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### **The politics of desire and possibility in urban playwriting: (re)reading and (re)writing the script**

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## **The politics of desire and possibility in urban playwriting: (re)reading and (re)writing the script**

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In this article, the author analyses scripts written by incarcerated girls in playwriting and performance workshops conducted in regional youth detention centres and performed by formerly incarcerated girls in a programme called “Girl Time” in an urban American southeastern city. Through a close reading and analysis of characters, plots and settings, the author argues that this catalogue of plays collected over a 5-year period (2006–2011) embodies the ways in which incarcerated girls – primarily African American and ages 14–17 – used playwriting as a tool to navigate “betwixt and between” lives that are a result of being entangled in the juvenile justice system. The author ultimately argues that these “urban playwrights” articulate a desire that focuses on possible lives beyond detainment and incarceration.

**Keywords:** literacy; girls; school-to-prison pipeline; urban playwriting; desire

### **Introduction**

*Life can change, From bottom to hope, Second chance, A new beginning and Unconditional love* are just a few of the heartbreakingly simple yet revolutionary titles of plays written by incarcerated girls in a playwriting and performance programme, “Girl Time,” in an urban American southeastern city. Straightforward and reverberating with words like “change,” “hope,” “chance,” “new,” and even “love” plays written by incarcerated girls constitute a new media. Girls transform incarcerated lives that are often viewed from the outside as stagnant, singular and predetermined into lives that are evolving, multiple and always exploring the possibilities beyond detention centre walls. While playwriting and theatre are not new, these literate strategies – reading, writing, speaking and “doing the word” (Peterson, 1995) – are being used in new ways in the lives of incarcerated men, women and children in the confines of the United States’ prison industrial complex (Fraden, 2001; Sweeney, 2010). From writing workshops like those documented in Wally Lamb’s (2003) *Couldn’t keep it to myself* and Ensler, Sunshine, Katz, Gavin, and Jenkins (2004) work in Bedford Women’s Correctional Facility seen in the documentary *What I want my words to do to you*, to Rhodessa Jones’ “The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women” (Fraden, 2001) in San Francisco and now South Africa, performed text forces audience members to ask nuanced questions about the increasing numbers of girls and women in

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detention centres, jails and prisons like those choreographed by Rena Fraden (2001) in her study of Rhodessa Jones' Theatre for Incarcerated women:

But what is the problem? Is it personal? (What is *her* problem?) Is it structural? (What is *the* problem?) Is *she* the problem? Is *jail* the problem? Are they both problems and are they both responsible for a solution? (p. 120)

What is “new” in the context of Girl Time is that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls use playwriting and performance as tools to speak back to institutions of power often for the first time in their lives. Here, institutions not only include detention centres, courtrooms and classrooms but also family dynamics and social networks. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls are also using playwriting and performance as a way to complicate the ways in which their families, schools, communities and incarcerators view them. These girls know full well the power of literacy and what it means to be literate (Winn, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). As playwrights and actors, they seize the opportunity to display their humanity and thus their citizenship through literacy (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Characters and scripts developed by incarcerated girls push their audiences to re-examine the very nature of jails for children and the ways in which the school-to-prison pipeline funnels particular children from schools and communities to detention centres, jails, prisons and probation periods. These plays also illuminate what I have referred to as a “pipeline of possibilities” (Winn, 2011). Witnessing these stories urges a response to the increasing numbers of girls becoming entangled in the juvenile justice system.

When I first encountered a Girl Time production, I was compelled by the number of plays that included variations of the “happily ever after” trope. This is not a coincidence. Incarcerated girls in Girl Time desire a “happily ever after” life and used playwriting to construct such a life when it was not readily available. Written in 2-day workshops in regional youth detention centres (RYDCs) and facilitated by a team of women teaching-artists, Girl Time scripts reflect the yearning and desire of girls who wish to rewrite their own life-scripts that are often plagued with socio-economic challenges, mis-education, hurtful stereotypes and an overall lack of being taken seriously (Fisher, 2008; Winn, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011; Winn & Jackson, 2011).

For the purpose of this study I ask what do scripts written by incarcerated girls tell us about their desires, and what do their characters, settings and storylines tell us about their possible lives? Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls I interviewed for this work had yearned for healthy relationships with parents and/or a caring adult, peers and partners; yearned for freedom (both physical, psychological and symbolic) as seen in plays that explore education and opportunity as well as crime, punishment and redemption; and, most importantly, these girls yearned to tell their stories while mapping their future(s). While interview data suggests these themes are most critical to formerly incarcerated girls interviewed in my larger study (Winn, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), here I focus on the scripts produced by girls in the Girl Time workshops and performed by student artists in the Girl Time summer programme. Ultimately, this study seeks to understand the ways in which incarcerated girls – ages 14–17 and primarily African American – use playwriting as a tool to articulate their desire and yearning through a close reading and analysis of plays written over a 5-year period (2006–2011) in Girl Time playwriting and performance workshops in the RYDCs in an urban American southeastern city. In these 2-day workshops, a rotating collective of African American and White women teaching-artists introduced the teen girls to ensemble building, theatre techniques and the writing process (Fisher, 2009; Fisher, Purcell, & May, 2009; Winn, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). In a summer programme for girls who

have been released from RYDCs, the teaching-artists support formerly incarcerated girls in staging 8–10 plays written by their peers for a public performance.

