

‘Punishment’s Twin’: Theorizing Prisoner Reentry for a Politics of Abolition

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**Abstract**

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*“Punishment’s Twin”*: *Theorizing Prisoner Reentry for a Politics of Abolition* investigates prisoner reentry as a discursive formation which shores up the naturalization of the contemporary prison as a means of managing populations deemed disposable through the vicissitudes of neoliberal globalization. Using a combination of ethnography and critical discourse analysis, my project argues that prisoner reentry is deployed using a vocabulary, which mimics a critique of mass imprisonment, in order to expand the punishment system and render it more flexible, cost effective and legitimate. The critique developed represents a significant contribution to scholarship on the gendered and racialized nature of punishment in late modern society.

In the chapter, titled “‘Where Ministry and Economics Meet’: The Convergence of Neoliberal and Evangelical Rationalities within Prisoner Reentry,” I analyze how neoliberal and evangelical

Christian rationalities come together in prisoner reentry discourse as it circulates in a large metropolitan area of the Midwest. I intervene in the theorization of neoliberal political rationalities by showing how neoliberalism borrows from other ideologies in order to find purchase in a particular locale and that this borrowing is profoundly implicated with regimes of race and gender. This chapter provides a window into the enactment of an emerging neoliberal masculinity within prisoner reentry discourse.

Using interviews with formerly imprisoned women in the Twin Cities, “‘prison treated me way better than you’: Representation, Perplexity and Barriers After Shakopee” is a chapter which grapples with the politics of representation in prison activist scholarship. The chapter attempts to disrupt the way that formerly imprisoned women’s narratives are “mined as rich sources” in pathologizing and voyeuristic ways. This chapter highlights two key findings from my interviews: 1) Using Priti Ramamurthy’s concept of subjects-in-perplexity, I argue that the representation of the women’s prison as an empowering space in Minnesota, as opposed to the disciplinary nature of residential reentry programs, naturalized the prison as the proper place where women prisoners could find help, healing and support; and 2) I found that the barriers attached to felony status often (re)produce the very vulnerability expected in accounts of imprisoned women’s lives. I situate participants’ stories within the context of post-WWII shifts in housing, settler colonialism, and legalized discrimination against formerly imprisoned peoples.

Finally, the dissertation argues that in order to genuinely transform the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence, prisoner reentry must be situated within a politics of abolition.

Chapter Four provides a broad critique of ‘prisoner reentry’ as a discursive formation. Using a Foucauldian approach to critical discourse analysis, I chart the deployment and effects of prisoner reentry in policy documents, case management manuals, and other discursive events at the national level. I argue that mainstream articulations of prisoner reentry represent the latest installment in a long history of reform movements which have tended to bolster the punishment system as opposed to questioning the conditions of its emergence. The final chapter theorizes the concept of “abolitionist reentry praxis.” I develop this concept by highlighting political principles and a case study to map the contours of what this kind of work could look like. *“Punishment’s Twin...”* serves as a call to prison activists to be alert to the potentially dangerous development that mainstream articulations of prisoner reentry represents and imaginative in constructing reentry work for a world without prisons

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## **Acknowledgements**

In many ways, I see the seeds of this project in an older obsession of mine from childhood. At a very young age, I became obsessed with the antebellum south and slavery. I devoured young adult books on Harriet Tubman, but quickly turned to the bookshelves of the adults around me. I can still remember the day that I found my aunt's college textbook, The History of the Negro in the United States. I read and reread this book until the cover fell off. It was a major turning point in a life long journey to understand African-American history and the relationship of people of African descent to the State. I am sure that as a child my ancestors were watching over that search for our history. In the journey that this dissertation represents and in my broader life's work as an activist scholar, I ask that they lend their presence to this endeavor. May we build a world without prisons.

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## **I—Introduction**

As the number of people incarcerated in the U.S. has expanded, the challenge of an increasing number of prisoners returning to their communities has become a site for governmental intervention in a way it never could have before. In 1997, Janet Reno asked a meeting of top corrections officials what the nation was doing to manage the increasing number of prisoners exiting state and federal prisons. Everyone responded with silence. Despite the rapid escalation in the use of imprisonment, no one (at least those in conversation with the Attorney General) had thought about the consequences of the prison-building boom. After this meeting, Janet Reno asked people to begin investigating strategies for managing the increasing number of prisoners being released from correctional institutions across the country (Travis 2007). Jeremy Travis, then director of the National Institute of Justice, and others began what has been termed “a reentry movement.” Travis is arguably the most prominent policy researcher in the area of prisoner reentry. He is said to have coined the phrase “prisoner reentry” in the first place. Travis, along with many other reentry reformers, has promoted this new trend within penological discourse and practice.

Since the late 1990s, when Janet Reno first initiated discussions around this subject, major reentry initiatives have been established on the national level, including the passing of the Second Chance Act, supported by both Republicans and Democrats. In his 2004 State of the Union address, President Bush characterized the U.S. as “the land of second chance” and stated, “when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life” (Bush 2004). Since the late 1990s, every state has developed a reentry task force and reentry services units are continually popping up in state Departments of Corrections, and county and city level governments (Travis 2007).

Each year, approximately 700,000 people are released from prison (Carson and Sabol 2012). People often exit prisons with very few resources. Some states offer “gate money” upon release, usually ranging from \$50- \$200. Studies have shown that access to housing, employment and other resources dramatically alters the likelihood of re-arrest for a former prisoner (Solomon 2006). However, two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested within three years of getting out (Petersilia 2009). There is a whole gamut of ways in which it is legal to discriminate against former prisoners. Educational, housing, and employment barriers represent a significant challenge to formerly imprisoned people and their efforts to remain free from the punishment system.

Additionally, formerly imprisoned people have their voting rights curtailed. The potential impact of the prison-building boom on voting rights alone demonstrates the significance of prisoner reentry as a political issue. Felony disenfranchisement laws restrict the rights of prisoners to participate in electoral politics. Approximately five million citizens are currently unable to vote (Bronstein, Pierce, and Sangster II 2012). Forty-eight states, as well as the District of Columbia, prohibit prisoners from voting while imprisoned (Alexander 2012). Four states permanently ban felons from voting for their lifetime. Additionally, “no other country in the world disenfranchises people who are released from prison in a manner even remotely resembling the United States” (Alexander 2012, 158). Depending on the convicting state, felony disenfranchisement laws also limit whether a former prisoner on probation or parole can participate in the voting process. Given the frequency with which formerly imprisoned people are returned to prison on parole violations, a massive group of Americans are removed from the electorate. According to The Sentencing Project, one in thirteen African Americans has lost the

right to vote. This has profound implications for the democratic process. Jessie Allen argues that in addition to the four states, which permanently disenfranchise felons, “administrative practices sometimes transform temporary voting bans into lifelong disenfranchisement” (Allen 2011, 389). Allen finds that even as states are instituting reforms to these laws, election officials often enforce nonexistent eligibility requirements that result in increased disenfranchisement (Allen 2011). The barriers facing formerly imprisoned people represent a vital site of struggle for those concerned with mass imprisonment, but also more broadly for those concerned with the state of democracy in the U.S.

What is startling is the fact that only within the last fifteen years have policy makers become concerned with reentry. For most of the prison-building boom in the U.S., reentry has remained little more than an afterthought. The ‘lock them up and throw away the key’ discourse obscures the fact that 95% of prisoners will eventually be released (T. Hughes and Wilson 2002; Lawrence 2004). The realization of this fact, as well as the increasing unsustainability of corrections budgets, has resulted in an “extraordinary policy ferment” (Travis 2007, 85). Prisoner reentry has emerged as an object of knowledge and intervention in profound new ways over the last decade.

Research on reentry within mainstream criminology and corrections has tended to be “theoretically shallow” focused on experimental design and program evaluation (Hallett 2012, 216). Michael Hallett (2011) has argued that critical criminologists must pay attention to the “subaltern context” of reentry, in order to see the macro-level shifts with which reentry is imbricated. In “*Reentry to What? Theorizing Prisoner Reentry in the Jobless Future*” Hallett writes, “as we have seen many times over in the history of punishment, the punitive turn in the United States had less to do with offenders per se than with large social dynamics in the

economy and race relations... It remains to be seen if the emerging prisoner reentry agenda develops into a genuine full swing of the ‘pendulum’ back toward a bona fide rehabilitation movement... or simply becomes an exercise in corrections budget recapture by politically powerful constituencies also experiencing fiscal crisis” (Hallett 2012, 218). Reentry research has been characterized largely by a focus on the need for employment opportunities. As Hallett writes, “Today’s contingent labor opportunities for ex-offenders must be seen by criminologists, then, as part and parcel of a larger apparatus of social control... To the extent that a ‘jobs’ agenda becomes and remains the ‘answer’ to the crime problem, employment programs may not result in transformational opportunities for ex-offenders, but simply perpetuate and reinforce preexisting patterns” (Hallett 2012, 222). Reentry initiatives cannot hope to solve employment issues or any of the other social problems they claim to address, if the problem is continually positioned as a failing internal to the individual prisoner as opposed to a cause for radical systemic change. Hallett’s work aims to situate reentry within the sociology of punishment literature. This dissertation builds on Hallett’s insights, arguing that this major development in penal policy and discourse must be situated within a politics of abolition as well.

### **My Intervention**

“ *‘Punishment’s Twin’: Theorizing Prisoner Reentry for a Politics of Abolition* ”

investigates prisoner reentry as a discursive formation, which shores up the naturalization of the contemporary prison as a means of managing populations deemed disposable through the vicissitudes of neoliberal globalization. Using a combination of ethnography and critical discourse analysis, my project argues that prisoner reentry is deployed using a vocabulary which mimics a critique of mass imprisonment in order to expand the punishment system and render it

more flexible, cost effective and legitimate. The project moves across scales, providing a broad critique of mainstream articulations of prisoner reentry at the national level and in a local study in the Midwest. I demonstrate the centrality of neoliberal political rationalities to contemporary regimes of punishment, but also how neoliberalism borrows from and converges with evangelical Christianity to find purchase in local contexts. The voices of women prisoners are centered in Chapter Three through an exploration of representation, subjectivity and the material barriers to building a life after imprisonment. Despite the problematic deployment and effects of prisoner reentry in corrections discourses, *“Punishment’s Twin...”* insists that the material conditions facing returning prisoners are of vital importance to prison abolitionist struggle. Thus, in Chapter Five, I map some suggestions for articulating a notion of ‘abolitionist reentry praxis,’ work that recognizes the centrality of formerly imprisoned people’s knowledge and wisdom in building a world without prisons. Individual-level service work can allow activists to ground abolitionist visions in the concrete everyday struggles of those most impacted by mass imprisonment. Alternatively, situating individual-level service work in a broader vision and analysis will enrich that work. Reentry is a vital site of struggle for a politics of abolition.

### **Prisoner Reentry in the Age of Mass Imprisonment**

*Researchers have “largely ignored how penal techniques are used to... extend the carceral gaze upon release” (Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat 2009, 532).*

The United States leads the world in imprisonment, incarcerating about 25% of the prisoners in the world while constituting only 5% of the world’s population (Liptak 2008). The U.S. incarceration rate of 751 people in prison for every 100,000 in population stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the world (Walmsley 2009). England’s rate is 151 per 100,000; Japan’s is

63 (Walmsley 2009). Counting only adults, approximately 1 in every 100 Americans is in prison (Pew Center on the States 2008). If one includes those on probation or parole, the correctional population was 7.2 million people in 2009- 1 in 32 adults (Glaze 2010).

One of the central arguments of *“Punishment’s Twin...”* is that our analysis of prisoner reentry must be situated within a broader critique of mass imprisonment and a politics of abolition. Thus, prison activist scholarship and the sociology of punishment represent the two main fields within which this dissertation intervenes. Without an understanding of the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence, we cannot hope to understand the politics of prisoner reentry or assess its potential pitfalls and opportunities.

The emergence of mass imprisonment has taken place within an important geopolitical context:

- The global north has witnessed a profound process of deindustrialization, which has devastated working class communities, and communities of color.
- A neoliberal political rationality where all actions are reduced to a calculus of actuarial risk, market logics of efficiency and values of profitability has come to dominate the social realm.
- The State has undergone profound transformations; less a weakening or ‘withering away’ than a remodeling and renovation, as social safety nets have been withdrawn and militarized carcerality has been extended.

Economic policy in the U.S. shifted with the introduction of reaganomics in the 1980s and these shifts are bound up with mass imprisonment. The neoliberal emphasis on small government has had the effect of pulling the social safety net from under the poor, as corporations were given tax cuts under the auspices of stimulating economic growth. While small government is the rhetoric when it comes to social provision, budgets for policing and prisons have risen dramatically. The economic restructuring of late modernity has rendered some populations disposable, as the global north has undergone as process of deindustrialization. The massive expansion of the U.S. prison system occupies a central place in the management of social and economic insecurities

rooted in the globalization of capital. *“Punishment’s Twin”* situates prisoner reentry within this wider context of mass imprisonment’s emergence.

The dissertation’s title is derived from a statement made by Justice Now co-founder and prison activist scholar, Cassandra Shaylor. In *“Not Light but Fire: Gender, Violence and Strategies for Prison Abolition,”* Shaylor writes:

“Though we can trace a pattern in prison history of the pendulum swinging from a professed focus on punishment to a commitment to so-called reform every 30 years or so, reform still always risks becoming punishment’s twin” (Shaylor 2007, 7–8).

This project takes up this notion of reform as “punishment’s twin,” and uses it as a rubric through which to pursue a critique of mainstream articulations of prisoner reentry. Prisoner reentry represents the latest installment in a long history of reforms, which have tended to bolster the punishment system. The material conditions facing people released from prison are vital issues for anti-prison activist scholars. However, we must be cautious of an uncritical acceptance of the seemingly benign notions of prisoner reentry circulating in mainstream corrections and criminology. Prison activists scholars must attend to reentry both because it is expanding the punishment system temporarily and because it represents an opportunity to ground our work in the concrete everyday struggles of those most impacted by mass imprisonment.

## **Research Questions**

The central research questions for this project are:

- 1) What does prisoner reentry do?
- 2) How is it deployed and to what effect?
- 3) What discourses are mobilized by policy makers, corrections officials, case managers, advocates and formerly imprisoned people involved in prisoner reentry?

- 4) How are neoliberal political rationalities imbricated in the articulation of prisoner reentry as a discursive formation?
- 5) How are these discourses racialized and gendered?

This project is concerned with the logics underlying prisoner reentry. I approach prisoner reentry as a discursive formation—an object of discourse, power/knowledge and policy intervention. Discourse “constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about or reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (Hall 2001, 72). This project investigates prisoner reentry as a discursive formation in order to make strange the common sense logics about punishment with which it is imbricated and to make visible reentry’s deployment and effects.

The dissertation takes a Foucauldian approach that views power and knowledge as inherently bound up with one another. “*Punishment’s Twin...*” refuses the binary between practices and rationalities. “The difference between the envisioned aims of a program and its actual effects does not refer to the purity of the program and the impurity of reality, but to different realities and heterogenous strategies... Thus, rationalities are part of a reality that is characterized by the permanent ‘failure’ of programs” (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 195-196). In analyzing neoliberal rationalities within prisoner reentry discourse, we see the convergence of neoliberal and evangelical rationalities, not as some polluted version or failure of neoliberal rationality, but as “the strategic completion (remplissement) of the apparatus” (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 195–196). The co-constitutive relationship between power and knowledge is central to how I conceived the project and particularly why and how I ask the questions that I pose. This framework allows me to ask different kinds of questions—rather than simply ask, what does

prisoner reentry mean or what does it refer to? Foucauldian scholarship opens a path for me to ask: How and to what effect is ‘prisoner reentry’ deployed and what does it do?<sup>1</sup>

## **Methods**

Prisoner reentry is not a stable object with a concrete existence. It is a socially produced site of intervention, which is produced by and simultaneously produces the penal system. Reentry is productive of penal categories and as Ian Hacking argues, “the power of categories rests in their capacity to impose the realities they ostensibly only describe” (Stoler 2002). Prisoner reentry can also be viewed as a process of subject formation. Embedded within reentry discourse are arguments about who prisoners are, what criminality means, and why mass imprisonment is a seemingly fitting solution to the fallout of neoliberal globalization and the racialized and colonial processes on which it is built.

Foucault usefully shifted our attention from language to an expansive conception of discourse as a system of representation, which brings together both language and practice.<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall neatly summarizes the meaning Foucault gives to discourse as: “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about-a way of representing the knowledge about- a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall 2001, 72). While some use ‘discourse’ as a purely linguistic concept and Hall re-centers language to a degree in the above summary, a Foucauldian concept of discourse can also highlight how all social practices entail meaning and thus have a discursive aspect. Foucault pushes us to interrogate how discourse renders some ways of talking, acting and viewing the world legible, while foreclosing other potentialities.

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<sup>1</sup> The works of James Ferguson and David Valentine were also influential in asking these Foucauldian questions.

<sup>2</sup> Following this conception of discourse as language and practice, I view the way that reentry is framed in language as central to what it does in the world materially. This paper attempts to move beyond a strict dichotomy between language and practice.

Discourse “constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about or reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (Hall 2001, 72). This project investigates prisoner reentry as a discursive formation in order to make strange the common sense logics about punishment with which it is imbricated and to make visible reentry’s deployment and effects.

Discourse analysis is an increasingly popular qualitative research method within the social sciences and more broadly. Scholars utilizing discourse analysis do not focus only on spoke discourse, but also on other mediums such as written data, as well as textual graphics and images (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Cameron 2001). *Critical* discourse analysis (CDA) has more often been used to analyze written texts, with analysts tending to “work with ‘institutional’ rather than ‘ordinary’ talk” (Cameron 2001, 123). Within critical discourse analysis, there are a variety of schools incorporating a diverse array of methodological approaches. Discourse analysis “is an umbrella term, allowing for considerable variation in subject matter and approach”(Cameron 2001, 7).

While not all varieties of discourse analysis conceive of discourse in quite the way Foucault does, my project is very much focused on developing a critical, Foucauldian lens. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with “the ‘hidden agenda’ of discourse, its ideological dimension”:

“... the ‘critical’ in ‘critical discourse analysis’ refers to a way of understanding the social world drawn from critical theory. Within that paradigm reality is understood as *constructed*, shaped by various social forces. These, however, are frequently ‘naturalized’—in everyday discourse, as opposed to critical discussions of it, reality is presented not as the outcome of social practices that might be questioned or challenged, but as simply ‘the way things are’. Naturalization obscures the fact that ‘the way things are’ is not inevitable or unchangeable. It both results from particular actions and serves particular interests” (Cameron 2001, 123).

*“Punishment’s Twin...”* takes seriously the idea that ‘experts’ are central to the operation of power; that criminological and penological knowledge production are bound up with the power to punish; that in their license to define, describe and classify things and people, ‘experts’ also act upon those things and people. Thus, many of my claims in this dissertation (particularly in Chapter Four) are drawn from data derived from ‘expert’ knowledge.

Given my commitment to a critical, Foucauldian approach, I utilize a form of discourse analysis outlined by Jean Carabine in Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis, which moves through the following stages (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001, 281):

- 1) Immersing one’s self in the data
- 2) Identifying themes, categories and objects of discourse
- 3) Looking for evidence of an inter-relationship between discourses
- 4) Identifying discursive strategies and techniques
- 5) Looking for absences and silences
- 6) Looking for Resistances and counter-discourses
- 7) Identifying the effects of discourse

The conclusions reached in Chapter Four were formulated based on an analysis of reentry policy documents at the national level. Specifically, the data are drawn from Jeremy Travis’ work, the 700-page Reentry Policy Council (RPC) Report, National Reentry Resource Center webinars, archived press conferences, youtube videos, reentry organization websites and mission statements, transcripts from legislative hearings, prisoner reentry case management manuals, Center for Effective Public Policy Reentry ‘Coaching Packets,’ and reports within the Urban

Institutes ‘reentry portfolio’.<sup>3</sup> As I collected materials, I wrote discourse notes, moving through Carabine’s stages. I took note of commonly used concepts and ‘best practices’, such as recidivism reduction and cost effectiveness, analyzing the way that reentry is framed by different claimsmakers in differing contexts. Common themes and patterns emerged which provided the constitutive elements of this dissertation’s main argument about prisoner reentry presented within Chapter Four.

