
solo/black/woman

scripts, interviews, and essays

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**IN THE SPACE BETWEEN LIVING AND DYING:
RHODESSA JONES'S *BIG-BUTT GIRLS*,
*HARD-HEADED WOMEN***

Lisa Biggs

Charlie, I'm pregnant.
Living on 9th Street
Right above a dirty bookstore off Euclid Avenue.
I stopped taking dope.
I stopped drinkin' whisky.
My ol' man plays the trombone . . .
And he says that he loves me
Even though it's not his baby . . .
—Tom Waits, "Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis"

Big-Butt Girls, Hard-Headed Women opens with music, invoking characters that are at once shabby, chic, shameful, and utterly fantastic. Actress and playwright Rhodessa Jones appears wearing a long, sparkling, red cape. She holds a small candle aloft in one hand. As she places the candle on a large altar built upstage left, she summons the Tom Waits song "Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis." Shimmering in the light, Jones unfurls the tragic ramblings of a slightly sleazy working girl, who, we come to realize, has a heart of gold and some beautiful dreams despite her troubles. Waits's song weaves the woman's fictions and truths, lies, aspirations, and failures in a lilting, loving, bluesy style that Jones delivers with reverence and joy.

At a time when poor black women were represented in the popular media and in American political discourse as incorrigible, hypersexual, parasitic, "welfare queens," "bitches," and "crack ho's" incapable and undesiring of anything other than a life of crime (Escobar, "No One Is Criminal"; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate*; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*), Jones birthed *Big-Butt Girls, Hard-Headed Women* to encourage and represent the incarcerated women she came to know while working at San Bruno, the San Francisco county jail. With a critical, loving playfulness, Jones uses her solo performance to reanimate their journeys to jail and their collective lives behind bars

(hers and the prisoners'), answering fundamental questions about how they all came to be there, and how they did their time.¹ But unlike other arts initiatives that arose in the fiery aftermath of the 1971 Attica Uprising, Jones's performance piece was not designed as a rehabilitative tool to fix prisoners (Balfour, *Theatre in Prison*; Hart, "Historical and Social Role"; Thompson, *Prison Theatre*). Rather, she describes *Big-Butt Girls* as an exercise in "personal transformation" as well as a "place of concrete memory." She hoped that the piece would demonstrate to the women inside that they could personally transform, but by the time Jones completed it, one—Regina—was dead and the others had moved on. Instead, for the last twenty years this solo work has memorialized a moment and staged a series of critical interventions in dominant discourse about crime, criminality, and justice for other audiences of men and women, incarcerated and free.

Harry Elam Jr. theorizes that solo performance can be utilized by black performers to "explore, expose, and even explode" concepts of race, in particular how blackness is "conceived and performed both on stage and in life" (Elam, "Black Performer," 288–89). Solo performance is an effective tool for this because audiences understand the theatrical event as an opportunity for performers to take on or play other roles than they would in everyday life. For black performers who don black characters, the performance provides an opportunity for them to mine the differences between social constructions of blackness embedded in the performance text, audience perceptions and misperceptions of black people, and their own personal experiences. The performance event facilitates the juxtaposition of multiple registers of blackness, and enables the solo performer to demonstrate that blackness ought not to be reduced or represented as a singular, monolithic, reductive entity. Playing the alternative or "excess" blacknesses allows them to critique, "transcend and even subvert" the known "socially patrolled boundaries of race," in particular the popular "political constructions and violent manifestations" that circulate at all levels of our society (Elam, "Black Performer," 289). Rhodessa Jones uses *Big-Butt Girls, Hard-Headed Women* not only to challenge racist thinking about black people, but to critique, "transcend and even subvert" reductive depictions of the criminalized, with a particular emphasis on representations of women offenders who, for the first time, were being sentenced to prison and jail in substantial numbers, and whose real-life

experiences were most often erased or ignored in discussions of law enforcement. Her nuanced portraits demonstrate that there is more to being a criminal than simply being black, and more to humanity than what power and authority allow.

