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# Decarceration and Social Justice Activism in South Central LA

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Mass incarceration is one of the most pressing issues facing the United States today. While having less than five percent of the world's population, the U.S. holds more than a quarter of the world's prisoners. In 2010, California alone held more people in its prisons than any other country in the world outside of Russia and communist China. In response to lawsuits, popular pressures including successful ballot initiatives, and a United States Supreme Court ruling in 2011, the state of California began to dramatically reduce its prison population. This study focuses on activists in South Central working to support and create initiatives that promote decarceration. Data and analysis draws from: 1) auto-biographical experience following long-term incarceration; 2) iterative participant-observation methods with community based organizations (CBOs) (which are part of a longer-term Community Based Participatory Research project on mass incarceration in Los Angeles as a researcher with The Million Dollar Hoods

project); 3) audio-visual recorded zoom interviews with key leaders of organizations in Black communities of Los Angeles who have been at the forefront of the push to decarcerate. It explores the ways in which their lived-experience backgrounds play key roles in driving formerly incarcerated people and former gang members into activism on behalf of their communities. The life histories of CBO leaders reveal the systemic routinization of police brutality and the persuasive logics for gang affiliation at an extremely young age that traps them into trajectories of long-term incarceration. They highlighted the life-changing, inspirational effect and cultural capital-building impact of conversion to Islam (or re-discovery of Islam) in jail or prison. The "righteous" ethics, discipline and stability introduced by Islam into their lives foments a desire to work altruistically on behalf of their communities and practically pursue the limited educational opportunities available in carceral facilities. Importantly, most funders fail to recognize the value of the "embodied cultural capital" of gang members and purposefully seek to exclude them while cherry-picking non-gang-affiliated youth to be target service beneficiaries. To be successful, however, programs must recruit active gang members and broker peace treaties with rival factions. Yet, negotiating the bureaucratic requirements to obtain funding requires the cultural capital of a university education which precludes most former and active gang members who would be the best leaders of effective programs from being able to submit fundable projects.

The thesis of Abdullah Puckett is approved.

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## Introduction and Research Questions

Mass incarceration is among the most pressing issues facing the United States today. It is an even bigger problem in the state of California than in the rest of the country. The prison population in California increased by over five hundred percent between the years 1980 and 2000. A large number of lawsuits have been filed against the California Department of Corrections (i.e. the state prison system) alleging deplorable and abusive conditions within the prisons. One of them, Brown v Plata, reached the United States Supreme Court which, in 2011, upheld a lower court's ruling that the atrociously substandard medical care for prisoners within the system constituted cruel and unusual punishment. The courts ordered the state to dramatically reduce the number of people held inside its prisons from approximately 156,000 to 110,000. As a result of this order and several ballot initiatives requiring sentencing reform and decriminalization, California began to implement a program called "realignment". This program entails releasing thousands of people from the prisons while simultaneously shifting a large share of the burden of incarceration onto the county jails. My larger doctoral project tracks the consequences of this and other recent shifts in the California justice system as they impact vulnerable communities and persons, by exploring the intimate experience of incarceration, release, and community engagement at the ethnographic and autoethnographic level.

I was a prisoner in the California correctional system when the decision in Brown v Plata was handed down. I distinctly recall many of the conversations that I and my fellow prisoners had regarding our desires to help further the cause of decarceration upon release. Why is it that people who were formerly incarcerated play such a prominent role in guiding this transition from mass incarceration to decarceration? In this ethnographic and autoethnographic account I will explore the lived experiences of being Black in California, negotiating relationships with gang members and gang membership, and being embedded in the Black American cultural history of resistance to an oppressive state system, as an

immersive practice – or *habitus* (Bourdieu 1980) – providing formerly incarcerated and incarcerated Black men with insights into the failure of the mass incarceration system to adequately solve or even address the problems it was sold to the public as being designed to deal with. I further analyze how Muslim leaders in the Black community in South Central Los Angeles, and conversion to Islam in the Black community interfaces with political activism against state violence.

Over 17,000 people are incarcerated in the Los Angeles County jail system on any given day. This makes it the largest system of local jails in the world. To deal with the pressures of realignment, the county board of supervisors had developed plans to build two new facilities to confine the expanded number of people that they anticipated would strain its already overcrowded lockups. This plan was met with broad-based opposition largely led by community-based organizations (CBO's) that had previously been engaged in a variety of activities tangential to the phenomenon of mass incarceration. According to their mission statements, these activities include opposing the expansion of the prison industrial complex, reintegrating former prisoners into their communities, promoting restorative justice, youth diversion, helping victims heal from their traumas, preventing recidivism, and helping families and communities deal with the hardships of losing their loved ones to incarceration.

A key element empowering the CBOs has been the work done by Million Dollar Hoods (MDH), a research project run by Dr. Kelly Lytle Hernandez and housed in the Bunche Center at UCLA. MDH uses a multidisciplinary perspective to examine and analyze data related to policing in Los Angeles County. The CBOs were able to use the analysis MDH produced, which showed large amounts of money being spent to incarcerate vast numbers of people for non-violent, non-serious offenses, to galvanize such a great amount of popular support that the county board of supervisors was convinced to cancel the contracts for the expansion of the jail system.

Since September of 2019, I have been working as a Graduate Student Research Assistant with Million Dollar Hoods on the public policy committee. In this role, I have interacted with the leaders and members of several CBOs. I have found that a large portion of the most active members are formerly incarcerated people, like myself, many of them former gang members, like myself, or people who have had loved ones incarcerated. The larger project of which this MA paper forms a part aims to ask: how have formerly incarcerated people in South Central LA, and particularly former gang members, been able to transition into the roles of conventional social justice advocacy? In what ways do their lived experiences translate into an expertise that is seen as authoritative in these communities? How and why are they able to convince people in the reputedly most violence wracked high crime areas of the city to support decarceration? What roles do the insights derived from the qualitative knowledge they provide play in guiding the quantitative data analyses being done by academy-based researchers such as MDH? In this paper I will focus on the results of my preliminary participant observation to date, as well as draw on a number of individual interviews conducted by Zoom during the Covid-19 lockdown period, to present and analyze key elements of the life histories and formative influences on some of my research participants based in South Central Los Angeles, against the background of the larger corpus of interviews I have completed so far. Importantly, I also draw on my own autobiographical experiences of incarceration and reintegration and my own broader life-history to probe the data I have collected so far.

## Research Design / Methodology

To answer the question of why formerly incarcerated people are successful at getting community support for social justice advocacy for decarceration despite continued violence in the communities they represent, I explore how they function within their organizations and what distinguishes them from others in similar roles. I give examples of their prominence in their organizations and in CBOs across South

Central LA through fieldnotes collected from participant observation and interviews with formerly incarcerated activist leaders.

In my capacity as a liaison between MDH and several of its community-based organization partners, I attended meetings with these organizations that range from around 10 minutes to two hours with an average of about half an hour. My role in these meetings was to provide the CBOs with information about the data analyses being conducted by MDH and get their feedback, which has often played a critical role in guiding the progression of those studies. This allowed me to become familiar and build rapport with key personnel within the leadership and membership of these organizations. Fieldnotes drawn from these experiences demonstrate how the CBO members and meeting attendees orient to formerly incarcerated activists as experts. Additionally, I was able to analyze the roles that academy-based researchers play with CBOs and how interactions between the academy and community-based organizations impact the movement.

