

Elizabeth Ferry (00:11): Greetings from the room formerly known as my dining room and welcome to Recall This Book. I'm Elizabeth Ferry, and I'm here with my co-host John Plotz--hello John

John Plotz: Hey. Hello.

EF: And we're delighted to welcome today's guest Laurence Ralph. Hello Laurence.

Laurence Ralph: Hi, great to be here.

EF: Dr. Ralph is here as the third installment of our series on global policing, where we try to look at policing and police violence from a variety of angles and in a global perspective. He is Professor of Anthropology at Princeton University and the author of *Renegade Dreams: Living with Injury in Gangland Chicago*, and in 2020, *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence*. I would start by saying that this was a timely book, except that one of the sad lessons of the book itself and of 2020 is that this is a topic that's been around for a long time, and doesn't seem to be going away. Perhaps at least the public discussion of it is growing, and we hope a sense of shared outrage that will persist beyond putting a sign on one's lawn. So perhaps Laurence, you could start us off by telling us a bit about the project and the book.

LR (01:22): Sure. I'd be happy to, well, my kind of introduction to the topic of police torture came when I was working on my first book, *Renegade Dreams*, which was about gang violence in Chicago. And obviously the question of gangs and gang violence has to do with policing and surveillance in urban communities. But I didn't go in depth in that book about how young people especially were policed in Chicago, because I quickly found out that that was an enormous topic with an enormous history of its own. And one of the reasons why I found that out was because when there was an incidence of police violence, in which a young person was shot, people often made the claim that if nothing happened about Burge and the torture ring, then nothing would happen about the young people who were shot. And this was in, you know, 2006, 2007, 2008, and -9 before the kind of burgeoning of the Black Lives Matter movement. And so I always had an idea that I wanted to look at the torture cases and figure out who this person Burge was that people kept mentioning in Chicago.

So *The Torture Letters* really centers on 125 Black men who were tortured in police custody under a police commander, Jon Burge, who controlled Area 2 and Area 3, police precincts in Chicago. And I follow what happened to the torture survivors, but also the activism that occurred in the wake of those torture cases that happened in the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties. We have to engage with the particularities of that community and really think about the problems they're facing. And that always stems from how people are already grappling with their own problems. And assuming that people recognize there is a problem, and then they're grappling with it as a kind of precondition for the work. Because if they don't feel it's a problem, then who are we to say that it is a problem, you know? But obviously, you know, when it comes to something like police violence, everybody knows it's an issue. It's a long historic issue. So, entering that space entails dealing with the history of how people have been grappling with that issue for a very long time.

JP (04:24): Maybe that's the context actually, Laurence, to ask you about the genre choices for your own writing. Cause you know, obviously one of the things that stands out is the letter decision. But not just your decision to write letters, but also to think about public letters, which I was just thinking it's such an interesting quality because on one feature of letters that we think about is their particularity in terms of personalized recipient, but you're kind of flipping that model around. In fact, when Elizabeth and I were talking, she had a wonderful line: She said, *it's almost as if you're hiding one genre inside another with your, with your letters*. So can you talk about that decision in terms of the encounter with the problem that you're describing?

LR (05:08): Yeah. I mean, I think in, in the spirit of, grappling with what people feel is the problem, one of the first questions I always ask when I embark on a research project is assuming that we're going to address this social issue together. You know, I think the first step is to see if people are interested in grappling with the social issue with me and allowing me to be part of their process in their community and grappling with the social issue. But assuming we've already established that we've decided to that we will work on this problem together—I always ask, you know, who do you want, this, who do you want to make aware of this issue? Like who do you feel that really needs to know about this problem? And when it came to police violence in particular

it struck me that no one really cared about what academics thought or scholars thought about it. That was the least thing from their mind. Whereas I think other issues, there was a sense that people were like, when you write your book, make sure you tell them that we're like this, you know, like there was other sense that there was an academic public that wasn't getting it and that people wanted them to know the truth of it.

But in this project about police violence, that sentiment wasn't really there. The sentiment was okay, you know, *police officers need to know this, politicians need to know this. Another generation of people needs to know this.* And so I really thought seriously about that. Why are these kind of same characters coming up in terms of, you know, needing to know this history of police violence and how can I reach them? What vehicle can I use as a scholar to reach them? And that's kind of the genesis of the idea of letters and open letters, because you know, the thing about letters is that they are very direct. They're to a particular audience. And you have to think about why the audience needs to know a particular thing and who wants them to know and why you're writing this letter, and what is the point of it?

