BECOMING ABOLITIONISTS

POLICE, PROTESTS, AND THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM

DERECKA PURNELL

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BY DERECKA PURNELL

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Names and identifying characteristics of some individuals have been changed.

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To Geuce, Garvey, Ma’Vis, Dereck III, and Demi Elyse, and those to come

To Virginia

And to the maroons, artists, misfits, and political prisoners whose sacrifices propelled us closer to freedom

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INTRODUCTION

HOW I BECAME A POLICE ABOLITIONIST

WE CALLED 911 for almost everything—except snitching. Nosebleeds, gunshot wounds, asthma attacks, allergic reactions. Police accompanied the paramedics.

Our neighborhood was making us sick. From 1990 until 2006, my family moved among four apartments in a modest complex called Hickory Square. It was located at the edge of the Gate District between Jefferson and Ohio in St. Louis. A Praxair industrial gas–storage facility was at one end of my block. I had no idea what it was until one year, gas tanks exploded one by one. Grown-ups panicked that the explosions were another 9/11. Scorching asphalt burned our feet as we fled because there wasn't enough time to put on shoes. Buildings and cars immediately caught fire and shrapnel pierced the trees and the houses. Nine thousand pounds of propane exploded and burned that day. Minnie Cooper died from an asthma attack related to the noxious fumes. The Black mother of three was only thirty-two.[1]

At the other end of my block, there was a junkyard with military airplane parts in full view. The owner of the lot collected the parts as a hobby, and had at least twenty-six US and Russian war craft machines. Each one ranged in value between ten thousand dollars and seventy-five thousand dollars, and shipping costs could be as high as thirty thousand dollars. One man's treasure came at the

cost of exposing poisonous particles to children in the neighborhood every day. His lot still sits directly across the street from my middle school's playground.

The fish-seasoning plant in our backyard did not smell. The yeast from the nearby Anheuser-Busch factory did. Car honks and fumes from Interstate 64 filtered through my childhood bedroom window, from where, if I stood on my toes, I could see the St. Louis Gateway Arch.

All these environmental toxins that degraded our health often conspired with other forms of violence that pervaded our neighborhood. Employment opportunities were rare, and my friends and I turned to making money under the table. I was scared of selling drugs, so I gambled. Brown-skinned boys I liked aged out of recreational activities, and, without work, into blue bandannas. Their territorial disputes led to violence and more 911 calls. Grown-ups fought too, stressed from working hard yet never having enough bill money or gas money or food money or day-care money. Call 911.

When people come across police abolition for the first time, they tend to dismiss abolitionists for not caring about neighborhood safety or the victims of violence. They tend to forget that often we are those victims, those survivors of violence, too.

THE FIRST SHOOTING I witnessed was by a uniformed security guard. I was thirteen years old. He was employed by Global Security Services, a company founded by a former Missouri police chief who was later convicted of homicide. The former chief managed to secure multi-million-dollar contracts in an embezzlement scheme to provide armed private officers at almost all of St. Louis's city-owned properties—including my public neighborhood recreation center. The armed guards replaced the city police. I was teaching my sister, Courtnie, who was nine, how to shoot

free throws at the rec center when the guard stormed in alongside the court, drew his weapon, and shot his cousin in the arm. Courtnie and I hid in the locker room for hours afterward. I thought the guard was angry that his cousin skipped a sign-in sheet, but the victim only told the police the shooting had started as an argument over "something stupid."[2]

Like the boy at the rec center who was shot by the private guard, most victims of law enforcement violence survive. No hashtags or protests or fires for the wounded, assaulted, and intimidated.

In 2020, Minneapolis Police officer Derek Chauvin pinned George Floyd to the concrete as he hollered that he could not breathe. Floyd screamed. He screamed for his mother. He screamed for his breath. For his life. Until he died nine minutes later. Calls for "justice" quickly ensued. I often wonder, *What if the cop who killed George Floyd had kneeled on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds instead of nine minutes?* Floyd would have lived to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for allegedly attempting to use a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Is that justice? I did not think so. Too often, the public calls for justice when Black people are killed by the police and ignore the daily injustice if the victims would have lived.

I was surprised by what followed next. Unlike the "Black Lives Matter" calls six years prior, protesters were shouting "Defund the police!" Abolition was entering into the mainstream.

Initially, the notion of "police abolition" repulsed me. The idea seemed like it was created by white activists who did not know the violence that I knew, that I have felt. At the time, I considered abolition to be, pejoratively, "utopic." I'd seen too much sexual violence and had buried too many friends to consider getting rid of the police in St. Louis, let alone across the nation. I still lose people to violence. Sapphire. John. Greg. Brieana. Monti. Korie. Christopher.

Jarrell. Sometimes, I reread our text messages to laugh again. And cry.

But over time, I came to realize that, in reality, the police were a placebo. Calling them felt like *something*, as the legal scholar Michelle Alexander explains, and something feels like everything when your other option is nothing. Police couldn't do what we really needed. They could not heal relationships or provide jobs. They did not interrupt violence; they escalated it. We were usually afraid when we called. When the cops arrived, I was silenced, threatened with detention, or removed from my home. Today, more than fifteen years later, St. Louis has more police per capita than most cities in the US. My old neighborhood still lacks quality food, employment, schools, health care, and air—all of which increases the risk of violence and our reliance on police. And instead of improving the quality of the neighborhood, St. Louis, which has the highest rate of killings by police among the largest cities in the US, spends more money on police.[3]

Yet I feared letting go; I thought we needed them. I thought they just needed to be reformed. Until August 9, 2014, when police officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown had a funeral. Wilson had a wedding. Most police officers just continue to live their lives after filling the streets with blood and bone.[4]

On that day in August, I threw a conference for high school girls in Kansas City, where I had been organizing, attending college, and teaching middle school. This was a part of my farewell tour of the place I had called home for six years. Harvard Law School was on my horizon; I planned to become an education lawyer, and, one day, superintendent of a school district or, possibly, Secretary of Education. After the conference, my hometown, St. Louis, was next. In high school, I had rented a room in my aunt's basement down the street from West Florissant and Chambers. She, like everyone in my family except my

mother, lived in “the county.” St. Louis City, where I grew up, is independent of St. Louis County, and Black people migrated to north county fleeing the violence and school districts in the city. My furniture was being held in the bright orange Public Storage in the county, on West Florissant—the street where the Ferguson Uprising exploded.

For weeks I protested in Ferguson. We chanted, “Indict! Convict! Send those killer cops to jail! The whole damn system is guilty as hell!” Tanks rolled in, regardless of the crowd size and hype. I was a new mom, breastfeeding my six-month-old, and I learned on the streets that tear gas was not only noxious, but could possibly cause miscarriages. Somehow, I escaped tear gas for a year; I was terrified the chemicals would pass through my breast milk to my child.[5]

I drove from Ferguson to law school after Brown’s death. I met, studied with, and struggled alongside students and movement lawyers who explained the power and the purpose of the prison industrial complex through an abolitionist framework. Mass incarceration, I learned, was a manifestation of a much larger, interwoven set of structures of oppression that we had to dismantle.

In Ferguson, I started to understand why we need police abolition rather than reform. Police manage inequality by keeping the dispossessed from the owners, the Black from the white, the homeless from the housed, the beggars from the employed. Reforms only make police polite managers of inequality. Abolition makes police and inequality obsolete.

My journey toward abolition is not mine alone. I’m an elder in what Elizabeth Alexander describes as the “Trayvon generation,” the young people who have watched the deaths of Black people go viral, the youth who were born again in the streets under clouds that rained smoke, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Alexander writes that when

her sons were young, her love was an armor that sufficiently protected them, but as they aged, she grew to fear for their lives. I'm older than her children, as are many of my peers who organized in the wake of Trayvon's killing. I witnessed activists of this generation organize to send Trayon's killer to prison, like I did, evolve into critical thinkers and budding revolutionaries who organized to close prisons and end policing altogether. The evolution was not linear and remains messy—as birthing ideas and relationships can be. This aligns with what it means to be a "generation." Fear, love, and possibility provide the armor for our generation. Most importantly, this generation, our generation, has been in deep love, study, and struggle with all generations to forge abolitionist futures.[6]

IN THIS BOOK, I share how the lessons from these generations have pushed me toward understanding police abolition, which is just one part of abolishing the prison industrial complex and key to a more just world. This journey has been made possible through radical Black and multiracial social movements, here in the US and abroad. By radical, I mean the people, plans, and practices within democratic traditions of activism that examine how power is arranged in society, and committing to eradicating exploitation where we find it. The commitment is key. James Baldwin wrote that "People can cry much easier than they can change." We need people to commit to changing, and the traditions that inspire these changes are vast. Consequently, *Becoming Abolitionists* is full of time travel and world travel, from the 1500s to the 2020s, from St. Louis to Soweto.[7]

Policing is among the vestiges of slavery, colonialism, and genocide, tailored in America to suppress slave revolts, catch runaways, and repress labor organizing. After slavery, police imprisoned Black people, immigrants, and

poor white people under a convict-leasing system for plantation and business owners. During the Jim Crow era, cops enforced segregation and joined lynch mobs that grew strange fruit from southern trees. During the civil rights movement, police beat the hell out of Black preachers, activists, and students who marched for equality wearing their Sunday best. Cops were the foot soldiers for Richard Nixon's War on Drugs and Joe Biden's 1994 crime bill. Police departments pepper-sprayed Occupy Wall Street protesters without provocation and indiscriminately tear-gassed Black Lives Matter activists for years—including me, twice. Most Black people I know trust the police—they trust them to be exactly what they have always been: violent.[8]

Black people, including Black slavery abolitionists, have tried different routes to stop police violence. They have resisted the role of prisons and police for centuries by physical force, flight, hiding, and the courts. They even tried becoming police officers to protect Black communities from racist mobs and white police officers. Believing that they were entitled to equal protection under the law, they tried, usually to no avail, to reform the patrol and the police.

In recent decades, Black prison industrial complex abolitionists have developed alternatives to 911, created support systems for victims of domestic violence, prevented the construction of new jails, called for the reduction of police budgets, and shielded undocumented immigrants from deportation. They have imagined and built responses to harm rooted in community and accountability. Abolition, I have learned, is a bigger idea than firing cops and closing prisons; it includes eliminating the reasons people think they need cops and prisons in the first place.

