came out of it fine. She’s made the honor roll since. She didn’t let it deter her, but she realized a lot of things by those six hours in jail. She realized, ‘Mom, I see what you go through now.’

In her photograph, DonAlda is wearing a buttoned shirt and has short hair, as her tilted face emerges into the sunlight. The photograph implies self-improvement while emphasizing DonAlda’s identity as a woman and a mother with a legacy. In her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” in 1851, Sojourner Truth famously expresses a concern for recognition as a woman due to institutional containment under slavery. She contrasts her emotional suffering after every...
forced separation from her children with her physical strength and demands polite treatment despite her social status. In the footsteps of Sojourner Truth’s speech, the aesthetics of Paula C. Johnson’s representations of (ex-) incarcerated mothers challenge how their identities could have been targeted during their physical containment. The theme of corporeality surfaces on the cover of Inner Lives as well, as it shows a woman’s face marked by stripes, or bars. These lines constitute the only visual allusion to the book’s focus on the issue of women’s incarceration—which is humanized with the help of portrait photographs, interviews, and edited narratives.

Sara Bennett’s Life After Life in Prison (2016) and Spirit on the Inside (2013): Black Women’s Survival through Motherhood

Sara Bennett’s series Life After Life in Prison includes photographs of a woman named Tracy in her everyday life following her release from prison. For her series Spirit on the Inside, Sara Bennett photographed several women as they recalled their incarcerations alongside the Communist activist Judith “Judy” Clark in captions under their own black-and-white photographs with their children. Their representations could express that motherhood represents a

Sara Bennett, “Anael, 29 and Rayne, 2. Served 8 years. Released: 2012. Judy’s great. She’s so insightful. In prison, I always said, ‘I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care,’ and she would say, ‘you do care.’ Judy taught all of the mothers on the nursery the same thing—we have to learn how to love ourselves because we’re no good to anyone if we’re not good to ourselves. I carry that with me,” Spirit on the Inside, 2013, https://sarabennett.org/spirit/7ipqppw3tekn-lt8qy1fyz1szheis5a (accessed July 12, 2021). © Sara Bennett
site of practicing agency for them compared to the time of their incarcerations. They imply that there is hope for the next generation—a revolutionary view for Black women in light of their historical oppression in the U.S. For example, Margaret Garner, whose story is loosely represented in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, killed her own daughter to prevent her from being enslaved and thus suffering like herself. Her famous act of filicide signifies both agency and despair to a shocking extent. In contrast, Sara Bennett’s photographs of ex-incarcerated women with their children highlight strength and survival. They do not emphasize maternal isolation like some of Paula C. Johnson’s portrait photographs of (ex-)incarcerated women.

For example, Sara Bennett photographs Anael while she supports her daughter Rayne in learning to ride her tricycle. The way Anael smilingly crouches beside Rayne, who clings to her at eyelevel, could symbolically reflect Rayne’s reliance on her mother as well as Anael’s willingness to support her daughter as an equal in pursuing her path in life. Anael’s emphasis on caring for others challenges stereotypes of incarcerated women as useless for society. Her care for her daughter could further prevent the cycles of social marginalization within families and communities that Michelle Alexander warns of as an effect of mass incarceration.53

Sara Bennett, “Monique, 49 and Joy, 16. Served almost 10 years. Released: 2007. I was known as a crier in prison—I always cried a lot because I was separated from my infant daughter, Joy. And people thought there was something the matter with me, but Judy never made me feel as though there was anything wrong with being a mother missing her child,” *Spirit on the Inside*, 2013, https://sarabennett.org/spirit/mbzg6qkvyxynrb69s-1nm1f6c9aq (accessed July 12, 2021). © Sara Bennett
Sara Bennett’s photograph of another ex-incarcerated mother, Monique, who wraps her arm around her teenage daughter Joy, who is wearing an outfit that matches her mother’s, as well as the accompanying caption, could emphasize both maternal love and (self-)acceptance as strategies of resisting the judgments of others as well.