I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Twin Cities during the summers of 2011 and 2012. I observed meetings of faith-based groups, including R3, a collaborative of over forty Christian ministry organizations “working together to transform and heal broken lives impacted by incarceration and addiction.” The R3 collaborative also houses a consulting firm called “Better and Faster,” whose slogan *where ministry and economics meet* is referenced in Chapter Two’s title.<sup>4</sup> The claims made in Chapter Two are also based on discourse analysis of faith-based reentry organization mission statements and other institutional narratives based on non-profit websites and training materials.

The ethnographic portion of the study was conducted in the Twin Cities— Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota. The Twin Cities represent the most populous urban area in the state. Divided by the Mississippi river, Minneapolis and St. Paul have an enormous social services industry that largely casts itself as caring and benevolent. Over the last 15 years, the Twin Cities have witnessed significant change as a result of increasing migration of black families from Chicago, and a growing population of Hmong and Somali immigrants, which have resulted in shifting ideas about community and social welfare. There is a tension in the social service

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the toolkits, reports, coaching packets and case management manuals analyzed for this chapter were mentioned by Department of Corrections officials when asked about national level materials they used in thinking through reentry in their system.

<sup>4</sup> (<http://www.betterandfaster.org/>)

industry between notions of undeserving outsiders and an ethic of ‘taking care of our own’.<sup>5</sup> The Twin Cities, thus, represents an ideal site through which to read the conflicts and synergies between older discourses of rehabilitation and neoliberal discourses, which often read success and self-sufficiency as issues of individual responsibility.

The penal system in Minnesota, particularly as it relates to imprisoned and formerly imprisoned women tends to imagine itself as empowering and rehabilitative. Given this Minnesota ‘nice’ approach to penalty, Minnesota utilizes probation and parole more than some other states. Minnesota is billed as a ‘community corrections state,’ meaning probation is utilized above imprisonment when possible. However the percentage of the population under correctional control is larger in Minnesota than in other states. 1 in 26 adults are under some form of correctional control in Minnesota, as opposed to 1 in 31 nationally, and only 12 percent of the state’s correctional population is in prisons or jails (Pew Center on the States 2009). Thus, while Minnesota imprisons a smaller percentage of those convicted of a crime, it has a larger percentage of its population under some form of correctional supervision than other states. The Twin Cities were thus an ideal site for this research because of the compatibility between the neoliberal and rehabilitative rhetoric deployed in prisoner reentry at the national level and the dominant social welfare ethics of Minnesota government.

For this study, I interviewed 14 women who had been recently released from MCF-Shakopee (Minnesota’s only women’s prison). All of the women had been released within one year of the interview. Half of the women interviewed identified as African-American or Black. Four women identified as Native American or American Indian, and three participants identified

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<sup>5</sup> These claims are based on my impressions after two years working in the Twin Cities as a rapid re-housing advocate for homeless families.

as white.<sup>6</sup> Each interview lasted approximately 1- 1.5 hours. Women were referred from a legal services non-profit and from other women who had been in the study. Two participants were informed about the study from their parole officers, who had heard about the study from other participants.

I also conducted 10 informal interviews with service providers in reentry services organizations and other stakeholders, including DOC officials. These interviews primarily helped me to understand the context of the punishment system in Minnesota and to identify spaces for participant observation. However, there are instances where they proved particularly useful. Case management manuals and other national level policy organizations and reports were often mentioned by these participants (particularly DOC officials and people in leadership in non-profits). Service-provider participants included two case managers, a parenting instructor, three Department of Corrections officials, and four Directors/Heads of non-profits providing reentry services.

## **Intersectionality**

An intersectional analysis of systems of oppression informs this project. State violence takes different forms based on race, class, gender, sexuality and nation. This dissertation is not about women prisoners per se. Some might wonder why I haven't limited the organizations and stakeholders I encountered to those focused specifically on women prisoners. I hope to disrupt the simplistic notions of gender often employed in the women in prison literature. Thus my

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<sup>6</sup> This study utilized a snowball sample method, which resulted in a sample with a disproportionate number of women of color than the overall inmate population at MCF-Shakopee. Approximately 19% of women imprisoned at Shakopee are Native American; 18% African American and 60% White. More white participants would be needed for a more representative sample. A daily inmate profile for MCF-Shakopee can be found at: <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/facilities/shakopee.htm>

fieldwork moves across discourses on masculinity in an organization that primarily serves black men, to evangelical discourses in reentry coalitions to the ideas circulating about gender responsiveness and interviews with women prisoners. It is my hope to defamiliarize the traditional distinctions made between people in women's prisons and the dominant figure of the male prisoner in criminological scholarship and practice. As the case of Cece McDonald highlights, the gender identities of prisoners do not always fit with how gender functions within penal systems (Pearce 2012). This dissertation is attentive to the gendered rationalities, which circulate in penal discourse, while hoping to avoid reifying those very rationalities in the analysis. I owe a great debt to feminist scholars, particularly women of color and third world feminists, who paved the way before me and made it possible to articulate the interlocking nature of systems of oppression. The works of Audre Lorde, bell Hooks, Angela Davis, Chandra Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander and Kum-Kum Bhavnani have informed my thinking in particularly important ways.

### **A Note on Language**

In this project, I have made a conscious choice to employ the language of prison abolitionist activists and critical prison scholars as opposed to the dominant terms of the punishment system. Instead of using the terms 'offender,' 'incarceration,' or 'corrections,' I deploy a vocabulary of 'prisoners,' 'imprisonment,' and 'punishment.' I use the term 'punishment system' to articulate the use of pain, violence and suffering as a naturalized response to perceived harm. Prisons exemplify this response in a very clear fashion. However, the punishment system also constitutes a more general centering of regimes of punishment in society, from the disciplinary practices of schools, social services institutions and households to militarized responses to human vulnerability.

Where I use the terms of the system, it is to analyze those terms as discursive constructs in order to unpack the workings of power behind them. However, one can never stand outside of the discursive constructs one is unpacking. Sedimented meanings adhere around terms such as offenders, punishment and reentry. These meanings structure what is possible in a given situation. For this reason, consciously employing critical language, as opposed to the language of the system is vital to destabilizing the realities imposed by correctional categories. However, at times, it is necessary to use the language of the system to analyze the rationalities underpinning it. This project seeks to defamiliarize the sedimented meanings attached to these signifiers, even as I am cognizant that language is inherently citational.

Additionally, in this dissertation, I use terms such as ‘the State’ and ‘the community.’ It is important to note the artificiality of a boundary between these two seemingly separate terrains. That boundary is increasingly blurred and untenable. Additionally, scholars have begun to question the seeming coherence of these formations in early eras. Roles traditionally attributed to ‘the State’ are increasingly taken on by actors, figured as member of ‘the community.’ Additionally, locating nodes of state power are increasingly difficult, even if those nodes were always already imagined. However, I will continue to use these terms, even as they are unstable because what gets coded as ‘state action’ and that which gets figured as ‘the community,’ as well as who is included and excluded are processes which have material impacts. As Judith Butler wrote about the contested category of ‘woman,’—in presupposing the way in which these categories designate spaces of contestation, ‘the State’ and ‘the community’ might become “a site a permanent openness and resignifiability (Butler and Scott 1992, 16)

## Chapter II— “Where ministry and economics meet”: the Convergence of Neoliberal and Evangelical Rationalities within Prisoner Reentry

*Although the current [fiscal] climate is distressing, we believe that the results from our evaluation combined with the dire need to control government costs at all levels provide opportunities for securing contracts with reform-minded government purchasers. Moreover, by building Better Futures Minnesota into a profit generating employer for some of our men, we can demonstrate creative ways to place hard to employ people on a pathway to self-sufficiency.<sup>7</sup>*

*The NetWork, a smart reform aimed at generating much better results at a lower cost for a group of high risk men, primarily African American men. We crafted a new model of success that provides access to the critical supports needed to transform consumers of costly public services into wage-earning citizens who assume healthy, productive roles as fathers, husbands, and members of their communities.<sup>8</sup>*

The texts above represent two examples of institutional self-representations used by Better Futures Enterprises (formerly The Network for Better Futures)<sup>9</sup> to describe their work. Better Futures explicitly identifies their organization as “an enterprise, not a program.” The organization’s use of the term “enterprise”, in addition to language such as “efficiency,” “profitability,” and “customers,” signals the dominance of neoliberal political rationalities wherein business rubrics are extended throughout the social realm. The organization focuses on the need for smaller, more efficient government and the place of private enterprise and community non-profits in taking up what were once seen as the responsibilities of the State. The continual emphasis on becoming productive, wage-earning citizens as opposed to “consumers of costly public services” needs to be analyzed within the context of neoliberal conceptions of self-

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<sup>7</sup> <http://betterfuturesenterprises.com/our-impact/the-challenges/>

<sup>8</sup> The Network for Better Futures October 2011 Newsletter.

<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs071/1107248862978/archive/1107253819586.html>

<sup>9</sup> I will refer to this organization as *The Network for Better Futures* throughout this paper as the majority of my quotes and examples are derived from the time period prior to their name change in the late Spring of 2013.

governance, where the individual's moral worth is "measured by their capacity for 'self-care'—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions" (W. Brown 2005, 42). Additionally, the statements above provide a window into the enactment of a neoliberal masculinity emerging within prisoner reentry discourse. In the discourses represented within the organization's brochures, website, newsletters and videos, a relationship of equivalence is drawn from overcoming addiction, healing the trauma of imprisonment and maintaining employment to paying child support, growing into an involved father, and being a husband. This chapter traces the imbrication of race, gender, neoliberalism and punishment as manifested within prisoner reentry discourse within Minnesota. I intervene in the theorization of neoliberal political rationalities by showing how neoliberalism borrows from other ideologies (particularly evangelical Christianity) in order to find purchase in particular locales and that this borrowing is profoundly implicated with regimes of race and gender. My argument in this chapter is that neoliberal and evangelical Christian rationalities co-constitute prisoner reentry discourse as it circulates in Minnesota.

Faith-based initiatives and neoliberal rationalities have been central to the discursive production of prisoner reentry in the U.S. These penal regimes "do not question the underlying causes of incarceration but view it as an individual failure with a cure that lies entirely with religion" (Erzen 2008, 664). A relationship with Christ is viewed as the key to rehabilitation. In a promotional video<sup>10</sup> for the R3 Collaborative, whose meetings I observed for this research, Doug Samuelson (the Director of Aftercare for MN Teen Challenge) states, "These men and women need the support of the body of Christ. The greater kingdom of God that's here. I see R3 as being the appendages of that body of Christ, that can work together... What I believe the call to you as

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<sup>10</sup> R3 Collaborative Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdYz56eB8c4>

Christians in this community is to seriously listen to what it is that the Lord may be saying to you.” The video ends with these statements by a variety of reentry stakeholders:

“Once the church engages, the fields are ripe. The harvest is ready. The next step is just to take that step out and begin to reap the harvest [Jeff Bremer, Executive Director-Bridge Builders for Kids]. We’ve done a great job reaching them, bringing the gospel to them and now it is time to plant them in a local, loving church with the resources they need so they can survive [George Gipson, Executive Director of R3]. You’re saving their families, you’re saving their community, you’re saving our communities [Lee Buckley, Community Reentry Coordinator- Minnesota Department of Corrections].”<sup>11</sup>

I attended my first R3 meeting during the Summer of 2012. The group sat in a circle while each participant went around and talked about how Christ guided their work. Then, a retired corporate CEO gave a presentation to unveil the website for the collaborative’s new consulting service, which is called “Better and Faster.” The presentation detailed the ways that the principles used to successfully run a corporation would be necessary to “transform and heal broken lives.”<sup>12</sup> The superior ability of the Church to implement efficient practices in order to save the State money and introduce former prisoners to Christ were the speaker’s primary emphasis. After this meeting, I began to examine the website and pay more attention to a common rhetorical emphasis combining cost efficiency, self-governance and Christianity that I had not paid significant attention to until this point in my research. Evangelical rationalities are particularly pervasive in prisoner reentry discourse as it is articulated in Minnesota. Minnesota is one of only two states (the other being Texas) where Prison Fellowship operates the InnerChange Freedom Initiative.<sup>13</sup> Evangelical Christianity comes together with neoliberal notions of self-governance and individualism in a way that tells us something broader about prisoner reentry itself.

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<sup>11</sup> R3 Collaborative Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdYz56eB8c4>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdYz56eB8c4>

<sup>13</sup> Prison Fellowship is the largest faith-based organization engaged in prison work in the U.S. Prison Fellowship describes the Innerchange Freedom Initiative in this way: “The InnerChange Freedom Initiative

## Neoliberal Masculinities and Race

“At least it might be said that whether reform succeeds or fails to meet its own aims, it usually succeeds in constituting a subject, the subject of reform, what might be called a ‘client-subject’” (Clough and Fine 2007, 267).

The policing of gender norms is central to punishment and an examination of regimes of gender is vital to building a politics of abolition (Davis 2003; Richie 1996; Sudbury 2005). Penal strategies have imbedded within them images of the ideal citizen-subject and the ideal’s constitutive outside. Prisoner reentry discourse is productive of particular representations of imprisoned and formerly imprisoned peoples. Who are the subjects personified in this discourse? How is “the offender” framed? An analysis of gender and race is crucial to adequately addressing these questions and to theorizing the deployment of these discourses. Neoliberal notions of productive, self-governing citizens rely on older moralizing discourses that are deeply racialized and gendered.

My fieldwork revealed an emphasis on self-governance, coupled with evangelical rationalities and notions of normative masculinity. Penal discourses often position prisoners as unable to care for themselves properly in gendered and racialized ways. Lynne Haney’s ethnography Offending Women: Power, Punishment and the Regulation of Desire demonstrates how notions of self-governance are gendered in two community corrections programs for women (Haney 2010). This chapter provides a window into the centrality of notions of black masculinity and fatherhood to neoliberal self-governance in the context of prisoner reentry. The issues facing

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(IFI) is a reentry program for prisoners based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Inmates begin the program 18 to 24 months before their release date and continue for an additional 12 months once they have returned to the community. This values-based program is built on the belief that real and lasting change takes place from within. IFI stresses personal responsibility, the value of education and hard work, and care of persons and property.” See <http://www.prisonfellowship.org/programs/reentry/ifi/>

male prisoners are often figured as moral failings directly linked to hegemonic masculinity and these notions of masculinity are profoundly racialized. Responsible fatherhood and financial support of the family are central emphases within prisoner reentry discourse. Looking at how these ideas are made manifest in institutional narratives and practice can tell us a great deal about how neoliberal rationalities, evangelical discourses and racialized gender shape punishment and the penal system.

Self-governance and self-care in the context of my study were enacted through notions of physical labor, financial support of the family, and discipline. The use of boot prints and the phrase “Success Works Here” around the organizational logo of *The Network for Better Futures* conveys the idea that work, particularly physical labor, is the key ingredient in transforming “Network Members” into self-governing subjects who properly accomplish masculinity as husbands and fathers. In one of the organization’s newsletters, Arthur Berman president and CEO of Twin Cities RISE! (a Better Futures partner) sums up the centrality of work to the framing of success:

“Employment is so fundamental in so many ways...Regular employment, even irregular employment, is a means to establish personal discipline and a pattern of being responsible. Ultimately, the success of these men will depend largely on their ability to get a job and keep a job.”

The ability to maintain employment is the core method of transformation in *The Network’s* model. The organization calls itself “a community of workers.”<sup>14</sup> In much of the organization’s brochures, videos and newsletters employment is continually tied to good parenting and financial support of the family. For example, a Hennepin County Public Affairs video featuring *The Network for Better Futures* demonstrates how ‘responsible fatherhood’ is framed and set up in a

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<sup>14</sup> Network Newsletter, December 2011.

<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs071/1107248862978/archive/1108956751768.html>

relationship of equivalence with discipline and physical labor.<sup>15</sup> The eight-minute video showcases two program graduates. The program's emphasis on paying child support is framed as central to the process of recovering from addiction. Participants in the program are shown doing morning calisthenics, after getting into an enterprise van at 5am. The participants then go to work in a waste recycling and waste sorting facility. As the video states,

“Once the men enroll, the hard work begins. *The NetWork* engages these men and on a daily basis creates a routine filled with high expectations. A young man in *The NetWork* would leave his housing about 5:30 in the morning, get on one of *the NetWork* vans, to the *NetWork* offices, they change into their work uniforms, they do some light calisthenics, there's a light meditation and then they are dispatched to various work crews. This routine helps develop good attitude and behaviors. The men learn to be on time, dress properly, engage in healthy activities and how to work and follow directions.”

The organization is characterized as a route through which to save the State money, while providing men the opportunity to be ‘productive citizens’ through private contracts for low-skilled work. The video cuts from waste sorting and recycling to a participant, “For my family, you see I have my son with me. He's with me all the time to help me be a better father. I can go out work honestly, I can come back home and I can feel good about myself that I've done something positive in my life and my son can see that.” The video cuts back and forth between scenes of participants working and footage showing each participant feeding and spending time with their children, marking them as becoming “responsible fathers.”

Through beginning the video with labor as the key strategy for success and ending the video depicting parenting time, the two are visually linked. Disciplining the body via calisthenics and waste sorting produces men who are able to properly care for their children, which is the defining scene of success at the end of the video. The suturing of black unemployment and

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<sup>15</sup> <http://betterfuturesenterprises.com/about-us/featured-videos/>

fatherhood is reminiscent of the infamous Moynihan report. While employment is an important area where former prisoners face barriers, the institutional narratives produced by *The Network for Better Futures* fail to set employment barriers within the broader structural context of black unemployment and the global economy. The notion of ‘responsible fatherhood’ relies on its constitutive outside—the figure of a “failed father.” The dominant figure of the absent father who fails to pay child support in this context is a black father and images of black men as lacking work ethic is at the heart of why they are positioned as “failed fathers.”

The U.S. Department of Justice has engaged in a number of initiatives under the rubric of fostering ‘responsible fatherhood,’ including Fatherhood and Reentry Courts, and Second Chance Act Adult Mentoring grants designed “to promote successful re-entry through responsible fatherhood and motherhood programs.”<sup>16</sup> “Responsible Fatherhood” has been a key focus of President Obama’s administration.<sup>17</sup> In the White House’s 2012 “Promoting Responsible Fatherhood” report, responsible fatherhood is described in this way:

Being a dad is one of the most important jobs a man can have. The greatest advantage a child can have is the love and support of a strong and stable family and the research clearly indicates the benefits to children who have two actively engaged parents. Families of all shapes and sizes love and provide for the needs of their children, including families headed by grandparents, same sex couples, and single parents. And in families of all types responsible parenting remains a crucial part of ensuring a child’s well-being. The President has often described the “hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children [as] one that no government can fill.” And while millions of single-mother households across the country are doing whatever it takes to provide for their families, we know that without a father doing his part it can be a struggle to meet the many obligations parents face. Responsible fathering means taking responsibility for a child’s intellectual, emotional, and financial well-being. This requires being present in a child’s life, actively contributing to a child’s healthy development, sharing economic responsibilities, and cooperating with a child’s mother in addressing the full range of a child’s and family’s needs. Today, however, one out of every three children in America—over 24 million in total—lives in a home without their biological father present. And data show that low-income men from communities of color are significantly more likely to be nonresident fathers than resident fathers (“Promoting Responsible Fatherhood” 2012).

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.fatherhood.gov/for-programs/federal-programs-and-resources#DOJ>

<sup>17</sup> Presidential ‘Responsible Fatherhood’ initiatives have a longer history than Obama’s presidency. They were started about 16 years ago with Clinton. See Weaver, J.D. “The First Father: Perspectives on the President’s Fatherhood Initiative.” *Family Court Review*, Vol. 50 No. 2 (April 2012).

While these initiatives address financial support and a personal relationship with children, funding under the rubric of “responsible fatherhood” also includes a focus on promoting “healthy marriage” and the preference for two parent families, where one of the parents is a man. While the statement above attempts to avoid stigmatizing single motherhood and single-sex couples, it reproduces the nuclear family as the normative and preferred unit for raising children.

