

From Slavery to Police Torture

Interview with Laurence Ralph

by Jules Naudet

Laurence Ralph's ethnography explores the various systems of punishment that injure black and brown Americans' bodies and that contribute to maintain social hierarchies that rely on the vestiges of slavery. These injuries call for healing and overcoming trauma, but they also call for reparative justice.

Jules Naudet: In your research, you've explored topics as varied as gun violence, police violence, police torture, drug trade, mass incarceration or disability. You've explored these themes through various formats and instead of sticking to traditional academic writing, you've also explored other forms of expression such as documentaries or innovative writing (*The torture letters* is a book that chooses the method of epistolary narratives). The question of Black injured and debilitated bodies, of suffering minds as well as of death seem to be at the center of all your reflections. What would you say is the common thread that knits together the various facets of your work? What does your work tell us of the current state of racial relations in the United States?

Laurence Ralph: In my work, I've explored the drug trade, gang violence, police violence, disability injury violence. I think the key theme that really holds my work together is looking at injury and violence together. And the reason I say that is because

often when we talk about particularly black urban youth, we think about it in terms of incarceration and death.

And what I try to do by bringing up the question of injury is to look at how people are actually living *with* injury, living *through* injury, and actually trying to overcome their circumstances. And for me, that's important because injury entails not just violence, but the idea that you can recover from that violence; and there's a way to explore repair. So I look at injury not only in the body, but also in forms of social injury as a way to think about reparative justice.

Jules Naudet: In *Renegade Dreams* you document how ex-gang members who were injured in gun violence ended up paraplegic or tetraplegic, condemned to spend the rest of their life on a wheel-chair, constantly micro-managing their bodies in order to avoid health complications. Yet, your book refuses to succumb to miserabilism and you rather show how these people keep dreaming and engage in politics, writing, community building, etc. Who are the "dreamers" you portray in your book *Renegade Dreams*? How do they force us to complicate the traditional narrative of the violent isolated ghetto marked by the symbiosis of hyper-segregation and hyper-incarceration?

Laurence Ralph: My first book, *Renegade Dreams*, really centers around the figure of the disabled former gang member. So disability became a key way to explore themes related to violence and gang involvement. And I think the reason why disability became so important for me is because disabled gang members were placed in a lot of paradoxical positions.

On the one hand, there's this notion that they had sacrificed themselves for the gang and therefore they should be honored. On the other hand, their lives were in contradiction to that. And because they weren't dead, they weren't motorized in the same way in which a lot of gang members are once they pass away. And so they were a kind of living testament to violence, but living testament to abandonment. And in a lot of ways as well.

And so I got interested in studying their lives and in studying how they were before and after they had been injured and their relationships to the community and their relationships to their family. And that took me into exploring dreams because I learned that they had a lot of aspirations.

They had a lot of aspirations for the future. They had a lot of aspirations for the lives they wanted to lead and the kind of families that they wanted to have. But these were different kind of aspirations that I was used to as a kind of middle-class person who was aspiring to be a professor at the time. And those aspirations had to do with having a community that was safe and free from drug involvement, having a community that was safe and free from shootings, and where people can walk around and not feel police harassment; and I don't take those dreams lightly because people really organized and mobilized and dedicated their lives to solving these community problems.

How do we get people to and from school safely? How do we make this a drug free zone? How do we curb gun violence? And these were dreams and aspirations that were vitally important to a community. And so it was important for me to focus on those everyday dreams that people were struggling for. In a way, it allows me to point to what I think most readers of my book would take for granted, the safety of their own lives, the kind of social mobility that they can see a clear path towards.

But on the other hand, I think that it sheds light on social inequality more broadly and shows the difference between – the difference in our dreams is also the difference in our social predicaments. And so I think focusing on dreaming is vitally important, especially where... Because there was a history of looking at urban communities as pathological, where there's no hope, and now people have alternative values that don't align with so-called mainstream values.

But that's not what I found. I just found that people had very intense and very important dreams that they were trying to fight for. But these dreams were something that most Americans can take for granted. And I thought it was very important to shed light on that.

Jules Naudet: In *Torture Letters*, you expose how Chicago police officers working under former Police Commander Jon Burge tortured Black suspects for years, beating them, electrocuting them, waterboarding them or raping them. What does your book *Torture Letters* tell us about the conditions that allow for the perpetuation and the maintenance of State-backed torture and other forms of dehumanizing systems?

Laurence Ralph : In *Torture letters*, I took on the very difficult topic of addressing police torture. And I looked at a case in which almost 200 black men had

been tortured in police custody. And the reason why it was very important for me to focus on torture in particular is because these these torture incidents were connected to a larger social movement in Chicago that had went on for almost 50 years to try to try to get recognition for torture. And the crucial part of this is that it involves steps. The first step was that people didn't even believe that these men had been tortured. Over the years, more and more evidence came through from civil cases and litigation that made it and unquestionable that they had been tortured.

But then the question is, what can be done about that? And so in the book, I try to look at everything from the torture devices that were used to electrocute and shock these men to the careers of the police officers who tortured them. And I found that these police officers had other careers in other lives as military personnel.

Sometimes they had come from the military and then implemented these techniques of torture. Sometimes they were then used by the military because of their efficiency at getting confessions. And they were found to be torturers in other places, in other black sites during the war on terror. So I found it important to trace these networks and trajectories as well as torture devices to show how easily people can be turned into enemy and what happens when that occurs.

And so a lot of dealing with torture is dealing with the question of how can we prevent this from ever happening again? And I think the most eye-opening thing in the book is that a lot of the same conditions that existed for these men to be tortured still exist. The same pressure to get confessions, the same hierarchy in which police officers move up the ranks based on their ability to solve cases; the same blind eye to complaints from the community that things are happening within certain precincts, that still exists. And so I want to outline this as detailed as possible so that we can see the steps and see the patterns of how torture takes place. And this project for me was important because it was connected to a wider movement in Chicago that tried to get reparations for the torture survivors.

And, in 2015, the city of Chicago awarded reparations in a landmark case. And this provided a host of collective resources for the city, based on what these men went through, and so, looking at torture again as a case of what I think of as reparative justice. How can we repair the violence that has been done in the past, whether it's interpersonal or state sanctioned violence?

Jules Naudet: How does your work approach the lines of continuity between the age of slavery and the current fate of African-Americans?

Laurence Ralph: I think my book falls in a long tradition, and my work in general falls in a long tradition of black scholars looking at the afterlife of slavery, or, as Cristina Sharpe says, the wake of slavery, and looking at the residual effects of slavery for African descended peoples. And the reason why that's important is because I look at the kinds of systems of containment, policing and confinement that have transformed over time and still have effects in the present. So, whether that's the slave patrols, they're monitored, free blacks and slaves alike, or whether that's the Jim Crow era that instilled places where African descended peoples could go or can't go, or whether that's the system of mass incarceration that disproportionately impacts African descended peoples, I want to look at how those systems maintain particular social hierarchies and racial hierarchies that persist over time.

And so, in doing that, that's one of the ways that I explore injury and social injury in particular. So even if you're not impacted by it in particular, if you yourself as a black person, living in the United States haven't been enslaved, it's very likely that someone in your family has; and for Latino people as well, it's very likely that someone that they know in their family has been incarcerated.

And so, this disproportionately affects black and brown Americans. And so how can we look at the systems of punishment in our society that reify certain forms of social exclusion? And how can we think about new ways in order to maintain safety that doesn't rely on the vestiges of social inequality.

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