

Women, Incarceration, and Social Marginality

“Look at the sky,” Rose¹ said. She was referring to a photograph she had taken of an alley located behind a homeless shelter where she had stayed off and on for several years (figure 1). Squinting at the photograph, Rose, a 48-year-old Black American² woman who had been incarcerated three times, pointed out a few doorways that opened from the shelter onto the alley. She commented that the shelter employees “never used those doors back there, so everybody just did drugs back there . . . They’s gettin’ high back there for a long time, and they still is. Police will ride through, you know, ask for ID or somethin’ So, if you got anything, you better been done smoked it or tooted it or whatever.” Rose laughed, then added, “Get out, they search us and stuff.”

Rose and I had been talking for about an hour as part of our second interview for my research on women’s incarceration and postincarceration experiences. In preparation for this interview, she had taken approximately 40 photographs to illustrate these experiences. At the start of the interview, she divided the photographs into two piles. One pile documented her life at Growing Stronger, the recovery home where she had been living for nearly a year after serving 18 months in prison for possession of a controlled substance. Photograph after photograph in that pile showed smiling women, posing with one another and some posing with Santa Claus at Growing Stronger’s recent Christmas party. The photographs communicated warmth and care, qualities Rose deeply valued. Over the course of my data collection, I observed Rose’s care for others, such as the time she brought items back from a local food pantry for a friend who was not able to go because she was busy studying for her adult high school classes. During our three interviews, Rose expressed appreciation for friends, family members, Growing Stronger staff members, and even a parole officer who supported her through multiple attempts to get her life back on the right track, meaning “livin’ the rest

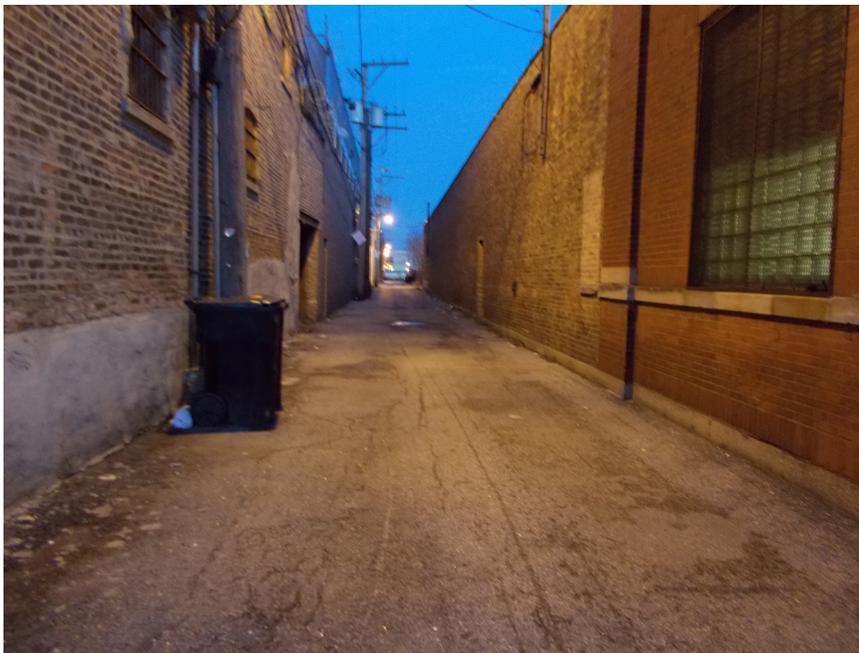


FIGURE 1. Rose's alley (Photo credit: Rose).

of my life clean and sober . . . doin' the right things, payin' my bills, goin' to work, helpin' somebody else." In a soft-spoken voice and with a slow pace that put me at ease, Rose said she felt positive about getting things right this time. She had learned from her past mistakes. She knew now to reach out to others when she experienced a challenge, such as a death, relationship problems, or a relapse. "I'm for certain now more than I was then," Rose explained, referring to her previous release from prison five years earlier.

