

“God Blessed the Child That Has Her Own”

Recovering Identity through Domesticity and Mothering

“This is a beautiful picture,” Ann Williams said (figure 16). “It’s gorgeous.” We were looking at a photograph she had taken of the dining room table where we now were sitting at Starting Again, where she had been residing for almost a year since her release from prison. “It just shows . . . inspiration. It just shows beauty . . . the setup is just gorgeous . . . it just shows greatness.” It wasn’t immediately clear what made this routine image so beautiful, but the 44-year-old Black mother of six was adamant. “How do you feel when you look at this picture now?” I asked. “I feel good. It’s beautiful,” Ann responded. “Cause, you know, when you look at things, you have to really look at ‘em . . . This is really gorgeous, because I’m really seein’. I didn’t used to see. I used to didn’t see anything ‘cause my eyes was blind. Now I can see! And it’s just gorgeous, the little things are just beautiful.” As this was our second interview, I knew how important Ann’s faith was to her. She thoroughly credited God with holding her through the many years she had spent in and out of prison, unhoused, and struggling with drug use and with guiding her through her current work to turn her life around. The religious imagery of a lost person who gains sight and clarity only after being saved was not lost on me.¹

Pressing further, I inquired, “Is there anything else this table, this picture tells or reveals?” Without hesitation, Ann explained:

One day I’ll be at my own table with my family, at a beautiful table like that. That’s what it really reveals . . . the table, my home, me and my kids. And we’ll sit at my table and have family time . . . That’s the good thing about this table. You can come and talk. If things seem like it’s a little shaky . . . like say me and my roommate be goin’ through somethin’ . . . this is the table to come and talk about it. Everything! That’s with my family too, now that I know, now that I’m learnin’. This is the table that we



FIGURE 16. “One day I’ll be at my own table with my family” (Photo credit: Ann Williams).

point out the issues and resolve ‘em. . . Just one day I’m a have the same house. I’m a be at the same house with my [children] at my table.

The table became a powerful symbol Ann returned to throughout this interview and the next, particularly as she discussed her evolving relationship with her children, who ranged in age from 5 to 17. She had lived separately from them for most of their lives. Four separate stints in prison and multiple years of being “out in the streets,” as Ann put it, while using heroin or cocaine had pulled her away from being physically and emotionally present in her children’s lives. She explained, “I never really was in their lives . . . I was there when I was tired and I was off drugs, comin’ off the withdrawals. You know what I’m sayin’? I did a lot of damage . . . once I started usin’ drugs, always ran.” The image Ann described of having all her children under the same roof, gathered around a table, eating and talking together symbolized a goal she was working toward—to be able to provide for her children materially and emotionally.

The table did not just represent a future goal, however. It also celebrated Ann’s current identity work and the incremental progress she was making to rebuild her family. She valued the process as much as the goal, and to this point, the process was going quite well. Ann had not used drugs in over a year. She regularly attended 12-Step meetings and had a sponsor whom she trusted and admired. Although she

did not yet have a job, she was looking into several job-training programs, as well as a GED program. Perhaps most importantly, she had maintained stable living arrangements through Starting Again since her release from prison. At no point over the past year did she worry about ending up back on the streets, in a shelter, or living again with her children's father—all moves Ann knew would jeopardize her progress. Alluding to the common 12-Step directive to avoid "people, places, and things" associated with one's past drug use, Ann explained why she moved into Starting Again directly from prison: "I had already made the decision that I'm gonna go to a recovery home and keep the process goin'. 'Cause I knew . . . I don't wanna go back to that same familiar places."

Ann's stability at Starting Again was a reflection of her progress. Between our first and second interviews, Starting Again's director, Miss Dorothy, had moved Ann to the agency's second site. The move was a privilege granted only to residents whom Miss Dorothy determined were serious about their recovery and could handle the relaxed rules and additional freedom the second site provided. The first site was similar to many of the recovery homes I visited and heard about in interviews. It was a communal setup, where women shared bedrooms and common living areas with one another and were required to follow program rules, such as attending groups and adhering to a curfew. A staff member was always on site, which meant support was always available, but so was constant surveillance. While Starting Again's second site still had rules and programming, it was a more independent setup. Ann explained:

That's a level one, this is a level two . . . you pay the rent over here, you get a job . . . you have more business, you have more . . . leeway . . . Over there you have to do groups, groups, groups, groups. Over here, it's like you're responsible now, so you know what to do, you know to go to your meetings, you know to do the necessary right thing . . . It's like bein' a big girl. Grown up.

Ann now had her own bedroom and shared an entire apartment with just one other resident. Women living in this apartment typically had to pay rent monthly, but Miss Dorothy, knowing Ann did not have the financial means, allowed her to live there rent-free. Ann continued to turn over her monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly known as food stamps) benefits to Starting Again, as she had done at the first site, but she would not have to pay rent until she secured an income. The move was an affirmation of Ann's progress and new identity. She explained, "It's a good move for me because it's another level . . . It's a next level and it's another, you know, phase and everything . . . showin' them my growth, my character."

The increased freedom at the second site also provided Ann with the chance to spend uninterrupted, private time reconnecting with her children. Miss Dorothy allowed two of her children at a time to stay with her overnight on the weekends. Ann was using those visits to have in-depth discussions with her children

about their past relationships and how to move forward. Looking at a photograph of her oldest child, Ann reflected on the work they were doing to rebuild their relationship:

Ann: That's my baby, oh my God! That's my daughter, my 17-year-old daughter. This is the one I told you we really didn't have a relationship because of my drug use and now she's, we're building, we tryin' to build that relationship. She's comin' around. I'm tryin' to open up to her, and . . . it's like, somebody meeting somebody for the first time . . . 'cause I never was a mom, I mean . . . I never knew how to be a mom, it's like me learnin' how to be a mom . . . learnin' to open up, listen to her . . .

CR: What does it mean to be a mom today?

Ann: To be open-minded, to be loving, to understand, to be responsible. You know, to be there every step . . . It's a lot. To be a mom . . . It's a lot, but I'm willin' and I'm learnin'. Every day with my kids, okay, I wasn't there in the past, but I'm here now . . . I can't go back to the past, but I can only do what I can do now in the present and the future . . . That's what I tell my daughter . . . She said, "Mama, I forgive you" . . . I was like making amends, so I said, "That wasn't the person I was when I did that, when I did those drugs, that was not me. That was a monster inside of me. That wasn't me. The real me, this is the real me." And I'm learnin' to know who I am and be comfortable with who I am . . . That was not me. That was some person that I don't know . . . She was like, "Mom, I forgive you . . . I know that wasn't you."

Ann drew clear boundaries between her past *criminal-addict* and current *rehabilitated* identities to demonstrate her progress as a mother. Whereas in the past she was homeless and absent from her children's lives, today she had secured safe, stable (though temporary) housing. She was finding ways to be fully present during their time together, in stark contrast to her memories of laying on the couch while going through withdrawals, physically present but not really there. She acknowledged she had a lot to learn about her children and how to be a mother, and she embraced that work, finding joy and meaning in the learning process.

Ann grounded her progress in her sobriety. Generally, she made clear that her accomplishments were only possible because she no longer was using drugs. Resuming use would send her back down the same path she had followed the previous three times she had been released from prison. Specifically, she used the 12 Steps to frame her relationship building with her children. Step 9 involves making direct amends to the people one has harmed. Ann described the conversation where her daughter forgave her as "making amends." She acknowledged the harm she caused and affirmed that because of her sobriety, she was and would remain a different person—a present mother on whom her children could rely. Ann indicated how making amends was an active, ongoing process integral to her rehabilitation. She suggested that as she became more certain in her own identity, she also would grow as a mother.

Ann's faith was as important as her sobriety for her identity work. As noted in chapter 3, Ann believed God had saved her through incarceration. She also believed God was making her ongoing rehabilitation possible. Reflecting on her developing relationships with her children, Ann explained, "I see the difference. I see some healin'. God came along, and God is healin' us . . . back then, they didn't wanna be close to me. They didn't even wanna look at me, they didn't even wanna say, 'That's my mama' . . . So now they're able to say, 'That's my mom.'" She referenced a recent school event her oldest daughter had asked her to attend: "That was openin' up a door, and God was answering my prayers. He was opening up a door." Ann alluded to her rehabilitation as a pact with God. Echoing the 12-Step logic, she had admitted powerlessness, turned her will over to God, and was ready for God to remove her defects of character.² As long as she put in the work, God would keep opening doors and helping her move through them.