The focus on responsible fatherhood within prisoner reentry is revealing. In a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation video featuring *The Network for Better Futures*, Minnesota State Representative Jeff Hayden says, “You got grand dads that have been to the penitentiary, dads in the penitentiary and sons in the penitentiary. They aren’t able to participate in their traditional family structure and they most certainly aren’t raising their kids...” An explanation for black men being unable to “participate in their traditional family structure” that goes beyond the individual level is never given. Responsible parenting discourses in Minnesota tend to pathologize Black fatherhood in the way that parenting is framed as an issue within the moral anatomy of the individual. *The Network’s* specific focus on work, parenting, and “high risk men, primarily African American men,” as well as the way that their members are discussed as the population most expensive for the State, is pathologizing absent an analysis that goes beyond the individual. The role of mass imprisonment, employment discrimination or any other structural factors and the impact on a person’s ability to spend time with his children, be paying child support or “cooperating with a child’s mother” is entirely absent from *The Network’s* materials.

Child support enforcement has increased dramatically in recent decades. Often, low-income fathers cannot afford to meet their support payments while still meeting their own basic needs (K. Martinson and Nightingale 2008). President Obama’s initiatives under the rubric of “promoting responsible fatherhood” such as the Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative and the

Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants, increase funding for child support enforcement and link funding for employment services to notions of being a good father (“Promoting Responsible Fatherhood” 2012). Prisoners in Minnesota often accumulate child support debt while imprisoned. The inability to pay child support debt can lead non-custodial parents to see less of their children (K. Martinson and Nightingale 2008). So, while these programs frame their efforts in terms of ameliorating the impacts of imprisonment on family relationships, on the ground they tend to act as surveillance mechanisms for child support enforcement agencies. For example, while the Obama administration’s “Promoting Responsible Fatherhood” report frames these initiatives as an attempt to “address the challenges that face individuals who are being released from the criminal justice system...connecting reentering individuals to their families and children to promote active, engaged fathering,” when one looks at the funding categories one sees it often goes toward increased enforcement. (“Promoting Responsible Fatherhood” 2012) “More recently, the Federal Interagency Reentry Council and the Responsible Fatherhood Working Group are coordinating to identify specific federal actions that better coordinate policies around child support that promote responsible fatherhood among the reentry population”(“Promoting Responsible Fatherhood” 2012, 25). The inability of formerly imprisoned people to repay child support debt within this context gets framed as an issue of moral failing because of the way that it is sutured to the ability or inability to maintain employment. Absent an analysis of black unemployment which goes beyond the individual level, this results in a pathologizing view of black fatherhood. Poverty, racism and mass imprisonment fall out of view and employment/fatherhood initiatives thus fail to address these key factors. As opposed to ameliorating these factors, the route to success is either the individual’s motivation and will to succeed or a relationship with Christ.

There is a focus on both ‘responsible fatherhood’ and ‘responsible motherhood’ within prisoner reentry discourse both nationally and in Minnesota. Both male and female prisoners can accumulate child support debt while imprisoned within Minnesota. However, fatherhood and motherhood are gendered in very different ways. The inability of a formerly imprisoned man to pay off child support debt is framed as a failure to properly accomplish a hegemonic masculinity. The CEO of the *NetWork* has said, “a productive wage earning man is not only good for the family. He is good for society.” In these statements and the other statements analyzed in this chapter, we can begin to see how neoliberal rationalities in reentry discourse come together with regimes of racialized gender. One of *The Network*’s many promotional videos provides a persuasive case for their approach within a discursive context dominated by a neoliberal political rationality. The video ends with these statements by Minnesota State Representation Jeff Hayden and *The Network* CEO/President Steve Thomas:

“You’ve gotta be working. If not on our work crew, then you got to find a job in the community. We have set up Better Futures Enterprise to be our business arm. These recycling initiatives we’re starting is a way not only to earn income, but it provides much needed work for the men. One challenge with any enterprise like this is how do you sustain it financially? The main strategy is convince government, who would be the primary purchasers, that this can get you much better results for a lower price [Steve Thomas]. I want to see, instead of it being a net takeaway from the State, I’d like to see those folks out of jail, rehabilitated and then giving to the State, paying taxes, taking care of their family, not being on the public assistance programs [Representative Hayden]. Here’s a way where you can hold us accountable—if we don’t hit one of those three outcomes, namely they go back to prison, or they’re not employed, or they’re not paying child support we get penalized. That’s the form of risk-sharing we are proposing [Steve Thomas].”

Responsible fatherhood is ultimately about saving the State money. As Al Gore stated in the June 2000 National Fatherhood Initiatives 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual National Summit on Fatherhood in Washington, D.C., “Promoting responsible fatherhood is the critical next phase of welfare reform and one of the most important things we can do to reduce child poverty.” The figure of the ideal citizen subject who is self-sufficient and productive is a gendered figure. His ability to fund his own life

and that of his family without relying on the State is a direct measure of his masculinity. The pathologization of black fatherhood and the welfare queen stereotype, are two sides of the same welfare reform coin. The figure of the absentee father's failure to accomplish masculinity in particular ways supposedly justifies imprisonment. Chronic unemployment is reduced to an issue of moral failure. His estrangement from his children is about a lack of responsibility and the analysis remains on the individual level. The impact of intergenerational incarceration, the structural aspects of poverty and histories of racial apartheid that impact parenting fall out of view. Penal discourses are a fitting place within which to study these representations because of the centrality of the punishment system in managing African American men.

Additionally, formerly imprisoned people and their families are measured by a white, middle-class norm without an adequate assessment of the structural barriers to and historically and culturally specific meanings attached to family. Family is an important figure in modernity and it is often cast as the primary site of subject production (Grewal and Kaplan 2001, 667). Family operates as an assumed good within the prisoner reentry discourses encountered within this study. The dominant view of "the critical role that family plays" and initiatives designed to "improve the functioning of the family" characterize prisoner reentry at the national level and in Minnesota ("Promoting Responsible Fatherhood" 2012, 27). Notions of "responsible fatherhood" within reentry also show us how hegemonic notions of masculinity are sutured to heteronormativity. This approach to the family produces representations of a heteronormative unit, which is normalized and against which the "pathological Black father" (who is also a 'criminal') is constructed.

## **Neoliberal Individualism**

Neoliberal political rationalities underpin the processes through which prisoner reentry is deployed as a discursive formation, particularly in the ways that discourses of individual responsibility come to obscure the structural dynamics at play. This neoliberal trope of individual responsibility, where all human action is framed as “rational, entrepreneurial action” is central to the positioning of formerly imprisoned people in reentry discourse (W. Brown 2003). Centrally, neoliberal political rationalities cast politics and all dimensions of human life and action in terms of a market rationality. As Brown writes, “While this entails submitting every action and policy to considerations of profitability, equally important is the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral-value-neutrality” (W. Brown 2005, 40). Neoliberalism is a constructivist project, which encourages and facilitates the development and institutionalization of a market rationality. Other potential values become foreclosed in this process. For example, the most persuasive argument against the death penalty becomes the expense of it in comparison to life imprisonment, as opposed to arguments grounded in morality, or human rights. One can see this extension of market rationalities at work in the discursive production of *The Network for Better Futures*. Cost effectiveness is the organization’s basis for legitimacy as opposed to other values placed on former prisoners’ lives. The worth of former prisoners’ lives is figured as their ability to save the State money by supporting their families.

Coming into this research, I was interested in how neoliberal political rationalities impacted penal policy. Minnesota employs widely used risk assessment tools, is procuring federal reentry funding and emphasizing cost effectiveness just as are most other states. However, the rationalities underpinning penal policy in Minnesota were unlike anything I had

encountered before. The findings of this research challenge theories of neoliberalism as a monolithic project. What I found was that various, seemingly contradictory political rationalities were operating at once. These various rationalities were operating together in important ways that required me to rethink theorizations of neoliberalism.

My argument in this chapter is that neoliberal and evangelical Christian rationalities co-constitute prisoner reentry discourse as it circulates in Minnesota. Scholars of neoliberalism have articulated a process of *responsibilization* wherein the welfare state has been replaced by a State characterized by local risk-management initiatives (Goddard 2012; O'Malley 2010). Risk management has become a central feature of penal regimes in the US and abroad. The use of risk management tools such as the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R), which is used in Minnesota, is commonly considered a corrections "evidence-based practice."<sup>18</sup> Risk calculations reduce a complex set of variables to a score, which indicates a former prisoner's probability of recidivating. Needs, such as housing, mental health care, and employment become "criminogenic risks," and the structural forces, which govern affordable housing, for example, are reduced to the level of individual responsibility. Nikolas Rose has characterized these new risk regimes as the "management of exclusion" (Rose 2000, 332). However, while scholars of penality and neoliberalism have tended to develop macro-level theories positing the complete replacement of older rationalities, my research demonstrates how we must complicate an easy narrative of the welfare state simply being displaced by a neoliberal, risk management framework. My research complicates such a narrative by showing how neoliberalism easily meshes with other ideologies in local interaction. Discourses of risk and welfarist notions often co-exist (Goddard 2012).

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<sup>18</sup> While the flaws of these assessment tools are widely acknowledged within the corrections literature, on the ground DOC officials, corrections institutions and non-profits continue to use them. In my fieldwork, they had material impacts on whether a person could get into a reentry facility. Funding was targeted toward high-risk offenders and who scored high on the assessment played out in gendered ways.

Neoliberalism, while emerging as a dominant rationality with the punishment system, takes up older “moralizing discourses” in order to find purchase in Minnesota. Neoliberalism may not be as defined by “moral-value neutrality” as scholars have argued.

Responsibilization entails the merging of two seemingly contradictory demands. On one hand, there is a demand for individuals to take responsibility for themselves, “take care of yourself, be independent, do not expect everything from the State” (Dubois 2009, 5). On the other hand, responsibilization of the poor is often accompanied by older moralizing discourses, such as that the poor are lazy, manipulative or undeserving. “There is an injunction to responsibility... but there is also a denunciation of the individual responsibilities of the poor, such as their lack of will, laziness, negligence or even dishonesty. Now the oldest moralizing discourses go together with technicist demonstrations by econometricians who advocate the ‘rational choice’ and neo-classical labour economy” (Dubois 2009, 5). “*Punishment’s Twin...*” provides a localized case study of this responsibilization as it relates to penal governance, showing how neoliberal and evangelical Christian rationalities co-constitute prisoner reentry in the Twin Cities.

### **The Convergence of Neoliberalism and Evangelical Christianity**

The convergence of neoliberal and evangelical discourses can be seen in the way that Damascus Way, a residential reentry program, articulated their mission:

The men who come to Damascus Way are here because they have lost their freedom. The misuse of freedom results in being locked up in addictions, destructive behaviors, and ultimately, iron bars & concrete walls. Most of the men who come here state that they are determined to never go back - but without learning to use their freedom in a different way, they often end up right back in bondage. The Damascus Way program is about freedom and change. Getting free and remaining

free requires a change of direction, a change in thinking and in habits, doing things differently. The power to make these changes comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The above mission statement embodies a framing that came up over and over again in this research. This framing is defined by a view of prisoners as mismanaging their freedom and lacking the necessary skills to live as self-governing subjects. Additionally, the social problems concealed by imprisonment were framed as problems within the moral anatomy of the individual prisoner. Prisoners are figured as unable to manage or govern themselves and their freedoms properly. A relationship with Jesus Christ is posited as the solution to this lack of self-governance.

The subject within this framework is governed through his or her freedom. The theme of freedom after incarceration through a relationship with Christ was central to many of the organizations I encountered in this research. For example the Minneapolis-based organization, R.A.I.N (Re-entry Assistance to the Incarcerated) of North America's mission statement reads:

R.A.I.N. shares a vision with people of faith to help the incarcerated obtain freedom in our Lord and Savior through the proclamation of the Gospel and remain criminally-free by being covenant keepers through our aftercare programs.

The website of another Minneapolis-based organization, called FreedomWorks, states:

**“The Revolving Door Stops Here.”** Upon release, an ex-offender is left with many obstacles to overcome, and often has no job, no home, very little money and few opportunities for a better life. Faced with these realities, many fall back into crime because they see no other options. People who go back to the same place, hang out with the same friends and do the same activities get the same result: more prison. Right now, the national average for recidivism (returning to prison within three years) is 65%. At FreedomWorks, the graduates have a recidivism rate of under 8%. And for every ex-felon we keep clean and sober, we're saving the state of Minnesota \$37,500. Our nine-month residential program focuses on helping former offenders reconnect to their family, their faith, full-time employment, the recovery community and the local church.

Faith-based organizations are positioned as cost-effective, saving the State money. A former prisoner's grounding in a local church and a relationship with Christ is framed as the aspect that

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<sup>19</sup> The phrases underlined in this passage were underlined by the organization, not by the author.

makes the organizations capable of lowering recidivism. Discourses of freedom do particular kinds of work in this context. Freedom as a signifier relies upon a constitutive outside, a subject who has lost his or her freedom, and the subject who is unfree is so because (s)he lacks a relationship with Christ, “The power to make these changes comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.”. Interestingly, the Damascus Way mission statement treats freedom as something that the former prisoner may have had at some point. The meaning of being “governed through freedom” takes on a very different inflection within this context. Freedom is not only determined by the capacities internal to the individual, but through a relationship between Christ and those capacities.

Faith-based prison programming often articulates imprisonment as an issue of morality, framed in terms of individual sin and personal redemption (Erzen 2008). These neoconservative discourses converge with neoliberal rationalities, which positions social responsibility as a private issue, as opposed to a political or state responsibility. The view is that “religious organizations are best suited to create the conditions of institutional caregiving and moral community” (Erzen 2008, 660). However, at the end of the day responsibility is located with the individual and hinges on their willingness to be redeemed. Penal discourses are imbued with a narrative of redemption, an *evangelical born-again narrative*, which is defined by the articulation of a former sinful self, the development of an intimate relationship with Christ transforming one into a self-governing individual who can lead a Christian life.

The reiteration of this narrative of transformation is central to a former prisoner’s ability to represent his or herself as successful or having the potential to be successful. This story is not only reiterated in explicitly faith-based programs. It is often reiterated in order to access services throughout the non-profit sector. In the course of this study, a number of service providers, as

well as Department of Corrections administrators articulated “creaming the crop” as a pressing issue, where organizations pick those most likely to be successful in order to juke their statistics. As COO Darryl Lindsey states in a *NetWork* video, “The key to turning these young men around is their willingness and motivation to transition in their lives.... We simply assist those men who have a strong desire or a strong motivation to make significant change in their life.” Reiterating a narrative of redemption is a central method by which former prisoners can position themselves as deserving or motivated to succeed.

The usefulness of this narrative for former prisoners, as well as a binary logic which position’s people in poverty as either deserving or undeserving, was revealed in an interview I conducted with a case manager, Casey. Casey related a story about a young woman who was interviewed for an open spot in a section 8 funded housing program. She interviewed with several case managers, including Casey, and their supervisor. Everyone was excited to admit her to the program until they asked where the father of her child was and whether he was involved. The young applicant stated that she did not know who the father was. Later, the case management team decided that this applicant should not be approved for this reason. According to Casey, the view was expressed that either the client was irresponsible because she was promiscuous or she was lying and intended to let the father live with her without being on her lease. Even social service workers like Casey, who see this as problematic, operate within this discursive field. After this incident, Casey said that she began to tell her clients to frame their relationship to their children’s father(s) as a long-term relationship that was completely over. Framing their children’s fathers as a past relationship, which had been long term, positioned women as morally upright, deserving of help and capable of being saved. Redemption narratives signal to service providers that a former prisoner has the potential to be successful based on the

outcomes and measures set forth by funders, as well as the standards set forth by a particular brand of evangelical Christianity. An analysis, which situates former prisoners' experiences in structures of race, gender and poverty is foreclosed by these discursive regimes as they were articulated within my fieldwork. Individual responsibility is the central analytic, but even as they are measured via this rubric, there is an expectation that they be humble enough to attribute any success to Christ's guidance. A relationship with Jesus Christ is posited as the route to successful self-governance.

Because federal funding often requires organizations to serve non-Christians as well as Christians, many organizations are not explicitly faith-based. However, in my research, I found that evangelical ideologies ran throughout the work of faith-based and secular community organizations alike. While attending explicitly evangelical coalition meetings, members of secular community reentry organizations were present. They discussed the way that federal funding limited their ability to do their work, specifically their ability to build prayer into programming. Organizations, which decided not to compete for federal funding were often positioned as superior to other organizations or as "more authentic evangelical Christians". In one faith-based meeting that I attended, an Executive Director of a non-profit raised his hand and urged others to keep Christ at the center of their ministry despite funding constraints. While funding limited how open some organizations were about the role of religion in their work, individual workers often positioned their work as deeply connected to their relationship with Jesus Christ. These same workers positioned former prisoners as "broken people" who were in need of a relationship with Christ in order to be self-governing subjects and to remain crime free.

Within this research, service providers took up language and political rationalities in complex ways. Neoliberal frameworks, such as cost effectiveness, recidivism reduction, and

individual responsibility were necessary, in part, because those were the dominant rationalities used by funders, whether the State or private foundations. Social services workers combined seemingly contradictory political rationalities even as their organizations articulated more coherent framings. For example, I interviewed Geraldine, a 58 year old, white woman who worked with former prisoners on parenting skills. When I initially interviewed Geraldine, she seemed to frame her work within the rationalities used by her employer. Geraldine worked for a prominent civil rights organization closely tied to the African American community in Minneapolis. During her interview, she talked about racial disparities, the importance of second chances, and building community capacity. However, I subsequently ran into Geraldine at numerous faith-based meetings, where she framed her work in strikingly different terms. During faith-based meetings, she framed her work in terms of “broken people” and “failed fathers,” who lacked the moral compass to appropriately provide for their children in traditionally masculine ways. I was struck by the fact that she seemed like a different person in faith-based meetings. The first time I encountered her after our interview at a predominately white, faith-based meeting, Geraldine seemed shocked to see me. She looked like she had been caught where she was not supposed to be. Geraldine articulated her work as ministry in these faith-based meetings, but framed it as racial justice when her employer was around.<sup>20</sup> While I initially assumed a kind of division between faith-based and secular community reentry service providers— after attending a critical mass of community meetings, I found that political rationalities and those that espouse them could not be so easily or so neatly categorized.

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<sup>20</sup> It is not that these are inherently contradictory positions. There are communities where racial justice and evangelical Christian rationalities come together seamlessly. However, in this context, these disproportionately white evangelical Christian organizations tended to view an analysis of racial oppression as “making excuses” and “avoiding responsibility.”

Cost effectiveness has been one of the primary rubrics used by policy makers intervening in the area of prison reentry, and in corrections more generally. The concern for cost effectiveness has often led to the centering of business principles in the design of reentry initiatives. Social service providers encountered within this fieldwork used market rubrics and business language to frame their work. For example, the *Network for Better Futures* is clear that it was “not a ‘program.’ It is an enterprise.” This organization frames its work as benefitting private businesses, which employ the men whom they manage: “*Better Futures* takes the uncertainty of labor out of the equation.” Policy decisions and social service programs, while often couched in the language of rehabilitation, are constructed through a rubric of market values. This market logic so dominates the rationalities underpinning these processes, that thinking through these issues via another lens is discursively foreclosed. This market logic elides the structural forces behind social insecurity and the *penalization of poverty* (Wacquant 2001).

Neoliberal rationalities have had the effect of placing responsibility for the management of risk onto community organizations (Lynch 2009; Goddard 2012). Community partnerships have played an increasingly important role in tackling responsibilities that were once seen as duties of the State. *The Network for Better Futures* goes so far as to offset the financial risks related to penal policy, “The core ingredients of *The Network’s* approach are also proven means for reducing recidivism and criminal activity... we are willing to share some of the financial risk if these better results are not achieved.” This organization has suggested “risk-sharing” or returning the funds from state contracts, if measurable outcomes are not achieved by the program. Within this example, one can see both how risk is displaced onto communities, but also how business principles and market rubrics constitute penal policy in this arena. Social service agencies within this framework must operate much in the way that corporations do, competing

for government contracts. The organizations able to produce this commodity— security— at the lowest cost, succeed in the punishment market.