In this paper, I first survey young lives and the increasing numbers of girls being jailed. Next, I explore why playwriting and the notion of urban playwriting are timely. After my discussion of the terms, I will introduce a theoretical framework that unpacks desire in the “betwixt and between” lives of formerly incarcerated girls drawing from Tuck’s (2009, 2010) work on desire and Madison’s (2005) work on the “performance of possibilities.” This framing sets the stage for my analysis of this collection of scripts written and performed by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls.

### **The “boyz” and “girls” in the ’hood**

Arguing that America’s Prison Industrial Complex in many ways resembles the Jim Crow South – that is, incarceration culture is the legalization of slavery and codes that deny incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people civil rights such as access to education, jobs, housing and health care – Alexander (2010) questions why mass incarceration in the United States has not been central to the civil rights movement. This timely and thoughtful analysis of mass incarceration indicts the civil rights community for being “oddly quiet” during a time when the “The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its Black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid” (p. 6). However, even in this critically important text documenting the ways in which the United States has legalized the discrimination of people of colour through jails, prisons and probation, there is little, if any, attention paid to the increasing numbers of girls and women in detention centres, jails, prisons, or on probation. More simply put, performance artist and co-founder of “The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women Rhodessa Jones” expresses her appreciation for the film *Boyz ‘n the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) but questions, “What about the girls in the hood?” as she began to see the women in her workshop get increasingly younger in San Francisco County jails. When the Pew Center for the States (2008) released its report, “One in 100: Americans behind bars,” they also revealed that Black women ages 35–39 have also reached the “one in 100 mark” adding to the “global lockdown” of women of colour throughout the world (Sudbury, 2005).

Throughout all of this, scholars argue that the incarcerated are seldom granted opportunities to tell their stories (Fraden, 2001; Sweeney, 2010). Practitioners in the field such as child welfare attorneys report girls being “forgotten, marginalized, and silenced” (Franklin, 2011, personal correspondence, October 13, 2011). However, when the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated finally get a chance to deliver their stories they are often steeped in what I refer to as incarceration discourse of “I came. I saw. I did something bad. And now I’m going to do right” but without the language to question, critique, or name the tensions leading to their incarceration. Another view of incarceration discourse is that it often takes the place of a critical interrogation of how and why particular youths move between schools and jails (Duncan, 2000, 2009; Meiners, 2007; Meiners & Winn, 2010). For example, Meiners and Duncan interrogate the redemptive genre of autobiographical writing by formerly incarcerated women and men; this genre, I would argue, is evident in Girl Time plays as well.

I have argued that many girls want to “do right” but often do not have the resources to live the lives they desire. These are not extravagant desires but humble requests that should be basic in the context of the United States – a competitive education for themselves and their children if they have them, safe housing, jobs, quality childcare and resources for the parents and grandparents who they often witness struggling. Additionally these

young people want to have dignity and participate in something meaningful (Green, 2010; Krueger, 2010; Sharma, 2010). Formerly incarcerated girls' articulation of these desires changed the way I asked questions in my qualitative interviews. Like Covington and Bloom (2003), I learned that incarcerated girls and incarcerated women have the right to name what they believe needs to change in the world around them in order to live the lives they desire.

### **Why urban playwriting?**

First, let me offer a note about the use of the phrase "urban playwriting." In her study of theatre classrooms in urban schools, Gallagher (2007) unpacks the notion of "urban" in urban schools by referring to these spaces as "lively labyrinths." For the purpose of this study, urban playwriting draws from this notion of a lively labyrinth; that is, plays written by incarcerated girls which explore themes and introduce characters that take audiences on journeys through places both real and imagined such as youth detention centres, courtrooms, classrooms, as well as fairy lands and the halls of ivy league universities. Much like a labyrinth, these plays are winding pathways that are alive with hope, desire and possibility. While a labyrinth has only one path, there are many bends like these stories penned by courageous playwrights to unite mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, junior correctional officers and inmates, siblings and friends as well as fantasy characters such as dragons, detectives and animals who experience issues much like humans. Urban playwrights in the context of this study create scenes that are inspired by lived experiences as well as scenes that examine what could be, what is possible and what emerges when given the space to assign dialogue to desire.

The playwriting process in this context invites students' language and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). As the language must be authentic if a play is to be believable, students are able to use words and concepts that are specific to their generation, neighbourhood and social networks. Social geography has played a key role in urban playwriting: the public hospital where many of the playwrights were born, public high schools carrying poor reputations, specific streets, shopping centres and clubs often provide the settings for these plays. Because most plays are set in the urban southeast, the hip-hop sound that has dominated the airwaves is often written in as the soundtrack for particular scenes. At one point, teaching-artists were invited to share their post-workshop reflections. One question on the post-workshop reflection asked what new words, songs, or concepts emerged from the playwrights ("new" to the teachers). This question demonstrated Girl Time teachers' commitment to learn as much as they possibly could about the playwrights and the sights, sounds and scenes that were familiar to the playwrights. Urban playwriting gave teachers a window into young lives that often looked very different than the teachers' lives.