From the Fall of 2018 thru May of 2020 (until the COVID lockdowns began), I had been spending alternate days with several CBOs including Critical Resistance, Dignity and Power Now, the Youth Justice Coalition, and Community Coalition while also attending major functions of the 22 additional CBOs partnered with MDH. The choice of these as primary loci rests on my observation of the particularly prominent roles that these CBOs play in leading the arrangement of activist projects, and conducting impactful activism throughout South Central LA. These organizations have community centers where they operate which are open to and frequented by members of the public. While there, I observed the general workday activities of the organizations and, through shadowing formerly incarcerated CBO members, I was able to witness how other members of the organization interacted with them. After gaining a more in-depth perspective of these organizations, their leaderships, and their interactions with the communities in which they operate through participant observation, I conducted

formal interviews. The sessions I have chosen to focus on here center on their backgrounds prior to becoming involved in social justice activism and their transitions into their present roles. I particularly focus on their experience of incarceration and/or gang involvement and what led to their subsequent politicization. My interviews have spanned people in at least eight categories at this point. These are:

a) Formerly incarcerated activist
b) Former gang member activist
c) Current gang member activist
d) Both a and b activist
e) Both a and c activist
f) Activist not a, b, or c
g) Community member non-activist
h) Academic researcher

Stratifying the interviews among these categories allows me to analyze what factors in activists' past and present lives contribute to their current trajectories. It gives me the opportunity to gain an understanding of what role current or past gang affiliation plays both within the community and the organizations. By interviewing academic researchers, I am also able to gauge the ways in which quantitative research has benefitted from qualitative guidance provided by the lived experiences of activists with these diverse backgrounds. The interviews I present here involve activists from Category D, and one unique activist from category F.

MDH is composed of three divisions. The archives division collects historical and recent documentation related to incarceration from government agencies. The Data division focuses primarily on statistics and mapping. The policy division, where I was employed for the majority of the time while I was conducting participant observation, acts as a central hub. This division identifies laws and government policies connected to incarceration in light of the information provided by the other two divisions and works collaboratively with community based organizations to analyze that data. We then

compile reports for publication and offer policy recommendations to government officials including state and local legislators.

One of the principal reasons for the selection of the identified organizations as opposed to others that are engaged in decarceration activism is the fact that each of them operated from a community center located in South Central LA which is within seven miles of my home. These centers are generally open to and frequented by the public. The time I have been able to spend in these centers has given me some insight into their operations and how they interact with the wider community. While there, interlocutors who did not know me typically assumed that I was a staff or community member. On one occasion when there was a gang truce being negotiated, I was directed to the room where the discussions aimed at reaching an agreement were taking place by staff who thought I was a member of one of the two rival factions. All this is to say that my presence at these locations is unobtrusive and generally indistinguishable from the community folk who frequent the centers. My unobtrusiveness facilitated gaining rapport with the people I interviewed, and my presence did not radically alter the events and meetings I attended.

## Significance

Several important contributions in the social sciences since the 1970s have established a growing field of critical carceral studies. These include Michel Foucault and Loic Wacquant. Incarceration as punishment for crime first began to be widely used in the eighteenth century. At that time, it was seen as a more humane improvement on previous practices such as the tortures and mutilations that were in common use prior to that time. However, another function of the prison was to solidify the control of the ruling class over other elements of the society (Foucault 1975). In the United States, this latter factor plays out along racial lines. Thus, the rise and vast expansion of the mass incarceration system in the U.S. is closely tied to the perceived need to repress and contain (specifically) Black and other nonwhite

populations (Alexander 2010, Wacquant 2009, Hernandez 2017). This is reflected in how, as California became more diverse in the last decades of the twentieth century, its prison population boomed - reaching its peak at around the same time that ethnic minorities began to outnumber whites.

The United States, with more than 2.2 million prisoners, leads the world in both the total number of people that it imprisons and imprisoned people as a percentage of the population. In recent years, particularly as people have been more open to discussing the impact disproportionate incarceration has on Black communities and the history of incarceration as a tool of oppression of Black communities, collectives, and organizations, there has been increasing public pressure throughout the country to reduce the size of prison populations and to reduce the use of incarceration in general as a mechanism of policing. This study assesses organizations at the forefront of the push to decarcerate, all located in Los Angeles which is both in the county with the most extensive jail system in the world and in the state with the largest prison population. Thus, LA is at the heart of what many CBOs and their members argue is a hotbed of brutal tactics of over incarceration and injustice meted out by state forces. I examine the ways in which formerly incarcerated people have been able to translate their lived experiences into an authoritative knowledge which has helped to galvanize communities to push government officials to seek alternatives to the established paradigms of carcerality. The findings from this study will be of direct and immediate use to activists and government officials in Los Angeles seeking to find solutions to the pressures of realignment policy in California. Additionally, publishing the findings from this study has the potential to help guide activists and government officials throughout the United States in developing new possibilities for moving away from incarceration. The insights gained from studying the symbiotic relationships between university-based researchers such as MDH and community-based organizations can serve as a model for academics and research institutions in every part of the nation seeking to assist and empower marginalized people impacted by excessive incarceration.

## Fieldwork

A good example of a typical experience I had while conducting participant observation was one night in November 2019. I attended a social event hosted by one of the community organizations in my research project. Almost all of the activist organizations that I study conduct this type of event on a regular basis. They recognize that simply bringing community members together to have fun is a very important part of the work that they do. While it may not be immediately obvious that the work of anti-criminalization, reintegration of former prisoners, and supporting families impacted by the mass incarceration system would entail putting together a primarily social event, it does soon become apparent, upon observation, that providing positive environments dedicated to socializing is vital to their mission. This event was a bowling night held at a local bowling alley. There was no special occasion. The main aim was to bring youth in the community together on a Saturday night when they might otherwise be engaging in social activity where they might be targeted by the mass incarceration system, such as hanging out with friends outside of a house or a shop or driving around in a car. The person who organized the bowling night event was the director of youth activities for the organization. In the terminology used by this organization, the term "youth" refers to people between the ages of about fifteen and twenty-five. As anyone familiar with the mass incarceration system knows, it is this age group that is most vulnerable to criminalization. Were it not for the type of activities hosted by these organizations, it is very likely that these youth would be targeted by the police for otherwise benign behavior. The bowling alley is located in a part of South Central that contains several options for socializing that are routinely targeted by police: a gambling den, strip club, hood spots, and several trap houses are located nearby. Given this scenario, one might wonder why a more innocuous location was not chosen for this event. Upon reflection, it becomes clear that hosting this type of activity outside of the hood would severely detract from its purpose. As it is, the bowling alley is located such that it is easy for the community members, many of whom lack private transportation, to access. Also, it is in an area that is considered

