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# Resisting internalized oppression: Black women's perceptions of incarceration

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RESISTING INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION: BLACK WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS  
OF INCARCERATION

A Thesis

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Master of Arts

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BY

Emily Williams

RUNNING HEAD: RESISTING INTERNALIZATION & BLACK WOMEN

Resisting Internalized Oppression:

Formerly Incarcerated Black Women's Perceptions of Incarceration

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Resisting Internalization.....	5
Two Differing Analyses of Black women’s incarceration from formerly incarcerated Black Women.....	7
Incarcerated Black Women.....	7
Hierarchies of Oppression: Black feminist Frameworks.....	13
Intra-Community Marginalization.....	19
Suppressing Identity, Masking Racism, & Advancing Myths: Neoliberal Capitalism.....	23
Neoliberal Foundations for Black Women’s Incarceration & the PIC.....	23
Neoliberal Capitalist Processes of Criminalization.....	29
Neoliberal Production of Criminalized Markets.....	30
Negative Effects of the PIC on Black Women.....	33
Education and Employment.....	36
The PIC & the Role of Racial Identity in Movement-Building.....	39
Prison Abolition Analyses of the PIC.....	40
Methods.....	46
Conducting Research with Black Women.....	46
Data Collection.....	49
Data Analysis.....	51
Analysis.....	53
Endangered Black Male Narratives & Politics of Loyalty.....	53
Neoliberal Conceptions of Personal Wealth.....	58

Question 2.....63

    Internalized Responsibility.....64

    Individual Perceived Benefits of Incarceration.....68

    Critical Consciousness & Political Analyses.....69

Question 3.....72

    Resistance, Activism, & Resilience.....73

Discussion.....78

Conclusion.....85

References.....95

Appendix.....102

### Abstract

In 2010, I attended two anti-incarceration events where formerly incarcerated Black women spoke against incarceration. While it seemed to me that the motivation to engage in anti-incarceration resistance could only allow for so much variance, I soon became painfully aware of the vital importance of considering formerly incarcerated Black women's stories while being critical of the broader contexts of American history and dominant political-economic paradigms. Specifically, as a result of synthesizing the messages I received at each of these events, I understood the importance of utilizing a politicized racial consciousness when considering the context within which Black women are the fastest growing population in American prisons (Roberts, 2012). Black women's politicized racial consciousness becomes important as similarities are uncovered between chattel slavery (and other pre-civil rights anti-black racist institutions like Jim Crow segregation) and contemporary incarceration practices in America (Alexander, 2010, Davis, 2010). The connections made between historic anti-black institutions and contemporary incarceration practices compel many to re-engage a Radical Black Feminist tradition and call for a broad-based movement to abolish the contemporary prison system. In anti-incarceration resistance, a politicized racial consciousness would allow a formerly incarcerated Black woman to perceive herself within a larger context of American socio-cultural institutions, to identify systemic racism as it relates to her life experience, and to formulate oppositional positioning against systemic anti-black racism (Brush, 2005). In this thesis, I argue that one critical step in anti-incarceration movement-building will be to invest considerable organizing efforts that politicize formerly incarcerated Black women's racial consciousnesses.

### Resisting Internalized Responsibility: Formerly Incarcerated Black Women's Perceptions of Incarceration

Black women's incarceration has been highly politicized in recent years. Much prison abolition research and analyses of the prison industrial complex (PIC) demonstrate that several systemic, political and economic factors contribute to Black women becoming incarcerated (Crenshaw, 2012; Davis, 2003, 2010; Sudbury, 2004, 2009). Davis (2005) suggests that one formidable step in dismantling the prison system will be to challenge mainstream perceptions that the logic of the prison is "self-evident" and that prisons are necessary to keep society safe (p.91). Intersectional analyses that focus on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women's lives have challenged mainstream notions of crime and defied simplistic notions about individuals who "choose" to participate in crime and subsequently become incarcerated. Primarily through life history methodology, this foundational body of research has illustrated the complexity of Black women's lives in economically disenfranchised contexts. Furthermore, this work is consistent with prison abolition perspectives that follow Black feminist traditions as it has captured the inequity created by systemic processes in the lives of Black women who are in danger of becoming incarcerated, are incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated. Also, this body of research reveals the inadequacy of American institutions and systems for Black women whose lives are intricately intertwined with criminal legal processes and systems. The women's lives are often impacted by systemic racial violence, experiences with male physical and sexual abuse, and participation in illegal markets to survive (Richie, 1996; 2012). However, this body of work has not explicitly considered incarcerated or formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions

of guilt and responsibility within the context of the PIC for the purposes of informing prison abolition movement-building strategy.

Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women's ideological perceptions of and political analyses about crime and incarceration are important. Formerly incarcerated Black women could form a broad political base with which to populate a robust prison abolition movement. While their stories have been used to challenge dominant perceptions of crime and criminality, efforts to explore Black women's perceptions of crime and criminality as it relates to their own experiences have been under-included in the research. This dynamic is important to explore with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women. Despite the overwhelming presence of institutions in their lives, they too are susceptible to internalizing mainstream ideological perceptions about the necessity for prisons to keep society safe. The potential for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women to have perceptions of responsibility that are consistent with mainstream ideology about crime and incarceration seems to have the potential to undermine prison abolition movement-building. Specifically, if formerly incarcerated Black women believe that they are responsible for becoming incarcerated, even though prison abolitionists assert that the PIC is responsible for the disproportionate number of Black women becoming incarcerated, this becomes a fundamental challenge to building a prison abolition movement that centers Black women's experiences and voices. The following juxtaposition of analyses about how Black women become incarcerated and who/what is responsible illustrates this contention.

### **Two Differing Analyses of Black Women's Incarceration from formerly Incarcerated Black Women**



In 2010, when I attended a lecture given by Angela Davis for Black History Month, I was introduced to the concept of prison abolition. Determined and eager to take full advantage of the privilege of being a graduate student in Chicago, I proudly sat in the front row while Davis gave a lecture on the prison industrial complex. Learning about the prison industrial complex as Davis (2005) defines it, "...the coordinated expansion of prisons, corporate involvement, provisioning of goods and services, and the use of prison labor resulting in the generation of vast amounts of capital," had a radicalizing effect on me (p.4). From this analysis, it was glaringly obvious that contemporary prison practices are not designed for the sole purpose of rehabilitating incarcerated persons or making society safer.

Davis asserts that the prison industrial complex is what has led to the formation of an apartheid society wherein more Black people are in prison than were slaves during plantation slavery (Alexander, 2010, Davis, 2010, Gilmore, 2011). Davis compares several contemporary prison practices to practices common in chattel slavery; such as, policies that require women's legs to be shackled during childbirth or custodial sexual abuse in prisons (Davis, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 1996). Furthermore, Davis identifies systemic factors that contribute to and create disproportionate rates of incarceration among Black women and other racial groups. Such systemic factors include the globalization of labor markets, criminalization of welfare and drug addiction, three strikes laws, plea bargaining, and a general subscription to individualist economic values.

As a prison abolitionist, Davis argues that the structural underpinnings of the prison industrial complex and the institution of the prison are beyond repair. Prison reform would not suffice to eliminate the racial and class bias with which the institutions that comprise the prison industrial complex currently operate. Some institutions that are implicated are public schools,

employment, the military and public social services. Rather, the entire complex would need to be dismantled (broken down and disenabled) and replaced with smaller institutions that actually solve problems to which society currently responds with incarceration (Davis, 2003, 2005, 2010; Gilmore, 2007).

Davis' analysis of the prison industrial complex expanded my racial consciousness by providing a clear analysis of systemic racism. It seemed clear to me from Davis' analysis that the overrepresentation of Black women in prisons was neither coincidence nor a result of an inherent criminal nature of Black women. Within an abolitionist framework, there were several examples with which to understand how race, gender, and social class can intersect to create a context for crime among Black women living in economically distressed situations.

I became impassioned by the realization of the degree to which the state continues to oppress Black communities. With strong conviction about the systemic injustices perpetuated by the criminal legal system and the liberatory promise of abolitionist perspectives, I committed to researching Black women and incarceration. This commitment led me to become involved with a small grassroots organization consisting primarily of formerly incarcerated people of color, the Changing Minds Campaign. The first event I attended with The Changing Minds Campaign was one in which the goal was to raise consciousness about the conditions of incarceration among family members of incarcerated individuals. Several members of The Changing Minds Campaign, all of who were formerly incarcerated Black women, had written a skit based on their experiences with incarceration which they performed at this event.

The women's skit began by sharing the complexity of their life circumstances prior to participating in criminalized behavior. All of the women were mothers. Traditional school settings had not supported their success. Two graduated from high school. Collectively, the

women had not had many opportunities to generate steady, sufficient income. Furthermore, their stories were complicated by histories of physical, emotional, and sexual trauma. A common theme in the women's story was an exclusion from mainstream institutions which resulted in isolation from access to traditional resources such as mental health services following traumatic experiences, full-time employment, and access to higher education.

As I listened to the women recollect their lives prior to incarceration, I was reminded of Davis' analysis of the prison industrial complex. The women were describing situations that were the result of the prison industrial complex as Davis had described in her lecture. While the women acknowledged that they believed that race had played a role in the length of their sentences and certainly affected the way they were treated by police, each refrained from holding criminal legal systems and other institutions responsible for creating contexts where their participation in criminalized behavior seemed logical or the best decision to ensure survival. Instead the women asserted that they had made conscious decisions about their participation in criminalized behavior and therefore felt as though they had deserved to be incarcerated.

