# 2: Many a Thousand Gone: Randolph Riley and El Jones

## INTRODUCTION

El Jones

1. In the Nova Scotia Archives you can hear William Riley, recorded by Helen Creighton in 1943. He sings the song “No More Auction Block.” “No more auction block for me,” the lyrics go. “Many a thousand gone.” William Riley sings the songs carried out of enslavement by the “freedom runners” (as Sylvia Hamilton names them) to Nova Scotia. During the recording he is overcome by emotion. “It makes my heart ache just to sing it,” he says. “Don’t sing if it’s that much effect on you,” his daughter Rose soothes him.1But of course he keeps singing because if our ancestors didn’t sing through pain, none of us would be here. And this is our liberation, that even as we sing of freedom, the suffering of our ancestors rises in us. And in 2018 I will sit in a courtroom and watch his great-great-grandson be convicted (wrongfully) of murder by an all-white jury. The auction block never went away. It makes my heart ache just to write it. Many a thousand gone.

2. I first meet Randy when I am teaching in the African Canadian Transition Program at the Nova Scotia Community College. He is about twenty. In my class, he writes two papers. The first is on money and the banking system, and the second is on Christianity and Africa. He prints copies of the papers and hands them out to the class and teachers and staff in the program and then to his friends and his neighbourhood. Later, in jail, he asks me if I still have a copy of his papers and if I can send them in to him. He wants to show the guys inside so they can discuss some ideas. I no longer teach in the program, and although I tear apart my boxes hoping that I’ve saved something, they’re gone.

3. I see Randy a couple of days before he is arrested, on the Commons; it is a summer evening. He tells me he’s been swimming in the river, tells me about pushing the raft downstream and swimming to it. His girlfriend is expecting another child. For years after, when I think of him I think of the sunlight glinting off him, a river running, and a raft, drifting away.

4. My mother never pierced our ears as babies because keloids run in her family. When you injure the skin, she tells us, the flesh keeps growing, a reaction to healing that never stops. Maybe it comes from slavery, someone else tells me. Maybe we survived because our bodies grew a protective cover. Maybe this is what survival looks like, a wound growing outwards. You cut it away, it comes back. Even our healing is another hurting. This is a metaphor I am using now to tell you about loss and about Black love through prison walls. “Even with all this pain,” I write to him after the verdict, “I would not exchange our friendship to not be going through this.” We find ways to grow around the wound that is always there in the flesh of Black life.

5. And in five years, his mother dead, his cousin dead, him nearly dead one night from a stabbing, and all while innocent, all while waiting for trial. How do we quantify that? What is the statistic for never having held your youngest daughter? What mathematical proof is there to show Black pain? “Many thousand,” sang William Riley, a number beyond numbers, because there is no way to count what happens to us.

6. Randy hears iZrEAL Jones on the radio a couple of years into his remand. He calls us the next time we are on CKDU and asks us if we can do a show educating the guys inside about Black history and culture. Todd McCallum joins us as our resident historian. We call the show The Black Power Hour (BPH.) People inside call in to discuss topics, or to share poetry and rap, or to request music. Sometimes white people call the show to complain about the language in the songs. We tell them prison is the obscenity. Claims of offense and obscenity are always used to silence Black voices. Say “fuck the police,” and you get investigated. Shoot Black kids and you walk away without even being charged.

Randy gets transferred to a jail across the province where phone calls are seven dollars for twenty minutes for the long distance call, plus service charges. He organizes a petition and challenges the province about exploitative phone charges. When members of Black Lives Matter—Toronto come to Halifax to give a lecture, we circulate the petition at the event and it gets hundreds of signatures. And I purchase a phone with a local number. We fight for justice and we work around injustice, always.

We present Randy’s work in New York, at the Beyond the Bars conference at Columbia University, and at Black Studies conferences, and in talks across Canada. On the phone we write together, discuss essays and lectures, talk about the news, talk about life. The phones are recorded and monitored—even if we wanted to we couldn’t talk about his case. He is always in a positive mood, always building, always looking forward. His voice is with me wherever I go, connected through the phone. This is all I can do for him; I can’t get his body out, so I record his voice, try to have it heard beyond bars.

“Do Black lives matter in prison?” I ask people inside. “What does Black Lives Matter mean there?” When I ask Matthew Smith, who fearlessly gives me testimony for the Senate hearing on the human rights of prisoners, he reflects: “The world is a prison for Black people.”

7. Randy’s mother dies after a long illness. We had to fight for him to be taken to the hospital to visit her, scared as the days go by that it will be too late. When he does visit her, the sheriffs tell him that since he is in leg shackles, it will be easiest if he sits in a wheelchair as they transport him to her bedside.