After each video of a police killing goes viral, popular reforms go on tour: banning chokeholds, investing in community policing, diversifying departments—none of

which would have saved Floyd or most other police victims. Princeton professor Naomi Murakawa wrote to me in an email:

> At best, these reforms discourage certain techniques of killing, but they don't condemn the fact of police killing. "Ban the chokehold!" But allow murder with guns and tasers and police vans? The analogy here is to death-penalty reformers who improved the noose with the electric chair, and then improved the electric chair with chemical cocktails.
>
> But the technique of murder doesn't comfort the dead. It comforts the executioners—and all their supportive onlookers. Like so much reform to address racism, all this legal fine print is meant to salve the conscience of moderates who want salvation on the cheap, without any real change to the material life-and-death realities for Black people.[9]

When Donald Trump was elected president, many liberals feared the end of consent decrees (legal agreements between the Department of Justice and police departments) intended to spur real change. After law school, I worked for the Advancement Project, which supported community organizers in Ferguson on the decree that was negotiated in the aftermath of Brown's death. Millions of dollars went toward an investigation, publicity, and a lawsuit to rid the Ferguson Police Department of "bad apples" and transform its culture.

After decades of police terror, widespread unconstitutional policing, and a year of militaristic ambush on the community, the consent decree provided members of the police department with mental health services to cope with the unrest, but no treatment or restitution for the residents who were tear-gassed, shot with rubber bullets, and traumatized by the tanks at the edge of their

driveways. The Obama administration's DOJ objected to dismissing thousands of old cases that were the result of unconstitutional policing, and protected the police department from criticisms that community organizers shared with the judge in court.

Constitutional policing is a problem too. As the legal scholar Paul Butler explains, the overwhelming majority of police violence is constitutional. Stops, frisks, and most of the police killings that turn our stomachs are protected by Congress and the Supreme Court. I believe that people began chanting "defund the police" precisely for these reasons. Reforms cannot fix a policing system that is not broken.

Still, many Americans believe that most police officers do the right thing. Perhaps there are a few bad apples. But even the very best apples surveil, arrest, and detain millions of people every year whose primary "crime" is that they are immigrants, Black, poor, and unhoused. Cops escalate violence disproportionately against people with disabilities and in mental health crises, even the ones who call 911 for help. The police officers who are doing the "right thing" maintain the systems of inequality and ableism in Black communities. The right thing is wrong.

Policing cannot even fix what many of us might fear most. People often ask me, "What will we do with murderers and rapists?" Which ones? The police kill about a thousand people every year, and potentially assault, threaten, and harm hundreds of thousands more. After excessive force, sexual misconduct is the second-most-common complaint against cops. Many people are afraid to call the police when they suffer these harms, because they fear that the police will hurt them, too. Thousands of rape survivors refuse to call the police, worried about not being believed or about being reassaulted, or concerned that their rape kit would sit unexamined for years. In three major cities, less than 4 percent of calls to the police are

for “violent crimes.” Currently, the arrest rate for homicides has declined from 80 percent to 60 percent, and cops frequently arrest and force confessions out of the wrong people.[10]

SO IF WE abolish the police, what’s the alternative? Who do we call? As someone who grew up calling 911, I also shared this concern. As *Becoming Abolitionists* explores: Just because I did not know an answer didn’t mean that one did not exist. Infinite questions, answers, and possibilities were on the road ahead, and many of them were already in play. Along with others asking similar questions, I had to study and join and create organizations, and find my place in the larger freedom movement. Rather than thinking of abolition as simply getting rid of police overnight, so many of us who were becoming abolitionists started to think about it as an invitation to create and support a range of answers to the problem of harm in society, and, most exciting perhaps, as an opportunity to reduce and eliminate harm in the first place.

That is where you, the reader, come in. This is not a “how-to” book on becoming an abolitionist. This is an invitation to share what I have been pushed to learn in developing the politics of abolition; this is an invitation to love, study, struggle, search, and imagine what we have around us to make this possible, today. This book’s purpose is to share the freedom dreams and real contradictions of a movement that I, that many abolitionists, hold dear, and to share how those dreams and contradictions and opportunities inspire me.

Before we begin, I make two requests of you.

First, I write about prison and police abolition as one paradigm, as one way to think about and experiment with problems and solutions. Abolition is important to me, but not abolition alone. I try my best to study abolition

alongside other paradigms, such as feminism, decolonization, and internationalism, and hope that you will consider doing this, too. For me, understanding abolition's relationship to capitalism is also essential to our liberation. I think about capitalism as a political and economic system that categorizes groups of people for the purposes of exploiting, excluding, and extracting their labor toward the profit of another group. Those categories can consist of race, gender, disability, sexuality, immigration status, and much more.

The slave trade is an example. By creating a category of enslaved Black people, white people could exploit their labor by benefitting from what slaves produced that they could not benefit from themselves. Additionally, by confining Black people to slave status, white people did not have to compete with it for other jobs on the labor market because Black people were excluded from them. Ironically, slavery became a tense debate among capitalists because slaves performed work that white people could have been paid to perform. But instead, poor white people were paid to manage enslaved Black people, as overseers, slave patrols, police, wardens, sheriffs, and prison guards. Today, the criminal legal system continues to manage people who are excluded from labor markets, education, health care, and quality housing—all of the things we need to reduce harm, and all of the things that cities and the feds choose not to fund when we can.

Extraction is harder for me to explain, but I know it when I feel it. It's the immeasurable and forced removal of our body parts, ideas, and emotions that accompanies capitalism. It's forcing someone to work fifteen-hour days picking cotton so that you can spend your time doing what you wish. It's the two-hour public bus rides that Amazon factory workers take so that the owner, Jeff Bezos, can travel between cities in an hour by a private jet. What's sad is that people claim that poor, Black communities need the

police the most to protect them, but this is not quite true. Capitalists need policing the most—to protect their property, billions, businesses, and borders by arresting the people whom they've exploited, excluded, and extracted from the most.

Second, let go. Well, maybe not *let go*, but, notice why you may want to know what "the alternative" is to police or prison. As someone who called 911 regularly as a child, I immediately wanted to know what the alternative would be if and when I was in a situation and needed help. A short answer is this: What if the solution is not one alternative, but many? By solely focusing on a single alternative, we fail to examine and eradicate the harm that gives rise to what we fear. And, we deserve options. "Option" stems from the Latin *optare*, meaning to "choose." Police and prisons—the default responses today—are woefully insufficient because they don't solve harm, they simply react to it. We must choose something better.

Who chose to have police? Originally, kings, colonizers, and capitalists. They chose police to protect their power to rule over people who had less. We must never forget that.

Certainly not the masses of Black people, whom police captured, brutalized, and returned to the plantation. Immigrants did not choose cops either, especially the immigrants who the police threatened to remain in their enclaves. Before the Irish were considered "white" in the US, they experienced policing as colonial subjects under Britain. Then, when they migrated to the United States, police targeted and arrested them so much that police vans are still called "paddy wagons," a derogatory use of the popular Irish name "Padraig." Women, even white women, had relatively little power in "choosing" to have police; during slavery, they were policed for prostitution and faced death for having sex outside of their marriages. And Indigenous people did not choose the police, either, or choose to be subject to the governance of those who

displaced and dispossessed them of their lands and relegated them to “reservations.”[11] Rather, police and rangers participated in mass genocide and war against Indigenous people in creating artificial borders called “states.”

The people who chose the police were the same people who drafted the Constitution, who started the wars, who owned slaves, who possessed property, who had the most to lose if oppressed people ever decided to revolt: wealthy white men. And rather than unifying and organizing against the concentrated wealth of this class, the rest of us have been tricked into demanding that the police protect us, too. They cannot.

Thus, there is no singular alternative to police that does not risk replicating the forms of oppression that we currently face. Police developed through slave patrols, colonialism, and labor suppression. The institution continues to support broader social, economic, and racialized systems that took millions of decisions to create. Together, we will undo them all. Somebody had to hammer “Colored” and “Whites Only” signs at schools, subways, businesses, and parks. Somebody had to remove them, too.

Slavery abolition required resistance, risk, and experimentation. Black people plotted, rebelled, ran away. Built an underground railroad. Marooned. Abolitionists wrote and orated against the “peculiar institution.” Allies funded campaigns, passed legislation, and changed the Constitution. Of course, people at the time felt a range of anxieties about abolition. Slave owners worried about their plantations and the profits that the labor camps wrought. White overseers feared joblessness. Both feared the loss of superiority. Some Black people had reservations about how they’d sustain themselves without the steady, yet violent, income from their owners. Police abolition triggers similar anxieties today—moral, economic, and otherwise.[12]

But if abolitionists had waited to convince every single person that freedom was worth the pursuit, Black people might still be on plantations. Slavery's violence and repression was riskier than Black people's plans, imagination, and will to be free. So they held the uncertainty in their bellies and started planning. Some started running. Rather than waiting for comforting answers to every potential harm ahead of us, let's plan. Run. Dream. Experiment. And continue to organize, imagine, and transform this society toward freedom and justice without police and violence.

ONE

WHAT JUSTICE?

SINCE I WAS about three, living in South St. Louis, my mother gave me two career choices: a lawyer or a doctor. She was neither, only encountering stethoscopes when she was sick and courts when there was trouble. Yet she believed that Black people needed Black lawyers to fight racism and poverty in the courts. She reminded me often that the US government did not care about the plight of poor people, especially poor Black women like her. Lawyers could alleviate some of the plight in court by winning trials. We called the court outcome "justice" when it was favorable. And if there wasn't any justice, then there wasn't supposed to be any peace. The popular chant demanded protests and disruptions to make the injustice uncomfortable. But growing up, I saw Black people lose so much in court—homes, marriages, children, freedom—and still there was so much peace.

Messages about my mother's lawsuit filled our mailbox and our voicemail. She was suing the factory where my father, Dereck, had been killed at the age of twenty-five, leaving her alone with me and pregnant with my brother, Dereck Jr. He was a machinist at Continco International, a plastics molding manufacturing company. St. Louis had been a site for many headquarters and industrial jobs, and Continco was one of the few that remained. In 1991, Daddy

was crushed to death while trying to remove material stuck inside of a machine. I couldn’t quite comprehend the story. For the first few years of my life, I would confuse strangers by saying that my dad died in a washing machine. I also tried to bring him back. My cousins, brother, and I would kneel and hold hands in the dark, near my mom’s red leather couch in the basement, mimicking seances from movies to raise the dead. We called out. Nobody ever said anything back.