And I think when you're talking about torture, it can very easily go off the rails where you go, you cross the lines into something that's voyeuristic, something's that's sensational. But I found that when my message was very poignant and direct, I was telling people at each instance what they needed to know. And it kind of assuaged that feeling of voyeurism that I was very worried about and very careful to address in the book. And so, yeah, that's the primary reason why I kind of picked the letters and they were different because they were open letters in a sense. But open letters are often more polemical than the kind of letters that I was writing though--where they were really a kind of intimate open letter that pointed people to a particular history. And I hope that together, all of the letters will kind of, illuminate the larger landscape of police torture, not only in Chicago, but, transnationally.

EF (09:49): Yeah. Maybe this is a good moment to bring in the second text that we were, we decided we'd bring into conversation with your book, because it's also a letter, right? So that text is *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Laurence, you suggested this, can you introduce the book to our listeners and tell us why you chose it?

LR (10:12): Yeah, I think, you know, I think the other reason why letters are important to me is because there's a tradition--an African-American literary tradition--of kind of writing letters to loved ones to kind of warn of the hazards that they might face. And I think that there is a resurgence among this tradition, ushered in by *Between the World and Me*, but of course it has a longer history in Baldwin and *The Fire Next Time*. That goes back to the reckoning that we opened with, you know, thinking about adversity and the, you know, one of those famous quotes from Baldwin is that "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed unless it's faced." And that's the kind of reckoning that is telling somebody something that they need to know because their survival depends on it. And that being an act of love, and I think *Between the World and Me* is, uh, is the epitome of that tradition. And so, um, in that way resonates what I'm trying to do in *The Torture Letters*.

EF 11:55): Because it's a letter that's addressed to, it's an open letter that's addressed to his son. Thinking for a second about Coates's book and the quite pessimistic way in which he describes the question of hope or one version of hope. So he's asked by a reporter, you know, *do you have hope* and shown a sentimental picture of a policemen hugging a young black boy, I think, and this is kind of the beginning of part of his ruminations on this question. And, you know, so hope is this complex thing that relates to something about optimism. It relates to something about despair and you clearly are addressing this in your book and you address it in the letter that you write to, um, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, the author of *Guantanamo Diary*. Can you talk about hope and despair and how those relate and how you work with them?

LR: (12:54): Yeah, I mean, I think this is a little bit of a divergence from where I go with the open letters and where Coates goes. And, you know, there was this, that debate between Coates and Cornell West, right, a couple of years ago, I think around this issue of hope in a way. I mean, I think that there's a way in which Coates's work (and this was Cornell West's point) there's a way in which the scale of the violence, the length of the violence and the historic scale of the violence and just the domination of police power can seem like wholly determining and in a way that there's just an annihilation of life and no matter what you do, you can never overcome it. And I think there's a way that you can read Coates as a concession to that.

Like you can see that's always been the purpose of the American system of government and that will always be, and right now there's nothing besides that. And there's a way in which *that* is attractive to people in the same way that torture is attractive to people and in a kind of voyeuristic and sensational way in which people actually derive some kind of sense of power and pleasure from seeing domination, right? And this is juxtaposed against a history in which people are always fighting back. People are always reckoning. People are always trying, no matter how overwhelming the odds may be, people are always trying to fight back.

So I feel like I have to also talk about that. And that's part of, again, my conception of injury, where I have to talk about the potential for repair, you know, and for me, that is talking through these issues with someone like Mohamadou, who was tortured in Guantánamo Bay by Chicago police officers. And he has a radical sense of optimism. And, I'm taken aback by his radical sense of optimism for the other reason that, it's, you know, seems individualistic. It seems in one's own power to will the strength to overcome. But I do recognize how understanding that can be a tactic and a strategy for fighting against oppression in the long run and also making different survivors of police torture visible to each other as a way to dismantle the American empire.

EF (17:07): So when you say understanding that you mean the understanding of one's capacity to continue to be hopeful..?

LR (17:15): Yes. But in a real practical sense too, in terms of just like what you did to remain hopeful.

EF: Right.

LR: Like, you know, when I'm talking to Mohamadou, I'm like every day what did you actually do? And so, like, he's talking about how he, you know, kept track of the days by reciting a certain passage of the Q'uran because he had memorized it, so he knew that if he recited a certain amount, that would be a certain amount of hours. And therefore he took, kept track of the days that way, or how he—they didn't want to want them to know what time it is. So he would ask people, his interrogators, for particular things in ways that they would reveal their wrists, so he can look at their watch. You know, these are

like literally ways in which he survived. And so I think those actual tactics are important, just to know,

EF: And not to underestimate,

LR: Right. and not to underestimate. So there's like the theoretical or the abstract notion of hope, but then there's the everyday practice of hope.

