

Back to Nothing: Prisoner Reentry and Neoliberal Neglect

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We come back to nothing. We left from nothing and we're back to it.

—Darryl (fieldnotes, December 14, 2011)

IN 2015, IN THE UNITED STATES MORE THAN 7 MILLION PEOPLE—CLOSE to 3 percent of the nation's total population—were living under some form of penal control. Within this mass of unfree citizens, 2.2 million individuals, equaling the fourth largest city in the country, were confined in federal penitentiaries, state prisons, and local jails (Kaeble & Gaze 2016, 1). According to recent estimates, children born in 1990 of an African American father without a high school diploma face a 50 percent probability of experiencing the incarceration of their male parent before reaching age 14 (Wildeman 2009, 273). Black men born between 1975 and 1979 who did not graduate from high school had a 70 percent chance of spending some time in prison by age 35 (Western & Wildeman 2009, 231). As criminologist Bruce Western has illustrated, the cycle of imprisonment and reentry has become a “modal life event” for a vast population of marginalized Black and Latino youth, for whom the experience of incarceration has become more likely than such life-course milestones as getting married, attending college, or serving in the military (Western 2006, 20–32). This extreme concentration of the state's penal power among poor urban communities of color has led critical scholars to describe the historically unprecedented carceral expansion of the last few decades as the consolidation of a racialized paradigm of punitive governance of the poor in a neoliberal society

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increasingly fractured along lines of racial and class inequality (Alexander 2010; Tonry 2011; Wacquant 2009).

Yet the warehousing of America's poor men and women of color only illustrates one side of the current penal crisis, the other side of which is represented by the escalating issue of prisoner reentry. As penal expansion proceeded unabated between the mid-1970s and the early 2000s, both mainstream criminologists and "tough on crime" politicians systematically overlooked the circumstance that over 95 percent of prisoners are eventually released from prisons and face the arduous struggle of reintegrating—or more likely, trying to integrate for the first time—into the larger society (Petersilia 2003; Thompson 2008; Travis 2005). In 2015 alone, more than 641,000 people were released from federal and state prisons in the United States (Carson & Anderson 2016, 11)—an average of 1,700 each day, and these numbers do not include the more than 11 million individuals cycled each year through the true "rabble management" institutions that are local jails (Irwin 1985, ch. 1).

These masses of marginalized young men and women are dumped on a daily basis into the segregated neighborhoods of urban containment from which they were forcefully removed months, years, or decades earlier. Often their only possessions are a bag of clothes, a bus ticket, and sometimes a few dollars of "gate money" provided by the correction's department at the time of release. When they are fortunate enough to have some family member waiting for them after release, former prisoners return to households that have been further impoverished and destabilized by the costly and traumatic experience of having a relative behind bars (Braman 2004; Comfort 2008, 2016). As a consequence of their criminal record—a state-sanctioned negative credential that effectively operates as a license to discriminate for employers, landlords, lenders, etc.—returning prisoners will be even less employable than they were before entering prison (Pager 2007). Once back on the streets, caught between the daily realities of poverty, homelessness, illness, addiction, and the looming threat of reincarceration, most of them will scramble to survive as chronically unemployed recyclers, panhandlers, hustlers, and backsliders (Gowan 2010), while the few "successful" ones will be channeled into the secondary labor market of minimum-wage, insecure, and degraded work, where they will serve alternatively as a hyper-exploited labor force or as a disposable reserve army of labor (Bumiller 2015; Doussard 2013). In other words, they will join the ranks of what British political economist Guy Standing (2011) has recently defined as *the precariat*. Unsurprisingly, the

cycle of incarceration and reentry has become a powerful engine—though a largely invisible one¹—for the reproduction of racialized inequality.

Prisoner Reentry in Oakland

This article presents some preliminary findings from an ethnographic study I conducted among a group of formerly incarcerated people facing the challenge of prisoner reentry in Oakland, California. Between March 2011 and March 2014, I spent time with recently released prisoners at street corners, and I interviewed and followed them as they were looking for jobs, applying for welfare, trying to get their driver's licenses reinstated, struggling against long-term addictions, hunting for affordable housing, getting evicted, sleeping in their cars, panhandling in the parking lots of local supermarkets, and so on. Over a period of three years, I developed close relationships with approximately 15 people. All of them, except one, were either African American or Latino men. Most of them were in their mid-forties at the time of the study (although there were also a few elderly individuals), often with lifelong trajectories of confinement in juvenile facilities, jails, prisons, and federal penitentiaries.

Oakland is a formerly industrial, predominantly Black and Latino city (28 percent and 25.4 percent of the population in 2010, respectively), with a significant history of political activism that intersects labor and racial justice movements (Murch 2010; Rohmberg 2007). Among other things, the first chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in Oakland in the October of 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, who at the time were both students at one of the city's community colleges. Not unlike other industrial cities in the United States, between the 1970s and the 1990s Oakland has witnessed major processes of capitalist restructuring, relocation, deindustrialization, and urban renewal that have turned its once vibrant working-class minority neighborhoods into largely desolated flatlands, scattered with dismissed warehouses, abandoned factories, and boarded up buildings—a paradigmatic example of what Loïc Wacquant has called the post-industrial “hyper-ghetto” (Wacquant 2001, 103–8; 2008, 43–91). At present, Oakland is afflicted by significant levels of poverty (in 2015, 20 percent of its residents lived below the official poverty line), high rates of unemployment (10.5 percent, compared to the national US average of 4.9 percent in 2016), wide income inequalities, and a rampant process of gentrification that is quickly reconfiguring the urban landscape and further deepening the spatial segregation of homelessness and urban

poverty.² Not surprisingly, the city also features a very high concentration of incarceration *and* prisoner reentry: as of 2014, 4,400 individuals on probation and 1,055 parolees resided in Oakland (Alameda County Probation Department 2014, 7–8).

The main focus of this research was on two areas of Oakland where racialized poverty—as well as mass incarceration and prisoner reentry—has been historically most concentrated: East Oakland and West Oakland. Most of the fieldwork took place within a geographic area spanning only a few blocks inside West Oakland—a dilapidated neighborhood known in the streets as Ghost Town. These few blocks emerged as a particularly suitable field site because they comprise an extremely impoverished urban area that is quickly turning into a “service ghetto”: a self-contained space, bordered on all sides by gentrifying uptown neighborhoods, which local authorities have designated as the ideal location for homeless shelters, transitional houses, community clinics, women’s shelters, halfway houses, SRO hotels, and rehabilitation programs. In this respect, Oakland’s Ghost Town offers a clear example of what the emerging “prisoner reentry industry” may look like in the age of mass incarceration (Thompkins 2010).

The specific area of my fieldwork features an extreme concentration of criminalized populations—homeless people, recyclers, drug addicts, physically or mentally disabled persons, street hustlers, sex workers, day laborers,

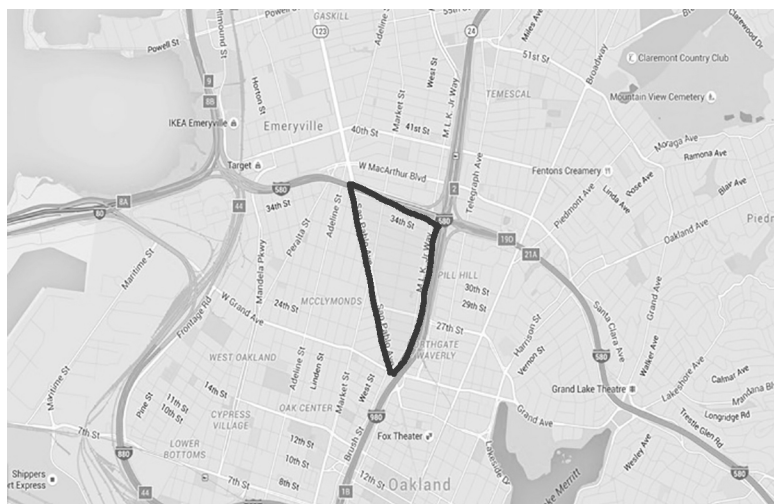


Figure 1. Map of Ghost Town.

formerly incarcerated people, etc.—and some of the highest rates of street crime, incarceration, and prisoner reentry in the city of Oakland. According to the 2010 census data, in the particular tract in which I conducted most of the study, 48 percent of residents are unemployed; the median household income is \$19,800 per year, compared to \$54,618 for the whole city of Oakland; 44 percent of families live below the poverty line, but the number jumps to 64.5 percent among female-headed households with children under 18 years of age. Finally, close to 50 percent of the population is African American and 21 percent is Latino/a.