Faith-based partnerships fit into this framework well. Neoliberal logics shift responsibility and accountability onto satellite state institutions, which “acts as a buffer against public criticism, though the State’s support allows it to take credit for any successes” (Goddard 2012, 5). Community-based organizations carry out the mandates of their State funding, but often reformulate practices in light of their own philosophies (Goddard 2012). Within my fieldwork, faith-based organizations continually stressed their superior ability to perform these State functions more cost-effectively. The State benefits from such an arrangement being cost-effective given that faith-based organizations are able to marshal large reserves of volunteer labor. In my fieldwork, the director of one faith-based organization commented, “We are uniquely suited to perform these tasks efficiently. We have whole communities to support this work.” The church thus becomes central to the State’s legitimacy. Faith-based organizations furthered their ministry goals through this work as well. During my fieldwork, I met a man at a faith-based meeting who had started a new organization, only months earlier. He excitedly told me about the mobile crisis team he developed, which the police often called when a parent was arrested and the children were present. He talked to the group in attendance at the meeting about the opportunity this presented to introduce children to Christ at a critical moment in their lives. A central goal of most of these organizations was the opportunity to proselytize society’s most vulnerable populations. A prisoner reentry ministry in this context becomes a sort of missionary work. This raises questions about the implications of outsourcing the management of vulnerable populations to faith-based groups. The racialized and gendered production of marginalized groups as “failed fathers” and mothers also renders proselytizing their children without parental

consent a legible possibility. The discourses on responsible fatherhood presented earlier in this chapter allow a neoliberal reentry ministry to enter “the field of possible action of subjects” (Lemke 2002).

### **Theorizing Neoliberalism and the State**

“As an array of techniques centered on the optimalization of life, neoliberalism migrates from site to site, interacting with various assemblages that cannot be analytically reduced to cases of a uniform global condition of ‘neoliberalism’ writ large (Ong 2006).

The concept of neoliberalism has generated immense scholarly debate over the past two decades. However, there has been a persistent lack of specificity when talking about neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has often been cast as a monolithic project (Larner 2003, 509). As Wendy Larner writes, “we need more careful analyses of neoliberal ideologies,” and “the varieties of neoliberalism, or the forms this political project takes in different places” (Larner 2003, 510). Scholars must move away from analyses of neoliberalism that posit it as a constellation of forces, which always produce the same results across spaces. The depth to which neoliberalism has impacted US social policy and eroded liberal democratic institutions in specific places requires more careful and nuanced scholarly attention (W. Brown 2005).

While frameworks that focus on the economic policies entailed by neoliberalism capture important effects, they also “reduce neoliberalism to a bundle of economic policies with inadvertent political and social consequences: they fail to address the *political rationality* that both organizes and reaches beyond the market” (W. Brown 2005, 38). Neoliberalism entails a *political rationality*, which carries a social analysis that “when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire” (W. Brown 2005, 39). My intervention into Wendy Brown’s casting of neoliberalism as

a political rationality is to demonstrate through a local case study how this rationality melds with other ideologies and the necessity of race and gender to such an analysis.

This study raises important questions about how we theorize neoliberalism. The coupling of a demand that individuals be responsible for themselves and moralizing discourses about prisoners are lazy, manipulative and incapable of self-governance destabilizes the supposed newness of neoliberal political rationalities. Race renders the convergence of these discourses intelligible. The framing of people of color as lacking self-governance, while blaming communities of color for the effects of oppression has a much longer history. We can only make sense of local articulations of neoliberalism within that history. In part this explains the fit between neoliberalism and evangelical Christianity within this study. The missionary framing of evangelical reentry work dovetails with ideas about race and self-governance lying underneath neoliberalism as a political rationality.

As Tim Goddard has suggested the tension between the State's priorities and local community-based priorities may be left open by design:

“Metaphorically, the State writes the script and encourages compliance to a (funding dependent) community body, but the agents' intentionality to act in accordance with the script is an open question... community governance is predictably going to be a blend of the provincial and the national. For sure, the new public-private mix in crime control is a 're-articulation and re-organization of the State's powers through new strategies'... but the dispersal of former State roles in the neo-liberal process of governing behaves symbiotically” (Goddard 2012, 14).

Neoliberal risk schemes are fluid and amenable to dynamic implementation in local settings (O'Malley 2004a). My dissertation fieldwork demonstrates the way that neoliberalism borrows from and melds with other rationalities in order to gain purchase in a given locale. Neoliberal, evangelical and welfarist notions come together in the practices of non-profits to produce hybrid

approaches. Prisoner reentry is characterized by these hybrid approaches, often depicting prisoners in individualizing and moralizing terms that are racialized and gendered.

## **Conclusion**

It is necessary to frame individual experiences within a social, economic and political context in order to genuinely transform the conditions of mass imprisonment's emergence. This chapter demonstrates how neoliberal and evangelical Christian rationalities convergence with prisoner reentry discourse in gendered and racialized ways. This convergence is rendered problematic because of the way that it frames formerly imprisoned people's lives in individualizing and moralizing terms. Neoliberalism's convergence with evangelical rationalities within this context pushes us to rethink monolithic framings of neoliberal political rationalities. In the context of penal reform, a much more nuanced critique of these rationalities on the ground, as well as their imbrication with racialized and gender regimes, will be necessary. While faith can be central to people's survival, the issue of mass imprisonment must be situated within a broader critique if the conditions of its emergence are to be transformed.

### Chapter III— ‘prison treated me way better than you’: Representation, Perplexity and Barriers After Shakopee

#### One Representation

*Housing instability was a major concern for the women that I interviewed. Many articulated that losing stable housing began a domino effect where their lives unraveled. Rita, a thirty-year old Native American woman, argued that her imprisonment began with losing her public housing. She was evicted after allegations of marijuana use in her apartment. As Rita explained, “everything began to unravel from there.” Rita became involved with child protective services after she lost her housing. The children and her moved around constantly, making it difficult to comply with CPS. Eventually, her children were removed from her home. She was allowed visitation, but the court moved forward on terminating her parental rights. Her tribe worked to prevent termination and was successful. However, after this her children remained in foster care and the State no longer allowed visitation. Rita attempted suicide and began using drugs more heavily. After years of substance abuse and prostitution, Rita was imprisoned in Shakopee on drug charges. She articulated that what began as occasional use of marijuana had a domino effect that led to her imprisonment. The loss of her children was devastating. Discussing her recovery, Rita stated, “I work hard for my kids. I just want to be ready if I ever get to see my kids again.” Housing instability made accessing social services and staying sober difficult for Rita. Moving constantly between the homes of friends and living in cars, she frequently lost important paperwork and struggled to keep track of the many components needed to access social services. Additionally, Rita articulated difficulty remaining sober given her housing situation. At the time of our interview she had been sober for 18 months. However, she stated that she felt unable to control her environment because of her unstable housing, “if I need somewhere to stay, I have to take what I can get. But I don’t like it. I don’t want to be around pot or ice or booze. I do my best to stay to myself, leave it alone. But, it gets stressful being on the street. Sometimes I think using will make it all go away.”*

The narrative account of Rita’s life articulated above is a common one in scholarly and journalistic work on women in prison. The question is not whether it is accurate. I am fairly confident that if Rita read it, she might say that it conformed in many ways to how she articulated her experience within our interview. We could ask her if this account was ‘accurate’ and depending on a number of factors, she may or may not say that it is a truthful reflection. However, during my research another set of questions emerged. From my view, the question we may need to ask is not whether these narratives are the truth of women prisoners, but— what are the effects of this particular way of framing the issue of mass imprisonment? What does this

story do? What does the narrative produced between Rita and myself really tell us about her life, our lives, and the systems that I navigate as a researcher and which she navigates as a former prisoner?

After sitting with these questions for over two years and revisiting them after writing up each interview, I began to wonder whether another accounting of women in prison was necessary, useful or beneficial. I have come to believe that this is precisely the sort of narrative that we expect about women in prison. Thus, researchers, policy makers, advocates and imprisoned women themselves dutifully reiterate it. A focus on lost paperwork, difficulties remaining sober and histories of abuse and prostitution often confines our analytic focus to the individual failings and triumphs of imprisoned people, as opposed to the discourses and logics which render some things possible and other potentialities effectively foreclosed. As one participant in this study said, “you really can’t just keep surfacing us.” This chapter grapples with this question of how to move beyond the dominant representations of women prisoners. My aim is to make space within this project for formerly imprisoned women’s voices, while disrupting the often, pathologizing gaze in the scholarship on people in women’s prisons. Scholars, policymakers, activists, as well as formerly imprisoned women themselves must begin to read penal narratives differently.

### **Mined as Rich Sources**

*“Complex personhood means that all people, albeit in specific forms, are beset by contradiction, remember and forget, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in what symptomizes their troubles and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those society names ‘other’ are never that. Complex personhood means that even those who haunt the dominant society are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their problems, about their society and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what’s immediately*

*available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward” (Gordon 2004, 100).*

This study began as an investigation of people’s reentry experiences exiting a women’s prison in the Midwest. At a certain point, I shifted my gaze from prisoners to the systems and discourses, within which they are embedded. There is an intense amount of focus oriented toward women prisoners and even as there are occasional attempts within the literature to represent people in women’s prisons as resisting or complex, one is still often left with a voyeuristic and pathologizing examination. This approach fails to question the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence. Research on women in prison has often focused on their histories of trauma and abuse. Their experiences are,

“mined as rich sources for understanding this aberrant behavior, and childhood abuse, domestic violence, or familial dysfunction [is] presented as the root cause. Presenting women’s experiences of abuse as the cause of incarceration individualizes and personalizes their treatment at the hands of the criminal justice system. It obscures the broader social disorder signified by mass incarceration, and it sidesteps the question of why the state responds to abused women with punishment... While the spotlight is turned on the personal failings of poor women and women of color, the political and economic interests that drive prison expansion remain in the shadows” (Sudbury 2005, xv– xvi).

I am wary of reproducing this pathologizing optics. In the midst of this study, I began to wonder whether another study seeking to illuminate the inner worlds of women prisoners was useful. The punishment system has been very skilled at making use of knowledge regarding prisoners in order to more effectively govern marginalized populations. Too often that knowledge is simply co-opted by the punishment system and used to expand and legitimate its mandate. With *“Punishment’s Twin,”* I aim to shift our attention from the inner lives of prisoners themselves back onto the punishment system and the emerging discourses and strategies of governance within prisoner reentry policy and programming. At the same time, I advocate that formerly imprisoned people be centered in prison abolitionist movement building and an abolitionist reentry praxis. Thus, their voices must be centered. Is it possible to bring these two potentially

contradictory aims into productive tension? This chapter's findings highlight formerly imprisoned peoples' reentry narratives, and the effect of various barriers facing people with felony convictions, set within an attempt to grapple with issues of representation and subjectivity.

Any account of this research is necessarily a representation of formerly imprisoned women. It is also a representation of the punishment system within which they are often caught. The interview is a co-constituted site, an act of representation, where researcher and participant make meaning and represent themselves to the other. As David Valentine writes in Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category, "Everything can be narrated, but what is narrated is no longer what happened" (Valentine 2007, 210). The interview, itself— as well as the transcript of what was said— are never simply "accurate portrayals." In the act of representation, "what happened" is narrated, remembered, forgotten, interpreted and transformed. In a way, prisoner reentry itself was produced as a discursive formation within the interview encounters themselves. Participants and the researcher collectively gained a picture of the "reentry experience" as we negotiated power, subjectivity and representation. The participant is an agent of representation, constructing a narrative that is a meaningful version of their individual realities. The power dynamics of who I was, how we were brought together (whether by another formerly imprisoned woman or a parole officer) shaped what we said and how we negotiated making ourselves intelligible to one another. In writing up this research, I reinterpret, rework and re-represent prisoner reentry as it emerged in the interview encounter.

My aim is to be attentive to power within the representation that will necessary emerge from their narratives, and to see what the interview encounter tells us about the punishment system. Formerly imprisoned people have the right to, what Avery Gordon calls, "complex

personhood.” Gordon reminds us that “even those living in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never covered by viewing them as victims, or as superhuman agents” (Gordon 2004, 100). Subjectivities are not fixed or singular. Formerly imprisoned women “exceed always their singular interpellation” (Ramamurthy 2003, 543) within discourses of punishment.

Taking up Priti Ramamurthy’s concept of subjects-in-perplexity, this chapter analyzes the reentry narratives of women recently released from MCF-Shakopee. I found that formerly imprisoned women simultaneously framed themselves as responsible, choice making subjects and as vulnerable to abuse and exploitation because of a lack of options resulting from their gendered status as felons. Their subjectivities exceed the bounds of penal discourses, neoliberal rationalities and representations of prisoners as always resisting in particular, convenient ways. Former prisoners take up and add on to penal discourses in contradictory ways in order to navigate bureaucracies and maintain their personhood. Sometimes the most potent method of resistance is to insist on one’s humanity within the vocabularies within which that humanity can be intelligible.

### **Worse than Prison**

*Fieldnote (November 2010)— My first visit to MCF-Shakopee was like nothing I could have anticipated. Yesterday, I received a call from the lawyer, Nancy, who took me to speak to the transitions class today. The transitions class is a course for women within three months of their release date. She told me that I could talk about housing services in the Twin Cities. I was prepared. I had collected applications for public housing, information on transitional housing programs and emergency shelters. What I was unclear about was what to wear.*

*When Nancy called me, I asked “what can I wear?” She paused silently on the phone. “What do you mean? Wear whatever you want.” I persisted, “What can I not wear?” I thought maybe changing the phrasing would make my question clearer. She persisted, “Wear whatever you want.” Looking back she must have thought I was pretty strange. Well, today I learned why. This morning, I drove to*

*MCF-Shakopee, fully prepared to be turned away for wearing blue or an underwire bra, as one would be in a California prison. But, that's not what happened. I met Nancy in the parking lot and we entered the prison. It looked more like a middle school than any prison I had ever seen. When we entered the front door, I was instructed to put my purse in a locker and was given a visitor ID. Then I was led through a metal detector that the airport puts to shame. As we walked through another set of doors, I looked around confused. When were we going to go through security? My guide turned to me, "You just did."*

*We walked out into a courtyard, where women walked about in a large circle. There was no fence to keep them from escaping. Later a guard would turn to me and say, "we've only had a couple walk off the grounds in the last few decades, but they always come back."*

Participants in this study continually expressed that their reentry programs and facilities felt more like prison than did the actual prison, MN Correctional Facility Shakopee. Shakopee is, as one Department of Corrections official told me, focused on "empowerment." During my fieldwork, this official told me, "At Shakopee we are really all about empowering the women and giving them services."

Again and again in interviews, formerly imprisoned women articulated confusion over their feelings upon release. Gwen, a 33 year old African American woman, stated "I thought when I got out, I would feel free. But, they [reentry program staff] are worse than the guards. It feels like I won't ever get out. But I try to keep a positive attitude. They can say I'm lying even if I'm not, or nit-pick on the rules." Gwen felt like there were more programs and services within the prison than in her reentry program. Additionally, she articulated feeling like the prison staff had been more committed to her transformation than reentry program staff. Of the reentry program staff Gwen said, "They will be sleeping at the job when they should have been working... The other lady caseworker, she lost my paperwork. I have to keep her on top of my paperwork. They don't care."

Betsy, a 46 year old Native American woman, articulated this view of the reentry program, where she was living: “When I got there [transitional living house], it seemed a little bit too much like prison to me. It really feels like prison. We can’t come out of our rooms. So, it is too much like prison.” A number of participants characterized reentry facilities as “worse than prison.” Shanice, a 38 year old African American woman, described her time in a residential reentry facility:

It was the worst place in the world. They treated us like crap. They promised they had groups [support and other life-skills groups] for us. I got out and they told me first that I could not hug my mom. I was like ‘are you serious?’ I hadn’t seen my mom in years. It was just a rule. You can’t hug. Even in prison they let us hug. They had promised they had groups for us. I had really wanted a program with groups. So, I started doing the groups myself. I started group facilitating because if we weren’t in group, we had to be in our rooms. And I thought ‘this is worse than prison’.”

This participant eventually decided to leave this particular reentry facility and return to prison to finish her sentence. Shanice recalled, “I said ‘I tell you what, I want to go back to prison.’ I said ‘prison treated me way better than you’ and I chose to go back to prison than to be there. So, I went back to prison. They treated us like we was garbage.” Shanice chose to serve the remainder of her sentence in prison, instead of remaining in this reentry program.

Tiana, a 43 year old African American woman, said of a reentry facility in which she had lived:

“They just made you feel like trash. I felt like that’s not what I’m here for... for you to humiliate me, or belittle me. I’m here to get myself better. I want to get the help I need. I already had negative feelings about myself. I didn’t need another person making me feel bad. Getting out, I was already stayin’ away from negative people that I used to deal with. I didn’t need negative people running that place [the reentry facility]. I needed support. I didn’t need them to keep kicking me. But they kept kicking me, you know?, and I kept saying ‘I’m going to end up using if I stay here’.”

Participants articulated feeling disrespected within many reentry facilities. They characterized reentry program staff as not genuine in their desire to help former prisoners. Participants continually expressed frustration with sitting in their rooms or being idle in reentry programs

when compared with their time in prison. Tiffany stated, “to lose your freedom, to be locked up in Shakopee. I was scared. But when I got there, it didn’t look like a prison. At least there you can go to the library. Here, you just sit there. I don’t praise prison. But, I did more positive things there. I learned how to work on a computer.”

The programming and policies of participants’ reentry facilities seemed much more focused on control and monitoring people’s whereabouts than rehabilitation. This opens onto some interesting questions. What does it mean if reentry facilities felt more like prison than the actual prison? What sort of work is this claim by the participants doing? The women interviewed for this research consistently articulated a desire to ‘get free,’ but where that vision could be realized was complicated by the way that the prison was shaped around a notion of empowerment, while reentry services were more focused on control, surveillance and monitoring. There is something here about confronting the way that they are treated as disposable. Prison time was most often articulated as an event, which if they simply endured it, they would eventually get out. It was a fixed part of life that one simply had to choose to get through. It was being marked as a prisoner on the outside that produced perplexity. That is the precise moment where an analysis of race, gender and the stigma attached to felony status would be most useful. However, within this discursive context, participants fluctuated between narrating their lives as either that of complete choice and responsibility or as vulnerable to abuse.

The framing of MCF-Shakopee as an “empowering prison” produced the articulation of contradictory feelings and a sense of bewilderment within women’s narratives. Participants within this study articulated a desire to “get free.” However, the dissonance between Shakopee’s institutional framework as an “empowering prison” and disciplinary reentry programs produced confusion about where freedom could be obtained. The idea of an “empowering prison” was

particularly perplexing. It naturalized prison as the proper place where they could get help because that support either did not exist or did not feel genuine on the outside. Freedom does particular kinds of work in this context. “Getting free” was framed as disentangling oneself from the system, getting off parole, getting one’s children back and staying out of prison. The ‘unfree subject’ upon which this notion of freedom was predicated was often themselves or the women they had been.

## **Perplexity**

Priti Ramamurthy uses the concept of subjects-in-perplexity to provide a more nuanced perspective on Indian women’s consumption within a global economy:

“Perplexity is a conceptual platform to think about the experiential contradictions of globalization as a series of processes that often overwhelm subjects. As an analytic with multiple subtexts, perplexity is a way of marking the tension between overlapping, opposing, and asymmetric forces or fields of power. Perplexity indexes the puzzlement of people as they experience the joys and aches of the global everyday, often simultaneously. Individually experienced feelings of confusion, of loss, and of desire are not separate...”

This notion of subjects-in-perplexity offers a useful rubric for thinking about the complex subjectivities, as well as the penal logics narrated in the interview encounters for this study. The perplexity of formerly imprisoned women disrupts the notion of experience as a direct window onto ‘reality.’ This allows us to highlight the social construction of contemporary penal subjectivities and to disrupt the way that analyses of former prisoners’ lives stay on an individual scale. Additionally, it opens up a lens through which to view the seemingly contradictory rationalities circulating within penal policies in Minnesota.

Tiffany, a 43 year old African American woman stated “When I got out and went to my parole officer, I thought well ‘maybe it would be easier for me to stay in prison.’ But then that’s

more confinement.” For Tiffany the clearest way that she could see to disentangle herself from the punishment system was to go to prison. By “executing her sentence” Tiffany went to prison for a year instead of doing 15 years on probation. She stated, “I took my freedom from myself by turning myself in. I couldn’t see doing fifteen years probation. I turned myself over because it was the best way for me to get away from this system. But, giving up your freedom [pauses] sometimes it’s your choice, sometimes it’s not.” This passage from Tiffany’s interview highlights the complex and contradictory ways that formerly imprisoned people negotiate rationalities of choice and individual responsibility. Many participants framed their narratives in terms of choice, and accountability.

