

(Re)entry¹ from the Bottom Up:

Case Study of a Critical Approach to Assisting Women Coming Home from Prison

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Abstract

Despite decades of critical reframings, policy and practice on prisoner (re)entry often remains situated within a framework of individual responsibility that fails to acknowledge the structural drivers of criminalization. Attending to individual symptoms rather than root social, political and economic causes, such approaches may ultimately reinforce the inequalities and injustices that fuel imprisonment. This article presents a case study of an alternative approach. It examines A New Way of Life Reentry Project, a nonprofit organization in South Los Angeles, California, that offers housing and support to women coming home from prison through a critical and holistic framework—one that attends simultaneously to the physical, mental and social contexts that

¹ Throughout this article, I use (re)entry and (re)integration to draw attention to the reality that many returning prisoners were not fully integrated members of society prior to their imprisonment.

shape lived experiences before, during and after prison. Drawing from seven years of observation and participation, supplemented by ten in-depth interviews, I argue that a critical, holistic approach can have a significant positive impact for people returning home from prison.

Key Words

prisoner reentry, imprisonment, women, program evaluation, qualitative, critical, feminist

Introduction

Having worked for several years alongside people returning home from prison, one of the things troubling me was the loaded notion of “success”—how to measure it internally, demonstrate it to potential supporters and communicate it to the public. I was particularly bothered by the snapshot “success stories” produced periodically by reporters, well-meaning supporters, public relations professionals and sometimes practitioners themselves. The problem lies in the difficulty of telling (re)entry stories in ways that don’t reinforce simplistic and uncritical understandings of crime and punishment. Inevitably it seems, the same narrative arc emerges: Childhood trauma and suffering. Drug addiction. Criminal activity. Imprisonment. Sobriety and rehabilitation. Redemption. Consider for example the Hollywood stage introduction of Susan Burton, A New Way of Life Reentry Project’s celebrated leader, Founder and Director, as she was named one of CNN’s top 10 heroes of 2010:

We all have someone in our life who causes us a lot of heartache. We fear that they will never change and we quietly wonder if it’s time to give up on them. The story of our next hero makes me want to answer that with one word. Never. Susan Burton was at home when grief knocked on her door. Her young son was struck by a car and killed. The loss shattered her world. She struggled with addiction and for more

than a decade she moved in and out of jail. Then her life changed. She got clean. She got a job. She bought a house. A house not just for her, but for other women struggling just like she was. It's called A New Way of Life Reentry Project and there are now 5 houses in Los Angeles where she has helped hundreds of women set things right. So many have a chance because she didn't give up on them and neither should we.

Along with others who deeply admire Burton's work, my eyes welled as I watched her receive this well-deserved award. Her story is powerful, appealing widely to our hopes that people can and sometimes do overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. And yet I also felt conflicted. In the focus on Burton as an exceptional individual, viewers might forget that exceptionality should not be required in order to successfully (re)enter. The narrative also omitted a critique of unequal and discriminatory social structures, presenting Burton's life story as entirely personal. CNN's hopeful message urged us not to give up on people, to believe people can be "rehabilitated," situating pathology and accountability entirely within the individual "offender." It was Burton (rather than the world around her) who needed to change, because it was she who had gone astray. Similarly, "the loss shattered her world" suggested the interruption of daily normativity, versus a condition of "objective vertigo" (Wilderson 2011) in which suffering and trauma are the norm. In fact, reflected Burton, "the death of my son was the straw that broke the camels' back. There was a whole lifetime of trauma before it."

When Burton tells her story in other settings, she never fails to mention her son was killed when struck by a police car and that the police offered not so much as an apology. She is similarly critical of a criminal punishment system that allowed her to cycle in and out of prisons for fifteen years without addressing the issues leading her there. Likewise, while her vision and initiative to start a nonprofit is admirable, she usually takes the time to remind admirers that

criminal record-based discrimination kept her from pursuing her original dreams—to gain custody of her young nephew and pursue a career as a nurse.

What happens when a (re)entry program is designed by someone who has embodied the structural injustices and vulnerabilities facing poor Black women in the United States, who has transcended the farce of (re)entry after multiple failed attempts and who has developed along the way a sharp critique of the criminal policing and punishment systems? Drawing from seven years of engagement with A New Way of Life, this paper explores how a critical perspective embedded in lived experience might be actualized at the level of programming. It does so by analyzing the qualities of the (re)entry model Burton has developed, detailing in concrete terms what an alternative approach to (re)entry could look like. Supplementing the ethnographic with ten in-depth interviews, I treat the analysis of this data as a case study (Stake 1995), by which I mean I focused less on the stories of individual women and more on what those stories as a collective reveal about prisoner (re)entry.