relatively neutral territory for the various gangs in the communities served by the organization. Considering the fact that many of the participants are affiliated to some degree with gangs, this is a very important factor. This is also an important factor when considering whether to hold events outside of South Central. Although it might seem like a better solution to hold social events away from the places claimed by gangs in the community, it is important to note that community members might not feel comfortable attending an event in say, Westwood, where they might suspect that the police would be called against them for meritless reasons such as racist attitudes or stereotypes against their style of clothing. I attended this event wondering how many of the target population would show up to the bowling alley and suspecting low attendance. Most of the events that I had attended prior to this with these organizations had been held during daylight hours or weeknights. This was a Saturday night, when other options abound that might be more appealing. The primary research question I had in mind going into the event was how the different types of participants would interact and how they would interact with the other people in the bowling alley who were not a part of the CBO. To my surprise, there was a great number of attendees to the event. It was scheduled from 7:00 to midnight. When I arrived at the bowling alley around 7:15, the parking lot was already three-quarters full. People continued to arrive the entire time that I was there. I had discussed my project with the organizer, who enthusiastically approved of my request to conduct participant observation and greeted me on my arrival. Though I was older than most of the attendees, I still seemed to fit in. This is probably partially because I had seen many, though not most, of them at other events and was recognized by them. There were also several thirty-something parents of younger kids (aged approximately 10-14) present who seemed to think I might be one of them. My question about how the different elements of the attendees and the outsiders present would interact was answered differently in two phases of the evening. For instance, while I observed and took notes, I noticed that there was very little interaction between our group and the outsiders. Because the attendees did not know immediately who was or was not with the organization event, they might briefly address an

outsider, but quickly after realizing they were not part of the group, the interaction would often, though not always, stop quite abruptly. I was a bit perplexed by this behavior. Once I stopped taking notes and began participating, one of the things I noticed is that when interacting with group members for the first time, introductions tended to include some mention of how one came to know about the organization, its members, or the event. This, of course, could make interactions with outsiders rather awkward.

There is another dimension to this. Gang affiliation is common in the community served by this organization. Many of the attendees of the event are affiliated, to some degree, with rival gangs in the area. Therefore, when interacting for the first time with someone whom a person does not recognize, talking about their connections to the organization appears to help potential rivals build a sort of common identity that allows them to transcend, temporarily at least, their gang rivalries. Not having this common ground would make interaction far more risky in this environment.

It is precisely this type of knowledge that former gang members bring to bear in their organizing. I have often observed organizers from outside of the "hood" discuss ways to exclude or eliminate youths with gang affiliations from their events and activities. This, of course, creates tensions between their organizations and the communities they purport to serve, making their efforts less effective. Bourdieu famously called this dynamic embodied cultural capital, "in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (1986, 17). I argue here that there are two layers of embodied cultural capital relative to the work of the CBOs: the first form, embodied by the smaller CBOs, is authenticity in the community and insider community knowledge that comes directly from personal experience with the carceral system and gang life. The second form is the type of cultural capital the Bourdieu originally argued for, accumulated from participation in the standard education system and wider American society outside of the "hood". This reality came up often in my conversations and interviews. It was often remarked that these outsider organizations, while successful at getting funding, only work with youths who were never

going to have much trouble staying out of jail in the first place. In stark contrast, the organizer of this event, like many other formerly incarcerated former gang members turned activists, was able to bring his understanding of gang dynamics to bear in order to bring together youth who might otherwise be engaged in violence against each other. In an interview I conducted with a leader of a different organization, a gang intervention specialist and activist doing work in South Central since the mid 90s, he speaks openly about the importance of bringing gang members into organizations in paid positions to intervene and aid in efforts to stop gang violence:

> MK: When I first got out you know I went to the Muslims and they really wasn't. It wasn't that same unity like in jail. You know it wasn't that same to the point that the people that was in the youth authority had to build really what really to this day are the Imams that's out there in the streets now. You know some of these brothers. Some of these brothers what took they shahada with me in YTS. And now they speak fluent Arabic you know and really- really pressin. You know what I'm sayin. And you know and some scholars. You know- you know it's a blessing that the brothers was able to come from where we came from to become righteous Muslims righteous citizens. You know but it's still a struggle and then and what we do to call it now we call it understandings. You know like we got an understandin with the Coastes (East Coast Crip gang), right, but you might got some homies that go - still might - somebody might get out of jail write F East Coast on a wall. Or East Coast might write F Swans on a wall. But we ain't gonna turn that into no war. What we gon do is go get that off of the wall and tell the people who did it don't write that on there no more. We ain't- we ain't on that page. And you know once you had the understanding with the Coastses you know based on the reputation of the Swans once you had that - crime- gang related crime it dropped 48 percent in south central LA as a result of the Swans East Coast understandin. At the same time we had just got our contract. So- so what I did was
>
> Abdullah: This was the Unity Two?
>
> MK: Yeah Unity Two had got a contract with the city- with the city on the LA Bridges program. So from that point you know each year our contract was going up because of the work that we was doin so we was receiving more money. And we got all the way up to like probably almost a million. 900,000 a year. Right. And with that once we in that last two years, once Omar got killed you know, we had to you know Marie came to us and said man what y'all thinkin about peace treatyin with the Coastses. I say well I- that's a lot of work. You know I gotta go really get some people and really talk to the people but once we really talked to the people got a- got a understandin with all the homies in the penitentiary and on the streets and everything uh I hired three Swans and I hired three East Coasts right. And all my staff took pay cuts in order to hire six people cause you know we didn't have no extra money. So all the staff we had a big meetin and said look man this is bigger than the money- we never was in it for the money from the get go. Even when we first started we was all on the same level cause I didn't want nothin more than what my homies was makin. You know cause we wasn't in it for that. You know what I'm sayin.

These points are driven home even further in an interview I had with a leader of another organization. ST is the leader of an organization that does a variety of things in South Central LA. These include children's programs, reentry work, mentorship, and advocacy. Its main activities center around diversion. That is, the organization aims at preventing youth from being targeted and criminalized by the mass incarceration system by redirecting them into activities and venues where they will be less likely to come in contact with the system. ST is one of the cofounders of the organization.

Prior to the interview, I attended a town hall meeting with some members of the organization. In January of 2019, this town hall was put on by state assemblyman Jones-Sawyer who had been instrumental in getting a bill passed that provides for thirty-seven million dollars in grants for nonprofits doing the type of work that this organization does. Specifically, the Youth Reinvestment Grant is designated for, "...diversion services approaches that are evidence-based, culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate...Target underserved communities with high rates of juvenile arrests and high rates of racial/ethnic disproportionality." During the town hall and the subsequent interview, several relevant issues came up including two major themes that continually resurface throughout my conversations and interviews. These are the ever-present reality of carcerality in the Black community and the consciousness that those with the requisite cultural capital to be effective at reaching the most at risk populations are being left out when it comes to the funding.

