

## **Breathing Electric Air**

Michelle Jones

Opportunity is life. Opportunity is life for an incarcerated man or woman, when those locked behind bars run the risks of atrophy of the mind and numbing of the spirit by the monotony and routinization of daily condemnation, the constant changes of staff and rules, the mediocrity of the collective prison consciousness, and the normalization of violence.

Incarcerated at the Indiana Women's Prison for twenty years, I lived through many cycles of governors, commissioners, and superintendents. All had their own ideas about how to make prisons work better, offering their own tweaks to a fundamentally broken system. Oddly, each change in staff, custody, and rules was accompanied by the reinscription of criminality upon us. Meaning, that in every reformulation of getting the incarceration—the processes of containment and confinement—of humans “right,” usually results in the loss of personhood, programming and opportunities for the incarcerated. How does one get free and breathe the electric air of newness and wonder?

Art was my path to freedom. I was a choir director, vocalist, playwright, actress, poet, and painter throughout my incarceration. I am also the founder of Lifted! Liturgical Dance, for which I served as director and choreographer for eighteen years. I needed these artistic avenues to breathe, to develop a deep knowledge of self and the resilience to endure prison.

Important in the development of resilience is community. There is a school of thought that says that no one in prison is worthy of your trust. Of course there are people you should not trust, but it is not an all-or-nothing concept that is specific to prisons alone. Building community

inside, a network of people who care about you and you about them, particularly for women, greatly increases one's ability to survive a system that is meant to tear down and destroy.

At the Indiana Women's Prison, over the period of many years, I was fortunate to build such a network. I trained in African dance under Mijiza Soyini of Ngome African Dance of Indianapolis. I also studied African dance styles and techniques through intensives, workshops, and classes with Muntu Dance Theatre of Chicago. The melding of African dance and storytelling techniques with a liturgical, spiritual, and sacred focus has been the foundation of the choreography I have produced. Lifted! Liturgical Dance was founded in 2006 to fill the void when the prison's "Sky's The Limit" Youthful Liturgical Dance program was terminated in 2005. "Sky's The Limit" had been established in 1999, when I started creating choreography for young incarcerated women. After that program ended, many of the adult women who enjoyed watching the young dancers wanted to participate in a liturgical dance choir, and Lifted! was born. More than one hundred women have counted membership in Lifted! as a part of their spiritual journeys.

For eighteen years I delivered a dance ministry to the prison. We also were extremely fortunate to have the spiritual mentorship and guidance of the Sacred Dance Institute of Indianapolis, whose members started volunteering and even dancing with Lifted! in 2011. Lifted! is the longest-running continuously operating artistic program in the facility. Nothing was ever so freeing and uplifting for me as making dance together with the other women. We breathed electric air, and there is nothing quite like it. The spirit of community that we co-created is remarked on in the statement that we reviewed every year:

Attitude is everything. If you possess a poor attitude you will infect everyone else. Your thought is your life. If you think you can succeed then you will. Believe in yourself,

believe in the group, and believe in the mission. Come prepared to put forth your best effort, you will infect others, and as a result, greatness will spread. Everyone does not perform at the same level, but everyone is expected to do their individual best. Members found demeaning other members and creating divisions may lose their membership. We are "Lifted!," we lift each other up, not tear down. We are called to be a light in the world, praise God and serve others. Each one of us is of value and important to God. Let us be of value and importance to one another and be a unit where "God is Lifted!"

So imagine: I spent a large part of my adult life building this fluid network of women, making room for new women as others went home or to other facilities. We kept the program alive through the arbitrary rule changes on every issue from costumes to CDs. Lifted! survived the whims of seven different chaplains, five superintendents, four recreation directors, and countless custody staff. It even survived when I was sent to solitary confinement for a short time. When it was my turn to leave, I planned ahead to pass on its leadership and operations to another to ensure the survival of Lifted!