Ann's photographs and reflections provided further insight into women's identity work and centered the next two gendered markers of recovery—domesticity and mothering—that constitute the rehabilitated woman controlling image. Securing housing and reestablishing relationships with children are challenging tasks most people face following release from prison. Yet, the meaning and experience of working to accomplish these tasks differ for criminalized men and women in nuanced ways, with gendered impacts on identity. As such, I use the term *domesticity* rather than *housing* to reference the broad care work encapsulated in criminalized women's reflections on housing.

As with appearance and employment, domesticity and mothering are complex components of identity that subject women to ongoing judgment and surveillance, while also providing opportunities for healing and growth.³ Domesticity and mothering also reflect ways criminalized women are judged not only for breaking the law, but also for violating feminine norms. Drug use and incarceration undermine women's ability to fulfill gendered expectations related to domestic and care work. Regardless of how unrealistic those expectations are, deviations from those ideals subject criminalized women to damaging assessments of their character. These assessments intersect with race and class, reflecting the controlling images of the "crack ho" and "welfare queen." The moral judgment the *criminal-addict* label bestowed on women tapped into something much deeper than criminalization and drug use. It suggested a weak, immoral self that prevented women from fulfilling their social roles and thereby threatened the stability of families, communities, and society overall.⁴

In this chapter, I use the clean/dirty and fear/joy framework established in chapter 4 to examine how women engaged domesticity and mothering discourses as part of their personal transformation processes. There was a constant push and pull between the *criminal-addict* identity women were trying to shed and the *rehabilitated* identity they were working to accomplish. In reflecting on domesticity and mothering, women drew boundaries between their past and current identities, highlighting the positive changes they had made even if their goals

remained out of reach. They engaged the 12-Step logic, the overarching discourse women encountered throughout the criminal legal system and postincarceration landscape, with its focus on sobriety, faith, and personal responsibility, to structure this boundary work. A sense of fear and vulnerability was associated with resuming drug use and the subsequent risk it would bring. There also was a sense of joy and excitement as women's goals related to housing and mothering grew within reach. Along with appearance and employment, domesticity and mothering were critical components of women's identity transitions that refuted racist stereotypes about criminalized women of color.

HOUSING: A FORMIDABLE TASK

Securing housing arguably is one of the most important and challenging tasks people face following release from prison. A wealth of research documents that housing, like employment, is crucial for people to end their involvement with the criminal legal system. Meeting conditions of release, finding employment, pursuing education, participating in drug treatment, reuniting with children, reconnecting with family, and abstaining from drug use are exceedingly difficult without a stable residence.⁵ As feminist scholars Megan Welsh and Valli Rajah summarize, "Home doesn't just mean shelter; it means a stable and safe place that is symbolic of full reintegration into society."⁶ Housing is central to postincarceration life because so much hinges on it.

Yet, similar to employment, a host of discriminatory laws, policies, and practices systematically exclude formerly incarcerated people from housing.⁷ In the private market, landlords regularly use background checks to justify not renting to applicants who have a criminal conviction. In a particularly exploitive move, landlords may charge application and background check fees, fully knowing they have no intention of renting to an applicant.⁸ Federal legislation allows, and in some cases even encourages, public housing authorities to deny housing to people with criminal backgrounds.⁹ The bans are so extensive that in many cases formerly incarcerated people cannot even move in with a family member who lives in public housing.¹⁰ These prohibitions impose financial and emotional strain, as the state limits how residents can offer support to newly released loved ones.¹¹ These policies exacerbate a host of historical and ongoing discriminatory housing laws and practices that have created and maintained entrenched racial and economic residential segregation throughout the United States.¹² As such, formerly incarcerated people typically return to the same disadvantaged communities where they lived before their incarceration and thus to the same challenging living conditions produced by community disinvestment and hypersurveillance that keep people caught up in the criminal legal system.¹³

These challenges are amplified for criminalized women, particularly criminalized women of color, who deal with intersecting oppressions related to gender, poverty, criminalization, and race.¹⁴ Given a general lack of affordable housing,

gender inequality in the labor market, the feminization of poverty, and women's disproportionate caretaking responsibilities, securing housing is a formidable task for women, even without a criminal record. The added stigma and discrimination caused by criminalization make a formidable task even more difficult. In her research with formerly incarcerated women, sociologist Beth E. Richie found participants felt overlooked by community organizations that focused on other groups needing assistance, concluding, "Women of color returning from jail or prison do not feel embraced by their communities, and they are not identified as having the right to demand services from it. The sense of being marginalized within the context of a disenfranchised community has a profound impact on the ability of women to successfully reintegrate into it."¹⁵ Additionally, housing insecurity increases women's vulnerability to gendered violence, such as sexual harassment and assault while unhoused and by landlords and family members on whom women rely for assistance.¹⁶ Similar to the ways employment discrimination funnels criminalized women into low-wage, precarious, and often unsafe work, housing discrimination keeps criminalized women contained in racially segregated communities shaped by generations of targeted economic disinvestment and subject to ongoing interpersonal, community, and structural violence.

Women's mothering responsibilities intersect with their housing needs.¹⁷ The majority of incarcerated women are mothers and were the primary caretakers of minor children prior to their incarceration.¹⁸ Whether they are biological mothers or not, women often fulfill important caretaking roles within their families and communities. As a result, women's incarceration creates severe disruption for families and long-lasting psychological impacts on children and women themselves. The separation from their children that women endure throughout their incarceration is a gendered pain of imprisonment.¹⁹ Given this separation, reunifying with children is a central part of postincarceration experiences for most women.

Reunification efforts take a variety of forms, from reconnecting with adult children to regaining legal custody of minor children. Many women have formal Child Protective Services (CPS) cases, often for no other reason than their incarceration and not having anyone who can care for their children. As such, women must not only meet postrelease conditions and requirements of any programs with which they are engaged, such as drug treatment and recovery homes; they also must follow stringent case plans with CPS. The competing demands imposed by these various agencies and the degree of intersecting surveillance can be overwhelming.²⁰ Securing stable housing is a minimum requirement women must meet in order to regain custody of their children. Shelter and recovery homes typically do not fulfill this requirement, especially as most do not allow minor children to live with their parents at these sites. Indeed, Ann Williams's ability to have her children stay with her overnight at Starting Again was a unique privilege. In a very basic way, housing is intertwined with criminalized women's ability to mother their children and, particularly for women of color, to contest perceptions of maternal deviance.

Housing is further gendered in the ways it impacts identity.²¹ Like employment, housing fulfills more than material needs. There is a psychological benefit to having safe, stable housing. Public health scholar Alana Rosenberg and colleagues found housing insecurity among formerly incarcerated people undermined ontological security, meaning the sense of feeling at home and at ease, with negative impacts on identity. Sociological research has documented a reciprocal relationship between housing and identity for formerly incarcerated people: "Just as housing access could support the construction of positive post-incarceration identities, the reverse was also true. Participants described how housing insecurity inhibited their ability to build credibility and distance themselves from stigmatized incarceration histories that were considered legitimate grounds for exclusion from resources."²² Both men and women in Danya E. Keene, Amy B. Smoyer, and Kim M. Blankenship's study revealed how housing is "a symbolic good in the context of widely circulating American values of self-sufficiency and independence."²³ As such, housing is a critical type of reparative identity work for criminalized men and women.

Given controlling images and discourses surrounding criminalized women, however, self-sufficiency and independence mean particular things for women. Independence, specifically economic independence, typically is gendered masculine, as men's perceived worth continues to be equated with (in)ability to financially provide for oneself and one's family. But for criminalized women, particularly women of color, dependence is a sign of pathology and ongoing criminality.²⁴ Thus, housing is a distinctly feminine goal in the context of intertwined discourses about criminalization, gender, poverty, and race. It is a resource women can use not only to increase their physical safety and support reunification efforts with their children, but also to contest dependency discourses and establish a positive rehabilitated identity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING ONE'S OWN

Women's attention to domesticity was a key component of the rehabilitated woman controlling image and a prominent way to distinguish between past and current selves. Similar to appearance, domesticity largely reaffirmed traditional femininity scripts. Stable housing represented women's ability to take on the traditional feminine task of caring for domestic spaces. It also offered protection from the gendered violence women had experienced in their homes and communities, as well as at the hands of the state.²⁵ In a practical manner, having a space of one's own separated women from past physical spaces that had been sites of violence. Symbolically, it also marked women as *not* deserving of the violence that, according to mainstream addiction and dependency discourses, their past behaviors had made them vulnerable to experiencing.