The analysis presented builds upon multiple critical, feminist and convict criminologist interventions well established in the literature: The relationship between discriminatory structures and imprisonment (Alexander 2010; Martin 2013; Nixon et al 2008) and the false assumption of prior integration contained in the concept of (re)entry (Bushway 2006); the reality of trauma as a defining aspect of criminalized women's lives and the role of imprisonment in reinforcing and exacerbating trauma (Richie 2012; Segrave and Carlton 2010); the importance of grounding (re)entry theory and practice within the gendered and raced socioeconomic contexts that shape the lived experiences of former prisoners (Eaton 1992; Maidment 2006; Reisig et al 2007); and the imperative to center the experiences and perspectives of people who are or have

been imprisoned in public policy and scholarly debates (Grigsby 2012; Richards and Ross 2002), particularly those of women and people of color (Aresti and Darke 2016; Belknap 2016; Ross et al 2016). The data also contribute to recent critiques of individualized notions of (re)entry “success” (Carlton and Segrave 2015; Kellet and Willging 2011), by expanding conventional definitions to include qualitative and collective aspects of healing, empowerment and social transformation.

This case study adds value to critical criminological reframings by describing what it might look like for (re)entry policy and programming to take seriously the perspectives and lived experiences of people who have been to prison. As expert Joan Petersilia highlighted more than a decade ago, a dearth of concrete examples limit our understanding of the how and why of what works (2004). In particular, the qualities and strategies of community-based programs like A New Way of Life are under-documented, with the result that such programs remain marginal, underfunded and their models underutilized. The data presented here demonstrate why a “bottom up” approach matters in practical terms, as well as how such an approach might be implemented. Answering Carlton and Segrave’s challenge to not only rethink dominant understandings about post-release integration and success, but to develop alternative approaches (2015:7), I argue that when (re)entry practice is grounded in a critical and holistic framework, it can have a significant, positive impact, by responding more appropriately to women's experiences.

Following a discussion of methods, I briefly describe the social, political and economic context in which A New Way of Life operates and then analyze core aspects of the organization’s approach. I conclude by discussing the significance of a critical, holistic approach for processes of individual and social transformation.

Method

The analysis presented in this article derives from data gathered in a number of ways over a period of nine years, but is most firmly rooted by my seven years as a community organizer, policy advocate and teacher at A New Way of Life. I started there as a volunteer in 2004 after meeting Burton at a local meeting. I was working at the time as an organizer with Critical Resistance² and in this capacity, was invited to facilitate biweekly workshops with residents on topics such as the war on drugs and the troubled history of prison reform. This effort became regular and was eventually named the LEAD Project (see Shigematsu, D'Arcangelis and Burch 2010). In 2006, Burton hired me as A New Way of Life's Director of Programs and in this capacity I spent five years developing the organization's leadership, education and advocacy initiatives while interacting on a daily basis with residents, former residents and a growing network of formerly imprisoned women and men.

To supplement this experience, in July 2012 I conducted ten in-depth interviews—eight with current residents of A New Way of Life, one with a former resident and one with Burton. These interviews were supported in part by a small grant awarded by the University of Texas' Center for Community Engagement, which seeks to support research undertaken in collaboration with and of potential use to community-based organizations. The women I interviewed represented approximately two thirds of A New Way of Life's total residents at the time. With the exception of Burton and the former resident, all had been released from prison within the past

² A political organization with a mission to end the use of prisons, police and surveillance as a response to social, economic and political problems.

year and had been at A New Way of Life for one year or less. None were transitioning home from prison for the first time and all had previously participated in after-prison or drug treatment programming. Although A New Way of Life serves a fairly equal mix of Black, White and Latina women, all the women available for interviews at the time of the study were African American, ranging in age from early twenties to mid-sixties. About half had been born and raised in South Los Angeles, two in the nearby city of Long Beach, one in an outer borough of Los Angeles and one out of state. Some interview participants wanted their real names to be associated with their stories and comments, but given that most did not, I opted to use pseudonyms for all participants save Burton, whose identity it would have been impossible to anonymize without also anonymizing the organization.

In keeping with the basic tenets of collaborative research (Lassiter 2005), in November 2013, I returned to A New Way of Life to share my initial findings with study participants and the organization as a whole. At the same time, I administered an open-ended survey to new residents who had not participated in the initial study, in order to further test the findings. A complete and detailed record of the process of data analysis used in this study has been preserved in an Audit Trail (Rogers and Cowles 1993) and is available for reference upon request.

I could have chosen to recount the life histories of individual women in more detail. I chose not to do so in part for reasons suggested in the discussion of Burton's Hollywood introduction: while detailing the events of individual lives can provide important insight into peoples' circumstances and challenges, oftentimes the reader/listener (and writer) becomes so enmeshed in these details and the emotions they produce that a focus on the relationships of power at the root of the suffering gets lost. I also wanted to heed Historian Saidiya V. Hartman's

caution that “shocking displays too easily obfuscate the more mundane and socially endurable forms of terror” (1997: 42) and to be mindful of the potentially dehumanizing and harmful effects of recounting trauma.

Finally, in keeping with the approach to objectivity taken by Convict Criminologists, as well as feminist and activist branches of Anthropology, I use my proximity to A New Way of Life as an advantage that informs my research questions and analysis. At the same time, I remain aware of the potential difficulties for maintaining the critical distance necessary for academic writing.

This study was less successful in addressing the challenge of positionality for residents of A New Way of Life. Despite my efforts to assure study participants of strict confidentiality measures and to encourage critical reflection about A New Way of Life’s shortcomings and contradictions, participants were reluctant to find fault. Profound gratitude, rather than concern for confidentiality, formed the basis for this reluctance, revealing as much about the abject position of (re)entering women as the merits of the program. The issue of gratitude in prisoner (re)entry and its impact for critical analysis may be a topic for further methodological consideration.