> A - The project that I'm working on is looking at organizations doing anti-criminalization work as well as reentry work and like work helping the youth diversion from the mass incarceration system, so right now I just want to ask you to tell me about something about what helped motivate you into this work. Could you talk about the first time you had your run in with the mass incarceration system?-- or whatever led you to realize you could start getting involved with this work.
>
> ST – ok Alhamdullilah. The first run in with the incarceration system, the mass incarceration system-- and the force of it --was when I was approximately 15 years old. I was sent to juvenile hall right down the street on central - the juvenile justice center on central and maybe 76th - sent to a judge named judge Jones. The people came to court and just blatantly lied. The fingerprints on the weapon that they said was (used) had their fingerprints on it, not mine. And yet still-- just because of whatever reason-- I was convicted and subsequently sent to juvenile camp for a nine

month sentence, when all of the evidence pointed towards it wasn't me. In fact, the people that came to court-- not only was their fingerprints on the weapons, they admitted to attacking me. And when I let [the judge] know I was walking down the street and I was attacked, that didn't matter because they assumed I had some type of affiliation because the gentleman with me was a Black man whose family happened to be affiliated, though he had no affiliation. And so it was no telling the truth. It didn't work.

A – Wow

ST – So from there it was like, the system is corrupt. And you got to understand, to a young man in his mind it's like, " Why am I gonna be fighting to stay in this system now when this system just failed me even though I wasn't wrong?" Right?

A – Right

ST – I was going to school. I was doing what I needed to do. Yes I had issues, but you convict me of a crime that the evidence (showed I didn't do it) and so that changed my perception of not only the judicial system but of the police in general.

A – Right, right. Wow. Yeah, ok so, what would you say would be the main thing that led you to becoming involved in the work you're doing now.

ST – So the main thing, for sure the main thing was after going through the pipeline. So, from camp you know you go (from) camp (to) county (to) prison. Going through that system and following it, the main motivator was my momma. I just wanted to show her that I could do something better. That led me away from, you know, trying to pursue certain actions and things like that. Then faith of course. I found Islam and that helped me to change my actions and to look towards something better. But the sticking point for doing the work after the transformation was that, once I got educated, I realized the system wasn't designed to rehabilitate us. It wasn't. Though (they're) getting money and it says rehabilitation on it and there are possible opportunities for a slim few number of people, the overall system in itself was designed to keep you coming through the pipeline. So, I decided it's time to open up some type of organization that's actually not only are we gonna try to put in the work, which it's been really hard because they're not tryna to help nobody putting in no work, but also we been predominantly - everyone on my board - has either been affected by the pipeline or have been directly in the pipeline. (Such that) we can change it because we've been through it. We know the tricks. We know the things that hinder you. We know the games they're gonna play. We know. The only thing we're learning now is the bureaucratic nonsense because that's the red tape out here. You know you're putting in work on the ground but if you don't have a budget, they stop your work.

A – Right

ST - And so that's what they do to smaller groups

A – Right

ST - that have legitimate services - wrap around services that can culturally target our people. See, you can't go with your culture into another culture and change them and transform them into better citizens or civilians until you actually lived in their culture, learned their culture, been exposed to their culture and they accept you into their culture. So each individual cultural group need someone who's been reformed and changed to come to them and say, "Listen you can relate

to me. I'm tryna tell you you can change. Look, I did it." They ain't tryna hear ya PhD, right? They wanna hear what have you done in these streets to make a difference.

A – Right

ST – You used to be big so and so, but now you're Mr. and professor and I've changed my life and this is the actions we can take. We need to change the cultural ideas that you're a sell out if you change. We need to change the cultural ideas that if you turn against this rule right here that was set up by a bunch of criminals that you're gonna be ostracized for the rest of your life. Nobody even cares. They're gonna all be in prison and dead anyway. What we can do is change the pace right now and you know that kinda went off topic but...

A – No that's what we talking about because it's all related from what you was explaining from the beginning when we're initially inducted into the pipeline, into the mass incarceration system, largely that was a result of how things was structured and now we tryna restructure the whole situation so that others don't have to be...

ST – Exactly - attacked!

A – Exactly

ST – Exactly. Attacked and it's disproportionately Black and brown

A – Right

ST – It's disproportionately Black and brown. You'll see it even in Caucasian neighborhoods that are disproportionately poor. You not seeing millionaires (or people) with 6-7 figures (income) households with their children in the pipeline. You'll see low income, the people who are on welfare, the people who are in trailer houses, section 8 and these different things. They're also being pushed through the pipeline - not even being Black and brown - because what? They ain't no different. They ain't no different because you need a lower class in a system that's designed to keep people in a certain area, right? So it's even somewhat surpassed just color. It's become a targeting of a certain class and it just adds on even more that people of color are even more attacked.

A – Yup

ST – Right. So that's that minority that's Black and brown, right. We got lack of education, our schools are suffering right because they not paying our teachers correctly. You have people being abused and harassed and shot and killed by police which is putting fear into them of going into fields that deal with politics and fields of office and all of these different areas where we could make a change. That fear keeps you away from the system you could actually change. But yeah.

A – Alright so when you first decided to start becoming involved with helping the youth what would you say was the biggest hurdle that you discovered? What is something that you maybe expected or something that you didn't expect to be a help or a hindrance?

ST – so the biggest hurdle was the parents. I noticed that the parents have the mentality that keeps the children down. So it's like, if you teach generational what we like to term crab in the bucket syndrome, you will then in turn teach it to their children who will teach it to their children who will teach it to their children. So we gear programs toward uplifting and building and doing all of these things but in the midst of doing it, the parents pull the children back down with their

mentalities you know. So that was the actual biggest hurdle with regards to the mental state and the progress of the programs and the second thing was that none of the larger organizations would give us the time of day. No matter, we been close to 4 years now, 3 years 3-4 years and none of the organizations that have the funding - though we met the requirements of running the programs, having the paperwork, putting everything in place - they wouldn't give us the time of day. And the reason being is that we're actually targeting uplifting these youth.

We believe that because in the programs (that are) getting funded - it's after school activities where they play foosball, shoot basketball, - they're funding them unlimited. But when you have programs that are aimed at uplifting these children to raise their mentalities from thinking they have to stay on the bottom, they're not tryna give you nothing. And that's the tape that's the real tape.

A – Yeah alright. So like today we went to this meeting with the assembly member who helped get this fund passed so that there's gonna be this money coming now. The pipeline coming now in order to help people is supposed to be for the community-based organizations. What is your perspective on that whole thing? What was your take - first on the whole town hall meeting - is that what you expected it to be and what do you think might come out of that?

ST – I think that the - I didn't know what to expect honestly. But I think what I took from it was that the council member himself said that his team didn't read the fine print so that they didn't even know that local grassroots organizations would still have to go through the local state and city and county entities that are known for stealing money or like he quoted, "... putting on such red tape where I will move on forget about it then it mysteriously gets spent." That was, you know this, but you didn't read the fine print? So to me that's just saying that either we have to take baby steps to getting the money out of they hands and not trying to really say, "Look, they wouldn't let us do it." Cause at the end of the day, with the end of the meeting, he said this is a stepping stone to next time tryna get it better. Segueing into the next question is that we can only wait and see because it looks like the top wigs that was there are gonna be the ones mostly getting the money based on what they said. These are the same players that been there. So they're gonna leave a small percentage possible for little grassroots organizations. Like he said, "I'm willing to give out a $10,000 grant. $10,000 will run programs for one month maybe if, you know, if you're touching a certain amount of people. If you have a hundred children in your organization, just to fund food for snacks, the rent and the utilities is $10,000 a month, easy. You know, basic necessities, writing materials and utensils. So what that would be is that would be a blessing but it also would not be life changing.