Rose's photograph of the alley where she was sexually assaulted, the photograph that opens this book, illustrates what housing means for criminalized women's



FIGURE 17. "Trying to live like a person's supposed to live" (Photo credit: Rose).

safety and identity. In addition to the alley photograph, Rose took photographs of her bedroom at Growing Stronger (figure 17). This was Rose's second stay at the recovery home. At the end of her first stay, she had moved into her own apartment. She eventually resumed using drugs, lost her apartment and job, and was incarcerated again for drug possession. Rose explained the bedroom photographs:

I could look at these now and say, "Well, I got all, I'm getting most of my stuff back." So I will know how to appreciate it, you know. 'Cause last time . . . I had all this stuff, I got rid of it. Due to me going back out there . . . just looking at . . . it just makes me feel good to know that I'm trying to live life. I mean, I'm trying to live like a person's supposed to live.

The bedroom provided Rose with a safe place, in contrast to the dangers she faced in the alley. The items that filled her bedroom showed her progress away from drug use, homelessness, and vulnerability to sexual assault and toward her new identity as a sober woman able to provide adequate shelter, clothing, shoes, and hygiene items for herself. By documenting her skill at creating a safe domestic space, Rose constructed a positive feminine identity, despite her inability to have her own apartment. Like Ann Williams, she took pleasure in the process and enjoyed displaying her accomplishments. By doing so, she resolved the dilemma of living in a society where affordable housing is not available and self-sufficiency

is not yet within reach. Her memories of the trauma and hardships she endured were persistent reminders of the risks associated with failing to maintain her new identity. Juxtaposing Rose's alley and bedroom photographs provided a striking visual of the relationship between her past and current identities and what was at stake while navigating between them.

When women first move into Growing Stronger, they are assigned to a shared bedroom. As women advance through the program, they earn the privilege of moving into a single room, where they enjoy greater privacy. Denise talked about her single room at Growing Stronger as a sign of her progress and contrasted having her own room to her past experiences living with abusive partners in a way that resonated with Ann Williams's reflections on moving to Starting Again's second site.²⁶ Denise recalled, "When I . . . got my own room in Growing Stronger, this was the first time ever in life that Denise's had her own room, that I ain't had to worry about waking up and there's somebody next to me." Despite the recovery home's rules and having to answer to staff, Denise enjoyed a relative freedom at Growing Stronger compared with the extreme surveillance and control she had endured from her violent partner and while in jail and prison.²⁷ She looked forward to the further peace and independence she anticipated would come with having her own apartment, "even if it's just a kitchenette or a studio," that she could decorate any way she wanted. As Denise summed up, "It ain't nothin' like havin' your *own*. You know, God blessed the child that has her own." The practical safety and symbolic redemption housing provided would further distance Denise from her past identity and move her closer to the new woman she was working so hard to become.

The Lioness also discussed how her room at Growing Stronger symbolized the better woman she was becoming. She took a photograph of the door to her room (figure 18) to show, like Denise, she had earned the privilege of staying in her own, single-person room, where she found "a peace of mind." She contrasted the privacy she enjoyed in her room with the complete lack of privacy she experienced in prison: "See I was in prison for two years with women . . . I never had privacy, you know? So to get in this room it was like . . . oh my God, I could breathe." The suffocating description of prison mirrored Denise's recollection of being in a domestic violence relationship. Like Denise and Rose, the Lioness enjoyed the relative freedom, safety, and ability to breathe that the recovery home provided. Having her own private room enabled her "to plan my day or plan my week, what move I wanna make, what goals I have for myself, so now, it's just my safe haven."

The Lioness also proudly described how well she cared for her room. While wearing a stylish pink sweat suit, she explained the significance of a photograph of her bed (figure 19): "This is my bed . . . I love pink." She added, "My momma used to dress me in so much pink. You know, my momma was the type of person that she wanna have little girls be always beautiful and clean. I used to have, my hair was always pretty and my clothes was never dirty." She continued, "I love



FIGURE 18. The Lioness's door (Photo credit: the Lioness).



FIGURE 19. "I like my bed nicely made" (Photo credit: the Lioness).

my room. I love everything. But the bed, it shows that, organized. I'm always keepin' it nice and clean, I keep my linen clean . . . now I make my bed, I mean I'm organized. I don't like to be no scattered, I like my bed made nicely." On the one hand, the Lioness's description reflected her internalization of the disciplinary regimes, structured living, and rigid routines many residential facilities attempt to impart to criminalized people.²⁸ An organized room and routine communicated rejection of an unruly, disordered self that was associated with the chaos of the streets and the drugs lifestyle.

There also was a gendered meaning to the Lioness's burgeoning organization skills. She used the photograph to show not just that she was working on her rehabilitation, but that she also was working to cultivate normative femininity. Her mother had taught her what it meant to be a proper woman ("beautiful and clean"). The Lioness suggested her drug use and participation in the streets lifestyle had compromised that identity, but she now was reclaiming it. Her repeated mention of being "clean" countered the judgment she faced as a Black woman without a stable home who had used drugs and engaged in sex work. The color pink, which for the Lioness "is a sign of woman . . . pretty in pink," represented that she was getting back to the type of woman her mother wanted her to be. Her housekeeping also reflected this transformation. She explained, "I have a ritual that I do. I clean my room in the mornin', vacuum my floor, make my bed." The cleanliness of her room reflected her rehabilitated gendered identity. She was a far way from the woman who stole soap, toothpaste, and deodorant and was condemned by the corner store worker as being not a real woman.²⁹ Similar to the way external changes in feminine appearance reflected internal changes in one's self, the chaotic or orderly presentation of one's room provided a window to what was going on internally.³⁰ The Lioness displayed and described her domestic skills in ways that contested the *criminal-addict* label and, more specifically, the "crack ho" controlling image. She still was poor, unemployed, and technically unhoused, but the social marginalization she now faced differed from what she encountered on the streets and in jail and prison. She was moving toward the rehabilitated woman controlling image, and being clean—with the multiple meanings the word connotes—was affirmation of that progress.

"BACK TO SQUARE ONE"

While a small minority of women had secured apartments either on their own or through a housing program, the vast majority of women's housing circumstances were much more precarious. Women's stays at recovery homes were limited, and the living conditions at many of these homes made many women eager to move out as soon as possible. Just as some women referenced positive experiences at recovery homes as indicators of their personal transformation, other women described problems at recovery homes as signs of their suspended progress. Women who did not have their own apartment or reside in a recovery home bounced between

temporary stays with friends and family members and periods of homelessness. Lynn and Xenia shared particularly turbulent housing trajectories throughout the period we were in contact for this project.

The living arrangements of Lynn, a 33-year-old Caucasian mother of two, frequently and at times unexpectedly changed during the nearly five months we were in contact. Between our first interview at Starting Again and our third interview at another recovery home, Lynn reported living in a hotel, being back in jail, being on the streets, staying inpatient at a psychiatric hospital, completing an inpatient drug treatment program, and briefly residing at multiple recovery homes. She made an explicit connection between being unhoused and her ongoing drug use, noting, "My main problem is somewhere to live, and, you know, I don't want to be in the streets. 'Cause that's a big trigger for relapsing, too, is being in the streets . . . I don't want to be sober in the streets."

Lynn faced a dilemma when it came to housing, though. She was anticipating receiving the second installment of a payout from a class action lawsuit against Cook County Jail for illegally shackling women during childbirth. Lynn was considering finding an apartment and using the installment to pay rent for several months in order to have secure housing, thereby eliminating one of her greatest stressors. She thought the apartment could provide a solid foundation for her girlfriend, Faye, and her. She anticipated the assurance that would come with having their own place would support both of them in their recovery and provide much-needed time to either find employment or for Lynn to finally be approved for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) due to a disability. Lynn had been kicked out of Starting Again two previous times for rule infractions, once for getting drunk and staying out overnight and, most recently, for being caught having a romantic relationship with Faye, who also was living at Starting Again. Lynn described how the resulting housing instability contributed to a familiar cycle where she would increase her drinking and drug use, miss check-ins with her probation officer, and be worn down from dealing with the general chaos of not having a place to stay. Perhaps, she reasoned, having a secure place of her own, where she did not have to worry about program rules or being kicked out, would help her break this cycle. Plus, Faye was advocating for this plan.