CONTEXT

Jones is the daughter of African American migrant farm laborers from Florida. She gave birth to her only child, a daughter, at age sixteen. Popular wisdom predicted that as an unwed teen mother she would go nowhere fast, but theater “saved” her life. By the 1980s, she was supporting herself and her daughter as a working actress and a dancer with the Tumbleweed modern dance ensemble in San Francisco. The California Arts Council recruited her to work at San Bruno, but jail administrators prohibited her from offering theater workshops due to concerns raised about her predecessor, Jaime, whose belly dance classes they disparaged as “stripper training.” The 1960s “war on poverty” had morphed into the “war on drugs,” a resurgent attack on the very same poor black, red, and brown people that twenty years prior had been recognized as standing in the greatest need of positive governmental support (Alexander, *New Jim Crow*; Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*; Garland, *Culture of Control*). The “culture of control” that prevailed instead insisted on “the essential ‘otherness’ of the criminal,” and equated poverty, especially the poverty of people of color, with criminality (Bumiller, *In an Abusive State*, 6; Garland, *Culture of Control*, 184). Criminologists such as James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling encouraged the dismantling of government-funded, public and privately run social welfare programs in favor of more aggressive policing. At a time when the labor market was shrinking, these actions left the most vulnerable members of society with limited or no access to essential resources such as basic housing, medical care, and food. Under the guise of “law and order” and “self-help,” the changes—initiated under Richard Nixon and extended by Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton—enabled the nation “to mask its responsibility for creating and maintaining the sub-par living conditions of marginal groups” (Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 82–83). Unfounded fears that a new class of “super-predators” born of drug-addicted, African American welfare mothers would soon terrorize the nation reframed the public welfare

debate, until “non-punitive government action on behalf of black and brown poor people” was dismissed as “ineffective and impolitic, if not misguided” (Adolph Reed quoted in Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 83). Instead, millions entered into the prison system.

The fastest-growing segment of the imprisoned population was women; their numbers skyrocketed 700 percent from 1980 to 2000, from 13,000 in all the local, state, and federal facilities combined, to nearly 92,000 (Johnson, *Inner Lives*, 34–37; Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Bulletin*, 2001). This shift was not the result of an increase in the crime rate, but was due to changes in legislation and law enforcement, especially a new emphasis on policing nonviolent women addicts, sex workers, and shoplifters (Bumiller, *In an Abusive State*).² Building upon a long history of discrimination, poor women of color received the most severe sentences (Flavin, “Of Punishment and Parenthood,” 628). By 1990, the overwhelming majority of people arrested nationwide were white, but the majority of women behind bars were single, poor but working, of black and brown mothers between eighteen and thirty-five years old, more than 60 percent reported being survivors of prior physical and/or sexual abuse (Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Special Report*, 1999). As their numbers ballooned, jail administrators faced enormous pressure to respond.³ Those that believed people could change, and had enough resources to offer rehabilitative, educational, or vocational programs, looked for courses to offer.

At San Bruno, Sheriff Michael Hennessey and his Assistant Sheriff Michael Marcum, himself a former “juvenile offender,” facilitated Jones’s entry (Warner, “Restorative Justice,” 237). Jane Fonda’s trendsetting aerobics videos had launched a nationwide exercise craze bent on molding every woman’s body into a new, slender ideal (Lloyd, “Feminism, Aerobics”). Marcum and Hennessey wanted to offer their women prisoners the most innovative, gender-appropriate, feminine physical exercise program possible. Jones had no experience teaching aerobics, was critical of the thin but physically weak body Fonda was selling, and had no desire to go to jail, but she decided to make it work. *Big-Butt Girls* is a chronicle of her early experiences behind bars and a record of the life stories of the women she encountered there. Her full and complex portraits destabilize popular representations of imprisoned women and men as deviant “super-predators” or “non-human others.” By educating audiences about who is really behind bars and what their journey to jail entailed, *Big-Butt Girls*

weakens the authority of the tellers of the popular, reductive tales about the criminalized, and the procedures and technologies that have been imposed to redress conflicts between people. Performances of *Big-Butt Girls* subvert penal authority by challenging the fundamental logics of the “culture of control.” It establishes a community space for audiences to critique the everyday performance of law enforcement and transcend the norm to imagine other outcomes.