Context and Background

Approximately one third of California’s prisoners come from and are returned to Los Angeles County. This seeming disproportionate representation can be partly explained by the sheer number of people who live in the County (26 percent of Californians), but also reflects the disproportionate impact of economic restructuring and deindustrialization on the handful of

neighborhoods from which the majority of the County’s prisoners are drawn. One of these neighborhoods—South Los Angeles, is home to A New Way of Life. This part of the city was hard hit by the deindustrialization of the 1970s and 80s and the accompanying rollback of welfare, civil rights and affirmative action. As critically analyzed by scholars of urban Los Angeles, a combined shift in politics and economics deeply intensified patterns of residential segregation, employment discrimination, educational inequality and police surveillance and brutality (Davis 1990; Bobo et al 2000; Vargas 2006). Vargas estimates, for example, that by 1990, almost 70% of black men aged 25-34 years living in South Los Angeles with less than a high school diploma were unemployed (2006:35). Residents at A New Way of Life are conscious of the relationship between the political-economic landscape and their imprisonment. Jasmine, a middle aged grandmother of five who had come to A New Way of Life following 100 days at an in-patient drug treatment program remembers pestering her mother as a child to move west to the Crenshaw or Leimert Park neighborhoods. “I seen South Central going down,” she reflected, “and that’s exactly what it did. The people that wanted something in life all left.” Althea, a nineteen year old resident who had also been raised nearby, spoke forcefully of the role of social context in shaping the possibilities—perceived and actual—for her life:

We know we can’t do certain things, that we won’t have certain opportunities. They got us bunched up in these cities, sitting on top of each other with all these problems... When you get older you realize you were set up, in a sense, because I didn’t gravitate toward the one or two kids who stayed in the class to finish their work, I was out there with everybody else. “The ‘normal’ black youth in America are disturbed juvenile delinquents. This is what I brought to be my norm because I’m surrounded by it and everyone is acting it... A young black person doing good? That’s rare. It certainly wasn’t anyone I knew. The system is designed for us to fail before we’re even born.

Within this context, imprisonment operates as a catch-all response to social, economic and political problems (Gilmore 2007; Parenti 2008; Sudbury 2005). Once marked with a criminal record, legal restrictions combine with stigma and discrimination to exacerbate pre-existing structural vulnerabilities. These “collateral consequences” include but are not limited to deportation, ineligibility for welfare, food stamps and student loans, discrimination in public and private rental housing and employment, restrictions on the right to become an adoptive parent, serve on a jury, obtain an occupational license, or vote (Harris and Keller 2005; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Oyama 2009; Pager 2007; Travis 2005). Such mechanisms of exclusion and social control can be understood as part of the “shadow carceral state”— the extension of penal power through a variety of non-criminal justice legal regimes and institutions (Beckett and Murakawa 2012, Martin 2013). Through gendered definitions of need, molding of desire and the construction and distribution of rights, social, economic and political inequalities are established and reproduced (Haney 2010).

A Critical and Holistic Approach to (Re)entry

It was 1998 when Burton acquired the first of A New Way of Life’s five single-family residential homes with the unexpected insurance pay-off from an accident. Two years had passed since her final exit from prison and she wanted to help other women break the cycle of re-imprisonment. Before she knew it, the Spanish-style bungalow’s three-bedrooms were full of women who had been recently released and she was sleeping in the small nook of the living room she had fashioned into an office. Through the custody battle surrounding her nephew, she had become connected with a neighborhood nonprofit called the Community Coalition that was

engaged in a grassroots campaign seeking to challenge the gendered racism inherent in the foster care system's treatment of relative care-givers. Burton's involvement in this campaign and subsequent exposure to political organizing served to develop her understanding that providing services to individual women was not enough—she would also have to confront the structures and policies that limit life options before and after imprisonment. With no prior knowledge of nonprofit management or social service delivery, she relied on her intellect, street smarts, past experience as a recipient and a few good friends to get established.

This study sought to identify and analyze the qualities of an alternative approach to (re)entry practice. The following sections describe and analyze six key elements of A New Way of Life's approach—components I offer not as a checklist or rigid platform for program design, but as Shaylor and Meiners (2013) suggest, as points for further discussion and analysis. Together, these elements reflect an overall approach, one that recognizes preexisting vulnerabilities; builds community; supports individual agency; resists cooptation; provides comprehensive services; and confronts unequal structures.