While I understood intellectually that I could not have any contact with the women still incarcerated, I was not prepared for the loss of my community. Women I celebrated and cried with, women who supported and believed in me to lead them in a ministry for eighteen years, I could no longer talk to. It was a corrosive acid on my spirit. I wanted to share my news, successes, and challenges. I wanted to talk to people who already knew me, women who could put all of what was happening to me into the perspective of their knowledge of me. In those early days and weeks, I felt alone. I felt like no one understood me. The violence inherent in the

separation was deeply felt by me and my friends, who sent messages through parents and other relatives.

I could have created an email account and secured a phone number that would allow me to stay in contact with my community. The price I would have to pay if I was discovered was high. Revocation of the interstate compact, the agreement between states that permitted me to move to another state; a violation of parole; and lastly reincarceration are the consequences that can follow having contact with incarcerated people. The logic surrounding these penalties is couched in the language of security. The “security” of the institution is privileged and favored over the successful reentry of the formerly incarcerated and their mental and emotional well-being.

It is in this way that I am challenged in my reentry and stymied in the ways in which I interact with others sometimes. Yet it is in those times that I remember how art was the path for me to get free inside. It is what I return to now to stay free on the outside. My multi-media artist installation “Point of Triangulation,” recently ran at the NYU Gallatin Gallery from September 26 to October 1, 2019.<sup>1</sup> I used photography, recorded interviews, film and text to challenge people to reflect upon the stigma that is produced and then weaponized when they use the fact of a criminal history to recriminalize and hinder the formerly incarcerated. This project fused my academic research with my need for artistic expression and is evidence of how I stay free.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dicks, Emily. “Multimedia Project Has You See, Hear and Watch Formerly Incarcerated People to Confront Stereotypes.” *Washington Square News*. 27 September 2019. Accessed 28 October 2019. <https://nyunews.com/news/2019/09/26/michelle-jones-incarcerated-student-phd/>

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Michelle. “Photography, Weaponized Stigma and the Formerly Incarcerated: Is Photography a Social Force for Change and New Stories?” *Medium*. 2 September 2019. Accessed 28 October 2019. [https://medium.com/@Michelle\\_Jones/photography-weaponized-stigma-and-the-formerly-incarcerated-5c89b0338985](https://medium.com/@Michelle_Jones/photography-weaponized-stigma-and-the-formerly-incarcerated-5c89b0338985)

While this project is certainly a political activist endeavor, as I said at the symposium, artists don't always have some grand ambition to make a difference. Sometimes it is simply that we want to breathe electric air and art can do that for us.

Theaster Gates, an artist from Chicago, has said, "Art is a means to a broader end," and for those of us incarcerated and formerly incarcerated, it is nothing short of a pathway to freedom.<sup>3</sup> So when you're thinking about a burden and you're thinking about all the work that it takes to go into prisons and bring programs and all the barriers that departments of corrections put up to make it less attractive to come in, so that officials will have less work to do, I want you to remember the power that is inherent in providing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people pathways to that real freedom, real spiritual freedom, real mental and emotional freedom. We, too, want to breathe electric air and be free.

**Michelle Jones** is a doctoral student in the American Studies program at New York University. Incarcerated for twenty years, Jones made the most of the academic platform provided to research the history of Indiana's women's prison and dispel notions about the reach and intellectual capacity of justice-involved women. She is board chair of Constructing Our Future, a reentry alternative for women created by incarcerated women in Indiana, and serves as Entrepreneurship Development Director for The Ladies of Hope Ministries. She is a 2017–18 Beyond the Bars Fellow, a 2017–18 Research Fellow at Harvard University, and a 2018–19 Ford Foundation Bearing Witness Fellow with Art for Justice.

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<sup>3</sup> "Theaster Gates Explores the Politics of the African-American Experience," Brilliant Ideas, episode 14, Bloomberg, November 10, 2015, video, 24:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1D4ne1jQKs>.