

The Personal Is Political

Moving toward Social Transformation

Toward the end of my third and final interview with Rose, the woman who took the alley photograph that opens this book, I asked her a closing question that I posed to almost every woman who participated in this project: how would you describe yourself today? Rose seemed a bit surprised by the question. After a brief pause, she chuckled, then said, “I describe myself as a different person today than I used to be. You know? Like I said, being open to suggestions. I describe myself as a helpful person. I like to help others if I can, in any kind of way . . . I would describe myself as more of a beautiful woman.” “Could you say more about that? What makes you beautiful?” I asked. Rose responded, after another thoughtful pause, “I have a different outlook of myself, you know. I enjoy life. I enjoy this side of the fence [more] than I did last time.” She paused again, seeming to search for just the right words to explain what precisely was different about her today and how this release from prison was different from her two previous releases. Rose continued, “I enjoy the things that I’m doing today. You know, I’m not out trying to manipulate or steal. So I enjoy myself today, very much so.”

With her concise yet thoughtful response, Rose again summarized the core analysis of this book. She previously had done so visually, with her alley photograph, and now she had done so verbally, with her self-description. Rose explained that her identity today was rooted in difference and was defined in opposition to her past identity. Over the course of our three interviews, I had learned that maintaining her rehabilitation from drug use was a central focus in Rose’s life, which would enable her also to end her entanglement with the criminal legal system. Rose was confident she had served her last prison sentence. She was certain this time would be different because *she* was different.

Each of the women whose stories open a chapter in this book shared descriptions of themselves that resonated with the positive, confident tone of Rose’s

self-description. In response to my closing question during our final interview, Tinybig described herself as being in a better place. Denise described herself as a caring person who loves to help people. She elaborated, “I done been through a lot, and I know it’s hard to rise above a lot of things that people go through. So I have a lot of empathy for people.” Ella also laughed before exclaiming, “I don’t even know! Um, wow. I’m excited about life.” After a pause, she added, “I’m a very happy person, and . . . I feel good about myself.” Without hesitation, Ann Williams described herself as “confident. Confident, content, and enthusiastic. Courageous . . . On some days I just feel so energized and so, especially when I’m doin’ the right things and, you know, accomplish things, I feel good, and then talkin’ about God, you know, I just, I get boost with energy and good things.” In her characteristic fashion, Chicken Wing was direct: “Today I describe myself as a good person. Yeah, somebody that know how to listen these days to somebody else. Yeah, somebody that’s not too judgmental . . . Somebody that’s trying to do the right thing in life. Somebody that’s loving, you know, to a certain extent. Yeah. Not an angel, but I ain’t what I used to be.”

I was deeply moved by the women’s self-descriptions. Especially in light of the accounts they had shared with me of sexual and physical violence, years of struggling with drug use and the associated vulnerabilities and challenges, and the dehumanizing treatment they experienced at the hands of police and correctional officers, there was something profound and resilient about their views of themselves as good people who cared for others, contributed to society, and truly enjoyed life today. Their descriptions signaled to me that they indeed were healing from the trauma that characterized much of their earlier lives and finally had reached a place where they felt genuine joy. They were not just getting by; they seemed happy and content.

Despite the joy and hopefulness women expressed, and that I felt as I listened to each of them reflect on their personal transformation processes and plans for the future, I felt a nagging concern. I knew the odds were stacked against them, for reasons detailed throughout previous chapters. I kept thinking, it should not be this hard for these women to make it on the outside. I knew these women would face lifelong legal discrimination due to their criminal convictions. Indeed, many had shared stories of being denied employment or housing because of their criminalization. This discrimination was not going to magically disappear, and it likely would constrain most if not all of these women to financially precarious lives on the margins of society. But these external factors were just part of the story. As I listened to each woman focus squarely on identity throughout our interviews, I became increasingly concerned about not just the external barriers they would continue to face, but also the internal work they would continue to undertake. Their identity work was not just related to their drug use or experiences of interpersonal violence. Their identity work also was necessary because of the

systematic process of dehumanization they experienced throughout the criminal legal system.¹