### **Framing desire in "betwixt and between" lives**

Elsewhere I discussed the "betwixt and between" lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black girls (Winn, 2010b). I argued that the transition to physical and psychological freedom is often fraught with disappointments and frequent reminders that participation in a theatre programme (or any programme for that matter) cannot and will not completely heal years of mis-education, a lack of safe and adequate housing and the absence of socio-economic opportunities. Incarcerated girls and women frequently report competing priorities with education and schooling. With a focus on merely surviving, these girls and women often leave behind dreams of pursuing their education and personal development.

Participation in a literate community – and in this case one that focuses on playwriting and performing – provides opportunities to rehearse for real-life scenarios both desired and possible. Playwriting and performance provides girls with second chances to revisit aborted conversations, face-to-face encounters with loved ones that may need to take place for a life to begin, and imagined lives with security where one can wake up to and, perhaps, not have to worry about navigating potential landmines in under-resourced communities and schools.

Here I use a “sociocritical” lens to understand the lived experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls – that is, a lens that values the historicized lives of these girls (Gutiérrez, 2008). As emerging Black women, Black girls are often subjected to a particular kind of policing and silencing of their bodies and voices much like their historical predecessors as well as their contemporaries (Fisher, 2004, 2009, Winn, 2010b). While I will not fully explore the historiographies of Black literate lives here, I wish to underscore the “dreaded eloquence” (McHenry, 2002, p. 23) experienced by Blacks in nineteenth century America. For Black women who shared texts that challenged slavery and sexism like *Sojourner Truth*, their bodies and voices were reviled, and they were scrutinized for having the tenacity as well as the temerity to speak publicly in ways that expressed their desire for freedom from multiple forms of oppression. Historicizing the lives of formerly incarcerated African American girls and the ways in which they write, rewrite and perform desire is also embedded in Madison’s (2005) concept of performance ethnography and the “performance of possibilities” (p. 172) in particular. Like Madison, I do not believe this work, or any work, gives girls voice and I did not conduct this critical ethnography to merely include Black girls in the education research dialogue. Madison asserts, “voice is an embodied, historical self . . . therefore the performance of possibilities is also a performance of voice wedded to experience and history” (p. 173).

In sum, the urban playwrights in this study came to this space with powerful and compelling voices and stories. All that was needed was a forum and a space to exchange these stories with various stakeholders including the public – men and women who work for the juvenile justice system – and family members. As I consider the role of desire in these young girls’ lives, I look to scholar Eve Tuck (2010) who complicates and extends the ways in which desire has been theorized in the scholarship of Deleuze and Foucault. While Tuck posits, “Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and our future; it is integral to our humanness” (p. 644), the girls in the context of my work often find themselves betwixt and between dichotomies assigned to them (good/bad; citizen/inmate; artist/delinquent) by people outside looking in. The girls’ writing and playwriting, in particular, articulates that desire is as much about preparing for possible lives as it is about reconciling past decisions (or indecision).<sup>1</sup>

Also, these girls, like the Black women writers, speakers and “doers of the word” (Peterson, 1995) who came before them, do not seek pity or hand outs; rather they use their playwriting and performance to articulate desires that show them in their full humanity. I turn to Tuck’s “break up” with Deleuze because of the way she pushes back and demands more from the definition of desire. Tuck yearns for a more inclusive definition of desire – one that I argue is more useful in framing the betwixt and between lives of formerly incarcerated girls because it acknowledges that self-determination is part of the process of desiring. Tuck (2010) posits that she wants Deleuze

to say that desire is smart – that it is purposeful, intentional, agentic; that it can teach itself, craft itself, inform itself; that it can make decisions, that it can strategize . . . I am ready for a politics of desire that observes desire as enjoying *some/a lot of* self-determination. (p. 645)

This notion of asserting self-determination in the politics of desire is particularly compelling in this discussion of formerly incarcerated girls who have been rendered voiceless or characterized as rebellious and/or promiscuous. In earlier work, Fine and McClelland (2006) offer a way for framing desire and “thick desire” in particular. When considering the lives of youths, Fine and McClelland argue

young people are entitled to a broad range of desires for meaningful intellectual, sexual and reproductive freedom, protection from racialized and sexualized violence, and a way to imagining living in the future tense. (p. 300)

By privileging desire, I join Fine and McClelland and Tuck who challenge researchers to resist the single story of girls, and Tuck who further refutes single stories of particular communities that speak only of pain and heartache. An alternative for researchers to conducting “damage-centered” research, according to Tuck (2009), “is to craft our research to capture desire instead of damage” (p. 416). In the following pages I aim to craft my research to do just what Tuck proposes, to “capture desire” by asking what do plays written by incarcerated girls and performed by formerly incarcerated girls tell us about their historicized and possible lives, and how do these urban playwrights articulate desire through creating settings, developing characters and plots.

#### **A note about methods**

This data set comes from my 5-year multi-sited ethnography of Girl Time in which I collected 169 scripts written by incarcerated girls in their 2-day workshops conducted in the RYDCs in an urban American southeastern city. These plays were written between 2006 and 2011 and are part of the Girl Time catalogue housed in Our Place Theater Company, which is committed to producing work created by women and/or with compelling roles for women. While previous parts of my work used a sociocultural and sociocritical lens to examine formerly incarcerated girls’ participation in Girl Time as well as teaching-artists’ pedagogical portraits through participant observation and qualitative interviews, this is the first study in which the scripts speak for themselves.

