

Interim Director Nora Krinitsky,

RE: Confronting Conditions of Confinement

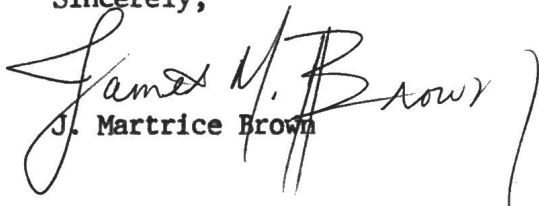
Dear Director,

Enclosed is the condensed version of the submission for the Carceral Project. The expanded version is on my laptop, however, due to the quarantine I am unable to print it out. Hence, I have typed quintessential portions to aid the project, with plans to forward my testimony in its entirety at a later time.

I hope my submission is sufficient. It was quite laborious given the task of manual typing. Therefore, forgive the 20th century utensil errors, smug, etc.

Also, enclosed is the permission form. Thank you for the invitation to participate, your correspondences, and work. If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me via snail mail or email.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James M. Brown". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name. The signature is enclosed in a large, thin, hand-drawn bracket on the right side.
J. Martrice Brown

James Martrice Brown #235699
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The Michigan Humanities Collaboratory
Attn: Carceral State Project
100 North Hatcher Gallery
Hatcher Graduate Library
913 S. University
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

RE: **Confronting Conditions of Confinement**
PCAP: Carceral State Project

BACKGROUND: James Martrice Brown is a 45-year-old African American male who has been incarcerated in Michigan State Prison since 2007.

Name: James Martrice Brown

Date of Writing: April 30, 2020

Place of Birth: Kalamazoo, Michigan

Date of Birth: March 12, 1975

Primary Caregiver: Father and Paternal Grandmother (from birth to four),
Mother and Stepfather (from four to sixteen); and then Mother (from sixteen to
eighteen).

WORLD OUTSIDE: FAMILY UNIT GROWING UP:

When I was growing up under my mother and stepfather's custody, the World outside of my family unit seemed to be more prosperous than my family's world. Perhaps, not every family was socioeconomically stable; however, every peer in every neighborhood of every city that I accosted--ate, dressed, and lived better than I did. I always found myself borrowing my friends' clothes and shoes, and spending the night over their house to eat their food when times were extremely difficult at home.

We moved around quite a bit growing up in Chicago Illinois. In fact, the longest we lived in any one residence was seven years. The other nine years was divided between four other apartment buildings--three of which became

abandoned, two of the three were condemned long before we moved out. We were so impoverished that there was an occasion when we had to borrow water and huddle in one room blocked off by a blanket and warmed by a space heater. We had to manually remove excrement, sleep three to a single size bed, and rely on Churches, the Salvation Army, friends, relatives, and Government subsidies like Welfare, Wic, and Section-8 to supplement our shortages at the end of each month.

My circumstances were so dismal that I became a criminal deviant as early as six years old--stealing from stores, fighting--acting out aggression, low self-esteem, and hatred. Demons that I had never knew prior to residing under my mother's custody emerged because of poverty, neglect, and abuse. The World around me made me hate my life, myself, and even the woman responsible for bringing me into this world, because I held her responsible for the culture she sat me in, i.e., poverty, drugs, gangs, violence, and crime.

WHERE DID I GROW UP BEFORE INCARCERATION--WHAT WERE THOSE PLACES LIKE:

I devolved a bit deeper into crime after moving from Chicago to Kalamazoo--my place of birth. By the end of my first summer, I felt a seismic shift--a culture shock really--on several different fronts. First, I no longer had to be self-conscious about how we lived because we moved into my grandmother's brick mansion--the biggest house in the neighborhood and the only house with a pool and east and west wings. Although we now had adequate housing and apex social standing, we still did not have our own revenue stream. And since Kalamazoo businesses--like Chicago businesses--turned me down for employment, I turned once again to the streets--joining my brother and cousins in the lucrative drug market.

PERCEPTION ABOUT THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM AS A YOUNG PERSON:

Accompanying the decision to become a drug dealer brought my greatest

fear into closer purview--going to prison. Any show or news report that featured prison shook me to my core. I was so afraid of prison that I never wanted to do anything that would land me in jail. In retrospect, my circumstances cause me to abandon my inner inhibitions and chart a course that was on a collision with my greatest fear--prison. Driving my fear was the terror of rape, stabbings, and long prison sentences, but as I got older and in greater demand of subsistence, I plunged deeper into oblivion of what was lurking for those who ran afoul of the law.

