Collective Difficulty, Feminist Interventions

Tamms Year Ten and Socially Engaged Art Praxis

Christina Aushana

The Tamms Correctional Center—a supermax prison facility dedicated to solitary confinement—has been closed since 2013, but the aftershocks of its existence continue to resonate in a network of embodied dimensions: in the new goals of the mothers of the prisoners, in the stories from prisoners that reached beyond its walls, and in the organizing work of Laurie Jo Reynolds.

Over the past seven years, Laurie Jo has helped organize the all-volunteer coalition of prisoners, poets, artists, men formerly incarcerated in the Tamms Correctional Center, advocates, and—perhaps most central to the project—the women who have shared in the struggle alongside her. This coalition, called Tamms Year Ten (TY10), launched multiple campaigns calling for the reform and later the closure of Tamms supermax, and, as the story goes, they were successful. However, metrics of success seem ill-equipped and the closing of Tamms itself is not the 'end of the story.'

It might be tempting to assume Laurie Jo's leadership position in this network of volunteers and imprisoned men; indeed, her Southern drawl and easy confidence seem to echo the embodied and rhetorical styles of proud Southern matriarchs who have helmed kith and kin. To engage in this poetic metaphor, however, is to mischaracterize the work of TY10. At the intersection of these lives imbricated in the infrastructures and emotional landscapes of incarceration is not one master narrative, but a confluence of many stories. It is, importantly, not a story about Laurie Jo, either. These stories illustrate the messy intersection of care and difficult work enacted among women on the 'outside' of prisons, men in prison, and in the aesthetic responses to the structural forces at play. It is a processual kind of work, and a feminist labour of love, literally. The vignettes that follow bear this affective weight.

Wednesday, 8:50 pm: Janice 'Cookie' Burnom—a long-time anti-Tamms activist—searches for a single text message while sitting across from me on an indoor balcony above patrons conversing over salt-rimmed margarita glasses, seemingly oblivious to the tiny circle of women huddled in a corner of this Mexican restaurant. Having been invited to this fundraiser for Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, alongside Cookie, Laurie Jo and the three other women from TY10, we spend little time regarding the present and its figures moving about in black suits. Instead, Cookie's flip-style mobile phone

orients us toward the past. Laurie Jo mentions that she is putting together a visual timeline for an upcoming gallery showing of TY10; she is asking different volunteers about the most memorable moments from the past few years campaigning for the closure of the Tamms Correctional Center. In response, Cookie has found her desired text message and regards our small gathering: 'How could I ever forget? I still remember getting your text message that night, Laurie Jo, saying that the governor agreed to close Tamms. Lord, I just started crying!'

In the convergence of both past and present, Cookie's eyes fill with tears. We are silent, and the chatter of politicians vying for supremacy in their conversations floats above us, disconnected and disinterested. These tears are complicated, for Tamms's closure did not, *could* not, liberate her brother—a story for another time, in another mode. Laurie Jo reaches out to hold Cookie's hand, and I work to hold my tears behind the levy that is the lip of my lower eyelids. This affective difficulty is interrupted when Governor Quinn, having made his initial rounds to greet supporters, stops by our circle. Laurie Jo, without skipping a beat, engages in what could only be described as an embodied shift: she springs up, shakes the governor's hand, and gestures for Cookie and the others to speak with him. Over the clatter of clicking heels and clinking glasses, the governor and Laurie Jo parlay over her upcoming trip oversees for an artist residency in the Netherlands; he insists she must stay and she assures him she will return in time to continue her support of his campaign. Laurie Jo's easy demeanour seems rare in the realm of state politics writ large. In this restaurant filled with seasoned politicians, it is clear that her straightforward sincere approach to working with and *beside* those who write legislation and operate inside of carceral systems disrupts the traditional tactics of both artists and activists.

There is no denying Laurie Jo's aesthetic and conceptual rigor, found both in the collaborative project *Photo Requests From Solitary* (2010) and in her past installations and films. I meditate on the ways in which she navigates the supposed

Fig 1 Celebration of Governor Quinn's birthday

boundaries between her activist commitments and her legibility as an artist. Legibility across different realms provides both affordances and constraints. After our first full day attending two meetings and a memorial service for a an ex-prisoner, Laurie Jo, Melinda, and I found a moment of sedentary respite from the hectic back-and-forth to dwell on the material stakes operating at this intersection between art, activism, and the politics of free labour.

Monday, 5:45 pm: Sitting in one of Chicago's many pub-style restaurants, Laurie Jo speaks frankly about the difficulties of navigating the liminal zones of artistic production and an activist mode; indeed, it is the first time since meeting her that she acknowledges her work within the parlance of art-making. Many of her scheduled weekly and monthly commitments involve hours of unpaid preparation: multiple PowerPoint presentations, phone calls to coordinate with the TY10 women, and endlessly scrolling spreadsheets. With the utmost sincerity, allow me to reiterate: Laurie Jo's spreadsheets are legendary. Not only are they rigorously maintained, they are aesthetic works of art—meticulously colour-coded boxes and little pixels in perfect alignment. They are also a principle figure in the matrix of organizational labour

Fig 2 Chicago Town Hall Meeting to address gun violence
Reverend Al Sharpton hosted a town hall meeting at Hyde Park Academy, sponsored by the National Action Network, aimed at discussing and ending gun violence in Chicago. Speakers lined up and spoke for more than two hours. Chicago, Illinois. December 19, 2013.

that illustrates how navigating the limitations of time, both inside and beyond the mechanics of the spreadsheet, is a collective practice performed by both Laurie Jo and TY10 volunteers.