Overall, Sara Bennett’s representations of her subjects outside penal institutions underline the survival strategies that circulate within their communities, as in the case of Tracy from the series Life After Life in Prison. The series Spirit on the Inside, however, could inspire questions about underlying power relations, since it features a white public defender’s representations of ex-incarcerated Black women expressing how an incarcerated white activist supported them in surviving their incarcerations. On the one hand, the white privilege of Sara Bennett and Judith Clark could risk overshadowing the strength that Black mothers, such as Anael and Monique already possessed before their incarcerations. Their own power to (re)claim their roles as mothers may manifest throughout their lives and not in any singular spectacle alone. On the other hand, photographs from the series Life After Life in Prison like the one of Tracy lying on the bed that a male relative provided for her in a room full of stuffed animals and pictures of children could project imaginations of childlike innocence and vulnerability upon her.

Sara Bennett’s photographs of Tracy do not emphasize her care practices alone but could point to the central role of family in her life that is evidenced by the pictures surrounding her as well. By representing Tracy’s connection

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Sara Bennett, “Tracy six months after her release. East Harlem, NY (2014). ‘This is my third home in six months. I was at Providence House [a halfway house]. But my time was up after four months and I ended up at a three-quarter house. It was horrible. Then the uncle of my grand-children, not related to me, took me in,’” Life After Life in Prison, July 17, 2016, https://sarabennett.org/life-after-life/2016/7/17/tracy-six-months-after-her-release-east-harlem-ny-2014 (accessed July 12, 2021).

© Sara Bennett
to her family through visual references, Sara Bennett emphasizes the difficulties of Tracy’s life in light of her ongoing separation from her family during her rehabilitation process. However, the photographs could attribute a legacy to Tracy, since she is shown actively rebuilding her life and could thus echo Hortense J. Spillers’ appeal to Black people to remember and embrace the legacies of their mothers despite their social marginalization. In this sense, the aspect of gender could connect Sara Bennett’s representations of Tracy desiring closeness with her family to the Black Lives Matter movement (2013—). The Black Lives Matter movement performs intersectional Black Feminist politics by giving voice to women who demand justice for young women and men. Intersectionality, as defined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, demands that people develop solidarity based on comparisons of their experiences of discrimination. As an ex-incarcerated civil rights activist, Angela Y. Davis traces her criminalization to prejudices against Black people and women that legitimate violence against others as well. In contrast, U.S. liberalism posits that every person can determine their condition in society. However, this opportunity has historically been denied to people who deviate from the white, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied ideal citizen. Sara Bennett’s photographs of (ex-) incarcerated women must consider

both the specific discrimination that they face even after being released from prison and the universal relatability of their suffering in order to advocate empathy. Her photographs in *Spirit on the Inside* pursue empathy by representing mothers alone with their children in blurred public spaces such as in streets or on doorsteps; therefore, the women’s and the children’s bodies are the only ones that viewers can identify with despite any markers of difference.

Sara Bennett’s photograph of Leah with her mother Toni and her son Liam exemplifies Audre Lorde’s intersectional concept for women’s resistance that she described in her speech, “The Master’s Tools will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1979). The photograph shows three generations that are affected by incarceration and its legacies. Leah, Toni, and Liam share laughs and smiles while they look away from the camera. The photograph emphasizes the joyful relationship that only a grandmother, mother, and son share with each other. The photograph could symbolically imply that the relationship between Leah and Toni is egalitarian and admirable, since the mother and the daughter are sitting on the same level of steps while Liam looks up at them smiling. Neither the women’s joyful expressions nor their fashionable clothing refers to their past incarcerations. Instead, Leah and Toni appear to be content in their roles and to have distanced themselves from their experiences of incarceration. However, both Leah’s performance of daughterhood toward Toni and Toni’s performance of motherhood toward Leah could be informed by their shared experience. The caption, which reveals that both mother and daughter were incarcerated, underlines the high risk of incarceration within their community.

Performances of unity among (ex-) incarcerated women and performed care for their children could represent political resistance in light of their isolation within institutions as well as their frequent victimization by the police. Mothers who transform their love for their children into a cause of activism, for example, within the Black Lives Matter movement, emphasize how remembrance instead of loss defines their collective identity. In 2019, Sheila Pree Bright’s black-and-white mural that portrays a group of mothers who lost their sons to police violence makes this point by foregrounding the bodies of the women, who are standing up and facing the camera directly—a visual reference to how Richard Avedon famously photographed the members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1963. In her urban art installation in Atlanta, Sheila Pree Bright’s juxtaposition of her photograph with Richard Avedon’s photograph commemorates how the mothers transfer the legacy of the Civil Rights movement into the present. Sara Bennett’s
photograph of Leah and Toni implies that they embody their community’s historical knowledge of the U.S. criminal justice system and transfer their perspectives to future generations as well.