I asked the women if they still felt responsible for having become incarcerated despite the fact that white women are incarcerated less often than Black women for the same charges. They responded, "Yes!" When I heard the women maintain that they could not be absolved of the consequences of their choices despite evidence of institutional racism (that white women are charged less often than Black women for the same crimes) and also considered that Davis' analysis clearly indicated that race is a better predictor of incarceration than is actual criminal behavior, it became clear to me that the women's stories were indicative of an insidious internalization of guilt, crime, and American institutional logic. I became preoccupied with the potential role that Black women's internalized oppression could play in maintaining the PIC and

the disproportionate representation of Black women in prison. Furthermore, I became concerned that a radical, politicized analysis of the PIC existed, yet the women whose lives seemed to be in many ways shaped by the PIC did not have access to that analysis. It seemed to me that with access to this information, the women would have been able to better resist pathways and circumstances which contributed to them becoming incarcerated. I wondered how the audience would have been impacted if the women had shared an analysis similar to Davis' analysis as opposed to one where the responsibility for becoming incarcerated was placed solely on Black women and their choices.

Contrary to mainstream ideology about individuals who become incarcerated, there are several concerns that relate to the potential for formerly incarcerated Black women to internalize responsibility for becoming incarcerated. The psychological effects of internalized responsibility could create the illusion that the problem, wrong-doing, and/or dysfunction is with the individual, not the system or institution. For instance, in the case of formerly incarcerated Black women, this illusion created by internalized responsibility has the potential to obscure the recognition and/or validation of other factors outside of an individual's control that could be responsible for Black women having become incarcerated. Furthermore, internalized responsibility in this case can be considered a form of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression is accompanied by harmful psychological effects and is a necessary factor in maintaining systems of domination such as racist criminal legal practices and misogyny (Pyke, 2010; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). Psychological distress experienced as anxiety, self-doubt, and low self-esteem can be caused by internalized oppression and can contribute to shorter life expectancy (Gilmore, 2011; Pyke, 2010).

The difference between the ideological foundations of prison abolition and the meaning the formerly incarcerated Black women of the Changing Minds Campaign made about incarceration raises questions about formerly incarcerated Black women's political consciousness and prison abolition movement-building strategy. Specifically, questions emerge about the extent to which one is able to identify racism in multiple forms, to recognize the ways in which institutional racism has influenced one's life experience, and to develop an oppositional stance against institutional racism accordingly (Stewart-Brush, 2001). Additionally, this disconnect raises questions about what strategies might lead formerly incarcerated Black women to recognize their experiences within the complex web of the PIC, to implicate the criminal legal system, and to engage in activism accordingly.

To explore the internalized oppression and racial consciousnesses of formerly incarcerated Black women is not to suggest that Black women are complicit with the social oppression that they may experience or that they have been duped by the system. The women of the Changing Minds Campaign agreed that racism in the criminal legal system existed; indeed, they cited many examples of such racism. However, their analyses of how they became incarcerated did not ascribe responsibility to the criminal legal system or social oppressions. In this thesis, I advocate for the formerly incarcerated Black women of the Changing Minds Campaign and Black women with similar life experiences to have access to further politicized analyses about their experiences with the criminal legal system. Specifically, I argue that prison abolition movement-building strategy can be informed by formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions of their experiences and ultimately incorporate resistance strategies to minimize internalized responsibility.

This thesis, grounded in Black feminist frameworks, utilizes a Foucauldian critique of the contemporary political and economic paradigm, neoliberal capitalism. This critique clearly illustrates the ways in which political and economic processes- fully removed from individual Black women themselves- create both markets for criminalized participation and subjectivities that make participation in criminalized markets likely (and in some cases unavoidable). Then, a review of prominent prison abolition ideological foundations and analyses will allow for a systemic level understanding of the role that formerly incarcerated Black women have played in movement-building. Specifically, this section focuses on race discourses within prison abolition analyses and the extent to which Black women's political and/or racial consciousnesses have been engaged with respect to developing movement-building strategy. Following that section, a content analysis of six formerly incarcerated Black women's life history narratives will provide deeper insight into the meaning they make about having become incarcerated and with whom/what they locate responsibility for having become incarcerated. In the final section of this thesis, I offer three recommendations for prison-abolition movement-building that center formerly incarcerated Black women's experiences and help to build resistance against Black women's internalized responsibility for having become incarcerated. It is my hope that while these strategies resist internalization, they will also politicize and even radicalize Black women and inspire fervent prison-abolition movement-building.

This thesis attempts to negotiate the tension between system-level processes and individual perceptions of experiences. The following questions guide this research:

1. How do Black women become incarcerated?
2. What is the meaning that formerly incarcerated Black women make about their participation in criminalized behavior and incarceration?

3. What are the implications of formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions of incarceration for prison abolition movement-building?

