Foreword
Groundings of Gratitude

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The U.S. incarcerates a higher percentage of its population than any other country in the world. According to the latest edition of the World Population List, as of 2021 the U.S. had "more than 2 million prisoners."[1] The Russian Federation, by contrast, has just over 430,000 people imprisoned with a population less than half than that of the U.S. The number of Black and Afrikan incarcerated people in the U.S. is almost double Russia's entire prison population. None of this is to account for other 5 million people ensnared in the state's captive mechanisms—those on parole or probation, under house arrest or wearing ankle monitors. Obviously, the mass incarceration system is under-

1 Helen Fair and Roy Walmsley, *World Prison Population List, 13th ed.* (London: Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, 2021), 2.

girded by white supremacy, but as Eugene Puryear notes, overall, it "has a clear class function, funneling poor people of all backgrounds [...] those sections of the population that the capitalist class considers most 'superfluous' from the point of view of the labor market" and that, historically, are the most oppressed and therefore rebellious sectors of the population.[2]

As an educator, questions of access to schooling and access to equal schooling inevitably come up when it comes to prisons, whether it be "recidivism" or incarceration rates. The slogan "Schools, Not Jails" or "Education, Not Incarceration" are common—and correct—refrains amongst progressives. They are right: we should invest in schools instead of jails, we should live in a society that values education and in which incarceration is unimaginable. The problems come, however, when we think that schooling and mass incarceration correspond with each other in any way, as if the reason there are 7 million people directly living under the carceral state is because of a lack of education and schooling opportunities. This erases or hides the historical production of certain populations as "criminals" or "animals," whether it be Black people, gay men, Arab or Muslim populations, etc. This reinforces the myth of meritocracy:

2 Eugene Puryear, *Shackled & Chained: Mass Incarceration in Capitalist America* (San Francisco: Liberation Media, 2013), 4.

that if you only took advantage of the schooling choices you had, if you only studied harder, saved more money, used your time more wisely, you too could be rich. In reality, those who have the most money do the least work. If all the bosses in your city didn't show up to work for a week, no one would notice. Now, if all the janitors didn't show up to work for a day, people would surely notice. It's the same with prisons. If the real criminals in society were imprisoned, we would have one of the lowest prison population rates in the world because we have one of the highest levels of inequality in the world. Yet the real criminals, those who bomb and invade countries all across the globe, who steal people's savings and pensions, who bankrupt entire towns and regions, who deny people access to health care and housing, are the least likely to go to prison. Why is that?

To ask the question is to answer it: there is no such "thing" as crime, and the ruling-class defines what constitutes a crime. Crime is, in the most literal sense imaginable, socially-produced, or man (and woman) made. To return to schooling, so much of what being a kid entails in the U.S. used to get you sent to time out or the principal's office; now it gets you sent to jail. Throwing a pencil across the room in a fit of rage, an example of a harmless necessary act in learning how to feel and relate to one's emotions, is attempted assault. There is no

"school-to-prison-pipeline" because schools in the U.S. are already like prisons. We walk single-file against one side of the wall between classes, enter and exit through ex-ray machines, are subjected to routine search and seizures, lockdowns, and even brutality by police or "school resource officers." The reason there are so many people imprisoned is because there are so many crimes, and those crimes are selectively and brutally enforced. The simple solution to mass incarceration? Eliminate laws that define crime. Because, let's face it: even if you've never been arrested or even had an encounter with a cop, you're just an unconvincted criminal and probably even felon. Have you ever thrown away a piece of mail addressed to someone else? That's a felony right there: a "federal crime."

Focusing on prisons alone narrows our focus to the physical structures that undoubtedly do tremendous violence to our people, but are not the only ones that do so. With such a limited focus, we might forget that there is no oppression without resistance and there is no need for the ruling class to resort to force if there is no counterforce capable of not only resisting but overthrowing it. Prisons function to contain the power of the people. There would be no need for a state if it weren't for the infinite intellectual and creative capacity of the 99 percent and the clear threat they posed to the completely illogical and irrational society in which we

live.

The state is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history, and it serves as a mechanism to protect the oppressing class and enforce its will over society. It does so through repressive and productive means. It represses with cops and courts, prisons and militaries, but it produces through media and schools, cultural norms and routine habits. On both counts—repression and production—it isn't seamless. Humanity can't be confined or enclosed. Harnessing that which always resists into a force capable of producing a new society is the most complex, realistic, and necessary process in the world that entails innumerable processes. One key element is the teacher, and Leon Benson is one of my favorites, one of the teachers that I, as a teacher, look up to. I urge the reader to engage this book as a series of lessons from a teacher, but not just any kind of teacher. To be more precise then, instead of lessons, they are groundings.

