

jackie sumell

Solitary Gardens — New Orleans, LA

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Rien Fertel: Alright, this is Rien Fertel, with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is a Thursday afternoon, May 22, 2025 and we're in New Orleans, Louisiana, and I'm sitting with jackie sumell, and I'm gonna have her introduce herself, please.

jackie sumell: Hi Rien, jackie sumell and we are sitting here in the John Thompson Legacy Center for Abolition and Beyond.

Rien Fertel: Thank you, and if you don't mind, would you please share your birthdate.

jackie sumell: Sure, June 11, 1973.

Rien Fertel: In prepping for this interview and thinking about this interview, I thought of a dozen different ways that I wanted to start. But I'm just gonna kinda let the space guide us, because the first thing that you brought to my attention to when you walked into this room was this beautiful mural. Can you describe — hopefully we'll get a photograph of it later for archival purposes — but can you describe what I'm facing? This beautiful mural.

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jackie sumell: Yeah, I'd be happy to. You're looking at a mural that Katie Green whose an artist based in Calgary, in Canada, and I collaborated on in 2019. And the mural looks at the ways that plants are storytellers, and in particular the ways that plants can teach us about the history of human trafficking, forced labor practices, colonization into radical triumph. There is gold rice and okra that was braided into the hair of the enslaved person as they were trafficked from the African continent and then forced to work colonized soil, which then became the practices of chattel slavery, the largest of those crops being sugarcane, cotton, tobacco. And today that evolved into the last crop that's in the background, which is soybeans.

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jackie sumell: Soybeans is the largest of the forced labor practices that we see in prisons across the colonized United States. And in the foreground are the first flowers chosen by Solitary Gardeners. You'll see forget-me-nots, you'll see maypop, you'll see carnations, you'll see marigold, you'll see sunflowers and pansies, and the mural is punctuated with *Rudbeckia hirta*, which is sometimes call black-eyed Susan. And in the floral crypto language of floriography, which was a Victorian way of communicating through bouquets and though flowers, the *Rudbeckia hirta* is the symbol of justice. We wanted to punctuate the mural with a justice value, the idea of justice.

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Rien Fertel: It's gorgeous and I hope everyone really gets the opportunity to see this. I wanna go into one plant you brought up in more detail. You said that soy, soybeans, or the soy plant, is the most commonly grown forced labor practice or commonly grown in prisons. Can you go more into that? For people who are completely unfamiliar with how the prison system works in America today, or has worked for centuries, what do you mean by that? Say more about soy and about growing crops in these institutions.

jackie sumell: Sure, I'd be happy to ground us in that reality and maybe I can just take us to Angola Prison, which was my on-ramp. Angola Prison, here in the state of Louisiana, is 18,000 acres of what they call a former plantation. Today, in 2025, that former, using air quotes, "plantation" asks, or forces, every able bodied prisoner to work that same land for two to twenty cents an hour, a minimum of forty hours a week. And the largest or the most populated crop today is actually soybeans.

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jackie sumell: Angola has a particularly special and egregious history. Isaac Benjamin, who was the original colonizer of Angola, I guess you can call it, purchased that land, he did so with the intention of having it be an enslaved person breeding plantation. Louisiana was made rich off of the labor, the forced labor or chattel practices, in sugarcane fields that line the Mississippi. What Isaac Benjamin recognized is that more people died through the forced labor practices of sugarcane than any other of the chattel crops and that it was very laborious and expensive to

come down the treacherous Mississippi to the slave port of *Nouvelle-Orléans* and repopulate the cane fields, and so he created an eighteen-acre plantation where he could breed what he thought was the most profitable chattel

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jackie sumell: property, named reverently for the place in the African continent where you felt the best chattel came from, named for the country of Angola. That's the history that I have been on-ramped through through my relationship with folks who served sentences and long-term solitary confinement in Angola Prison.

Rien Fertel: We'll get to that in a moment, one more question about soy, what happens to the soy that is grown in Angola?

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jackie sumell: Most of that is sold back to the open market. You can imagine like they are profiting from the sales of crops like soy. They also have a multitude of other ways of creating income when you have a labor force that is working for two to twenty cents an hour, a minimum of forty hours a week. So you're able to cut costs and increase profit. And it's not explicit to Angola. If you look at the way the Thirteenth Amendment is written, its written with the

intention of continuing these forced labor practices for anyone who is duly or justly convicted of committing a so-called crime in the colonized United States.

Rien Fertel: You gave a really succinct history of Angola. For those who might not live in New Orleans or live in Louisiana — and I would hope most New Orleanians and Louisianians know and understand what Angola is and represents today — can you just kind of give a picture of what Angola, what the place is today?

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jackie sumell: Sure, I was just there last week. So I want to position this in maybe a complicated view, but Angola Prison is a death camp where so many beloveds of mine and of others have discovered their own humanity. And to call in a little Thích Nhất Hạnh, “No mud, no lotus,” right. So you have this legacy, this history, of it being a chattel plantation that was intentionally created to repopulate the bloodiest of all of the chattel crops with human beings that they believed deserved nothing but to die creating profit for white colonizers.

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jackie sumell: And today you have a population of 6,000-plus able-bodied human beings who are forced to work that same land under the statute of the Thirteenth Amendment, a duly convicted human being, with a predominantly white upper administration and over sixty-five percent of the

population of Angola being Black, or of African descent. It changes pretty regularly, but about seventy-eight percent of any of those who are sentenced to serve out their time in Angola will die in Angola. And they have multiple cemeteries called Point Lookout — Lookout One, Lookout Two, Lookout Three — for bodies whose families have forgotten them in the decades that they have served their time there. Within that institution so much humanity and dignity is created within the population.

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jackie sumell: You can imagine that the experiences we have in the free world are also experienced in institutions like Angola, the complicated spectrum of how human behavior manifests, right? So you have really terrible people who are not incarcerated, you have extraordinarily gorgeous people, also. And the same thing happens in prison. Within Angola, the picture that I would want to paint is one of that complexity and I myself, as an artist who never expected to spend the last twenty-five years working with folks serving their sentences in long-term solitary confinement, found my own humanity and dignity inside Angola.

Rien Fertel: You said you were there just this past week or weekend. What brought you there?

How often do you go?

jackie sumell: Oh, I still visit folks who are incarcerated there and I'm only allowed to go twice a month.

Rien Fertel: The administrators tell you this?

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jackie sumell: Yeah, yeah, everyone, with the exception of attorneys. So I try to visit as often as I can.

Rien Fertel: What do you call the folks who — because there's been a lot of rewriting, reimagining of how we refer to incarcerated individuals — how do you prefer to call them? You might also call them friends or family or mentors, but how do you think the media or historians should? What's the best practice?

jackie sumell: Yeah, I believe it's called person-first language-ing. So you nailed it. If we are looking at the history or language of oppression it's a reductive history, so we reduce people to a DOC number that then is attached to the harm that they may or may not have caused. So how do we expand or you know, exude the complexity of that person through their own experience of personhood? So you could say, "incarcerated people." I often refer to them as "incarcerated elders" or "beloveds." But if we look at the entire prison industrial complex, I tend to refer to them as "incarcerated persons," yeah.