Sara Bennett’s photographs could inspire criticism of the notion that incarceration is necessary for all offenders in order to mold them into law-abiding citizens. According to Michel Foucault, modern Western practices of incarceration are rooted in a post-Enlightenment belief in the value of isolation, critical introspection, and routine physical labor. In contrast, Sara Bennett’s photograph of Denisha emphasizes her bond with her daughter Zeiyana, happiness, and laughter as sources of her wellbeing and as evidence for her recovery from any past criminalization. Denisha challenges stereotypes of (ex-) incarcerated womanhood with her fashionable short dress and slippers, while she smiles and cradles Zeiyana on her knees, as their hands overlap. The caption alludes to her joyful practice of motherhood as an indicator of her rehabilitation. Sara Bennett therefore highlights Denisha’s agency in her private life instead of her past incarceration. The aesthetics of Sara Bennett’s photograph could further reflect her emphasis on Denisha’s present role as a mother, since their urban setting is blurred and seen only from their eyelevel. Similar to the photograph of Leah and Toni, Denisha’s and Zeyiana’s postures and expressions almost...
mirror each other and could underline their emotional connectedness. Since generations of women with experiences of incarceration and a commitment to their children constitute Sara Bennett’s subjects, her photographs evidence that motherhood represents a site of knowledge formation as well as political resistance in their lives.

**Revolutionary Implications of Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s Pictures of (Ex-) Incarcerated Black Mothers**

In this essay, I analyzed the aesthetics and discourses of Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s representations of (ex-) incarcerated women with a focus on how they express timely and urgent criticism of U.S. racism, sexism, and mass incarceration. The photographs, edited narratives, and captions give women opportunities to represent their agency and survival in their private lives and thereby challenge the primary association of incarceration with rehabilitation in society. The women appear both powerful and vulnerable in their everyday performances of motherhood in light of racialization, discrimination, and institutional containment. Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett do not define the women by their incarcerations but emphasize their subjectivities in the titles of their projects, *Inner Lives*, *Life After Life in Prison*, and *Spirit on the Inside*. The women identify themselves as Black women, (grand)mothers, and daughters in their edited narratives or captions. Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s projects seem to illustrate Alexander G. Weheliye’s argument that the gendered racialization of people is related to their experiences of dehumanizing victimization in institutions. However, Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s projects imply a revolutionary potential in the women’s performed connectedness to their community’s past, present, and future. Their politics of representation could elevate (ex-) incarcerated women’s performed care practices in their private lives to sites of knowledge formation about their communities with the potential to reduce incarceration rates in the future. Celeste-Marie Bernier points out that enslaved women in the U.S. devised plots of resistance and escape while they practiced traditionally feminine labor in the household, such as quilting, embroidering, and sewing.

When Paula C. Johnson gives women the opportunity to (re)write their lives with the help of photographs and interviews, she echoes Audre Lorde’s understanding of marginalized women as experts on how to overcome their oppression by deriving strength from their own identities.

For example,
Donna Hubbard Spearman contrasts how she hated being a parent when she was an incarcerated drug addict with how she loved being a mother while she holds her award that she won for her activism on behalf of incarcerated mothers, underlining the connection between her experiences as a mother and her self-image. In her photograph, Donna Hubbard Spearman’s physical appearance with her broad smile, bejeweled sweater, and perfect hairstyle and manicure could challenge stereotypes of ex-incarcerated women. However, her award directly references her organization, Revelation Seed, which she founded following her pregnancy during her incarceration, when she experienced how incarcerated mothers comforted each other after forced separations from their babies after delivery. In her edited narrative, Donna Hubbard Spearman advocates recognizing the opportunity to practice motherhood as a condition for criminalized women’s rehabilitation,

It’s going to take a community’s support. It’s going to take some innovative ideas. It’s going to be criminal justice folks being willing to take some chances and take some risks. Granted, there are those of us that need to be in prison. I’m not going to lie, but there is a larger majority of women who don’t need to be in prison and who would be better served by being in a program with their children. We’re talking about rehabilitation. How about talking about habilitation. If you’ve never had a healthy life or a productive life, then you can’t return somebody to something they never had.