Thursday, 7:40 pm: We are sitting in a town hall meeting hosted by Al Sharpton and the National Action Network in Chicago's Hyde Park. Reginald 'Akkeem' Berry, Sr., a former Tamms inmate, stands at the front of a crowded high school auditorium. He speaks quickly into a microphone about his work with gang-affiliated youth in the local community, a concerted effort to guide a future generation of Chicagoans while improving public spaces through brick-and-mortar improvement projects. His message is clear: youth should lay down guns in favour of laying down bricks—an intimate engagement with soil over the imagined 'cold' distance between fired bullets. He speaks quickly, and the cant of his speech is lyrical yet tinged with a grave sincerity: a call to material action amidst other impassioned voices and pleas for change in 'our community.' Sharpton nods impassively, but after an hour of questions and comments from community members, he seems withdrawn. Moments afterward, we are standing together near the high school's entrance, and Akkeem regales us with tales of sentimentality and difficulty. His eyes smile as he regards Laurie Jo; here is one of the few women who fought tooth and nail for the closure of TY10, Akkeem left many close friends behind when he was released from prison and he was very invested in the struggle to help get them out. I find myself romanticizing this narrative, but must ground this tendency in a solemn fact: Akkeem stands before me, a suit made of fine taupe wool and gold finery accenting his tall frame, while other men fill a row of cell blocks many miles away—burnished cuffs of steel their state-sanctioned adornments. Though Akkeem is the first Tamms survivor I was able to meet, the *Photo Requests From Solitary* project continues to operate as a material connection to these other men, voices, and desires.

Reflecting on traditions of critical feminist scholarship, I dwell on difficulty in the context of TY10 as a significant component in performing an intersectional analysis. Like the emotional and physical labour women from TY10 engage in, 'doing' intersectional work is difficult work as well: time consuming, challenging, and, sometimes, unpopular in particular academic disciplines. It is often a messy attempt to reach out and hold onto cross-cutting social and cultural forces long enough to make sense of the structures of domination and exclusion that complicate lives—both inside of prison and those on the supposed periphery. Difficulty is always necessarily embodied, and this is how I understand it in relation to the structures at play that shape interactions between Laurie Jo, TY10 volunteers, and prison officials, to name but a few relational intersections. Difficulty isn't a disembodied metaphor: it is blood, sweat, and tears. Difficulty, as a through line in this text, is also embodied in the many different roles Laurie Jo must navigate in relation to TY10.

Sociocultural and political markers do not necessarily restrict Laurie Jo to any category or primary method of engagement. Rather, the promiscuous movement between and across activities and methods suggests something more profound about her activist ethos and the work of TY10: the flexibility of social practice is necessarily unbounded,

Fig 3 Prayer Vigil at Bald Knob Cross
'Photo Requests from Solitary' was one of many projects launched by Tamms Year Ten to build up publicity for the campaign. The men in Tamms were invited to request a photograph of anything in the world, real or imagined. The resulting requests were touching and often surprising. They included: the sacred mosque in Mecca, comic book heroes locked in epic battle, Egyptian artifacts, Temms Year Ten volunteers, and a brown and white horse rearing in weather cold enough to see its breath. Willie Sterling III asked for a photograph of a vigil at Bald Knob Cross on top of a hill in southern Illinois to pray for his deliverance from Tamms and to be granted parole. Tamms Year Ten caravanned down to the cross, held a litany of songs and prayers, and celebrated with a dinner. The next day, they drove family members to visit loved ones at the prison. Sterling was transferred from Tamms, and on 27 July 2012 he was given parole after thirty-six years in prison.

Fig 4 Myself with blue sky background
Several men asked for photos of themselves, taken from their online Department of Corrections photos, to give to their families. Robert wanted his picture to have an alternate background. He wrote, 'If you can place my picture on another background, nothing too much please. Something simple like a blue sky with clouds or a sunset in the distance would be fine.' Robert also said, 'I want to extend my love to you, for you, as you have already done for me. Because genuine, authentic true love is when you do for others just because you can, and you hold no preconceived notion that you will be getting anything in return.'

and thus open to the interstitial spaces, modes of language, and strategies that make this fluidity and mobility possible.

Discourses of 'doing time' in a correctional facility are thickly and intimately constitutive of this configuration of women, carceral bureaucracy, and the politics of 'bare life' in the system of imprisonment.[1] Notions of giving time, taking time away from prisoners, navigating the institutional time of prison schedules, finding time to commute to visit a correctional facility, and the difficulty of making time when seemingly in short supply were expressed in conversations with mothers of the incarcerated and in speaking with Laurie Jo. These reorientations of time experienced by the volunteers of TY10 have been shaped by the incongruence between the isolating spatial practices of prisons and the difficult spaces that these women must make for themselves across shifting sites: borrowed conference rooms where they meet with prison officials to plea on behalf on their loved ones, temporary gallery spaces that serve as a home base for their campaign materials, and in the in-between spaces of hallways and corners of restaurants.

TY10 members remain closely connected, in the most poetic and embodied way, to the personal times that men negotiate in prison. Institutional time may structure bodies according to a political economy of schedules, but shared temporalities between TY10 volunteers and incarcerated men—activists as well within this paradigm—illustrate the nuances of living with and in spite of incarceration.

1 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).