Recognizes Preexisting Vulnerabilities

[Some providers] simply seek to fulfill the function that they are there for. They're not looking at what people have been through...it doesn't go to the depth of the person to see the value of the person or the experiences that they've had prior to getting there. Probably there's something that they want to do to help the individual, but it's just a piece of the thing and they're not looking at the whole individual. They don't understand that they've just been traumatized in an institution that they shouldn't have been in anyway. They're thinking, you're here now, let's get it in gear, I have this, eat it and if you don't want to eat it that means you don't want nothing. Never mind, I can't chew 'cause I ain't got no teeth.
—Susan Burton

Monique was born in Los Angeles to a family of six girls and four boys. Adopted by her grandmother at six months, she was taken with one of her sister's to a small town in eastern Kentucky where she would spend the next thirty-one years. She saw her mother only twice during that time and although her relationship with her grandmother was loving and strong, Monique never recovered from the unfulfilled promise that her mother would send for her. Becoming pregnant during her last year of high school, Monique completed her General Education Diploma and went to work as a Nursing Assistant—the income sufficient to supplement that of her new husband, a railroad man. Things were relatively stable as they worked to provide for their growing family, with one big exception: Antoine was an abusive alcoholic. Covered in scratches and scars, Monique eventually left him and upon rejoining her siblings in Los Angeles at her mother's funeral, decided to stay. She got a part-time job at the voter registration office, became manager of the apartment complex in which she rented and sent for her kids. But the new start wasn't easy, on her own in the big city with three kids. When a new friend introduced Monique to cocaine, she became quickly addicted and found herself in relationship with another abusive man, lacking the financial or emotional strength to kick him out. "You see Melissa," explains Monique, "my life was already chaos before I started my prison journeys."

Like Monique, most residents of A New Way of Life carry histories of trauma, violence and emotional harm. Some were raised in large families in which they felt lonely, under-nurtured, or lost in the shuffle. In other cases, overwhelmed and under-resourced parents had given them up for adoption or care by relatives. Resisting narratives of cultural pathology, residents tend not to blame their families for early childhood suffering, saying things like, "I

know they did the best with what they had.” They understand the connections between familial experience and external systems of hierarchy and structural disadvantage. “I didn’t really like myself as a child,” explained Sandra, the eldest from a family of five. “I felt like the outcast in my family because I was the darkest and the biggest and my sisters and brothers and my mom were all light.”

For many women, public schools had also been experienced as oppressive structures. For example, Jasmine had been expelled from the Los Angeles Unified School District in her second year of high school after falling in with the wrong crowd and “ditching” too many days. She was imprisoned at fourteen years old at a Juvenile Camp, where she worked hard to improve her grades and complete tenth grade. Hopeful that she had turned a corner and eager to pursue her dream to become a Cosmetologist and track star, Jasmine was deeply disappointed when upon release, she was again rejected by her local public high school, this time because of her criminalized status:

I completed the tenth grade in juvenile camp. I came home and I wanted to go to Freemont [high school] and run track and graduate, but they escorted me out of the school because somebody told them I was a Crip and they were Bloods over there and they said I had come over there to start something. I was really disappointed. I wanted to graduate from Freemont like my brother and sister did. I never did finish school, I regret that.

At least half of residents had lived in households terrorized by male violence, resulting in a range of traumatizing situations including physical and sexual assault, self-defense and defense of their mothers and siblings, as well as forced removal from their homes by the child welfare system. Later in life, many became involved in physically and emotionally abusive relationships

with men and found themselves in situations feminist scholar Beth Richie describes as “gender entrapment” which in turn played a key role in their imprisonment (1996).

A turn toward “gender responsiveness” has been upheld in recent years as a strategy to address the failure of mainstream corrections programming to address the complex and distinct experiences of imprisoned and formerly imprisoned women. However, feminist scholars and activists have demonstrated that gender responsive practices have not led to better support for women, primarily because of their location within the prison industrial complex, which ensures they will always be used to expand and strengthen the punishment apparatus rather than to shrink or challenge it (Carlen 2002, Shaylor 2009). Further, essentialists notions of gender (Shaylor and Meiners 2013), a failure to understand how gender interacts with race and class (Carlton and Segrave 2015) and limited ability to operationalize gender in program design (Hannah-Moffat 2009) have also inhibited results.

“Ms. Burton gets it,” residents unanimously echo. At A New Way of Life, they encounter a different kind of responsiveness, one grounded in shared social position and based in firsthand awareness of the vulnerabilities produced through the intersections of gender, race and class in Los Angeles. “I’m understanding when a person shows up and walks through this door that there’s been a whole bunch of stuff in their past,” explains Burton, plunking down with fatigue on a rolling chair before the heavy glass-topped table to review the paperwork for a Latisha, a bright, chatty new resident in her early forties. “I already know that, it’s a given, because you don’t come here otherwise.”

Builds Community

“I like being in an environment where I can live and deal with women in a different perspective, not being locked up or anything like that. Like before, I wasn’t able to sit down and talk with people about what I was going through.”

—Latisha

It’s 8am and residents are making their way to the living room from the kitchen and second floor. It’s time for “morning meditation, where women take turns opening the circle by introducing a quote or passage from a book popularly known as Hazelden’s Daily Meditations for Women (Casey 1991). The living room is comfortable, humble and clean—soft fabric sofas, donated tables and shelves in miscellaneous varieties of wood, inexpensive artwork hung slightly off-center on pastel walls, vertical blinds supplemented by heavy curtains, patterned tile floors and low, textured ceilings. This morning’s topic is “love.” The option to speak is passed around the circle to the left and a handful of women reflect on the value of love, it’s pain and how to reframe distorted concepts. Each month (and whenever conflict arises), a house meeting is called in this same living room and residents are coached to air concerns and problem-solve in a respectful manner. These processes are part of A New Way of Life’s version of the “soft skills” training found in many (re)entry programs. The goal: to hone individual attributes through an atmosphere of accountability, responsibility and mutual respect.