I WASN'T BORN A BITCH, A LOT OF SHIT HAPPENED

The process of undermining the “culture of control” begins with the opening Tom Waits song. The script indicates the protagonist is a hooker, but audiences encounter her without the designation of her criminality. Instead, Jones evokes her vocally as she stands, still, downstage. The lyrics reveal her to be living in difficult circumstances, “above the dirty bookstore on Euclid Avenue,” with a good man who loves her and the child she carries “even tho’ it’s not his baby.” Her tender reminiscences about the listener’s greasy hair and the people they both have known present her to us as a sympathetic, engaging woman who has known troubles but is not without joy. Because Jones stands still onstage and delivers the song with little noticeable physical characterization, we are left to imagine what she must be like. Thick, thin, short, tall, pockmarked, elegant or shabby chic? White? Black? Native? Latina? Asian? Which Asian? Red hair? No hair? Something else? We conjure her in our minds individually and we like her. Her story makes us laugh, but in the last stanza our images are challenged by a series of revelations. She admits there is no man, there is no money, she is in jail and needs money for a lawyer. The woman we thought we knew has been replaced by this complicated, distant, criminal figure asking for our help. Her parole date on “Valentine’s Day” hangs like a bittersweet promise as the last notes fade away. What are we going to do about it?

Dispossessed by legal and civil society, prisoners occupy a liminal, “provisional existence” in the popular imagination, one marked by multiple losses—of family, coworkers, support networks, morality, dignity, and time. They are figuratively suspended in a state of backward-looking, paying penance for past wrongdoings, and divorced from the “prospect of a different future” (Kanter, *Performing Loss*, 148–49). To compensate the

state and other victims for their losses and suffering, the prisoners’ future is imagined as being painfully “stripped away” from them, with prisons and jails the sites where both the removal and transference of time occurs (Moses, “Time and Punishment,” 71). As imprisonment strips the prisoner’s body of the capability to advance through space or time under its own propulsion, it diminishes or dehumanizes the prisoner into “a thing that is held, observed and controlled” (Leder, “Imprisoned Bodies,” 64). People become their mistakes. Using song and a series of vignettes centered on the character girlchild, *Big-Butt Girls* restages this accepted narrative with a critical difference.

Following the opening song, Jones transitions into girlchild, a mythical every-black-girl-who-grew-up-in-the-hood. Girlchild appears as the last notes of “Christmas Card” fade away. The montage that follows tells the all too typical story of her “decline” into prostitution. At first, she appears vibrant, surrounded by girlfriends with whom she confidently and happily sings and dances. Her original rendition of Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin’s “Respect”—“What you want, somebody got . . . What you need, you know I got it”—builds into a celebratory but “suggestive” dance with the other girls, demonstrated by Jones twisting her hips as she cheers herself on with “I got it. I got it. I got it . . . Git it, girl! Gon girl!” At the swirling and chanting crescendo, girlchild garners attention from unseen forces and there is a sudden change. Jones interrupts girlchild’s play, dropping her voice and raising her hand to manifest a parental authority figure.⁴ Girlchild is in trouble now. The parent orders girlchild to “Git in the house! Git yo’ big butt in the house!!” Girlchild whines in response, “But I wasn’t doing nothin!” to no avail. Dejected, she turns upstage toward the house, complaining, “I gotta get in the house? But I wasn’t doin’ nothin’.”

As those words reverberate, Jones advances girlchild into her teen years. Hand on hip, she spots a couple of neighborhood boys and hails them. Imaginary girlfriend(s) in tow, she sashays over to meet Tony and Jerry at the corner store. There, an enthusiastic make-out session with Jerry ensues. Alternating vocally between Jerry’s deep register and girlchild’s high, thin voice, Jones enacts their love talk. Jerry begins, “You love me, baby?” and girlchild coos back, “I love you . . .” The scene continues with Jones’s back turned to the audience, her hands caressing her own shoulders like young lovers do. Her voices shifts back and forth from

Jerry to girlchild: "Is it good? Tell me that it's good . . . It's good . . . You like it baby? . . . I like it." Almost as quickly as these lines are delivered, however, the make-out session escalates into a whirlwind movement sequence in which girlchild gets pregnant, goes into labor, and delivers a newborn baby girl.