The entry point into the field was provided by a small community clinic located at the heart of Ghost Town, which provided free basic health care services to the poor and uninsured residents of the area. The clinic was founded in 2001 by an African American pastor, a former NBA prospect player born and raised in West Oakland, who in the early 1980s—after suffering a severe injury in the court—developed an addiction to prescriptions painkillers and later to crack cocaine. A faith-based nonprofit organization largely funded through grants and fundraising events, the clinic was housed in a modest storefront edifice surrounded on all sides by boarded-up buildings. It consisted of a small waiting area with a front desk for the staff and a few chairs for the patients; a visitation room furnished with basic medical technologies, where a doctor and two nurses would see the patients; and a small bathroom. Inside the same building, next to the clinic, a few spare rooms were used by various nonprofit organizations as classrooms for computer literacy courses and résumé preparation sessions, as a barbershop providing free haircuts, and as the headquarters of a local crime prevention initiative focused on street outreach.

In addition to offering basic medical assistance and other services to the poor, the community clinic also provided some volunteer and employment opportunities to a limited number of recently released prisoners. During my period of fieldwork at the clinic, formerly incarcerated people who had just been released on state parole or federal probation had the option to sign up for one or more services offered by the clinic, as well as to apply to the nonprofit organization for a volunteer position. Eventually, some of them would get hired—although always part-time and only for a few months—as staff members. Normally, an average of six or seven “reentry” staff would be on the organization’s payroll at any given time. As members of staff, their responsibilities would include doing outreach to other recently released prisoners, checking in new patients, answering the phone, sweeping the floors, cleaning the bathrooms, emptying the trash, and standing at the

outside corner to ensure that potentially disruptive or dangerous individuals (such as visibly intoxicated people or anyone carrying weapons) would be kept outside the premises.³ The hourly pay for the clinic's staff was \$12; people typically worked around 20 hours per week, for average monthly salaries of \$960.

At the time of this study, most of the staff members were still on state parole or federal probation. Some of them were living on their own or with their families and were thus able to bring home the whole check they received from the clinic. Others were residing under strict supervision in a nearby federal halfway house operated by the multinational prison corporation GEO Group. These people were only allowed to leave the halfway house for a few hours each day to volunteer or work at the clinic, apply for social services, or search for housing, and they were tested for alcohol and drug use on a daily basis. In addition, as soon as they managed to get hired (either by the clinic or by any other employer), they were required to give up 25 percent of their paychecks to the privately owned halfway house as a "subsistence fee." Finally, a smaller group of staff members lived in a building comanaged by the same nonprofit organization that ran the community clinic. As tenants, these employees were required to pay monthly rent for an amount that was only a few dollars lower than the checks they received from the clinic. Thus, once rent was subtracted from the paycheck, they would be left with only a few dollars of spending money each month. Admittedly, some of the staff members considered this whole arrangement a "scam." Yet being able to work part-time and having access to decent housing—not to mention basic health care—was already far beyond what other formerly incarcerated people could ever aspire to. In fact, most of the staff employees never questioned these arrangements with the clinic's management.

As I will try to illustrate in the remainder of this article, the initial goal of my research was to study prisoner reentry—which I considered at the time as the latest chapter in the ongoing expansionist trajectory of the US carceral state—but I ended up learning more about chronic poverty and the daily struggle for survival in a neoliberal city than I was able to document any significant expansion of the penal state. In a sense, rather than fugitive lives "on the run" from the tentacles of a hypertrophic penal system, to borrow from Alice Goffman's (2014) recent work, I witnessed instead the daily struggles of stigmatized people scrambling to disentangle themselves from the treacherous grips of chronic poverty, sudden homelessness, untreated physical and mental suffering, and the lack of meaningful social services:

a surplus humanity reproduced more through institutional neglect and abandonment than by any concerted effort by the social and penal arms of the state to subjugate them (see Wacquant 2009, 289–303).

Rising above the Ghetto

Most of the participants in this study are the sons and daughters of the so-called Second Great Migration, which over the span of three decades (1940s–1970s) saw more than five million African Americans leave the segregationist South for the heavily industrialized cities of the North and West (see Wilkerson 2010). Here, a significant fraction of the Black working class would find employment either in the expanding industrial economy (particularly in the defense and automobile industries) or in the desegregated federal public sector (e.g., postal service, transportation, etc.). With its large port, army base, and shipyards, between the end of World War II and the late 1960s Oakland became an important destination for this large wave of internal labor migrations. The parents of my research subjects were for the most part members of the Black working class, gradually turned into a surplus labor force by the processes of outsourcing, downsizing, and industry relocation generated by the capitalist restructuring of the 1970s–1980s (see Rhomberg 2007, 183–98; Self 2003).

Many of the research participants came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, at the crossroads of such major structural transformations as the neoliberal revolution, the drastic retrenchment of welfare, the explosion of the crack epidemic, and the war on drugs. Entering their adulthood during a historical conjuncture that witnessed one of the most severe economic crises of the second half of the twentieth century, with steadily increasing unemployment rates, rapidly declining wages, and a dramatic wealth redistribution towards the top of the US class structure prompted by Reagan's neoliberal economic policies (see Harvey 2005, 39–63), most of them were attempting—by their own account—to rise above the ghetto. After the crumbling of the industrial sector prompted by the globalization and automation of production of the late 1970s, the shrinking of public sector employment in the wake of the fiscal crisis of the state of the 1980s, and the disappearance of anti-poverty programs in the aftermath of the welfare reforms of the 1990s, the underground economy—and specifically, the crack economy—emerged as one of the few equal-opportunity employers accessible to young men of color with modest education and few marketable skills (see Bourgois 1998, 64–65; Sullivan 1989; Wacquant 2008).

The life experiences shared by many research participants reveal that their families (and specifically the single mothers and grandmothers who raised them for the most part) did everything they could to keep them off the streets—doing their best to be adequate role models, struggling to enroll them in better schools, even signing them off to other family members, in a sort of self-inflicted “natal alienation” aimed at preventing “the system” from taking their children (Patterson 1982, 7–8; Price 2015, 22–39). Yet, these attempts were systematically frustrated by endemic poverty, structural segregation, pervasive incarceration, and the virtual absence of any social safety net. Drawing from a narrative of self-affirmation and individual achievement that clearly resonates with the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s, several of the people I followed revealed that they had become involved in the drug economy after witnessing what they perceived as the failure of their own parents—lower-working-class people whom they saw engaged in a lifelong struggle to make ends meet and who nevertheless never rose above the status of low-wage earners. Ethan’s story offers an ethnographic snapshot of this reality.