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Rien Fertel: Thank you, that's very helpful. Right now we're in the John Thompson Legacy Center. Who was John Thompson?

jackie sumell: Oh, yeah, that's great. So JT was a friend of mine. And in the spectrum of how you originally asked that question, I have a lot of elders and it was through working with my elders that I met JT, and JT became more of a friend. He and I were about the same age. He spent seventeen years in Angola, fourteen of those on death row. He survived seven stays of execution. So seven times the state of Louisiana, under the tutelage of Harry Connick Sr., the longest standing D.A., tried to execute this man for a crime he couldn't have possibly committed. And his conviction was ultimately overturned because it was obvious that Harry Connick Sr.'s administration and the D.A., Jim Williams, hid evidence that would've exonerated him at the time of his trial.

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jackie sumell: There's a long-standing legacy and practice of this within these inarguably racist administrations. And so JT's conviction was overturned in 2003, and then in 2007 a benefactor to the Innocence Project donated this building, which he called RAE, Resurrection After Exoneration. The doors opened in 2007, and for about ten years JT operated this building as a space for returning citizens. So folks who were coming home from incarceration could live

upstairs where you'll hear some footprints moving around. And then the downstairs where you're sitting, I often describe as a manifestation of JT's wild imagination.

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jackie sumell: It was everything from a print shop, to after school programming for children, to adult literacy, adult computers. At one point, he had a cafe. He would host open mic nights in this backroom. And it was amazing, it was the center of a lot of organizing that happened in the Seventh Ward. But you can imagine that seven stays of execution, fourteen years in a six-by-nine cell a minimum of twenty-three hours a day, for a crime you couldn't have possibly committed, takes a toll on a person's body. So JT suffered from a heart attack in 2017 and joined the ancestors. So he passed in 2017, and from 2017 till Hurricane Ida hit in 2021 this building was mostly empty and then JT's widow Ms. Laverne whose a beloved friend of mine, folks from the Promise of Justice Initiative, and myself reopened it in the wake of Hurricane Ida.

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jackie sumell: Basically the work that I had done post-Katrina with Malik Rahim and other elders sort of named me as a person that would accept supplies in the wake of Hurricane Ida, which happened on the anniversary of Katrina. And so my personal home was filled with gas and water and food and pads and mops and bleach and all of these things. And at a certain point, all of these folks from the neighborhood were coming in and I was like, I can't maintain this in my

home. So I called Laverne and said, “Is it cool if we open up RAE?” And then in the wake of that it was so incredible, right, because we were working with World Conflict Kitchen and giving out something like 400 meals a day. The front was all supplies and materials. New Orleans didn’t have power for eight days and in the River Parishes for months, and so we were operating gas in the back, food and water in the front, and it was just the greatest way to honor JT.

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jackie sumell: And at that point in time I had been given money from Art for Justice, which no longer exists, but it was a nonprofit that was dedicated to supporting artists who were doing work around criminal justice. They had given me a grant for the Solitary Gardens, and I called them up and said, “Can we use this money to reopen RAE?” So on September 26, 2022, what would’ve been JT’s sixtieth birthday, we opened the doors to the John Thompson Legacy Center for Abolition and Beyond.

Rien Fertel: You mentioned the Solitary Gardens, which really put you on my radar long ago, but I think before we get there I’d like to kind of go back. I think this is a good moment to kind of restart the conversation in some way and get at the roots of your story. So can you please tell me where you’re from — you’re not from New Orleans, although this is very much a New Orleans story. But you’re not from here. Can you talk about your beginnings, however you would like to describe that?

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jackie sumell: Sure, as I said at the top of this conversation, I was born in 1973, so the beginning's really far away. [Laughs.] I grew up on Long Island. I was born in Brooklyn to my parents, one from Brooklyn, one from Queens, both of them first and second generation. And I had a pretty suburban, normal upbringing where I was a jock who traveled out of Long Island playing Division I soccer. ultimately. Then I kind of banged around and knocked into and tried a bunch of different things until I found my way into using art as a tool to organize.

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jackie sumell: And I always had been an organizer and had a penchant for what you might call “ignorant righteousness.” And then when I realized that art was a power vehicle to bring people on board, I was like, “Oh, this is the way I’m going.” And then in 2001, I was beginning my master’s degree at Stanford University, which is not something I usually lead with, and I had the incredible opportunity of meeting Robert King, who was the first free member of the Angola Three. I often tell this story, which I’ll try to make palatable because it’s long, but I had no idea that Angola Prison existed.

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jackie sumell: I like many people at the time, 2001, pre-Michelle Alexander's *New Jim Crow*, there wasn't a conversation, at least nationally, around mass incarceration. We weren't naming it. But obviously folks like Robert King and Norris [Henderson] and JT and all of these folks that were affected by it knew it, right.

Rien Fertel: I might've interrupted you there. Have you ever been to Louisiana or New Orleans before, at this period you're talking about, when you first met Robert King?

jackie sumell: I'm gonna plead the Fifth on this because I did go to New Orleans for spring break, prior to that but no one's allowed to know that story. [Laughs.]

Rien Fertel: Sure.

jackie sumell: But I had no investment in New Orleans, nor did I think that my career trajectory would take me here. I thought that I was going to be in New York or L.A. or San Francisco as an artist, as a practicing artist.

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jackie sumell: But I had a crush on this organizer who was bringing Robert King to the Luggage Store Gallery in San Francisco.

Rien Fertel: It was an art gallery?

jackie sumell: It's an art gallery and also similar to the way the John Thompson Legacy Center operates, it's like a cultural space where they bring conversations and politics and really important and radical exhibitions. This person said, "Hey, there's this guy, he spent twenty-nine years in solitary confinement for a crime he couldn't have possibly committed in this prison called Angola, in this state called Louisiana, he's gonna be speaking at the Luggage Store Gallery. Do you wanna go?" And all I heard was, "Do you wanna go?" And I vividly remember biking down Market Street in San Francisco and getting cut off by this SUV and throwing my bicycle down and pulling my earrings out, as this like little jock from Long Island, and screaming profanities at the car, ready to go fisticuffs with a total stranger. And then I reapplied my makeup, walked back up the stairs of the luggage store gallery, and I sat in front of this man who had just spent twenty-nine years in solitary confinement.

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jackie sumell: I was twenty-nine years old. For a crime he couldn't have possibly committed and he was chill. He was at peace. And I had almost thrown down with this total stranger. So there was this moment that was very much a felt sense: "How do I get like that? How do you do that?" Someone who had suffered far worse than I could ever have imagined was at peace. That began the journey that has taken the last twenty-five years of my life by surprise. King, he was so awkward, he had just come home, this was April 2001, and at the end he said, "Does anyone

have any questions?” And we were all made silent because even the seasoned activists amongst us, no one knew that solitary confinement was still being practiced, or this legacy of chattel slavery, in the bastion of this liberal thinking state of California and in San Francisco. I just raised my hand and said, “What can we do?”

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jackie sumell: I wasn't even identifying as an artist, I'm just a student. “What can I do?” And he said, “Write my comrades. Write Herman Wallace and write Albert Woodfox and let the prison know you know they're alive.” And that was it, I started writing them, the letters became phone calls, the phone calls became visits, and then ultimately I moved here to be closer to them and continue organizing on their behalf.