A – Right. So were the people in there the type of people you expected to see?

ST – I seen, at least in the circles that I frequent in the nonprofit world, they were all there. So that was a good sign in the sense that those people came to try to do something because they're actually putting in work. Now some of them, like the whole front crowd right there - the whole first 2-3 rows - was all the big wigs, right. That's why they was in the front. They was probably there for hours already right in the front waiting to get that money. You had the people from Community _ not Community Partners what's the other one Community _ , I forget, but all the people who already had billion dollar contracts was there too. So you looking at, you got a person with a billion dollar budget, unlimited amount of money for lawyers grant writers coming against small grassroots entities that are scraping up to pay $1,500 to someone to write a grant. It's like

you need to set aside a certain portion of money that they can't get and so that percentage was like super low.

A – Yeah right

ST – It was really low

A – And they actually did something like that it seems like for the Indians right?

ST – Right 10%

A – The federally recognized tribes actually had a certain amount that was set aside specifically for them. And yeah, like there was a guy who asked a question about that right? Because he pointed out something that you pointed out - (i.e.)the grassroots organizations that really actually work with the at-risk youth that really are in the hood doing the work really working with people and know how to work with people and know how to motivate these youths, they're not the people who are the so called experts. They're not the ones with the grant writing experience or the lawyer or any of that type of thing but they're the ones who are actually doing the real work that really, really

ST – Matters

A – That really matters, right. Like we know there was the after school programs that was there - the same type of things that was there when we was young - but those afterschool programs they really don't work with the people who are at risk. They working with kids who are gonna be fine anyway. So, I guess the question would be, "We know that these big orgs are not really doing the work in the hood. they're not really doing the work with the people who are at risk - the youth who really need it. They're not really doing the kind of work that these grassroots organizations are doing, but they have the connections - they have the funds. How do we get past this hurdle? How are we gonna work this into something that can be beneficial? What are we gonna have to do in order to get the resources to the people who are actually doing the real work?"

ST – I think the key for that is that if you can't go around them, go through them. And that don't mean go through their resources. That means run them over. So we need to educate the people we're touching. We need to educate them to be in fields, like yourself, to be like the brother who's running for office tomorrow who's on the ground to be who we need. (We need) to have them in these fields where they're educated theirselves but they come from these roots. They know how to correct these roots and then keep the people around them that don't let them forget where they came from. Cause the reality is, unless we go and make millions of dollars on our own and then flood it into our community like certain organizations did back in the day who were then labeled as fanatical terrorist groups (like the BPP) we're never gonna get anywhere because they're gonna continue to pull us down cause that's what a pipeline is.

A – Right

ST – It's like we're all in the bucket and there's a hole in it and the bucket is slippery so all we doing is climbing on top of each other and another person falls and they still dropping people in. We never getting to the top until we educate our own people to be in office to be in positions of authority, to be officers, to not be scared to stand up against the systems that are corrupt, to get the education needed to write grants, to put yourself at the table with the people, to conglomerate, to

have everyone who's a part of something small come together as one unit and be a voice. (Such that) you got 100 organizations in Los Angeles city, not the county, in the city...

A – Right

ST – touching this part, that part that part, and that part. And when we come together we speak for L.A. but separately we speak for 20 blocks this way, 14 blocks that way, 6th district, 8th district, 9th district … If we come on a state level together as one group, they gotta listen to us you know.

A – Got you.

**Some of my story**

When I am called to remark on how carcerality has affected my life, I often start by reflecting on the fact that my mother was born in 1954 in Arkansas, mere months before the US Supreme Court handed down the historic Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka ruling. It would be another three years before the Little Rock Nine would integrate the first desegregated highschool in the state of Arkansas. I say this to highlight the fact that Black people in America lived under a system of criminalization that severely constrained all aspects of their lives, where segregation laws made much of what now is considered normal activity illegal for Black people. During the struggle against Jim Crow oppression, one of the key elements of the strategies used by the activists was to intentionally get arrested. That is, they would openly defy racist laws, customs, and institutions knowing that they would be arrested. They did this understanding that the jails would not be able to hold all of them. Thus by flooding the jails, they would overwhelm the capacity of the oppressors to constrain them through imprisonment. As Michelle Alexander explains in *The New Jim Crow*, the vast expansion of the mass incarceration system is a direct outgrowth of this phenomenon. Black political activism and resistance to state violence has a long history in the Americas. Zoe Samudzi and William C Anderson note in *As Black as Resistance* (2018):

> Black resistance across the Americas has laid the foundations for many of the progressive developments in the nations of the Western Hemisphere, from the establishment of the Haitian Republic to the black movements that would embrace self-defense in the ways that we can appreciate today. Much of the legislation we value, like the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, arose from the state's concessions to the civil rights movement and other Black resistance efforts at the time. What many would call "freedoms" in a society that is not free are actually cherished but weakening policies relied upon by oppressed people throughout the nation.

> Policies and laws, which are not permanently secured, helped bring about some progress in areas like education, labor, entertainment, and in many aspects of daily life. The desegregation of public spaces and facilities is one such example. These reforms were admissions of guilt for systemic inequality based on race, gender, ethnicity, and other identities. It is important to realize that without Black resistance such progressive developments would never have occurred.

Many of my elders had been part of that liberation struggle, understood the resultant dynamic, and passed on the understanding to us, the youth, that the law enforcement/mass incarceration system was a repression apparatus targeted at Black people. I cannot remember a time in my life when I was not thoroughly aware of this reality. I cannot remember a time when I and my cousins and friends and neighborhood kids, no matter how young we were, were not discoursant with this reality. In many respects, the ever-present reality of the carceral state and its anti-Black orientation is similar to how Fanon (1961) describes the situation of the colonized:

> The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers; the two zones are opposed, but not in the service of higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotalian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous. The settlers' town is a strongly built town all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settler's town is a town of white people, of foreigners. The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire…This world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species.

There is an American game called cops and robbers. I have brought this game up in various forums. The game is so well known that I'm never asked to explain what it is. When we played cops and robbers in our Black neighborhoods, we had to have imaginary cops. No one wanted to play that role. When I tell this story in many forums, I usually see signs of surprise, even shock from the audience. When I tell it in Black forums, I receive only responses of acknowledgement.

I was born in Saint Louis, Missouri. My family moved to California when I was three. I say my family intentionally because it was a wider affair than just our nuclear unit. This was the 1970s and the effects of globalization, specifically the offshoring of manufacturing, was beginning to have the devastating effects on the Midwest that today has us calling that region the Rust Belt. While my grandparents had moved to St. Louis fleeing Jim Crow and seeking opportunity in factory jobs, my aunts and uncles were hoping to find similar employment in California as the Midwestern industries began to vacate. Thus, we initially joined some of my uncles who had come to California in the 60's. We lived in San Francisco in the lower Third Street neighborhood which, due to gentrification, now no longer exists. Then we moved to other cities.