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A charming 47-year-old African American man wearing long dreads, golden dentures, and a number of chains, Ethan is the latest addition to the clinic’s staff. He is staying at the halfway house and has been a volunteer at the clinic for a couple of weeks, although he spends most of his time at the corner, talking on his cellphone and smoking cigarettes. He is one of four children from a working-class family that moved to California from Oklahoma in the 1950s; his mother worked all her life as a janitor and made great sacrifices to get by as a single parent. Ethan dropped out of school at age 16, after his father’s premature death, and started getting involved in the streets. When I first met him, he had just been released from a federal penitentiary after serving 7 years of a 10-year sentence for drug trafficking, so he still had three years of “papers” ahead of him. On a cold morning in late November, we sat at the corner outside the clinic to talk while sharing a cigarette.

ETHAN: I done it all, man. You become a part of the streets and the streets is no good. There ain’t nothing in these streets but death, man, and that’s what you do to people, you bring death to people when you sell ‘em crack. But how you look at your drugs is money, man. And when you start having money you get a sense of power ‘cause can’t

no one tell you what to do. The term “above the ghetto” means you don’t have to live in the ghetto no more.

ALEX: So, was that your plan? Making enough money to get out of here?

ETHAN: Yeah, above the ghetto! And have nice things. My mom and dad worked—well, he worked till he died at 57, and she still works cleaning places now, at 74 years old. Matter of fact, my mother just turned 75. She’s worked all her life and my father worked all of his life, and you could put they earnings together and they never been in as many places I been, cars that I drove, the cities and states that I been in, the clothes that I’ve worn, you know what I mean? I looked at my parents and said “there’s no way in the world I’ll get a job. You guys worked all your lives to raise me and my brothers and you have what you have, which is nothing. You guys ain’t never been anywhere.” There is no way in the world that my dad would go purchase a \$600 pair of alligator shoes or a \$900 pair of crocodiles. I did.

ALEX: So was that your reasoning? They worked their whole life and never got anywhere?

ETHAN: That was one of the reasons. I wanted things, but when you have to break that one income down for all the bills, all the food, where’s the clothes now? Why don’t we get to go to the mall? I’m not living like this. Plus, being a male you is taught to be a man. What is a man? No one tells you what a man is, they tell you what a man is supposed to be. So you grow up trying to be this man, a provider, a protector, a breadwinner, right? I mean, if you sell drugs, you do the same thing! You brainwashed me “this is what a man supposed to do.” So, OK, I’ll find an easier way even though it’s breaking the law and still get the job done.

ALEX: So, at the time you were dealing, would you also buy things for your mom?

ETHAN: Oh yeah! I would say to her “Hey ma, what you going to do for your birthday?” She’d be, “Ah, I just want to go to Black Angus.” And I said, “OK.” I would invite probably 15 different people that she’s close to and people that’s close to the family. “Man, I’m taking my mother to Black Angus. Y’all be there at this time!” And when we got at the restaurant I’d say to her, “Mom I don’t know why they putting us at this big table!” And as soon as some people’s starting to come in, she’d be like “I just knew you were going to do this.” And I’d pay for everybody, everybody.

ALEX: So that would be a surprise for her.

ETHAN: Yeah, or she'd wake up in the morning and I'd try to find one of them giant birthday cards and set it on the kitchen table and a dozen roses, or I'd fly her to Vegas and then one day I'd have a stack of, you know, silver dollars in those little trays, I would carry those for her. "Wherever you want to go mom, this your day whatever you want to do!" You know, she'd get dressed and we'd hit the casinos and she's playing them slot machines and she went to Tony Roma's for baby back ribs and shit, and she's happy. You know what I mean?

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In the streets of the ghetto, at the margins of a crumbling industrial economy and in the narrowing shadows of a shrinking welfare state, Ethan's generation was trying to grab its piece of the American dream.

Neoliberal Neglect

As I mentioned earlier, my expectation during the preliminary stages of this project was that the ethnographic fieldwork would provide evidence of an extensive and intrusive penal state entangling formerly incarcerated people in a wide net of post-carceral controls, ongoing surveillance, aggressive policing, and unrealistically strict parole and probation conditions (see Feeley & Simon 1992; Goffman 2014; Rudes 2012; Simon 1990, 203–49). Instead, I documented widespread public neglect, institutional indifference, and programmatic abandonment of these marginalized populations by both the social and the penal arm of the state (Wacquant 2010). Paraphrasing Michel Foucault's (1978, 138) famous definition of biopower, I would argue that the research has documented several instances of a system that "foster[s] life or disallow[s] it to the point of death," rather than examples of a disciplinary state intent on imposing punishment and surveillance on its unruly populations. Overall, the experiences of the returning prisoners I followed seem to suggest the emergence of a low-intensity model of segregated urban containment that largely devolves to market forces and private or semi-private actors—from nonprofit agencies to minimum-wage employers, from ghetto slumlords to faith-based organizations—and is aimed at the low-cost management not only of formerly incarcerated people, but also of the variously marginalized and disenfranchised populations that inhabit the postindustrial ghetto: people on parole and probation, homeless individuals, persons suffering from severe physical disabilities or mental illnesses,

drug addicts, chronically unemployed or underemployed men and women, undocumented migrants—the assorted surplus humanity that Zygmunt Bauman (2003) has famously defined as “wasted lives.”

The institutional framework for this low-intensity/low-cost model of governance of urban marginality is provided by the current parameters against which a “successful reentry” is measured. These standards are extremely low: Essentially, a reentry process is considered successful as long as the released prisoner does not commit any serious crimes. In this sense, recidivism suppression prevails over any meaningful institutional effort to improve former prisoners’ socioeconomic stability, well-being, physical and mental health, and civic integration. As far as the present study is concerned, these developments might be explained at least in part by the circumstance that most of the fieldwork for this research took place in the aftermath of the great recession of 2008 (with the ensuing fiscal crisis and major cuts to state and local budgets) and at the height of California’s implementation of the Public Safety Realignment Plan of 2011 (AB 109). This major legislation was prompted by the US Supreme Court’s decision in the case of *Brown v. Plata*, which upheld a lower court’s order to reduce the state’s prison population to 137.5 percent of stated capacity, in an attempt to address the lack of medical and mental health care due to prison overcrowding. The new legislation established that effective October 1, 2011, certain non-violent, non-serious, and non-sexual felonies would carry sentences of incarceration to be served in county jails (instead of state prisons). In addition, AB 109 has essentially eliminated state parole for a large number of offenders, while shifting the responsibility for the supervision of released prisoners to local counties. Predictably, this experiment in penal devolution—not dissimilar in its logic from a comparable trend toward localization that has been documented in the field of welfare (see Soss et al. 2011)—has resulted on the one hand in a drastic reduction of the services once available to state parolees, and on the other hand in a process of “transcarceration” (Lowman et al. 1987) whereby a significant portion of the reduction in the state’s prison population has been absorbed by an increase in the jail population of some counties.⁴ More generally, however, to the extent that the new model of low-cost penal supervision heralded by the conjoined forces of fiscal conservatism and carceral devolution is to be considered not as an exception, but rather as an increasingly central feature of the governance of social marginality in the age of austerity, what emerged from the fieldwork for this project might actually provide a blueprint for post-carceral supervision in the present conjuncture.