### **Hierarchies of Oppression: Black Feminist Frameworks**

“The only ones who we can expect to work for our liberation is us.”~ Combahee River Collective

“If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.” (Combahee River Collection, 2005; p.315). The possible truth of this claim is compelling and makes the argument that if the logic of gendered anti-Black racism is eliminated, then the current systems of domination would not be able to function, and would therefore be unable to dominate groups with other marginalized identities (Rose, 2012). Black women have had a long and complicated history with American systems and institutions. Since slavery, Black women's social positioning, agency and ability to self-determine social outcomes has been entangled with and suppressed by capitalist interests as represented by American heterosexual white male values or white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (Davis, 1998, hooks 2007).

A few Black feminist concepts will provide theoretical foundations for exploring the potential for formerly incarcerated Black women to internalize responsibility for becoming incarcerated despite evidence that suggests that the criminal legal system operates with racial bias. One concept is capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchy. The Combahee River Collective (2005) asserts that within this system, Black women are positioned at the very bottom of the social organization with heterosexual white males at the top. Many Black feminists agree that the systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy are deeply implicated in

the social oppression experienced by many Black women. Specifically, Black women's social positioning, agency, and ability to self-determine social outcomes has been entangled with capitalist interests (Davis, 1998; hooks, 1993; Smith, 2008).

The clearest example of the ways in which capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchy has been used to advance capitalist interest at the expense of Black women is slavery. The logic of slavery was founded on anti-black racism and the constructed idea that Blacks are inferior to whites (Smith, 2008). Many anti-prison scholars agree that while slaves were emancipated in 1863, structural anti-black racism has persisted in American society and white supremacy and heteropatriarchy have remained the social norms (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003, 1998; Wacquant, 2002).

Heteropatriarchy has been used to maintain capitalist interest primarily through the normalization of the nuclear family and monogamous marriage primarily for the purposes of transferring wealth through generations (Wolf, 2010). The assertion of heteropatriarchy necessitated the construction of a belief system that female individuals are inferior to men. Furthermore as a dominating system, heteropatriarchy, as a dominating system, makes all other family structures and organizations seem pathological (Wolf, 2010). Furthermore, during slavery, these standards were rarely attainable for Blacks because of forced separation and sexual terror that was characteristic of the slave trade. This misperception is related to historic trends in employment, when Black men were systematically excluded from traditional employment and Black women were able to work as domestic help in white families, therefore becoming breadwinners in Black homes. That Black women were afforded minimal employment opportunities created the illusion that they had access to privileges which Black men did not. It is a gendered expectation for men to be providers, and patriarchal constructions of masculinity in



relation to Black males did not account for their intentional exclusion from lucrative employment (hooks, 1995)

Capitalism, the dominant political and economic system in America, is a system based on competition, commodification, and the maximization of profits (Davis, 1998; Smith, 2008; Wolf, 2010). The wealth of this nation was built on slave labor and many argue that anti-black racism is endemic to American society (Taylor, 2012). For this reason, socialist and anti-capitalist Black feminists assert that the social and political disenfranchisement that they have experienced is a result of imperial, colonial, and hegemonic legacies (Combahee River Collective, 2005; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1995). Therefore, anti-capitalist and socialist Black feminists have developed political visions and positions that resist oppressive conditions created by dominant political systems. Furthermore, as it is purported that capitalist white supremacist and heteropatriarchal domination affects individuals differently based on their location within social hierarchies of gender, race, sexuality, and class, Black feminists acknowledge that there are many groups and social identities that experience oppression as a result of systems of oppression. They have come to understand that they constitute the bottom of this hierarchy, but they also believe that it would be short sighted and ineffective to organize only for their liberation (Cohen, 1997; Smith, 2008).

White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy has contributed to oppressive situations in the lives of Black women also through its domination of other identities. They are the invisible values that define American institutions (hooks, 1995). By the very construction of identities, social groups are formed and some are “othered.” One way in which social groups’ identities have been constructed is through the construction of stereotypes. As is the case presently with the PIC, historic institutions constructed meaning about Black women with the sole purpose of creating a social and political landscape wherein the exploitation and oppression of Black

women would become normalized. This normalization of Black women's inferiority allows exploitation to occur without challenging the legitimacy of the individuals and institutions participating in Black women's oppression by creating the illusion that Black women's oppression was/is warranted (Collins, 1996).

In the case of Black women, de-humanizing images have been deployed to control Black women's social agency and mainstream perceptions of Black womanhood. The benefit for white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy is that they can control the social positioning of Black women while maintaining the illusion that Black women are responsible for their experiences and predicament (Lorde, 1984). The stereotypes are dehumanizing because the meaning is not grounded in reality about Black women; rather they are constructed for the purposes of maintaining exploitative systems from which white supremacy is preserved and its benefits reproduced. In the case of the PIC, there are several specific stereotypes that relate to the criminalization of Black women.