My mother and grandmother were neighbors. During the day, my mother would knock on the living-room wall that split our apartment from my grandmother’s home. My grandmother babysat me and Dereck when my mom worked at a wholesale floral distributor on Lasalle. After work, she’d teach us how to read, spell, identify musical samples, and breakdance. Late nights, she’d tour the nightclub comedy circuit. I loved sitting in the kitchen listening to her practice standup. Especially the dirty jokes. “God gave me one titty and told me to split it.” My grandmother would roll her eyes at our bubbling laughter.

With my mother, grandmother, and uncle living between two apartments, I felt immense love and protection in my early years. They set high expectations for me academically, especially as the oldest. The twins, Courtnie and Corey, came along in 1994. Later that year, our apartment caught on fire. I ran next door to warn my grandmother as my mom ran the three other children down the concrete steps to the patchy grass. She didn’t know I had gone for help first, so she ran back into the fire searching for me. When she emerged minutes later, frantic that she couldn’t find me, my grandmother and I had to grab her wrists to show that I was there. She hated apartments already and the fire made it worse. She had grown up in substandard housing where the pipes always broke and once the ceiling caved. A fresh new home, she figured, would eliminate landlords and slumlords. She

resolved that I would become a lawyer in part so that I could protect her from them, and also so that I could make enough money to buy her a house. This was my goal entering kindergarten, where I was the first experiment of my own advocacy.

One day, a cafeteria lunch lady stopped me from grabbing a chocolate milk, but did not stop the kid in front of me. He had handed her quarters so I assumed it was for sale. I had no money. The following day, I came prepared. I quickly grabbed the milk, opened my palm to flash a few coins, and disrupted the food chain. She was shocked. My teacher was standing nearby and she asked what happened. When I explained to her that the cafeteria worker had stopped me the day before, my teacher assured me that I did not have to pay for anything. I was elated and puzzled. The lunch lady couldn't deny me, or anyone else, the sinful beverage. My mom explained to me on the walk home from school that the worker was withholding treats from children whose families belonged to the free lunch and breakfast program. We could not afford to pay for school meals, and to her, that made us unworthy of chocolate milk.

For me and many other students, confronting mistreatment at school was our introduction to self-improvement, punishment, and activism. I wanted to avoid mistreatment by proving that I could be the best student that I could be. School discipline and punishment is rather arbitrary. At schools I attended, "good students" did not talk back to adults and quickly complied with their orders. This environment was not conducive for disabled students and kids who dared to resist unfair treatment. I was *good*, my brother was *bad*. My brother knew that the teachers and school cops treated us differently because of our oversized clothes and natural hair. He defended himself and defied them. They responded with repeated punishment through suspensions. I decided that I would

prove the teachers wrong by earning good grades and becoming a lawyer one day. After I scored high on gifted and talented tests, everything changed. Our home filled with my laminated citizenship certificates, academic awards, sports trophies, and medals. The celebration of my obedience increased my brother's justifiable defiance and the school's punishment. I wish we had both known then how to organize. Maybe I would have resisted the urge to be so respectable.

I did not meet student activists who learned to organize against their mistreatment until later. They made the connections that schools were microcosms of neighborhoods we lived in. At school, it was terrible food, school cops, and economic incentives tied to high stakes testing. Our teachers were stressed, too, and not necessarily the enemy. The bell rang each day and most of us went home to street police, segregated blocks, and government divestment from our neighborhoods. My brother and I certainly did. Our apartment complex was nestled in the poorest corner of the Gate District in St. Louis. Elders sat on their porches in the summer and spring. Kids shared portable basketball hoops in the alleys, where we also tumbled on mattresses for fun.

About half of my neighbors were African Americans who worked menial jobs at nearby stadiums, gas stations, and grocery stores. The other half were Ethiopian and Somali refugees who had fled wars in East Africa for the dream of America. Men drove colorful cabs and kept their apartment doors open when they prayed in Arabic. The kids, all of us, played soccer and did push-ups when the other team scored. Several kids had scars from the war; a few still had pieces of metal inside them. Half of my friend's body experienced the crushing weight of his collapsing house as his dad tried to cover him from a bomb explosion. We would tease that the immobility of his right side made his left hook stronger. He reminded us with a blow every time he'd

get into a fight. The women wore colorful hijabs and were reluctant to let me come over. Maybe it was because I wasn't Muslim, or because I was a tomboy, or because they had heard my mother's dirty jokes, too. Still, they were generous to my family with food and supplies when we were in need. My closest friends also wore hijabs—until high school, when they would quickly tuck them into their backpacks once we hopped off the school bus.

Black people in St. Louis have a long history of using education as a site of resistance. After Missouri required the police to suppress educational and religious gatherings for enslaved *and* free Black people in the 1840s, Black Baptist minister John Berry Meachum moved his freedom school to a steamboat on the Mississippi River where the police lacked jurisdiction to enforce state law. After the Civil War, Black people renamed colored schools after abolitionists and revolutionaries. In 1890, my middle school was renamed after Toussaint L'Ouverture, a leader in the largest slave rebellion on the island of Santo Domingo, modern-day Haiti. I grew up around streets named after French colonizers, including Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau. In 1764, the pair had named St. Louis after one of their kings, Louis IX. It's remarkable that fresh off of the heels of the Civil War, Black St. Louisans named a school after a Black insurrectionist.

I started L'Ouverture days late after 9/11. I can't recall why. When I entered the building, I assumed that the school police holding the scanners on the other side of the metal detector were a consequence of the freshly fallen towers. But they were there every day. School districts have had relationships with law enforcement for decades; the Los Angeles school district has its own police department that emerged in 1948. As street police increased for Black people who rebelled over police violence, substandard housing conditions, and unemployment, school police expanded to patrol Black

students. Students, parents, and teachers resisted the proliferation; school districts employed them anyway. By the time of my first day of school at L'Ouverture, the federal government used the Columbine High School shooting and 9/11 to increase funding for "school resource officer" positions for cops to perform multiple roles "as law enforcement officer, counselor, teacher, and liaison between law enforcement, schools, families, and the community." The Department of Justice issued more than $750 million to police agencies which paid for almost seven thousand additional school cops between 1999 and 2005.[13]

I couldn't sort out why an all-Black middle school in south St. Louis needed police after 9/11. Since we lived with the Arch in view, my mom's neighborhood friend, Michael Jackson (we always had to say his full name) spread conspiracies that our city was next for an attack. When the Praxair tanks exploded, he incorrectly warned us that it finally happened. However, the only people I saw school police apprehend were my friends and crushes. When the metal detectors, wands, and school cops were there again the first day of seventh grade, I realized that they were there for us. Schools like mine—majority Black and economically divested—had the highest percentages of school cops, and it remains so.

For high school, I spent several miserable weeks at a construction-themed charter school where kids had to wear tan hardware boots. During the welcome orientation, a school administrator did a call and response exercise to help Black families remember which infractions led to detention, suspensions, and expulsions. She'd say, "No belt with your uniform?" We'd say, "You're going home." Without giving the school (or my mom) notice, I stopped attending and enrolled myself in Vashon High. My grandmother had gone to "the V," along with Donny Hathaway, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, and Lloyd Gaines, the student responsible for the Supreme Court

decision that required all white law schools to admit Black students if the state did not have a Black law school. He disappeared before he enjoyed the fruits of his suit. Whether he was murdered or fled the country due to threats is still unknown.

The V was named after George Vashon and his son, John. The elder Vashon was the first Black graduate of Oberlin College, an abolitionist, and the first African American to practice law in New York. But I only lasted a few weeks there, too; the school guards there were more aggressive than the ones at my middle school. Every day, I had to unzip my jacket, open my bookbag, flip through my binders, and raise my pants to show my legs. They never told us what they were looking for and nor asked permission to search our bodies and belongings.[14]

A magnet school accepted me late in the year, so I transferred. Under a court-ordered inter-district desegregation program, several Black schools became "magnets": forceful attempts to attract suburban white families who had been repulsed by the inner city. Over time, the program became voluntary, coinciding with the attempts of the state to remove accreditation from majority Black school districts in St. Louis. My junior year, an education organizer asked if I was interested in planning protests and sit-ins against the state's takeover. I was humbled at the request and scared because we had to prepare to be arrested at any moment. She explained that our education was a civil rights issue, and that we needed to be on the side of justice. We organized demonstrations and chanted, "Don't Slay Our Future!" against Mayor Francis Slay. A handful of us invaded City Hall wearing matching bright yellow T-shirts and occupied his office overnight. Even though we lost our accreditation, the student protests and walkouts all over the city felt like a win. Our student movement planted seeds within the organizers in our group who would eventually bloom into

educators—or activists for education civil rights, including me.[15]

My new school was much more diverse than Vashon and still had school cops. I maintained cordial relationships with them; because I had figured out the calculation for "good behavior," I had more privileges and less trouble. Until we had hall sweeps. Hall sweeps were in-school raids to clear the hallways between classes. Students had three minutes to transition between classes at the sound of a bell. At random, our principal or disciplinarian would make this announcement: "Teachers, three minutes have passed. Lock your doors. Security, bring any students caught in the halls to detention. This is a hall sweep." The threat created chaos. Students screamed and ran into each other trying to catch doors from closing. Teachers were hurt by thrusting their weight against the locks. Many of them hated it and would let students in anyway. School guards would then raid each floor and bathroom to round up students who had been locked out. We would spend the remainder of the period in in-school detention. I envied the students who did not run. They called the sweeps silly and defied the commanding voice from the speaker with their slow pace.

After the adrenaline rush from fleeing school cops, the principal expected us to sit quietly and learn geometry. At home, my friends already ran from the police and their families experienced raids on their houses. If cops were supposed to keep kids safe at school, using cops to cause additional chaos and violence through the sweeps opposed that goal. Instead of reducing police violence, local and federal governments funded "school resource officer" programs to improve Black kids' relationships with law enforcement. Maybe it did foster some relationships because many of us had our favorites inside the school. Yet the relationships did not stop the violence, punishment, or discipline at home or school. Relationship building had a perverse effect. School cops could punish us more subtly—

because if we liked them, we would accept the punishment along with a hug or fist bump. After hall sweeps, students could cry and complain to their favorite school cop as they headed for in-school suspension anyway.