The second pile of photographs documented that earlier time in Rose's life, a time characterized by drug use, homelessness, vulnerability, and run-ins with the police. By the time Rose showed me the photograph of the alley, she had already casually mentioned twice that she had been raped there. Now that our conversation was focused on this photograph, I carefully broached the topic. Rose explained, "I didn't know him. He talked about he had this money and these drugs, so we got in that little gangway, he just grabbed me. You know, had me to do things, you know, do things and then he did things to me and took off runnin'" The alley had been uncharacteristically empty that night, so no one was around to help Rose. I asked her what happened after the man took off. She recalled:

I mean I was so scared, I, you know, I stood back there for a minute. So, I mean when I did come out, it was a few peoples walkin', but it was cold that night, so there

wasn't too many peoples on the street. So that's why wasn't too many peoples in the alley. But I asked a couple people, "Did you see this guy? This guy runnin' out of the alley or whatnot?" Everybody said, "No." So, and, you know, I never ran into that person again.

I inquired what she did next. Rose replied, "Nothin'. Just walked up and down the street cryin'. I didn't go to the hospital or nothin' because I didn't think it would do any good. I didn't have a description of the guy or nothin'. Only thing I knew that he had on black. I just cried. I, you know, it stayed with me for a long time." Rose eventually confided in an acquaintance about the rape. She recalled, "They'd be like, 'Well, what you doin' up in here in this alley cold as it was? Why didn't you go in the shelter?' You know. Why? 'Cause I was tryin' to get drugs." She sighed before continuing, "I don't know, for some reason didn't nobody come in that alley! I couldn't believe that! I was like, wow. Out of all these times, didn't nobody come in this alley. I stayed in there a good 30 minutes or longer . . . every time I tried to scream, he was like pullin' my hair and hittin' me and stuff, and I was just cryin'. I was hopin' somebody would hear me, but nobody never came that way."

Rose identified a critical tension. She understood this experience as a violent act someone perpetrated against her, despite her verbal and physical resistance. Yet, she suggested she could have prevented the assault. As the person in whom she confided had asked, why had she been in the alley? Reacting to the implicit blame in that question, I commented, "I hope you know, Rose, that it's not your fault and that it's not because you were getting high or because you were in an alley." Rose replied, "I thought it was." When I asked her if she still felt that way today, she explained:

It's kind of, I don't know. 'Cause I figure if I wasn't gettin' high or wasn't there in that alley, that wouldn't of never happened to me. So, I can't blame nobody, you know, but myself . . . if I was doin' somethin' else . . . it wouldn't of never happened. So I did blame myself for a long time, you know. I did. But I just will say . . . that will never happen again. Only thing what really, really hurt me was that the person that did it didn't get caught or somethin' like that. That's the main part that hurt me. You know. I been raped a lot of times due to my addiction or jumpin' in people cars and stuff. And with the grace of God, I don't have AIDS or anything. You know, that ain't nobody but God.

Without absolving this man of responsibility, Rose held herself responsible. As she reasoned, if she had not been getting high, she would not have been in that alley and thus would not have encountered the man who raped her. For Rose, her addiction was the ultimate cause of that assault and the numerous other rapes she survived. She could not blame anybody other than herself.

Rose also commented on the experience of returning to that alley and taking the photograph in preparation for our second interview. She explained she had stood at "the very beginning of the alley . . . so that's maybe why it got the blue sky like

this.” Rose stressed, “I will never go down that alley again, and if I do go past it, only thing I can do is just look down there, you know, and be like, ‘Wow. Thank you, God.’” She added, “I just couldn’t see myself walkin’ through there no more. I mean for what? For what?” How Rose positioned herself when taking the photograph indicated how precarious her recovery felt to her. One false step could lead her back to her old lifestyle, making her vulnerable to more violence and even to death.

Each time I looked at the striking alley image, I imagined Rose taking the photograph, balanced not just at the edge of the alley, but also between her past life, in which she bore the *criminal-addict* label, and her current life, in which she was fighting for her recovery from drug use, incarceration, and the countless traumatic experiences she had survived. As she struggled to end the cycle of poverty, interpersonal violence, drug use, and incarceration that had characterized much of her adult life, Rose grounded her postincarceration efforts in her sobriety and faith in God. She credited God for her commitment to her recovery today and for mitigating the consequences of the threats, violence, and overall hardship she had endured while using drugs. Even while looking at a site where she had been raped, she expressed gratitude for God’s protection. The photograph and Rose’s interpretation of it perfectly represented the personal transformation process described by many women who participated in this research, specifically the tension between the past identities they were working to leave behind and the current identities they were constructing, as well as the centrality of recovery work and religion as mechanisms to facilitate that transformation.