The arrival of the baby signals the transition into the next confrontation with authority. A stunned girlchild holds the baby in her arms for only a moment before her parent(s) literally knock her off her feet. Angry entreaties to "Git in the house. Git yo' big butt in the house. Don't be so hardheaded. Haven't you done enough?" are accompanied by open-handed slaps to her head and body. Dodging the blows, girlchild dances the "frenzy of self-defense," crying out, "Mama, don't hit me! Daddy, don't hit me!" The attack dissipates, but parental disapproval, it turns out, is not the only obstacle she faces. When her mother and father fade away, Jerry lashes out like a tornado. Girlchild can hardly get a word out of her mouth when his assault begins. Jerry echoes the words and actions of her parents, but rains fury down at an unprecedented level. He curses and knocks her to the ground. When girlchild defends herself, he berates her. When she tries to rise and return to the house as ordered, he beats her harder. She repeats her earlier protestation, "Stop! I didn't do nothin'!" until the incantation grinds down to the realization that it does not matter. Nothing she says or does matters. Everyone that is supposed to love and value her believes instead that she "ain't nothin'." Alone, abandoned to the streets, and in despair, she takes her first drink. Trembling hands search the ground for drugs and find them. She touches a crack pipe, lights it, and inhales. Her mind and body deteriorate. When girlchild finally does stand again, she sways under the lights. Girlchild has been transformed into another worthless junkie, another "nothin'" black woman.

The final moment of girlchild's story depicts the last step of her journey to jail. As she struggles to stand, there is the sound of a car horn. Girlchild solicits kisses and caresses—any kind of affection—from the invisible driver. Before we hear their response, Jones turns away from the audience and thrusts her hands behind her back signaling the imposition of handcuffs. Girlchild has been arrested. She struggles against the police pleading, "I wasn't doin' nothin'." But as before, her cries fall on deaf ears, and this time, Jones does not bother to stage their reaction. Girlchild has become a person whose story is not worth hearing much less

believing. Girlchild resists this devaluation and the arrest, calling out to other women—other prostitutes perhaps—who we now learn are nearby. She demands that they contact her family, and that they acknowledge the police have got her on "a humbug," on manufactured charges. Her denial of criminal wrongdoing echoes her previous encounters with authority figures, but now, her credibility has been damaged. Did we not just see her prostituting herself? Do we not recognize this story?

Only the last authority figure, the police officer, has the power to encase her behind bars. Jones's staging ensures that the officer's designation of girlchild's activities as criminal emerges from a continuum of confrontations with other authority figures—mother, father, boyfriend—that have marked her as offensive long before the cuffs come out. Girlchild's act of prostitution may have been illegal, but in performance, Jones does not focus on her actions alone, but instead enacts a pervasive "culture of control" that devalues girlchild everywhere she ventures, from home to street to store to corner and courthouse, and around again. The people who inhabit these places contribute to girlchild's criminality by labeling and treating her like "nothin'," like a deviant, monstrous, nonhuman "other" whose presence and actions are always so offensive they demand isolation ("Git in the house!") and corporal punishment. Girlchild may be bad, Jones seems to say, but she is not bad all by herself. Her criminality is not innate or endemic; society has identified certain behaviors as inappropriate or criminal and she is their target.⁵

Having established that criminality is not inherent to a degenerate class of criminals, but rather the product of interlocking social processes that accumulate and evolve over time, Jones advances through a series of monologues set inside the jail. She weaves glimpses of herself as an enthusiastic aerobics instructor in between monologues told by the four other main characters—Regina, Mama Pearl, Doris, and Lena. The monologues reveal details about each woman's journey to the jail, beginning with Jones's own. Each story, each woman, differs from stereotype. The contrast between the women's life stories and the popular myths reveal the myths for what they are—stories about women behind bars rather than stories of or by women who have been in those circumstances. By juxtaposing the popular myths with the text of their life stories and the embodied performance, Jones reveals the limitations of the popular representations, and destabilizes the authority of the tellers of those tales.

TROUBLE INSIDE

We enter San Bruno with Jones as herself, the enthusiastic aerobics instructor. As the chorus to Public Enemy's "Terminator X" fades in the background, Jones introduces herself to an imaginary officer on duty in the visitor's lobby. They immediately challenge her right to be there, deciding to "run a check" on her despite her "newly issued pass."

"You got to run a check?" she quips in response. "Look Sergeant, why would I want to break into jail, most folks I know want to break out? . . . Whoa, I'm not trying to be a wiseass. I just have no great need to sneak into jail first thing on a Wednesday morning!"