Titles from the Girl Time RYDC workshop catalogue tell part of the story but a close reading and analysis of scripts tell the rest. With the assistance of research assistants, all scripts were collected and coded for general themes such as relationships (i.e. between friends, children and parents and romantic), freedom (i.e. aspiring to have), and obstacles to success (i.e. abuse, unplanned pregnancy); the second level of coding involved showing the nuances in each of these coding categories. For example, relationships in the plays included a wide range of subcategories such as mother and daughter, and female/female friendship. Within these subcategories were even more nuanced descriptors such as mothers warning daughters about “trouble” or two female friends deciding not to allow a boy (who they both liked) to come in between their friendship. Initially the coding category for “freedom” referenced plays in which a character is released (or aspiring to be released) from a detention centre, jail, prison or treatment centre; however, this was limiting because “freedom” also encompassed obtaining access to higher education, a healthy relationship or partnership, and also reuniting with family. Therefore, freedom included “education and opportunity” as well as “crime, punishment, and redemption.” In an effort to complicate the notion of desire and offer a view of desire that is inclusive of self-determination and considering possible lives, I turn to scripts that capture desire through ideal endings. In the

following sections, I will explicate one to two plays in each category and offer a discussion. Appendix 1 includes a complete list for the Girl Time plays between 2006 and 2011 as well as their coding categories.

### Relationships

While most plays involve a relationship or relationships, I still found this coding category necessary because of the various configurations of relationships including mother/daughter; father/daughter; friends, sisters, romantic partners and others. Some plays reveal how incarcerated girls yearned for healthy relationships with parents, primarily mothers. Plays coded for “relationships” also demonstrated how girls desired friendships with other girls. Most of these plays told stories of girls prioritizing their friendships with each other over their interest in particular boys or had started with an initial conflict between two girls or women over a boy or man. Other subcategories in the “relationship” theme included plays about romantic partnerships featuring both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, although there were more of the former. When boys made appearances in plays they would seldom rise above the status of a “baby daddy” who was initially disappointed to learn his girlfriend is pregnant but returned apologizing and pledging his commitment to helping raise his child. Men appear as pimps, “tricks” (men who hire prostitutes), or cops. Men also appear as characters engaged in an inappropriate relationship with an underage girl, which are captured in straightforward titles such as *Young Women Going with Grown Men*. The power dynamic was frequently uneven with male characters as the decision-makers who could make a female character’s life easier or excruciatingly more difficult. Judges and police officers were often male characters while junior correctional officers were typically written into scripts as female characters.

Plays depicting relationships between mothers and daughters were popular and often cross-listed with the coding category of “freedom.” It was not unlikely to see stories in which a mother cautions her daughter about a particular boy or way of life that the mother deems problematic; inevitably, the daughter pursued the relationship or activity in question in spite of her mother’s advice. Playwrights often closed these plays with daughters humbly returning to their mothers to apologize and/or let them know they were correct. For example, in the script *Life’s a Trip* written in the 2006–2007 season, the protagonist “Kee-Kee” is pretending to go to school every day when in fact she is skipping school to see “Mike.” After a concerned adult calls from the high school – which the playwrights named after a very popular, largely all African American public high school in their city – Kee-Kee’s mom learns that she has not been going to school after all. “Ms Morlin,” who in the playwright’s notes is merely a “voice” on the other end of the phone as opposed to a character on stage, and her off-stage presence is critically important for Kee-Kee and Kee-Kee’s mother. Ms Morlin expresses, “I was just calling out of concern for Ms Keandra Reed. She’s been missing class for the whole week. Is everything okay?” Once Kee-Kee’s mother, simply referred to as “Mom” in the script, expresses disbelief since she dropped Kee-Kee off at the bus stop that morning, Ms Morlin continues to make her case: “It’s not just my class. I checked with the other teachers and she hasn’t showed up there either.” “Mom” vows to get more information and calls Ms Morlin back. This script is consistent with narratives I collected from formerly incarcerated girls who participated in the Girl Time summer programme which staged 8–10 plays written in the RYDC workshops in a public theatre and in the RYDC for incarcerated boys and girls. Girls, hereby referred to as student-artists, often reported that they gradually lost interest in school yet there was no

“Ms Morlin” who noticed they were missing. This finding is consistent with other studies such as Simkins, Hirsch, Horvat, and Moss (2004) in which they find that abuse plays a key role in the school-to-prison pipeline for girls. They argued that girls in the school-to-prison pipeline “experienced significant difficulties with formal schooling, including truancy, repeating grades, and suspensions and expulsions” (p. 62). In Scene Three of *Life’s a Trip*, Kee-Kee’s mom confronts her and asks if she has been skipping school to see a boy. After refuting her mother’s accusations, Kee-Kee blames her mother for not trusting her and jumping to conclusions. Kee-Kee’s mother holds her ground and warns her daughter, “I’m taking this serious. Anything could happen to you now-a-days. Boys would tell you anything to get in your pants. Life is rough. You don’t need to be moving too fast. You betta think before you let it go.” Scenes Four and Five reveal Kee-Kee’s relationship with Mike; Mike is ready to engage in sexual intercourse while Kee-Kee expresses her discomfort: “I ain’t ready yet,” Kee-Kee insists and after Mike’s desperate plea, “If you love me than you’ll do it.” Kee-Kee asserts, “No, fa real. Get off. Take me home.” In the sixth and final scene, Kee-Kee is back home and goes to her mother crying:

- Kee-Kee: Mom . . . you were right (still crying). I’m sorry. I did lie to you. And I think that boy just did want to have sex with me.
- Mom: Oh baby. Come here. (Kee-Kee and mom embrace). I’m sorry baby. Hush now.
- Kee-Kee: I thought he loved me.
- Mom: Well it’s his loss. You have to be careful, baby, but don’t you ever sell yourself short. You’ll find a good man when you’re ready.