Rien Fertel: I'm gonna ask you questions that kind of fill in the gaps. I wanna ask more about Mr. King, can you tell us more about him? Was he from New Orleans? Has he passed on? Is he still around today? And what did your relationship look like over the years? At first he says, this is how you could help, right, write these men, my comrades —

jackie sumell: Yeah.

Rien Fertel: — the other two-thirds of the Angola Three, and we'll talk about what that means, that phrase. But what did that relationship look like over time?

jackie sumell: So, well, King is still alive, he was the first freed and only living member of the Angola Three, and I think that's important to note: the less time you spend in prison the longer your life may be. It's a complicated answer because King is my family and the relationship takes on, with any family member, different shapes at different times but he's one of the most important people I've ever met in my life, yeah.

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Rien Fertel: And I wanna ask a few questions before we talk about your friendship with Herman Wallace. You described yourself early on as a jock that became an artist, who got really interested in art, and I wanna ask about your parents. Were they jocks or artists? To use kind of the simplest of language, were they progressively minded? Who were they, if you'd wanna talk about them? How did they maybe encourage, inspire, or encourage and inspire you to be different from them, which I think is often the story of people's relationships with their parents, certainly mine.

jackie sumell: [Laughs.] Yeah, 1000 percent a cauldron of all of those experiences. I just want to name how significant it is that you're asking about my parents, because I just had a conversation with an archivist about my father's journey through dementia.

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jackie sumell: My parents were not artists. They were both in healthcare. My mom was a nurse and my dad was a prosthetist. He made fake legs and fake arms by way of being an amputee himself. My father and I had a tumultuous and complicated relationship, which you can imagine that someone — he lost his leg when he was nineteen-years old through a really terrible accident and was in a body cast for almost three years. And he really struggled with his own trauma, and I'm really blessed and thankful to say that when my dad finally did pass in July of last year that we were friends and that was a long journey. My parents definitely *did* encourage me to be as radical as I needed to be.

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jackie sumell: I played football, I was first girl to play football, at least documented, in New York.

Rien Fertel: You were featured in the *New York Times* in 1985, you were twelve years old. And it's this lovely, only-in-New York story or big city story, 500 words.

jackie sumell: Yeah.

Rien Fertel: What do you remember about that? Maybe not just a story about playing football, and maybe was that at all formative in developing your identity?

jackie sumell: Oh yeah, for sure. What I remember about that is that I had no awareness of gender, I just was a great athlete, I was a good athlete, and my dad who wanted so much to love me, to be proud of me, loved the sport of football.

Rien Fertel: Did he have sons?

jackie sumell: Two sons, neither of them played football.

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jackie sumell: When I started playing, and people started calling me the girl, and making fun of me and pulling my hair and all of those things, I was like, “Oh shit, I’m not a boy” kind of moment. My mother and father were supportive the whole way and in that way they were really formative in my belief that if I needed or wanted to do something, I had to chase it. And my father really identified as someone who questioned authority, although he lived under it as a Navy vet and other things throughout his life. That instilled, that sense of incredulity, that I think was at the formation of the work I do now. They also voted for Reagan and they cussed me out when Clinton was elected because I was part of a campaign to support Ross Perot and split the Republican vote, and it was my fault.

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jackie sumell: So there's that complicated history where we didn't see eye-to-eye politically but we met each other in a space of acceptance.

Rien Fertel: Where did you go to college and what did you study in college?

jackie sumell: I did my undergrad at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, where I played Division I soccer.

Rien Fertel: And were they supportive of what you majored in and what you studied, or what did they think about when you went to get an MFA at Stanford?

jackie sumell: This is hilarious. I don't know why you're asking these questions, but my parents, yes, they were supportive when I went to undergrad because I was a soccer star in a small liberal arts college, and I studied sports medicine and physical therapy. So I was like on a path to be healthcare aligned like them. Then I took four years of experimenting and making tragic mistakes before I met someone who was like, "You'd probably be a great artist."

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jackie sumell: As I said, my mother's first generation Malaysian-Italian, both her parents were immigrants, she grew up dirt-ass poor, and she was so worried about me surviving. I was waiting tables as a career for six years when I decided to apply to get an MFA.

Rien Fertel: Where were you living then?

jackie sumell: Yeah, then I was living between Charleston and Wilmington, North Carolina. Then I applied to get an MFA because I was told I could teach and maybe I could be a teacher. And she was really hard on me and was like, "You're gonna be waiting tables the rest of your life, is this what you want?" And then when I got into Stanford, she said, "I always knew you were gonna be an artist." [Laughs.]

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Rien Fertel: I am interested about your early art career and if there are deep connections to what you do today. In that application to Stanford, what was in your portfolio? What sort of art were you doing?

jackie sumell: I don't know what you'd call it, like a leap year at the San Francisco Art Institute, which was incredible. I think it's called the post baccalaureate so somewhere between BFA and MFA. That year I just was introduced to all these incredible artists who were working within the

concept of social practice, which is not something I ever heard of. I went to school thinking Egon Schiele was the most incredible artist that ever existed.

Rien Fertel: The painter who can paint the human condition and gorgeous.

jackie sumell: Right, torment. That's where I was emotionally.

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jackie sumell: That's where I was emotionally and then I got to see artists like Joseph Beuys and Linda Montano and Mel Chin and all of these artists that exploded my mind. And I realized that my political orientation could be represented through a practice of art, a creative practice. And during that time, it must've been 2001, was the first time that I had success. It was through a project called the No Bush Project. When George Bush Jr., the little one, W., was elected arguably through a political coup in the early 2000s, the first piece of legislation that he passed through was the Mexico City Ban, which ended funding to basically any clinic, but predominantly Planned Parenthoods, around the country that provided abortion healthcare.

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jackie sumell: And I remember being in San Francisco and being outraged and people doing all this organizing work and then the *San Francisco Chronicle* comes out and the headline is how

Lucy Liu helped progressives and how progressive we are and successful because Lucy Liu is the new whatever sex symbol. Isn't that great? She's Asian, wow, we're doing so great. And then a little blip about this policy that would affect way more people than Lucy Liu, you feel me? And so I just remember being outraged and disgusted and this was pre-social media. I sent an email to a girlfriend and said we should all start to protest this by shaving our bush, you know no bush blah, blah, blah. And then she sent it to a girlfriend, who sent it to a girlfriend, and then it grew and then there was this online — I don't know if it was a blog or a magazine, Salon.com — that picked it up, and then the next thing you know I have something like 480 bags of pubic hair from women around the country that are appalled and disgusted and wanting to join the fight.

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jackie sumell: And the reason I say it was successful was because it was the first time in my life that a piece of art was suddenly catalyzing a conversation that was happening at dinner tables in other places. Even if people were like, "look at this crazy artist collecting pubic hair," they were still talking about the policy. And ultimately those bags of bush, my mother and I took to Washington, D.C. in protest with the NOW organization. There's one of those moments where my conservative mother and I agreed about bodily autonomy and women's rights.

Rien Fertel: And that article is still up and there's this beautiful picture and I think maybe a short snippet of a video — no, I think it's a picture — of you and your mother kind of holding this quilt, I guess is the best way I could describe it, out of all the hair.

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Rien Fertel: So that was 2001, around the same time you meet King for the first time so you write correspondence, you write letters to —

jackie sumell: Herman.