Kyala, a 32 year old African American woman stated, “I chose to hurt people, smoke pot, party before ‘cause I was messed up, I was hurtin’. Now, I keep my calendar on track. I am more responsible. I want my life to be better for my daughter. She really missed me when I was gone and I know I gotta get off paper [get of parole] and stay off, so I stay home and take care of my business so I can never go back to prison.” The women interviewed for this research often framed their narratives in terms of choices they had made. While to a degree, this demonstrates a kind of internalization of neoliberal rationalities of individual responsibility, I came to see this as necessary in order to maintain their dignity and humanity while attempting to extricate themselves from the punishment system. Neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility often offered the only vocabulary for making one’s humanity and dignity intelligible within these systems. Additionally, these narratives were crucial to marking oneself as deserving of a second chance and of help with immediate survival needs. Given that participants were often referred to the study by service providers, their decision to articulate their lives in those terms when talking with me makes sense. By marking their former selves as “unfree” and themselves as subjects in

the process of becoming free, participants simultaneously marked themselves as deserving and motivated to succeed, as well as more than their status as felons allows. As Jasmine stated, “I understand that we are felons and we have made bad choices. But, sometimes it’s just our felony makes us look suspicious all the time and they don’t look at you like a human being. You’re just a felon. It’s a lot of pressure. You need to understand that even though we’ve made mistakes that [pauses] you know [pauses], we are changing. Understand that we are starting over.”

Formerly imprisoned women are not simply duped by neoliberal discourses within the punishment system. Additionally, they are not unified and coherent subjects of resistance to penal power. The narratives of formerly imprisoned women produced within these research encounters reveal the contradictory nature of subject formation within late modern regimes of punishment. Formerly imprisoned women simultaneously framed themselves as responsible, choice making subjects and as vulnerable to abuse and exploitation because of a lack of options resulting from their status as felons. The narratives of formerly imprisoned women are “entangled and weave between what’s immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward” (Gordon 2004).

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *perplexed* as full of uncertainty, puzzled, or full of difficulty. Perplexity, as a noun, refers to the state of being perplexed, but also to being entangled. This certainly seems a fitting description of the narratives of women being released from prison. I do not use this term to portray the women as incapable of understanding their situations. They had nuanced theories about how they became caught, as it were, in the punishment system. But the meaning of perplexity as entangled allows us to see both the way that formerly imprisoned women represented themselves as ensnared by various systems, but also how they attempted to make sense of the contradictory and bewildering logics of the system.

Perplexity helps describe the way that seemingly contradictory discourses operate simultaneously within the punishment system. Formerly imprisoned women are expected to simultaneously be rational, entrepreneurial subjects and deserving victims in need of intervention. The convergence of these two expectations is mirrored at a broader level in the reentry discourses circulating in Minnesota. As Chapter Two demonstrated, neoliberal and more welfarist rationalities come together in this context. That convergence can also be seen in the way that formerly imprisoned women narrated their lives. Negotiating the dual expectation to be rational, entrepreneurial subjects and deserving victims requires a delicate and complex maneuvering on the part of formerly imprisoned women.

The way that Tiffany had to go to prison to ‘get free’ is perplexing and it was clear in talking to her that she was perplexed by the fact that ‘choosing prison’ was the most effective way to disentangle herself from the punishment system. Additionally, the “empowering prison” model of MCF- Shakopee was perplexing for me as a prison abolitionist researcher. Prisons are contradictory and perplexing institutions. Increasingly, as mainstream criminologists lament the obvious failure of the mass imprisonment binge, the palatability of imprisonment is shored up by bringing the rehabilitative ideal back in and framing the prison as a potential site of liberation.

### **Increased Vulnerability**

Another significant finding of this study is that the barriers attached to felony status often (re)produce the very vulnerability expected in accounts of imprisoned women’s lives. The barriers facing returning prisoners often produce or at least increase their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse by others in the community. Difficulty in finding work is one facet of this increased vulnerability. Nadine, a 29 year old African American woman, discussed experiencing

sexual harassment and abuse while working in telemarketing. Nadine related that the abuse was a continuation of a longer history of trauma. Her father, who had introduced her to crack cocaine, attempted to abuse her while high. Nadine related the story about her father as one where she had some agency, saying “I was a fighter. I fought him off. It was still traumatic though.” In relating this to the harassment and abuse she faced in the workplace, Nadine’s narrative shows a much greater feeling of powerlessness. Nadine stated that she “had to stay.” Despite wanting to leave the telemarketing job, she stayed because of the conditions of her parole.

“I couldn’t change jobs. I didn’t think I was gonna get a new job quick enough if I left. They said I had to keep a job if I was gonna stay outside [of prison].”

Tracy, a Native American woman in her 30s, related a similar situation. Tracy’s boss refused to pay her unless she had sex with him. In her interview, Tracy said that she had doubts about whether her boss really had the power to stop her payroll check from being dispersed. However, the centrality of employment to demonstrating successful reintegration and the difficulty finding work with a criminal background made formerly imprisoned people more likely to remain in situations where their safety was threatened.

Employment discrimination is one of the most cited barriers facing formerly imprisoned people. In almost every state, private employers can legally deny jobs to people on the basis of a criminal conviction. Additionally, most states allow employers to discriminate on the basis of a past arrest even if a person was never convicted (Alexander 2012). In recent years, a ‘ban the box’ movement has gained more attention. Referring to the box on applications asking whether one has been arrested and/or convicted of a crime, prison activist Susan Burton says, “It’s not only [on] job [applications]... It’s on housing. It’s on a school application. It’s on welfare applications. It’s everywhere you turn” (Johnson 2006). Former prisoners are often denied professional licenses, even if their conviction is unrelated to their professional obligations.

Globalization and the accompanying process of deindustrialization in the United States have eliminated many of the jobs that former prisoners would be most likely to obtain, such as manufacturing jobs. Former prisoners are much less likely to be hired for retail positions, which represent a large number of low skilled jobs, because they require continual contact with the public and often access to cash registers, etc.

Participants suggested that employers viewed them as easy targets. As Nadine articulated, “he thought he could treat me any way he wanted because I am a felon. He [her supervisor] used to say ‘where else you gonna work? This is a good deal.’ ” Racialized and gendered relations of ruling produce the view of former prisoners as disposable (D. E. Smith 1989). The ascription of criminality onto the bodies of people of color has been central to racial formation throughout U.S. history.<sup>21</sup> Prisons are race-making institutions and white supremacy is central to how mass imprisonment and the supposed disposability of prisoners are rendered palatable (Wacquant 2002). As Angela Davis writes, “ Ideologies of sexuality—and particularly the intersection of race and sexuality—have had a profound effect on the representations of and treatment received by women of color within and outside of prison” (Davis 2003, 79). There is nothing natural about the idea that formerly imprisoned people are disposable. My research finds that the barriers attached to felony status enable that idea and (re)produce the exploitation and abuse faced by formerly imprisoned women.

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<sup>21</sup> Mass imprisonment in the U.S. cannot be explained without reference to racial formation and gendered rationalities. Mass imprisonment is a *racial project*, “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (Omi and Winant 1994, 56). Michael Omi and Howard Winant theorize the concept of racial projects to think through the smaller building blocks of the more general process of *racial formation*, which they define as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1994, 55). Despite the prominence of color-blind ideology, race remains a salient category of analysis.

In addition to being more vulnerable to employers, the vulnerability of participants was increased because of the barriers they faced in obtaining housing. Participants articulated living with family and friends, despite abuse, drugs and other problems, because they felt that they had nowhere else to go.

Housing discrimination is a particularly devastating barrier for formerly imprisoned people. One of the first questions a released prisoner must face is where they will stay. In my work as a housing advocate, I saw firsthand how obtaining housing within the private housing market can be difficult for someone with a felony conviction. Background checks are a routine part of the rental application process. Unless a former prisoner has substantial financial resources, so as to reassure a private landlord, it can be difficult to find housing. Additionally, public housing can present many barriers. Federal law bars many people with felony convictions from eligibility for public housing, section 8 voucher lists, and project-based section 8, particularly former prisoners with drug convictions, histories of violence or who are registered sex offenders (Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001). While reentry reformers have sought to ‘educate’ former prisoners about the legal perimeters of their eligibility, the degree to which former prisoners are screened out of housing programs is underestimated and rarely acknowledged (Federal Interagency Reentry Council 2011). People with felony convictions who are technically *eligible* for public housing are still often screened out of project-based section 8 sites that are run by private housing developers and HUD funded programs that want to “keep their numbers up” by choosing only the most-likely to be successful<sup>22</sup>. The families of former prisoners are often reluctant to allow a returning prisoner to stay with them for fear that they will lose their HUD-funded housing (Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001).

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<sup>22</sup> This claim is based on my experience as a housing advocate in a HUD-funded program, as well as my interviews with former prisoners. Additionally, in my fieldwork, Department of Corrections officials also recognized and articulated this problem of “creaming the crop.”

Sandra, a Native American woman who was imprisoned for 4 years in Shakopee, reported experiencing constant housing instability. She stated:

“While I was there [in the sober living house], the owner foreclosed on the house. That was another shock. I was like ‘Wow I’m homeless again’. I ended up back at the shelter. I was worried and I was scared. I didn’t want to sleep outside. [With] The shelter, you have to call every night to get a bed. The doors open at 6pm, but you never know whether you’ll get a bed. That was scary. There was a time when I had to sleep in like a stairwell. That was embarrassing. You wake up feeling dirty and have to wonder ‘where am I going to wash up, where am I going to clean.’ You sleep with one eye open when you’re sleeping in stairwells or under stairs. It’s a struggle when you don’t have housing.”

This housing instability resulted in increased vulnerability on a number of fronts. At the time of our interview, Sandra was primarily staying with a cousin. She reported, “I’m living with a cousin. That’s not working out well. I gave her three months rent. My phone bill is \$50 a month. So, I’m left with about \$30 a month. Somethings gotta change. Somethings gotta give.” She went on to say, “Its scary. I have no one to turn to, nowhere to go. My mom, my sister. There’s no one left. I wish she was here, my mom, I could use somewhere to sleep. It’s really hard being homeless. Everyone else is dead or in prison, so I’m out here alone.” Sandra described her cousin’s house as a problematic environment because it triggered her posttraumatic stress disorder, and was a challenge in maintaining her sobriety:

“I’m always doing what I can to keep myself safe. I’m always looking ahead, looking around. There was a lot of abuse in my childhood. My mother. She was an alcoholic. There was a lot of verbal abuse, psychological abuse. There were attempts on me [attempts at sexual abuse] by uncles and strangers. Because mom was an alcoholic, there were parties, people around. It’s kind of like the house I’m livin’ in now. People everywhere. You got strange men coming in here. I’m not happy with the environment that I’m in.”

Sandra was clear about not wanting to remain in her current living situation. She reported constant drugs and alcohol in the house, which made sobriety difficult. Additionally, the number of people, particularly strangers, triggered her PTSD. However, without somewhere else to go, she decided to stay. In order to maintain her sobriety and her housing, Sandra stayed to herself, “I just stay in my room. That’s how I stay sober.”

Housing insecurity must be situated within the context of post-WWII shifts in housing. During the Second World War, transient populations became increasingly less common. Home ownership emerged as an important emphasis for middle-class families and “prosperity’s discontents” became largely confined to ‘Skid Rows,’ living in SROs, single room occupancy dwellings (Hopper 1991; Willse 2010). During the 1960s and 1970s, urban redevelopment schemes and the idea of ‘revitalizing’ neighborhoods facilitated the demolition of skid row districts and the SROs began to decrease in number (Wright and Rubin 1991). The elimination “of this form of housing had both immediate and long-term effects—immediate in the displacement of residents and long-term in the erosion of a form of private housing on which future populations in need of low-cost shelter could no longer depend” (Willse 2010, 161–162). Individual experiences of housing insecurity must be understood within this wider context of political, social, and economic shifts. Deindustrialization, the withdrawal of the social safety net and neoliberal political rationalities produce homelessness and housing insecurity.

Sandra also reported being more vulnerable to sexual assault because of her housing instability. She decided to store her most important possessions (her social security card, birth certificate, and a new pair of shoes) with a friend because he had the most stable housing of anyone she knew. On occasion, she went to his house when her cousin’s home became unbearable or when she was staying in a shelter. Regarding this friend, she said:

“You know you do get tired when you’re out there. They kick you out of the shelter at seven in the morning and you know, where are you going to go at that time in the morning? Maybe I can sneak a blanket out and go lay in the park. But you’ve got to find the right park. It’s rough. Men think that if you’re in their house, they are entitled to touch you. I haven’t come across a respectful man yet. And its really hard you know. I try not to exchange sex for, you know, a room or whatever. That’s not me. I’m just not interested in men period. He was trying to fondle me. He knows I have nowhere to stay.”

Sandra felt that she had no options for housing. She repeatedly applied for public housing and was denied because of her criminal background. She described her life as constantly “bouncing around” between the shelter, her cousin’s and this male friend’s houses. However, she remained hopeful that she would turn things around, stating “I’m strong. I’m very strong. I haven’t allowed this stuff to break me.” She attempted to keep her days filled with AA meetings, outpatient drug treatment, therapy and other appointments in order to avoid being imprisoned again or experiencing abuse and exploitation. While participant’s described their lives as difficult prior to imprisonment, the barriers attached to felony status exacerbated and increased their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

In order to understand Sandra’s story, an analysis of settler colonialism in Minnesota is necessary.<sup>23</sup> For Native communities, housing insecurity, addiction and violence are part of the everyday life of being a colonized people.<sup>24</sup> As one participant in the American Indian Policy Center’s *Searching for Justice...* study asserts:

“why do Indians go to jail? And that’s basically from, that stems from almost three hundred years ago, from the culture. Think, what happened to our forefathers was a really bad thing, and through the generations have been traumas and traumas and traumas that have been carried over and carried over. And then multiplied by the shockwaves that came after that, which hit us bad in the boarding school days. I was from a boarding school myself – we’re just now getting hit by that, let alone learning how to float through it, and get past it and deal with it – you know, how are we going to deal with this? What happened to our forefathers and what carried over all the way from them – about 275 years ago to now, and what’s happened to us, that’s the multiple factor and how are we gonna deal with that?”(Poupart et al. 2005)

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<sup>23</sup> Minnesota is home to seven Ojibwe and four Dakota reservations. As a result of relocation policies and the poverty on reservaitons, Minneapolis has a large Native American population (Poupart et al. 2005). In some neighborhoods in the Twin Cities (for example, the Phillips area, where the Little Earth housing project is located) over fifty percent of the population is Native American or American Indian.

<sup>24</sup> It is also important to note Minnesota’s long and vibrant history of Native American activism. The American Indian Movement (AIM) began in Minnesota in the summer of 1968. Calls for revolution by AIM leaders drew the attention and violence of the FBI and CIA. The suppression of the movement, including the criminalization and imprisonment of important leaders, is still very much a part of the everyday life of the Native American community in the Twin Cities.

Sandra's stories must be understood within this wider, collective context of colonial rule and the violence of wave after wave of U.S. policies through removal, and termination to relocation. Additionally, the political and economic formation of settler colonialism is constituted by gender and sexual relations of ruling (Morgensen 2012). Sexual violence is not only a central feature of colonialism. Colonialism is "itself structured by the logic of sexual violence" (A. Smith 2003). The sexual violence, as well as the violence of housing instability faced by Sandra is part of a larger genocidal project. The supposed disposability of Sandra is connected to the theft of Native lands and natural resources.

### **Conclusion: "You Really Can't Just Keep Surfacing Us"**

In this chapter, I have attempted to do justice to the conversations I had with formerly imprisoned women during my fieldwork; to negotiate the perplexity of representation, power and subjectivity in the research encounter, while still saying something about the context of prisoner reentry as it is constituted in the Twin Cities. These women allowed me to come into their lives and shared intimate aspects of their experience with me. It is possible that 'doing justice' is foreclosed in a context where formerly imprisoned people are expected to both be victims and superhuman agents; rational subjects and the Other in contradictory ways. Power is inherently exercised in the production of knowledge. Still, the voices of formerly imprisoned people must come to the center of critical work on prisoner reentry. As one participant, Tiana, stated, "the thing about women in prison is that there's things that go much deeper. You really can't just keep surfacing us and wondering why we keep committing crimes and stuff. You gotta do some deep sea diving."

## Chapter IV— “Punishment’s Twin”: An Abolitionist Critique of Prisoner Reentry

*“We have come to realize that there is and must be another way. Along with ways of assisting with survival, there must be inspiration that is not only about personal transformation but which allows those who have been in prison to recognize the political struggle that we are subject to and must become subject of” (Nixon et al. 2008, 36).*

### Introduction

In “*Not Light but Fire: Gender, Violence and Strategies for Prison Abolition*,” Cassandra Shaylor writes, “Though we can trace a pattern in prison history of the pendulum swinging from a professed focus on punishment to a commitment to so-called reform every 30 years or so, reform still always risks becoming punishment’s twin” (Shaylor 2007, 7–8). Following Foucault, Shaylor suggests that reform is in a mutually constitutive relationship with punishment and that reform is itself internal to the penal system and its reproduction. This chapter takes up this notion of reform as “punishment’s twin,” and pursues this idea in the context of an analysis of prisoner reentry. Prisoner reentry represents the latest installment in a long history of reforms, which have tended to expand the penal system. The immediate survival needs of people released from prison are vital issues for anti-prison activist scholars. However, we must be cautious of an uncritical acceptance of the seemingly benign notions of prisoner reentry circulating in mainstream corrections and criminology. Prison activists scholars must attend to reentry both because it is expanding the punishment system contemporarily and because it represents an opportunity to ground our work in the concrete everyday struggles of those most impacted by mass imprisonment. This chapter addresses two of my central research questions: 1) What does prisoner reentry do? And 2) How is it deployed and to what effect? I chart a critique of reentry’s deployment and effects, arguing that prisoner reentry must be grounded in a politics of abolition.

This dissertation opens up a space for inquiry into reentry's place within late modern punishment. The present chapter is aimed at laying out a preliminary critique and charting arguments that form the foundation of a broader research agenda. This broader project theorizes the way that prisoner reentry discourse shores up the naturalization of the contemporary penal system as a means of managing populations deemed disposable through the vicissitudes of neoliberal globalization. I approach prisoner reentry as a discursive formation in order to show how reentry is serving to render the penal system more flexible, cost effective and legitimate even as it is deployed using a vocabulary, which mimics a critique of mass imprisonment.

I begin by describing the relationship between reform and the prison. In order to examine the work which reentry does, we must understand the historic centrality of reform movements to the reproduction of the punishment system. Then the chapter moves into charting this dissertation's main argument with regard to prisoner reentry. My critique is divided into two parts: 1) Reentry's deployment and 2) Reentry's effects. Because these two aspects are closely related, the organization reflects a matter of emphasis, not a strict partitioning. I analyze the deployment of reentry as a discursive formation and argue that it mimics critique, looks to the punishment system as a solution to social problems that it itself is imbricated in, and fails to question mass imprisonment's conditions of emergence. After examining how reentry is discursively deployed, this section makes an argument about the effects of reentry as it is currently articulated. This critique is significant because it demonstrates the importance of grounding reentry in a politics of abolition.

## **Reform and the Prison**

*"The cycle seems never ending: exposés, reports, proposals, then more exposés" (Morris 1998)*

Reform plays a central role in the way that the penal system is maintained and reproduced. Prisoner reentry represents the latest installment in a long history of reform movements, which have bolstered the prison system as opposed to questioning or transforming the conditions of its emergence. In order to accurately chart the work that reentry does contemporarily, it is necessary to elaborate on the historic centrality of reform movements to the prison and the emergence of mass imprisonment.

The contemporary prison and movements for reform are deeply imbricated with one another (Shaylor and Chandler 2011; Shaylor 2007; Davis 2003). Foucault articulates the historic centrality of reform to the prison in Discipline and Punish:

One should also recall that the movement for reforming the prisons, for controlling their functioning is not a recent phenomenon. It does not even seem to have originated in a recognition of failure. Prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme. (Foucault 1995, 234)

Foucault locates reform squarely within the heart of the prison itself. In fact, the modern penitentiary is itself the product of reform as movements to end 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century spectacles of public, corporal and capital punishment gave rise to the prison. While reform can often be genuinely aimed toward alleviating the suffering of prisoners, "...program, policy, and legislative reform often better serve those who design, and administer and regulate these reforms than they do those for whom the reform policy and programming were supposedly intended." (Clough and Fine 2007, 267).