*Life’s a Trip* demonstrates many layers of desire. First, there is the desire for a mother/daughter encounter in which a mother expresses love and wisdom in absence of judgment. Kee-Kee’s mom is displeased with Kee-Kee missing school but she does her research, collects more information, and is prepared when Kee-Kee returns with her confession. The “voice” of Ms Morlin is as important as any character appearing on stage and, perhaps, is an expression of what many of the girls would like from schools; it is Ms Morlin who cared enough to notice Kee-Kee’s absence, to take time to learn that this absence was a pattern across other teachers’ classrooms, and to take time to phone Kee-Kee’s mother thus giving Kee-Kee’s mother critically important information about her daughter. Simkins et al. (2004) also found that incarcerated teen girls interviewed in their study of the school-to-prison pipeline expressed their yearning for sustained relationships with caring adults in their families and also in their school worlds. Finally, Kee-Kee in many ways is lucky. She is lucky because while it remains unclear how she got home the fact is she did make it home without being sexually assaulted or coerced by Mike. Kee-Kee was able to get away from Mike; however, this is not a representative story. Most incarcerated girls, like incarcerated women, have been sexually abused and/or raped in their lifetime (Belknap, 2006). The fact that the playwrights, Nikki-Rosa and Alana,<sup>2</sup> wrote Kee-Kee out of trouble represents a keen awareness for what could have happened.

In the context of the script for *Life’s a Trip*, girls have a second chance, mothers have an opportunity to “school” or educate and affirm their daughters, and educators have the time, commitment and passion to pay close attention to their students. To push this notion of desire further, the playwrights also presented the desire of a mother. Here, Kee-Kee’s mother wanted her daughter to be focused on school and avoid the potential trappings of unrequited love. Ms Morlin’s character expressed a particular desiring as well; as an educator, Ms Morlin wanted to see Kee-Kee do well and wanted to partner with Kee-Kee’s mother and create a safety net around her.

## Freedom

### *Education and opportunity*

Opportunities in the context of Girl Time plays include getting out of detention centres, jails, treatment programmes, being able to access higher education, getting married, raising a child with a partner, reuniting with a child taken into custody as a result of a mother's arrest, and getting out of the 'hood. In the play *Journey of Dancing Drama Sisters* written by incarcerated girls during the 2010–2011 season, two sisters – “Tiffany” and “Tasha” – consider each other their biggest rivals. While Tiffany identifies as a classical ballet dancer, her sister Tasha prefers hip-hop style dancing. After a dance battle drives the sisters apart and spurs an estranged relationship between them, the girls reunite years later in the halls of the Julliard School. The playwrights of this piece are not the first to integrate a well-established education institution into their work. In *All Drugged Out*, also written during the 2010–2011 season, three playwrights re-imagined a life for a young girl, Alice, who takes responsibility for a drug charge on behalf of her mother in hopes that her mother will seize the opportunity to become sober. After serving time in jail for her mother, Alice goes on to graduate from Harvard University with a degree in Psychology, and gets engaged and pregnant by her supportive fiancé. It is only after Alice reaches these goals that she is able to forgive her mother, demonstrating a full circle of life in less than three pages.

The desire urban playwrights have to access higher education should not come as a surprise. Many of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls I interviewed over the course of 5 years understood that college could be a potential way to chart a new life course. This was confirmed in plays. Characters got out of jails, detention centres, earned GEDs or high school diplomas and went to colleges like Spelman College that represented passage not only into the Black middle class but also important social networks that led to social mobility, more education and professional opportunities. Here, desire is indeed “smart” and full of “self-determination”; urban playwrights know what being affiliated with these institutions could do in their lives. More specifically in the urban southeast, these girls understood that there was a Black middle class and Black wealthy class that had access; this world seemed very far away from their own even though there were constant reminders with Black leadership and messages calling their city a “Black mecca” of sorts. However, few girls knew how to begin preparations for journey to higher education and social mobility in spite of their idealistic story endings. Girl Time playwrights had limited time to develop their scripts and characters, and seldom were they able to show how a character like Alice actually went from jail to Harvard and what steps are involved in making such a transition. Integrating institutions such as Julliard and Harvard with a stroke of a pen was more plausible than actually going to such places. With the stroke of a pen – or in this case a dull pencil on a yellow steno pad – girls named the places and practices that could give them a seat at the tables of equity and access.