Rien Fertel: Herman and Albert Woodfox, who are both incarcerated in solitary confinement in Angola so let's pick up there. Who writes back, what happens next?

jackie sumell: I think this is important is that I didn't know anything about writing folks inside, I'd never written anyone, I thought everybody who was incarcerated was a bad person, right? And so having my mind explode and expand in meeting Robert King was so significant because there's this person that I immediately loved and felt drawn to who took over the identity, the monolith identity, that I was told from the society that I grew up in.

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jackie sumell: When he said write my comrades, I was like, "What do I say?" I'm at Stanford University on a full ride with stipend to make art. They are in solitary confinement for the same amount of time I've been alive. This is an absurd disparity. And so I ended up duct taping a

disposable camera to my wrist and then setting my watch to go off every hour on the hour and I just took a picture of whatever was in front of me. So seven of those were blankets and pillows and socks and the dashboard and I'd gone on a run and whatever and this was at a time where digital cameras were not being employed, phones were just phones, and so you know these are printed photographs that most of us would've thrown away. And I sent twenty-four to Herman, twenty-four to Albert, and I said, "Here's twenty-four hours in my life, I can't imagine what yours is like."

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jackie sumell: And instead of throwing them away, they, like the artist's mind, were like, "Wow, I can't believe the stitching on that blanket and dashboards have really changed in the last twenty-nine years." We connected in that space of like wonder and curiosity and we continued writing each other for over two decades, basically. Herman and I began writing each other and then Herman went from being in CCR, which is Closed Cell Restriction solitary confinement in Angola, to being in Camp J, which was also called the Dungeon. So he went to a place that was even more punitive than what we understand as solitary and so I began to see him really suffer through his literal handwriting and through his inability to keep a consecutive thought. And I was like what am I gonna do, here I am with all of this privilege and access at Stanford University, and here is this person who I am growing to love and respect deeply who is being tortured.

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jackie sumell: And I was gonna drop out of school and start organizing on his behalf. And my mother was like, “I told you, you quit everything.” And it was Herman who said, “You gotta finish school, baby” and “we can do this.” And then there was this class that I was taking where they gave us this ridiculous assignment to ask a professor about their dream home and I asked the professor can I ask Herman. And it was complicated because he was like, “I don’t know is that cruel to ask someone whose serving a life sentence?” And I was like, “I don’t know if it is, but he knows.”

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jackie sumell: And so I just asked him as a way to get his mind out of the Dungeon. Then the more I asked him questions about the house the more he was transcending the confines of solitary confinement in Angola. And the more I realized the power of the imagination and this project in particular for our relationship. And then Herman said, we should bring this to the public, this is really powerful in the way that others were writing him now, “Hey I heard about this project you’re working on with jackie. I think your bedroom is beautiful, your gardens are amazing.” And so it was 2004 that we really put the throttle into “The House That Herman Built” and turned it into an exhibition, which became a book, which became the movie, which became part of the fulcrum that liberated Herman Wallace in 2013.

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Rien Fertel: And because Herman Wallace is so central to this story, your story, can you maybe just give a bit of background about who he was? Where he came from? What kind of person he was? What the Angola Three meant to his life? How he ended up in Angola? You've shared a bit of what his life was like, but he was — tell me if I'm wrong — but he certainly, along with his comrades, became famous because of numbers, because of how long, how many days stacked up and how many years stacked up, that they were in solitary confinement. Can you talk a bit about that?

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jackie sumell: Sure, let's paint a picture of Herman first. So Herman Wallace grew up in the Thirteenth Ward of New Orleans. He grew up dirt-ass poor, he's one of eight kids, his mother Antoinette was an amazing woman who did the best she could with what she had. Herman got into what I would consider pretty minor crime early in his life, and then ultimately robbed a bank, which was something he never denied. While he was in Angola for that bank robbery, he began to organize with the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and learn about it. He actually learned about it when he was awaiting trial at Orleans Parish Prison, and this was a much longer story, but at that time there was the Desire Shootout and Malik Rahim and other Panthers were on the tier with Herman.

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jackie sumell: And so he began to learn about the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and then ultimately, in a very truncated version of his story, he, Albert Woodfox, and Robert King started the first chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense inside a prison. That happened to be Angola, where they advocated for human rights and demanded land, bread, water, housing, education, healthcare, control of technology, an end to police brutality inside Angola. And they were incredible in dismantling the power structures of division in the 1970s when Angola was the bloodiest prison in America. And so on April 17, 1972, when a prison guard named Brent Miller was murdered, the entire prison went into lockdown and nobody saw what happened. Every Black prisoner was thrown into solitary confinement. I believe it was four days later, a prisoner named Hezekiah Brown came forward, who was legally blind, and said I know exactly who did it, Herman Wallace, Albert Woodfox, and Robert King, the three most successful organizers in Angola Prison.

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jackie sumell: It's important to name that King was actually in OPP, he was in Orleans Parish at the time of the murder, yet he spent twenty-nine years in solitary confinement under the investigation of the murder of Brent Miller. It's a prison, you know where your prisoners are, you know where your population is. It is documented that Albert Woodfox was in the mess hall and Herman Wallace was at work, but somehow Hezekiah Brown saw them commit this egregious murder. When Herman first tell me the story, he said, please don't believe me do your own

research and I carry that forward and ask folks to do their own research. But it was impossible that they could've committed this murder.

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jackie sumell: And so what I know from my personal relationship to Herman as my elder and mentor and from others is that he was a remarkable human doing — he was never a human being — whose life and legacy was rooted in his commitment to serve the people mind, body, soul at the sacrifice of his own life. He understood that if he could endure the inhumanity of solitary confinement for as long as he did that there was a possibility he could leverage that against the criminal punishment system to make sure that no one else would have to. And him and Albert and King were radical in their ways of thinking, in their ways of organizing, and that made them targets for extraordinarily racist administration that not only was born out of the legacy of Angola Prison slash plantation but was the descendants of. So Brent Miller was the descendant of the blue line in Angola, which is folks that used to be part of the plantation's origin story and then families who continued it on when it became the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

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Rien Fertel: Why do you think Mr. Wallace, or Herman —

Jackie sumell: Can I just call you into something?

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

jackie sumell: So when I first wrote Herman and Albert I said, “Dear Mr. Wallace” and “Dear Mr. Woodfox,” and they both wrote back independently, they were on different tiers at the time and they said, “Very nice to meet you. Please don’t call me ‘mister’ because its derivative of ‘master.’”

Rien Fertel: Okay, that’s helpful, thank you. I will call him Herman. Why do you think Herman and Albert, but focus on Herman, why do you think he wrote you back, because I’ve spent time in prisons doing work, in one prison in particular in Louisiana, the main women’s prison, and I know from — I was a teacher for several years in that institution — and I know that people who are incarcerated receive mail from people, hopefully from people they know but also from people they don’t know.

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Rien Fertel: I’m assuming — and this is a big assumption — that you weren’t the only person who maybe sent a letter to Herman in this era or in his lifetime. Why do you think he wrote you back and why do you think that relationship developed and that connection developed?

jackie sumell: Well, it's not true that a lot of people were writing him at that time. Angola really buried them and it wasn't until King came home that people started writing them. And I think it was just strange that I sent them twenty-four photos right that were often unfocused and closeups of my blankets. So they were just like, "What is this weirdo doing?" And so that, I think was the beginning of it and then you know letter writing is something we don't participate in very often and it requires you to be fully present with your thoughts cause you can't really edit them.