The federal government's decision to brand school cops as "school resource officers" had initially clouded my understanding of their purpose. My freshman year, rumors had spread about school resource officer who had impregnated a student. We knew that he was flirtatious with students, like the others, but his disappearance confirmed our speculations. Later, I saw one of my favorite school resource officers break up a fight outside the school. The boy he grabbed fell back hard as a result of the momentum, hitting the officer. The school resource officer waited a few seconds in angry disbelief. Then, he punched the student so hard in the ear and head that the boy caved in pain. The blow was worse than the silly back and forth pushing that he was trying to stop. I knew the violence was wrong, I just wasn't sure what to do about it. Before I learned about the "school to prison pipeline" in college, I had already known that it was impossible for the school cops to be resource officers because they were also a constant source or threat of violence. The only "resource" that the school resource officer program provided were jobs to Black people who worked in the district. They could have been trained to be the counselors, coaches, and teachers that we actually needed. Students needed resources, not "officers."

Most of the significant resources from my childhood were tied to law enforcement or the military. Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) was—by far—the program with the most resources at school. As of 2018, the Pentagon spends $370 million a year on the program that is disproportionately located in diverse, economically disadvantaged schools like the ones I attended. During hall sweeps, sometimes I'd run to JROTC

to avoid detention. David, my freshman year sweetheart, jokingly called it my “underground railroad.” Our instructors cared deeply about us and saw the program and the military as an opportunity for us to travel, pay for college, and see the world. Like most of my peers living under racism and class exploitation, I certainly did not have these opportunities, so JROTC was responsible for nearly every flight I took in high school. My family could barely afford bus fare to the airport, but once I was there, JROTC covered my travel to the military bases in Illinois and Arizona for elite summer camps. After meeting other Black students from around the country, I realized that we desired the resources that the military provided, not necessarily the military. We should not have had to risk our lives, and the lives of others, to attend college, travel, have income, and avoid the grave or prison.

At my award ceremonies, my mother always bragged about the awards I’d won and how sharp I looked in the pressed light blue shirts and heavily starched navy slacks. On the ride home, she firmly reminded me that I did not need the military to go to college because I would secure a full-ride scholarship. I thought she envied my relationship with one of my Black instructors, but she was afraid that my adoration for the program’s teacher would inspire me to enlist. She would say that she did not believe that Black people should enter the military to fight wars for people who don’t care about Black people in the US or anywhere else in the world. My mother was right about the military, and more. I received several full-ride scholarships to college. And I watched my less fortunate peers enter jobs that were always hiring: the military and the police.

JROTC is also where I began to read and write about the news. Students could report the news as a current-events exercise at the start of each lesson. The local evening news overwhelmingly covered murders and assaults, so that is what several students reported. One

day, an instructor hovered anxiously behind the podium and pleaded with the class to stop reporting shootings. Names could fill the hour, and trying to have a normal class on aerospace science afterward was an impossible challenge. Korie Hodges, my classmate who had prompted his plea, was later murdered following the Ferguson Uprising.[16]

I mostly read news online because I wanted to know what was happening in other parts of the country. I came across tragedies that captured national headlines, including Hurricane Katrina, the police shooting of Sean Bell, and the Jena Six. I reported each of these stories during the current events section of our JROTC class, jumping down rabbit holes of links and clips and pictures of suffering. I also found the protests surrounding these events interesting. Many of the interviews I read and watched demanded "justice," a concept that I was still trying to understand. I shared information about the protests to the class because I found them inspiring, like pieces of history reliving itself in the present.

HURRICANE KATRINA CAME first, in 2005. I thought that I was just reporting on a brewing storm heading directly for Louisiana and Mississippi, but one story quickly became a set of reports about the country's racial climate. Kanye West was my favorite rapper when the storm landed that August. On a nationally televised broadcast to raise money for survivors, West trembled as he uttered, "I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family, it says they're looting. If you see a white family, it says they're searching for food … George Bush doesn't care about black people." West's video was the first viral video I remember. YouTube had only launched months earlier. President Bush did not fly to New Orleans, but rather over the devastation, safe in the stratosphere, peering down from Air Force One. On earth, armed militias stopped and

shot Black people trying to enter the suburbs that surrounded the swiftly submerging city. Homeowners placed “We Shoot Looters” signs in their yards. But looting—not the shooting—was the big story, and portraits of Black people as criminal characters. Football stadiums became domestic refugee camps for the disabled, elderly, dark, and dispossessed, while there was public outcry about pet homelessness. Black adults in one parish had a mortality rate up to four times higher than white adults, and still, sixteen years later, there is no official death count for that catastrophe.[17]

A year later, in class, I reported on Sean Bell, the first police killing that I ever wrote about. Each word I read from the thick, black Dell in ROTC’s main office twisted my stomach. I wrote a Facebook note about what happened. Five undercover New York Police Department (NYPD) officers surrounded Bell’s car after he left his bachelor party at a strip club. Police claimed that they heard one of Bell’s friends say that he was going to retrieve a gun from his car following an argument with the club owner. Other witnesses dispute this account, saying that the undercover police officers were not in close enough range to hear anything. Nevertheless, the cops shot fifty rounds of bullets, one of them emptying a magazine and reloading. Sean, who was just twenty-three years old, died. His friends were critically injured. Three cops were charged because of protests that followed the tragedy, but eventually they all were acquitted. Sean never wedded his bride.

I also reported about the Jena Six for class. Black lawyers, I understood at the time, defended Black people from injustice. But I did not really understand the role of prosecutors then, let alone that they could be unjust actors. I knew the metonyms, *they, the man, the system, the law, the court.* Six Black boys in Jena, Louisiana needed protection from their peers, their school district, police, *and* prosecutors.

I told my class about a Black freshman who had asked his high school principal permission to sit under “the white tree” in the school’s yard. The principal said yes, assuring that anyone at the school could sit in the shade. The morning after the boy and his friends sat under the tree, three nooses appeared on its branches, hung there by white students. Federal prosecutors refused to prosecute the white teens for a hate crime. For punishment, a local cop scolded that the white boys “should be ashamed of themselves.” The school district overruled the principal’s recommendation to expel the white boys, who received supervised suspensions. Brian Purvis, one of the Jena Six, explained that Black students and families protested and held demonstrations every day after the noose incident for weeks. This angered and agitated white students and fights ensued. Purvis wrote in *My Story as a Jena 6*: “It was so bad, there were at least two cops and a dog in every hallway throughout the school. Our school was now like a prison.”[18]

Racial violence continued in the town of three thousand souls. Black boys were invited to a party that had a “No Niggers Allowed” sign on the door. A white man punched one of them in the face, and later tried to shoot the boy during a confrontation. The boy and his friends took the man’s gun from him. Some of the same Black boys who survived the racial violence from the party and gun incident were then accused of beating up a white boy at school. Police cuffed them and put them in jail. The “Jena Six” were charged with attempted murder because one of the boys used what the prosecutor argued was a deadly weapon: a sneaker. District attorneys have the power to charge widely and harshly, though the same prosecutor had said, months earlier, that he could not find any hate crime charges to prosecute the white kids for the nooses. He additionally charged the Black boy for defending himself against the

white man whose gun he took. Purvis was not there during the school fight, but he was prosecuted anyway.

The boys' parents raised awareness about the charges and the death threats that they received. In 2007, more than twenty thousand people packed Jena, creating the largest civil rights protests in a decade. Prosecutors relented and dropped or reduced the charges.[19]

Stories around the Jena Six focus on the nooses, charges, and marches. However, the local resistance to police and white supremacy strikes me as the most important. Black kids conducted sit-ins in their segregated school. They physically defended themselves and took a white man's shotgun. Purvis's family sent him out of state for his safety. He writes that the Black Panthers provided protection during the court hearings. Their parents could not afford bail so Black people created a legal defense fund. From the activism surrounding Jena 6, Hurricane Katrina, and Sean Bell, I began to understand why my mother condemned the government's contempt for poor, Black people. And I hoped that we would continue to fight for each other.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES TOOK up most of my time but I wanted to start learning more about racial justice—especially if I was going to become a civil rights lawyer. I started going to community meetings where I met organizers who increased my participation in local activism. My plate was also full at home. My grandmother's lung collapsed after consecutive strokes; nobody could afford to take her in with the level of care she needed, and she entered an elderly facility. The company that owned the apartment complex where we lived fired the white manager because he was overcharging rent and taking cash instead of money orders from the tenants, including my mom. The new manager, a Black woman, was sent to "clean things

up.” She evicted my mom for several reasons, including the fact that my mom couldn’t make up the rent that she had given the previous manager. Against the terms of the lease, my mom had also opened up a small candy stand on our porch to make money. She paid kids in the neighborhood to bring grocery carts of snacks from the store because we never had a car. It was very little money, but the only chance that some kids had to earn twenty dollars here and there.

Jarrell, my first real crush, would run these errands for my mom. He had round, bright eyes and wore braids. We walked to L’Ouverture together on some mornings when I was in sixth grade and he was in eighth. I tested for gifted and talented early in elementary school, so I was put into his eighth-grade algebra class as a learning accommodation. After school, I would check to see if he was playing basketball at Buder because he would always encourage me to get on the court with the boys. Without me saying a word, he knew that I liked him. Much to my vexation, he mostly treated me like a sister and a friend. By the time he started coming to my house for my mom, I would simply freak out at the thought of him being downstairs in *my* living room. But my mom’s business plan and benevolence did not matter to the landlord. Neither did my secret obsession with Jarrell. We were kicked out.

We were evicted again after my mom complained to a new landlord about the conditions of our apartment. My family had grown, with my two youngest sisters, Kayla and Vickie, and asking someone to take in a family of seven was an enormous ask. So we had to split up. I began renting a room in my aunt’s basement and catching several buses in Ferguson to get to school in the city. A county school district originally sent taxis to pick me up and drop me off at school through their homelessness services program. I stopped requesting rides after several of the drivers made advances toward me.

I was also working at an after-school and youth empowerment program at the Kingdom House. There, I was a peer counselor to keep students in our communities out of violence and in school. We ran programming, homework support, and a host of social services that gave families in the neighborhood food, gifts, and clothes during the holidays. Ironically enough, through Kingdom House, I was also a local ambassador for Youth Crime Watch of America, a nonprofit dedicated to training middle and high school students to identify teenage and student criminals to report to law enforcement. YCWA receives grants from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The other ambassador and I traveled to national conferences together to meet a handful of other students who took their positions very seriously, and the rest of the attendees, like us, who wanted to take advantage of free trips to Miami. Fortunately, I did not have to interact with any law enforcement when I was at work or school. The funding was a way for Kingdom House to pay the bills. However, the other ambassador temporarily became a police officer; she resigned after the protests against police violence began in 2014.