Rose’s photograph also brought into focus how these personal transformation processes were deeply gendered and raced. When discussing how she blamed her choices and her drug use for the multiple sexual assaults she endured, Rose indicated the streets were no place for a woman. The risks she encountered while getting high and trying to access drugs were forms of gendered violence. The threat of sexual assault, the multiple rapes, and the risk of AIDS were the costs she bore as an unhoused woman struggling to maintain her drug use. Additionally, Rose’s behavior violated conventional notions of femininity, specifically attachment to and responsibility for the domestic sphere and responsibility for monogamous, heterosexual relationships. Feminist criminologists note this violation of both the law and of feminine norms mark criminalized women as “doubly deviant.”³ Yet, Rose’s Blackness already violated normative femininity, which is coded White.⁴ Like all of the women of color in this study, Rose faced a distinctly gendered stigma related to her status as a *criminal-addict* and to her race.

For these reasons, Rose’s photograph provides an apt introduction to this book. It encapsulates the vulnerability and strength, the violence and beauty, and the precarious boundaries between past lives, determined presents, and hopeful futures that characterized criminalized women’s lives. The photograph compels viewers to acknowledge a highly traumatic incident that legal and social systems never

addressed, while also compelling viewers to understand this incident as but one of many significant acts that have influenced the complex, multifaceted woman Rose is. Perhaps most importantly, the photograph centers Rose's survival. She was able to return to the alley, which represented a portal back to some of the worst times of her life, confront it, and walk away, back to Growing Stronger and the caring community of friends and supporters she found there.

This book examines the identity work of women, like Rose, who fight for their dignity and freedom in the face of criminalization. Based on a series of in-depth, semistructured qualitative and photo-elicitation interviews with formerly incarcerated women living in Chicago, I show how identity is created through and in response to the pervasive violence and punishment that permeated criminalized women's lives. Through their interview narratives and the photographs they took for this project, almost every one of the 36 women who participated in this research conveyed an intense sense of personal responsibility for the challenges they experienced and a commitment to transforming their selves. While women's stories were deeply personal, they seemed to draw from a common script. As I noticed these similar narrative features, I wondered what larger discourses were at work and how women encountered them. To answer this question, I turned to cultural discourses about women of color that date back to colonization and chattel slavery,⁵ neoliberal and neoconservative discourses about crime and social control that ushered in the era of mass incarceration in the United States,⁶ religious discourses of redemption that have structured prison life since the birth of the penitentiary,⁷ and addiction and recovery discourses rooted in the 12-Step model of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous that pervade the U.S. correctional system today.⁸

By bringing together these discourses in an original way, I develop a more comprehensive understanding of the lifelong consequences of criminalization for women's identity than previous scholarship that has engaged these discourses individually has produced. I go beyond existing research on redemption narratives by examining how such narratives are constructed in the context of dehumanizing discourses and practices that relegate women to a permanent degraded social status, neither fully accepted or integrated into society. Additionally, I offer new insights about ways the carceral state has merged faith-based and addiction discourses to such an extent that it subjects criminalized women to a lifetime of recovery and rehabilitation work. I also show how, despite these consequences, criminalized women engage these restrictive discourses in innovative ways that allow them to not just survive oppressive systems, but also thrive in the rehabilitated identities they create. In the broadest sense, this book engages fundamental sociological questions about the relationship between agency and structure. More specifically, it adds to our growing understanding of how the carceral state governs socially marginalized groups—inside and outside the prison walls—while centering hopeful signs of resistance.