Socialist and anti-capitalist Black feminists assert that the social and political disenfranchisement that Black women have experienced within a United States context is a result of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy which has a historical legacy of colonization, imperialism, and hegemony (Combahee River Collective, 2005). Prison abolitionists still argue that this historical legacy influences the social positioning of Black women in economically depressed communities (Davis, 2005). Therefore, while Black feminists have developed analyses that define oppressions specific to their subject position and situate said oppressions within American institutional and white patriarchal power systems, they also recognize that their oppression is a part of American colonial domination whereby many ethnic, racial, national and gender groups have been violently suppressed, exploited, and marginalized (Combahee River

Collective, 2005, Crenshaw, 2000). The political and social disenfranchisement of Black communities generally, and Black women, specifically is directly related to the stabilization of white male rule, white supremacy, and capitalism (capitalism also operates from a top down notion, i.e. capitalism thrives on the exploitation of one class by another). The PIC creates social and political dynamics that are illustrative of a regenerative relationship between American institutions, Black women, and economic capital that is deeply entrenched in white supremacy, heterosexism, patriarchy, and capitalism. The PIC relies on Black communities as an economically depressed and socially devalued population on which it can criminalize, extract resources, and relocate without contestation.

An anti-capitalist stance possesses the potential to interrupt the symbiotic relationship between politicians, corporations, and Black women that characterizes the PIC. To acknowledge the revolutionary acts of Black feminists in American history illuminates strategies that have been successful in securing liberation from oppression for Black women in an American context. It is precisely the destruction of the current political-economic institutions which could lead to Black women's liberation. In, "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation", Angela Davis (1998) states, "An effective women's liberation movement must be cognizant of the larger social revolution: the capitalist mode of production must be overturned, like the political and legal structures that sustain it." (p.56) Anti- capitalism is a vital political stance in considering Black women's perceptions of incarceration as it presents a politic that is directly in opposition to the American political- economic system that has caused centuries of exploitation, social, and political subjugation for Black women and other people of color (Combahee River Collective, 2005, Davis, 2005). An anti-capitalist lens allows for a radical politicized analysis about the ways in which state and other institutions criminalize and oppress

Black women. While there are historic examples of Black women's individual and organized resistance to white patriarchal systems, deeply entrenched ideologies about Black women's worth and respectability have consistently proved to be barriers in securing the economic, social, and political self-determination for American Black women (Combahee River Collective, 2005, Jones, 2007).

This next section, discusses the ways in which oppressive conditions created for Black men and white women have further marginalized Black women from historical movements for liberation. The outcomes of Black women's positioning within the Civil Rights and Women's movements make visible the short-comings of organizing for equality on the sole basis of one aspect of one's identity: race or sex.

### **Intra-Community Marginalization**

Black feminist political activism is distinct given that Black women's liberation from systems of domination has required that their political goals be defined separately from Black men and white women (Combahee River Collective, 2005; Davis, 1998; James 2000; Roth, 2004). Black women have endured an equally long and often times violent history in the U.S. However, Black males' experiences are often the focus in conversations, discussions, research, and movements for racial justice (Crenshaw, 2000; 2012; James, 2000). For example, apart from Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, the most well-known leaders from the Black Rights movement are males (McGuire, 2010). When one considers Jim Crow segregation and the violent racism which was characteristic in many American towns and cities, one most often thinks of lynching, even though sexual assault and rape were also common forms of violence used against Black women to reinforce white supremacy (McGuire, 2010). The same is true for contemporary analyses of the PIC. Although there has been an increase in research about mass

incarceration and Black women (mostly research done by Black women), Latino and Black males are often reported to be the primary victims of police brutality, criminalization, and incarceration in mainstream discourse (Alexander, 2010; Corbado, 2012). However, Black feminists assert, and statistics support that Black women experience oppressive conditions on the basis of multiple identities- race, gender, sexuality, and class (Crenshaw, 2012; Collins, 1991; Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1995). Furthermore, Black women have become an increasingly criminalized group (Bush-Baskette, 2012; Corbado, 2012; Crenshaw, 2012; Richie, 2012).

In addition to the way in which Black women traditionally have been marginalized in racial justice discourse, they also have been marginalized in women's rights discourse (Combahee River Collective, 2005; Crenshaw, 2005, 2012; Davis, 1998; James, 2005; Roth, 2004). While Black women's gender granted them group membership with the mainstream, predominantly white women's liberation movement, Black women's experiences were not fully represented. Instead, Black women's efforts and support were utilized in the movement, but their political demands were not central concerns (Roth, 2004). This development created a situation in which Black women's experiences with social oppression were undefined in American legal terms; therefore discriminatory treatment on the basis of gender and race was not recognizable by American law, leaving Black women without the option of legal redress for mistreatment on the basis of race and gender (Crenshaw, 2000; 2005; 2012).

The perceived ideological difference between white women and Black women relates to constructions of femininity and patriarchy utilizing harmful stereotypes to define perceptions of womanhood. White womanhood historically has been constructed as pure, innocent, and moral. In contrast, Black womanhood has been "othered" and constructed as domineering, sexually amoral, and unattractive (hooks, 2000; Giddings, 1984). Although, the origins of these

stereotypes date back to American slavery and were used in part to justify the enslavement of Black women, contemporary effects of these stereotypes can be found in criminal legal practices and the extent to which Black women are perceived to be victims of domestic and sexual violence, and are perceived as dysfunctional mothers (Richie, 2012; Roberts, 2008).