I have this blur of memories from when I was young of living with various relatives. These are almost all happy memories. I always felt loved, cocooned in a network of supportive relationships, safe. This is in spite of the fact that I starkly remember that much of this time we were hungry, had threadbare, hole-filled clothing, and slept on shared couches or on the floor. After they broke up, my father moved back to St. Louis and my mother would often try to find work in different cities. As a result, I would be left with whichever family member could take me in for a while. Similar was the case with others among my cousins. It would be a long time before I came to realize that this situation was not considered normal or common among any community outside of African Americans. There are a lot of memories that I have from those times of seeing family and community members having negative interactions with the legal system. Here it should be mentioned that several of my family members were affiliated with the Black Panther Party whose targeting by the legal system is well documented. In fact, the main archetype for Black resistance and activism in South Central LA is famous Black Panther leader Bunchy Carter, a former gang member who converted to Islam in prison like many of the community leaders I interact with and who they often referred to directly or indirectly.

## The Archetype: Bunchy Carter

Alprentice (Bunchy) Carter, in many ways, exemplifies various elements that are found among social justice leaders in South LA. He was a former gang leader. In prison, he converted to Islam. Upon release, he established the southern California chapter of the Black Panther Party. When admitted to UCLA, he worked extensively to connect on-campus activism with South LA communities. Bunchy Carter was raised in Florence-Firestone where he was leader of a street gang known as the Renegades. He was sent to prison for armed robbery, and while incarcerated he converted to Islam. In prison, he met members of the Northern California Black Panther Party, and became politicized. Upon release, Carter founded the southern California chapter of the BPP and established a range of community programs. Significantly, he brought many gangs, including the nascent Crips, under BPP leadership. In 1968, Carter was admitted to UCLA as part of the first cohort of the High Potential Program (HPP) which was designed to recruit Black and other minority students to train them as leaders and organizers who could return to their communities with the knowledge they gained. Already an organizer, Bunchy became a student leader on campus and was involved in establishing the first curriculum for the Black Studies program. Like many of his BPP compatriots, Carter was targeted by the FBI's COINTELPRO. Importantly, the FBI worked to manufacture feuds and dissent among various Black activist groups to stoke and cause violence between them and disrupt their leadership and thus their political action. As a result of FBI interference in Black activist groups, Bunchy Carter was assassinated along with fellow Panther and UCLA student leader John Huggins outside of Campbell Hall on January 17, 1969. Bunchy remains a legendary figure in the SoCal Black community to this day especially among community organizers, activists, Muslims, and gang members. There is a current student led movement to have Campbell Hall renamed for Bunchy Carter.

Bunchy Carter's story is especially important to understanding Black activism and social justice movements in South Central today because of the parallels between his background and transformation with those of so many activists today and the phenomena of COINTELPRO and the continuous over policing, mass incarceration, and state violence against Black communities. All the people I interviewed mention distrust of the police, specifically the LAPD, and how LAPD policing tactics inflamed rather than calmed gang violence in their communities. One such exemplary instance comes from my conversation with JM. JM is a former gang member and formerly incarcerated community leader and activist. He grew up in South Central LA and identifies a connection to local gangs and induction into gang membership at the age of 10. He narrates how his experiences as a child shaped his relationship with his community, his family, and with the LAPD.

> JM: Every house, it was gang activity there. We only had a few men in the community, you know. And I don't want to call out the other brothers and say they weren't men but they just had different circumstances. Put it like that, so yeah.
>
> Abdullah: Right, right. So, what kind of effect did that have on you?
>
> JM: I think it had a really big effect on me because at the age of 10 years old, you know, I experienced my first time getting shot at. And I think that kinda created my lifestyle, to be honest with you. I think that created, you know, my thought process in the way that I felt about the opposing gang. I think it created a hatred toward them, a dislike, I wanna say. We also had to experience, you know, the police coming in almost every night talking about they were looking for somebody and police dogs and all this other stuff. Having them, you know, have flashlights and guns and stuff pointed at us. And this was as a- as a- as a child. And that also created a mindset and a personal dislike towards LAPD. I remember seeing the first brother getting killed by LAPD. He had a wallet in his hand and they said they thought it was a gun. I remember it like it happened yesterday. I remember the LAPD having a couple of dogs attack one of the brothers in our backyard. And you know, my mom made us lay on the floor and turn all the lights out because they didn't know we were looking and if they'd a found out we were lookin, there's no telling what would've happened to us. You know, we was looking out the window. So, stuff like that, I think it shaped my mindset. We saw LAPD writing on the wall. And I know this is not about LAPD but this is about what I saw. You know, this is about my experience. You know, seeing what we want to call a hero, you know, one of the brothers that was giving us money, you know, he was selling his crack and stuff like that but buying us stuff from the ice cream truck, you know. The Bloods killed him, you know what I mean. So it created my mindset.

JM describes policing tactics so violent that as a child he was able to recognize that his community member and neighbor who was a gang member who sold crack was more reliable and safer than the

police officers in the neighborhood. These experiences join a community together in knowledge and cultural understanding. As in the community-based organization that organized the event at the bowling alley, one of the things that made that event so well attended is that the organizers knew how to make community members feel safe because they are a part of the community and understand the dynamics and knowledges that the attendees will be drawing upon to analyze whether a situation is safe or not. In communities that are targeted for overpolicing and suffer most from mass incarceration, people learn from childhood how to negotiate violent police intrusion into their homes and lives. JM speaks openly about policing tactics that were transparently abusive and betrays a longstanding belief shared by many others in the community that I spoke to that the police were untruthful about the real reason for their raids. These events felt more like tactics of control and surveillance than protection from crime or violence:

> Abdullah: Dig that, dig that. Yeah, that's a lot but I can definitely relate. One thing I wanna go back to though, right. Just to talk a little bit about, you were talking about how you saw the police murder somebody for the first time, how old was you then? And like when you was sayin you saw them torturing people and moms knew to cut down the lights and have y'all lay down so they wouldn't come after y'all too, right.
>
> JM: I was in the 5th grade.
>
> Abdullah: You was in the fifth grade?!
>
> JM: I was in the fifth grade. I remember we moved into the community in 1978 and from that time, the time that I can remember, we been having the police come in and out of our houses. Pretending they searching for somebody. And this was as a child, I mean, and I remember in my household we had the white carpet, stuff like that, we didn't go in the house with our shoes on. And sometimes it would be raining and their muddy boots, the dogs, you know, the shepherds, they would come in the house with. We had pit bulls in the yard, we had to hurry up and run outside and make sure we tied the dogs up so they didn't kill the dogs, you know. So it was just all kinda stuff that, from a young child, you know, that I had to experience that we had- no I'm gonna say we, yeah we as a community had to experience.
>
> Abdullah: Right. A lot of times when I'm at UCLA when I'm in these spaces. I tell folks, that when we played cops and robbers on the block, didn't nobody wanna play the cops. They, like, shocked when they hear that right. But I know you can relate though right?
>
> JM: Well the robbers were the good guys.
>
> Abdullah: Yeah, the robbers was the good guys. In our eyes? Yeah. Real talk.
>
> JM: Because the cops were the robbers. The cops were the robbers. The cops were robbing us from our, they were taking away and breaking up our family home, our household. They were