Even though these women welcomed the opportunity to transform their selves and expressed feeling deep joy in the new rehabilitated women they had become, I remained skeptical of the singular transformation narrative the criminal legal system offered. The 12-Step logic, with its focus on individual responsibility and change, might provide criminalized women with a small carve-out in a hostile society, but it did little, if anything, to disrupt the systems of power that contributed to women's criminalization in the first place. As women discussed the deep, intensive, and at times painful identity work they dedicated themselves to daily, I wondered, what were we asking criminalized women to work so hard for? The rehabilitated woman identity offered a chance to survive on the margins of society, where women likely would continue to face gender-based violence, navigate Chicago's racially and economically segregated neighborhoods, and find ways to take care of themselves despite systematic disinvestment in the neighborhoods where they lived. Throughout it all, the daily choice of whether to return to drugs as a way to cope or just numb out when things felt a bit too much would persist. In the face of these relentless challenges, women would be armed with a strong sense of self, the 12 Steps, their faith, and their connection to a community of criminalized women—women who, like them, had made it out and women whom they had left behind inside prison but had not forgotten.

THE MESSENGER MATTERS

My intent is not to critique women's general embrace of the 12 Steps or religion. Both were sources of strength and comfort that provided women with reassurance their lives could be different and with practical strategies to make those changes. My critique is of the carceral state's use of the 12 Steps and religion. For decades, the United States has advanced an agenda of criminalizing drug use.² This agenda relies on willfully ignoring the social causes of drug use, particularly systemic racism, community disinvestment, and a culture that condones gender-based violence. Every woman who participated in this research traced their ongoing drug use to the seemingly inescapable web caused by the intersection of trauma, poverty, and criminalization. Rather than address these social causes, the criminal legal system blamed women for the circumstances that led to their criminalization. Once women were pulled into the system, they almost exclusively encountered individualizing discourses steeped in moral judgment. These discourses tapped into cultural tropes about the inherent deviance of women of color, justifying the violent treatment women encountered throughout the criminal legal system and holding women personally responsible for extricating themselves from the carceral web.

The 12 Steps and religious programming were ubiquitous in jail, prison, and throughout the postincarceration landscape. In this carceral context, I argue this

programming was neither voluntary nor neutral. Women might technically have had the choice to attend a 12-Step meeting or Bible study class in prison. The choice hardly was free, however, given the lack of other available services and pressure to prove they were reformed in order to secure release, as well as coveted spots at popular recovery homes. As discussed in chapter 3, the widespread imposition of the 12-Step model throughout the criminal legal system reflects a particular view of addiction and criminality as personal problems caused by individual defects of character and will.

The 12 Steps augment a range of personal responsibility discourses available to women under correctional control. Carceral scholars have extensively documented and critiqued these discourses across a variety of settings, including habilitation programs in prison,³ alternative-to-incarceration programs,⁴ residential drug treatment programs,⁵ religious programming in prison,⁶ and prison libraries.⁷ These ethnographic studies provide important, detailed analyses of the ideological underpinnings of these programs, how they operate, and how people respond. *Recovering Identity* seeks to contribute to this critically important scholarship by suggesting how these discourses converge in the *12-Step logic*, creating a broad impact across the diverse settings with which criminalized women engage. The 12-Step logic shows the fusing of concerning punitive discourses that largely have been addressed individually in the literature. My research suggests these discourses are not confined to a single program or site.

The 12-Step logic's merging of recovery and punishment subjects women to the lifelong *criminal-addict* label and thus the lifelong project of creating and maintaining a *rehabilitated* identity. It asserts the addict is perpetually in recovery, never recovered. The carceral state's linking of addiction and criminality and its near exclusive reliance on the 12 Steps creates a social reality where criminalized women perpetually work on their rehabilitation but are never rehabilitated. Between the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction and the moral judgment it imposes, women remain vulnerable to ongoing criminalization.