But even when we just look at Chicago, I think that in terms of hope, I think what the torture survivors in that movement has been able to attain is like pretty remarkable in the sense that they're using the language of reparations. They get, they won a reparations ordinance in 2015. And that was really landmark because, you know, the way that we deal with police violence in this country is often through settlements. And what those settlements often do is to stop victims from then sharing what happened to them. But this reparations ordinance wasn't only about individual compensation. It was also about collective resources, and it included a torture justice center where people could get counseling and included job training and education for the torture survivors and included a mandate that the history of the torture cases be taught in Chicago public schools. And so I think those kinds of resources, -- and having redress on a collective level--I find hope in that as a model for how to address something like police violence. But the limitation of that is that it doesn't ask anything of the police themselves. It puts the onus on the community to address their own problem and provides resources to do that. But it doesn't ask the police to, to address their own complicity.

EF (20:52): Right. In some ways that seems, I mean, that, that sort of movement to a collective model, rather than an individual kind of settlement, it reminds me a lot of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that we see in other countries mostly. I mean that in and of itself, I hear what you're saying about the sort of individual or even departmental accountability of the police, but that in itself feels hopeful to me because it is also kind of undermining a sense of American exceptionalism that we don't commit human--It's other countries where they committed human rights violations, or it's other countries where you have to have national sorts of reckonings.

LR (21:40): Yeah, and that's been a big part of the torture cases that comparison internationally in those models of truth and reconciliation. And the United Nations because when these cases, uh, first happened in the

Eighties, uh, well, they first kind of gained recognition in the Eighties. And then they found out that they had happened earlier in the Seventies. But when that happened, there was a lot of debate, as you can imagine, about whether this was just *brutality* or actual *torture*. And it's been a lot of work for us to say that, *no, this is police torture*. But that came from the international comparison and comparing what actually is happening and what devices people are using the torture people and how that compares to what's happening in other spaces.

The first set of comparisons happened in the Nineties around dictatorships in Latin America. And then it kind of died down. Those comparisons die down. There is an attempt within Chicago to erase and mute those experiences and classify them as mere brutality. But then there was the you know, War on Terror. There was a resurgence of that language of torture and again, another resurgence when it came to Guantánamo and the atrocities that happened on Guantánamo. And so this is not divorced from what's happening internationally at particular periods of time. So that's been vitally important in seeing torture as torture in the U.S.

JP (23:43): I was going to ask, Laurence, whether Hannah Arendt's work is helpful to you at all? Like, do you think through like some of the "Banality of Evil" argument, the, the account I was thinking, especially towards the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, there's this, again, not optimism, but hopefulness she has about how stories are going to emerge, you know, the impossibility of keeping the truth down. And I can read that and in one light, think of it as so naive, like her conception of the truth is just this like little gold brick that you find somewhere hidden, but on another level, yeah. She's got a faith in reckoning as well, I think. I was just wondering if, if she's somebody that you bounce off of or think through.

LR (24:30): Yeah. I thought a lot about Holocaust studies in general when looking at these cases, because I was really interested, especially in the beginning, around witnessing and what the role of the witness is and, you know, how to convey the unimaginable as a mode of witnessing. And a lot of that work has been done and, and, and Holocaust studies, but also the work in which you think of, the potential for there to be many Holocausts and not look at it as an event that can never be surpassed. But to ask the question, *what is*

to prevent this from happening again? And I think that emerges, you know, out of Holocaust studies.

And I really was interested in that question when it came to Chicago police torture, like, what is that, what is to prevent it from happening again? And a lot of that has to do with the banality of evil in the sense that there's an aspect, a pervasive aspect of complicity. And I talk about like the "open secret of police torture." And it's the case that people knew about this the whole time. But they also knew that to say something about it would mean that they would risk their careers, risk their lives in some cases. And there became incentives for people to move up the ranks. And once they moved up the ranks, once they were a District Attorney who had heard someone say *I've been tortured* and they ignored it, then that district attorney becomes a judge. And when he or she is a judge, they don't want to hear any torture cases because they themselves are complicit or the people who they work for are complicit. And so there's a way in which it then becomes a coordinated effort to conceal the truth.

JP (26:55): Just a tiny point, but like from a literary-studies perspective, I really appreciate that account of what you can get out of Holocaust witnessing studies. Because I think for too long, the discourse of trauma has seemed, you know, so predominant in terms of defining the unspeakability around this sort of terrible crimes or genocidal-like crimes that we forget that there's lots of ways to talk about the silencing of witnessing or the suppression of witnessing, which does not involve trauma. Because trauma is like a psychological aporia, which is definitely there and it real, but it isn't the only account for why silence would spread. I just think it's important to keep those different....something like the Arendtian account of, of the difficulty of witnessing and the logic of why witness would be suppressed or silenced, but it's a non-traumatic account of what that is. And it gets away from what, as you were saying, it gets away from the notion of the singularity of the Holocaust. If you treat the Holocaust, as this one, you know, blockage, rather than understanding, you know, Holocaust-type events that are pervasively present and have to be recognized.