Donna Hubbard Spearman does not foreground the act of childbirth but connects the condition of being together with own children with wellbeing and rehabilitation. With regard to motherhood, she invokes her mother’s expectation of early marriage and motherhood after joining the Nation of Islam, her own perception as a drug addict that her children would benefit from her absence, and her later realization that she had to care for her health in the interest of her children. On the one hand, Donna Hubbard Spearman’s edited narrative implies that (ex-) incarcerated mothers can choose to practice care toward each other and thereby empower each other in (re)claiming their roles as mothers. On the other hand, Sara Bennett’s representations of Tracy’s rehabilitation process in Life After Life in Prison criticize her limited opportunities for self-determination, since the Salvation Army was the only employer to hire her, as a bell ringer at first, and she could only afford to live in a three-quarter house or with a friend. Sara Bennett’s photograph of Tracy with Joshua
implies that she desires closeness with him and that the love she shares within this familial relationship contrasts with the surveillance and marginalization that she experienced within the criminal justice system. Accordingly, Tracy’s representation from behind as she cradles Joshia does not yield her body to external gazes.

Both examples, Sara Bennett’s photographs of Tracy and Paula C. Johnson’s photograph and edited narrative of Donna Hubbard Spearman could represent care as resistance against women’s physical containment and thereby posit their private lives as possible sites of identity (re)negotiation in light of histories of racism and sexism in the U.S. Under slavery, Black women were prevented from creating their own homes for their families, since their familial ties were denied any legal recognition. After the abolition of slavery, Black women who were incarcerated for alleged crimes were less likely to be considered as “‘fallen sisters’” and assigned to women’s reformatories. On the one hand, Michael Welch contrasts the custodial institutions that dominantly held disenfranchised women of color with the reformatories for middle-class women that aimed to transform inmates into submissive housewives until the 1930s. On the other hand, Paula C. Johnson refers to the public rape and lynching of the accused Laura Nelson in Oklahoma in 1911 as an example of how Black women were historically punished for alleged crimes in the U.S. South.

Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett could symbolically support (ex-) incarcerated women in expressing their agency and subjectivity when they photograph them according to their own wishes. By representing how the women express maternal love or experience separation from their families, they challenge stereotypes of criminalized womanhood and advocate understanding. In contrast, Paul Gilroy explains that stereotypes of violent mothers from the U.S. South do not consider the women’s fears in light of Jim Crow laws that their children had to internalize in order to survive. However, Paula C. Johnson’s and Sara Bennett’s representations of confident women and loving mothers advocate resistance against discrimination by humanizing their subjects. The women’s performances of confidence despite their (past) incarcerations underline the historical knowledges and survival strategies that circulate within their communities and which they could transfer to their children. The women’s performances of motherhood both resist stereotypes of their stigmatized identities in the eyes of viewers and positively influence their children’s perceptions of them in the future.

To conclude, the analyzed representations by Paula C. Johnson and Sara Bennett prioritize the performances of agency of (ex-) incarcerated women
over their experiences of incarceration as sites of knowledge formation about their lives. Firstly, Paula C. Johnson’s portrait photographs and edited narratives in *Inner Lives* criticize mass incarceration with the help of perspectives of women who already experienced violence before their criminalization and who often discuss how motherhood inspired them to change their lives. Secondly, Sara Bennett’s photographs in *Life After Life in Prison* and *Spirit on the Inside* could juxtapose women’s care practices with their stigmatization within the criminal justice system, since the politics of mass incarceration perpetuate racist and sexist discrimination against Black women, including mothers. Thus through these representations, (ex-) incarcerated women who perform their identities as mothers could practice resistance against forced absence from their children’s lives and emphasize their experiences as critical sites of knowledge formation about their societies.

**Notes**

2. hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, 11.
15 Wanzo, The Suffering Will not Be Televised, 176.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 26–27.
21 Johnson, Inner Lives, 16.
22 Johnson, Inner Lives, 96.
23 Johnson, Inner Lives, 57.
24 Johnson, Inner Lives, 78.
25 Johnson, Inner Lives, 175.
29 Johnson, Inner Lives, 57.
33 Johnson, Inner Lives, 133.
37 Johnson, Inner Lives, 175.
38 Johnson, Inner Lives, 179.
41 Johnson, Inner Lives, 177.

Johnson, Inner Lives, 63.


Shakur, “From the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter”.


Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 2, 96.

Bernier, African American Visual Arts from Slavery to the Present, 43.


Johnson, Inner Lives, 204.

Johnson, Inner Lives, 201.


Welch, Corrections, 164.


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