We laugh at Jones's humorous, yet direct, challenge to the officer's authority. It demonstrates that her character will occupy the jail space in surprising ways that exceed our expectations. Jones will joke inside; she will question officers; she will not be intimidated; and, we later learn, she will not be afraid of the prisoners. Unlike girlchild, she will be seen, and heard, and taken seriously. In the visitors' lobby, her resistance works and Jones is allowed to pass without further confrontation. She carries a perspective of critical playfulness inside with her.

A unique kind of aerobics class ensues, one that is light on lunges and heavy on offers of support without castigation or preaching. Jones engages the imprisoned women like girlfriends.⁶ She cajoles them into doing face stretches by appealing to their (everybody's) vanity—these are "anti-aging devices." She rotates her tongue "to the side . . . the top . . . the other side . . ." and around, in a gesture that she acknowledges evokes sexual activity. Jones recognizes it and jokingly entreats all the "working girls" to "pay attention." She encourages them to continue to work other parts of the body, in particular the butt and legs, to improve their health and their livelihood. "You can't sell chicken if it looks like Jell-O," she remarks, and you cannot run from the pimp, the trick, or the police in high heels unless your legs are strong. Jones represents an approach to working with these stigmatized people which stands in sharp contrast to the agonistic perspective that characterized previous "authority figures" in the show, and which habitually frames discussions of crime and its perpetrators in everyday life (Lugones, "Playfulness"). Instead of enacting or enforcing distinctions between herself and the prisoners, she sees similarities. In a moment of soliloquy between exercises, Jones reflects on how familiar the women look: "I look out at all those faces. There's my mother's face,

my sister's face, and my daughter's face . . . It could have been me in here and she out there." She blurs the lines further between the criminal and the supposedly law-abiding and innocent rest of us when she has audience members join the imaginary exercise class in the "Hand Dance."

Subsequent monologues by Regina, Mama Pearl, Doris, and Lena explode the boundaries between criminals and the innocent rest of us. The women's stories reveal them to be complicated figures, but never lazy, self-indulgent bitches as the "welfare queen" lore insists. Each acknowledges they have engaged in objectionable behavior, but their stories also offer pointed critiques of mainstream values that resulted in their imprisonment. For Regina, sex work enables her to achieve and maintain independence: "I am a prostitute, straight up. I decided a long time ago, wasn't no man gonna tell me what to do." If Mama Pearl had been able to access appropriate care for her disabled daughter in the 1960s, would she be sitting behind bars? If Lena could have gotten adequate treatment services when she injured her foot as a dancer would she be detoxing in the hole? Finally, Doris's case reveals how random police power can be and how imprisonment can destroy families despite the efforts of single mothers—which most women behind bars are—to keep multiple generations whole and together.

The culminating conversation between Regina, Mama Pearl, and Doris puts all the issues each individual character raises about crime and punishment onstage at once. Rather than a single, monolithic, fixed image of women behind bars, the audience must drink in a multitude of characterizations with Jones always at the root. Her performance in this scene achieves her stated goal of demonstrating that transformation is possible, as she moves her voice and her body from one characterization to the next with clarity, ease, and grace. The dialogue provides outsiders with a glimpse of how incarcerated women—a population that we never hear from—think, talk, and feel about crime. It is through their dialogue that we are introduced to Deborah, a woman who killed her baby, and therefore epitomizes society's worst fears about women, that they will refuse or fail to be good mothers. Mama Pearl, Regina, and Doris, like the audience, do not know what happened between Deborah and her man, the baby's father, but Jones stages how they contend with the rumors, critiquing what they have heard from the wellspring of their personal experiences.

It begins with Doris, who caught that Deborah killed the baby “because of some crack,” but Regina counters, “It wasn’t because of no crack . . . It was because of that man of hers.” Regina continues that once Deborah got hooked on dope, he threw her out. The irony is that “she da dope fiend, after he brought the shit in the house in the first place.” For Mama Pearl, the problem began when the baby died because they were both “tweakin’ . . . out of they minds on cocaine.” The tragedy happened, though, “when he decides to leave her, poor thing . . . I hear she loved him with a hungry love.” Doris dismisses their compassion for Deborah, saying no man “could ever make me do something like that for all the love in the world,” leading the others to challenge her conclusions. Mama Pearl admonishes her, “Doris, don’t ever be sayin’ what you won’t do. You just keep your eyes open.” Regina’s last words, “Yeah, ’cause I seen some motherfuckers do some strange things in the name of love. Fuck love. Love kills,” go to the heart of it all. These three women behind bars know that human beings do things that may not be right or acceptable, and that we even go so far as to destroy one another. Human beings do this, they say, and we do it all the time.