The challenge, though, was Lynn was not certain she wanted to leave the new recovery home where she and Faye were staying. Although Lynn had only been there for about a week, she explained she thought the program might be able to help her. She summed up how it was distinct from other recovery homes where she had stayed: "This is not like a slop house. This is not like, you know, just somewhere to live and not do what you're supposed to do." Plus, she described it as "relationship-friendly . . . This is like the only place you can have a relationship at . . . that's big, you know, because . . . there is a lot of gay couples that are trying to get clean together, and they don't want to be separated, and they shouldn't have to be." She and Faye had been kicked out of two recovery homes because of their

relationship. At the current program, they did not have to hide their relationship, even though they had to stay on separate floors, and program rules prohibited any sexual activity in the house.

Additionally, Lynn was not confident she was ready for her own apartment. She explained:

When I get my money, I wanted to stay [at this recovery home] for like a month . . . 'cause I am fresh in recovery once again . . . My mom put in my head that I've been, I'm gonna need to be institutionalized for the rest of my life, 'cause, you know, I've been in recovery homes for like the past 10 years, and I've never really lived on my own. So, you know, she's [Faye's] tryin' to get me out of that, "You don't need to be institutionalized, and you can just jump out on faith" . . . I'm just kind of scared [laughs] to . . . go out there. And it makes her so mad. [laughs] She's like, "You cannot keep depending on people for the rest of your life."

Lynn hoped the current recovery home would provide her with "some stability," which to her meant "being able to wake up and stay sober, be around sober people, just to be around recovery . . . I want to be clean . . . I want to, you know, like the meetings and stuff, you know. I'm getting up on time. Makin' my bed. You know, structure, I guess you could say." Attempting to clarify her point, she defined stability in opposition to her past lifestyle. "Because I was all over the place. You know, takin' my medicine here and there, you know, just doin', you know. Here you gotta take your medicine at a certain time. You gotta make sure you take it. You know, you have morning med, you have to get up for morning group at 6:30. You have to be on the floor at 6:30, you know, you *have* to go to groups, you this, you know. You're supposed to be goin' to IOP [intensive outpatient treatment], too . . . every day." Lynn described how she had tried numerous times to stop using drugs on her own or to be able to just drink casually, but one drink always led "to the harder stuff." She commented, "I think I'm an addict." She seemed to be searching for a different way forward.

Lynn's ambivalence about what housing would be most beneficial for her at this point in her life alluded to dominant dependency discourses, the 12-Step logic, and the rehabilitated woman controlling image. Faye suggested dependency was a weakness and encouraged Lynn to become independent as soon as possible, even if doing so felt risky. Lynn, however, focused on the meaning of dependence associated not just with drug use, but also with her *criminal-addict* self. In Lynn's explanation, she would not be able to abstain from alcohol and drugs and stop depending on institutions until she did the deep work required to bring about a true, lasting identity change. Resonating with the 12-Step logic, Lynn suggested true recovery required a transformation of self. In this respect, dependency on institutions was an acceptable temporary state while she committed to the lifelong project of recovery. Lynn implied she had to accept she was an addict. Provided she was willing to put in the work, the recovery home's programming might help

her develop a structured life out of the current chaos that reflected her disordered, undisciplined self. Lynn revealed the reciprocal relationship between identity and housing and how, in some cases, a recovery home that felt accepting and stable might provide a greater sense of ontological security and support for positive identity development than an independent apartment.

Xenia's experiences throughout the course of our interviews affirmed Lynn's concerns about preemptively leaving the recovery home. The 41-year-old Puerto Rican mother of eight also had lived briefly at Starting Again. Unlike Lynn, Xenia left on her own terms. She identified multiple frustrations with the program, such as the requirements to attend Miss Dorothy's church with the other Starting Again residents every Sunday and to turn over her food stamps, which staff used to purchase food for the entire house. Xenia said she ultimately decided to move out because she wanted to be with her family, and her niece invited Xenia to move in with her. After a couple of weeks, though, Xenia's niece told her that if she could not contribute to rent, she could no longer live there. With no income, Xenia moved out and was staying "here and there," including living out of her car. Although Xenia did not miss Starting Again's rules and restrictions, she noted she was missing out on Miss Dorothy's resources and referrals and having a stable place to stay.

Beyond the physical hardships she endured due to her homelessness, Xenia also reflected on being pulled back toward her *criminal-addict* identity. Xenia explained she was trying to hold on to the insights she had learned in the 12-Step-based drug treatment program she attended in prison. She was trying to "let go and let God" and accept her "powerlessness," as she now worked to abstain from drug use and stay out of prison. Lack of housing and poverty were making it difficult, however. "I don't have a stable place to go. So I'm back to square one again," Xenia said. "Yeah, it's kind of difficult . . . for me to live and survive I have to try and, you know, find ways and means of survival. You know, I didn't want to go back to prostituting, what I'm used to doing. I didn't want to go back to that. Didn't want to go back to selling drugs . . . I just want to do it the positive way."

Two months later, at the time of our third interview, Xenia's situation had not improved. She was staying at an overnight shelter that required her to leave daily between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Having nowhere to go during the day was especially hard on her arthritis during Chicago's cold winter months. She needed to purchase a new battery for her car, which was parked in the shelter's lot. She had started spacing out her psychiatric medication, taking one pill a day instead of two as prescribed, since she was unsure when she would be able to afford a refill. With no assurance she would be able to secure a legitimate income or stable housing anytime soon, Xenia noted the draw of past behaviors: "I don't wanna get out here and sell no drugs. And I know people ask me all the time, you know, 'Just stand here and be our lookout, you know?' And I'm about to do it because I need that battery before, it's getting to the point where now they're telling me that they're gonna tow my car. Now I'm in a bind between a rock and a hard place. Now I have to make a

choice of what I'm gonna do." Xenia linked having a place to stay with more than physical shelter, safety, and protection from Chicago's brutal cold. She linked her ongoing housing instability with a potential return to her *criminal-addict* identity.

While Lynn's and Xenia's experiences at Starting Again drastically differed from those of Ann Williams, all three verbalized an understanding of rehabilitation as a process of personal transformation and of housing's central role in that process. Lynn and Xenia were earlier in their recovery than Ann and did not express as much joy or hope in the process. Unlike Ann, they did not share a vision of their future selves. Rather, their comments seemed to center more on risk, insecurity, and even fear. Lynn did not want to repeat what she had done with the first installment of her lawsuit settlement—spending much of it on drugs and ending up back at the beginning of yet another recovery attempt once the money ran out and she landed in another institution. As a result, she doubted Faye's advice. She suggested independent housing maybe was not what she needed at the moment. Lynn wondered if maybe she needed to first focus on internal change, which would allow her to confidently secure her own housing, which in turn would support the identity transformation process she had begun. Xenia did not want to return to sex work or selling drugs. She had turned her will over to God, and if she could just find a stable place to stay and hold on to enough money to pay for her car, medication, food, and personal items, she then could focus more intently on her rehabilitation. Without some stability, though, her progress was suspended. The positive reflections and hopeful outlook Ann shared seemed to indicate what could be possible once women had the foundation that safe, stable housing provided.

"MY OWN PLACE, MY OWN KEY, THE LEASE
IN MY OWN NAME"

Photographs representing women's future homes further revealed women's use of domesticity discourses to narrate their personal transformation processes, as well as the importance of women's imaginings of their future selves. Women's discussions about their future homes often intersected with their desires to reconnect with their children. In this way, women illuminated a strong connection between a structural need and a relational need.³¹ Beyond fulfilling a basic material need, housing provided support to fortify relationships, and those relationships were central to women's identity shifts.

Chicken Wing, who took the photograph of the police officer, visually represented this connection between structural and relational needs with another evocative photograph (figure 20). The image of a building represented her goal of home ownership. She referenced her four children, who ranged in age from 23 to 36, while reflecting on the photograph:

I can't wait to get my own place so I can have my kids over for dinner. So they have somewhere they can go. When they get tired of runnin' the street, they can come



FIGURE 20. “I can’t wait to get my own place” (Photo credit: Chicken Wing).

home to their mom’s house, you know, bring their friend over, “This my mom!” You know what I’m sayin’? So that’s a beautiful thing. I can’t wait for that, to cook for them.