Today, whatever minimal services are available to former prisoners are provided mostly through the non-profit, faith-based, semi-private sector, what Jennifer Wolch (1990, 201) has aptly defined as an emergent shadow state: a “para-state apparatus with collective service responsibilities previously shouldered by the public sector, administered outside traditional democratic politics, but yet controlled in both formal and informal ways by the state.” In this framework, highly individualistic and market-friendly solutions are systematically proposed as the only answers to a broad range of structural obstacles faced by formerly incarcerated people: At every turn in their trajectories through the carceral state, from arrest to reentry, criminalized people are taught that success or failure is entirely dependent upon their own efforts. As I will discuss below, the neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility, market competition, and self-help ultimately pervades every aspect of the reentry process as it is presently framed. Criminologist Elliott Currie has recently defined this approach to reentry—and more generally to the rehabilitative interventions directed at criminalized populations—as “conformist intervention”:

Conformist intervention is about getting people to accept the typically bleak conditions of life that have put them at risk, or turned them into “offenders,” in the first place. As a corollary, it teaches them to locate the source of their problems mainly, if not entirely, in themselves. So “rehabilitation,” for example, comes to mean trying to train vulnerable people to navigate what are often chronically marginal lives and stunted opportunities; and we then measure the “success” of these efforts in very minimal and essentially negative ways: they commit fewer crimes, do fewer drugs or different drugs, maybe get, at least briefly, some sort of job. And even if the job is basically exploitative and short-lived and their future options are slim and their present lives are still pinched, desperate and precarious, we still count that as all good—as evidence of programmatic success. (Currie 2013, 5)

Indeed, the main services offered to reentering prisoners are aimed at restructuring their personalities along the coordinates of an idealized neoliberal subject: a self-reliant entrepreneur of the self, constantly at work to accumulate human capital and eager to compete with his/her peers in the lowest regions of a deregulated labor market (see also Halushka 2016; Miller 2014). Consistently, former prisoners can access plenty of résumé preparation courses, job interview coaching workshops, anger management

classes, group counseling sessions, NA or AA meetings—but no affordable housing, free health care, accessible education, or a basic income.

“Get a Job, Any Job”: The New Working Poor

Although “get a job, any job” is perhaps the injunction most frequently directed at former prisoners—not just by parole officers, but also by family members who now face the challenge of housing and feeding an additional relative on what is often a meager budget—the great majority of the research participants could not find a job after incarceration. The few among them who did were usually working for minimum wage, without benefits, part-time, and temporarily: They were joining the ranks of the working poor. This meant that the majority of them literally struggled to survive in the streets, and their basic needs—from housing to food, from medical care to transportation—often went unmet. They faced sudden homelessness, food insecurity, persistent physical ailments, and mental suffering.

Yet, being poor is not only a depressing, alienating, and dangerous experience for these people, it is also *expensive*. Former prisoners normally have no bank accounts and no credit, despite the fact they are often in debt, either with the court system or with their families and friends. Cashing a check at a check-cashing store (for \$10–\$15) costs them more than what a bank-account holder pays for it. Their persistent condition of economic disenfranchisement feeds the predatory capitalism of the streets—slumlords, pawnshops, check-cashing places, bail bonds, and so on (see also Desmond 2016, 306–8). During the fieldwork for this research I have seen people panhandle to survive even while they were employed, as is illustrated by the case of Ray and his girlfriend Melisha.

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Ray is a 49-year-old African American man who was released from prison in 2010, after serving 11 years. This was his “second strike,” following a two-year prison sentence served in the late 1980s. As a child, Ray was raised by his single mother in the infamous Nickerson Gardens projects in Watts, Los Angeles. Although he likes to reminisce about his “gangbanging” days in the streets of LA, before ending up in prison Ray had experienced a few stints of working-class life. In the 1990s, he had a temporary job unloading trucks at a warehouse; he worked at a Taco Bell restaurant and then at Home Depot. Ray is proud of his working past, which he sees as a gateway to a successful future after prison. Indeed, after his release he didn’t waste



Figure 2. Ray at work (*left*) and panhandling (*right*).

any time. He immediately signed up as a volunteer at the community clinic and eventually was hired as a part-time employee. He worked there for a few months but was soon dismissed for lack of funds. He then landed another part-time job at a furniture shop, where he worked for five months at \$10 an hour (\$800 per month), until the store went out of business. For the following three months, his only income was a \$200 monthly check from General Assistance. In the spring of 2012, he reconnected with an old colleague from Taco Bell who was now the manager of a KFC restaurant. This friend hired Ray “on call” at \$8.00 an hour. Ray has managed to keep his job for most of the three years since his release, but—as illustrated by the following field notes—he has struggled to survive at the bottom of the US labor market.

January 14, 2013

Six months have passed since Ray started working at KFC. He calls me this morning: “Bro, can you bring us something to eat today? We starving...”

Two weeks ago they received an eviction notice from their small apartment in East Oakland, which they must leave by Sunday. Back in December, Ray and Melisha were arrested after getting involved in a late-night fight outside the apartment, which prompted a neighbor to call the police. The police took them to jail, where they spent the next three weeks. Partly as a consequence of this, they have not been able to keep up with their monthly rent of \$900, so they now owe \$600 to the landlord.

Over the last few days they have been moving their few appliances out of the apartment. During my last visit, they squeezed their belongings into a few garbage bags, which I helped them take to a cheap self-storage service in East Oakland. All that is left in the apartment is the mattress they plan to sleep on until the sheriff kicks them out and the old laptop I gave to Melisha so that she could apply for jobs online.

When I pull in front of their apartment—Ray calls it “the garage”, because it’s basically a ground-floor concrete box—they are waiting for me outside, as they often do, sitting on the sidewalk. Stewe, the small pinscher Ray adopted soon after being released from prison in 2011, starts jumping around when he sees me. “How are you guys doing?” I ask. Melisha barely acknowledges my presence and keeps staring at her phone—usually a sign that they have been arguing. Ray replies with his usual sarcasm: “Exactly as planned, bro! We are homeless and starving!” I give Melisha the two bags of groceries I brought for them, and she steps inside the apartment.

Ray asks me to follow him into their car, because “we need to have a man-to-man conversation.” We sit in the Camaro, which is slowly falling apart. It is even messier than usual, with dirty clothes, empty KFC bags, and other stuff scattered about. I wonder once again how they could have paid \$4,000 to a shady East Oakland dealer for a car in such abysmal condition: The stained upholstery is peeling off, the seats are dotted with cigarette burns, the wires are coming out from under the steering wheel, and the window on the driver’s side doesn’t work anymore. They paid \$2,000 up-front, thanks to a tax return Ray had finally received after months of anticipation, and agreed to pay the rest in 12 installments of \$250 each—though of course they would never keep up with the payments.

Ray tells me they are desperate for money. He has only been able to work for a few hours a week at KFC since being released from jail last month. He still works on call for \$8.00 an hour and makes less than \$200 each week. Meanwhile, Melisha has been unable to find any job—despite filling out applications at McDonald’s, Walmart, Pack n’ Save, Ghirardelli, and several other places—and her SSI payments were suspended while she was in jail.

ALEX: Right now... The two of you, how much cash do you have?

RAY: Nothin’.

ALEX: Nothing?

RAY: Zero. Pennies. Oh, here you go! [*searches into his pockets, then opens his hand to show me a few dimes*] That’s our savings right here. Oh yeah ... And our free cookie [*hands me a greasy paper bag from KFC with a half-melted chocolate chip cookie inside*].

ALEX: A free cookie?

RAY: Yeah! Free cookie, from KFC. Free cookie, that’s all we got right here.

They must leave the apartment by the end of the week and need to find a new place to stay. Ray tells me that one option would be a trailer park right underneath the freeway’s ramp around the corner. While we’re talking in his car, Ray takes out a piece of cardboard on which he has written, with a black marker: “HELP ME SAVE MY DOG ... needs a Doctor! Donations to pay one please.” He explains that today he plans to panhandle, with the dog by his side, at the entrance of a Safeway supermarket located in a nearby residential area. He tells me that he is optimistic about how much money he will make, because Stewe attracts middle-class women who have pity for him. Afterwards, we drive toward the Safeway where Ray

plans to panhandle, but Melisha makes it clear that she doesn't want to be there with him and will wait in the car. She has been crying along the way and says that Ray has lied to me about not having a drink since his release from jail. He's been drinking a lot, she says. She is depressed about this and everything else that's going on in their lives.