Most women who come to A New Way of Life arrive directly from prison or a highly structured drug treatment program. While some have family, friends or intimate partners with whom they could live, these are often not viable or positive options for the long term. “I like it better here says Latisha, who had come to A New Way of Life from one of the city’s biggest drug treatment centers. “I get a feeling of serenity when I’m here. This is more like a home.” With no predetermined limit on how long residents may stay, some women come to see A New Way of

Life as a foundation from which to build new futures. Burton resists a uniform timeframe, conceptualizing the program as more than a transitional shelter with ancillary services. “Most women who come to A New Way of Life are not comfortable with idea of home as a base of support,” she explains. “Maybe if I didn’t get it back then, maybe I can recreate that now and have that be the basis from which I move forward and repair and rebuild the relationship I had with home.”

Marie Segrave and Bree Carlton (2010) find that in addition to well known post-release challenges such as accessing employment, housing and healthcare, women struggle significantly with loneliness and boredom. In forging new forms of community, friendship and peer support and offering a stable foundation, A New Way of Life tends to the emotional and psychological aspects of (re)entry. Women are approached not simply as clients of social services, but rather as potential longterm members of an extended community.

Supports Individual Agency

A heavy metal security door, typical to the city, squeaks upon opening. Upon arrival, I head to the kitchen to refill my travel mug from the pot of drip coffee. On the way, I pass a resident seated at the small desk in front of the communal computer, checking email, looking up a bus route and browsing jobs on an Advertisement-laden search engine. Another resident rushes down the stairs on her way to an appointment. A few women are still in the kitchen fixing breakfast, tending to children, prepping snacks for the road and taking a turn at dish-duty. Each person “doing what they need to do,” as the mantra goes. Other than active engagement in a plan to stay sober, which minimally includes attending support groups and meeting with a sponsor,

the only requirement for residency at A New Way of Life is active pursuit of self-improvement, in whatever forms appropriate at the moment. The organization intentionally steers clear of funding sources attached to rigid criteria and outcomes, allowing it to operate to some extent outside of what Anthropologist Karen Williams (2016) calls the “scientization of incarceration,” in which scientific practices and rationalities are extended to penal practice. The flexibility is in turn extended to residents, allowing for open, individually tailored programming that contrasts with residents’ prior experiences. Latisha elaborates:

MB: Did you come to A New Way of Life from prison?

Latisha: I went to a program initially, but I didn’t want to be there, I had already been in prison.

MB: The treatment program felt like prison?

Latisha: Yeah.

MB: How so?

Latisha: The structure, having to be in groups all day every day; not being able to step outside and do what you want. I felt incarcerated really.

MB: There’s some of that here too, isn’t there?

L: Well, we have a curfew and there’s some mandatory meetings and there are some things they ask of you, but that comes with life and it helps you stay structured, you know, focused on what you really need to do. Respecting the curfew at 10 o’clock, not being out there running the streets, that’s ok with me... everything after 8 o’clock is trouble anyway.

Ethnographers have theorized how even within a structure like parole, characterized by intensive regulation of everyday activities, former prisoners exercise considerable agency by resisting stigma and repairing damaged identities (Opsal 2011) and by negotiating the terms of parole itself (Werth 2012). Rather than try to suppress this agency, an approach Werth notes is “frequently met with subversion, resistance, and hostility” (2012:329), Burton tries to support it.

For example, a new resident had recently left the house during A New Way of Life’s initial thirty-day “restriction period,” in which comings and goings are more closely monitored.

When the woman came back, Burton could tell something was off, so she tested her and found her positive for Methamphetamines. Burton described her intervention:

I told her that if she wanted to stay here, I needed her to restart her 30-day period, beginning from the day of the dirty test. Then I asked what she needed, reminding her that we have a therapist, that she can call me any time, etc... The goal is to encourage residents to make their own choices—sometimes good, sometimes bad—and to be responsible for them. Later, I'll give her a ride to the AA/NA meeting. I'll hold her close for the next few weeks...but only if she wants it. She has to choose it.

Most women at A New Way of Life relish the opportunity to be in an environment that effectively supports their sobriety. But they also appreciate a structure that provides support while treating them as self-determined agents. “It’s enough rope to hang yourself,” one resident mused. The organization takes seriously its role as a provider of drug and alcohol-free space. “But there’s a difference,” explains Burton, “between keeping an eye out and holding people accountable versus guarding people so closely they are unable to make choices.”

Support for individual agency is also demonstrated through trust and the assumption, in keeping with one of the basic tenets of Convict Criminology, that moral character is not determined by the fact that a person has been convicted of a crime or spent time in prison (Jones et al. 2009). Monique described how encouraging it felt to be seen with fresh eyes, as a person with value and potential:

Miss Burton gave me the key to the front door when my family wouldn't give me the key to nothing, not even the front gate. I remember one time my family was letting me stay in the garage. But I would come back sometimes and they weren't home. The gate was so high, I'd have to get a shopping cart and pile stuff on top of it just to climb over...[eyes fill with tears]...I'm not saying she's god [Burton], I'm just saying her being willing to take a chance on a formerly incarcerated person...My parole officer took one look at my long record and said I'd be back on the streets in no time. In other words, his assessment was, you're an addict, so

you're going to do what addicts do...He didn't have faith that given the *opportunity*, a person would change.