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jackie sumell: You can't go back and change them as if it were a text or an email. And so the amount of time that we spent thinking about each other and writing each other was extraordinary. Herman and I would write multiple letters a week to each other. He was a prolific writer, and I think that just grew our friendship in ways that were remarkable. My friend and comrade Mariame Kaba often says, "Abolition moved at the speed of trust." We moved at the speed of trust. There's thirteen years that he and I collaborated on "The House That Herman Built," thirteen years of building the infrastructure of trust as it relates to that relationship. And we were a lot of alike in so many different ways.

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jackie sumell: In fact, for one of the exhibitions I created a timeline of Herman's twenty-nine years in Angola, my twenty-nine years of living, and it was intersected at the points where we

might've been watching the same football game, like when the Saints played the Giants. And in this exploration of the oddities that we were, we found so much of the things that we loved together, and that was beautiful, that was a beautiful journey.

Rien Fertel: So before I ask you to talk a bit about Herman's background, you talked about that question you asked him, "What does your dream house look like?" How did he answer back? What did that dream house become?

jackie sumell: Yeah, so when I first asked him what kind of house do you dream of after spending twenty-nine years in a six-foot by nine-foot cell, he said, "I don't dream about a house, I'm a revolutionary. When I come home, I'm gonna be in the Hills of Mexico fighting with the people, for the people."

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jackie sumell: And I was like, "That's dope, but you're sixty-five. Maybe just like a spot to retire?" And then he said, "Alright, jackie." His exact words: "I'll play your game." He said, "I can clearly see the gardens, they'll be full of gloxinias, delphiniums, and roses, and I wish for guests to be able to smile and walk through gardens all year round," was the first thing he asked for. Sorry I'm getting emotional. And the second thing he asked for was a swimming pool with a light green bottom and a large Black Panther in the center and then he went on to describe the house and it had the intricacies of the time capsule he was in. He went into prison in the early

70s, so there was like shag carpets and lava lamps and mirrored ceilings and details that someone who was forced into a myopic space of a six-by-nine cell could only imagine. So I'd say, "How big is your kitchen?" And he would struggle with the idea of space.

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jackie sumell: But then he'd say, "I want yellow tiles, I want six microwaves for entertaining guests, I want a table here, and I need fire alarms, especially if you're gonna be cooking in it." And then he described that he would have a hobby shop, because he loved working on electronics. And the hobby shop had an escape shoot to an underground tunnel in case the house was ever under siege, and that underground tunnel led to a bunker that had a natural water source. And I think that is indicative of the duress and stress and torture that that man was under for so many years. And then there were these incredible moments where he would describe his bedroom, so he had this elaborate bedroom that was almost panopticonic so the bedroom was in the center of the house. The outside of the house had all these features that looked a lot like a Louisiana childhood, like a big old porch for folks to gather in, had extra bedrooms for organizers that might come to town. And then his bedroom had a big old

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jackie sumell: hot tub and the hot tub actually was six-foot by nine-foot, which was the same size as the cell he was in. But I made drawings and then those drawings became computer animated

renderings and I would send him the stills and he would edit. And he said, “I want a bear skin on the bed.” And when I sent him a rendering of the bedroom, he wrote back and he said, “Can you make sure that everyone who sees this knows that the bear skin is fake fur in case there are any vegetarians who would be offended by it.” So this was like a rendering, a drawing of bear skin blanket that he didn’t want to offend anyone. So he was inside that house, and I know that to be true, and I know that when he was inside that house he was not in his cell.

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Rien Fertel: So his conceptual design, his dream became an art project, “The House That Herman Built,” and it toured around the world. Can you talk a bit about that and what people maybe got out of it, why they latched onto it, what happened there?

jackie sumell: Well, you got to meet Herman through the house, so that was a gift, that was a gift, and I think that was the success of the project. I also think in most kindergartens and elementary schools across the United States they ask kids to make drawings of houses and dream houses and what not. So there was a place that we could almost always connect with: “What’s your dream house?” And that place was not determined by your race or your gender or your background, class, or anything like that.

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jackie sumell: It was a shared experience so to see this man imagining this house from something that was almost unimaginable for most folks, I think was like a critical piece of what made the project successful. And I took the time to build out Herman's cell and juxtapose it to his house, to his imagination, so you would have that experience of his reality, and the reality that we're complicit in creating these spaces of torture. And I think that as an artist I have the great privilege of going in and out of museums and institutions, almost as much as I'm going into prisons and other spaces, and seeing artwork and I've never seen people emote like they did when they saw Herman's cell next to his house.

Rien Fertel: Which you built to the exact dimensions correct, his cell?

jackie sumell: Yeah, I think it's important to say, I built it to the dimensions that he gave me. So if you read *Herman's House*, the book, you can see that it's based on his relationship to his own body. He knew he was about six foot so he could touch both walls when he's standing inside of it.

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Rien Fertel: You're centering him rather than centering the architectural?

jackie sumell: Exactly, yeah, and so that's how it was built. And right now at Solitary Gardens we have a cell that's there that is actually six foot-by-nine foot and the markings inside of it are

from Herman, so the way that he described his cell. So the idea is that there's a placeholder that maintains that six-by-nine-by twelve shape so that people can experience that next to the lushness and the vastness of the gardens that are ever changing and growing.

Rien Fertel: So, how did the house that Herman built become Solitary Gardens?

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jackie sumell: So, as many people know, on October 1, 2013 Herman's conviction was overturned. A federal judge, [Brian] Jackson, stepped in and overturned Herman's conviction. He came home and he joined the ancestors on October 4, 2013, after three days of physical freedom. He had been suffering from the advanced stages of liver cancer at that point. Excuse me. And I had the great honor of being the last person to visit him which was one of the hardest days of my life because the real fuel to this work, the thirteen years of this work, the service of this work, the love that went into it, was to determine that Herman would die free. And there he was in his late stages of liver cancer, which you know my mom had died in 2001 and I was with her through that journey and the demise of her health, and I knew he was gonna die soon.

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jackie sumell: And so it was a Sunday and the correctional officers had to pull me out of the prison, because I was like, "I promised you weren't gonna die here, you weren't gonna die alone,

and I failed you.” And he mustered the strength, and he was barely talking, and he mustered the strength to raise his fist and say, “Thank you for everything. I love you, baby.” And those were his last words to me. And I left the prison and I called King who was gonna visit him on Tuesday. And so King and Woodfox — Woodfox was still incarcerated but was housed way out in rural Louisiana — was supposed to have their first meeting in twenty years of all three of them in the same room, which is something their lawyers had to advocate and fight for because the prison knew the power of those men coming together.

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jackie sumell: And so that finally happened, and here’s Herman on the brink of death, and I’m calling King and I was like, “I don’t think he’s gonna make it to Tuesday.” And he was like, “I’m still coming.” And so the three of them come together and they learn that morning that Herman’s conviction was overturned by a federal judge, and it is Albert Woodfox and Robert King who get to tell him that he’s coming home. Yeah, it was amazing, the greatest day of my life for sure. And so all of these people who had grown to love Herman and support Herman came together, despite our differences, and ensured that he got to die with dignity surrounded by those of us who loved him most. And there I was in the state of Louisiana, for no reason other than to be closer to Herman and Albert, grieving, thinking, “What am I doing here? I’m here to build Herman’s house.” I was determined to build his house.