Although she had maintained a relationship with her children during her 21 years of incarceration, being on the outside now gave her opportunities to mother in ways that had been out of reach for decades. Securing her own home would expand those opportunities, as the program rules at Growing Stronger and the conditions of her mandatory supervised release limited how and when she could be available to her children.³² Like Ann Williams, Chicken Wing envisioned her home as a gathering place for her children, a refuge they could rely on and a space where she could care for them in ways that were meaningful to her. Establishing a safe, stable home for herself and her children was a central part of the rehabilitated identity she envisioned. Like her employment and appearance, home ownership would further establish her identity as a dependable mother, refuting her self-described past identity as a “crackhead” and contesting racist controlling images and dependency discourses.

Iris, a 49-year-old White mother of two teenagers, took a photograph similar to Chicken Wing’s that also represented her long-term housing and family goals. Iris had been living at Growing Stronger for a few months at the time of our interviews. She had been living apart from her children for much longer. After her most recent

arrest and stay in jail for a DUI charge, her husband had filed for divorce. He had won custody of their children, who now lived with him in another state. In order for the judge overseeing their divorce to approve a visit where Iris's children could stay with her, Iris had to secure permanent housing. During our second interview, she shared a photograph of what she described as a nice condo building downtown.³³ The building looked like the typical mixed-use structure that had been popping up in Chicago's west loop, a gentrifying area that was steadily extending west. Six floors of condominium units stood above a Starbucks that occupied the ground floor. Each unit had one to two large windows that stretched from nearly floor to ceiling and faced onto one of two busy downtown streets. Iris noted that in addition to the Starbucks, a dry cleaners across the street, a nearby sandwich shop, and multiple public transportation options made the location particularly desirable. Her driver's license had been suspended as a result of her most recent DUI, and Iris explained it would be a long process to reinstate it. Until that time, she would continue to rely on public transportation.

Iris explained how the photograph represented a number of her goals, and in doing so linked her sobriety with domesticity and mothering. She explained the building represented "the next steps in terms of my permanent address, if you will. It doesn't have to necessarily be a fancy condo downtown, but obviously since June of 2010, I've been pretty much institutionalized, meaning living in the treatment centers, recovery homes." The past nearly three years of her life had been characterized by instability and an inability to make sustainable forward progress. Like Lynn, Iris attributed this cycle to her addiction and used the 12-Step logic to make sense of it. Specifically, she referenced the dangers of institutionalization. A popular maxim within 12-Step circles is that addiction leads to one of three ends: jails, institutions, or death. Iris and Lynn suggested they had covered the jails and institutions options; ending their alcohol and drug use was a matter of life and death. Securing "a nice, not super huge, fancy place, but a place big enough, and safe and secure enough to accommodate" her children, similar to the condo building she depicted in her photograph, would affirm Iris's ability to avoid all three devastating ends and escape the cycle in which she was caught.

Iris continued to engage the 12-Step logic to explain her life trajectory as she reflected further on the photograph:

Ultimately this is what I want. I want my own place, my own key, the lease or whatever in my own name. And see the thing is that I've had all of that, so . . . I know what I'm, hopefully with this sobriety being the only focus, huge priority, because that's the thing that took everything away from me. Because I knew how to get a good job, how to even maintain a good job when I was still drinking, for 18 years I had a career going, how to make good money, how to maintain a home, because I was paying the bills. So, once I can get this other side of the street cleaned up and be able to maybe work with the sponsor and stay in the recovery circles and go to meetings and, because at some point I was still functioning, but then the addiction finally progressed

because they say it's not only cunning, baffling, powerful, but it's progressive, deadly. So it had progressed to the point where I just couldn't function anymore, and then as a result of that, I lost everything.

Iris implied her internalization of the 12-Step logic's conceptualization of addiction. Using the common 12-Step phrase "cunning, baffling, powerful," she suggested she was powerless over her alcohol use and shared her understanding that unless she committed to working the 12-Step program in perpetuity, she would end up again in jail or an institution, or potentially even dead. Her past experiences of getting clean and resuming her normative behaviors and roles, only to relapse and lose it all, reminded her she could not control her addiction on her own. Like Ann Williams and Lynn, Iris expressed she needed more than just housing. She needed to make and continue to nurture a deep internal change. As such, Iris suggested a reciprocal relationship between stable housing and her rehabilitated identity, with each supporting the continuation of the other.

There is a gendered component to this relationship between housing and identity. When Iris commented her addiction had taken everything away from her, she referred, in part, to her identity as a woman. She had been a successful working mother who skillfully "maintain[ed] a home." She indicated if she was unable to maintain her sobriety, then she also would be unable to fulfill these responsibilities. Furthermore, Iris's ability or inability to "maintain a home" would directly impact her ability to mother her children. She was working hard to win back visitation rights, and the judge would determine her fitness as a mother based, in part, on her ability to maintain a home. Iris indicated a similar self-assessment, as she linked her recovery with her ability to again "have a nice place" and provide a safe, loving environment for her children.

Despite varied housing circumstances at the time of our interviews, women consistently used housing to demarcate different phases of their lives. A few had enjoyed relatively stable home lives that had been disrupted by their drug use. Many more described chaotic home lives, marked by poverty, insecurity, and sexual violence throughout their childhoods and adulthoods that precipitated any drug use. Across the board, criminalization exacerbated women's housing challenges, contributing to ongoing instability that jeopardized other areas of women's lives, specifically recovery, safety, employment, and mothering. Yet, women did not only talk about housing as a barrier. Many referenced housing, verbally and visually, in positive ways to show the progress they had made, were making, and would continue to make in their personal transformation processes. Additionally, women talked about housing as more than a physical place to stay. They noted its connections to care work and safety, for themselves and others, such that domesticity was a more accurate, comprehensive term to describe what housing meant. Women referenced domesticity in joyful ways that allowed them to claim dignity and a positive sense of self as independent women and as mothers. Their reflections also suggested fear, as women considered the risks they faced and what

they stood to lose if they resumed drug use and slipped back to their past identities. A similar dynamic structured their reflections on mothering.

RENEGOTIATED MOTHERING

Research on criminalized women's mothering documents the many challenges women face to maintaining and reestablishing relationships with their children during and after incarceration and what mothering means for women's sense of self. Oppressive cultural ideologies about mothering, discriminatory policies and practices, and material needs make mothering particularly contentious terrain within the postincarceration landscape. While the intensive mothering ideal that demands women's selfless devotion to child-rearing is an impossible standard that constrains all women, it has particularly devastating consequences for women of color and poor women.³⁴ The ideal presumes a significant degree of social privilege—Whiteness, heterosexuality, marriage, middle- to upper-class status—and is central to creating oppositional definitions of femininity in which normative Whiteness is defined against deviant racial others.³⁵ While structural oppression and material conditions have precluded access to the intensive mothering ideal for socially marginalized women, the ideal has never been ideologically available to this group, particularly women of color. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins's work on controlling images again is relevant, as so many of these images explicitly evoke assumptions of women of color, and Black women in particular, as inherently deviant and incapable mothers.³⁶ In sum, motherhood is a social position that bestows reverence to some and is an ideology that, by denying motherhood claims to many, supports oppressive social structures that reinforce hegemonic ideals of Whiteness, wealth, and heterosexuality.

Mothering is a site of gendered surveillance that disproportionately subjects poor women and women of color to criminalization. Sociologist Dorothy Roberts's extensive work on the child welfare system, for instance, documents pervasive racial discrimination and the disproportionate breakup of Black families through placing children in foster care as opposed to providing services while keeping the family intact. This disparity reveals the disproportionate scrutiny Black mothers face by social institutions, which increases the likelihood of child welfare involvement, as well as the increased surveillance Black mothers then are subjected to through case plans that may include supervised visits, drug testing, and mandatory participation in a variety of classes and services.³⁷ Criminal charges related to child abuse and neglect further underscore the state's punitive orientation to Black mothers. Seeking a prison sentence rather than providing support is a choice. Comparing the prison system and child welfare system, Roberts concludes, "Stereotypes about Black criminality and irresponsibility legitimate the massive disruption that both systems inflict on Black families and communities."³⁸

These practices and controlling images perpetuate the systematic denial of mothering by women of color that extends back to slavery and colonization.³⁹ This denial persists postincarceration in material and subjective ways.⁴⁰ As previously explained, formerly incarcerated women face numerous challenges to securing safe, stable housing and permanent employment that pays a wage sufficient to support their children and themselves. These material resources often are prerequisites for Child Protective Services (CPS) to allow women to regain custody of their children. Even when CPS is not involved, many women express the need to have these resources in place before they are ready to physically reunite with their children. Additionally, parole conditions may prevent women from living with their children, such as in situations where women are required to live at a recovery home or residential drug treatment program postrelease. Similar to parole, CPS typically imposes a list of tasks and programs women must complete before reunification is considered. The ongoing separation from their children creates significant stress for women who are limited in their ability to ensure their children's safety and well-being while they are in someone else's care. The measures women take to keep their children safe may violate parole conditions or recovery home rules, ultimately leading to women's reincarceration.⁴¹

