

Name: Arthur Aldrich

Title:

Organization or Agency: Incarcerated in CT DOC

Topic: Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

Testimony:

The federal and state government, along with the power of taxpayer dollars that fund this injurious penal system, have destroyed my relationship with my daughter. Indeed, the Connecticut Department of Corrections (D.O.C.), through a series of pernicious laws and policies, has become so complicit in severing ties amongst loved ones that incarceration in Connecticut mirrors the United States' earliest foray into family separation: the transatlantic slave trade .

I have not seen my daughter, Arnisha, once in the 27 years I've been incarcerated. Current laws and D.O.C. rules and regulations have made speaking to her incredibly difficult and our ability to see each other at contact visits impossible. Unable to hold my daughter not once in her life, to feel her warm cheeks against mine, to kiss her and tell her how much I've missed her, how much I love her and that I have never, ever, forgotten her has stripped me of all that it means to be a father. The distance and time that separate us feel, to me, like the miles between plantations that held, separately, multiple members of one family. Neither of us have been sold off, but the nature of my confinement makes me no more free than a slave, held captive on a different plantation than his children.

Before emancipation and the abolition of slavery, the children of enslaved people were often forbidden from acknowledging their biological enslaved parents; doing so could result in being sold to a different owner. This inhumane separation could make it so that family members—if they ever, on the off chance, reunited—were unrecognizable to each other. For my daughter and I, the oppressive practices that forced our physical separation have severely strained our relationship in a variety of ways, making us more akin to strangers than father and daughter.

When I was first sent to prison, I was incarcerated too far away from Arnisha's mother for her to be able to visit me. I felt helpless. I had no control over my life or circumstances and was rendered incapable of executing the most important responsibility I'd ever been tasked with: being a parent. I was in the sunken place, where grief, sorrow and guilt had whipped me shamelessly into submission.

Since I could not afford to pay 18 dollars for a 15 minute phone call, I not only could not see my daughter, but I couldn't even speak to her. On an average salary of less than 1 dollar a day for incarcerated workers, the price once charged by the D.O.C. for phone calls felt inhibitive at best, and just plain cruel at worst. It is morally astounding that they had no compunction over charging this amount for us to be able to reconnect with loved ones they'd separated us from, profiting all the while from people's desperation to hold onto their family in some small way.

By the time Arnisha grew up, any second chance at a relationship between the two of us was rendered nearly impossible once she, too, fell prey to this unjust penal system. Due to her previous incarceration, she has been removed from my visitor list, and while she has re-applied several times and written multiple letters over the course of several years, wardens continue to move the goalpost. "Inmate Directive 10.6 (D) Current and X Offenders," which keeps Arnisha from visiting me, does not serve any safety goal, but is just another method by which America destroys our families, causing irreparable harm to us personally and to the communities we come from. Many times these tactics work and wear me down. It feels as if I am an insect crushed by a foot or a car, something so much bigger than I am that allows me no recourse to fight back. Our federal and state laws, alongside D.O.C.'s policies regarding visitation and contact with loved ones are a constant reminder that these systems do not see me as a human being. My efforts to maintain a connection with my daughter and to be a good father, things that

should theoretically align with the D.O.C.'s mission of rehabilitation, are not supported by our governments or prisons; rather, when these efforts are enabled, they're frequently treated solely as a potential source of profit for the Department.

In this way and many others, mass incarceration reminds us time and again that it is neo-slavery at its core. The oppressive and exploitative practices that have separated me from my daughter should not be surprising in a country that has denied certain people the right to a family, to love, and to form human bonds with their loved ones for centuries.

Toni Morrison writes in her 1987 novel *Beloved*: "'Here,' [Baby Suggs] said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it...More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.'"

Like my ancestors before me, I have been forced to eke out an existence in a society where my existence—as a full human being, who loves, who hurts, who is free—was not wanted in the first place. Yet, like my ancestors—who were not loved by their country, nor were they permitted to love freely in it—I soldier on, creating my own way to be. And in talking and writing about the unjustness of the systems that try to rob us of our humanity, I find a certain freedom—a place where my heart, and who it loves, my hands, and what they create, my mind, and what it thinks, matter. A place where the claws of unjustness can't reach and my love for my daughter roams free, even if just on these pages.