Rien Fertel: Turning the model into an actual —

jackie sumell: Into an actual home.

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jackie sumell: Yeah, and then I'm looking through all of his letters and realizing how much Herman Wallace, who has been kept in concrete and steel for forty-one years of his unnatural life, how much he talks about plants, and flowers, and gardens. And like I said earlier, the first thing he asked for were gardens. And then as I built out the house, drew out the house, he was like, "Oh, can you put a greenhouse at the top because I want to be able to build flowers all year round?" And he used to make me these gorgeous paper flowers that he would spend eighteen hours hand drawing, folding, cutting with his thumbnail because he wasn't allowed to have sharp objects in his cell. His commitment to the natural world was remarkable. And so I knew there was some way to uphold his life and legacy through gardening but I didn't know what. And I'm grieving deeply, you know and there I am, just trying to figure it out, not sure what to do.

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jackie sumell: I'm an artist, I build a lot, a lot of my stuff is sculptural. I don't spend very much time in the garden, and then I have a homie who starts this project called Grow Dat in City Park, and Leo [Gorman] says, "Why don't you come see what we're doing?"

Rien Fertel: I'm interviewing him next week.

jackie sumell: Oh, beautiful, it's an amazing project. And so Leo's showing me the gardens and I was like, "Oh, it's about the same size as Herman's cell." And then it was just download after download after download that using a garden bed that's the same size and blueprint as an isolation cell is an actual cross-section that illustrates the bed, the toilet, sink, the desk, and the bench, was a way to illustrate the inhumanity of practices like long term solitary confinement, but provide a space and a place for a different outcome. Because the garden beds themselves are grown in collaboration through letter writing like I shared with Herman and Albert and [Kenny] "Zulu" [Whitmore] so many others.

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jackie sumell: Through that letter writing process we plant the herbs, the flowers, the plants that currently incarcerated people want to see. And so it becomes portraits of folks who are condemned to long-term solitary confinement around the United States.

Rien Fertel: I have a couple questions. Why do you think Herman was so attracted to gardening and to flowers? Was there anything from his childhood? His childhood home? I've been to Angola; I'm not sure what grows there that's not in the fields. Where does that come from?

jackie sumell: Why does a hungry person attracted to food, right? He was starved of beauty. And I think that he felt and experienced an implicit beauty in what the natural world could do, yeah.

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Rien Fertel: So you start Solitary Gardens, talk about the way you build the beds. Do you call them beds?

Jackie sumell: Yeah.

Rien Fertel: Okay, you're not building them out of what we call a traditional say vestibule or flower bed of bricks or wood. You talked about the design and the spatial representation of these beds, but how do you build them?

jackie sumell: Yeah, thank you for asking. We build them out of sugarcane, cotton, and tobacco that we grow at Solitary Gardens here in New Orleans. And so we dry it out and mill it down and then through this collaborative social practice, we mix-in non-hydraulic lime, and then pour that into a mold of the solitary cell. And through this rammed earth process build this prison cells turned garden beds out of the largest chattel crops to illustrate the evolution this renaming of these forced labor practices into mass incarceration.

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Rien Fertel: So then incarcerated people had the opportunity to design what goes in these beds. Can you talk maybe about one bed in particular, what that looks like, how that works? You mentioned a man named Zulu, I don't know if that's a good example or not, but step-by-step what that looks like so how he designed it or how someone else designs their bed, and finally what it looks like kind of at the final.

jackie sumell: Yeah, it's really beautiful. We invite folks to participate in Solitary Gardens through a pretty standard letter where we explain the project. And then we'll send a template of the garden bed and a little tiny growing almanac, what grows where those garden beds are because there's Solitary Gardens around the country, it's not just here in New Orleans.

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jackie sumell: Although we have a chunk of them. And then that person can choose from the list or they can choose from their memory, what they want growing in the garden and we're committed to trying, that's for sure. And so we will seed and plant those choices and then send them photographs of the garden as it thrives or fails. There's so many really beautiful examples of gardens, one I think is really important to share, maybe beautiful. So the last bed that we built here in New Orleans is on St. Charles Avenue and it's at the Center for Faith + Action, on the front lawn, so its Broadway and St. Charles, it's amazing, you should see it.

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jackie sumell: And that bed is being grown in collaboration with somebody named Obie Weathers, whose incarcerated in Texas, he's on death row in Texas. And Obie designed a bed that is reminiscent of how childhood, with plants that would feed the community. One such moment where that you get to see that expanded humanity of someone whose sentenced to die by the state of Texas is when he asks to plant aloe, because he can remember getting sunburned as a little boy in rural Texas and his mom breaking off a leaf of aloe and rubbing it on his forehead. And the memory of the coolness of his aloe was as sweet as his mother's kiss. As I said these gardens become almost like little baby Herman's Houses because they facilitate relationship.

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jackie sumell: They facilitate exchange. And they're also very practical in terms of how they can be used to support people who are up for parole. So they've been part of three successful parole packages, where folks go before a parole board and say, "Here's proof that I'm doing good things and I will continue to do good things." And in fact, right now we have two Solitary Gardeners working with us, so two former Solitary Gardeners who came home and are now growing literally the soil that they imagined while they were incarcerated on behalf of other folks who are currently incarcerated. Yeah, isn't that beautiful?

Rien Fertel: It's so beautiful. And that was my next question, who does the work of tending the garden?

jackie sumell: So right now it's Cedar Annenkovna, who was incarcerated for six years in Colorado.

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jackie sumell: And she grew a garden with us for about two years and then her sentence was vacated, it was a wrongful conviction. She came home and was like I don't know what I'm doing. I was like, "Get your butt over to New Orleans." And she's been incredible, she's the lead garden steward, and she's now studying plant medicine and is helping build the Abolitionist Apothecary. And then Warren "Chopper" Palmer, who I met through folks in Angola. You go to Angola for twenty-four years you're gonna meet a bunch of folks. Chopper fell in love with plants and gardening and plant medicine while he was incarcerated and talks more beautifully than I ever could about how the relationship to plants while he was incarcerated saved his life. And so he designed gardens with us for seven years before those gardens became part of his successful parole package. Then he came home, started a landscaping company, and continues to work both in the Apothecary and at Solitary Gardens.

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Rien Fertel: And there's all types of plants being grown in the gardens, are any of the food plants put to further use? Are they cultivated?

jackie sumell: Yeah, when we pair volunteers and Solitary Gardeners — folks who are still incarcerated designing the beds — the nature of how and where their relationship goes is individual, it's like whatever happens in those cases. But one of the beautiful things that I've seen happen in those cases is that folks will make meals with whatever the Solitary Garden's growing and then send them pictures of the meals and describe the meal which is like a proxy relationship to the experience of growing. Sometimes food, for instance, is given to the neighbors, the volunteers as I've said, or the families of the Solitary Gardeners.

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jackie sumell: But then we have nine gardens in Back of Town here in New Orleans and then we have one garden Uptown. And so we have a lot plant materials, plant stuff that is coming through, and some of it is designated to a project called the Abolitionist Apothecary, which is also here in the John Thompson Legacy Center. And the Abolitionist Apothecary takes the plant matter, turns it into medicine, and then that medicine is given back for free to systems-impacted folks, folks who have incarcerated beloveds or formerly incarcerated themselves.