### *Crime, punishment and redemption*

While crime, punishment and redemption (CPR) may appear to be a simplistic category, it offers a glimpse into what Meiners (2007) refers to as the “redemptive genre” in the writings of formerly incarcerated women and men. Urban playwriting has elements of the redemptive genre; however, it also demonstrates a willingness to be critical and try to source everyone who contributed to tensions and conflicts in girls' lives. Desire in the context of the category CPR, involves the audience of these performances. Playwrights invite the audience to consider the perspective of the female character who has been vilified

as a criminal, prostitute, or addict. Girl Time scripts often depict stories of how girls get involved in crime, their passage through the juvenile or criminal justices system, and finally their efforts as well as the support of people around them to begin a new life. *Unconditional Love*, for example, opens with the character “Cindy” looking through a fence at her daughter, from whom she has been estranged after a battle with drug addiction. Although it is unclear whether Cindy was incarcerated while she was away, it is clear that she was oppressed by her addiction to crack cocaine. Cindy decides that she is tired of looking at her daughter from afar:

I’ve been coming up to this school for weeks now. I’m tired of looking at my baby through this fence. I’m not strung out anymore, I want my baby back. She’s been with her auntie for some time now. I appreciate all that she’s done for us but I gotta get her back. I don’t know why Linda won’t let me see my daughter. (pause). I know, I’m gonna take her to Six Flags.

In the next two scenes, it becomes evident that Cindy has abducted her daughter “Angel” leaving her sister “Linda,” devastated and committed to locate her niece whom she has cared for over the past 7 years. By Scene Three, Linda confronts Cindy in the school parking lot as Cindy attempts to return Angel. As the sisters shout at each other, the daughter speaks up:

Stop it! Just stop! I want both of you! Aunt Linda, I really miss my mom and I want her in my life. Aunt Linda, mommy is better this time. She even took me to meet her counselor that she meets with every week.

Angel’s determination and assertiveness changes the direction of the dialogue from accusatory and indicting to one of problem solving. Linda and Cindy talk about living arrangements and what would work best. Finally, Linda invites Cindy to live with her and Angel. However, it is the Narrator who brings the story to a close:

Three years later, Cindy is a certified nurse assistant and has her own apartment. She has turned her life around and is looking forward to a better future for her daughter and herself.

Cindy’s transition from battling a drug addiction, to reconnecting with her daughter (and consequently her sister), and lastly to a professional working woman is tempered by the narrator asserting that while Cindy has “turned her life around” that she is still “looking forward to a better future for her daughter and herself.” Caitla and Telley, the playwrights for *Unconditional Love*, understood that Cindy’s life is in progress and that there is a process involved with working to change one’s life course. *Unconditional Love* expresses desire in other ways. There is Cindy’s desire to rebuild with her daughter, Angel’s desire for her mother and her aunt to make peace so she can enjoy them both, and Linda’s desire to protect Angel even if it means keeping her from her mother who she at one point viewed as an impediment to Angel’s well-being. Caitla and Telley created a script in which all of their characters were able to obtain their desires or begin the process but everyone had work to do. Cindy had to show she was responsible. When Linda learned that Cindy had a counsellor and took Angel to see the counsellor, she was more open to considering her plea. Angel had to have the courage to speak up even if it meant risking hurting her Aunt Linda’s feelings. Linda had to surrender her distrust and disdain for her sister and be willing to hear her niece who she worked so hard to protect. While these characters initially viewed their objectives as seemingly distinct and even in conflict, the playwrights crafted each

characters' lines to show how they actually shared the same desires and wanted the same outcome for Angel.

### What these new scripts teach us

Assumptions are often made about youth entangled in the juvenile justice systems as well as their families (Winn, 2011). As part of the welfare queen mythology, Black single mothers were branded as lacking morals, values and not the least bit concerned about their children's education, thus contributing to a cycle of disengaged youth in schools (Kelley, 1997). Black girls are carrying the weight of these ill-informed allegations. As Fine and Ruglis (2009) posit, many youths in under-resourced schools and communities experience "circuits of dispossession" (p. 20) – that is, there are systematic injustices such as a focus on control and management in particular schools as opposed to cultivating intellectual curiosity and providing teaching and learning experiences for students to explore a variety of paths through arts and extended day programming.

Scripts written by incarcerated girls and staged by formerly incarcerated girls suggest something different. These girls know full well the value of education and understand the role of being literate in the context of "betwixt and between" lives. Urban playwrights not only capture desire but complicate it through the lenses of relationships, multiple forms of freedom (including education and opportunity), and narratives of CPR from the perspectives of various stakeholders (including girls, parents, educators, children of the incarcerated and incarcerators). Urban playwriting is a tool to present more nuanced ways of problem solving in young lives. All encounters are possible. Dialogue is possible and scripts serve as practice ground for both opening the door to problem solving and conflict resolution. Urban playwriting, then, is a new media in that it disrupts dispossession and hopelessness using an established art form as a medium to articulate desire, perseverance and resistance. The politics of desire in urban playwriting offers a new lens to view desire as well as understand some of the obstacles incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls boldly face in order to forge possible lives.

### Notes

1. In my experiences of listening to formerly incarcerated girls, I have learned that they have encountered many situations in which they were unable to make choices or decisions for themselves; therefore I am compelled to acknowledge the role of indecision. For example, some girls in my study were "committed to the state" by a parent struggling to communicate with his/her child, thus beginning an unwanted relationship with the juvenile justice system. It is also critical to note that most incarcerated girls and women report being sexually abused, yet girls are fed "abstinence only" philosophies without the consideration that they were exploited without consent.
2. All names in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

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### Appendix 1: Girl time play analysis