Furthermore, deep ideological entrenchments about Black women's worth and innocence have consistently proved to be barriers in securing the economic, social, and political self-determination of American Black women (Combahee River Collective, 2005; Jones, 2007).

Presumably, previous social movements and liberation struggles have failed to sufficiently make claims that have interrupted the capitalist logic which perpetually and strategically re-creates the social, economic, and political subjugation of Black communities generally and Black women specifically (Alexander, 2010, James, 2000). Ultimately, while Black women played pivotal roles in each historical liberation movement, their claims have yet to be central to mainstream political movements (Crenshaw, 2000; James, 2000). This consideration of Black women's roles in the Civil Rights movement and the Women's movement provides insight into the formulation of Black feminist ideologies which emphasize multi-issue politics and demonstrates the importance of intersectional analyses with respect to Black women's experiences (Crenshaw, 2000, 2012; James, 2000; 2005).

That Black males have dominated racial justice discourse, and that white women have dominated sexual violence/gender equality discourses, has had both systemic and intra-racial community effects for Black women. In particular, endangered Black male narratives within Black communities create precarious expectations for Black women. Endangered Black male narratives advance and contribute to the perception that Black women do not similarly experience systemic racial oppression. Therefore, Black males experiences with racism are often

privileged over Black women's experiences with racism (Crenshaw, 2000, 2012; hooks, 1995; Richie, 1996, 2012). West (1999) describes Black women's obligation:

...Black women's awareness of the systematic oppression of black men through lynchings, imprisonment, unemployment, and the ever prevalent "rape" charge causes women to feel obligated to be understanding and forgiving of Black men. There are cultural cues that foster the notion that because of the racist oppression suffered by black men, a sacrificial role is demanded of black women. (p. 83)

Black women's perceived privilege in contrast to Black male's racial oppression can often be translated into the expectation that Black women have an obligation to support racially disenfranchised Black men and put their interests above their own (Richie, 1995, 2012). That Black women are by contrast perceived to have more social mobility, the expectations are set that Black women compensate or use their social "privilege" to support Black men who experience decreased opportunities because of systemic and social racism. Beth Richie (2012) refers to this dynamic as loyalty politics and asserts that these politics also arise from Black women's understandings that Black men experience racism to a greater extent than do Black women. Rhetoric of racial solidarity can also contribute to Black women internalizing responsibility for the well-being of Black men and their communities. This perception that Black women are safe from racial social oppression illustrates the importance of affirming Black women's voices and developing resistance strategies specific to their experiences with the PIC.

This racial disenfranchisement for Black men being reflective of dominating systems of patriarchy and capitalism, in many cases, plays out in interpersonal violence (hooks, 1995; Smith, 2008). Indeed, Black feminists have examined the ways in which loyalty politics, endangered Black male narratives, and race and gender identities contribute to oppressive

experiences for Black women. In a study of incarcerated African American battered women, Richie (1996) defined gender entrapment as:

The socially constructed process whereby African American women who are vulnerable to men's violence in their intimate relationship are penalized for behaviors they engage in even when the behaviors are logical extensions of their racialized gender identities, their culturally expected gender roles and the violence in their intimate relationships. (p. 4).

The, "logical extensions of their racialized identities," (p.4) to which Richie (1996) refers were often informed by cultural values that extended to Black women's intimate relationships with men. Richie noted that often, the women she interviewed embodied self-sacrificing ideology. The gender roles that women assumed in intimate relationships often involved the woman risking her safety for the betterment of her intimate relationship or for her family. Many of the women in Richie's study participated in prostitution and drug trafficking (for which they were ultimately incarcerated) wherein they sacrificed their well-being to generate income for their families, selves, and/or intimate partner. These criminal behaviors often constituted relatively "low risk" activity with profitable ends. For this report, intersectional analyses are vital when conceiving of Black women's potential to internalize responsibility for incarceration, as race, class, and victim-survivor status greatly influence one's life experiences in America (hooks, 1995, West, 1999).

As Black feminists have established, white supremacist heteropatriarchal domination suppresses all other social identities in the interest of privileging its own. Therefore, this discussion of domination illustrates the importance of developing organizing strategies that do not appeal to only one marginalized identity. Rather, models which organize on the basis of challenging the power system based on shared oppression are likely to yield better results for all



oppressed identities (Cohen, 1997; Smith, 2008). Furthermore, that the laws and policies which resulted from the civil rights' movement did not end racial discrimination and secure full equality for Black women calls into question the legitimacy of assimilationist models in achieving liberation. The following section provides a critique of the contemporary political economic landscape and locates with the processes that have intentionally criminalized Black women. Neoliberal capitalist, political, and economic paradigms and the processes of criminalization and market creation demonstrate the ways in which capitalist logic relies on Black women in economically disenfranchised communities to build industry and global profits. Furthermore, the following section discusses the extent to which the state controls economic and criminalized behavior.