Rien Fertel: Yeah, that's very cool. I did not know about the Apothecary until this morning. Can you talk more about that, maybe what the seed of that idea was and where you hope it goes?

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jackie sumell: Yeah, the seed came from Chopper. So Chopper was designing medicinal gardens. I didn't know very much about plant medicine; I went and took some courses and learned more and more and more. And then some of the other Solitary Gardeners, we would share books and information with them, so they'd start designing garden beds that were determined to heal the communities they were convicted of harming, which is a really beautiful moment to think about how restitution and reciprocity can actually exist, and how healing communities we have harmed is a practice of abolition that is excluded from the current criminal punishment system, right? Solitary Gardens has been an amazing project, and it's ten years old, and it's done incredible things as I said for the liberation of folks and to draw awareness around practices of solitary confinement, but they are enormous and cumbersome to build.

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jackie sumell: One thing that's been really beautiful about the Abolitionist Apothecary is we can make plant medicine that moves into the places and spaces that need to have these conversations more readily. And it has been used, for instance, with the Bourbon Street Massacre. We were able to put together plant medicine that folks who were currently incarcerated grew, designed to heal some of the dancers and folks that were harmed on Bourbon Street on New Year's Eve. It was amazing, it's really amazing! And then the same thing, the fires in L.A. this year, we put together

a bunch of salves and other things and sent them out to folks in L.A. And the movement for black lives in the wake of George Floyd uprisings to be able to support folks doing organizing work has been incredible. And all of that origin story, much like my own, comes from folks who are incarcerated.

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Rien Fertel: Right, you're letting them lead. I don't want or need a complete list but Solitary Gardens now exists all over the country, correct? Can you say a bit about that expansion and how that works? If someone wanted to do this in their community, how does that start, or is it you that goes to different communities and makes that happen?

jackie sumell: It's both and, yeah, but its open source so you can just go to the website solitarygardens.org and then download how we've built them. But you can also interpret that to your best ability. And the only thing that we ask is that folks grow gardens for at least three growing seasons.

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jackie sumell: And I say that because folks who are incarcerated, particularly those who are in solitary confinement, are buried deepest within our carceral system and furthest away from our daily consciousness, and therefore most easily and quickly to be forgotten. And so we don't want

to start or encourage relationships that can't be upheld, because they're used to that, right, and that furthers the trauma and the experience of incarceration. And so that would be the only kind of bottom line for us. In 2019 I went on tour with someone who had just come home from five years of a wrongful conviction in solitary in Angola, and he and I went and built nine garden beds all along the northeast coast in different places and spaces. Everything from a youth prison that is now turned into a sustainable farm, to a church, to the Lower Eastside Girls Club, to a community garden.

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jackie sumell: We built Solitary Gardens all around the North East and then down to shape in Houston, Texas and then folks have built them on their own. There's three existing Solitary Gardens, Visible Records in Charlottesville, Virginia and then there's some out in California. Sometimes I'll get emails from people who have built their own Solitary Garden, and I find that charming and remarkable and another way to uphold Herman's legacy.

Rien Fertel: Does Solitary Gardens have a main site? I volunteered a few years ago, that's still existent?

jackie sumell: Yeah.

Rien Fertel: Can you talk a bit about that main site? I only have few more questions. I don't know if you think about that as the main cite or the headquarters or the ground zero, but talk about that space.

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jackie sumell: Yeah, we have two spaces actually. So the space that you visited is 2600 Andry Street. And that I think of as the origin story, more than HQ, because that's where I got to experiment with growing sugarcane, cotton, tobacco, and figuring out this messy process to get to where we are now. And that space has nine gardens that mimic the experience of a prison tier, so there are nine gardens front facing with prison gates out at the front. And what's important about that process of making them out of Revolutionary Mortar — the sugarcane, cotton, tobacco mixed together — is that it changes it over time much like people. And so part of what we're saying is if these prison cells turned garden beds change over time, what else can happen?

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jackie sumell: And Solitary Gardeners might say, "Oh can you turn that into a butterfly? Can you turn my garden into a heart? Chopper, can you turn my garden into a caduceus?" The symbol of medicine as the walls start to fall apart. And so as an abolitionist I'm asking folks to apply that logic to human beings. What does it mean to take someone who has caused great harm and then invest in their possibility? Invest in the ways that they change rather than the rigidity of the

carceral system, which reduces them to a DOC number attached to the harm they caused. So how do they become healers and butterflies and hearts, right? And that as a practice of abolition. And so the Solitary Gardens in Back of Town they have all these different shaped gardens that once were prison cells and then that one single cell that's built from Herman's lived experience.

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jackie sumell: And then we have the Abolitionist Sanctuary, which is in the Seventh Ward, and that's on North Robinson Street. And I encourage folks to engage with that space. It's where the first Solitary Garden was ever built. It's a community garden and it is a space that is meant to encourage a sense of wonder and curiosity around the practices of abolition. It's a sanctuary, a safe place to think about what does abolition mean because it's not a definition that is rigid, its ever evolving like the natural world, and it's not for me to define, it's for us.

Rien Fertel: Because that was gonna be my next question is how would you define, you've used that word abolitionist and you've called yourself an abolitionist, but I also understand if you do not personally want to define it, but maybe we as a community or we universally define it.

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Rien Fertel: This was gonna be my last question, but I'll ask it now. If you think of it as an abolitionist movement, a term that we ordinarily link to the nineteenth century, to the 1800s United States? Do you encourage people to be abolitionists or how do you encourage? You wrote

this letter to Herman all those years ago. You said, “What can I do?” “What can people do?” I guess people must ask you this question. I’m guessing it might be an infuriating question to ask because there’s so much to do, right? But maybe what do people do? How do people become their own sort of, define that word abolitionist for themselves?

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jackie sumell: Well, let me just say that when I met Herman in 2001, I was as ignorant as they come and that man met me where I was at, was generous with his tutelage, his patience, and his love, and so I’m never infuriated when people ask me. I know that I honor Herman when I receive those questions, yeah, and people do all the time. I often say the first ingredient to abolition is curiosity, it is a sense of wonder, and it’s an important muscle to be flexing. And I mean that in the sense of what is abolition I am curious about it, and I mean that in the ways that we respond to harm.

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jackie sumell: So abolition is a practice that will ultimately help us replace systems of oppression, punishment, control, and surveillance, sure. And abolition is a practice that ultimately will help us to be better people, to be better humans, to respond to intimate and micro harm that happens amongst us. And I think if we wanted to distill it down to something that folks can take with them, it’s a practice of responding to harm without causing more.

Rien Fertel: I have two more subjects I really want to get at. When did you first move to New Orleans?

jackie sumell: Oh, 2005.

Rien Fertel: Okay, so twenty years, and this was after Katrina?

jackie sumell: This was seven days after Katrina.

Rien Fertel: You moved here seven days after Katrina?

jackie sumell: Don't ask.

Rien Fertel: Okay.