2006/2007 Season	2007/2008 Season	2008/2009 Season
Total number of plays: $n = 32$	Total number of plays: $n = 37$	Total number of plays: $n = 21$
Relationships: $n = 22$ ; Crime and punishment: $n = 8$ ; Fantasy/mystery: $n = 2$	Relationships: $n = 22$ ; Crime, punishment and redemption: $n = 3 (+4)$ ; Second chances: $n = 2 (+2)$ ; Educational opportunity: $n = 1$ ; Bullying (at school): $n = 1$ ; Fantasy: $n = 6 (+1)$ ; Religious: $n = 1 (+1)$ ; Mystery/detective (could also be fantasy): $n = 1$	Relationships: $n = 17$ ; Crime, punishment and redemption: $n = 1 (+1)$ ; Fantasy: $n = 3$ ; Education and opportunity: $n = 4$
		<i>Note: These plays were written during Obama's election and inauguration; the word "hope" appears more frequently.</i>
<b>Relationships</b> <i>Mothers and daughters</i>	<b>Relationships</b> <i>Mother and daughter</i>	<b>Relationships</b> <i>Mother/daughter</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I never knew</li> <li>● Life's a trip</li> <li>● One step at a time</li> <li>● Secrets of love and drama</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Common sense</li> <li>● Regrets</li> <li>● The betrayal</li> <li>● Buddy</li> <li>● Second chance</li> <li>● Diamond's doll (religious undertones)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Follow your dreams (also education and opportunity)</li> <li>● Independence Park</li> <li>● Conflict between mother and daughter</li> </ul>
<i>Boyfriend and girlfriend</i>		<i>Friendship</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Baby mama drama</li> <li>● Ex-girl to the next girl</li> <li>● Following the word</li> <li>● Thin line between love and hate</li> <li>● Ride or die</li> <li>● Why do good girls like bad guys?</li> <li>● Shades of grey</li> <li>● Two can play dat game</li> </ul>	<p><i>Father and daughter:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No more chances</li> <li>● Where to turn (father as main parent)</li> </ul> <p><i>Friends (and deceit)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Keep your friends closer than your enemies especially when it comes to love</li> <li>● Tow days in the life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A changed life (also in crime, punishment and redemption)</li> <li>● Back together (also in crime, punishment and redemption)</li> <li>● Different worlds</li> <li>● I thought you was my friend</li> <li>● Kate's Island</li> <li>● Sacrifices and choices</li> <li>● Spike and fluffy's adventure</li> </ul>

(Continued)

## Appendix 1. (Continued).

*Underage girl and man*

- Caught up
- True life
- Young women going with grown men

*Sisters*

- Lessons learned

*Friends*

- Problems between two friends
- That's what friends are for
- The big city ain't always pretty (cousins)
- Thin line between two best friends

*Lesbian*

- Take me for who I am
- The ruby show

**Crime, punishment and redemption**

- Get money
- Hustle
- Jail and nothing else
- Never judge a book by its cover (AIDS)
- Ride or die: Bonnie and Clyde '07 (Humor)
- What money will do to ya'
- Unconditional Love
- A reflected life

**Fantasy and mystery**

- Hair drama
- Rich woman/homeless lady

*Friends (multicultural, school)*

- Tois, Nuevo, Shawty

*Friends (love triangle)*

- Metro love (setting: RYDC)

*Friends (learning a boy/man is not worth fighting)*

- Truly best friends
- Dime piece or a nine piece
- Sisters

*Boyfriend and girlfriend*

- Jail Love
- There is not love in jail
- A new beginning
- Expect the unexpected
- The wrong reason

*Mother and son*

- A change of heart

*Friendship*

- The reuniting (could also be under father and daughter)

**Education and opportunity**

- The changes

**Crime, punishment and redemption**

- Good looking out
- Meditations
- Changes at Fairytale Land
- Also: Metro love, Jail love. There is no love in jail and expect the unexpected

**Second chances**

- Hi, my name is Mariah
- Also, second chance, There is not love in jail, a new beginning

**Bullying (at school)**

- To bully or not to bully

**Fantasy**

- Trouble in Castlehood
- Real queens
- Rough times
- Sky, lead my way
- The switch around
- Without you there is no me
- Also, changes at Fairytale Land

**Religion**

- Journey of an angel
- Also, meditations

**Mystery**

- Trouble (detective story)

*Lesbian*

- Coming out

*Love triangle*

- Baby Daddy Drama
- Save dat drama for yo mama (Note: also has abuse)
- Finding the perfect pair

*Male/female*

- The big leave (Note: abusive relationship)