Whereas reform movements often discursively position themselves as in opposition to the prison, history has shown that reform is internal to punishment and is central to the reproduction of the penal system. After the American Revolution, reformers sought to end the ghastly spectacles of capital and corporal punishment inherited from England (Davis 2003). The

penitentiary was thought to be a more humane method of punishment and reformers advocated an approach characterized by seclusion and isolation from both the larger society and their fellow prisoners. The idea was that prisoners would be “shield[ed] from contaminating influences”, and that religion, discipline and work would transform the prisoner (Morris 1998, 151). Reform remained central even as imprisonment became the dominant method of punishment in the early 19th century.

Immediately after the emergence of the prison, reformers began to voice concern about conditions of confinement. Women’s rights advocates voiced concern about the abuses facing women incarcerated in co-ed prisons leading to the establishment of separate women’s prisons (Davis 2003). Reform efforts have led to the building of bigger, ‘better’ prisons, as opposed to a more fundamental transformation of the underlying dynamics of state violence. “The history of prison reform efforts reveals that mere reform fails to address the inequalities, oppression, and state violence upon which the institution of the prison is built, leaving the violent foundation intact and rendering ineffective attempts to relieve the suffering of oppressed people confined within it” (Shaylor and Chandler 2011). The complaints of reformers about prison conditions and overcrowding are used to legitimate building more prisons. Criticisms about abuses within prisons, the distance between prisons and the location of prisoners’ families, and appalling inadequacy of healthcare, have all been used to expand the prison system (Chandler 2003; Shaylor and Chandler 2011).

In “*Reform and Abolition: Points of Tension and Connection*,” Cynthia Chandler and Cassandra Shaylor show how penal authorities co-opt the language, claims and approaches of prison activists to bolster the prison system:

“Efforts in California to implement a strategy of decarceration for seriously and terminally ill prisoners through compassionate release have been co-opted by that state,

for example. California anti-prison activists have argued that prisons are ill equipped to deal with the needs of seriously and terminally ill prisoners and therefore they should be released to their families or to hospices in their communities. However, in an effort to keep people in prison and increase the number of beds within the system, the rhetoric deployed by anti-prison activists to persuade politicians and the general public that people in prison who are dying deserve to die with dignity is being used by the California Department of Corrections itself. The CDC is now arguing for the creation of hospices within prisons and corrections-controlled skilled nursing facilities in the community that could housing prisoners in locked wings” (Shaylor and Chandler 2011).

Activism about medical neglect issues within prisons in California led the Department of Corrections to propose expanding prisons through the building of new wings for terminally ill prisoners. This highlights a clear example of how reform efforts can serve to legitimate expansion of the prison system.

Concerns about conditions of confinement will continue to be central to the reproduction of the penal system unless grounded in a radical critique of social control and state violence. Following Foucault, prison abolitionist intellectuals have incorporated this critique of reform into their strategies for combatting the emergence of mass imprisonment contemporarily. As Piché and Larsen have noted, “historically, authorities have responded to criticism by adopting an endless cycle of ‘reforms,’ geared towards transforming the prison within, so that it could then in turn transform so-called criminals into law-abiding and productive citizens” (Piché and Larsen 2010, 393). Cassandra Shaylor and Cynthia Chandler argue that prison activists can more carefully craft strategies to help alleviate prisoners suffering in the present through reform that diminishes the power of the system, while building a world without prisons (Shaylor and Chandler 2011). Reentry represents the latest reform effort to captivate the penal system. In reentry, prison abolitionist intellectuals have a unique opportunity to challenge the expansion of the penal system and ground our work in the material conditions facing those most impacted by mass imprisonment.

## **An Abolitionist Critique**

“... reentry turns those of us who have been imprisoned into data”  
(Nixon et al. 2008, 27)

This dissertation finds that the mainstream approach to reentry, as advocated by penologists and criminologists, is aimed at extending the prison beyond prison walls in order to expand the surveillance aspects of penal control while saving the criminal justice system money. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the costliness of mass imprisonment is the primary threat to its legitimacy among policymakers (Petersilia 2011). While prison activists have created a vibrant movement for challenging the prison industrial complex, the reentry reform movement attempts to foreclose a vision of radical social justice that questions the racialized logics underlying mass imprisonment.

This section is divided into two parts. First, this section looks at how ‘reentry’ is deployed. Specifically, how it mimics critique, looks to the criminal justice system as a solution to social problems that it itself is imbricated in, and how it fails to question mass imprisonment’s conditions of emergence. After examining how reentry is deployed in language, this section makes an argument about the effects of reentry’s problematic deployment, arguing that reentry expands the punishment system, shores up its legitimacy, and renders the system more flexible and cost effective. In sum, reentry serves to formalize the revolving door between the ghetto and the prison that so many commentators continually lament as a failure of the punishment system.

### *Reentry’s Deployment- Mimicking Critique*

Reentry discourse mimics many of the critiques prison abolitionists have articulated for years. First, mainstream penologists are beginning to argue that mass imprisonment has been a

failure and one with devastating consequences. Statements proclaiming the end of the mass incarceration era abound. For example, in “Beyond the Prison Bubble,” Joan Petersilia writes, “For decades, America’s chief answer to crime has been to put more criminals behind bars for longer. That expensive strategy is yielding diminishing returns. It’s time for a closer look at ways of helping ex-offenders steer away from crime” (Petersilia 2011). At first glance, statements of this sort appear benign and long overdue. However, it is my contention that the new discourse on the expense and diminishing returns of mass imprisonment represents an attempt by the punishment system to co-opt abolitionist critique. This co-option serves to render the penal system more palatable, cost effective and flexible.

Additionally, mainstream policy researchers have begun celebrating the slight decrease in the U.S. prison population as if it represents a sea change. The decrease in the prison population is the first decrease since 1972 (Petersilia 2011). In 2010, the prison population decreased by approximately 3,000 prisoners (Petersilia 2011). This hardly represents a shift in terms of strategies of penal containment and the logics, which naturalize mass imprisonment as a solution to social problems.

Reentry is also deployed in such a way that it co-opts the language of abolitionist, anti-racist and feminist politics. This co-option lends reentry a façade of progressivism. Reentry reformers have put forth a number of recommendations, which highlight this co-option. ‘Evidence-based practices’ such as gender responsiveness and cultural competency represent two sites through which the punishment system absorbs the critical language of feminist and anti-racist politics. Gender responsiveness seeks to create “an environment that reflects an understanding of the realities of women’s lives and addresses the issues of the women” (Bloom, Owen, and Covington 2003). Increasingly, the construction of community reentry facilities and

community-based prisons are framed in terms of gender responsiveness. Thus feminist rhetoric gets taken up in the service of expanding the punishment system. Rose Braz, the director of Critical Resistance, has written about these developments in California:

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has identified 4,500 women that, by its own criteria, do not need to be in state prison... But, rather than release them, the Governor, CDCR, feminist scholars, and some advocates have proposed building a whole new system of smaller prisons throughout the state for people they concede do not need to be in prison (Braz 2006, 87).

Liberal feminist scholars participate in the construction of these programs with little regard for the implications of this kind of collaboration with the State and the punishment system. “The biggest pitfall of gender responsiveness in relation to mass imprisonment is that gender responsiveness fails to challenge the notion of prison as an institution that can effectively ‘address the issues of women’” (Braz 2006, 87). Just as in the notions of masculinity analyzed in Chapter Two, gender in this context is treated as fixed. The deployment of a static notion of gender through the concept of gender responsiveness elides the inherent violence of the prison as an institution and mass imprisonment as a set of relationships.

Similarly, cultural competency is an evidence-based practice that, while potentially well intentioned, results in an apolitical view of the relationship between race and imprisonment. In my fieldwork, cultural competency got signaled through gestures like displaying an African mask on a conference room table. In my fieldwork, I attended a meeting with social service providers, where cultural competency and black communities were discussed. Gestures such as using African-inspired prints for a table cloth and serving fried chicken at events were mentioned as methods of being ‘culturally competent.’ What renders this problematic is not fried chicken in and of itself. It is the idea that these gestures are sufficient for addressing white supremacy. However, issues such as employment barriers and homelessness cannot simply be alleviated by

making clients comfortable accessing services by displaying an African mask. These gestures also assume that black culture is always, everywhere the same. Absent an analysis of history and power, gestures such as this represent a simplistic attempt to mark difference.

In a toolkit for reentry service providers, written by Jeremy Travis and JoAnne Page of The Fortune Society, they state, “Federal agencies that fund reentry programs... expressly make evidence of cultural competence a criterion for eligibility to receive program grants” (Travis and Page 2011). Cultural competency is defined as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross et al. 1998, 28). In the “Employing your Mission...” toolkit, Cross et al’s definition of culture as “the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group” is used (Cross et al. 1998, 28). ‘Cultural competence’ implicitly centers a white subject who ‘recognizes’ and responds to cultural difference. What both gender responsiveness and cultural competency result in is a push for a penal system that recognizes the importance of an analysis of race and gender, while foreclosing a nuanced view of how the penal system is itself imbricated in the (re)production of gendered and racialized inequalities.

Interestingly, gender and culture are defined as ‘criminogenic needs’ (risk factors linked to recidivism) by reentry reformers. In the Center for Effective Public Policy’s initial coaching packet “*A Framework for Offender Reentry*,” gender and culture are placed in a list with and thus in a relationship of equivalence to “antisocial personality patterns,” level of motivation, and functioning level (Kempker, Gibel, and Giguere 2010, 18–19). These ‘criminogenic needs’ form the basis for the evidence-based practice of assessment. With a focus on continually assessing

and measuring risk levels for “effective offender management,” reentry reformers rarely move beyond an individual level analysis. Inequality is translated into an individualized deficiency within the soul of the offender. Case managers are to act as guides, “assisting them [former prisoners] in meeting their criminogenic and transition needs” (Kempker, Gibel, and Giguere 2010, 21). Race and gender analyses are effectively depoliticized and become techniques for effectively governing prisoners upon release.

Additionally, reentry is often also deployed using a medicalized language. In a number of the case management manuals analyzed for this research, the concept of ‘dosage’ was continually stressed (Kempker, Gibel, and Giguere 2010; Carey and Carter 2010). “Another feature of effective case plans is that they meet dosage, intensity and treatment duration requirements in order to maximize the treatment affect” (Carey and Carter 2010, 23). ‘Proper dosage’ refers to the ideal number of programming hours required for successful reentry. Properly managed and regimented time becomes key to offender success. Teresa May-Williams, Deputy Director of the Dallas County Community Supervision and Correction Department, emphasizes that returning prisoners, “are coming out of a really regimented, structured environment” and reentry serves to create a similarly regimented environment in the community. Douglas B. Marlowe, Chief of Science, Law, and Policy at the National Association of Drug Court Professions advises, “With reentry offenders, you don’t want to water down your intervention; you build up your intervention... In other words, 40 to 70 percent of their time, they’re getting their reintegration, treatment-oriented job training services” (Wolf 2011, 3). This language for reentry posits the soul of the offender as the primary terrain for transforming mass imprisonment. The use of medicalized language signals that the proper site of intervention is within ‘the offender,’ not social, political, and economic conditions. Additionally, it

demonstrates the extension of the disciplinary aspects of the contemporary prison out into the community.

Reentry services such as housing services, employment services, and mental health help are not inherently opposed to abolitionist goals. However, the logics that often underpin their deployment fail to question mass imprisonment's conditions of emergence in ways that activist scholars must be wary of reproducing. We must pay attention to the rationalities unpinning these practices. Reentry reform has the effect of rendering the prison palatable by mimicking the language of critique to portray control and management as empowerment.

Reentry reformers also mimic critique in the way that barriers to reentry are framed. It is not uncommon in mainstream corrections and reentry manuals, reports and toolkits to detail the list of extensive barriers faced by formerly imprisoned people. Mainstream criminologists highlight the legal and de facto sanctions that result from a felony record, from barriers to education and employment to housing and health care. However, these barriers are never analyzed as a function of broader systems of inequality. For example, the "Conversations Around Reentry" report of Minnesota's Council on Crime and Justice falls into this format. The report begins with a "Overview of Reentry" section which details employment, housing and other barriers. One paragraph reads:

**Health**

Individuals leaving prison and jail system are often disproportionately impacted by mental or physical health problems. Three fourths of those released from jail or prison have a substance abuse problem, and only 10 percent of those who spent time in state prisons had formerly been diagnosed with the problem (Reentry Policy Council, 2005). A high number of incarcerated individuals report and are subsequently diagnosed with depression. In 1997, prisoners had an HIV infection rate five to seven times higher than the national rate (Travis et al., 2001). Health care tends to be readily available inside correctional facilities, but the continuation of these services after release is far from adequate. One study found that fewer than one third of correctional facilities assisted releasees with finding a health treatment provider (Travis et al., 2001). These individuals are often greatly in need of medical services and are ill-equipped to find the appropriate services on their own.

Health issues are very important and the kind of information presented above is necessary. However, reports like the “Conversations Around Reentry” report detail this information and then move directly into individual-level interventions without an analysis of the broader factors which result in the fact that “A high number of incarcerated individuals report and are subsequently diagnosed with depression.” The resulting analysis is individualistic. Issues from voting bans and housing barriers to substance abuse and mental illness all get grouped together and framed as emanating from the inner life and lack of self-governance of the returning prisoner.

While reentry is often discursively positioned as opposing mass imprisonment, arguments that fundamentally question punishment are foreclosed. The ‘Coaching Packets’ of the Center for Effective Public Policy are clear to state, “punishment and sanction-driven approaches like incarceration do not reduce recidivism *when used in isolation*” (Kempker, Gibel, and Giguere 2010, 19). Reentry reformers simultaneously articulate the ineffectiveness of imprisonment and posit it as a necessary feature of the social landscape. The wisdom of combining punishment and rehabilitation is never questioned. Ultimately, reentry reforms posit that we can have rehabilitation in the service of a cost efficient system of mass imprisonment. While this way of framing claims is effective in winning supporters within the criminal justice system, it will fail to fundamentally alter mass imprisonment’s conditions of emergence, if these conditions remain unarticulated. This framing shows how reentry ‘adds on’ to current penal practices as opposed to transforming the system. Understanding the narratives, which mimic critique in contemporary punishment discourses, as well as the management and control imbedded within these narratives is necessary in order to see the work which reentry does contemporarily.

### *The Punishment System as Solution*

Another key feature of reentry's deployment is the central role of the punishment system. Reentry reforms look to the criminal justice system as a solution to social problems that it itself sustains and perpetuates. As Nixon et al. argue, "...in investing too much in the uncritically held belief that the causes and effects of mass incarceration are primarily a problem to be solved by the criminal justice system, we are investing the cultural and political system of racial control or population racism." Anti-prison activists and scholars of punishment should be wary of looking to the punishment system to transform the material conditions of former prisoners' lives in a context where the criminal justice system is itself a major conduit for state violence and social and economic insecurity.

Advocates of reentry reform continue to naively believe that prisons can be made into suitable spaces for personal transformation. This belief fails to recognize the violence of imprisonment. Jeremy Travis in much of his work has articulated a vision where prison time becomes an accomplishment, families are included in the process, and society would ritually recognize the hard work of prisoners in paying restitution to victims, "When released John would be brought back to court, perhaps the same courtroom where he was sentenced. A public recognition ceremony would be held, before an audience of family and other members of the support team, and the judge would announce that John has completed a milestone in repaying his debt to society" (Travis 2000). Whatever warm feelings this vision of a public recognition ceremony may evoke, ultimately this reform vision repackages and renders palatable state violence. Imprisonment has enormous impacts on families and communities. While maintaining family ties is perhaps a worthy goal, we need to ask serious questions about the wisdom of positing family inclusion as the most radical strategy imaginable here. As Chapter Two

demonstrates, a heteronormative family is often posited as the norm in these initiatives. These reforms may simply leave families more entrenched in the punishment system, without challenging the violence inherent in tearing mothers and fathers away from their children.

Glenn Martin of The Fortune Society has termed the emerging policy fervor over released prisoners, “reentry mania” (Mauer and Epstein 2012, 48–49). Reentry is what Martin calls, *a downstream strategy*:

“For everybody we’re able to pluck out of the river and save, thousands of others are swept away... reentry programs, if not combined with front-end strategies, rely on the banks downstream to collect and mend the bodies of young, poor, black and latino men and women who are chewed up and spit out by our unforgiving prison system. We need to march upstream” (48-49).

Reentry reforms will do little beyond revitalizing the penal system’s legitimacy in the absence of a critique, which challenges the logics that render mass imprisonment so radically naturalized.

### *The Hidden Conditions of Mass Imprisonment’s Emergence*

Reentry reforms leave intact the racial logics, which undergird mass imprisonment (Nixon et al. 2008). In fact, the logics, which structure mass imprisonment go completely unnamed. CLEAR (Community, Leadership and Education After Reentry), a research group of former prisoners, argues that through reentry reforms, race may be undergoing a transformation to “a crude evolutionary or ‘biopolitical’ racism” (Nixon et al. 2008, 21). This racism operates in aggregates, or on the level of governing populations. It “*devalues* populations with practices that continually target and mark them as objects for surveillance, control, and life management beyond the prison” (22). Reentry manages former prisoners and the marking of those populations by their histories of imprisonment in racialized ways. This new racism makes the measure of a population’s life capacity or the seeming lack thereof come “to represent its risk to the vitality,

the security, or the future of the society as a whole” (21). Within reentry discourse, we witness a kind of double move: on one hand, the soul of the offender is posited as the terrain of struggle and on the other, aggregate level solutions for managing offenders as a population are proposed.

Reentry programs often implicitly accept that former prisoners are disposable or that the greatest possible success for the formerly imprisoned is a minimum wage job. As the CLEAR research group writes, through higher education:

“we have been afforded experiences through which we have come to a self-reflective realization: the ideologies of [reentry] programs which we, too, internalized are in actuality very diminishing, offering limited expectations, and certainly not expectations that can be experienced in higher education. When as professionals we tell the groups whom we are training that they should take any job at any wage, to be grateful for being part of programs even though they will not be paid for working in them, when we discipline their bodies and behaviors, it often is out of habit and an imaginary idea that those of us living with criminal convictions still are to be treated as if we are in prison” (Nixon et al. 2008, 35)

Even as prisoner reentry discourse mimics a critique of mass imprisonment, it often elides the structural forces at play. The notions of personal responsibility circulating within reentry discourse posit transformation as a process through which the state intervenes within the soul of the offender as opposed to a collective process of political struggle. Prisoner reentry, as it is deployed in corrections, tends to stay at the individual level while also utilizing techniques for governing populations. Many reentry proposals stress teaching prisoners and former prisoners responsibility skills, and facilitating inner transformation. The system’s role is conceived as a guide and manager, ensuring public safety while former prisoners learn to be productive citizens. As CLEAR writes, “From the state, reentry’s focus on the individual was not so much meant to evaluate the specific needs and capacities of individuals but rather to reconstitute the individual in reentry as one in need of therapeutic management and control” (Nixon et al. 2008, 30). Thus, the problem to be solved is still located within the individual, who is characterized by moral failings. The solution is simultaneously posited as a transformation within the individual and

governance techniques designed to manage aggregates or whole populations, such as risk assessment tools and measures.

In order to genuinely transform the conditions of mass imprisonment's emergence, it is necessary to ground reentry work in a politics of abolition which is attentive to the imbrication of the prison with neoliberalism, globalization, heteronormativity, gendered relations of ruling, and longer histories of enslavement and colonialism. Some reentry reformers have made recommendations that move beyond the individual level. Advocating for justice reinvestment, these proposals argue that some of the funding for prisons should be diverted to rebuild communities most impacted by mass imprisonment. These proposals move in a productive direction. However, given decades of punitive rhetoric, serious engagement with these proposals is often foreclosed. As a result, many reentry reformers have framed reentry proposals in terms of cost effectiveness and recidivism reduction, which have profound implications for the transformative potential of this reform agenda. These discourses result in an extension of the punishment system into the community, rather than a broader transformation of the social relations of mass imprisonment.