> taking the men away; whether they lock them up or kill them. The cops were, were for one, if we wanna go for that other, that other, the real issue of how the drugs got into the community, we all understand Ronald Regan's part in that. So the government puttin the drugs in the community, (while) making sure that black men couldn't have jobs. My stepfather was a truck driver and he used to take a lot of the brothers in the community with him. Look brother, I saw, I saw men, men with families, hang at the liquor stores waiting to get a job by the local truck drivers or whoever the case may be. Now the Latinos do it today at Home Depot. But they used to stand at the liquor stores and wait on somebody to come give them a job. My pops used to give people jobs, help him unload the truck, the diesel right. But I also saw them go home sometimes and they not havin any money, they didn't work for the day. And of course their females, "Did you make any money today? No. Aw you ain't shit, get outta here", or whatever, whatever, whatever. But one part that I'm not talking about is before they got home, sometimes if they didn't get employment, they stood there and got something to drink. And by the time they got home those spirits was in 'em and they would beat up their wives for feeling less than a man, and her making him feel less than a man. You get me? So we saw the cops come and get guys like them. We saw the cops come and arrest the guys for standing out there waiting for employment, drinking and would get locked up for drinkin in public. They may have been intoxicated or whatever, so they have to go to jail and detox for the night but we saw that, it gave them a record.

I share this section in its entirely to highlight how over policing, gangs, drugs, domestic violence, and incarceration link the hood to the prison. Outsiders frequently analyze this link as a "prison pipeline," ironically reinforcing a hard line between "out" and "in" that doesn't exist for community members. Living in hyper patrolled areas where your every movement is criminalized and has the potential to end in violence – even in your own home – coupled with high incarceration rates that pull family, friends, neighbors into the system makes prison an extension of the community or auxiliary outpost that exists in a constant feedback loop. A conversation with MK that lasted over an hour and a half brings this point home. MK is a former gang member and formerly incarcerated Muslim convert and community leader. He built his own post incarceration rehabilitation program and gang member reform program and has been consulted by the LAPD to negotiate with gang leaders to reduce violence and broker truces between rival factions. MK recounts his efforts at converting and rehabilitating an incarcerated gang member through letters post incarceration to this man in prison. I asked him about his first efforts at activism and his primary goals for helping the community once he decided to begin doing activism:

> MK: That was our first- our first mission was to bring some consciousness to the community. You know and we did that. It took time over the years you know and we're still workin on it to this day. And it, you know, it's nothin happens overnight. Imma give you another example: I had a

> homie in the prison you know he ended up gettin killed by prison guards later in- later on, but I'm hittin him about Islam right and he- he writin me back "all I know is Bloodism. I see demons at night. This is Blood. All I know is Blood. I don't know nothin else." And this is the mentality as a 57 year old man that he's livin with for the rest of his life. You know next and then even to this day I just go into some just reflectin back on gangs as a culture. And you got, you know, your red bandana is the symbol of the Bloods (and for) the Crips the blue bandana and when one of the brothers we recently buried - but this is common - he got the red bandana over the coffin he got a red casket, red everything. Bloods all the way till they put the dirt on him.

MK was 51 years old when I interviewed him and had been in the Los Angeles area his whole life. He began interacting with his local gang when he was in elementary school, hanging out with gang members he knew from school and from his older cousins. MK describes how he saw prison and jail time as a child:

> MK: My first run in with uh law enforcement I would say I was probably around 11 years old and I was carryin some bullets while my other partners was carryin guns and I had the bullets. So I was placed on probation for that, for carryin some bullets while the other guys had the guns. So that was my first encounter basically with law enforcement.
>
> Abdullah: Wow.
>
> ((overlapping))
>
> Abdullah: Go ahead on
>
> MK: I was gon say even back then I, you know as I look back bein a part of the gang and being a, you know, that was a part of uh what I was sayin. Publicity quote unquote, you know, bein pulled over by the police. Everybody lookin, " Oh them the bad guys." So that was a part of groomin toward the gangs and bein accepted because people would fear gangs and at the same time they respected the gangs. So then you looked up to as like a big man, quote unquote. "Oh they got- they got such and such," you know and that was a part of your initiation - bein you know actually once you are a part of the gang - incarceration. Doing that time while I was growin up wasn't no deterrent. Because that was one of your ways of proving your manhood. Provin that you could stay down under pressure proving that you wasn't gonna go to jail and get punked and get beat up and you was gon stay down. So jail at that time in my life wasn't a deterrent. You know you was almost lookin forward to goin to jail because that was a part of your initiation.

Similarly to Bunchy Carter, MK converted to Islam while serving time in the system and began an AA degree while at the California Youth Authority, a system of corrections facilities housing young people up to the age of 25. He recognizes receiving education as one of the kickstarters for his activism, and how

learning about nation building in college, while he was incarcerated, led him to the realization that street gangs are a type of nation building activity with territory, symbols, belief systems, and community.

Then there is the case of TD, an activist who describes a connection to carcerality not through his own incarceration or gang membership but via his entire family being incarcerated at some point. He points to the incarceration of his family and the poverty he experienced as defining factors to his politicization:

> TC: For sho, for sho. Alright. So the question is like, how I got involved in organizing work? That's kinda like the question?
>
> Abdullah: All of that, all of that. But also like just your background. Who you are. What made you who you are.
>
> TC: Bet, Bet. So yeah man. Gender pronouns he/him/his. Jesus. I guess I got, you know, for me, organizing is, I mean it is political of course but it could be personal, right. So I'm the only member of my immediate family to not be incarcerated. So my mother and my sister and my father at one point have been incarcerated for various reasons. And I think witnessing that as well as the life of poverty that my family experienced, really politicized me at a very young age. Right. So I went to 15 different schools before I got my high school diploma. You Know. So moving left and right all over the place. We were never really stable and you can see it in my transcripts right where the times where I had stability at a time when my grades were the highest, right. You know, and the times where we didn't is the times when my grades was pretty low. So that definitely played a role in me growing up. I was born in San Bernardino, California. Then moved around. Lived in Inglewood for a bit. Moved back to the IE. Then lived in Tennessee; came back to the IE, then back to Inglewood. Then that's where I finished high school at. So that's when I lived in the Bottoms of Inglewood. So yeah man, graduated from Morningside High, class of 2009. I think all of this got started when I had an English teacher named Mr. Robbins who really politicized me at a young age. Helped me to understand that what I was experiencing, what I was seein in our community wasn't by mistake but it was by design. And that really changed my life trajectory so much. So he had us reading Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed in high school and that- that just- it changed my life. It totally changed my life. So, because of that I ended up where I'm at now. I did my BA at Cal State Dominguez Hills. While I was at Dominguez Hills I majored in Africana Studies, minored in sociology. Got involved in a lot of organizing work there, student organizing. Some stuff around the Occupy Movement, stuff around tuition hikes, um you know then got involved in the work around Trayvon Martin. On top of all of that, right was also, like got involved in community work. In my senior year at Dominguez Hills that's when I started volunteering, not volunteering, but when I started working at the [Social Justice Learning (SJLI)] Institute part time. Then I got my Master's at the University of Pennsylvania. While I was at Dominguez Hills, I was a McNair Scholar but that's another story. But I got my Master's at the University of Pennsylvania in Higher Education Systems. You know, social justice related community engagement related work when I was there. Started my coursework at Berkeley. While I was at Berkeley, you know that's when the movement for Black lives took off. The day of my wife and I's engagement slash going away party when we went up there, was the same day Michael Brown was killed.