When Jones returns as her narrator self, she poses the meta-question to us all—“Who are these women? And what are they to you, and you, and you?” Her reply, which draws us to the final moments of the performance, begins with the song “Joanne Little” by famed civil rights chanteuse Bernice Johnson Reagon.⁷ The lyrics, “She’s our mama, she’s yo’ lover . . . that woman, the woman who’s going to carry your child,” tie Doris, Lena, Regina, Mama Pearl, and Deborah to the larger struggle for black liberation as gendered subjects. In 1974 Little, a twenty-year-old imprisoned black woman, went to trial on murder charges for killing her jailer, Clarence Alligood, a white man forty years her senior and known racist, who had entered her jail cell with sandwiches and an ice pick to rape her. When the jury found her innocent of the murder, for the first time in U.S. history, the courts sanctioned black women’s right to defend themselves using deadly force against a white man’s sexual assault and other bodily incursions. The Little case set a legal precedent that recognized black women “deserve justice,” regardless of other people’s racial bigotry and sexism, and despite the victim’s at times less than “respectable” past (McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 225). The defense’s successful argument that the jailer had abused his power and acted with

“lawlessness and indifference toward black women’s humanity” was a watershed moment in the long black liberation struggle, as well as for women’s rights, prisoner rights, and antirape organizing (McGuire, 224). The song “Joanne Little” was their battle cry. In performing this archive Jones places the prisoners’ stories in a context that frames their criminality as having roots that reach back through generations of inequality perpetrated by other authority figures, as well as in inequalities in operation now. The women reappear then as both victims and perpetrators of wrongdoing, not as one or the other as dominant discourse would suggest, but as both, and more.

The question of what to do about them—the women, the inequalities, the injustices—will take more than aerobics class or a theatrical event, but she begins an answer in the final moments back at the altar.⁸ Her decision to bring the issues “to the ancestors” shifts us outside of the punitive trajectory of law enforcement into the realm of spiritual possibility. We participate in finding an ending to the performance, and with it a solution to the bigger issues that the piece grapples with. In the ritual she conducts, by raising our hands we acknowledge we have known crime from both sides of the fence—we know victims and we know perpetrators (we may even have been both at various times). Our participation evidences that there are no real boundaries between the criminal and the rest of us. Criminality, like race, is a performative, a framework we utilize to inhabit, make sense of, and navigate the world. The altar becomes a place in which to lay our fears of criminals and of crime aside. Where penal institutions are designed to commemorate past wrongdoing by placing perpetrators in a painful state of perpetual backward-looking, the altar enacts a practice of commemoration that memorializes the past but enables us to grow toward a future as new tokens of our experiences are placed upon it. Altar practice connects us to the past, the dead, even the dying, while working to enact change for the living, the present, the future.

In the final moments of *Big-Butt Girls* Jones enacts a vision for the future. She unfolds and reads a yellowed letter from a nephew serving time for murder. Taking it from the altar, she shares with us his dreams for the future as well as his sorrows. The dreams, given new life by her reading, point to the possibility of futurity for people locked in steel and concrete cages. Not only will what he wrote be remembered, but in her performance of his text Jones reenacts the moment of dreaming. As she reads,

we travel with them, and we know how very close, very real, very human, very vulnerable we all are. Our act of collective witnessing affirms one of Jones's closing statements: "We're all involved here . . . this ain't no time to be buying dogs and locking doors because you see 'them' coming. 'Cause they could be us and you may wake up and find that you've locked yourself in and they're sitting at your breakfast table." Because she has shown us who we/the criminals are, these final words land without evoking fear. Her arms outstretched, dancing, calling to catch imaginary women falling all around her as evidence that the struggle continues, and that we need not be still or silent in it.⁹

To rehumanize the criminalized means to do more than just release the incarcerated body from the confines of the penal institution, but to free it so it may enjoy the rich sociocultural practices of human life. In the words of Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, not only must the material body be valorized by such acts of liberation, but "the culturally inscribed human practices which animate" human beings as people must be enacted over and over again; all our humanity depends upon it (Ross, *Primo Levi's Narrative of Embodiment*, 10).