### *Reentry's Effects- Expanding the Punishment System*

Recent calls for making parole and probation more strict—more punitive and empowered with greater means of surveillance—only further ensure that a captive population remains simply that, regardless of the rhetoric that surrounds these institutions. The PRI [prisoner reentry industry] can, with a straight face, say that they are doing more for former prisoners and public safety now than at any time in the past. Yet the one thing they are *not doing* is exactly what they claim to do—helping people move out of the prison system (Thompkins, Curtis, and Wendel 2010, 428–429).

Prisoner reentry, as it is currently deployed, has the effect of expanding the punishment system, rendering it more legitimate, flexible and cost effective. In a movement reminiscent of

Foucault's concept of *the carceral*, the prison appears to be travelling beyond prison walls. Prisoner reentry programs can be “used as forms of surveillance that allow the state to monitor where formerly incarcerated people spend their time and allow private entities to turn a profit” (Ortiz 2011). The revolving door “of post-prison supervision—parole and probation—together ensure that the PRI [prisoner reentry industry] has the power to maintain an ever-growing population whose lives are subject to intense control” (Thompkins, Curtis, and Wendel 2010, 428). Prisoner reentry represents a further step in the expansion of the prison industrial complex (Thompkins, Curtis, and Wendel 2010).

Reentry represents a new set of practices and programs for *imprisoning beyond the prison* (Nixon et al. 2008). Reentry reforms extend carceral controls into the community, increasing surveillance and control while cutting costs. “We are entering a new phase of institutionalization of the criminal justice system, with the increasing likelihood of extension of the carceral system of punishment and control beyond prison walls” (Nixon et al. 2008, 22). While reentry discourse mimics a critique of mass imprisonment:

“reentry programs are not an antidote to but an extension of punitive containment as government technique for managing problem categories and territories in the dualizing city. They are not a remedy to, but part and parcel of the institutional machinery of hyperincarceration ... whose reach they stretch beyond bars and over the lifecourse of convicts by keeping them under the stern watch and punctilious injunctions of criminal justice even as they return to their barren neighborhoods. Reentry must therefore be understood as an element in the redrawing of the perimeter, priorities, and modalities of action of the state as a stratifying and classifying agency...” (Wacquant 2010a, 616).

In fact, this potential effect of reentry is acknowledged by reentry reformers themselves to a degree. One well-known example is Project Greenlight. This program provided cognitive behavioral therapy to former prisoners transitioning from incarceration to the community (Hamilton 2011). Internal evaluations found that Greenlight participants “faired significantly worse than comparison group offenders on several recidivism measures 1 year following release”

(Hamilton 2011, 387). In an evaluation of the Harlem Parole Reentry Court, titled “*Adapting to Bad News...*” Zachary K. Hamilton found that participants in the reentry court had nearly double the rate of revocations for technical violations compared to the comparison group (Hamilton 2011, 396). While reentry programs sometimes have positive effects on new arrests, they carry an added risk of “supervision effects,” or increased parole revocations on technical violations. This potentially leaves former prisoners cycling through penal processes, as opposed to fundamentally transforming the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence.

Jeremy Travis has characterized reentry as an “opportunity to produce a commodity—safety—that is highly valued. Set against the low expectation of probation and parole agencies being able to deliver this commodity, such a view of community corrections becomes imbued with the enthusiasm usually seen in high-risk business ventures and too rarely seen in criminal justice reform efforts” (Travis 2000, 6–7). “Reentry mania” feeds into the non-profit industry that relies on government contracts. With each new trend, mainstream non-profits often mold themselves to fit new funding priorities. Former prisoners, thus, become objects in the service economy and in the burgeoning research within criminology.

Loic Wacquant offers a critique of the concept of a prison industrial complex and this new concept of a prisoner reentry industry. Wacquant states, “The penal boom results *not from profit-seeking but from state-crafting*” (Wacquant 2010a, 611). The important factor that Wacquant misses in his critique of these concepts is the role of the neoliberal state in maintaining the conditions for the global economy. In locating mass imprisonment as an issue of “state-crafting” as opposed to capital accumulation, Wacquant uncritically accepts a state/economy binary that is itself an effect of these very processes. Imprisonment is profitable for corporations that provide services to and aid in the construction of public prisons (even as this empties the

State's coffers). The term 'prison industrial complex' helps activist scholars to name the way that prison construction has been framed as a method of economy development for rural areas devastated by economic restructuring (Sudbury 2008). Further, 'Industry' is a useful term because it highlights the punishment system's role in maintaining the conditions for capital accumulation. Managing disposable populations (who would otherwise be counted in labor statistics or demanding a more equitable economy system through political struggle) is in part a feature of the political economy of prisons and prisoner reentry. Punishment is thus in part an economically useful mechanism and with reentry we see it expanding.

Additionally, the punishment system is an industry in so far as it has spawned the growth and differentiation of professions. Mental health providers, housing/homelessness service industries, employment service providers and other professionals all comprise a part of the punishment system. In my fieldwork in the Midwest, Department of Corrections officials urged service providers to join their relevant professional organizations. This was seen as essential to sustaining their jobs. At one meeting I observed, a large organization providing Adult Rehabilitative Mental Health Services (ARMHS) gave what was basically a marketing presentation to corrections providers. The executive director of the mental health organization, who was also providing meeting space for the group that day, said, "Don't worry. We will find a way to make your clients eligible for our services." While community corrections organizations may not profit on the scale of large multinational corporations, attention to this desire to perpetuate their organizations and thus, their jobs is important in analyzing how these systems work.

### *Legitimacy*

Prisoner reentry is also deployed to the effect that the punishment system is rendered more legitimate. One of the primary ways that the legitimacy of the system is shored up is through bringing rehabilitation back into these discourses. In 1999, Jeremy Travis, reentry movement founder, and then-Attorney General Janet Reno held a press conference to introduce the idea of prisoner reentry, calling reentry a way to “rebrand prisoner rehabilitation.” It is important to note that reentry has been framed as more than assisting prisoners once they leave prisons. The Re-Entry Policy Council, other prominent national organizations, along with Jeremy Travis and other policy reformers have framed reentry as a process that starts at the time of sentencing. In this way, reentry is conceived of as a movement that seeks to redistribute resources and authority throughout the entire system, from police and judges to parole agencies. One of the founding documents of the reentry movement is the Re-Entry Policy Council of the Council of State Government’s seven-hundred page report “*Charting the Safe and Successful Return of Prisoners to the Community*”. This document outlines recommendations for the development of new intake procedures and programming within prisons in addition to programming upon release. While reentry initiatives tend to focus on the individual level in terms of assessing the challenges of the reentry process, particularly promoting individual responsibility and self-sufficiency, reentry has also been aimed at increasing the flexibility of the punishment system as a whole. Many reentry reforms have advocated a transformation of institutional and organizational barriers. “Too often, discussions of the purposes of sentencing and corrections are constrained by organizational boundaries and legal constructs” (Travis 2000). For example, Jeremy Travis argues that judges should serve as “reentry managers.” These recommendations advocate a return to rehabilitation. However, again we see that, the basic premises of the penal system and the use of imprisonment remain unquestioned.

While reentry aims to bring rehabilitation back, it is prisons that are being ‘rebranded.’ Shoring up the palatability of the prison is arguably the greatest effect of the reentry movement, not genuine rehabilitation. We can see this when we look at the amount of funding being devoted to reentry. Some federal prisoner reentry initiatives, when divided amongst the target population, amount to as little as \$13.84 a prisoner (Nixon et al. 2008, 41). Prisoner reentry is profitable for other reasons, however. Reentry remakes the face of the prison as an institution of genuine transformation.

As mainstream penologists have begun to lament the failures of mass imprisonment, the punishment system has often reincorporated the ideal of rehabilitation into institutional narratives. California returned ‘rehabilitation’ to its mission statement in 2005 and is embarking on a number of reentry initiatives. Prisoner reentry brings the rehabilitative ideal back in, while still couching it in terms of recidivism reduction and cost savings. The extreme costs of mass imprisonment make it necessary to manage offenders differently.

### *Cost Effectiveness*

In analyzing the discursive terrain of prisoner reentry, a neoliberal<sup>25</sup> narrative emerges. Here again we see the way in which this narrative mimics a critique of mass imprisonment without questioning its conditions of emergence. The narrative begins with a general statement about how the U.S. prison population has spiraled out of control, but quickly dovetails into a neoliberal discourse about cost effectiveness. As a Pew Center report states, “despite the massive increase in corrections spending, in many states there has been little improvement in the performance of corrections systems” (Pew Center on the States 2011, 2). This narrative of

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<sup>25</sup> Neoliberalism is a political rationality that extends market values throughout the Social. (See Lemke 2001, Larner 2003 and Brown 2005).

revelation over the fact that “prisons don’t work” takes for granted the goals of imprisonment, which are not social inclusion but containment. Additionally, this framing of reentry in terms of rehabilitating prisoners forecloses the possibility of asking more radical questions about the uses of locking people away in the first place.

Corrections officials have begun to openly recognize that imprisonment does not make communities safer and that it is not “fiscally responsible” given the current economic landscape. Recent policy developments in Georgia highlight a useful example of this; where the extension of carceral controls in the community from electronic monitoring to the development of reentry courts, are couched in terms of out-of-control prison spending (Sanders 2012). Prisoner reentry has emerged as a cost effective mechanism for maintaining social control.

In the U.S., the costs of imprisonment have grown from \$9 billion to more than \$60 billion annually within the last twenty years (K. A. Hughes 2006). These figures do not include the costs of courts, prosecutors, public defenders or probation and parole (Kempker, Gibel, and Giguere 2010). Reentry is increasingly seen as a solution to the unsustainability of corrections budgets. As one reentry manual states, the “growing burden on federal and state budgets has resulted in increased interest in the complex challenges of successful offender reentry, encouraging many jurisdictions to reexamine their current policies and practices in the light of escalating costs, limited resources, and particularly, emerging research on methods to reduce recidivism” (Kempker, Gibel, and Giguere 2010). The unsustainability of corrections budgets could cause a shift in resources to education, healthcare and other areas that result in human flourishing. However, reentry is deployed to the effect that the punishment system is rendered more flexible and cost effective. Additionally, the prison industrial complex is figured as the set

of institutions most capable of solving social problems. The violence and containment aspects of the punishment system are simply reworked as opposed to transformed.

In his book, But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry, Jeremy Travis writes, “Accepting released offenders into the community without a period of supervised release is morally unsatisfying; they have not yet earned their place at our table” (Travis 2000). This idea that *they have not yet earned their place at our table* is indicative of the work that prisoner reentry is doing contemporarily in managing populations that represent a “risk to the vitality, the security, or the future of the society as a whole” (Nixon et al. 2008, 21). Additionally, it is indicative of the exclusionary logics, which constitute the carceral state more generally and it raises the question of prisoners’ relationship to “our table” prior to the offense that supposedly justifies their social abandonment. Centrally, this idea of unsupervised release as morally problematic opens a space for increasing the surveillance capacities of the penal system.

### **Conclusion: Grounding Reentry in A Politics of Abolition**

“... transformation is made a personal issue rather than a collective and political one that would necessarily provoke an encounter with the legacies of racism, segregation, disenfranchisement, ghettoization, and mass incarceration” (Nixon et al. 2008, 31).

The rationalities, which underpin and render normalized the contemporary system of mass imprisonment, as well as the function of reform in bolstering the system require an abolitionist stance on the part of critical intellectuals (Shaylor 2007; Davis 2003). This chapter charts an abolitionist critique of prisoner reentry, an issue to which few anti-prison activist scholars have paid adequate attention. We should be cautious of the seemingly benign notions about prisoner reentry circulating in corrections and mainstream criminology. Reentry is remaking the carceral landscape and expanding the punishment system, even as it is deployed in

such a way as to mimic a critique of mass imprisonment. While statements about the end of the mass incarceration era abound in prisoner reentry discourse, it would be a mistake to uncritically accept this pronouncement. The dominant reentry discourses do not seek to abolish the prison. In fact, reentry is deployed to the effect that the prison system is rendered more flexible, cost effective and legitimate.

However, reentry also represents an opportunity. An analysis of prisoner reentry grounded in a politics of abolition can tell us a great deal about the imbrication of race, gender, the naturalization of the contemporary prison and the role of reform in the reproduction of mass imprisonment. Centering reentry holds out the possibility of grounding abolitionist visions in the concrete everyday struggles of those most impacted by mass imprisonment. The everyday material conditions of former prisoners' lives must be brought to the center of prison abolitionist movement building. The next chapter provides a preliminary sketch of "abolitionist reentry praxis," a concept I coin that provides a generative alternative to my critique of mainstream reentry as a discursive formation.

## Chapter V— Toward an Abolitionist Reentry Praxis

“... to imagine and strive for a very different social landscape.”  
(Davis and Rodriguez 2000, 214–215)

### Introduction

In the above quote, Angela Davis articulates the breadth of prison abolitionist visions. Prison abolition is centrally about transforming systems of oppression and exploitation, striving for “a very different social landscape.” The transformation of colonial and gender relations, heteronormativity, and racism is fundamentally bound up with building a world without prisons. This chapter will provide an overview of prison abolition, and then will turn to theorizing a concept of *abolitionist reentry praxis* in opposition to reformist conceptions of prisoner reentry, which perpetuate reliance on the criminal justice system as a manager of social and economic insecurity. Mainstream articulations of prisoner reentry fail to question and address the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence and the analysis remains at the individual level. On the other hand, abolitionist reentry praxis seeks to address the pressing needs of formerly imprisoned people, while remaining vigilant about ensuring that our work does not bolster the punishment system. It is rigorously reflective about the historic imbrication of reform and prison expansion, as well as the potential of the punishment system to co-opt radical critique. Importantly, abolitionist reentry praxis takes up coalitional consciousness-raising and popular education techniques in order to situate individual-level service work in a broader context of community organizing. Formerly imprisoned people must come to the center of abolitionist movement building. An abolitionist reentry praxis recognizes and supports the necessity of formerly imprisoned people’s leadership within our freedom visions in the twenty-first century.

## Prison Abolition

*“... we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future... Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal.”*<sup>26</sup>

Prison abolition is a political vision and broad strategy that aims to eliminate imprisonment, policing and surveillance as methods of containment, control and redress for harm. Chapter three of *“Punishment’s Twin”* developed a critique of mainstream articulations of reentry and the failure to question the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence, arguing that prisoner reentry must be firmly situated within a politics of abolition. In his interview with Cedric Robinson, “Capitalism, Marxism, and the Black Radical Tradition,” Chuck Morse states:

It is the task of the radical critic to illuminate what is repressed and excluded by the basic mechanisms of a given social order. It is the task of the politically engaged radical critic to *side* with the excluded and repressed: to develop insights gained in confrontation with injustice, to nourish cultures of resistance, and to help define the means with which society can be rendered adequate to the full breadth of human potentialities (Morse 1999).

This imperative to *side* with the excluded is central a prison abolitionist politics. Prison abolition is a critical practice and a liberatory vision of a world without prisons. It insists on a radical critique of the root causes of mass imprisonment and highlights the failure of policing and prisons to create safe communities.

Prison abolition is often immediately dismissed as naïve and utopian. However, as Angela Davis has written, “... abolitionism should not now be considered an unrealizable utopian dream, but rather the only possible way to halt the further transnational development of prison industries... The call for prison abolition urges us to imagine and strive for a very different social landscape” (Davis and Rodriguez 2000, 214–215). Abolition encompasses a broader goal of abolishing systems of oppression and the exploitation of capitalism. Given the

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<sup>26</sup> <http://criticalresistance.org/>

imbrication historically of reform and the prison, an abolitionist approach is the most feasible method of genuinely transforming the conditions that lead people to commit crimes, the logics that inscribe criminality on particular racialized and classed bodies, and the seeming naturalness of incarceration as a response to these issues.

Prison abolition refuses to view the prison as an isolated institution. Rather, an abolitionist approach views the prison industrial complex as *a set of relationships* which must be transformed in order to build a more just world (Davis 2003, 106). Abolition becomes very difficult to imagine, if it is conceived as a vision limited to replacing our current criminal justice system with another system for dealing with violations of the law, absent an analysis of the relationships underpinning it. We must let go of “the desire to discover one single alternative system of punishment that would occupy *the same footprint* as the prison system” (Davis 2003, 106). Abolition encompasses the transformation of oppression and exploitation on a wider scale. In Piché and Larsen’s 2010 *Contemporary Justice Review* article, “The Moving Targets of Penal Abolition: ICOPA, Past, Present and Future” they write:

“the proliferation of carceral controls... requires the international abolitionist community to again assess and expand our understanding of what is to be abolished.”

Piché and Larsen point to the way in which abolitionist visions are fundamentally tethered to transforming colonial and gender relations, heteronormativity, and racial apartheid across institutional landscapes. Prison abolition requires the abolition of systems of oppression and exploitation. Thus, abolitionist goals encompass diverse aims from revitalizing our educational systems, ensuring access to healthcare and mental health treatment for all, and ensuring that members of our society have food, shelter and the tools with which to build a meaningful life.

*Abolition* references a longer history of struggle against colonialism and enslavement. In “Maroon Abolitionists: Black Gender-oppressed Activists in the Anti-Prison Movement in the

U.S. and Canada,” Julia Sudbury articulates a unique abolitionist vision and praxis rooted in African diasporic traditions of resistance and spirituality. Employing the term ‘maroon,’ Sudbury locates contemporary anti-prison activism in a longer trajectory of rebellion and resistance, “while slavery was premised on the black/white binary, maroon communities resisted this racist logic. Maroon settlements incorporated resisting Indians and exiled whites as well as runaway slaves and offered a radical multiracial alternative to North American apartheid” (Sudbury 2009, 11). Locating the project of prison abolition in this longer history of struggle centers the need to attend to the sedimented meanings, which form the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence.

#### *Genuine Human Security and Alternatives Response to Insecurity*

Prison abolitionists have begun to develop solutions to violence, which do not rely on state violence. The reluctance of communities of color to seek assistance from law enforcement makes the development of these alternatives a necessity. These proposals focus on providing safety and accountability, while locating violence within a broader analysis of systems of oppression. Margo Okazawa-Rey and Gwen Kirk’s “Maximum Security,” radically questions the dominant notions of security, which our prison and military industries rely upon: “we argue that the idea of security must be redefined in sharp contrast to everyday notions of personal security that are based on the protection of material possessions by locks and physical force, as well as prevailing definitions of national and international security based on militarization that includes police, border patrols, and armed forces....” (Okazawa-Rey and Kirk 2000, 120). This approach articulates the profound insecurities produced by war, environmental degradation and capitalist exploitation. Okazawa-Rey and Kirk articulate a notion of genuine human security, which

encompasses the need for housing, food security, a sustainable environment and fundamental human dignity.

Protection from harm is central to the concept of genuine human security. A number of organizations have worked to develop alternative systems of accountability at the local level. For example, Generation Five in San Francisco trains people to respond to child sexual abuse without relying on child protective services or the prison system.<sup>27</sup> Generation Five seeks to end child sexual abuse in the next five generations by addressing, interrupting and mending the intergenerational impacts of abuse and the systems of oppression which foster child sexual abuse. This organization has developed a notion of Transformative Justice (TJ), which focuses on safety, healing, accountability and transformation. Generation Five has also developed concrete strategies for dealing with violence in communities.<sup>28</sup> The organization's paper *Toward Transformative Justice* outlines practical strategies for groups including developing safety plans and establishing accountability mechanisms, setting these within a broader framework for understanding abuse in relationship to systems of oppression and exploitation.

The activist text, [The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities](#), also develops useful strategies for combatting intimate violence. A chapter within the volume by The Chrysalis Collective describes the process the collective went through in practicing Transformative Justice in a case of acquaintance rape. The collective developed a Survivor Support Team (SST) and an Accountability Team (AT). These teams

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.generationfive.org/index.php>

<sup>28</sup> Generation Five defines community as “a group of people in relationships based on common experience, identity, geography, values, beliefs, and/or politics.” They go on to say, “The idea of community is often romanticized by the assumption that it is a cohesive group with common values, interests, and priorities. However, people doing violence prevention and response work inside of the communities in which they live are often challenged by structures and relationships of power invested in maintaining the inequalities that allow intimate and community violence to continue.” From *Toward Transformative Justice*, [http://www.generationfive.org/downloads/G5\\_Toward\\_Transformative\\_Justice.pdf](http://www.generationfive.org/downloads/G5_Toward_Transformative_Justice.pdf)

worked together to facilitate and support the healing and transformation of both the survivor and the aggressor. The collective's experience in this case provides practical tips and strategies for developing a transformative justice plan, approaching people who have harmed others in the community and developing a plan with an aggressor to take accountability and offer restitution.