Subjectively, criminalization adds another layer of stigma, further cementing the perception of criminalized women as maternally deviant.⁴² In addition to racist and class-based stereotypes that already frame them as bad mothers, criminalized women also face judgment for abandoning their children and shirking maternal responsibilities. As Brittnie L. Aiello and Jill A. McCorkel note in their ethnographic study of a program through which children visited their mothers in jail, strict rules shaped how mothers interacted with their children, undermining mothers' authority and ability to parent. The visits also subjected women to further judgment of their mothering: "When children expressed 'negative' emotions like sadness or anger, staff blamed it on mothers' inability to follow the program's rules and used this as a basis to evaluate women's selves."⁴³

Mothering constitutes an important dimension of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women's reparative identity work.⁴⁴ Research investigating this identity work uncovers a number of resilient strategies women employ to renegotiate their mothering identities, including embracing religion and spirituality;⁴⁵ reframing their past mothering practices as evidence of their identities as good mothers;⁴⁶ employing a forward-orientation focused on what they will achieve as mothers rather than dwelling on the past;⁴⁷ and taking intensive measures to protect their children from state intervention, abuse by caretakers, and community violence.⁴⁸ Collectively, this research foregrounds criminalized women's agency, despite structural and ideological impediments to mothering. It also shows criminalized women are aware of the stigmatized mothering discourses that shape others' perceptions of them, as well as women's perceptions of themselves. Finally, it suggests successfully renegotiating mothering identities is not a given. Despite women's best efforts,

barriers to mothering may derail physical reunification and emotional connection with children, as well as development of a positive mothering identity.⁴⁹

Thirty-one of the 36 women who participated in this project were mothers, and all discussed how their drug use and incarceration had impacted their relationships with their children in long-lasting ways. Women did not avoid the disparaging discourses that labeled them as “bad” mothers. They confronted these discourses, openly acknowledging the ways they had not been there for their children in the past due to drug use and incarceration. For the most part, however, women refused to be trapped by their pasts. They foregrounded the ways they were present in their children’s lives today, often despite significant constraints caused by poverty, lack of independent housing, and legal restrictions. The familiar pattern of drawing distinctions between their past *criminal-addict* and *rehabilitated* identities structured women’s reflections on mothering. As they contested controlling images of mothering, women engaged another dominant discourse, the 12-Step logic, to structure their narratives.

BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION: “IF I’M NOT RIGHT, I CAN’T BE RIGHT FOR THEM”

At the time of our interviews, none of the women were living with their children. Many children were adults and living on their own. Most of the younger children were living with family members, sometimes as a result of involvement with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) but more commonly because family members had stepped in to assume a caretaking role when women’s drug use interfered with their mothering or when the women were arrested. While women frequently discussed their desire to have their children live with them again, many took a measured approach to their reunification plans. They spoke candidly about the importance of not rushing physical reunification and taking the necessary time to build a strong foundation. Similar to Ann Williams’s, Lynn’s, and Rose’s cautionary reflections about leaving recovery homes prematurely, women explained that moving too fast could lead to relapse, which would just harm their children. Thus, taking a long-term orientation was a critical part of some women’s work to renegotiate their mothering identities.

While reflecting on a photograph her five-year-old daughter had taken during a weekend visit at Starting Again, Ann Williams discussed how the visit helped her honestly assess whether she was ready to have her children all living under the same roof with her. That vision remained her goal, but Ann realized it would be some time before she was able to make it a reality. She recalled how energetic her daughter had been throughout the weekend and described it all as a bit overwhelming:

Sometime they say, “You be careful what you ask for, you just might get it too fast”
... That’s why I know things don’t happen by mistake, it happen in orderly fashion,

in a reason. You know what I'm sayin'? 'Cause I'll be so quick to say, "I want 'em [her children] back, I want 'em back," but it's a lot of workin' on me that I gotta do. 'Cause I gotta be honest with me. I love my kids, and God knows I do, but He's settin' me up . . . to be prepared for 'em. So, I'm not confused . . . When she [her daughter] came, I gotta tell you, I was a little like, "Oh boy, I don't think I want to do this right now." [laughs] I really was, I was like, "Oh my goodness!"

She added that God was showing her "so, this is what you gon' be ready for. So, you think you ready right now?" No. You know, it's goin' all in a straight path." In addition to providing Ann and her children with quality time to connect, the weekend visits provided a reality check. Taking care of her children full-time would be hard work that would demand her full attention and require much more than providing material necessities.

Ann realized that despite her strong desire to be the primary caretaker for her children, she was not mentally and emotionally ready for that responsibility. She returned to this point later in our interview, commenting, "Now that I'm tryin' to change . . . I gotta be honest with myself. Yeah, this is what I'm lookin' towards the future, my kids gettin' back in my life, but I gotta work on me. If I'm not right, I can't be right for them." Getting right required continuing to work on her recovery, through her commitment to the 12-Step program, and trusting in the linear path God had laid out for her. Becoming the mother she wanted to be was a process. She explained that her children also needed time. In response to my question about what problems she had faced since her release, Ann said, "The guilt, the shame, the things that I did to them [her children]. All that came back. But I'm takin' it in a positive aspect. 'Cause I'm trustin' the process in time, the healin' process. 'Cause I know they still, some things that they goin' through is things that I put them through. I reflected back on all that, but I was sick." As painful as these realizations were, Ann welcomed them. Rather than discourage her, they made her mothering goals seem actually attainable. She was leaving behind her *criminal-addict* identity and trusted that her sobriety and faith ultimately would repair her mothering identity.

Iris similarly focused on the importance of taking time for herself before reuniting with her children. The urgency she felt to secure an apartment so her children finally could visit collided with her pragmatic understanding that rushing the process could jeopardize her own recovery, thereby fracturing their relationship further. Iris explained:

I just need to really, changing more on a, from the inside and building a strong foundation and just going forward not just surface-wise. And not just trying to grab bits and pieces and maybe a job, an apartment, or buy a few things here or there, open a bank account, I just need to have something little more substance and a foundation like a solid program and some steps, and the sponsors.

Having a job, stable housing, and financial stability all were requirements to gain visitation with her children, but Iris stressed these achievements alone were insufficient to mother appropriately. Without doing the deep work of personal transformation, Iris suggested she could lose each of these things just as she had before. The only way to provide true stability for her children was to foster a deep change of her self that went beyond the surface.

Like Ann Williams, Iris put her trust in the 12-Step program, her sponsor, and God to help her facilitate this interior change. Iris also reasoned the extra time could benefit her children. She recalled a recent meeting with her attorney where Iris provided proof of her 12-Step meeting attendance and a negative drug test from Growing Stronger for her attorney to submit to her ex-husband's attorney. Her attorney asked Iris, "So, what's the worst case scenario? The kids see that the mom is clean and sober. If they don't come in the summer, they come for Christmas. Perfect time because they don't see winter in [the state where they now lived with their father]'. . . She brought a good point! The kids could never be happier than hearing that I'm doing okay."

Stacey Williams (no relation to Ann), a 41-year-old African American mother of six children, expressed a similar mix of urgency and pragmatism regarding reuniting with her children. As discussed previously, her sister had cared for Stacey's youngest two daughters since they were born. Due to poor health, her sister could not continue to be the girls' sole caretaker indefinitely. This development intensified housing and financial pressures for Stacey and posed potential risks to her recovery. Stacey explained:

First I have to get myself together to let them [her children] know that, well, she's sayin' one thing and then down the line she's gonna do another thing. So I'm gonna have to make sure that I'm OK. You know. 'Cause you never know what tomorrow brings. I might wake up and say I want to use drugs. I don't know. That's the type of person I am. I don't know where I go from the next moment.

Having been out of prison for only about three months at the time of our interviews, Stacey knew she had a long way to go before she would feel secure in her recovery. She had been incarcerated four separate times throughout her adult life, meaning family members and her children had witnessed her come home before and eventually return to prison. Stacey wanted to take the appropriate amount of time to feel secure not only for herself but also to prove to her family and children that this time would be different. She suggested that type of security only would follow an identity change. She attributed her ongoing drug use and criminalization to her nature ("the type of person I am"). Beyond behavioral changes, Stacey implied she would have to achieve a change in self. That type of deep work would take time. Repeatedly, women stressed a "clean" identity was foundational to their rehabilitated gender identities as mothers.