WOMEN'S CRIMINALIZATION

Over the past 40 years, the United States has experienced an unprecedented expansion of its prison system. Between 1972 and 2007, the rate of people incarcerated in the United States more than quintupled.⁹ In the present era of mass incarceration, almost two million individuals are incarcerated in prisons and jails in the United States, and nearly six million people are under some form of correctional supervision.¹⁰ The United States incarcerates more individuals than any other country in the world and incarcerates at a higher rate than any other country.¹¹ A disproportionate number of incarcerated people are Black or Latino.¹² The racial bias in arrest, prosecution, and incarceration rates has prompted critical analyses of the carceral state as a racialized form of social control.¹³ Legal scholar Michelle Alexander, for one, argues that mass incarceration is “the new Jim Crow” in the sense that it supports a racial caste system in the United States not only through incarceration but also through disenfranchisement and the loss of social rights and benefits imposed on individuals postincarceration.¹⁴ Similarly, sociologist Loïc Wacquant argues the present day U.S. prison system is the latest institution that operates to confine and control Black people, following chattel slavery, the Jim Crow system, and the urban ghetto in northern metropolises.¹⁵ An important contextual point about mass incarceration in the United States is that public and private prisons largely have abandoned their past goal of rehabilitation and replaced it with a managerial ethos,¹⁶ as well as “the goals of incapacitation, deterrence, and retribution.”¹⁷

Although men make up the vast majority of the U.S. incarcerated population, the penal system has impacted and continues to impact women in direct and damaging ways. Between 1980 and 2020, women’s incarceration rate (including jail and prison) rose twice as quickly as that of men. In 2020, the United States incarcerated more than 150,000 women in state and federal prisons and local jails throughout the country, an increase of 475 percent since 1980. More than one million women live under some form of correctional supervision, such as probation, parole, or serving time in alternative-to-incarceration programs located in community settings.¹⁸ These gendered shifts in the criminal legal system’s focus target particular women; incarceration disproportionately impacts women who belong to marginalized groups, particularly women of color and women who are poor, undereducated, survivors of physical and/or sexual violence, and who experience with mental health issues.¹⁹

This profile indicates most incarcerated women face multiple forms of social disadvantage throughout their lives. Incarceration constitutes a secondary victimization for many women who encounter state violence in the form of inadequate medical and mental health care; shackling during childbirth; separation from children and loved ones; and sexual abuse by correctional officers, the majority of whom are men who perform body searches and have access to women when they

undress, shower, and use bathroom facilities.²⁰ The very experiences that make women vulnerable to criminalization and incarceration continue to impact them while they are in the custody of the state.

Undeniably, the War on Drugs is a leading cause of mass incarceration in the United States. Changes in laws, such as mandatory minimum sentences, and correctional policies, such as revocations of parole and probation, over the past 40 years contributed to more prison admissions, as well as longer prison sentences for a range of drug-related charges.²¹ The War on Drugs also is a leading reason for the spike in women's incarceration. Feminist scholars have advanced an understanding of how the War on Drugs has hit women particularly hard, operating, in effect, as a "War on Women."²² Despite the War on Drugs' clear role in driving mass incarceration, broadly, and increases in women's incarceration, specifically, it does not explain mass incarceration in the United States. Rather, the War on Drugs is a mechanism the state has used as part of a larger project to contain social marginality.

The era of mass incarceration in the United States developed alongside the retrenchment of the U.S. social welfare state.²³ Welfare and penal scholars have documented the convergence of the welfare and the penal states since the mid-1970s, showing how both social welfare policy and penal policy have taken a punitive turn and represent a coordinated effort by the state to regulate social marginality in new ways.²⁴ Wacquant argues the retrenchment of social welfare policies and the rise of the penal state are linked projects of the neoliberal state that manage and regulate marginal populations, with the Left hand of the state morally reforming poor women of color and their children through Public Aid's bureaucracy and the Right hand of the state morally reforming poor men of color through the penal system.²⁵ This gendered division of regulation is not as neat as a feminine Left hand and masculine Right hand, however.²⁶ The Left and Right hands of the state do, in fact, work together to regulate the poor, but women are not immune from the expanding reach of the penal state. Rather, as social welfare assistance, public institutions, and jobs have withered away, the criminal legal system has stepped in to fill the gaps through which women fall.