Like the funding for JROTC and school resource officers, the government decided to tie funding for youth to law enforcement. Kingdom House could have done the exact same work in that community if the grants had come from another federal agency, such as the Department of Health or the Department of Education. But, since the grants came through law enforcement agencies, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention encouraged young people to snitch on other young people in the name of justice and public safety. Like schools, nonprofits needed the resources to provide services in the community, not stronger relationships to the police. And the families in that neighborhood only needed the Kingdom House because their jobs did not pay them enough to take care of their

families; they, too, needed to live under an economic system that ensured the equitable distribution of resources.

When I entered the University of Missouri-Kansas City in fall 2008, I joined and created racial justice organizations to continue my activism. Outside of class, I spent most of my day tutoring and mentoring Black and Latinx students in middle and high school across Kansas City, many of whom were undocumented. These students introduced me to the problems of immigration enforcement and border patrol. One year, I organized a regional college fair with schools from all over the country. A group of about fifteen Latinx students sat on the stairs in the arena. I assumed that they were either shy or acting like they were too cool to participate. “Hey, come on, why are you all sitting here? You can apply to all of these schools today and even get scholarships on the spot!” Not budging, they explained that some schools were requesting social security numbers that many of the students did not have. In solidarity, they all sat down to protect and support each other from being outed. These teenagers had to be vigilant against anything that could signal to law enforcement that they did not have citizenship.

Back on campus, I also realized that the racial violence and discrimination I’d reported about in high school was not just relegated to the south. White student organizations received funding allocations sometimes thirty times higher than diverse affinity groups’ allocations for programming. A white student journalist used horribly racist stereotypes to mock a Black fast-food worker in the school paper. Ku Klux Klan members successfully sued to have their rally near the flagship campus. I had studied political science, Black studies, and sociology. After years of student and community activism, the university finally made Black Studies into an official department. They soon undermined its development by refusing to enter an agreement to hire core faculty and rescinded the contract offer for the

director who'd grown it. The Black Studies House would become the target of hate acts and vandalized with racial epithets. Each event gave rise to more protests, more student demands, more temporary resolutions by the university.

Beyond school, organizing, and work, I was navigating exciting and troubled waters in my own life. An ex-boyfriend had begun stalking me my freshman year. One day, I'd switched routes and found him there, behind me. I rushed toward the entrance of the cafeteria so that I could confront him in a public setting. I begged him to stop and to please move on. He grabbed my wrists. When I pulled away, he grabbed my backpack to pull me back toward him, a common move he'd done when we were dating. I removed my bookbag to escape and fled to my dorm room. I called my mom, aunt, and boyfriend for help. My mom and aunt told me to come up with a plan so that I would always be with someone else on campus until I could figure out how to handle the situation. Grandon, my boyfriend at the time, did not consider my ex to be a real threat, but still called him to warn him about trying anything else. The stalking stopped.

I'd also started blaming violence I'd experience, like the stalking, and unhealthy friendships on myself. After a series of heartbreaking fights and losing friends, I'd turn to the church to seek spiritual guidance. Grandon was living in St. Louis, and when he told his parents that he might move to Kansas City to be closer to me, they said that we had to get married. Some traditions of Christianity forbid living together before marriage and belong to the set of biblical teachings that condemn premarital sex, adultery, and divorce. I trusted and adored his parents, who were small business owners, ministers, and active in prison ministries for several decades. Grandon's life had also appeared so much more stable than my own, and I largely attributed it to their parenting, not fully understanding the role of our

class differences. Not that they were rich, but my family was especially poor. Grandon proposed after a few months and we gleefully wedded in August 2009. He was twenty-one. I was nineteen.

THROUGH ALL OF the violence and activism, local and national, I was hopeful that the United States was truly becoming an amazing country. Unlike any other generation of Black students ever, my freshman year of college coincided with the election of the first Black president. Barack Obama was my kite. Kites are beautiful. Watching the colorful threads soar made me feel like I was having a conversation with a butterfly, like I could hold one for a while. With wind, kites rise. We are supposed to let them fly, then pull in on the line to manage the climb. Kites reward us when we allow them to work with wind, space, and control. Otherwise, they disappoint, become tangled. Crash. Obama was supposed to be proof that the United States could let people of color soar, with the right space, control, and wind beneath their wings. I voted for him twice. Filled with hope, I set up voter registration sites, organized “get out the vote” rallies, and, the second time he was elected, I saved money to fly to Washington, DC, to attend his inauguration. I stood several hours on a corner in DC for inauguration tickets in January 2013. Not because there was a line stretching around the capitol, but because my best friend was lost in the pre-inauguration traffic and forgot where she had dropped me off. Anyway, I wanted to be like Obama—a Black lawyer who spoke truth about freedom and justice for everyone.

Flags are not as beautiful to me as kites. We honor flags as symbols of pride and freedom, but rarely interrogate what we are proud of or what freedoms we have. Because of JROTC, I have recited the pledge of allegiance hundreds of times. In school, at events, and at military camps.

Standing at attention, with the backs of my shiny black oxfords pressed firmly together, I noticed that unlike kites, flags are attached to immovable poles, only waving in response to the wind, unable to roam in search of something more free. We'd pledge allegiance to the republic, "for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Reciting the pledge became increasingly difficult because I knew there was not liberty and justice for Sean Bell, for the Jena Six, for the families flooded by Katrina, or for those immigrant students on the steps. *Why would I continue to pledge allegiance to the republic "for which it stands," when it stood for violence against Black and brown people?*

If Obama was a kite, Kris Kobach was a flag. He was proud of nothing worth preserving in this country and the liberty he desired was the freedom to control others. When Obama was running for president, Kobach was a law professor at my college. He was authoring anti-immigration bills all over the country. Dubbed the "Nativist Son," Kobach was the father of Arizona's Senate Bill 1070, or as activists called it, the "Do I look illegal?" bill. Bill 1070 was the most restrictive state immigration law in the United States, mandating that cops racially profile drivers during traffic stops to determine their immigration status. Mexico borders Arizona. Cops used brown hues to make investigatory stops against people they suspected had crossed over. The federal government primarily holds jurisdiction over immigration and cannot force states or municipalities to assist. Here, Arizona was volunteering.[20]

Cities and the federal government have long used law enforcement and the military for border control. During the 1800s, Indigenous peoples and Mexicans fought militiamen, the Army, vigilantes, and rangers who helped colonize the same land where, a century later, Kris Kobach planned to expand police for immigration control. A primary reason that Mexicans were "immigrants" in the

first place is because the United States transitioned from a settler colony under Britain to a nation state with borders. Until then, the land had been Mexico, and before that, inhabited by various Native peoples who roamed the land without notions of “legal” or “illegal.” The roaming continued after the US was officially formed—except for Indigenous people fighting for their land and enslaved people fleeing the plantation.

But Mexicans were not the initial impetus for “illegal immigration,” it was Chinese immigrants. In *Amnesty or Abolition,* historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez explains that white slave owners tried to preserve their economic power by importing Chinese contract laborers to replace enslaved Black people near the end of the Civil War. Congress banned the Chinese immigrants to prevent the emergence of new forms of slavery. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass called the importation the start of a “Asiatic-slave trade” and opposed Congress’ actions because it criminalized the Chinese immigrants instead of the exploitative white Americans. The ban was foundational to the expansion of later immigration bans, law enforcement, border patrol, prisons, and detention centers for other immigrants. Hernandez argues that the white men who worked in Border Patrol specifically “Mexicanized” enforcement to maintain a system of racial control. They used their policing jobs to target and cage undocumented Mexican workers in the local agricultural labor force. Anti-immigrant law enforcement had been an ongoing project to displace people, control land, and protect the economic interests of the colonizers. Kris Kobach was only a fresh face in the long and ugly history of colonization and policing. He made this clear to the committee who drafted the 2012 Republican platform: “If you really want to create a job tomorrow, you can remove an illegal alien today.”

I joined students in Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MeChA) to raise awareness and organize against

the expansion of police power in immigration. In July 2010, MeChA counterprotested a rally celebrating Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, the staunch xenophobe and racist who created illegal armed mobs to “round up illegal immigrants” in the state. The rally took place in Overland Park, Kansas. Kobach and Arpaio were championing a similar anti-immigration bill for Kansas. Initially, our group stood across the street with hundreds of people holding signs and chanting. At the Kobach-Arpaio rally entrance, I spotted a table sponsored by Bott Radio. I listened to the Christian station daily on my way to class. Grandon had also spotted a Black student from his bible college there. I figured it might be safe enough to discover what the police were doing in Arizona. We entered the packed arena.

In the sea of nearly two thousand white faces, our Black and brown shells stood out. Veronica, a friend and student from Spain, wore a “Do I look illegal?” shirt that day. My heart raced. *How could this many people cheer on racial profiling by the police? How could Bott Radio support this?* A speaker announced the pledge of allegiance. Without hesitation, almost everyone faced the flag. I did not move. If supporting racial profiling and the police required us to be one nation under God, then there was no way that I would keep pledging. A tall, blond, white woman grabbed and pushed me from behind.[21]

“Put your hand over your heart!” she demanded.

“Don’t touch me, don’t ever put your hands on me again,” I retorted, partially angry, partially afraid.

“Aren’t you an American?” After more back-and-forth, she walked away. I was relieved, until she returned with a cop.

“Ma’am.” He looked at her. “I can’t force her to pledge.”

Her disgust was audible. She moaned and groaned until she disappeared again. The speaker on the stage indicated that there were unexpected people in the audience. At a

public rally, everyone should be “unexpected.” He just meant our group. He escalated the announcement when he added that there was a bomb threat, too. I was terrified because I didn’t want to die in an explosion. What followed made little sense. Kobach and Arpaio said they understood if people wanted to leave. The crowd stayed and cheered. I started to realize exactly what they were doing: creating a sense of victimhood in the crowd to make them feel as if their beliefs and bodies were under attack. Who was going to plant a bomb that day and kill two thousand white people? The NAACP counterprotesters? Us? I was standing in the middle of a racial hoax, and the crowd started looking at us, angrily. We hurried out and went back across the street. It was late and most of the counterprotesters had left. As rally attendees exited the parking lot, they shouted at us from their pickup trucks and minivans. “Terrorists!” “Go back to Africa!” “We know you planted the bomb!”