The 12-Step logic also refers to the distinct fusing of faith- and abstinence-based discourses that emerged in carceral settings and instilled a lifelong commitment to rehabilitating the self. Comparing the experiences of someone who chooses to attend a 12-Step meeting, absent any coercion from the state or threat of punishment for not attending, with the experiences of a criminalized woman who cannot avoid 12-Step messaging and whose freedom and relationships with her children may depend on her ability to demonstrate a commitment to the 12 Steps is like comparing apples to oranges. The 12 Steps, with their moral and spiritual roots, take on a distinct quality in the carceral context and among the plethora of personal responsibility discourses extensively documented in the literature.

Discourse becomes a weapon when used by violent systems whose social function is to dehumanize, punish, and control. Discourse provides ideological cover for this institutional and systemic violence and suggests that criminalized women

only deserve recognition of their humanity if they fit into the narrow image of the rehabilitated woman. But even then, that recognition is of partial humanity, not full. The *rehabilitated woman* identity exists in opposition to women's *criminal-addict* identity, an identity that is past but also still present given the threat it can potentially be reactivated at any time. As detailed throughout this book, the presumption of criminality never fully goes away. Additionally, the intense moral judgment, discrimination, and surveillance that follow women after release from prison effectively relegate them to a place on the margins of society. Ongoing challenges related to employment and housing made it difficult for the women in this study to be financially secure. While relationships with children were a source of pride, joy, and connection, they also could be a source of considerable stress. Whether women were dealing with Child Protective Services, helping their children with their own criminal legal system involvement, or trying to make up for lost time, mothering was a site where the perpetual impact of the *criminal-addict* identity made itself clear.

IDENTITY WORK AS JOY AND RESISTANCE

Despite the limiting nature of the 12-Step logic, women found ways to experience joy in their personal transformation processes. Even though the *criminal-addict* identity seemed always to be present, as women repeatedly contrasted their current identities with this identity, women expressed confidence that this identity indeed was in the past. As evidence, women commonly pointed to their appearance, employment, domesticity, mothering, and relationships as markers of the progress they had made in rehabilitating their selves. I refer to these markers as gendered, since they reflect distinct challenges formerly incarcerated women face. I argue that taken together, these gendered markers constitute a new controlling image in the era of mass incarceration: the *rehabilitated woman controlling image*.

Controlling images, by definition, are racist, sexist, and constraining. The rehabilitated woman controlling image is all of these things. By centering the voices of criminalized women, however, I show how women also experienced joy, confidence, and even empowerment through engaging and repurposing this controlling image. On the one hand, the gendered markers of rehabilitation that are recognized by actors throughout the criminal legal system and the postincarceration landscape prescribe particular ways of being. On the other hand, women explained finding deep meaning in changes related to appearance, employment, domesticity, mothering, and relationships. While women at times expressed concern and even fear about possibly returning to a past *criminal-addict* identity, they focused overwhelmingly on what they were doing to ensure that return did not occur. I sensed an undeniable joy in the progress they were making, and the gendered markers of rehabilitation provided specific evidence of this progress to which they could point in narratives and photographs.

IT SHOULD NOT BE THIS HARD

One of my significant concerns with the 12-Step logic, and the rehabilitated woman controlling image it offers as a solution to women's problems, is the dismissal of social factors. As with other responsabilization strategies, they effectively individualize social problems. It seems not only unfair, but also harmful, for the criminal legal system to demand personal transformation from women without attention to the need for social transformation. The lifelong moral judgment the 12-Step logic imposes on criminalized women is another significant point of concern. To respond to women who have survived gender-based violence, poverty, and a host of vulnerabilities connected to drug use with punitive discourses and practices only exacerbates the violence they already have endured. These responses further entrench the ongoing cycle of criminalization, creating additional barriers that marginalize criminalized women and their children. What if Lynn continued to relapse, for instance, not because of a weak, disordered self or lack of will, but rather because of the trauma caused by giving birth while shackled to a hospital bed and being separated from her newborn son? What if Rose struggled to make it after her previous release from prison not because of insufficient determination, but rather because of deep feelings of abandonment and loneliness in part tied to her multiple experiences of sexual assault and incarceration?