GENDERED GOVERNANCE

In addition to showing how the expanding carceral system physically contains and monitors socially marginalized groups through correctional interventions, punishment scholars, drawing on the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, have also shown how this system governs "risky" populations through interventions designed to encourage self-regulation and self-discipline. Rather than manage social problems, the state works to manage individuals. Punishment scholars study how the penal state encourages an inward focus on

self-improvement by imposing therapeutic interventions on individuals who are under correctional supervision.²⁷ In addition to punishing people for their “criminal” behavior, therapeutic interventions claim to help individuals come to know themselves so that they can correct their individual deficiencies that have led to their “criminal” involvement. People learn to regulate their desires, reform their thinking, and modify their behavior in order to come in line with the status quo. Collectively referred to as *responsibilization*, these strategies bracket out structural inequalities in favor of teaching participants to look inward to reform their personal failings.²⁸

Feminist sociologists have assessed the gendered nature of these governance strategies when applied to criminalized women. Rather than address the structural conditions that shape women’s pathways to incarceration, gender-responsive programming in women’s prisons and alternative-to-incarceration programs encourages participants to recognize weak control of flawed selves as the core problem they must address. Women regularly encounter discourses that identify their criminal dependency, dangerous desires, and lack of self-esteem as the causes of their criminalization.²⁹ These gendered governance discourses intersect with deeply rooted controlling images that frame women of color as inherently deviant and always already in violation of conventional femininity.³⁰

CRIMINALIZATION’S CONSEQUENCES

The punitive shift in the state’s efforts to contain social marginality has long-term consequences for women. Scholars who study postincarceration experiences have thoroughly documented the range of collateral consequences that follow people long after the end of their prison sentence, permanently subjecting them to discrimination and social exclusion. While research consistently shows the pivotal role education, employment, and safe housing play in helping women end their entanglement with the criminal legal system, systematic barriers prevent formerly incarcerated women from accessing these critical supports.³¹ Certain criminal convictions prohibit formerly incarcerated people from accessing a variety of public benefits, such as public assistance, food stamps, and public housing.³² Lack of supportive, gender-responsive drug treatment and mental health services further hamper women’s efforts to navigate the transition from prison to their communities. Complicated and unsafe relationships with family members and romantic partners pose additional barriers that characterize women’s postincarceration experiences.³³ Reunification with children is another central and gendered challenge associated with postincarceration life. The majority of incarcerated women are mothers, and most were the primary caretakers of their children prior to incarceration.³⁴ After their release, women face the challenge of reuniting with their children, which can be particularly difficult if Child Protective Services (CPS) is involved. In addition to meeting parole stipulations, women also must follow

CPS's requirements and prove they are financially, emotionally, and mentally prepared to become the primary caretakers for their children.³⁵ Healing from the trauma of incarceration is an equally important though less studied challenge of postincarceration life.

In addition to these external barriers, sociologists and criminologists have examined the interior work of postincarceration life, specifically the process through which people change their understanding of their own identity. Criminologist Shadd Maruna's work on redemption scripts has been particularly influential in this area. Based on qualitative research with formerly incarcerated men and women, Maruna showed how people crafted these scripts "to rewrite a shameful past into a necessary prelude to a productive and worthy life."³⁶ The scripts allowed individuals to make sense of their past criminal behaviors while envisioning the rehabilitated selves they have (or want) to become. Sociologists Andrea Leverenz and Tara Opsal similarly have focused on the narrative strategies women deployed to establish a positive self-identity postincarceration.³⁷ Identifying markers such as employment, abstaining from drug use, and reconnecting with children helped women distinguish their past and present selves and affirm their continued movement away from criminalization.

These studies of identity narratives provide illuminating insights on criminalization's deep, lifelong impact and encourage appreciation for the degree of visible and invisible work women undertake as part of transitioning out of prison. Some studies examine the available narratives women engage, such as those offered by 12-Step, self-empowerment, and religious programs, to structure their personal narratives of identity change.³⁸ Yet, such studies seldom connect women's identity work back to larger governance discourses. This gap is significant, since governance discourses focus squarely on presumptions about identity, specifically a gendered, racialized, deviant self that must be managed in perpetuity. To truly understand criminalized women's identity work and the way they see themselves, it is imperative to also understand their perceptions of how the state sees them.