The morning of the funeral he calls and says he’s not going to come. The sheriffs won’t bring him his clothes; they are making him come to the funeral in orange. “Do you think nobody in the community has seen someone come from jail at a funeral,” we say to him. It won’t matter. Come. In the Cherrybrook church, Randy stands up to speak. He is in cuffs and shackles. They won’t let him come to the front, but a microphone is passed to him. “I’m sorry to come before you like this,” he begins, and there, in his childhood community, where he grew up, the church turns to him. “We love you,” people call out. After he speaks, the community gets to their feet and applauds him, welcomes him home. And there is no stopping the love. People shout out to him, line up to hug him, to touch him, to cry with him. The sheriffs, sensing that there is no resisting, don’t even stop us from touching him. He holds his children. The community opens its arms to him, lets the prison know that they cannot shame us or separate us, that he is their child. In that Black church, in the heart of a historical Black community, as one, we resist the prison-industrial complex through the force of Black love.

8. The verdict takes five days. The courthouse is freezing cold. By the end of the weekend, in a deserted courthouse, we are lying on the floor and on the hard benches. We are in limbo. I think about the name we gave to our ritual dance, now entertainment on cruise ships. In the crowded hold of the slave ships, our bodies were twisted into the small space. The slave goes down, down into the hold, contorting his body under the stick of slavery. And then he jumps up, liberated.

Downstairs, in the cells, Randy is waiting alone. On the fourth day, his lawyer comes upstairs with a note written on a napkin. He hands it to Randy’s oldest aunt. Calling us together, she reads his message:

April 15/18

Family:

Keep your heads high up there, and don’t stress over what is now taking place. We must remain in good spirits and synchronize our hearts and our minds, for there is power in the unseen! It is our duty to remain strong, no matter the outcome. We’ve seen the evidence and we know what a just decision should be. What I wanted most from this trial was to have you all see my name cleared of this, and that has been accomplished. I’m grateful for that. You no longer have to doubt your nephew, cousin, brother, or friend. Now that you all know what’s right, I’m happy!

Love all y’all

Thx for the continued support.

We are all crying. The media waiting there for the verdict turn away uncomfortably, aware they are watching something unbearably painful and private. We never stop being spectacle, here under the white gaze of lawyers, judges, jury, media, who write how he is “staring” at the witnesses, who see threat on Black faces just for having eyes and directing them somewhere, and who then pretend that Black skin doesn’t matter here.

9. The foreperson reads the verdict wrong. “Not guilty, first degree,” she intones. We are hugging and crying. And then the clerk starts panicking. Read everything in the box, the judge instructs. Start again.

This time she reads, “Guilty, second degree murder.” Coming out of the courtroom, his sister gives the finger to the cameras stuck in her face. Tears streaming, she tells the truth. This is a racist system. We can’t get justice. A white cameraman argues with her; white people aren’t racist he says. Even here, even now, we can’t even grieve in peace. We have to come back to the courtroom to hear the sentencing recommendations the white jurors make. The reporters sit awkwardly. One of them asks me, are you okay, and I break down. “How can I be okay?” My hands are lifted to the sky, to the salvation our grandmothers pray for that doesn’t come for us. “How can we be okay when you do this to us day after day?” Randy’s aunts surround me, make a barrier with their arms, hold me. “Give us some dignity,” they condemn the reporters. We are Black flesh, growing around a wound.

10. “What does justice look like?” I ask Randy after he reads me the chapter he wrote for this book. “I think we should end the chapter there,” I say. Randy writes back, what does justice feel like? This chapter, put together over jail phones that cut out, through lockdowns, written in pen across pads of paper, recorded over calls and transcribed. This is how we speak justice. The family and friends spread out on the floor of the freezing courthouse lobby, refusing to believe the lie that we wouldn’t be here if we hadn’t done something. This is our bodies showing up for justice. William Riley, historian of our suffering. That is what justice sounds like, remembering our dead and speaking for them even when it hurts.

Why do you do this, people in prison always ask me; why do you bother fighting for people? Do you think you can win? And yes, I say, yes we can—not all at once, not all the time, and sometimes just the small things. This love, in the pews of the Cherrybrook Baptist Church, in the arms of the community, in the voice over the phone, in walking step by step through suffering and not looking away, in Randy asking how I am through the worst oppression, our tears, our anger, this is how justice feels, this is where we begin to liberate ourselves. This is why we wrote this chapter together, because we are not supposed to reach through the steel doors and the locks, because we are supposed to feel shame, because Black love exists, and it matters.

It makes my heart ache just to feel it.