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Jackie sumell: No, no. I came down, I had been visiting Herman and Albert since 2001, my first visits. So I was kinda familiar with the city. I would stay with King in Mid-City and visit Herman mostly, I also visited Woodfox. And then Katrina happens and then another elder mentor of mine, Malik Rahim, says, "Y'all call yourselves the activists. You better act." At this point, King is

missing; we don't know if he drowned, we don't know where he is. And it was just excruciating to be watching this on tv, and I was living in New York at the time, actually as a carpenter's apprentice. And so I just got with a bunch of folks that I had met through organizing on behalf of the Angola Three and I was like, "What do we do?" And they were like, "We gotta go support Malik." And so I flew into Austin, Texas with a bunch of — and I know this is being archived and I don't know if there's a statute of limitations here — but a bunch of Red Cross welcome letters that I had photoshopped.

Rien Fertel: You're okay.

jackie sumell: Yeah, I think I'm okay. [Beeping sound]. I have to shut that off, I'm sorry Rien.

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Rien Fertel: So the Red Cross?

jackie sumell: Yeah, I had photoshopped badly Red Cross welcome letters. And then myself and a couple of other organizers drove from Austin, Texas to New Orleans. We were met by the National Guard, who that day had turned away something like forty-two doctors, Black doctors from North Carolina, and they looked at my poorly photoshopped welcome letter and said, "Go ahead."

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jackie sumell: And then we were able to bring supplies, gas, water, bicycles, to Malik's. Malik tells this story like I was the first person he knew before, that had come. And I only expected to stay for a month or so, and then, twenty years later, I'm still here.

Rien Fertel: So how has your relationship with the city evolved because the Big Easy can be I think a hard place to live, I think, for a lot of people. How would you answer that question? How has your relationship with the city evolved? You have chosen to stay here for twenty years.

jackie sumell: No, I'm gonna reframe that. New Orleans is the most alive place that I've ever been and I think New Orleans chooses you.

01:21:00

jackie sumell: It's colonized swamp, so it will suck you up when it wants you and it will spit you out when it's done. And I'm expecting to be spit out at some point, I don't know when that is. But I often describe the city as magedy, as equal parts magic and tragedy at the same time. So occupying that same space, and much like abolition, to not take the reductive nature of the criminal punishment system — guilty, innocent, good or bad — to have one eclipse the other but to hold these opposing truths at the same time. And New Orleans is such a good teacher of that, right? This is a city that is so utterly violent and the violence is in front of you. My nine-year-old

godson was shot in the back of the head two blocks from my house while he was texting me and he died, right? This is 2020.

01:22:00

Jackie sumell: And on that same street I raised six children of a single mother whose children's fathers are both incarcerated, right? That is magic, that's absolute magic that wasn't gonna happen in the bubbles of San Francisco.

Rien Fertel: That you are allowed into their lives, into those families?

jackie sumell: Yeah, and then the ways that we've shared our lives together taught me a new way of living. I learned about mutual aid and community care by existing in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana. What a gift. When the rest of the country — at least when I moved here in 2005 and my family was like, "Why are you going to Louisiana? New Orleans is so backwards, you guys are thirty years behind." Some of that is true when you look at the politics. But we are fifty years ahead when it comes to learning how to take care of each other, and that is beautiful.

01:22:59

Rien Fertel: My last question involves taking care, you've mentioned on several occasions over our talk about the toll that imprisonment takes on the bodies of an individual. I don't want to draw too deep of a false parallel, but I would say or assume that a lot of the work that you do also takes its toll on your body. And I'm not just talking about working gardens, outdoor work, but the abolitionist work that we've been talking about for over an hour now. What do you do to take care of yourself? You've talked about the relationships that you've developed in the city, you've talked about the communal aspect the city allows you that other cities in this country might not. But the individual you, what do you do?

01:24:11

Rien Fertel: And this is 2025. New Orleans is as beautiful as it ever was but at times it feels in a rougher place than it has ever been.

jackie sumell: That is true.

Rien Fertel: Or at least in my past twenty-five years of living here. It also feels and this country is certainly in a different place than we were when you did your first art project that took issue with George W. Bush. It's a much different place than it was in 2005 when you moved to this city. How do you take care of you?

jackie sumell: Well, it's a tender question, because for the first decade and a half, I had these remarkable elders, Herman and Albert in particular, who would tell me when I went too far, who really were the bookends of my lived experience.

01:25:14

jackie sumell: And now, I myself am becoming the elder. I don't have the same kind of markers and so I'm learning, you know? I have beautiful community and beautiful people in my life who are adept at calling me in when I have exhausted myself. But I will also just say that one great gift that I learned from so many of the elders that I worked with, but particularly Herman, Albert, and Robert, is that all of our freedom is experienced in the service of others.

01:25:57

jackie sumell: And you can hear this in passages from Christianity and Buddhism and Islam and any faith that has withstood the test of time, that selfless service is a practice of liberation. It's a practice of being with your understanding of God. And I don't think you can endure forty-one and forty-four years of solitary confinement unless you've figured something out. And what they figured out was their selfless service of the people mind, body, soul as Black Panthers could withstand the impossible, could sustain, could transmute, could alchemize. And that didn't mean that they weren't exhausted or they didn't feel tortured or they weren't traumatized, right? But

how did they alchemize that into action? And that was a great blessing and a great gift that they have given to me.

01:26:56

jackie sumell: And I would say that the Gardens and the Abolitionist Apothecary and the Sanctuary and the John Thompson Legacy Center and this project Freedom to Grow, all of that is birthed out of that desire to give people tools to be able to alchemize their own pain and hurt into action, into care, into radical love. And so that is, in no uncertain terms, how I sustain this work twenty-five years later.

Rien Fertel: Thank you. I think that's a good place to end. I wanna thank you so much.

jackie sumell: How do you do this? This is like a marathon!

Rien Fertel: This conversation? Oh well, I'm glad I did it because you're a great conversationalist. I wanna tell one story, just to get it on the record. I volunteered just once at the Solitary Gardens — we talked about that earlier. There were maybe, I'm guessing, two dozen volunteers there that morning; I think we met at 9 a.m.

01:28:08

Rien Fertel: It was exactly four years ago, it was March of 2021. I think we showed up wearing face masks and there was definitely a bus or two of younger people, I think, in their twenties, maybe college students, that had come from wherever to do service work in New Orleans. They weren't locals, I don't believe. And you greeted us at the Gardens and you had us all gather round, sit down, and you gave like a five to eight minute introduction to the place where we were, to the organization, to Solitary Gardens. And it was kind of like the most perfect five minute explanation. I knew it was a talk you had given many times, but it didn't feel practiced. I think about that often: "Oh, that is the way you give a very defining five minute intro."

01:29:16

Rien Fertel: It was just like the perfect pitch. And I distinctly remember this — that's only half of what I wanted to say — the whole time you were doing that you were plucking clover out of the ground and weaving clover into a ring. And I believe one was a four leaf clover and you weaved it to a ring and after you finished you said, "Okay y'all are gonna go follow this lead volunteer to do this, and y'all are gonna rake this, and y'all are gonna go do weeds." You gave me the ring of clover and it still sits on the dashboard of my Toyota Prius. It's still on the dashboard of my car today, four plus years later. So just to tell that story and get it on the record. It is now all dried up, but it's still there and it's still a ring, it still exists. But thank you, thank you for sitting down to talk.

[End Transcript]