Flags soared high that day in Overland Park, Kansas. I was learning that policing was much larger than how individual cops treated Black people. Policing was, and is, deeply connected to the control of land, labor, and people who threatened white supremacy. Many white people used the police to punish Black and Latinx people who dared to move freely in the US. Even the white woman *who broke the law and assaulted me* went directly to a cop afterward to further punish me. Others, like her, who screamed at us lived in Kansas; they worked in corporate offices and police departments and day cares and community colleges and hospitals. The rally’s attendees listened to Bott Radio, like I did, and worshipped in Christian churches, like me. They probably took mission trips and vacations to Mexico, and yet deeply feared “Mexican invaders” who would steal their jobs. And obviously, they hated the kite, and the possibility of losing *their* country to people who were not white.

ALONGSIDE STUDENT ACTIVISTS, administrators and assistants in the chancellor's and diversity offices had become my dear mentors. They pushed me to read widely outside of class to cultivate my budding activism and political analysis around race, class, immigration, disability, and sexuality. So in 2010 the diversity office tapped me to introduce Dr. Angela Davis's Martin Luther King keynote lecture. What an honor—she was a legend, *the* legend, my mom's focal point. My mother associated Davis with the Black Panther Party and told me stories about the Black Power movement each time my hair was being braided down from an Afro. Davis represented an era that I had first understood aesthetically more than politically. I knew the black berets, fros, and fists. I had to learn that the free breakfast and lunch program from my elementary school cafeteria days was co-opted from Black organizers who fed thousands of poor children every day as a moral duty and political practice of their socialist beliefs. Nevertheless, I was largely unfamiliar with Davis's written work and activism on abolishing the prison industrial complex. Abolishing the death penalty made sense to me, especially since my aunt worked on a campaign to free a man from death row. I had also read Sister Helen Prejean's *The Death of Innocents*. But I only believed that prisons, particularly death row, were bad because prosecutors and police caught and executed the wrong people. Or, if they caught the right person, the state disproportionately killed Black people or people who could not understand their crime. However, the problem was not that the system got it wrong sometimes; Davis's work emphasized that the *system* was wrong all the time. I completed her introduction and discussed how activists like her influenced me to become a civil rights lawyer.

After Dr. Davis's speech, I wanted to know everything she had done, she had written, she had believed in. When I headed to the private reception with her at the Black

Studies house, a university employee whom I deeply admired stopped me in the hallway. I thought that she was going to congratulate me. She did not. Instead, she asked if I knew that Dr. Davis was in a relationship with a woman. I did not know and the question confused me. She said that I should “be careful” about whom I admire because as a Christian, I was called to rebuke particular lifestyles. It felt like a rug was snatched from beneath my feet. At nineteen, I was trying my best to be a new Christian. I was heavily involved in the church, anti-abortion, and I had even cut off any friends who I suspected were queer or having premarital sex. Including people I loved and danced on teams with in St. Louis. I had thought that I was supposed to hate the sin, love the sinner. All sins equally. My best friend, Porcia, and I would go to nightclubs to try to *save* the souls of young women in the parking lot.

A lot of my justice work had also been influenced by my faith, so I was challenged by the homophobic nudge. I was supposed to love people as I believed that Christ loved me. The hallway conversation did not feel like love. It felt like control and jealousy. The drive to the Black Studies House afterward felt much longer than the three minutes it usually took. And once I went inside, I couldn’t bring myself to ask any substantive questions of the funny, charming, and brilliant revolutionary I had just hugged hours earlier. This is how homophobia can create spectacular and mundane forms of violence against queer people. Shouting slurs reveals the hatred and fear. Silence can conceal it. And akin to racism, homophobia and capitalism exploits, excludes, and extracts from people who are marginalized because of who they might be attracted to. For the person in the hallway, homophobia categorically excluded gay people from admiration; it could have been exclusion from housing, employment, health care, and the opportunity to speak at my university.

I think I'm patient with people I organize with who have conflicting ideas about justice because my own ideas about oppression and freedom formed dynamically alongside my ideas about sex and sin. I had been active about racial and economic justice and simultaneously had unexamined commitments to harmful beliefs. Ironically, many people I loved at church and in community organizations thought they were protecting Black people from single mother homes, abortions, and queerness. Fear of additional stigma made us cling to what we perceived as righteousness and purity. To save others, we lost ourselves—because homophobia is bad for the people who carry it, too. Here, it foreclosed a relationship with another human being. It made me cower instead of chasing her ideas that were necessary for my own liberation, too. At least temporarily. Eventually, I emailed Davis, expressing gratitude for our encounter and asked to remain in touch.

AFTER THE KEYNOTE, I sought organizations, movements, and employment that focused on the criminal justice system. In 2011, The Kansas City's Human Relations Department posted an investigations internship position for its Civil Rights Division. They recruited law students, but after I did some pleading, they gave me an interview, then an offer. On day one, I had an hours-long conversation with my new supervisor, Mickey Dean. He had an enormous red, green, and black flag that covered the wall above his desk. He explained that civil rights enforcement was his day job, but he'd spent more than thirty years organizing through the National Black United Front. In Kansas City, members opened an African-centered school and community center. He taught math every Saturday. They were pan-Africanist, greeting each other with "Hotep!" They traveled extensively throughout Africa and launched campaigns to

bring the chairman of the Kansas City chapter of the Black Panther Party, Pete O'Neal, home.

Kansas City was a major hub of Black organizing during the Black Power Era. Kansas City's Black Panther Party protested police violence, launched local free breakfast programs, and offered educational programs for students of all races. O'Neal previously spent time in prison, and upon release, the State of California was supposed to expunge the felony from his criminal record. State officials failed to do so, keeping O'Neal in housing, economic, and employment precarity. Not to mention the additional targeting by police who exploited his vulnerable status to threaten imprisonment. O'Neal fled Kansas City in 1969; he was facing a federal charge for transporting a gun across state lines during the height of his political leadership. As Mickey put it, "Pete is in exile due to some bogus charges that he picked up thanks to the government's attack on the Panther Party through its COINTELPRO operations. He can't return to the country without going to prison." Like Angela Davis, police and federal agents imprisoned several Black radicals for their beliefs in socialism and communism. Police killed activists. Others went into exile. O'Neal ultimately landed in Tanzania, where he and his wife, Charlotte, continue their activism and run a school. When Mama Charlotte would visit Kansas City, I'd attend the NBUF events to spend time around her.[22]

When President Obama was leaving office in 2017, I asked Mickey if I should begin organizing a commutation campaign for Pete. Obama commuted sentences for whistleblower Chelsea Manning and Puerto Rican liberation leader Oscar López Rivera, and there was hope among activists that the first Black president might also commute the most famous political prisoner in the world, former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal. Through Mickey, Pete offered his gratitude for my offer, but gracefully bowed out. He believed if there was any chance for Mumia's

freedom, then all of the energy should be directed toward that cause.

Under Mickey, I investigated how companies and landlords used criminal records to deny jobs and housing to applicants, particularly people of color. This is precisely what had happened to Pete O'Neal when he left prison and looked for work. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits companies from denying employment to people on the basis of their race, but if a Black person has a felony, then businesses can deny employment on the basis of the criminal record, which can also serve as a proxy for racial discrimination. At the time of my employment, one report estimated that one-third of Black men had a felony conviction compared to 13 percent of all adult men. Organizations and landlords make millions of people ineligible for housing and jobs due to criminal records, including arrest records that do not result in convictions. Complete bans on criminal records bypass the civil rights laws that were meant to protect people of color who already experienced discrimination and exploitation in the job market, and increased availability for white people seeking employment and homes. Many Kansas City area employers and landlords, I found, had blanket bans on hiring or leasing to people with records. Since police primarily patrol, arrest, and imprison economically exploited Black people, Indigenous peoples, and people of color; these groups were routinely denied housing and jobs. It was not solely about public safety: white men with criminal records were more likely to interview for jobs than Black men without criminal record. Federal government policies exacerbated the discrimination by additionally barring people with records from public housing, welfare, voting, and financial aid for school.[23]

I conducted phone interviews with administrators of local businesses and apartment complexes. They defended the background checks and bans. One woman even

bragged that the application and background check did not even matter. If someone even “looked bad,” they could be denied. Mickey and I offered a training to an apartment complex association about the impact of their blanket bans and how they might be in violation of the law. The training emphasized how to navigate maintaining a safe environment while limiting racial discrimination against people with records. When we arrived at the location, Mickey stopped suddenly when he opened the door. The apartment complex association had come with the police, who took up half of the medium-sized conference room. I really did not understand why landlords and apartment managers would bring so many cops to this meeting, but I felt so alarmed. Mickey did not waste any time on assumptions. He just asked. Everyone was white except us and the manager who answered Mickey. The manager said that the cops were there to protect the rights of the proprietors. This didn’t make any sense. Mickey was a government lawyer who enforced the civil rights code in Kansas City against businesses who were breaking the law by discriminating against people on the basis of race, sex, gender, disability, and family status. He *was* law enforcement. Cops are not lawyers and it was absurd that they would use their publicly funded positions to protect private property owners from the government. Companies defend themselves from law enforcement with lawyers, not cops, at least I had thought. Without flinching at the ridiculous nature of the man’s response, Mickey started the presentation.

On the drive back to the office, I asked why the police were there. He explained two reasons. First, police protect private property, and people who control the property can control the police. Second, they thought that they were going to intimidate us with police presence, and they failed. Regardless of our positions in law enforcement, we were Black people trying to tell white people how to use their

property. He turned up *Democracy Now!* with Amy Goodman on the radio for the rest of the drive.

Mickey's explanation about who controls the police provided further context to the anti-immigration rally that I had counterprotested the year before; the white kids who "owned" the tree in Jena; and the armed white militias who threatened and shot Black Hurricane Katrina survivors. Police targeted people because of their race and certainly more. Race and ethnicity are inseparable from who hoards wealth and who fills out endless job applications for low wage jobs; who owns apartment complexes and who rents rooms; who celebrates Independence Day and who is deported; and who languishes in prisons and who is free. Cops are the armed force that maintain these divisions.