RESEARCH AIMS AND REVISIONS

At the outset of this project, I was not particularly interested in women's identity work. I planned to focus on how the state intervened in women's lives across varied settings. I was curious how women's experiences with service providers, such as domestic violence advocates and public aid caseworkers, compared to their experiences with criminal legal authorities, such as police and correctional officers. To investigate these questions, I conducted a series of qualitative, semistructured interviews and photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) based on participant-generated images with formerly incarcerated women. This type of PEI involves providing participants with cameras to take photographs that will help them tell their stories. The photographs become the basis of a subsequent interview, during which the

participant selects the photographs they wish to discuss in the order they want to discuss them and explains what each image communicates. The decision to include PEI was critical, as the photographs women took and their explanations of them completely changed the focus of my research.³⁹

PEI provides a number of benefits related to the research process and outcomes. It helps ensure participants have a voice in the research process, in part through breaking down the traditional power differential that exists between researcher and participant. PEI's collaborative approach also helps the researcher avoid overlooking or misunderstanding important points by allowing participants to drive the interview by using images they create. PEI is particularly well-suited for research that investigates trauma, disadvantage, and inequality and may even provide healing benefits for participants. Additionally, people sometimes can express experiences, especially painful experiences, more easily in nonverbal ways. PEI also has been shown to produce richer, more detailed recollections than interviews alone.⁴⁰

Between December 2012 and July 2013, I conducted 99 interviews with 36 participants.⁴¹ To recruit participants, I partnered with two recovery homes and one nonresidential program in Chicago that provide services to formerly incarcerated women. All 36 participants expressed an interest in taking photographs and received a camera at the end of our first interview, but only 32 participants completed a PEI. Women's ages ranged from 20 to 63 years old, with a mean age of 45.5 and a median age of 46.5. The vast majority of women (28) identified their race/ethnicity as Black or African American. Four women identified as White, two women identified as multiracial, and two women identified as Latina.⁴² Thirty-one of the women were mothers, and none of the women with children under the age of 18 were living with them at the time of our interviews. Information related to women's social class indicated precarious living and financial situations in line with the structural challenges thoroughly documented in the literature on women's incarceration and reentry. All of the women indicated that their last incarceration was related to drug or alcohol use, even when the official charge was not drug related. For instance, women often were arrested for criminalized behaviors connected to their drug use, such as engaging in sex work in order to be able to access drugs.⁴³

Each interview typically lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. I provided participants with a \$20 gift card to the store of their choosing at the end of each interview session. Participants kept their cameras, which served as another form of compensation. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. I completed open coding and then focused coding, looking for linkages among the categories that had emerged.⁴⁴ Early on in the coding process, personal transformation emerged as a noteworthy theme. As I reread interview transcripts, I focused on specific ways women demonstrated their personal transformation. I also noted the tendency for women to contrast their current identities with their past identities. I came to understand the interview itself and women's photographs as sites of identity work.⁴⁵ Additionally, as I noticed similarities across women's

personal transformation narratives, I began to connect their individual narratives to dominant discourses they encountered in jail and prison and across recovery homes and reentry programs. These discourses focused on faith and recovery from drug use. Over time, I came to understand these personal transformation narratives as working to oppose dehumanizing discourses and treatment women encountered throughout their criminalization processes, as well as racist controlling images of women of color that date back to the founding of this country.

OVERVIEW

In the chapters that follow, I examine the dehumanizing discourses criminalized women regularly encountered, the routine violence they survived, and the intense identity work they did to claim dignity and find joy, despite living within oppressive systems that continued to monitor and judge them. Recovering from criminalization is a lifelong process with no end point. I strive to center the voices of the women who participated in this research and present their experiences as they understood them, while developing my own critical analysis about the limiting discourses the state offered to women as ways out of the criminal legal system.⁴⁶

Chapter 2 focuses on the dehumanizing nature of women's experiences of incarceration. Drawing on women's recollections of correctional officers' abuse, giving birth while incarcerated, and medical neglect in prison, I assess incarceration as gendered state violence. I also examine how the experience of incarceration attacked women at the level of identity, thus setting the stage for subsequent chapters that examine women's identity work. The chapter concludes with an initially confounding contradiction: despite painful recollections of incarceration, women often credited prison with saving their lives.