At Safeway, Ray gets his sign and dog ready and sits by the side of the supermarket's entrance. He seems in good spirits, and we crack a few jokes about what he's doing. I stay at a distance because Ray says that if passersby see me they will think it's a joke and won't give him any money. So I sit on a wall nearby and watch the scene. The few people who stop by—mostly elderly white women on their way to the supermarket—are clearly attracted by the little dog, while barely acknowledging Ray and mostly ignoring his solicitation for money. Meanwhile, Melisha is sitting in the front seat of the Camaro, playing with her phone and pretending that she doesn't know Ray. Around 4 pm, almost four hours into the panhandling session, Ray has made \$20 and a few pennies. He sets aside \$10 for gasoline and gives \$5 to Melisha (who immediately buys a lottery ticket). He spends the rest on a few cans of malt liquor from the liquor store around the corner.

* * * * *

Ray and Melisha's case is not isolated. In fact, during my fieldwork I have seen people sleep in their cars in the parking lot of the same fast food restaurant where they were employed, and be told by their parole officer that this was acceptable as long as they notified the officer whenever they parked somewhere else (something they had to do frequently, in order to avoid tickets). More generally, finding suitable housing upon release from prison is one of the first priorities and one of the most difficult challenges for ex-offenders. The recent sociological literature has only sparsely analyzed the nexus between homelessness and incarceration (but see Gowan 2002, 2010), despite several surveys showing that a high percentage of homeless people have spent time in prison, and that a significant number of released prisoners face the prospect of homelessness upon release (Roman & Travis 2004, 7). The effects of draconian measures introduced at the height of the war on drugs, such as the "one strike and you're out" provisions that deny convicted drug offenders access to subsidized housing, are compounded today by the chronic lack of affordable housing in the urban areas to which most ex-offenders return (Thompson 2008, 68–87). In California, and particularly in large cities such as San Francisco and Oakland, the situation is made even worse by the ongoing gentrification of residential areas, which

is narrowing the stock of accessible housing (see Beitel 2013; Smith 1996), and by the provisions of the already mentioned Public Safety Realignment legislation (AB 109), which has essentially deprived large numbers of ex-prisoners of some of the few emergency housing options (e.g., halfway houses, transitional housing, etc.) that were once available to state parolees. Under these circumstances, returning prisoners are increasingly left to fend for themselves in a hostile and discriminatory housing market. The few who are fortunate enough to have stable families find adequate housing upon release; many, however, face the prospect of becoming homeless or falling prey to the many slumlords who populate the shadow economy of the streets.

* * * * *

Rico is a soft-spoken 50-year-old Puerto Rican man who was released from prison in 2010. He was raised by his single mother in the Marcy Projects in Brooklyn. During his childhood, which he spent as a hustler in the streets of New York, he was sexually abused by an uncle and suffered constant beatings by his mother's violent boyfriend. As a young teenager, he started using drugs and dropped out of high school; as soon as he turned 18, he moved to Oakland to be with his biological father, who was dealing drugs. Rico sold drugs for his father, but soon the two were arrested. In jail, his father assured him that they would both be out in no time if Rico, who at the time did not have any prior convictions, would "take the rap" for the two of them. Young and inexperienced, Rico obeyed, and his father was released after a few days. Rico, however, was sentenced to five years in state prison; during that time, he never received a visit, a call, or even a letter from his father. Rico became addicted to heroin at the age 18 and has been in and out of prison, mostly for drug-related charges, for the past 30 years.

When I first met him, on a warm morning in late September 2012, he had been clean for over a year; he had just graduated from a drug rehabilitation program and was staying in a sober-living house. At the time, he was earning \$800 a month at the community clinic in West Oakland that served as the base for my research. This job allowed him to save money each month—something he did methodically with the dream of renting a small apartment. In the notes that follow, I document Rico's struggle to achieve housing independence after prison.

December 7, 2012

Rico is about to finish his shift at the community clinic. On the street corner outside the office, we are chatting and smoking cigarettes. He tells me

enthusiastically that, since he has diligently saved a few dollars each month, he now has enough to put down the first month and deposit and is ready to move into his new place in East Oakland. After work, he plans to pick up a sofa and two couches from a used furniture warehouse downtown. For the job, he has borrowed an old white Toyota pickup truck that is literally falling apart. Because Rico has been without a driver's license since 1981, he asks me to drive the pickup. At the warehouse, which looks more like a dumpsite beneath the freeway, we laboriously squeeze the oversized sofa and the two couches onto the truck. We then drive to East Oakland through a spectral sprawl of abandoned warehouses and factories. Liquor stores dot the landscape, in front of which congregate hustlers, drug dealers, and homeless people with carts in tow.

Rico's new one-bedroom apartment, although in desolate surroundings, looks decent. A modest ground-floor unit of a duplex, it is surrounded by a metal fence. The small front yard is unkempt, with tattered furniture and old car parts scattered across the sidewalk. The apartment sits across from the parking lot of an elementary school, which is now bursting with people—most of them Latinos—as the children are getting out. After bringing the sofa and couches inside, we begin to turn the empty space into Rico's first living room in years. Shuffling the bulky furniture around takes a good hour. Meanwhile, Rico has been jumping excitedly from one seat to the next, in anticipation of the great times we will have playing games on his PlayStation and chilling together. As he gives me a tour of the other rooms, he repeats that for the first time in years, he feels happy. In the kitchen, he opens the fridge to show me the fresh groceries he bought. Unlocking the kitchen window facing a small backyard, he points to the corner where his grill will go. Then he invites me to the first BBQ he will host to celebrate the new house.

February 15, 2014

Last January, the community clinic suddenly dismissed Rico for “lack of funds.” Now out of work and without any source of income, he will be forced to leave the apartment at the end of the month. I drive to his place around noon and find that he is just getting out of bed. He is depressed over losing the apartment and looks thinner than the last time I saw him. He stresses that he has done everything he could to do good. While looking for another place to live, he has to find a place to store his recently acquired furniture.

I agree to drive him around East Oakland to find a place to stay. There's a dilapidated building on Front Avenue, where Rico says rooms rent for

\$500 a month. A rusted metal gate opens into a messy communal lobby: bags of trash and old furniture are amassed in each corner, cigarette butts litter the carpet, and debris is scattered everywhere. Black plastic bags covering all the windows prevent natural light from entering the building, even during daytime. The 12 single rooms are arrayed along both sides of a long, trash-filled hallway. A large white pit bull with a plastic bottle in its mouth runs back and forth.

I follow Rico to the last room on the left, which is occupied by one of his old friends. Peering through the open doors, I see only decrepit rooms with littered floors. In some, people are sitting on their beds eating, smoking, watching TV, and arguing loudly. All residents of the premises share two bathrooms and showers. Like the rest of the building, they are filthy. Hip-hop music blasts from the surrounding rooms, including the one we enter. There, two middle-aged white men, whose teeth are mostly missing, are smoking crystal meth. They become nervous at the sight of me, but when Rico reassures them that I'm not a cop, they intently inhale the vaporizing crystals again. After a few minutes of silence, Rico explains that the building was formerly the site of a transitional housing program for recovering drug addicts. Now it is just a ghetto building with cheap rooms for rent. Since Rico is no longer on parole, he cannot go back to the halfway house; moving here may be his only option, because the landlord does not require a deposit or credit report.

October 10, 2014

Rico has lived on Front Avenue for almost eight months. He covered his rent with monthly General Assistance checks from the county, along with money from odd jobs, hustling, and gifts from friends. In June, the complex caught fire, likely because a tenant had a malfunctioning hot plate in one of the rooms. Rico says that the sprinklers did not work when the fire erupted. Without emergency exits, the tenants had to jump out of their windows to escape the flames.