Changing the race of the people in power did not necessarily end the hierarchies that maintained racism, classism, and xenophobia. The spokesperson for the apartment association was a Black man and he legitimized the police presence at the meeting and property owners who wanted to keep tenants out. Black and Latinx activists were criticizing President Obama's immigration policies for the same reason. The president was clear: "No matter how decent they are, no matter their reasons, the eleven million who broke these [immigration] laws should be held accountable." Activists were critical of his crackdown against the undocumented and labeled him "deporter-in-chief." Immigrants and advocates demanded comprehensive immigration reform rather than detention and expulsion. They started campaigns around the most sympathetic groups, children they called "Dreamers," who were brought here by their parents to flee violence or seek opportunity. While Obama did not spew the kind of xenophobic speech that I had heard at the rally, I realized that his message led to the same outcomes. Border patrol and detention increased and he surpassed his Republican predecessor's record on deportations. My kite was attached

to police, private property, prisons, and borders over people. The colors that once made me marvel were a distraction.[24]

Activists continued to pressure President Obama to reform immigration and criminal justice systems that we called "broken." In 2011, I joined thousands of people who were signing, circulating, and making calls around petitions to stop the State of Georgia from executing Troy Davis. Davis was on death row because he had been convicted of killing a cop. Davis's case was obviously flawed. The evidence against him was largely absent and what evidence was present was weak. No weapon tied him to the shooting, and seven witnesses recanted testimonies that cops forced them to make years before. One million people signed petitions for his release. I felt that this was our opportunity to stop the death of an innocent. I found it profoundly unfair that when cops kill Black people, nobody had to be punished, but when a Black civilian kills a white cop, any Black person can be punished.[25]

Black students protested and marched for Davis's freedom. Howard University students went to the White House with signs in their hands and tears in their eyes, imploring the Black president that many of us helped get elected to do something. *Anything*. He did nothing. Thirty minutes before the execution, the White House press secretary issued a statement explaining that while President Barack Obama "has worked to ensure accuracy and fairness in the criminal justice system," it was inappropriate for him to "weigh in on specific cases like this one, which is a state prosecution."[26]

President Obama could have done something. He could have personally condemned the execution, just as he personally condemned states' bans on gay marriage. Per the Death Penalty Information Center, Obama could have possibly investigated any federal issues in the case which would have suspended Davis's execution. Writer Sherry

Wolf explained that US presidents have authorized themselves to do catastrophic violence in the world, and the president could have found a way to prevent violence if he had had the will and courage. Calling Obama's silence "bullshit," she wrote: "Presidents have declared multiple wars without Congressional approval, they have defied international law through special renditions torture program, they have run a gulag at Guantánamo Bay, they have ripped up civil liberties to read our e-mails and rifle through our trash. Obama himself has just waged a months-long extra-legal war on Libya." Even William S. Sessions, Ronald Reagan's former FBI director, called for a stay of execution. Politicians on both sides of the aisle called for the death penalty team to strike.[27]

I had known that someone's innocence was not enough to protect them from state violence. Well before I learned about Sean Bell and the Jena Six, I knew the histories of Black bodies swinging from trees in this country. Death penalty abolition would at least stop one form of state executions one day, but we just needed something right then and there. Just as activists had demanded justice for Davis, the slain cop's family demanded justice for their loved one. On September 21, 2011, the State of Georgia answered. An executioner killed Troy Davis. It was a sobering lesson that when Black people are on death row, and activists are fighting for their freedom, the people opposing us say that they want their "justice" too. As I would later learn while awaiting convictions for cops: The same systems responsible for our oppression cannot be the same systems responsible for our justice.

Black and multiracial student activism around Troy Davis catalyzed subsequent organizing around social justice issues. We were always organizing on and off campus in response to racism from our peers, professors, and police, but our activism was evolving. The petitions that I used to carry on brown clipboards shifted to online

shareable links. Criminal justice was taking over the mainstream as a popular site of political struggle. I was especially moved by the protests to the extent that, at the end of my civil rights internship with Mickey, I changed my senior thesis topic from education desegregation to "disparate impact discrimination on ex-offenders of color." Lucky for me, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* was still fresh on the bookshelves. Alexander's book was a crash course on the criminal legal system and history of racialized control in the United States. Not only did the prison population explode, she explained, but mass criminalization and policing kept Black men trapped in a carceral cycle after they exited prison. Like Angela Davis a couple of years before, Alexander was booked as my college's MLK keynote speaker. But because I was the student speaker then, I couldn't do it again. My mentors in the diversity office, Kristi and Dr. Dace, knew about my research interests and still invited me to the private dinner afterward. Mickey was the first civil rights lawyer I'd met, but Alexander was the first Black woman I met who was a civil rights lawyer, so this was my chance to ask questions about what justice really meant to her. As we were leaving a famed Kansas City BBQ restaurant in a ritzy midtown area called the "Country Club Plaza," I thanked her and asked if I could be her research assistant. She agreed, but I never followed up. The following month, I found myself organizing in another movement for racial justice.

THE SPRING AFTER Davis's execution, when I was finishing my thesis, I learned about the white self-appointed neighborhood watchman who followed, fought, and killed a seventeen-year-old Black boy in Florida. In February 2012, Trayvon Martin was walking home from a 7-Eleven with Skittles and an AriZona iced tea. His hood was over his head. George Zimmerman started following Martin and

called the police to report a suspicious character. Zimmerman told the 911 dispatcher, “These assholes … always get away.” The dispatcher told Zimmerman that he did not need to follow Martin, but he ignored the request and ultimately killed the teen. Following the news story, a shock wave of grief and disbelief washed across the public. *How could a white man follow a Black boy, start a fight, kill him, then go home—in 2012?* I did not have to be a lawyer to know that killing someone after stalking them was illegal. Wasn’t it?[28]

Protesters then didn’t know what we learned soon after. Police did not originally arrest Zimmerman because of Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law. It did not matter that he initiated the fight; he could claim immunity for using fatal force during the encounter and avoid arrest if the police believed he was justified. Then, in states where the law requires someone to flee a potentially violent encounter, rather than “stand your ground,” white people are 250 percent more likely to be deemed justified in the “self-defense” killing of a Black person than a white person. In “stand your ground” states, like Florida, that number jumps to 354 percent. To the contrary, predictably, Black people are almost never found legally justified in the self-defense killing of a white person. The Black boy from the Jena Six was prosecuted for taking the white man’s gun in self-defense. If Martin had survived, rather than Zimmerman, he would likely be in prison.[29]

Young Black and brown activists in the Sunshine State started singing freedom songs and demanding justice for Trayvon Martin. This group, some of whom would become the Dream Defenders, blocked the entrance to the Sanford Police Department to put pressure on cops to arrest Zimmerman. They also occupied the governor’s office to repeal the Stand Your Ground law. Black organizers from across the country went down to Florida to support them.[30]

Thousands of people were also cheering for George Zimmerman. I thought about all the white people I had seen in Kansas, cheering on the empowering of police to racially profile people. George Zimmerman was not a cop, but the state certainly protected his behavior to racially profile, target, and even kill a Black kid. The media and activists called him a vigilante. A vigilante is someone who takes the law into their own hands to threaten or punish someone without legal authority. But Zimmerman *did* have legal authority to undertake law enforcement under Stand Your Ground—he had the power to strike even when he had no reason to do so.[31]

Hundreds of thousands of people were inspired by the Dream Defenders' activism, including me. Rallies popped up all over the country to seek justice for Trayvon. I didn't go to Florida as I had dreamed in 2012. I remained in Kansas City to organize and plan protests in solidarity to get Zimmerman arrested. I pulled a group of students and clergy together to plan a rally in Kansas City, Missouri. We chose to hold the rally at the J. C. Nichols fountain at the Country Club Plaza because police racially profiled Black teens who visited the scenic, high-end retail and restaurants there. Additionally, J. C. Nichols had been a real-estate developer who had made his wealth by building the Plaza and surrounding homes using racially restrictive covenants, agreements that kept Blacks and Jews out of white neighborhoods. His covenants cemented a racial dividing line in Kansas City that kept Black families in neighborhoods east of the Plaza for the next century. We believed that a racial justice rally near a physical relic of white supremacy would condemn the legacies of racial violence in the US.

"Bring your hoodies and your AriZona tea!" "Meet us at the Plaza!" We circulated flyers in neighborhoods and on Facebook. The media picked it up. Soon, a conciliation specialist from the Department of Justice called me,

warning me that white supremacists were threatening to counterprotest our rally. Conciliation specialists mediate disputes in local communities. *White supremacy isn't something to mediate, but eradicate,* I thought. She had called me to put me on notice that we could expect violence, and to think through options for safety. I did not expect the police to protect us from the counterprotesters. Usually, when I counterprotested white supremacist rallies in Kansas City, the police faced us. Besides, our organizing team did not expect a large rally. We thought that the threat would die down as we moved closer to the date so we pressed on. We created a calendar of community events where we made announcements and attended so many meetings that people started mentioning the rally before we could. Alvin Brooks, a Black former police officer and the person who created and directed the department where Mickey eventually worked, announced the rally on his radio show. Brooks's show was a part of his project, AdHoc Group Against Crime, a nonprofit dedicated to responding to violent crimes in Black communities using tips and rewards for information. He commanded the respect of Black Kansas Citians, so when I heard the announcement on my ride home, I started shouting with joy.

The most painful moment happened at my church. I dearly and deeply loved my pastor, who was a critical thinker and fiery preacher, and a warm and inviting spirit. He talked about social issues and encouraged people to go vote, probably as much as any other pastor in a traditional Black church in the Midwest. On the Sunday morning before the rally, he condemned the racism in this country, and described how Black men were so dehumanized and walked around with targets on their backs. Then, he invited all of the Black men in the church to come to the altar. He directed the congregation to stretch our hands toward them in preparation for prayer. He pleaded with God, begging to help us save the souls of Black men, so that

when they are hunted and killed, they will go to heaven. I snatched my arm back, raised my head in horror, and promptly exited the church at “Amen.”

The prayer hurt me. I felt sad for my pastor who was trying his best and mad that his best only saved Black men in the afterlife. *How could I worship a God who did not have the decency to permit victims of white supremacy and police violence into heaven?* I vehemently rejected the idea that premature death disproportionately sent Black people to hell. *Why weren’t we praying to stop the violence? Or at least praying to learn how to fight back?*

I called my friend JP, who was a student at Yale Divinity School. We had met on Alex Haley Farm during our Children’s Defense Fund Freedom School training. CDF was modeled after the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 and trained thousands of mostly Black college students to teach in social justice summer programs at schools and churches across the country. JP and I became friends after an argument. I believed in organizing and protests to stop racial violence. JP criticized marching because Black people could enter policy positions. He had been influenced by Warren Kimbro, a former Black Panther in New Haven who ran a program for men exiting prison. “Warren told a group of Black men, ‘The time for Molotov cocktails is over. We did that so y’all could be judges and politicians,” JP said. Between Kimbro and shadowing leaders at Rev. Al Sharpton’s National Action Network, JP was disillusioned with protests. He later told me that Freedom School and Black theologians like Emilie Townes revived his energy for resistance. So I knew that he was the right person to call.