In chapter 3, I analyze the dominant discourse women encountered as they moved through the criminal legal system, what I term *the 12-Step logic*. Rooted in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, the 12-Step logic is the fusing of faith- and abstinence-based discourses that instills a lifelong commitment to rehabilitating the self and embracing personal responsibility for one's criminalization, drug use, and recovery. I argue that this logic operates as an organizing force throughout incarceration and the postincarceration landscape, characterizing recovery and rehabilitation as lifelong interconnected moral and spiritual projects. I show how women engaged this logic in innovative ways to recast incarceration as a redemptive experience, while remaining critical of the dehumanizing treatment they endured.

Chapter 4 is the first of three chapters that analyzes how women's personal transformation processes are raced and gendered and how women work within the constraints of the *rehabilitated woman controlling image* to claim dignity and joy. This chapter focuses on the first two components of the rehabilitated woman controlling image: employment and appearance. I begin with these components, as they represent dimensions of independence. Employment held the promise that

women would not have to depend on other people or institutions for their day-to-day survival. Women's self-described improved, healthy appearances communicated their recovery from drug use, in other words, that they no longer were dependent on drugs or alcohol. These dimensions of independence were foundational to all the identity work women did.

Chapter 5 assesses the next two components of the rehabilitated woman controlling image: domesticity and mothering. Through their photographs and reflections, women frequently discussed the importance of having their own space, whether that be a single room in a recovery home or their own apartment. Having their own space signaled their transition away from the vulnerability they faced when they were still actively using drugs and living in unstable arrangements. Women also connected their housing goals with rebuilding their relationships with their children. As such, women made an insightful connection between the structural and relational needs of housing. In reflecting on their relationships with their children, women also drew distinctions between the ways they felt they were not there for their children in the past, due to drug use and incarceration, and the ways they were present in their children's lives today.

Chapter 6 presents romantic relationships as the final component of the rehabilitated woman controlling image. Similar to the way women drew distinctions between their past and current relationships with their children, women contrasted their experiences of abuse in past romantic relationships with the healthy romantic relationships they either currently had or planned to have in the future. This chapter also presents women's reflections on their friendships with other criminalized women. These reflections reveal how, throughout their incarceration, women relied on other women to survive the daily stresses of prison life and do their time. Similarly, postrelease, women found a sense of community as they connected with other formerly incarcerated women and helped one another manage the challenges and setbacks they encountered. Women grew stronger in their own personal transformations as they did the work of recovery and reentry with supportive peers. I conclude the chapter by showing how women's critiques and moments of collective awareness—which in part emerged through their friendships with other criminalized women—challenged the individualistic focus on personal transformation and highlighted the need for broader social change.

In chapter 7, I summarize the main contributions of this study and provide suggestions for how to limit the harm the criminal legal system perpetuates in women's lives. The chapter asserts that our current system does not allow women the chance ever to move beyond the *criminal-addict* label and subsequently subjects women permanently to moral judgment and the threat of further criminalization. I argue that meaningful change requires abolitionist approaches that seek to shrink the carceral state and link formerly incarcerated women's personal transformation processes to organizing strategies for social transformation.

This book implores us to pay attention to what formerly incarcerated women want us to know about their journeys through the criminal legal system and their postincarceration experiences. The women with whom I have had the privilege to work on this project were complicated, strong, resilient, caring, determined, and funny. They were mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, cousins, nieces, girlfriends, wives, and friends. They celebrated successes, such as earning GEDs and high school diplomas, completing drug treatment programs, and completing probation and parole. They found ways to keep moving forward after setbacks, such as relapsing, losing jobs, and being told to leave recovery homes. They survived multiple types of intersecting violence and employed creative strategies in their struggles to maintain sobriety, secure employment and housing, leave behind the criminal legal system for good, and ultimately turn their lives around. They had loud voices that they wanted people not just to hear, but also from which to learn. Scholars often write and talk about criminalized women in terms of numbers: incarceration rates, recidivism rates, the percentage who have experienced violence, and numbers who have lost their children. Through their words and photographs, the women I met while completing this project demand that we look beyond these statistics and take the time to deeply understand what it means for women to be entangled in the criminal legal system and how they work to survive that system.