While there is still much work to be done in developing alternative systems for accountability and healing, anti-prison activists have developed a useful framework for beginning this work. Prisoner reentry work should incorporate and extend these frameworks in order to stop people from cycling in and out of the punishment system. The recognition of the fundamentally systemic character of abolitionist visions and the necessity of developing alternative systems for addressing harm are central to concept of 'abolitionist reentry praxis' that is developed in this chapter.

### **Abolitionist Reentry Praxis**

In Are Prisons Obsolete?, Angela Davis writes, "Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition" (Davis 2003, 108). As laid out in the critique developed in chapter three, mainstream articulations of prisoner reentry tend to elide the conditions of mass imprisonment's emergence and the analysis remains at the individual level. How, then, might we construct prisoner reentry work that addresses structures of domination? What might the prison abolitionist movement gain from centering prisoner reentry work and how might prisoner reentry become more genuinely transformative by being grounded in abolitionist visions?

I would like to suggest incorporating a number of strategies and abolitionist principles into prisoner reentry work, including 1) what Cricket Keating has called, coalitional consciousness-raising and 2) popular education that forms the basis of leadership development for formerly imprisoned people. Central to both of these suggestions is the notion of praxis. Praxis brings together reflection and action. Reflection is central to abolitionist reentry praxis and must be a continuous process that is an integrated component of political struggle. The question of whether our work is abolitionist must remain an open question. This injunction to leave the question open suggests an approach akin to Stuart Hall's 'politics without guarantees'. Speaking about an anti-racist politics, Hall has stated:

“it’s rather a sort of approach to the political, which I always see as not a practice which has any guarantees built into it... there is no law of history which tells you that we will win, we may lose. Just as there is no law of history, which states that human beings won’t blow themselves to bits. They probably will. So one has to act in the notion that politics is always open. There’s always the contingent of failure and you need to be right because there is no guarantee except good practice to make it right, to mobilization, to having the right people on your side, committed to the program. So, I want people to take politics a bit more seriously” (Hall and Jhally 1996).

It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order to critically reflect upon that reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection. Praxis is the dialectical process of moving between reflection and action. Abolitionist reentry work should take a praxis-oriented approach, moving between reflection about the shape of our actions within the broader punishment system, and concrete action that embodies abolitionist visions, and back into reflection.

## *Coalitional Consciousness Raising*

*“The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive”*  
– Bernice Johnson Reagon (B. Smith 1983).

Central to abolitionist reentry praxis is coalitional consciousness-raising, a method articulated by Cricket Keating, which borrows some of the useful elements of 1970s feminist consciousness raising, while incorporating the critiques of the approach by women of color feminists (Keating 2005). Women of color feminists have developed a critique of traditional feminist consciousness-raising as a practice which privileges commonalities over difference, fails to pay adequate attention to the inequality among women, and assumes groups of women are inherently “safe spaces” (Keating 2005, 91). Coalitional consciousness-raising, on the other hand, aims to build ‘deep coalitions’ (to use María Lugones’ term) that go beyond narrowly defined self-interests, challenge participants to negotiate difference in the forging of solidarity, situate their lives in a broader context of struggle and to develop a nuanced view of how race, gender, class, sexuality and nation are imbricated with one another (Lugones 2003, 26). This reworked form of consciousness-raising keeps intact the feminist ethic that ‘everyone is a theorist.’ It takes seriously the idea that everyday people have important thoughts, ideas and frameworks for explaining their life circumstances and the way that power functions in their worlds. This is particularly important for abolitionist reentry praxis, as formerly imprisoned people have a unique knowledge and experience of the prison, which others cannot have. Centering and valuing that knowledge is important. Coalitional consciousness-raising provides a framework and a space for formerly imprisoned people to reflect on their confrontations with the punishment system. Coalitional consciousness-raising, however, does not require a focus on sameness. Difference, in fact, is leveraged as “a springboard for creative change” (Lorde 2007,

115). These groups are not assumed to be safe space, a home, or a place where you can “only be with people who are like you” (B. Smith 1983, 357).

Formerly imprisoned people should be at the center of prison abolitionist movement building given their unique knowledge and experience of the prison. In my fieldwork, Tiana’s comments give us a glimpse of the impact of imprisonment,

For me, the thing about women in prison and people that are on the street. People can talk about anger management, this, this, that and the other. But there is something that goes deeper. That runs deeper. There is a sense of hopelessness that is in us. It is so overwhelming. It just takes control. People don’t realize that when we are alone you have all those thoughts about what has happened to you. That stuff just starts to get the best of you.

Coalitional consciousness-raising is one method for bringing formerly imprisoned people together to utilize and build on the unique knowledge, which they possess about the prison as an institution and as a set of relationships. Through creating spaces to articulate and have validated that “something that goes deeper” our work might be better equipped to result in genuine healing and transformation. Coalitional consciousness-raising should be centered within abolitionist reentry praxis because it is a useful starting point for people to process and put into context their experiences of imprisonment.

Additionally, abolitionist reentry praxis should incorporate popular education and leadership development as formerly imprisoned people reflect on their experiences. In this way, praxis is the framework for the project. Coalitional consciousness-raising is a central component of *reflection*. Popular education and leadership development bring formerly imprisoned people into *acting* together to build a world without prisons.

### *Popular Education & Leadership Development*

Popular education should be used as a method of abolitionist praxis and leadership development, so that former prisoners take a central role in building the prison abolition movement. Popular education is a pedagogical method developed by Brazilian educator and writer Paulo Freire. It is structured around work *with* marginalized groups, not *for* marginalized groups, and represents a counterpoint to a banking model of education that posits students as passive vessels.

The knowledge and wisdom of formerly imprisoned people must be brought to the center of reentry work and abolitionist movement building. In “Life Capacity beyond Reentry...” CLEAR, a research group of former prisoners at CUNY argues that education oriented reentry programs have more radical potential than programs based within the punishment system (Nixon et al. 2008). This group of formerly imprisoned people articulate experiences where their knowledge about the punishment system is not valued in the social service work they engage in. “It has been our experience that the powerful knowledge of those living with criminal convictions has not been engaged in a systematic way” (Nixon et al. 2008, 38). ‘Abolitionist reentry praxis’ would center the knowledge of formerly imprisoned people and create and foster spaces for the development of their knowledge and leadership. The immense capacity and desire for transformation that many people released from prison have was the most important lesson that came up for me as a researcher during my fieldwork. As Shanice said during our interview, ““I want to change, I have a desire to change. It’s struggle, it’s a process.” Formerly imprisoned people have much to contribute to abolitionist movement building. The way that Shanice began to facilitate programming in her reentry program when staff refused demonstrates underutilized leadership potential among formerly imprisoned people. Instead of remaining idle in her room,

Shanice became a leader, “I had really wanted a program with groups. So, I started doing the groups myself. I started group facilitating because if we weren’t in groups, we had to be in our rooms.” Creating spaces of liberatory education with former prisoners would prove beneficial for everyone interested in a more just future.

It is vital that reentry educational programs be structured around anti-oppression frameworks. Educational institutions are not inherent empowering or free from the carceral logics underpinning mass imprisonment. “Hence, while formal higher education seems essential, even the most cursory review of education programs suggests that not every kind of education accomplishes, or is intended to accomplish, critical learning; nor is education, itself, free from racist practices” (Nixon et al. 2008, 37). Former prisoners should have the time and space, with immediate survival needs (housing, food, health care) taken care of, to reflect on the gifts they have to give in this life and the knowledge gained from direct confrontation with mass imprisonment. The case study in the next section, featuring Los Angeles-based non-profit A New Way of Life, highlights a useful example of an organization that embodies abolitionist reentry praxis and methods for employing popular education in that work.

*Holding the Tension: Non-Reformist Reforms and A Politics of Abolition*

*“Any efforts undertaken to engage with the system must be carefully crafted and flexible enough to respond to potential outside attempts to make those efforts contradict abolitionist goals”  
(Shaylor 2007, 8).*

It is also vital that abolitionist reentry praxis attend to the potential of the current punishment system to co-opt radical movements, language and practices. Part of taking seriously ‘a politics without guarantees’ or an approach which leaves these questions open, is continual reflection on

this potential for co-option. Cynthia Chandler and Cassandra Shaylor's "Reform and Abolition: Points of Tension and Connection" highlights some abolitionist principles, which can be usefully applied in constructing a notion of abolitionist reentry praxis, which can resist such co-option.

Prison abolition necessitates engagement in 'non-reformist reforms' (Shaylor and Chandler 2011; Shaylor 2007; Gorz 1967; Mathieson 1986). Andre Gorz defines the differences between reformist and non-reformist reform in this way:

"A reformist reform is one which subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy. Reformism rejects those objectives and demands—however deep the need for them—which are incompatible with the preservation of the system. On the other hand, a not necessarily reformist reform is one which is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system of administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands... A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be" (Gorz 1967, 7–8).

Non-reformist reforms work to improve the conditions of people's lives without bolstering the very systems, which have produced social and economic insecurities. The work of prison abolitionist organizations, such as the Oakland-based non-profit Justice Now, provides an useful example of non-reformist reform work. Justice Now provides legal services to women prisoners in California, particularly women who are terminally ill or facing significant health issues. In my past work with Justice Now, I saw firsthand the need to demand that terminally ill women be released to die with their families, instead of seeking reformist-reforms that would bolster the prison system. The prison system responded to lawsuits challenging inadequate medical care by proposing to hire more staff or in one case, by building a new wing, the Skilled Nursing Facility to house terminally ill prisoners and prisoners in vegetative states. This example highlights this crucial distinction between reformist and non-reformist reforms. Obviously, one does not want to oppose changes that help people to survive in the here and now. However, abolitionists can

strategically advocate for reforms that both improve people's daily lives and challenge the massive growth in imprisonment as a response to social problems.

Cassandra Shaylor and Cynthia Chandler's work on the tensions between reform and abolition provides a useful model for beginning to theorize abolitionist reentry work. Shaylor and Chandler hold in tension the need to attend to the immediate survival needs of prisoners and abolitionist visions. "We can simultaneously address the needs of people who are suffering in the system currently and challenge the efforts by the Right to co-opt our attempts to change the system" (Shaylor and Chandler 2011). Abolitionist reentry strategies attend to formerly imprisoned people's needs in the here and now, while diminishing the power of the punishment system and developing alternatives. As was shown in chapter three, mainstream reentry initiatives have tended to increase the power of the punishment system, extending carceral controls into communities and neighborhoods outside of prisons. Abolitionist reentry praxis would be rigorously reflective about this possibility of bolstering the punishment system. This involves questions about where funding is procured, the nature of organizations' relationships with parole and probation departments, and how to develop language other than that used by the punishment system. Abolitionist reentry work requires being "ever vigilant to ensure that none of our work contributes to the expansion of the system" (Shaylor 2007, 5; Shaylor and Chandler 2011).

Additionally, Shaylor and Chander provide a useful framework for avoiding and responding to the co-option of radical language by the penal system. Questions organizations might ask when engaging in reentry work and community organizing include (Shaylor and Chandler 2011):

- Are we responding to conditions by calling for more or 'better prisons'?

- Are we calling for new modes of policing that expand surveillance and policing in our communities (for instance electronic monitoring, house arrest, etc.)?
- Are we calling for more money/ staff to go into the system?
- Does this pit categories of people against each other (guilty vs. innocent)?
- Does this approach ultimately undermine the long-term goal of abolition? How can we shift it without losing our goal of addressing current harms so that it doesn't?
- Can we build into our strategy ways to reframe rhetoric and reclaim language that has been co-opted by the Right, such as 'public safety,' 'safe communities,' 'violence against women,' 'compassion,' or 'family values?'

Abolitionist reentry praxis must work to build alternative systems of accountability and to incorporate those alternatives into the everyday operations of reentry organizations. The work of Generation Five and other organizations practicing Transformative Justice, outlined in the previous section for addressing harm without using punishment, as well as Shaylor and Chandler's suggestions regarding non-reformist reforms provide a useful starting point.

To summarize, abolitionist reentry praxis: 1) Incorporates alternative systems of accountability and healing; 2) Addresses the pressing needs of formerly imprisoned people; 3) Remains vigilant about ensuring that our work does not bolster or expand the punishment system; 4) Resists the co-option of abolitionist language by the punishment system; 5) Utilizes coalitional consciousness-raising practices; 6) Situates formerly imprisoned people's struggles within a broader analysis and 7) encourages the centrality of those most impacted by mass imprisonment through popular education and leadership development.

## Case Study: A New Way of Life

There are already people doing prisoner reentry work, which embodies an abolitionist framework. This section features a case study of a Los Angeles-based non-profit, A New Way of Life, which brings together many of the elements outlined in the previous section. A New Way of Life Re-Entry Project focuses on housing, legal advocacy, leadership development and community organizing. A New Way of Life was founded by Susan Burton, herself a formerly imprisoned woman in California. As the organization's website reads:

“Susan quickly recognized that her individual efforts were not enough. She saw that women coming home from prison faced tremendous institutional barriers —rules, laws, policies, and attitudes— that operated to deny them access to employment, student loans, permanent housing, public assistance and many other benefits. Challenging all of these rules, laws, policies, and attitudes in isolation would be a futile exercise. Susan came to understand that real change could only happen through a powerful, grassroots community organizing effort—one that could amass enough political power to bring an end to discriminatory practices, and shift public attitudes in a way that would break the cycle of mass imprisonment” (<http://anewwayoflife.org/history/>)

Burton started the organization with one house in South Los Angeles. A New Way of Life currently has five homes, which house twenty women recently released from California prisons. When a woman gets out of prison, the organization starts by helping her with immediate needs. They work with the woman to obtain necessary documentation, including an ID and a social security card, to apply for public benefits, connect with drug treatment and navigate parole. Once a woman's basic needs are more stable, the organization works with her to begin setting goals for the future, to obtain employment, and enroll in educational programs. During this time, they also begin working with women to rebuild their relationships with their children.

A New Way of Life works to situate the meeting of these basic needs within a broader context. In partnership with Critical Resistance-Los Angeles, the organization offers the LEAD (Leadership, Education, Action, and Dialogue) program which engages formerly incarcerated women in monthly workshops that explore the symbiotic set of relationships which constitute the

prison industrial complex. Each session, “helps participants make connections between the social, economic, and political underpinnings of the criminal justice system and their own imprisonment, helping participants situate their own experience within a broader context.”<sup>29</sup> The LEAD program has produced ‘zines, digital stories and a documentary film.<sup>30</sup>

A New Way of Life provides other opportunities that go beyond an individualizing approach. For example, the organization offers a four-month intensive training institute, “Women Organizing for Justice,” which engages formerly imprisoned people in learning about the role of community organizing and social movements in bettering the world. The institute seeks to help former prisoners to “develop their confidence as public speakers and advocates” through skill-building workshops and opportunities to participate in community organizing. Participants are “equipped with a critical analysis of the justice system and a belief in themselves as important participants in the struggle for social justice.”<sup>31</sup> The “Women Organizing for Justice” Institute is an embodiment of abolitionist reentry praxis in the way that it moves beyond an individualized approach. It connects formerly imprisoned people to abolitionist movement building and recognizes the centrality of their leadership to abolitionist visions.

A New Way of Life is a revealing case study for abolitionist reentry praxis because the organization holds the tension between individual-level service work and broader campaign work to challenge the prison industrial complex. In this case, these two poles create a *productive* tension. The broader, community organizing work is enriched by a grounding in the material lives of those most impacted by mass imprisonment. Alternatively, the individual-level service work is enhanced by situating the challenges facing the women within a broader context. In

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<sup>29</sup> <http://anewwayoflife.org/the-lead-project/>

<sup>30</sup> (*Visions Of Abolition: From Critical Resistance To A New Way Of Life 2012*).

<sup>31</sup> <http://anewwayoflife.org/women-organizing-for-justice/>

situating the meeting of basic needs in this broader context, formerly imprisoned people become aware that they are not alone and that their struggle is shared, even as it is their own.

Additionally, formerly imprisoned people emerge as the leaders of abolitionist movement building, as experts on imprisonment, and as people with unique gifts to bring to this life.

## **Significance**

Reentry is a vital site of struggle for a politics of abolition. Individual-level service work can allow us to ground abolitionist visions in the concrete everyday struggles of those most impacted by mass imprisonment. Additionally, it represents an opportunity to center the leadership of formerly imprisoned people and to develop those leadership capacities in a more systematic way. Former prisoners must play a central role in imagining genuine alternatives to the punishment system. Through coalitional consciousness-raising and popular education, prison abolitionist visions can enrich individual-level service work and build space for leadership development with formerly imprisoned people.

This chapter begins the work of developing ‘abolitionist reentry praxis,’ in opposition to mainstream articulations of reentry, which fail to question the conditions of mass imprisonment’s emergence. Mainstream prisoner reentry work has tended to look to the punishment system to solve problems that the punishment system itself creates, sustains and perpetuates. Abolitionist reentry praxis addresses the immediate survival needs of formerly imprisoned people, while remaining vigilant about maintaining a critical relationship to the punishment system and its ability to absorb radical critique. Abolitionist reentry praxis incorporates alternative systems of accountability and healing that “represent how we want to live in the future.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> <http://criticalresistance.org/>

## **Coda—Publication Plans and Future Research Directions**

*“As abolitionists, we see prisons as a form of violence... We are committed not only to challenging what we see happening in prisons and the prison industrial complex more broadly, but in building a different world where all of us have affordable housing, food, healthcare, economic opportunity, and freedom from individual and state violence” (Shaylor 2007, 5)*

I first became intrigued by mass imprisonment through my work with Justice Now, a prison abolitionist organization based in Oakland, California. At Justice Now, I met with women prisoners in the Central California Women’s Facility, primarily around medical neglect and compassionate release issues. Once I witnessed the conditions facing imprisoned people, it became clear that I could never live my life as if I were unaware of the profound devastation caused by the punishment system in the United States. The women I met through Justice Now were the strongest people I had ever encountered. They laughed in the face of domination and kept fighting despite enormous odds. They are the reason I do this work.

After completing my doctorate, I will begin a position as an Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at Humboldt State University, where I will help build a new Criminology & Justice Studies program centered on community-based research and service. My vision of my work as an activist scholar is one where my teaching, research, service and activism blend to form a coherent whole. I will blur the distinctions between scholarship and activism, mining the tensions between the academy as an enabling space, but also as a space of constraints and contradictions given the neoliberal university’s complicity with mass imprisonment. As Julia Sudbury writes, the academy is not “just complicit with the prison-industrial complex; it is a constitutive, if overlooked, part of it” (Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009, 26). My vision of my life’s work as an activist scholar is one as a public intellectual, using filmmaking, participatory action research and other methods of community-engaged work, in addition to traditional

scholarship. Humboldt State University, given its focus on social justice and community engagement, is an great site within which to begin my career.

The primary contribution of this dissertation is to question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions within mainstream articulations of ‘prisoner reentry’ and to make a case for situating reentry within prison abolitionist politics through this questioning. The project is conceived as a collection of publishable articles and writing that would lay the groundwork for my pre-tenure research agenda. Toward that end, Chapters four and five will become standalone publishable papers to be submitted for publication during the 2013-2014 academic year. Chapter four, which provides an abolitionist critique of mainstream prisoner reentry, will be submitted for publication in the journal, *Critical Criminology*. This article lays out some of the preliminary arguments necessary for me to proceed with my plan for publications in this area. My second publication will be based on Chapter five theorizing a concept of ‘abolitionist reentry praxis.’ Chapter five will be submitted to *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict and World Order*.

Following these publications, I plan to pursue a second project, which will follow up on chapter two. Chapter two will become a proposal for further research titled “ ‘A Productive Wage Earning Man’: Neoliberal Masculinities, Race and Prisoner Reentry Discourse.” Through an ethnography of a faith-based reentry initiative, I will continue to explore the convergence of neoliberal political rationalities and evangelical Christianity in regimes of punishment. Post-tenure, I plan to expand my research interests to include the emerging field which Mary Bosworth calls “the criminology of mobility.” I am also interested in pursuing cultural criminology and the representation of crime, as well as the relationship between structural adjustment and prison expansion in the Caribbean.

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