“JP,” I said, on the verge of tears “how can you be Black and Christian?” I told him what had happened at church that morning and how I felt about seeing the Christian radio station support the police at the anti-immigration rally. I reminded him that a minister had encouraged me to

change majors after I shared that poverty derives from slavery, Jim Crow, and capitalism, not whether we paid tithes. JP explained that there were different traditions of Christianity, and the one he belonged to believed that God was on the side of the oppressed. He recommended Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and sermons from Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Trinity, he believed, would help me through my faith and activism. The church's slogan was literally, "Unapologetically Black, Unashamedly Christian." There, I didn't have to choose.

Days before the rally, I received a call from Charlene Carruthers. Carruthers was organizing with Color of Change at the time and wanted to list our rally on a national website featuring Justice for Trayvon Martin events. I sent the logistical details, and Carruthers helped me create a program. She told me that organizers could create space for people to grieve, heal, and act as a community. That's exactly what we did. We designated times for an open mic, to let different people in the community sing, perform poetry, and express anger. Street violence interrupter groups challenged the crowd to keep our neighborhoods peaceful. Activists helped hundreds of people sign petitions for Zimmerman's arrest. Elders kept saying that it was one of the largest civil rights rallies they'd seen in decades.

Our organizing team tried to prevent police and vigilante shootings locally, so we organized next steps meetings at Believers' Temple who gave us resources and space to gather. We drafted scripts and made hundreds of calls to follow up with anyone who signed up at the rally or online. Our group reached out to law enforcement and neighborhood watch groups to attend. We called ourselves Warriors Actively Transforming & Creating Hope for Kansas City (Watch4KC). It was our attempt to shift

neighborhoods from relying on punitive neighborhood watches to building community relationship formations.

Nearly one hundred people showed up. Organizers facilitated small group dialogues around three commitments. The first was community ownership. We believed that violence declined with increased levels of community involvement and care. The small group had brainstormed activities on how to interrupt violence, including deescalating fights that occurred among Black teens on the Plaza. The second commitment involved teaching people how to file complaints at police departments. We wanted to ensure that the police arrested people for crimes, so that they wouldn't remain free like George Zimmerman. At the time, I believed that's what justice required. And finally, the third breakout group helped individuals draft pacts toward peace and relationship building in their community. We asked questions like, d*o you know every neighbor on your block? What are good ways to meet them?* At the end of the meeting, we decided that Watch4KC would prioritize deescalating fights among the teens at the Plaza and intervene if law enforcement tried to arrest them. An elder Black man condemned this decision. He didn't like that a racial justice movement was becoming about fixing Black-on-Black crime. His plea prompted pushback and did not change the decision, though it had a lasting impact on me. So for that summer, that's what we did. Deescalated fights; monitored the movie theaters to keep crowds cool; even talked police out of arresting Black boys out past curfew.

I think about that elder's comments when I hear critics of abolition suggest that Black activists just want to hate cops or that we do not care about community-based violence. It's ironic because most of the Black abolitionists I know now came together in 2012 to plead with the police to do what we thought their job was: arrest George Zimmerman for killing Trayvon. That's how I met Charlene

Carruthers, who one year later became a founding member of queer, feminist grassroots organization Black Youth Project 100. Carruthers went to Florida to support the Dream Defenders capitol takeover; there she reunited with DD leader Phil Agnew, her elementary schoolmate from Chicago. We were all trying to get the police and prosecutors to do what their job was: secure justice for victims. Watch4KC literally brainstormed ways to make sure that police made arrests, especially for murders in Black communities. We also practiced trying to keep our neighborhoods calm through community-based intervention. But the elder was right. We were mixing up solutions to very different problems.

I EXPECTED THE protests to send Zimmerman to prison, and more importantly, send a warning to white men that would save Black kids' lives. Police eventually arrested George Zimmerman. We felt like we had won. We wept. By fall 2012, it had happened again. Michael Dunn, a white man, reached into his glove compartment and shot indiscriminately into a car that carried Jordan Davis and his friends. Dunn was upset because the Black boys were playing what he called "rap crap." Davis died that day in Florida. Dunn went to his hotel and ordered a pizza.

My belief that Black kids had to be good to survive mistreatment and violence still lingered. Davis's murder erased what remained. Jordan had two present parents and lived a comfortable middle-class life. His grandparents worked in the medical field and owned an African American newspaper. His mom is college educated, a member of Delta Sigma Theta, and had careers in politics and airlines. Jordan's dad had turned down a job with the FBI and had become a regional manager of operations for Delta Airlines, where he worked for decades. He was retired and enjoyed playing video games with Jordan and doing important dad

duties, like taking the door to Jordan's room off the hinges after catching a girl in there. This was the kind of Black boy whom I least expected to be gunned down. Not because his life was more valuable than the boys in the Jena Six. But because I assumed that upward social mobility kept us relatively safe. It did not, no more than a having a Black man ascend to the highest office in the country had protected us from police violence, deportations, and dying on the execution table.[32]

I was teaching math at a middle school at the time and became conflicted when telling my students that they could break a cycle of violence and poverty solely by going to college.

This was a major Teach for America mantra—to give every kid in poverty an excellent education. Like with every other educational program I encountered, kids did not just need an excellent education. They needed resources and the elimination of poverty. Overcoming barriers could provide individual social mobility, but it did not keep them safe from violence nor eliminate poverty. I wasn't sure whether my well-meaning teacher colleagues understood this, and I started to feel even lonelier than I already did. I had much more in common with my students than my peers. At any moment, the police, racists, or community members could kill me, my students, and our loved ones. My colleagues felt like witnesses; we felt like targets. During the summer of 2013, I decided to start studying to take the entrance exams for law school, just in case the law could provide more protection for us than education.

That summer, Michael Dunn was in jail and George Zimmerman's trial started. Unlike during the execution proceedings for Troy Davis, President Obama did address Trayvon Martin's death. The mainstream media coverage centered on his comments that Trayvon could have been his son, and that if the boy had been a white teenager, then the outcome and aftermath might have been different.

Though what he said next alarmed me: “I think it’s understandable that there have been demonstrations and vigils and protests, and some of that stuff is just going to have to work its way through, as long as it remains nonviolent. If I see any violence, then I will remind folks that that dishonors what happened to Trayvon Martin and his family. But beyond protests or vigils, the question is, are there some concrete things that we might be able to do.”[33]

Obama’s comments were audacious. The US government repeatedly used the deaths of Americans as an excuse to act violently toward people, organizations, and entire nations. Why didn’t he honor the dead by telling police and military to not act violently? I found it contradictory that Obama was not practicing what he had been preaching. Here we were as activists, passing around petitions and organizing rallies and sitting-in and praying because a Black boy was killed. Our activism was belittled as “stuff” that needed to “work its way through.” Additionally, Obama did not remind white people to not racially profile, nor kill, but quite paternalistically, he warned Black people, us, the targets, to remain nonviolent in the face of our demise. Per his own account, the protests were already nonviolent, but still, he felt compelled to scold us for the *potential* of being disruptive. And once again, we listened.

During Zimmerman’s trial, I protested and watched and read and sweated and missed meals and cried and journaled and prayed for justice for Trayvon. Back then, justice meant that George Zimmerman had to be convicted and imprisoned. In July 2013, my two friends Luisa and LaShay came from New York to visit me in Boston while I was completing a fellowship at Harvard. We had just left the movie theaters and were still laughing at Kevin Hart’s jokes from his latest film. Now, outside, we heard people screaming in the Boston Common. I pulled out my phone.

George Zimmerman had been found “not guilty.”

My mother's face and number replaced the news alert on the small screen in my hand. Before I could force a hello through my tears, she asked, "What you gon' do? You gon' cry or you gon' fight?" I wanted to do both. She had witnessed all that I went through to plan the rally, to get petitions signed and people activated, all in the name of "justice" for Trayvon. Jurors denied it, and President Obama encouraged the mournful onlookers to accept the jury's decision in silence. My mother already knew that her six Black children were vulnerable in the United States, and she had little expectation of the courts to do the right thing. What she did not know on the day of the verdict was that I was pregnant.

Luisa and LaShay did not know either.

"Derecka, you okay, sis?" Luisa asked. I was desperately trying to fake it through our dinner at Legal Sea Foods. I'm an Aries' Aries. Big personality, caretaker, a natural host to company. I can be really funny and spontaneous because I was raised by a comedian. I sat eerily silent during our meal. "I'm sorry. We found out that we were expecting a little one last week." I should not have said it. There's an unwritten rule that people are supposed to make it through the first trimester before telling anyone. But I was in Boston, terrified, alone, and angry. Would we be able to protect our children? Would we be able to protect ourselves?

IN THE FALL of 2013, after the verdict, I decided to apply to law school. Dreams from my high school years were simultaneously shattering and actualizing. Shattering because racial tragedy forced me to reckon with the limits of education as a salvific force in the face of white supremacy. Actualizing because maybe, through the law, I could learn how to protect people from their peers, police, prosecutors, and white supremacists. By then, the public

was preparing for Michael Dunn's trial. Activists challenged the coverage because pundits kept calling them the "Trayvon Martin case" and "Jordan Davis case," when neither boy was on trial. Media eventually resorted to using the "loud music case" for Dunn.

On February 15, 2014, a week after I was admitted to Harvard Law School, a jury found Dunn guilty on three counts of attempted murder, one for each of Jordan's friends in the car. Jurors could not reach an agreement on whether he was guilty of first-degree murder when he killed Jordan. The judge declared a mistrial on that count. I wrote a letter to my unborn child:[34]

> Dear Son,
> You are literally moments from being with us, so I want to let you know this before you arrive:
>
> Since we've been expecting you, two men have been on popular trials for murdering Black boys. One found not guilty; the other found "kinda guilty and kinda not." Countless other trials have occurred for your other brothers and sisters, but they have not received the same deserved attention.
>
> However, I want you to know this: people are fighting so that you will have the luxury of being a child. You will be able to wear hoodies in any neighborhood. You will not have to turn your music down because you are afraid of being killed. You will do more than "survive." You will live.
>
> You will play. Make mistakes. Grow. Advocate.
>
> Most of all, you will learn to love—even learn to love the men on trial for taking life. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it.
>
> Can't wait to meet you.

Three days later, I delivered Geuce.

ENDNOTES

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