In contrast to the many individualizing discourses, steeped in moral judgment and punishment, that bracket out the social, we need a new discourse that allows for individual healing and accountability with analysis and organizing for social change. In short, we need discourses that connect personal and social transformation. Such discourses would support women in their identity work by affirming who they are and who they want to be without defining those identities in opposition to a presumed *criminal-addict* identity. Drug use, drug selling, sex work, shoplifting, child neglect, child abuse, and assault would be recognized as things women had done, not who women are. Drug recovery discourses would not judge women as "addicts," but rather acknowledge women's survival and address the root causes of problematic drug use. The discourse offered by the 12-Step model likely could do so, provided the 12 Steps were divorced from the imposition or threat of criminalization. But additional discourses and models of recovery must also be available. Women's reflections made clear it is not only the physical structure of the prison that is harmful; its very organizing logic of mortification must be uprooted. As Caleb Smith concludes in his extensive study of the origin and afterlives of the penitentiary, we must "discover a language that refuses both the prison's dehumanizing violence and its captivating vision of human redemption."⁸ Revising this language only will produce slightly different types and degrees of dehumanizing violence. We need radically different discourses.

The women who participated in this research pointed out what was most helpful to them in their recovery and rehabilitation processes. In addition to material support, the ability to develop and receive affirmation for their identity work,

specifically related to appearance, employment, domesticity, mothering, and relationships, was critical. Their insights suggested the value of providing targeted support for these very identity components. Rather than dehumanize women and tell them they are “nobodies,” how can we introduce humanizing discourses that acknowledge the mistakes they have made while creating opportunities for them to develop in the ways they identified as important? Furthermore, becoming a part of a larger community of women who also had experienced criminalization was critically important. It provided opportunities to foster connections that helped women reclaim their humanity and dignity and critique personal responsibility rhetoric. Rather than isolate women from their families and one another through incarceration, what if our responses facilitated such life-sustaining connections?

These questions demand a new way of imagining. Working within the bounds of the current carceral system, such as through developing more gender-responsive and trauma-informed programs, ultimately will only fortify that system.⁹ We have to divest from our social obsession with punitive logics that presuppose the value of mortification. As Megan Sweeney concludes, “Our current failure to approach communal safety and well-being from the perspective of social equality and social justice . . . represents an impoverishment of our social imagination.”¹⁰ As long as we remain socially invested in the prison as a response to social problems, we will reap harmful social consequences. We will reinforce patterns and systems of inequality and oppression. If we cannot imagine different ways of organizing society and our relationships to one another, we will fail to enact actual systemic change.

Prison abolitionists have been doing the hard, slow work of developing a new social imagination. As scholar-activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore steadfastly reminds us, abolition is not only about the absence of prisons. Abolition also is about presence, meaning the intentional, long-term work of creating and nurturing relationships and institutions that support the ability of people and communities to thrive. Abolition demands we divest from institutions, like policing and prisons, that cause death and invest in institutions, like education and health care, that affirm life.¹¹ Education and health care also can dehumanize, punish, and surveil, however. The divest/invest strategy does not only refer to funding. It refers to how we imagine these institutions. It requires replacing the current “sacrificial logic that pervades our culture and governs U.S. penal policy” with a logic that honors the inherent humanity and dignity of even the most marginalized.¹²

The women who participated in this research were candid about the mistakes they had made and the harm they had caused. None were looking for a free pass. All deserve the chance to heal, find joy, and fully participate in society, free from the lifelong discrimination and stigma criminalization currently imposes. As a society, we have a choice to hinder or to support those efforts. For far too long, we have made the wrong choice, responding to women’s survival with dehumanizing violence. The women whose stories fill this book make a compelling case for making a different choice.