I arrive at the building around 10 am. With half-burned cars, bags of garbage, abandoned appliances, and carbonized furniture accumulating all along the fence, the front yard now resembles a dumpsite more than ever. On the front door, a red notice warns people not to enter the building because it is "seriously damaged and unsafe to occupy." Several people still live here anyway, paying around \$300 per month in rent to stay. If tenants have insufficient cash, the landlord accepts food stamps.

Rico opens the gate and lets me into the dark space. As we hug, I can almost feel his bones. He has been losing weight over the last few months and doesn't look good: His eyes are sunken and he emanates an aura of affliction and weakness. I thought his hepatitis might be getting worse, but he claims the situation is simply stressful, and to prove his strength, he starts doing pushups. "I'm alright, bro... See? Still can do these."

The building has no electricity or heating. In the former communal area, exposed electrical wires are hooked up to some outside source. The smoke-stained walls support a structure verging on collapse. A pungent post-fire odor still dominates three months after the flames. Every window is boarded up, and flashlights are needed to navigate around the debris and charred furniture. Rico's room feels claustrophobic in the darkness. The furniture from the old apartment barely fits: a small TV, the sofa with the two couches, a microwave, an old coffee table, and a small cabinet. A huge Puerto Rican flag hangs from the wall facing the door. Rico is on the sofa, watching "The Brady Bunch." I join him and hand him the lottery scratcher and packs of Newport cigarettes I have picked up at the corner liquor store. He has something for me, he says, and produces a black T-shirt with *The Godfather* written in Spanish from a nearby pile of clothes.

Then he shares news of his new 2015 license plate sticker. The registration fee came from money earned doing plumbing work with his older son. He paid the fee—despite not having a driver's license—so the cops won't have another pretext to "fuck me." Next, he shows me pictures on his cell phone. There is a video of Rico working with his son, as well as a picture of the \$400 check he received for the work. After paying \$300 in rent to stay in the building, only \$36 in "spending money" remain each month from his \$336 GA check.

A skinny young man in his mid-20s ambles into the room while we talk. This is Rico's younger son, who has spent the last few nights in one of the rooms. About a month ago, Rico explains, the Oakland Police Department, the anti-gang task force, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives raided the building. They stormed the place looking for drugs and weapons and took away a few people, thus vacating some of the rooms. During the police raid, Rico escaped through a window in the back of the building. Rico also says that the place has become very dangerous lately. With some of the old residents having left or been arrested, new ones have moved in. Most people in the building have guns, and violent incidents have happened with increasing frequency over the past few weeks. Rico feels so unsafe that he has installed two CCTV cameras—one overlooking



Figure 3. Rico in the abandoned building.

the front yard and the other covering the hallway. Both are connected to a small monitor in his room, which he keeps on all the time.

The most significant violent incident occurred late one night a month ago. One resident had agreed to hide a bag belonging to a man on the run from the police. However, the resident disappeared with the bag, which contained several ounces of marijuana, three handguns, and \$10,000 in cash. So the victim threatened to shoot up the building unless his property was



Figure 4. The front yard of Rico's house.

returned immediately. Rico attempted to talk to the man and to prevent him from entering the building. An hour later, the man returned with three other heavies, who forced their way past the main gate and into the building. They kicked down doors and beat an elderly Black resident almost to death. When they approached, Rico grabbed the .357 he keeps for “self-protection” and sat on the couch facing the door. Rico’s door started to give way under the pounding. He fired several shots and they returned fire as they retreated down the hallway. Outside his room, Rico showed me the bullet holes that pocked the hallway, the bathroom door, and the ceiling. I counted eight holes, but he assured me that many more shots were fired. The door to his room is now broken in half and has four bullet holes in it.

Inside Rico’s room, he shows me his loaded gun. It’s too dangerous to keep anymore, he says, since he already has two gun charges on his record. Another resident—a Latino man in his 40s—enters and asks Rico for some weed. Rico agrees to give him some, but then he tells the man that he expects \$10 from him. The guy promises to bring the money soon. When he leaves, I cannot hide my surprise and ask Rico whether he has started dealing again. He says no.

At the time of this writing (April 2017), Rico has left the burned-down building. As a felon with multiple drug convictions, he could not apply for subsidized housing; without a job, he hasn't been able to afford to move to a better place; instead, he has moved into a decrepit RV, parked in an abandoned lot in East Oakland, which he bought for a few hundred dollars from a heroin addict.

* * * * *

During the three years I spent in the field, not a week has passed without someone imploring me to bring them some food because their fridges were empty. I have also seen people sell their plasma and bone marrow to get a few dollars. This was the case of Carmen—a young woman of Mexican-American descent, who had served three years in federal prison for a bank robbery she committed when she was a student at a UC campus in order to be able to pay for her college tuition. Carmen was “donating” plasma and bone marrow at a local lab for money. In this shady business there are specific going rates, depending on the amount of marrow one donates. In Oakland, donors get paid \$125 for 250ml, \$200 for 500ml, and \$450 for 1,500ml. Under pressure to raise some quick money, which she needed mostly to care for her terminally ill mother, Carmen used to donate the maximum amount allowed, although this would force her to wait for up to 10 weeks until she could undergo the next procedure, which involves local anesthesia and is quite painful.⁵

Most of the people I followed were unable to receive any kind of public assistance—either because none was available or because they were ineligible as a consequence of the many welfare bans attached to their criminal convictions. As is well known, a lifetime ban on food stamps eligibility for felony drug offenders was introduced as part of the 1996 welfare reform. Since April 1, 2015, the ban on food stamps (Calfresh) and workfare benefits (Calworks) has been lifted in California. But despite their potential eligibility for food assistance, many people with criminal records choose not to apply, either because they are unaware of their entitlement to these benefits, or because they have some pending issues with the criminal justice system—such as unpaid child support, court-imposed fees and fines, or even outstanding warrants for minor offenses—that make them wary of providing identification to any public official. As for subsidized housing, although felony convictions do not automatically disqualify applicants, at the time of this writing (April 2017) the Housing Authority of the County of Alameda is not accepting applications for Section 8. The only way to get

into the waitlist for public housing is through a lottery system that has also been closed in Oakland since 2015, and in any case applicants can still be discretionally screened out due to prior criminal convictions, particularly if drug related.

Of course, besides housing, the most urgent need people face upon release—particularly if they don't have families waiting for them outside—is access to spending money for the basic necessities of life. But the only cash allowance currently available to single men and women without children is General Assistance: a county-level emergency program that offers a maximum of \$336 per month, for a maximum of three months within a year. Yet it would be misleading to even consider this form of cash advance as a welfare provision, since it is considered a *loan*, and recipients must sign a reimbursement agreement as a condition of eligibility—a clear instance of the post-welfare neoliberal logic of “governing by debt” (Lazzarato 2015).

“We Do It to Ourselves”: Internalizing Neoliberal Ideology

Despite the weight of the structural circumstances they face, the participants to this research appear to have internalized the neoliberal narrative of personal responsibility that is constantly inculcated in prisons, rehabilitation centers, and reentry programs (see also Gowan & Whetstone 2012; Miller 2014; Werth 2012, 2016). They wholeheartedly embrace the dominant rhetoric of free choice, as well as hegemonic definitions of social deservingness and undeservingness. This is illustrated by the following two ethnographic snapshots. The first is a conversation between Ethan, whom I introduced earlier, and Spike—a 40-year-old African American man who served 10 years in a federal penitentiary after the major drug-dealing operation he had built in West Oakland in the 1990s was disrupted by the police.

* * * * *

November 22, 2011

ETHAN: We got a Black president. A Black president, it showed the Black community that you can be anything. We've come a long way from slavery to a fucking Black president ...

ALEX: True, but does that mean that racism is over? I mean, look at the prison population; who's getting imprisoned all the time? It's the Black community, isn't it?

ETHAN: We do it to ourselves. You can't blame nobody for our actions. You have to take blame for your actions, that's what I learned. Hey man,

none of this shit is nobody's fault! [*opens his arms as if to embrace the dereliction surrounding us*].