FIRST CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM--WHAT WAS THAT EXPERIENCE LIKE:

It was only after incarceration that I looked as far back as my first contact with the criminal legal system to recognize how potent the need to extract oneself from poverty must be in order to diminish the fear of imprisonment for committing crimes. My long and arduous journey through the system began when I broke into my school at six years old with my older brother and a family associate. The objective was to steal computers that we could later exchange for cash. In the course of the breaking and entering, a silent alarm was tripped. By the time we made it to the rooftop, Chicago police were everywhere ordering us to come down. Down went the sixteen year old family associate first, who was immediately slammed to the ground with a pistol pointed to the back of his head. My nine year brother went down second, and was ruffed up against the school wall and handcuffed. I came down last--crying my eyes out. I was placed in the back seat of a police car and taken to the station to wait for my parents to come get me.

While at the station, officers spoke to me about being so young and going down an endless path following older influences. More impressionable to the lecture though was how they manhandled the sixteen year old family associate. The treatment was traumatizing because my six year old mind could not make

sense out of law enforcement treating a child so abusively--despite the fact that we were engaged in a crime. From that moment forth, distrust of law enforcement was forever cemented in my perception of those entrusted to serve and protect the community--which necessarily meant a day in court--not body-slammed to the ground with a gun pointed in the back of a child's head.

INCARCERATION

SECURITY LEVELS:

For my first nine years, all of my incarceration was at levels IV and V's, and then in the fall of 2002, my custody level was lowered to a level III security management pursuant to a new policy that had just come into effect that no longer required serving a third of the minimum sentence. The new policy required a quarter time served as part of the M.D.O.C.'s efforts to reduce the higher-level populations due to considerable higher operational cost. Today, the bulk of the prison population is concentrated in level II custody.

WHAT IS INCARCERATION LIKE FOR ME:

Incarceration for me is like perpetual psychological and emotional death. Prison really is the embodiment of hell, a pit of agonizing grief and torture--withstanding the physical and social torment. Prison has been like pouring acid into the top of my cranium--eroding everything down to my toes. Prison has turned parts of me into a figurative donut while the edges of my drives are the only things that sustain me. Moreover, being a lifer in prison adds an additional psychological castration every waking day. Prison is the worst thing that ever happened to me; for, I know that I deserve better, especially when I, nor any of my friends had a criminal or general intent to engage in any criminal endeavor. Lifers nevertheless, fight every day to maintain our sanity and to preserve our humanity, which in most cases, we have to

internalize to prevent our humanity from being deflated.

A lifer goes through suffering and shame, particularly, when he or she cares about life; their own and the loss of life that they are convicted of. For example, at my arraignment, I sobbed as I heard the mother of my victim painful cry. It hurt me to my soul that my actions and inactions caused her an unbearable grief. She neither knew that I was not my worse moment, nor that I spent my life helping ease the vicissitudes of others--despite my contrariness, because I knew what it was like to suffer, to pray for a blessing, a helping hand, and someone to intervene in my affairs.

In the grace that I extended, it did not matter if the recipient was a family member, friend, associate, or someone I saw needing a ride as I drove down the street. I would open up my life and share it with those in need of clothes off my back, a meal off my table, or a couch lifted, grass raked, or money to buy a daughter a prom dress. Hence, my current lot has tormented me, where, hanging in the balance is the uncertainty of relief and release--weighed against all of my good in life.

I have those cold-sweat nightmares of being in prison and never getting out--only to wake up thereafter with a life sentence. I have the agony of being in a dream where I am free, only to realize that it is a dream while still sleeping, and wake myself up to escape the toying torment. Then there is the agony of trying to make it to my house and the streets turn into a treadmill, or breakup, or disappear. If I do make it home--all the way to Chicago, the police raid my house to take me back to Michigan's prisons as if I had somehow escaped and been living on the run. Out of the vein of having illegally obtained my freedom, I spend restless nights in my dreams anticipating capture, to which, at the point of capture I try to fly away, which looks a little something like the first awkward flight attempts in the

early 1900s.

Collateral to being in prison with a life sentence is the insomnia associated with having a lot on my mind. These four walls in front of me defer my dreams, hopes, prayers, plans, and goals--leaving me quite often in a trance of trying to figure out how I got into this mess. The looming questions of what should have happened, could have happened, and would have happened to alter my fate--therefore my victim's fate--haunts me.

A life sentence grows a person up fast--progress is exponential because a lifer has the weight of the world on his shoulders. It forces him or her to navigate through the perplexities of their former life, current reality, and potential future. It is this churning inside that separates a lifer from the general population. We see life differently--it is more serious to us--we therefore, behave differently, having come into maturity and structure that we lacked in society. We are less impulsive, vulnerable, and gullible because we understand that our window of opportunity to live as a free person is closing every day. Furthermore, we factor in our age, health, and sanity.