NOTES

1. I use the terms "prisoners," "incarcerated women or men," "men or women prisoners," and "imprisoned women or men" interchangeably in this paper to refer to those study participants who are under some measure of penal supervision, whether they be physically in prison or jail, on probation, or on parole. I utilize this terminology rather than refer to them as "female convicts" or "inmates" to continually evoke the participants' political relationship to the state as gendered—as well as racialized and classed—subjects. As Megan Sweeney argues, the terms "convict," "inmate," and "prisoner" are used widely, interchangeably by prison professionals and the general public. However, each signifies "different political charges" (*Reading Is My Window*, 271). The term "prisoners" encompasses all persons *deprived of liberty*, a key concept in the development of American judicial and penal practices that specifically evokes the image of a person "held against [their] will" (Willie London quoted in Sabo et al., *Prison Masculinities*, 9). "Imprisoned" and "incarcerated" highlight the penal institutions' "act[s] of enclosure" and the "process of cancellation" that moving from a state of *citizenship* to the status of a *prisoner* confers (Billone, "Performing Civil Death," 263). While I recognize that prisoners and officers prefer "inmate," for this study I utilize the alternatives so that I might continually highlight the incarcerated people's gendered "status" while I "denote their physical confinement

without conferring on them an existential or fixed identity as criminals" (Sweeney, *Reading Is My Window*, 271).

2. Under the guise of pursuing fair, gender-neutral justice, in the late 1980s police officers nationwide implemented a policy of "dual arrests" in domestic violence calls. This led to the heightened persecution of women as offenders, many of whom were actually victims of abuse who had injured their attackers while protecting themselves. For many poor women and racial minorities, the changes led to increased "involvement with officials" who, once they arrived on the scene, inquired about unrelated issues such as their immigration status or parenting ability. These "unwanted interventions by the state" placed already marginalized women in still more vulnerable positions vis-à-vis their abusive partners and the government (Bumiller, *In an Abusive State*, 11).

3. Jails hold three primary categories of prisoners—those who have been convicted of crime and sentenced to serve up to one year behind bars (prisons are for those sentenced to one year or more time); those that have been accused of crimes and are awaiting trial behind bars because they have been denied bail by the court; and those who are awaiting trial, but cannot afford their bail. The latter are the majority of people confined to U.S. jails.

4. The script indicates this parental authority is a father, but in the Northwestern performance Jones conjured the mother instead. Over twenty years Jones has made many new discoveries in performing *Big-Butt Girls*. Many of these discoveries have been incorporated into the performance, but they remain unscripted. My discussion of Jones's work utilizes the published script as a foundation, but relies heavily upon my own experiences seeing the show and video documentation of the performance at Northwestern University in May 2011.

5. Simply put, during Prohibition the sale and consumption of alcohol was illegal, making a host of brewers, merchants, and drinkers criminals. As soon as Prohibition was lifted, this class of criminals disappeared.

6. Jones never stages stereotypical jail scenes or stereotypical people. We never see the prisoners in those spaces you would expect, such as immobilized in a jail cell or lounging around an outdoor exercise yard. Her performance intervenes in common perceptions about the internal architecture of jail spaces as well as prisoners' uses of them.

7. Though spelled Joan, Little's first name was pronounced Joanne.

8. Installation artist Amalia Mesa-Bains was another inspiration for Jones's performance and her inclusion of the altar. Mesa-Bains describes her altar practice as a repository for the past and an enactment of healing. Altars are sites of women's specific memory-making in domestic spaces. The accumulation of objects upon their surfaces mark singular moments in the life of the women who erect them, but taken as a whole, the altar serves as an indicator of the passage of time. For Mesa-Bains, altars stand at the intersection of the past, the present, and the future, what she calls "the space between living and dying" (Munro, "Moving, Personal Works").

9. This choreography also references the Progressive Era notion that white women who were engaged in crime had “fallen” from their original, god-given state as virtuous “true women.” Because women of color were never granted such esteem, Jones’s efforts to catch them as they fall stages an important intervention in penal discourse by confronting the raced as well as gendered practices of law enforcement (Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*; Freedman, *Their Sisters’ Keepers*).

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