Abdullah: Wow

TC: So, you know, like that was- I think the movement for Black lives kind of encapsulated my entire graduate experience. So I got involved in that and that's what actually kept me in graduate school, was organizing. After I finished my coursework, I moved back down to LA and here we are, you know. So I went back to SJLI, was a programs manager over there working full time. And then in 2018 I took over as the manager of the Brothers Sons Selves Coalition. So I guess that's the truncated version. You know, of everything, cause it's definitely a lot of details. Yeah man, you know, so, I think again, the organizing against criminalization, against school pushout, against state sanctioned violence in our community, it's personal. That's why I do the work that I do.

TC's organizing work and politicization is founded on the understanding that over-policing in majority Black, low-income neighborhoods is a part of a larger paradigm of racist state violence as depicted by the Black Lives Matter movement. In the same vein, MK remarks on how policing, law, and city policy come together to maintain a violent paradigm of neglect in the South Central communities his organization serves:

But everybody in your house goin to college and everybody in yo system still workin but the system in the hood is still there. And another thing to add - one person being killed in south central adds up to a million dollars. Pick me up off the street, send me to the coroner, the police involved, and everybody remove me - removin me from that scene that's one million. So a death equals money. You know what I'm saying. So these deaths equal money. So it ain't just gon stop just cause you out here doin your work if you don't understand the backdrop of how they done figured out this money thing. You know and then what I'm seeing too is some of these things. I pulled up on this scene about probably four or five years ago my little cast of dudes that I knew. I knew they mothers. They mothers bout my age. Mothers and parents about my age. (I)Pull around, heard shootin, went around the corner, I see two young Black dudes layin on top of each other like this. One on the bottom the other one on top. One facin that way the other one facin this way. One on the bottom - he aint breathin. But the little dude that I know he- he kinda breathin still right. Now, mind you, I done came from around the corner, jumped out my car, looked at em, seen em, like "Oh man, lemme get his mom." Drive back down to his house like three blocks down the street, get his grandmama, bring her to the scene. Guess what? They aint even picked him up off the ground yet.

Abdullah: What?

MK: With the ambulance sittin right there. Then when the grandmama get there they put him in the ambulance but the ambulance don't move, right. And the ambulance don't move.

Abdullah: and the one cat's still alive

MK: They're tryin to find a hospital. The one cat's still alive. But he eventually passed away when they get to the hospital. Now I got to realize that hey this got to be- it's somethin more to this. You know cause they say you got the critical period is like you gotta after being shot or critically injured you got like a 30 to 40 minute window to really get some care to save your life. They

came after that. They set up- they done set the ambulance right there and let you pass away or almost dead then they decide to take you off. So you know it goes back to organ donors. You know some of these people is young African Americans are gettin they organs took. You know what I'm sayin. My lil- one of my little buddies he just recently got killed probably two weeks ago or something like not- no probably about three weeks ago. Now he was a youngster in his early twenties right. Little young cat got green eyes right. The day he got killed that night people called his mama talkin bout can we don- can you donate his eyes to us. And his mama cussed them people out. How is this goin on? Who informed you that he even got green eyes that you would want his eyes you know? You callin the people mama talkin bout could you donate his eyes? The man aint even been dead five hours and y'all talkin bout gettin his eyes. Come on man. So that and then right up the street at USC the man get busted a few years ago four or five years ago for sellin body parts. You know what I'm sayin at UCLA. I mean not UCLA, USC. You know what I'm sayin. You know and then even with that scene with the little crew gettin killed right, he still breathin in the car but based on its a shootin, the ambulance right there the ambulance is not allowed to come into a shootin scene. So the ambulance right there on the scene, the paramedics there, but they not able to render no services to him until 30 minutes later after they done put the barrier around it and backed everybody up. Its another thing. This is the critical time in which the people got to live. Now they finally get to him they pumpin on his chest you know what I'm sayin and this is constant recurring. Recurrent. Waitin 30 minutes before the people who get shot then bring the ambulance then. But this is the law or the way they do it because the city need the scene secure before they let anybody in. But the scene is already secure because they got a million police there already. Wat's not secure about the scene when y'all already on top of everything? Why do y'all gotta wait additional 30 minutes to even let the ambulance come get to the person? You know so this happenin at almost every scene so the people is dyin with the ambulance right there. They're not even able to render service to em, you know. So this is the type of stuff that the common person in south central and other low income areas dealin with. You know this how you get the hatred or the disrespect between law enforcement and the citizens because you're not treated as the same as if you were in Beverly Hills or you was somewhere deep far west. You know what I'm sayin? You not gettin that same you know you know with law enforcement. You know the law enforcement in south central is not to protect and serve. When they come out the station- when they come out the station they lookin to arrest a African American a Latino. They lookin to put you in that prison to fill that cell to meet that quota to pay for this city outta town. To fund this penitentiary city. You know what I'm sayin. So they not comin to south central to say hey man did somebody break in your car? Or how are you doin sir, you know, you havin a good day? No they comin to simply where gang members quote unquote are located to arrest em so they can fill that cell. So this is how the system is constantly recurring. Its creatin itself over and over. Cause they not comin out to protect and serve but they comin out to arrest. So that's the difference in our community.

## Conclusions

One important message that runs throughout all the interviews I conducted was the pervasiveness of carcerality and police abuse in daily life. Everyone I spoke to had intimate experience with policing tactics that are violent, manipulative, and increase rather than decrease crime. Importantly, the activists I

spoke to all pointed to both education and conversion to Islam as mechanisms for them to identify both a) the systemic nature of the oppression they face and b) the ways in which they can oppose it. As in the case of the organization holding the bowling event, they have largely and uniquely been able to incorporate gang members current and former – even traditional rivals – into their events as collaborators and leaders managing to broker hard won peace that the state systems claim they want but actively work against. MK is a key example of this kind of work, taking pride in his ability to hire rival gang members to work collaboratively in his organization. It takes the embodied cultural capital of a gang trajectory to recognize how to promote peace treaties and channel the solidarity inherent in the raison-d'etre of a gang and to channel that energy, skill and credibility positively. Active members and former respected members of gangs need to be welcomed into the organization—not excluded. Funders, larger outsider led organizations, and the state apparatus often fail to recognize the value of the embodied cultural capital of gang members and exclude them or distrust them. Thus, a paradoxical situation arises from the people who have the embodied gang cultural capital to effectively assist those most at risk  not having the university-based cultural capital needed to secure funding e.g., capacity to prepare a credible budget. As a result, often the most genuinely grassroots embedded CBOs with the most embodied cultural capital tend to be excluded from funding. To quote ST: "if you don't have a budget, they stop your work."

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