Losing love-ones and supporters forces us to narrow our focus, chisel our resources, tighten our circle of intrigue, and execute with an aim and a purpose. We have the lowest recidivism rate because all we do is condition ourselves to capitalize on the moment to appreciate a second chance. Our appreciation of a second chance grows out of the recognition that we have lived for 20, 30, 40, and 50 years incarcerated--knowing nothing in the world was worth devolving into a life of crime for--neither amassing wealth nor compensating for childhood inadequacies glossed over by our violent tendencies.

We now know nothing was worth wearing a "crown of thorns" and "carrying a cross" for i.e., the suffering and shame experienced by our victims and their families, ourselves and our families, and the debris we left scattered throughout our communities. Although we are affected in different ways, still,

we only have 0.2% recidivism rate, i.e., 1 out of 646 non-parolable lifers from 1900-2003 have committed another crime (Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending [CAPPS], 2006). Moreover, according to The Detroit Free Press, Governors commuted 44 lifers without the possibility of parole sentences in the last decade, and of those 44 lifers, Chris Gantz, the Michigan Department of Corrections' Spokesperson, reports only one reoffended (City Pulse, 2020, p. 15).

The lifer's law does not take into account the mitigating circumstances of a person's past, present, or future. Seldom is there a prosecutor, judge, governor, or parole board member that cares about an offender that way in light of a heinous crime he or she may have committed. Therefore, once a judge sentence us to LWOP, the chances of coming from underneath it are improbable, albeit, in some cases, impossible where there are too many vested interests in population control disguised as law and order.

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE IN PRISON:

Good people like me who successfully make the transformation end up warehoused decades longer than when we were ready to return to our communities as productive and contributing citizens. The legitimate demands of justice are real, but so are the biases that perpetuate the mindset behind the cruel but usual punishment of "life means life," which makes living in prison feel more retributive rather than rehabilitative.

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO LIVE IN A CELL:

Because of the spirit of vengeance in criminal justice, living in a cell feels like confinement to a first-century bathroom cellar of bars, steel, and concrete--despite 20th century modernity.

WHAT WERE THE LIVING CONDITIONS LIKE AT EACH FACILITY:

In short, living conditions at each facility varies very little. Each

cell at each prison is like living in a bathroom--some have access to a dayroom with microwaves, irons, and coffee pots, while some do not. Some have insect and rodent infestations while very few do not. Some facilities are violent and predatorily; others concentrate on vocational and educational programming. Some facilities are eight men cubicles, most are double bunking prisons. Every facility I have been to has its issues with being abusive to prisoners, monetarily exploitive, and repressive of religious, political, and cultural ideologies rooted in ethnicity. Therefore, every facility I have been to has its race issues between staff and prisoners and prisoners and prisoners. Food, linen, and cleaning supplies have been lousy across the board--with few exceptions. Water is often rusty at Ionia and Jackson prisons, and smelly at the St. Louis prisons.

Twenty-five prisons later, I landed at my current location, Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility, a.k.a. M.T.U. (Michigan Training Unit), a.k.a. gladiator school. Upon my arrival, I was confronted with several phenomenal experiences at once, i.e., being called the N-Word, inappropriately searched by a male corrections staff, fraudulent misconduct reports, not notified of visits, placed in solitary confinement unscrupulously--with the added injury of planted evidence. Deplorable food, water, living conditions... like, my initial unit was inhumane--the toilet is six inches from the bunk, therefore, when flushed, the bottom bunk is often splashed with excrement, urine, and toilet water.

Seven years ago, M.T.U. had a very violent inmate on inmate culture and few programs that lifers could enroll in, but once Warden Burton arrived, everything changed. M.T.U. has now become the M.D.O.C.'s model facility of programming, both as receiving and guidance counseling recommendations and self-help. Five of the six units have programs ranging from fully paid

accredit Bachelor Degree courses, hands on Vocational Training, Dog program, Residential in and out-Treatment programs, Resume Writing, Employment Readiness, Job Fair, Local Union meetings, Drama and Poetry classes and more.

In the midst of taking advantage of equipping myself with tools to make myself a better person, I suffered a stroke and was transferred to several hospitals--including Duane Waters (prison hospital). The facility was killing me with the daily 21-hour lock down, three showers a week, and liquid diet. It took five weeks to get out of Duane Waters and back to M.T.U., where the Warden himself welcomed me back and recommended me for the College program. Today, I am an Associate Degree graduate seeking an opportunity to rejoin society as a returning citizen.