BEING THERE

While working toward their long-term mothering goals, many women discussed their efforts to be there for their children as much as possible in the present. Despite structural constraints, such as poverty, DCFS cases, parole conditions, and recovery home rules, women found joy in the moments of genuine connection they shared with their children. These moments were a gendered type of identity work, as women contrasted their current presence with their past absence as mothers. Women used the clean/dirty dichotomy to demarcate these oppositional mothering identities.

New Life, the Black 30-year-old mother of two whom Pastor Geraldine had convinced not to leave Growing Stronger, provided a vivid illustration of the difference between absence and presence in her children's lives. Her reflections were particularly insightful since New Life had lived with her children prior to her incarceration and had been their sole caretaker throughout their lives. In contrast to many of the women who participated in this study, New Life did not discuss repeated stretches of being physically separated from her children. New Life's self-described 'addiction' to marijuana, rather than drugs like heroin and cocaine, further distinguished her from other research participants, as did her housing and financial stability prior to her incarceration. Despite these distinctions, New Life shared a similar process of personal transformation and referenced changes in her mothering to illustrate the deep identity shift she was cultivating. Two specific examples of New Life's current presence and past absence illustrated her renegotiated mothering identity.

New Life recalled participating in a surprisingly meaningful family event at Growing Stronger.⁵⁰ She had planned to skip the event and enjoy her weekend pass away from the house, but Pastor Geraldine specifically encouraged her to attend with her daughters. New Life complied and experienced what she described as one of her best days at Growing Stronger:

I got here, and it was like, wow. It was some women singing, they was all recovering addicts, and they just sounded like angels. Like, and all the women here had their family and people here . . . and I don't know why she [Pastor Geraldine] pinpointed me, but she was like, "There's a very special young lady who came, and I'm so grateful she came" . . . And she said, "God has a calling on your life . . . You're here for a reason." And at first I didn't know she was talking to me, but I got tears coming down, because I know God saved me. And He does have a calling for my life, you know. And all my kids, you know, they, "Mom, you okay?" I'm like "Yeah, yeah." She's [Pastor Geraldine's] like, "New Life, come on up here so I can let them know who I'm talkin' about." And I said, "Me?" And I got up there and everything . . . and she was like, "Sing that song I always hear you sing" . . . And it's "Grateful." You know, in the song say [*singing*], "Grateful, grateful." 'Cause I am so grateful, you know, I never used that word so much in my life until I was released. And I sung that song, and my kids sung it with me, and everybody just started singing 'cause it's a very popular

song, and you know it was just hugs and kisses, and it was just, I don't know, I don't know. I could honestly say I think that was one of my breakthroughs. I think I really loosened up and started getting more out of the meetings and the groups that we have. I really started opening up more because all I [had] wanted to do [was] just run out here. I didn't never want to stay. When I got my [weekend] pass, it was my pass. I didn't want to have to come back for anything. So I really think that day was one of my breakthroughs.

The event marked a critical turning point in New Life's postincarceration process when she shifted from just doing the minimum that was required to fully engaging with Growing Stronger and its lifestyle. The intermingled faith and recovery meanings embedded in this memory were particularly noteworthy. New Life came to believe Pastor Geraldine was correct that God had a calling on her life and had saved her and that she must respond by engaging deeply with the 12-Step logic, specifically investing more in "the meetings and groups" and "opening up more."

This deeper engagement supported New Life's identity change, not just from *dirty* to *clean*, but also as a mother. New Life's participation in Growing Stronger's family event demonstrated her growth as a mother, underscoring a shift from absence to presence. This display of family togetherness contrasted with her past absence from her children's lives. Although drug dealing had allowed New Life to provide more than adequately for her children financially, the lifestyle required her to spend considerable time away from them. She recalled that while participating in parenting classes in prison, she began to realize she had "made them [her children] happy with a lot of material things," but she had not spent enough time "communicating" with them and developing a "bond." New Life regretted this trade-off and vowed to correct it going forward.

To illustrate her point, she recounted a birthday party she threw for one of her daughters a few years ago. After her daughter opened her birthday cards, many of which contained money from relatives, New Life had to leave to meet a customer. She explained:

My daughter looked at me, she like, "Mom! What you fittin' to do?" I said, "I'm fittin' to go and pick up somethin'. I'll be back, OK?" She said, "Mom, I'll give you all my money I got, Ma. You know what I really want for my birthday? I want a whole day with my mama." Oh my God. Do you know how many days I cried thinkin' about that day? Do you know I still walked out that door? Because I thought my baby was just talkin', you know how kids say little stuff? But in reality my daughter wanted me there for her birthday!

New Life implied she was becoming a better mother today because she was spending "quality time" with her children, such as at Growing Stronger's family event. Her orientation to motherhood shifted from being a sound financial provider to being present and attentive. This shift was just one reason New Life declared:

I was gone, though, for a long time. I was. I mean a long time. I thought I was gonna sell drugs forever. You know, I hate it took for me to do them three years, but I can truly say I walked in there kind of lost and confused, but I walked out with a lot of goals, determination to do good. I walked out there a better woman, out of Decatur Correctional Center. I walked out of there a better woman. You know, with my head on right. You know, and I still got some growing to do, but it's nothing like knowing that I'm in the right place to grow.

Being gone referred to the totality of her time away—her time in prison and selling drugs. But that absence marked the past. Today, New Life was present—for her daughters and for herself.

Lynn provided an instructive contrast to New Life's reflections on the relationship between mothering and rehabilitated identities. As discussed above, Lynn was cycling through drug use, homelessness, recovery homes, and institutions during the course of our interviews. This instability was reflected in the way she discussed her relationships with her two young children, who lived with two different family members. During our first interview, I asked Lynn how she was a mom to her kids today. After a pause, she replied, "I'm really not." I pointed out that she still saw and spoke with her children, that she was in their lives. Lynn countered, "But I don't [*pause*] not, you know, I'm not, I'm their mom, but I don't take care of them." I asked her what she would like her relationship to be like with her children in the future. After another pause, Lynn said, "You know, I want to be the one to take care of them, send them off to school, and help them with their homework, and, you know, do things for 'em, teach them life." In response to my questions, Lynn explained, while quietly crying, this goal did not feel realistic, because she had so much going on in her life and felt stuck. She was kicked out of Starting Again shortly after this interview, catalyzing the cycle detailed above.

During our third interview, Lynn reflected on a phone call with her daughter while Lynn had been hospitalized at a psychiatric hospital: "She was mad at me because . . . she's goin' through a lot, my daughter, just a lot . . . she's gettin' to that age where she's like, 'Damn. When am I gonna get it?'" I asked Lynn what that question meant. She clarified, "When am I gonna get clean? When am I gonna, just, you know, be a mom that I need to be? . . . She just wants to spend more time with me. You know, she just wants to be with me." Lynn explained that she wanted to be present in her children's lives, but her ongoing drug use and run-ins with the criminal legal system continued to pull her away. She made clear how her *criminal-addict* identity undercut her ability to renegotiate her mother identity. Lynn did not make a connection, at least not explicitly during our interviews, between the trauma she experienced approximately four years prior of giving birth to her son while shackled to a hospital bed and then being separated from him almost immediately and returned to Cook County Jail. It is plausible, however, that violent experience deeply influenced her description of herself as not really being a mom to her children today, as well as the cycle in which she continued to be caught. The earlier state-imposed absence continued in a new form.

NAVIGATING THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM

Multiple women shared their concerns regarding their teenage and adult children's own troubles with the criminal legal system.⁵¹ By modeling their own survival of the system and sharing lessons they had learned about navigating the postincarceration landscape, women provided encouragement and practical guidance to their children. This support constituted a distinct type of mothering that deepened women's connections with their children and strengthened their renegotiated mothering identities.

Sharon was a 44-year-old African American mother of one child, a 28-year-old son. She had been incarcerated six times and explained prison's dehumanizing impact in clear detail. At the time of our interviews, she had been living at Growing Stronger since her last release, approximately seven months prior. Sharon described how her progress since her release and the relationships she developed with Growing Stronger staff members were now benefiting her son. During our second interview, Sharon had just found out her son, who was being released from prison later that week, could not parole to her sister's house as planned. About two months later, during our third interview, she explained her son initially had paroled to a large homeless shelter, but he now was staying at the men's recovery home that was run by the same parent organization as Growing Stronger. Pastor Geraldine had helped her son secure a spot.