While Burton's decision to trust Monique with a key is deliberate and principled, it also reflects her unique structural position in the lives of these women. Neither Burton nor the organization are responsible for supervising residents in the correctional sense and neither is she/ the organization burdened by the webs of obligation and emotion associated with family. Further, the organization is relatively small, allowing for close relationships to form among residents and between residents and staff. In the context of funding sources that allow for maximum autonomy, this unencumbered position sets forth the conditions of possibility for A New Way of Life to respect and promote (re)entering women's agency.

Resists Cooptation

The contract came with a lot of requirements that I don't think should be a part of this household. For example, residents now have to sign in and out when they come and go. I didn't like that, but it was one of the things I had to do in order to get the contract. I also had to bring on additional staff in order to meet the requirements and the staff came in thinking they were in a supervisory role. I had to explain to them that they were here not to *supervise* the residents, but to *support* them. It almost changed the dynamic of our household.

—Susan Burton

Burton reflected on her experience when A New Way of Life entered a contract for the first time with the Probation Department under California's Realignment Act of 2011. Onerous paperwork became a major source of stress for already overworked staff and new requirements for 24-hour staffing and reporting on all aspects of residents' daily activities impeded case managers' capacity to engage in the more meaningful work of one-on-one advocacy. As

Burton's quote suggests, the contract began to undermine the organizational mission by introducing new staff roles with the explicit function to oversee and enforce on behalf of the Probation Department. The new requirements also threatened the organization's support model and its tremendous emphasis on individual agency. In reorienting the focus away from the pursuit of self-defined goals in favor of (unrealistic) benchmarks set by others in positions of authority, Burton believed the contract undermined residents' usual processes of personal growth, including making mistakes, taking responsibility for their own freedom and becoming accountable to a supportive community. Burton too felt infantilized. Rather than trust her to do the work she had been doing effectively for more than fifteen years, contract managers verified each and every detail.

A New Way of Life's explicit separation from the criminal punishment system has always been important to both Burton and residents. For residents, the autonomy is crucial to their embrace of A New Way of Life as a trusted ally. Too often, (re)entry programs emulate the surveillance practices of state corrections systems and despite their missions to support, are experienced by participants as extensions of the punishment system (Maidment 2006; Shaylor and Meiners 2013). For Burton, a home environment that neither is nor feels like part of the prison industrial complex is essential to the program's integrity and to how she conceptualizes her role in the South Los Angeles community. She sees A New Way of Life as not only an alternative to prison, but as an opposing force, part of her vision for a society that does not rely on imprisonment as a response to social problems (Shigematsu 2015).

An ideal of absolute autonomy from the criminal punishment system isn't easy to maintain. As a small nonprofit organization providing housing and social services as well as

engaging in community organizing and activism, nonrestrictive funding sources are difficult to come by. Foundations often want to support policy advocacy, but not direct services—encouraging formerly incarcerated women to become activists, for example, but insisting their housing and other basic needs be otherwise met. And so Burton had been forced to supplement organizational income by operating as a subcontractor under larger service providers that held state contracts and managed to provide free services to women with no funding. Although these contracts (like many foundation grants) often require more rigidity of focus than A New Way of Life would have liked, Burton felt the benefits outweighed the costs. The pertinent question to be asked, “does the funding source help A New Way of Life to carry out its mission in accordance with its values and principles, or does it impede its ability to do so?”

Provides Comprehensive Services

Usually, they get you out, stick you in a drug program and that’s it. Ok, so where do I go from here? What do I do?...When I first got out of the program, I went to GR [General Relief] and they gave me a housing voucher, but it only lasted thirty days. Ok, after the thirty days what am I doing? \$221 a month is not gonna get it no where...If you’re worrying about if I have a place to lay my head today or tomorrow, you can’t focus on getting a job...Where am I going to take a shower and how am I going to get there?

—Latisha

In the early days of A New Way of Life, Burton was devastated watching women lose their children to the foster care and adoption systems when they failed to meet time-sensitive requirements for regaining custody. One requirement that often stood in the way was a permanent place to live with a separate bed for each child. Determined to make this possible, Burton leveraged a few key friendships to purchase a second home a few doors down on the

same block, designating the original for women with children. In the new home, she converted the garage to an office and eventually rented an apartment for herself nearby.