WHAT IS PRISON COMMUNITY LIKE:

Although I have been exposed to an ability to take advantage of programming opportunities that has altered my concept of self and how I interact with others, prison community as a whole, is like the gang cultures of the United States' biggest metropolis. At best, community encounters here are superficial--at worse--the crab in the barrow syndrome. Hence, to the former, ex-offenders market themselves to society as representations of our voices with a pulse on what's happening in our neck of the woods, but they are not in contact with us. To the latter, there exist an everyman for themselves syndrome disguised as community. I have yet to experience a single program in my 27 years of incarceration that is not Game of Thrones in principle.

HOW DO I SURVIVE IN PRISON:

Today, I survive in prison by minimizing the extent of my association, minding my business, and staying focus on the task in front of me.

WHERE AND HOW DO I FIND JOY:

My joy is found in writing books, short stories, poems, and papers that

contextualize my life, creativity, and aspirations of being published one day.

REFLECTION

WHAT DOES MY INCARCERATION MEAN TO ME:

My incarceration means to me that I violated the God-given right to life of a world citizen. My incarceration means that I committed a flagrant ill upon society, and suffered fallenness because of deviating from scriptural narratives and laws. Moreover, incarceration to me means an opportunity to recalibrate deviance.

HOW HAS MY INCARCERATION AFFECTED ME:

Although my incarceration has added virtues to me that should have amalgamated to my character in society with a just chance of existence, anything left in the fire too long inevitably blemishes--even galvanized objects. Therefore, I have been purified and now exert energy trying to resist the impurities that accompany overexposure of incarceration.

WHAT ARE MY IDEAS AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE CARCERAL SYSTEM NOW:

Incarceration is a necessary tool of society in response to the breakage of its most sacred laws; yet, incarceration is supposed to be the back-end of jurisprudence which became the front-end of jurisprudence due to financial and political gains. I advance that the need of incarceration can inevitably dissolve with front-end investments into the lives of the impoverished, underemployed, undereducated, and mentally ill. For instance, a one-time two trillion dollar stimulus check divided by the 2.2 million prisoners nationwide equal a little over \$900,000 investment in a law-abiding life. On a local level, if Michigan invested its two billion dollar corrections check just one time into the front-end of incarceration, Michigan prisoners would have a little over \$50,000 as a down payment on a law-abiding life. However, lobbyist, fearmongering, and population control continues to advance erosive

criminal justice policies.

HOW DID MY PERCEPTION ON THE WORLD CHANGE:

My perception on the world changed once I infused and weighed my views with and against the views of disinterested or non-similarly situated persons.

WHAT I WANT KNOWN ABOUT U.S. INCARCERATION:

What I want known about U.S. incarceration is that it is separate and unequally applied within and across every jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions afford prisoners second chances, others do not for the same or even lesser crimes. Also, most facilities are fraught by racism, abuse, and violence, while there are some outliers that are or become slitters of rehabilitation like M.T.U. under Warden Burton.

WHAT I WANT SCHOLARS TO KNOW:

I want scholars to know that I am willing and able to contribute my voice, my experience, my worm's eye view to the application of scholastic research.

WHAT I WANT POLICY MAKERS TO KNOW:

I want policy makers in Michigan to know that they can revolutionize the state's prison system in two unique ways; first, by enacting a term of years for all offenses, second by reinstating Good-Time and Disciplinary-Credits. The former act gives the parole board jurisdiction to release rehabilitated offenders sentenced to mandatory sentences, while the latter incentivizes good behavior by affording all offenders the opportunity to prove they are rehabilitated.

WHAT DO I WANT THE COMMUNITY TO KNOW:

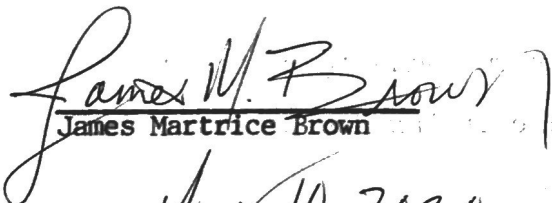
I want the community to know that the majority of offenders are not criminals--they committed crimes. Prisons and the lack or pro-social support while incarcerated and upon release, inevitably produces criminals. I want my

community to know that I want to atone for all the ills I committed and those it has suffered at the hands of others. I want my community to know that I want to represent it and its grievances on the highest platform there is to obtain redress. I want to write for it, speak for it, and work for it to prevent as many tragedies as possible. I am sorry, I apologize from the bottom of my heart, and promise to never-ever offend it again.

WHAT DO I WANT ACTIVIST TO KNOW:

I want activist to know that they have to begin actuating themselves into prosecutors' offices, and for or against a prosecutor that value or don't value the goal of justice, i.e., chastisement, rehabilitation, then release.

Sincerely,


James Martrice Brown

Date: May, 10, 2020