ALEX: So, do you think the system is fair?

ETHAN: The system is fair because somebody got to fall. Why not the Black man? Don't nobody like a Black person. We don't even like each other. Who kill more Black people than a Black person? Man, we don't even like us... How can you expect somebody else to like us?

ALEX: OK, but don't you think that the police target Black people more than others?

ETHAN: Hey man, it's because we most likely are the ones that's going to commit crimes, because of poverty, where we live, lack of jobs.

ALEX: But so can you really blame the Black community for those crimes?

ETHAN: Yes, you can! When you want stuff you have to go get it. The shit that's going on with people that don't have anything, it's because they don't want nothing. It's nobody's fault but theirs. Don't believe that shit, man! You starting to be brainwashed. We got opportunities, we got to take advantage of them. I learned all this shit now. I didn't give a fuck about no opportunity. I gave a fuck about getting my money, man! Now I don't care about money. I need money to survive, but all I care about is my family.

ETHAN: Hey! [*Talking to Spike, who has just joined us at the corner*] Do you believe this? Do you believe a person that don't have nothing don't want nothing, or is it somebody else fault that they in that situation?

SPIKE: It's they fault.

ETHAN: That's all I'm saying.

SPIKE: It's they fault, Alex.

ALEX: But so you blame poverty on the poor?

SPIKE: Hold up, Alex, listen to this! I explained this to you once before. It comes a point in a person life when he know wrong from right. Just because your parents was using drugs or robbing and stealing, it don't mean that you have to do it. You can go out and make a better life for yourself. Now you can cripple yourself if you choose to do it because people that do things in life, they do it because they obligate they self to do it, not because they have to. You got to make you own choices in life.

ETHAN: You see, Alex? If I worked all my life, they going to give me retirement and social security and shit. I'm going to get social security benefits. So this country will make sure that a person is taken care

of even when they get old. You don't have to be in poverty, you don't have to be at the homeless shelters.

ALEX: But what about people who work three or four different jobs and still don't get health insurance or benefits?

ETHAN: That's not true. If a person works three or four jobs and don't have healthcare or health insurance, it's because they don't want it. I just got out of prison and the clinic here gave me medical, and I don't have a job.

SPIKE: It's Medicare. Just because you don't have no Kaiser it don't make you less of a person. I mean I got high blood pressure pills and all that... I'm not paying for it. They give it to me. Some people, you give 'em free medical, do they come get it? Nope. So, they choose to make choices in life, they choose not to want to take the medical but when the rain starts falling they hearts is short-breathing, they feet swelling up and all that, and then they say [*impersonating a child's whining*], "Oh I don't have medical..."

ETHAN: [*continuing Spike's impersonation*] "It's somebody's fault!"

SPIKE: Life is what you make it, Alex.

ETHAN: The poor don't have to be poor, man!

ALEX: OK, but I mean back in the 1990s they cut welfare, right? People don't get nearly as much as they used to get back in the days.

ETHAN: Yeah, I remember when they cut it. Then they made programs for them parents where they can go learn a trade.

ALEX: Well, people now *have* to show that they're looking for work to receive any assistance.

ETHAN: They still give you government aid. Go learn this trade and we going to send you to get a job. But people wouldn't do it.

ALEX: Alright, but what kinds of jobs were actually available to people, part-time? Minimum wage?

ETHAN: Come on, Alex. They got colleges all day long that advertise on TV and you hear these young girls that get on there and say "I have a career now!" They still got programs.

ALEX: So, do you think that you can actually get "from rags to riches," so to speak?

ETHAN: Yes, you can. Where do you think you going to be in another 10 years, after your book comes out? You out here grinding in the heart of Oakland! You interviewing brothers to make a book, that's grinding, you hustling. Not hustling *us*, you know what I mean? But you grinding to make money.

The second excerpt also features a conversation with Spike, who revealed to me that he had started dealing drugs at age 13 in order to provide for his heroin-addicted single mother and to protect her from the violence she would suffer at the hand of other drug dealers for not being able to pay them. Despite having experienced homelessness, hunger, and violence during much of his adolescence, Spike takes full responsibility for his “choices” as a teenager coming up in the ghetto.

October 14, 2011

SPIKE: My mother used heroin [*pauses for a few seconds, keeping his eyes down*]. So, by the time I got to the fourth grade I was ready to deal with some situations and do certain things, because me coming up as a kid, I seen some of everything. And I remember sitting in class, and I left school and I told myself that I didn't wanna be one of the young men seeing their mama get jumped on 'cause she owes some money for some drugs... So I had to make a choice in life: drop out of school, sell drugs to take care of my mother's dope addiction, or deal with the consequences that's coming behind it... So me as a kid growing up, I grew up in the life, selling drugs for different individuals...

ALEX: So you started dealing out of necessity, so to speak? You wouldn't have started at all if you had enough to live and your mom wasn't on heroin?

SPIKE: Man, coming from a kid that didn't have nothin'—I'm talkin' about nothin' man!—to something, is a gift. You know, and not blaming nobody for the choices I've made is a bigger gift. 'Cause now that I have changed my life, I'll sit up and hear people say “Well, I didn't have a father figure.” You can't blame that on yo pops! My father, I don't even know my father. But when I went out and committed them crimes, I couldn't say, “Oh it ain't my fault 'cause my mama on dope.” No, I know wrong from right! Just because she usin' dope do that mean I should use dope?

ALEX: I understand, but as a kid, that's what you had to face growing up, right?

SPIKE: Man, when you grow up you have choices [*pauses*] you can make [*pauses*] in life. You have choices. So, it comes a point in your life to where you say “man, I don't want to go to no jail. I can make it better.” So just because your daddy went to jail all his life, that

mean you have to go? No! I have kids that's mine that's in college! I never made it out the sixth grade.

ALEX: So you don't want people to think that you did this because you had no other option?

SPIKE: No. My thing is, when people do stuff, they make they own choices. Stop blaming other people for shit you do! Like you ask me, if I end up losing this job [*at the community clinic*], if I go back to the streets am I gon' say it's their fault? It ain't! How's it they fault? How's it the organization fault?

ALEX: I see your point. So you would take full responsibility for it?

SPIKE: [*emphatically*] You hafta!! When I go to jail, they [*the community clinic*] ain't goin' to jail with me.

* * * * *

As neoliberal citizens in the making, forged through the hyper-individualistic correctional narrative of personal change and redemption, the former prisoners I followed blame only themselves for their past and present circumstances, which they systematically attribute to their own choices—never to the structural dynamics of class and racial oppression that constrained their life opportunities since childhood. In this frame, the political and civic disenfranchisement suffered by criminalized populations becomes normalized as the reasonable and predictable outcome of their own abject lifestyles.⁶ In this sense, the emergence of any kind of political consciousness as members of a subordinated social group targeted by structural oppression, social inequality, and racial discrimination is effectively prevented through the stubborn behaviorist ideology that is actively promoted at every turn of these populations' journey through the criminal legal system—from arrest to pretrial detention, from plea bargaining to sentencing, from incarceration to reentry.

Conclusion: Against Neoliberal Penal Reform

In the mid-1970s, the United States abandoned the war on poverty (one of the shortest wars it has ever fought) and declared a war against the poor (Gans 1995; Katz 2013). Throughout the following four decades, its power elites would treat the nation's racialized poor as a dangerous class and would confine an astonishing number of them in prisons; they would diminish their socioeconomic status, cripple their civil, political, and social rights, and most importantly, they would threaten with the same fate all those

who would not submit to the new conditions of exploitation, subordination, and existential insecurity brought about by the capitalist restructuring and neoliberal revolution of the late twentieth century (see Camp 2016; De Giorgi 2012; Wacquant 2013).