Grounding with Gratitude

Benson was incarcerated for over 24 years, which is how old Walter Rodney was when he got his PhD in 1966. Born in colonial Guyana six years before it gained political independence after centuries of colonial rule, he left for Jamaica in 1960 on a scholarship to attend the University of the West Indies in

Jamaica, a country that achieved flag independence in 1962, although the British Crown still called the shots, even if Black and West Indian people carried them out. He graduated in 1963 and shortly thereafter moved to London to study at the School of Oriental and African Studies. He and his wife, Patricia, moved to the newly-independent Tanzania governed by the socialist leader Julius Nyerere, before returning to Jamaica for another academic position. While Rodney first felt the disconnect between academia and the streets as an undergraduate, it was more pronounced in 1967. As Patricia Rodney recalls, his being was traumatized by the division "between academia and the working class," which motivated his attempt "to bridge these worlds."[3] Despite gaining a wide audience from his many spontaneous lectures, this was not a practice of the academic "enlightening" the ignorant; it was, in fact, the opposite.

Rodney was influenced by the wave of socialist and anti-colonial revolutions at the time, including the Black Power movement in the U.S. In Jamaica, he translated it into the West Indies context. After teaching about Black Power in the academy, he went to talk about it with the masses or, it might be better to say, he went to the people

3 Patricia Rodney, "Living the Groundings—A Personal Context," in W. Rodney, *The Groundings With my Brothers*, ed. A.T. Rodney and J.J. Benjamin (New York: Verso, 2019), 80.

to teach him about Black Power. He called his pedagogy "groundings," a term he took from his brothers in the streets and in churches, in the gutters and abandoned houses. Black Power, he argues, is part of this pedagogy, the act of "sitting-together to reason, to 'ground' as the brothers say" but, he clarifies, "to 'ground together.'"[4] Groundings exposed Rodney to the immense capacity of the most oppressed Black people in Jamaica, as he says, "with the [B]lack brothers you learn humility because they are teaching you. And you get confidence, too; you get a confidence that comes from an awareness that our people are beautiful."[5] Humility and confidence are allies, not antagonists.

All working and oppressed people are capable and creative, if only we lived in a social system that nourished that fact instead of repressed it. In fact, I learned about Rodney's pedagogy from my comrade D. Musa Springer, a teacher of mine who is a decade younger than me and doesn't have some string of letters next to their name. Rodney's groundings occurred wherever Black people gathered together to talk and were part of Black Power (although he had an expansive notion of Blackness, arguing Cuba was only country in the entire hemisphere free from white power even though most

4 Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with my Brothers* (New York: Verso, 2019), 67.

5 Ibid., 72.

Cubans were "white").[6] The various poetic reflections and meditations, theoretical expositions and political explanations, confessions and misgivings, certainty and vulnerability that overflow throughout this short book read like a groundings session.

My suggestion to the audience, particularly those unfamiliar with Leon or his case or the intense struggle against mass incarceration in Indiana, is that you engage them like a grounding session. You will, at the very least, learn the same humility and confidence in our people that I did. I learned both in my latest grounding with it in five sentences consisting of less than 100 words. In the 10th letter, one addressed to the relatives of the man Leon was convicted of murdering and written years prior to his liberation from prison, he writes:

> That whole trial was a mockery. Because it was based on the values of white privilege against those of poor black people. The word of one white woman, no matter how contradictory, held greater value than that of seven people of color who firmly showed that i did not kill your loved one... It's bigger than black or white, like Hip Hop artist Lil Baby sings. It's about JUSTICE for Kasey and myself. But we must see the reality of the situation without being made to be enraged by our losses or manipulative people.

Read how Leon moves from the (now) indisputable fact that his decades in prison (one decade spent in torturous conditions) were due solely

6 Ibid., 27.

to a racist, capitalist system to the desire to build common unity with the recipients. The system he identifies and the techniques it's developed over centuries now to repress—that is to re-press, to press again, to mold—our state of mind into resignation and hatred, isn't denied or bypassed but acknowledged and transcended. It's like watching water flowing over a rock to reach the goal that we're raised not to be able to see or conceptualize: *justice for all*. When you read in the 11th letter how Kolleen Schoen-Bunch, the sister of Kasey Schoen, reached out to Leon and how that interaction unfolded, you'll learn confidence, the belief that WE can win justice for all.

As I said, Leon Benson is one of my favorite teachers, and this introduction is my letter of gratitude to him and his comrades. The letters that follow bear witness to an individual whose potential was unleashed while enduring the state's most repressive forces; they stand as a permanent witness to the system's inability to capture the imagination and the common that is the universal condition of the spirit.