### **Suppressing Identity, Masking Racism, & Advancing Myths: Neoliberal Capitalism**

“In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.”~Audre Lorde (2007, p. 53)

“In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable. When you have a normalizing society, you have a power which is, at least superficially, in the first instance, or in the first line a biopower, and racism is the indispensable precondition that allows someone to be killed, that allows others to be killed. Once the state functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the state.” (Foucault, 1993; p.256)

### **Neoliberal Foundations for Black Women Becoming Incarcerated and the PIC**

In America, current prison trends coincide with the adoption of a neoliberal political-economic framework. That is, a rise in the PIC is correlated with an ideological shift regarding

criminality, an increase of privatization, and a decrease in social welfare (social services) funding. These neoliberal shifts contribute greatly to the increased number of Black women who are incarcerated in America. The significance of the correlation between Black women's representation in prison and the adoption of neoliberal capitalist policies indicate that neoliberal philosophy and practices frame the ways in which Americans perceive crime, incarceration, and working class, urban, Black women (Crenshaw, 2000, Davis, 2005). These perceptions shape policy development and the formation of institutional practices (Harris-Perry, 2011). The central tenets of neoliberal capitalism create a social and political discourse wherein Black women blame themselves for their participation in illegal behavior and wherein the larger society fails to support claims that the criminal legal system operates with institutional racism to incarcerate Black women at alarming rates.

This section examines the overall American political economic landscape to identify the factors which create a context wherein Black women can be incarcerated at disproportionate rates without alerting the general public to the racist praxis of the criminal legal system, as well as how many Black women themselves might assume guilt irrespective of their perceived experiences with racism throughout their involvement with the criminal legal system. To be observant of neoliberal philosophies and practices will likely aid in establishing an understanding of the rationale behind the "self-evident" logic of contemporary prison practice. A critical analysis of neoliberal frameworks allows for investigation of social policies that create a socio-political and economic ethos wherein incarceration can justifiably play a central role to the US monetary economy, the prison economy that capitalizes on Black communities while appropriating claims of racism, and incarcerated Black women perceive themselves to be

responsible for becoming incarcerated despite evidence of institutional racism and several experiences with inadequate institutions, such as school, foster care, or juvenile detention.

Many elements of domination as described by radical and socialist Black feminists can be found in the ideological foundations of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism is a political economic theory and practice that equates personal liberation with consumption, economic freedom, free trade, and unregulated markets (Harvey, 2005). Essential to the premise of neoliberalism is the ascription of economic terms to domains that previously had no economic implications for the state; for instance, modern education links performance on standardized tests, school funding, and labeling particular schools as failures. Neoliberalism is not just a concept which is solely relegated to politicians and policy, but it is deeply entrenched in the lives and psyches of the American people (Harvey, 2005). The concepts of the state working for the collective good of American citizens have been replaced by the central concepts of privatization, individualism, personal responsibility, and meritocracy. Within an American context, many believe in a bootstrap ideology: a hard work ethic pays off and that free enterprise should guide economic endeavors. According to David Harvey (2005) in, A Brief History of Neoliberalism:

The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices [free trade, unregulated markets, private property rights, etc.]. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist...then they must be created by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. (p.35)

This re-framing of the state's role represents the beginning of a series of political shifts which have contributed to an increase in the population of Black women in prisons, the potential for formerly incarcerated Black women to internalize responsibility for becoming incarcerated, and to mainstream society's failure to recognize institutional racism in the American criminal legal system. Prior to neoliberal capitalism, the political economic landscape was one in which re-distributive policies such as affirmative action and social welfare were posited to be solutions to minimize economic inequalities created by historical anti-Black institutions like Jim Crow segregation, redlining, systemic sexual violence, and slavery. These historical practices inspired committed resistance from Black communities and political organizations against structural injustices. Some of the results of that resistance were the abovementioned social programs that resulted in increased access to social and economic resources (Morris & Davis, 2007; Taylor, 2012). This political economic system, Keynesianism, served as the umbrella concept behind a broad set of social welfare programming and policies that were instated as part of the "New Deal" to assist Americans in recovering from the Great Depression (Gilmore, 1998).

While neoliberal philosophy and policies are stated in what is presumably "deracialized" terms, the neoliberal subjects and the ways in which crime is constructed within a neoliberal context altogether have racialized outcomes (Foucault, 2003, Roberts, 2008). Furthermore, the absence of racial language is reflective of a colorblind racist paradigm, wherein the assumption is made that if race is not mentioned explicitly in the constitution, laws, or policy, then racism does not exist and has no effect on social, legal, and political outcomes (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Crenshaw, 2012).