In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, some contradictory signals have started to emerge from the US penal field. Over the past few years, the country has witnessed a timid reduction in some states' prison populations, prompted essentially by fiscal concerns. In this context, the "tough on crime" posture of the last three decades seems to be losing ground to what in her recent book Hadar Aviram (2015) has defined as an emerging "cheap on crime" approach—one that seems to be more concerned with the cost-effective management of a slightly leaner correctional system than with any serious effort at dismantling the carceral state or improving conditions of life inside as well as outside prisons. Even if they were to continue under Donald Trump's law-and-order presidency, piecemeal penal reforms inspired by budgetary concerns—like the ones promoted by current bipartisan initiatives such as the Coalition for Public Safety, Right on Crime, etc.—although perhaps necessary to initiate modest prison population reductions, will not even begin to address the structural crisis of mass incarceration in the United States. Similarly, when it comes to prisoner reentry, current policies, reform proposals, and the accompanying evidence-based rhetoric eschew any consideration of the structural processes that produced—and continue to reproduce—the conditions of segregated poverty and marginality to which the reentry populations return (see also Gottschalk 2015).

Despite the abysmal levels of neglect and abuse characterizing US prisons and jails—particularly when it comes to the physical and mental health of their guests—penal institutions have come to represent one of the few sources of public relief available to the poor in the postindustrial ghetto, and often their only chance to access food, shelter, and sporadic healthcare. In the end, the new penal austerity pursued by current mainstream penal reform campaigns might well be an indication not so much of US society's reckoning with the structural injustice of the US penal state, but rather of the nation's growing unwillingness to fund *even prisons*, to the extent that the carceral system has essentially become the only residual provider of basic social services for America's poor and racialized populations.⁷ In this light, current neoliberal penal reforms should be seen as the latest chapter in a long history of public retrenchment from the ghetto and institutional abandonment of the racialized urban poor.

The US carceral state (and the emergent prisoner reentry industry as an extension of it) keeps fulfilling the role penal institutions have historically played in capitalist societies, according to the materialist theoretical framework that inspires the present work: transforming the poor into criminals, criminals into prisoners, and prisoners into a disposable labor force ready to fill the ranks of the working poor (see De Giorgi 2006, 2012; Melossi & Pavarini 1981; Rusche & Kirchheimer 1939/2003). In the process, the carceral state also performs the crucial ideological work of disciplining exploited and marginalized social groups to internalize their condition of structural oppression as the predictable outcome of their own criminal behaviors, and to normalize any form of neglect, marginalization, and exploitation in the “free society” as a preferable option to resisting their subjugation—through crimes of survival, if not political mobilization—and getting punished for their unruly behavior. Ultimately, the reproduction of a large army of disenfranchised poor people rendered politically powerless to resist their exploitation in the labor market, and desperate enough that they will accept any condition of work—no matter how insecure, precarious, or low-paid—as the only alternative to starvation or further incarceration, is not an unintended consequence or a collateral effect of the prison, but rather one of its constitutive features and historical *raisons d’être*.

As Georg Rusche wrote in the 1933 article titled “Labor Market and Penal Sanction,” which laid the foundations for the materialist criminological approach known as political economy of punishment:

All efforts to reform the punishment of criminals are inevitably limited by the situation of the lowest socially significant proletarian class which society wants to deter from criminal acts. All reform efforts, however humanitarian and well meaning, which go beyond this restriction, are condemned to utopianism. (Rusche 1933/1978, 4)

This means that, as long as conditions of life for those at the bottom of the US structure of racial and class inequality will be characterized by chronic poverty, civic and political disenfranchisement, and pervasive marginality, the prison—even a reformed one—will maintain its role as a tool for the punitive governance of the racialized poor. Absent a radical overhaul of both the hypertrophic carceral state and the punitive welfare system of the United States, with the goal of affirming the human rights to health, education, housing, and adequate living standards for all, any effort to reduce the prison population will amount to little more than replenishing the ranks of the (post-)industrial reserve army of labor (Marx 1867/1976, 781–802). If it is

true that mass incarceration has substantially reversed the achievements of the civil rights movements of the 1960s, then the time has certainly come for a new mobilization for social rights: a movement led by the populations that have been the main targets of the American penal experiment—the poor, the unemployed, and stigmatized urban minorities—to take up the unfinished struggle against neoliberal neglect and the carceral state that continues to thrive on it.

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NOTES

1. The invisibility mentioned here is at least twofold. On the one hand, the hyper-criminalized social groups who fill the ranks of both the prison and the reentry populations are rendered largely invisible to their middle/upper-class fellow citizens by the racially segregated nature of virtually every aspect of civic and social life in the United States—from work to leisure, from education to consumption, etc. On the other hand, the carceral warehousing of the racialized poor effectively hides millions of marginalized people from governmental statistics on a broad range of social issues (e.g., unemployment, education, wages, etc.), with the consequence of artificially distorting several official indicators of social inequality (see Pettit 2012).

2. According to a report released by the Oakland-based community organization Causa Justa/Just Cause (2014, 7), between 1990 and 2011 in the city's more rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods (e.g., North Oakland and Rockridge), average monthly rents increased by 30 percent. Over the same period of time, as a consequence of gentrification, Oakland lost nearly 40 percent of its African American population.

3. Working at the corner outside the clinic was the most desired task by the members of staff, as it involved the freedom to socialize with others on the street, smoke cigarettes, use one's cellphone, and sometimes pay a visit to the nearby liquor store. Predictably, these semi-clandestine expeditions to the liquor store turned out to be very productive—although somewhat expensive—ethnographic sessions.

4. According to a report released in 2015 by the Public Policy Institute of California (Lofstrom & Martin 2015, 3), between September 2011 and September 2014 jail populations increased by 15 percent, reaching the total number of 82,681—well above the stated capacity of 79,855.

5. Paid bone marrow donations were punished as a felony in California until December 2011, when a three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that since the process of donating bone marrow is now similar to that of donating blood plasma—which people can be paid for—bone marrow should no longer be considered an organ for which payment is illegal under the National Organ Transplant Act. Needless to say, the practice remains highly controversial, and opponents argue that this will determine one more class/racial divide between rich recipients and poor “donors.” Along the same lines, Wacquant (2008, 125) states that “commercial plasma banks do a booming business in the hyperghetto.” Another reference to the selling of plasma as an income-generating strategy among the urban poor can be found in Desmond (2016, 284).

6. The democratic consequences of this normalization of the political disenfranchisement of “custodial citizens” through the colorblind ideology of personal responsibility are analyzed by Amy E. Lerman and Vesla Weaver (2014, 25) in their recent book *Arresting Citizenship*: “This new and more complex racial regime is the modern threat to a racially equal democracy.... In particular, the use of individual choice to explain black overrepresentation in criminal justice—whether the choice to commit crimes is seen as stemming from a lack of moral values or rooted in the trappings of poverty—is particularly pernicious, because it taps into another core value of liberal democracy, the idea of individual liberty. By using the language of personal choice to justify racial inequality, we effectively allow one democratic norm (liberty) to justify the subversion of another (equality).”

7. This is illustrated, among others, by Armando Lara-Millan and Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve (2017, 72) in their recent ethnographic study of the gatekeeping role performed by jail staff members in limiting access to “jail benefits” by the undeserving poor who enter the jail: “Intake staff members view a portion of the jail population as purposely committing crimes to receive ‘jail benefits’—what staff members construe as shelter and safety from the streets, food, showers, and medical services. As they have come to understand it, their role ... is in part to keep people they primarily understand as the undeserving poor from entering the jail. It is common among the intake unit to refer to inmates as ‘regular customers’ and to be on the lookout for inmates trying to ‘game the system’” (see also Comfort 2007, 285–89).

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