**Education and opportunity**

- Different worlds
- Follow your dreams
- From bottom to hope
- Kate's Island

**Crime, punishment and redemption**

- From bottom to hope (Note: also has abuse)
- Hope for Fabian

**Fantasy**

- Beyond the volcano
- The scientist who found music
- The witch and the boy

2009/2010 Season	2010/2011 Season
Total number of plays: $n = 40$	Total number of plays: $n = 39$
Relationships: $n = 26$ ; Education and opportunity: $n = +3$ ; Crime and punishment: $n = 4 (+6)$ ; Second chances: $4(+2)$ ; Fantasy/mystery: $n = 2 (+1)$ ; Pregnancy: $n = 2 (+3)$ ; Rape/abuse: $n = +5$ ; Ride or die: $2 (+2)$	Relationships: $n = 14$ ; Education and opportunity: $n = 4$ ; Crime, punishment and redemption: $n = 7$ ; Second chances: $n = 1$ ; Pregnancy: $n = 9$ ; Drugs: $n = 3$ ; Domestic abuse: $n = 1$ ; Fantasy: $n = 3$
<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Relationships</b>
<i>Mother/daughter (R-MD)</i>	<i>Mother/daughter</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A girl named Polly (also in CPR and SC)</li> <li>• A mother's rage, A daughter's forgiveness (also in pregnancy, CPR)</li> <li>• Existing but not living (also in rape and abuse)</li> <li>• Forgiveness</li> <li>• Love Game</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The fear of a mother</li> <li>• Soldier of love (also in CPR)</li> <li>• All drugged out (also in E&amp;O)</li> <li>• The baby decision (adoption, parenting)</li> </ul>
<i>Father/daughter (R-FD)</i>	<i>Friendship</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• King Fabian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sistah strength</li> <li>• Forgive and forget</li> <li>• Best friends (Betrayal)</li> <li>• Best friends hair drama (Editorial on straight hair; Set in jail)</li> <li>• A life lesson learned</li> <li>• A change of heart (Note: At school)</li> <li>• Evolution: (Note: discusses Meth)</li> </ul>
<i>Friendship</i>	<i>God's love</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different Lessons (also in CPR)</li> <li>• Don't trust a pretty face (also in rape and abuse)</li> <li>• Frienemies (also in EO)</li> <li>• In only a day (Note: involves DUI)</li> <li>• Life can change (also in SC and CPR)</li> <li>• OVBFF</li> <li>• The Big Break up</li> <li>• I thought I loved her (male friendships)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One love</li> <li>• One last chance</li> </ul>
<i>Friendship (boy not worth it)</i>	<i>Father/daughter</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life of the party</li> <li>• Metro High</li> <li>• Same guy</li> <li>• Sista Act</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I got you</li> </ul>
<i>Male/Female (R-MF)</i>	<i>Love triangle</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two wrongs</li> <li>• Blind Love (Note: Interracial romance during enslavement of Africans)</li> <li>• Life's lessons (Note: Includes Bonnie and Clyde; also in RorD)</li> <li>• It ain't worth it (Note: Involves STDs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play or get played</li> </ul>
<i>Love triangle (R-LT)</i>	<b>Education and opportunity</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To tell</li> <li>• Dog eat dog</li> <li>• Just keep it 100</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journey of dancing drama sisters (Note: mentions Julliard)</li> <li>• The fear of a mother (Note: mentions soccer scholarship)</li> <li>• Living a double life in the hood (Note: introduces the concept of "slow money")</li> <li>• All drugged out (Note: mentions Harvard)</li> </ul>
<b>Education and opportunity</b>	<b>Crime, punishment and redemption</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lil way out (also in CPR, Pregnancy)</li> <li>• Frienemies (also in Relationships/F)</li> <li>• The Tiffany Witherspoon story (also in CPR)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soldier of Love (also in relationships)</li> <li>• Living a double life in the hood (also in E&amp;O)</li> <li>• Probation: Does the punishment fit the crime?</li> <li>• A change in Jessica</li> <li>• Apologies</li> <li>• Struggles</li> <li>• Sista Strength (also in relationships/friendships)</li> </ul>
<b>Crime, punishment and redemption (CPR)</b>	<b>Second chances</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lil way out (Note: Similar to "Set it off")</li> <li>• A mother's rage (also in relationships M/D)</li> <li>• Because of my mistakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A change in Jessica</li> </ul>
	<b>Pregnancy</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What comes around</li> <li>• Best friends</li> </ul>

(Continued)

## Appendix 1. (Continued).

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- Different lessons (also in relationships/F)
  - The Tiffany Witherspoon Story (also in EO)
  - Til Death do us part
  - Til Jail do us part
  - Voices can be heard (also in SC)
  - Life can change (also in SC)
  - Not yet (also in SC)
- Second chances (SC)**
- Voices can be heard
  - A girl named polly (relationships/family)
  - From tragedy to survival
  - Life can change
  - Not yet (also in CPR)
  - Teenage Addiction
- Fantasy**
- King Fabian
  - Who cares?
  - Teen Addiction (Note: there is an appearance of an angel)
- Pregnancy**
- A lil way out (also in CPR)
  - A mother's rage, A daughter's forgiveness (also in CPR and Relationships M/D)
  - Now and then (also in rape/abuse)
  - Sixteen at War
  - Watch who you sleep with
- Rape/abuse**
- Because of my mistakes (also in CPR; Note: involves motherhood)
  - Don't trust a pretty face (also in relationships/F; Note: involves date rape)
  - Existing but not living (also in relationship M/D)
  - Love game (also in relationships M/D)
  - Now and Then (also in Pregnancy; Note: similar story to "Precious")
- Ride or die (RorD)**
- Player getting played
  - Life lessons (also in relationships m/f)
  - Not yet (also in CPR and SC)
  - Til death do us part
- Baby Mama Drama
  - Truth hurts (Note: involves abuse)
  - Struggles (Note: involves ride or die)
  - Same girl
  - Lost with a friend
  - I got you
  - Galump (also in relationships)
- Drugs**
- Life Lesson
  - One Love (Note: a Lil Wayne song plays while a character is shooting up heroine)
  - Hippies gone good
- Domestic abuse**
- Las Vegas Get Away
- Fantasy**
- Ro-Love (Robot)
  - Bossed up (talking shoes)
  - Jungle Love
-