Now armed with more than fifteen years' experience and a range of specialized staff, A New Way of Life's network of services and resources is extensive. Residents praise the breadth and quality of available resources, which reflect the staff's deep knowledge of how to best navigate social service bureaucracies and legal barriers in ways that maximize benefits and minimize harm. For example, Desiree had first come to A New Way of Life when as a young adult, she ended up in prison after years cycling in and out of juvenile hall. She stayed at A New Way of Life for six months and after discharging parole, got a job providing live-in home care for an elderly woman and went back to school. One year later, she became pregnant and because of medical complications, was forced to leave her job. She had nowhere to go, no income and was denied food stamps because of her criminal record. Desiree was welcomed back to A New Way of Life where she planned to stay until the baby was born. She soon discovered, however, that she would not qualify for state-subsidized childcare services because of her criminal record, which meant she would not be able to go back to school or look for a new job. Fortunately, A New Way of Life was able to connect her with a private charity that would help with childcare costs and within a few years, she had completed a training program to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). But after passing all of her classroom and clinical training requirements, the Board of Registered Nursing for the State of California called to say they had found something in her criminal history that would prevent her from being licensed. Operating as much as possible as a one-stop-shop, versus the increasingly popular silo approach (Carlton and Segrave 2015: 11), A New Way of Life was able to assign one of its (re)entry rights attorneys to

the case. She gathered court dockets, police reports and letters of recommendation as evidence of (re)habilitation and submitted these to the Board. Four months later, the bar was lifted and Desiree was granted her CNA license.

With A New Way of Life as an ally, (re)entering women can get much closer to their goals and dreams than would otherwise be possible. But neither can the organization work miracles, which is to say, the same structures of inequality and disadvantage that inform women's imprisonment continue to shape their possibilities in (re)entry. Residents are keenly aware of the unequal distribution of resources, information and opportunities and while deeply grateful for the opportunities the organization provides, ultimately want more than basic housing, employment, healthcare, childcare and education. For example, two years had passed since Monique had "graduated" from A New Way of Life. She was proud to have discharged parole and maintained sobriety, but still she felt stuck:

See to me, I look at other people and I see that they are able to buy homes, cars, they're able to support themselves. I'm in a position whereas I call myself being rehabilitated, but yet I'm still not functioning on what you call the American dream or the American middle class family. I'm in what you call poverty and to me it's a vicious cycle...a small income and a place to live, which is great, but it frustrates me. America is really moving and I'm at a standstill.

Given a number of mental and physical illnesses, the state had officially labeled Monique "disabled"—a status important because of its attachment to government-funded housing and a small monthly stipend. While uncertain about the prospect of longterm self-sufficient living, Monique would like to go back to school and work part-time in order to build skills and confidence. However, she lives in fear that appearing the least bit competent could jeopardize her disabled status. As a "disabled" person living in a subsidized supportive housing complex, she

lives under constant state surveillance of her activities, including monitoring of work and school hours, comings and goings from her apartment and careful tracking of her medical appointments and prescriptions. She worries that were she to decide to cut back or stop taking any of her prescriptions, to enroll at the community college, or to acquire even a part-time job, she could be judged “able” and lose the meager support of the state. This fear may not be entirely founded—for example, individuals receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are not technically prohibited from attending school. Rather, her fear illustrates how support can go wrong when staff are not equipped or empowered to respond to individual needs and instead apply blanket rules in order to simplify case management. This approach can leave social service recipients trapped within webs of bureaucracy and surveillance that prevent them from taking logical steps to improve their well-being.

Confronts Unequal Structures

“I know they need a space to heal and a space to have access to the privileges other people have had, a place to begin to realize themselves and the importance of their lives.”

—Susan Burton

Right from the start, Burton’s personal frustrations with the mark of a criminal record were re-lived through the experiences of the women she was trying to help. The pressure to “succeed” from parole and probation officers, families and social workers was tremendous; the obstacles endless and overwhelming. Those with felonies were not eligible for state-supported affordable housing. Parole officers expected the women to get jobs, but employers wouldn’t hire them when they learned of their criminal records. Those lucky enough to find jobs were forced to

rely on public transportation requiring long and unsafe walks and waits before sunrise and after dark. Those with drug felonies were denied food stamps and student loans. Angry and frustrated, Burton made a commitment to actively confront those structural barriers as an integral part of her program. She partnered with Critical Resistance in order to build a critique of the punishment system into A New Way of Life's educational curriculum and began her own leadership program, Women Organizing for Justice, specifically for formerly incarcerated women. She formed a chapter of All of Us or None as a vehicle to organize for the restoration of Civil Rights to formerly incarcerated people and took up the national Ban the Box³ campaign. She pursued the establishment of the Reentry Legal Clinic in partnership with UCLA's School of Law to help people with criminal records confront employment discrimination. Steadily, A New Way of Life reached beyond the traditional goal of preventing recidivism and became a program aimed simultaneously at personal transformation and transformation of the relations of power in which imprisonment is rooted.

The benefits of this work are not solely political. In her ethnographic study of (re)entering men, Anthropologist Lucia Trimbur (2009) finds that a critique of the system can actually protect (re)entering people from failure. This has certainly been true for Burton. Developing a critical social analysis has been important to her personal process of emotional and psychological recovery and so she prioritizes opportunities for intellectual growth and political action as an integral part of A New Way of Life's service-delivery. Resident's participation in various campaigns and initiatives takes different forms—whether testifying before the County

³ Ban the Box is a policy reform initiative that seeks to remove the question about conviction history from initial applications for public employment, with the goal to reduce criminal record-based discrimination for job seekers.

Board of Supervisors on the Ban the Box initiative, producing educational documentaries about their life experiences, or traveling to the state Capitol to argue for expanded resources for (re)entry. Residents also often participate in some form of organized book study—most recently, *Are Prisons Obsolete* (Davis 2003); *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Alexander 2010).