LR (28:16): Yeah, there's a resonance there between African-American studies and slavery in which that kind of unspeakability of the horrific as well on the one hand there's that unspeakability of the horrific, then there's the, seeing it as the ultimate event that nothing can compare to as well, right? I really, you know, thought carefully about that because on the one hand, there is a perspective that it's so horrific that you can't really describe it. And to try to describe it only plays into a kind of pornography of violence, right? Where when it comes to the legal aspect in like truth and reconciliation and the practicality of having to tell the stories in the law, through the court of law, it's a different thing because people have had to say what happened. They've had to show the scars on their body. They had to describe the instruments of torture in order to gain recognition. So there's this balancing act between like how you described that process and how you do pay careful attention to the pitfalls of describing suffering in a non-critical way. And so again, this is why the letters for me became important because there a way to mediate that tension,

EF (30:31): It makes a lot of sense. And actually there's a good connection there to the final part of our show, which is about recallable--recallable books and other things. And the one that I had thought of which is Frederick Douglass' 1876 speech on the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument, very much connects to this question about how slavery is represented and what might be some of the pitfalls of representing it. The reason I thought of this speech is, because it also has a kind of one genre nestled inside another, because it's this commemorative speech--these sorts of speeches are supposed to be unqualifiedly praising, and yet Douglass and we'll, we'll have a link to this on our, on our webpage clearly hates the monument. Because it has this, you know, slave kneeling, you know, while Lincoln kind of extends his benevolent white hand over him to save him.

He manages to both convey that but especially to convey within the genre of the speech to convey the history, highly ambivalent history, of Lincoln's relationship to slavery relationship to enslaved and non-enslaved Black people, the various kinds of reversals that that he did. And give a very incisive history about this at this kind of hidden inside the commemorative speech. So that's what made me think of it, but it's also connected to these questions about facing up to history, to the issues of whether, you know, how does

erasure happen or get undone. So that was mine and, Laurence do, do you have something you'd like to talk about as in our recallable somethings?

LR (32:41): I'll be happy to talk about "Strange Fruit" and Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit" because for me, not only is it a kind of historic song in the way that we think about state-sanctioned violence in the US, and what kinds of bodies are disposable and the history of African-descended people being disposable in the U.S. But also for me, it merges two critical metaphors in my book, which are the torture tree on the one hand, and the black box. And so, the black box was a device that Jon Burge used to electrocute torture victims. But I also conceive of the black box as a kind of reservoir in which knowledge gets obscured. And people say things like, *well, we can't know about it because there's no witnesses. We can't ever know what actually happened, because it's his word against the torture victims.*

To repeat some of the things we mentioned earlier, I am interested in exploring those silences. So what does the black box teach us? And in this case, literally it connected torture survivors through the scars that left on their bodies. So people were able to say, this mark is the mark of electrocution that could only have occurred from attaching this device to my body in this way. And other torture survivors were allowed or able to show the same thing. So it allowed for that. And so there's the black boxes as a torture device and as a kind of epistemological apparatus in that it produces certain kinds of knowledge about torture. And then there's the torture tree, which I discussed, that for me is about a kind of structure of torture in which people rise through the ranks and are allowed to hide torture in plain sight because they become complicit.

And in "Strange Fruit," Billie Holiday is talking about a tree that is a torture device. You know, you know, the tree that lynches Black people is the torture device. And so there's that resonance there and the resonance of the way that this history is always with us and that this history is also foundational to the black experience in the U S.

EF (36:10): Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Well, thank you, Laurence. This has been a really amazing conversation and I'm sure that our listeners will have lots to, to follow up on and much of that will be on our website. So to conclude, Recall This Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry.

It's affiliated with Public Books and is recorded and edited by Plotz, Ferry and a cadre of colleagues here in the Boston area. And beyond our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, "Fly Away." Sound editing is by Claire Ogden and production assistance, including website design and social media is done by Nai Kim. We appreciate the support of University Librarian Matthew Sheehy and Dean Dorothy Hudson, the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis and the Mellon Connected PhD grant. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes.

You can email us directly at [ferry](mailto:ferry@brandeis.edu) or plotz@brandeis.edu or contact us by social media and our website. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcast joy. And you may be interested in checking out past episodes, in particular, two other episodes on policing and police violence with Hayal Akarsu and Daniel Kryder and David Cunningham, and on the economic origins of mass incarceration with Adaner Usmani. So thanks very much, Laurence.

JP (37:44) Yes. Thank you.

LR: It's been a pleasure.