Sharon now was helping her son adjust to living in a recovery setting. He was feeling overwhelmed by the recovery home's requirements, such as attending NA meetings, parenting classes, anger management groups, vocational programs, and school. She recalled:

He got distracted and upset about it because he said, "Mom, this is too much at one time." So I said, "Just calm down and just talk to somebody . . . I'm sure they can work around your schedule" . . . 'cause he wanted to leave. He wanted to pack his stuff and leave. I said, "No, that ain't the way out." I said, "God sent you . . . through stuff for a reason, for you to open your eyes and to realize . . . That's just a stomping ground, just to prepare you to get out into the real world." So I said, "Don't get frustrated, because I get frustrated sometimes. But by me being here at Growing Stronger almost seven months, I know the format. I know what I have to do to stay clean and sober and not to go back out there and use drugs. And you have to do the same thing."

Sharon offered her son a needed perspective he had not yet developed. Based on her lived experience, she was able to normalize her son's frustrations and assure him the recovery home had a reason for its many requirements and that, by following its program, he would be better prepared for "the real world." Although he did not yet understand the "format," Sharon reassured him she did and encouraged him to follow her lead. Because she no longer was incarcerated, Sharon could be there for her son. Furthermore, because she had stayed at a recovery home and remained "clean and sober," she could give him specific guidance on how to navigate his own postincarceration process. Sharon explained:

So I talk to him on a daily basis and tell him, "It's gonna be okay. We gonna have stumbling blocks we have to go through to get it right." So I told him, "It's okay. But you don't have to jump up and run every time you get in a situation." So because, like . . . I do it, too, but I know I can't run. Because if you just get up and take off and wanna go back out there, you ain't gonna do nothing but find trouble.

Sharon merged her son's experience with her own, noting "we have to . . . get it right." She mothered through modeling a successful postincarceration and recovery process and passing on lessons she had learned.

Sharon reflected on how her close relationship with her son today was a stark contrast to the relationship they had for most of his life. She explained, "I was young when I had him, so I really didn't know how to raise a child." DCFS removed her son when he was about four years old, and Sharon's mother took custody. Sharon added, "I really didn't have a bond with my son due to me using drugs and stuff like that, etcetera. And due to that . . . he stayed in the neighborhood with drug selling and a lot of that. So he grew up to that, and so he started selling drugs, and due to that, he was getting locked up and stuff . . . We really didn't really have a mother-and-son bond. We mainly had like a sister-and-brother relationship." The self-blame implied throughout Sharon's reflection suggested her absence as a mother caused the problems her son was grappling with today.

Sharon effectively contrasted that past absence with her current presence, explaining how through regular communication, their sister-brother relationship transformed to a true mother-son bond. That communication began with letters they wrote to one another when they both were incarcerated. Now that they both were out of prison, Sharon said her son "calls me on a daily basis and tells me how he feels now and what to expect of him and stuff like that." They were continuing to get to know one another and committing to the active, daily work of relationship building. Due to her own recovery work, Sharon was able to pass on wisdom to her son and guide him, embracing her newfound identity as a mother. Sharon explained how her renegotiated mother identity was a central part of her overall rehabilitated identity: "And today, I'm a new person. Even though I'm still working on some things in my life, but I know it's gonna get better as I go. Long as I stay in this program and do the right things, and I've been doing that, God been truly blessing me. And he blessed me with my son back in my life, and he close to me . . . We can talk. So it's truly a blessing to me."

Nyla, a 42-year-old Black mother of six children, shared a particularly vivid example of helping her 20-year-old son navigate the criminal legal system. She described how about a week after her release from prison, she attended her son's sentencing date for a burglary conviction. Prior to sentencing, the judge gave Nyla an opportunity to speak on her son's behalf. She recalled her impromptu statement:

"I would like to apologize on behalf of my son and us bein' here today as a result of the crime committed against the young lady." Um, and I don't know quite verbatim, but it was geared in that direction. And how the time that my son had spent in the

Department of Corrections, I believe in my heart without a shadow of a doubt that he, too, is very remorseful and is sorry for what he's done. And if given the opportunity, I believe also in my heart that he will do the right thing, as a result of havin' to have sat down and having had the time, the time that he sat to take a look at the error of his ways and the pain that it has caused someone else. And it was very emotional that day.

Nyla described how the judge listened attentively to her, turning all the way around in his seat to face her and even putting his pen down. The judge sentenced her son to three months in boot camp, and her son's public defender told her that her statement influenced this relatively favorable outcome. Before the sheriff's officer led her son out of the courtroom, he instructed Nyla, "Hug him. Hug him. Hug your son . . . He's gettin' ready to go. Hug him now!" In these ways, Nyla gained recognition from influential others as a caring mother who had stepped up to support her son, signaling her achievement of a credible identity.

When I asked Nyla how she felt about her statement, she said, "I'm glad that . . . I was able to be there and that I was in the mentality that I was, because, truthfully, I don't think that anyone knew that I had just come back from the penitentiary. And that I also had a background. Wow. Somethin' to think about, huh?" Nyla's physical presence in the courtroom that day allowed her to advocate for her son and publicly demonstrate her love for him. It also reflected her transformed "mentality" and shifting identity from a *criminal-addict* to a rehabilitated woman, which was interconnected with her renegotiated mothering identity. Importantly, throughout our three interviews, Nyla suggested she would continue this mothering beyond the courtroom experience. As discussed previously, Nyla used photographs to document the many reentry organizations she visited as part of figuring out how to navigate postincarceration life. She explicitly connected that work to both of her incarcerated sons. When reflecting on those photographs, Nyla indicated that leaving prison, trying to find a job and an apartment, and staying out of trouble with the law would allow her to provide her sons with a model of how to turn their lives around once they also were released from prison.

CONCLUSION

While women consistently expressed remorse, guilt, and shame for past absences from their children's lives, they consistently articulated a forward-looking orientation to mothering.⁵² As Ann Williams plainly stated at the beginning of this chapter, "I wasn't there in the past, but I'm here now . . . I can't go back to the past, but I can only do what I can do now in the present and the future." Women focused on ways they were present in their children's lives today through spending time together, showing up to important events, and drawing upon their experiences to help children navigate their own involvement with the criminal legal system. They also stressed how they were building relationships with their children in

order to remain involved in their lives and continue to deepen their mother-child bond. These efforts were rooted in women's commitment to their own recovery. Although women were anxious to reunite with their children, particularly when there were external pressures from family or an open DCFS case, they took a measured approach and explained that rushing things would only cause more problems down the road. A renegotiated mothering identity was anchored in sobriety, in other words, in a *clean* identity.

Women also applied a forward-orientation in their reflections on housing. While supportive recovery homes provided temporary refuge from gendered violence, women consistently stressed their desire to find their own place. A place of their own would further protect them from the vulnerability and violence they had survived, in their homes, on the streets, and in jail and prison. In some cases, having a home also would support women's efforts to strengthen relationships with their children. Practically, a home would provide the physical space for women to mother their children in immediate, close ways rather than through the more restricted avenues of letters, telephone calls, and monitored prison visits. Symbolically, providing children with a safe, structured living environment would contest the controlling image of the absent, drug-addicted Black mother whose instability undermines family values, thereby perpetuating social disorder.⁵³

This forward-orientation connected all components of the rehabilitated woman identity. Threat and judgment persisted, but women remained vigilant in their commitment to find a way. Rather than dwell on the past, they sought a better future. As with employment and appearance, women engaged the 12-Step logic to distinguish how their identities related to domesticity and mothering were different today, often identifying specific approaches and behaviors as evidence of change. Through these examples, women implicitly and at times explicitly contested controlling images, like the "crack ho" and "welfare queen," and dependency discourses that always already frame criminalized women as deviant women and "bad" mothers. Additionally, in line with the 12-Step logic, women frequently wove references to God into their reflections on housing and mothering, suggesting how their faith provided reassurance about their value.

Despite limitations, women shared moments of joy and connection they were experiencing in new housing arrangements and with their children, which not only reminded them they were on the right path but also provided hope for the future. The limitations were real, however. External restrictions, such as precarious housing situations, DCFS cases, and parole conditions, limited some women's ability to find stability or be present in their children's lives. Additionally, some women doubted whether they would be able to maintain their sobriety and thus secure permanent housing or make the relationships they envisioned with their children a reality. Women's housing and mothering joys often existed in tension with their housing and mothering fears.