Sometimes, residents' analysis of their own experiences are rooted within a politics of personal responsibility that conflicts with the critical perspectives taught at A New Way of Life. "I went through what I went through because of the choices I've made," said Michelle. "We can always break the cycle because God gave us free will." Latisha shared a similar outlook. "I think that [getting into gang-banging] was just a choice that I made. I was looking for a sense of belonging, a sense of finding love in a different place."

Yet in my ethnographic experience, the gap between Burton's perspectives and those of other staff members and residents rarely gave pause. Somehow, the very richness of the organization—workshop on the prison industrial complex on Tuesday night, Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on Wednesday—afforded space for multiple frameworks. In fact, argues Burton, multiple frameworks are necessary. Many of the qualities of A New Way of Life's approach that residents appreciate—understanding, solidarity, lack of judgment—derive from a critical lens. On the other hand, taking responsibility for one's life and believing in the power to make choices about one's future is also necessary to immediate survival and longterm wellbeing. This spirit of openness permeates A New Way of Life's culture and residents embrace the opportunity to incorporate new ideas into their own explanatory frameworks. Some go further and join the organization in working for reforms and structural changes. But regardless their

relationship to A New Way of Life's critical politics, residents appreciate the opportunities to grow and learn and are glad to be part of an organization that is actively working to change things and unequivocally on their side.

Conclusion

Against the current backdrop of extreme social and economic marginalization, stigma and discrimination, state surveillance and legal and bureaucratic barriers, it is not difficult to understand why “successful” (re)entry is the exception rather than the norm. And still, many discussions of prisoner (re)entry unfold as if successful (re)integration is merely a technical, albeit complicated, problem to be solved—a feat achievable by the individual who takes all of the appropriate steps to attract an identifiable set of resources and supports.

This study sought to explore how a critical perspective embedded in lived experience might be actualized at the level of programming, in order to analyze what an alternative approach to (re)entry could look like. I have argued that when (re)entry practice is grounded in a critical and holistic framework, it can have a significant, positive impact, by simultaneously supporting individual processes of healing and self-actualization and actively confronting oppressive structures. Materially, A New Way of Life's model provides housing with no predetermined time limit and comprehensive, high-quality direct services—a foundation essential to the very possibility of a new start. Psychologically, it offers guidance, direction, support and community, rooted firmly in a critical and realistic understanding of formerly incarcerated women's past and present contexts. As a social actor, it exposes and confronts the conditions of racism,

heteropatriarchy and economic marginalization that inform imprisonment and shape processes of (re)entry.

In 2015, A New Way of Life assisted seventy-four women and twenty-seven children. Twenty-six women found jobs. Thirty-one accessed permanent affordable housing. Ninety-six percent were not re-incarcerated. Burton made the difficult but powerful decision to end the Realignment contract.

Jasmine stayed at A New Way of Life for a little more than one year, after which she qualified for a unit in government subsidized housing and regained custody of her teenaged daughter. The organization helped her connect to a job training program with the California Department of Rehabilitation, through which she realized her childhood dream to complete Cosmetology school. She got married and now works part-time as a hair stylist. After nearly four years, Monique qualified for a housing affordability voucher and moved out of the permanent supportive housing setting that had been weighing her down with excessive requirements and monitoring. With the move came the courage to enroll in a few courses at the community college to improve her computer and administrative skills. She now works part-time as an office assistant.

The stories told here also reveal more subtle, collective and qualitative aspects of “success” as (re)entering women overcome massive odds and begin new lives that include the possibility of family, career, community and joy. In creating space for (re)entering women to take ownership of their own successes and failures, A New Way of Life yields women who begin to heal from painful pasts, who feel affirmed and validated, who find self-worth and esteem, who

support one another and build new communities, who begin to realize their human potential and in some cases, who join the fight to transform conditions of social inequality.

Like all living experiments in social transformation, this project is dynamic, messy and imperfect. To mention a few of the contradictions, for many years, the organization depended on the endless volunteer (or very low-wage) labor of formerly incarcerated women, Burton included. This tiring reality was unjust and unsustainable. There have also been troubling issues of power and privilege, as in all hierarchical working relationships (nonprofits not exempt) and in most attempts to bring together diverse people toward a singular mission. Further, central to the possibility of replicating such a model lies the question of whether a less charismatic leader would be able to garner the attention of funders or the press. And relatedly, the biggest current challenge confronting A New Way of Life: what happens when the charismatic visionary retires?

This case study is part of a growing body of critical (re)entry scholarship that forefronts a call for decarceration and decriminalization (Richards et al 2012). It contributes to efforts to reframe (re)entry discourse, policy and practice in a way that highlights the social hierarchies that underlie imprisonment, resists the pathologizing of people who go to prison and inches toward non punishment-based responses to harm (Nixon et al 2008, Larsen and Piché 2012). The study revealed how and why a holistic approach matters to people coming home from prison and how such an approach can be operationalized at the level of a program. A New Way of Life Reentry Project has grown a model that both addresses immediate needs and edges toward longterm systemic change. Toward this possibility, Burton is a leader who offers hope; who helps people to understand what happened to them and to forgive themselves; and who is building a

new community based on mutual accountability and respect. Such an approach can only expand the possibilities for collective political action to transform the punishment system.

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