In this era of color-blind racism, there has been a corresponding shift from de jure racism codified explicitly into the law and legal systems to a de facto racism where people of color,

especially African Americans, are subject to unequal protection of the laws, excessive surveillance, extreme segregation, and neo-slave labor via incarceration, all in the name of crime control. At present, civil justice has been at the center of legal claims of color-blindness, forwarding the notion that if race is no longer the basis for legalized discrimination, then it is no longer relevant to the law at all. It is civil justice that currently claims that when explicit racial discrimination is removed from the language of the law, it is magically removed from any societal impact and any subsequent legal remedy (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008 p.626).

Consistent with these claims, Harvey's assertion that neoliberalism was instated not as a means of extending freedom for all, but instead as an avenue by which to restore class domination further supports claims that American institutions are not currently equipped to achieve racial equality and will exploit Black people and Black women in particular to the extent that it is in the interest of the state to do so (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Combahee River Collective, 2005, Gilmore, 2007; Taylor, 2012). In this sense, the state has the ability to criminalize populations without recourse in order to preserve its image, wealth, status quo functioning, or to develop a global industry.

A prime example of one technology that the American neoliberal state has used to create markets where none had previously existed has been evident in an ideological shift around drug policy. The political, legal shifts that began in the 1980's illustrate very well how the state went about setting up a racialized prison market where one had not existed previously. The instatement of the "War on Drugs" depended on highly racialized images that relied on threatening stereotypes of Black women and unleashed a literal war on Black communities (Taylor, 2012; Jordan-Zachary, 2007). After the CIA introduced crack-cocaine, a highly addictive drug, into Harlem and likely other predominantly Black communities, the Reagan

administration began the divestment in social service funding, privatized large fractions of the prison industry, and created a criminalizing discourse around working class, urban, Black women (Olsson, 2011).

The “War on Drugs” was the primary source of racialized discourse to directly target Black women (Alexander, 2010, Clarke, 2005, Jones, 2005). In this campaign, Black women were portrayed as pregnant mothers who were addicted to crack and reproducing a generation of “crack babies” that would become the downfall of respectable American society. Black women living in poor resourced and urban areas became synonymous with crime in the minds and hearts of mainstream America (Alexander, 2010). Pregnant Black women were incarcerated on charges relating to use and/or possession of crack cocaine and were convicted of child neglect and distribution of drugs to a minor, despite the fact that white women are more likely to use drugs while pregnant (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). These images were spread in newspapers, previously reputable news programming networks, and in public policy (Davis, 2007; Jordan-Zachary, 2007). The advancement of this campaign and the hysteria that it provoked is frightening and it was the impetus to promote sterilization among Black women (Davis, 2007; Shihadeh & Steffensmeier, 1994). To describe how these stereotypical images translated into increasingly oppressive structural conditions for Black women living in economically disenfranchised communities, Jordan-Zachary (2007) states:

The Policy elite used and responded to the crack mother symbol—one of an incapable and irresponsible decision maker, a moral deviant, and an unfit mother that became synonymous with “bad” black women—by implanting increasingly punitive policies... Ultimately, the war on drugs came to be distorted, unduly focusing on women and black people. This war forced

the black community to restructure itself in the individual, economic, and political realms.

(p.112)

As Blacks were portrayed as dangerous threats to society, a “tough-on-crime” discourse emerged from this political era that gave birth to the harsh three strikes laws, and long sentences for drug offenses (Alexander, 2010). The harsh sentencing practices and mandatory minimums are directly correlated with the drastic increases in prison populations (Alexander, 2010, Davis, 2009). While drug addiction is a real social problem in many communities, white males in fact account for the majority of drug users in America, and Black women are charged on drug-related crimes more often than any other racial group (Alexander, 2010, Clarke 2005). This statistic illustrates the pervasiveness of the racist discourse advanced by the war on drugs and the effects it had on social perceptions of Black women.

### **Neoliberal Capitalist Processes of Criminalization**

The way in which crime and the criminal are defined in neoliberal capitalist societies allows for an alternative perception of the methods by which the state directs and constructs economic behavior. Crime is defined as, “...that which is punished by the law...” (Foucault, 1999). So, in this sense, the state has sole discretion to decide what behavior is punished and that which is deemed acceptable. The state has a long history of enforcing social control through criminalization of particular racialized groups. For example, Black women can be criminalized for self-medicating with street drugs, yet common mood-altering pharmaceutical drugs, like Prozac and Aderol are used in upper middle class white communities and not criminalized (Jordan-Zachary, 2007). Moreover, the state is concerned with policing its borders with Mexico and disproportionately deports Mexican immigrants; however, the same ferocity is not used in enforcing immigration from European countries (Davis, 2005).

If one were to believe in Harvey's assertion that neoliberalism is actually a well-executed plan to restore class power, then one could posit that a prime technology of the state to control individuals' economic participation would be to criminalize market participation that threatens or undermines the power of the state (Foucault, 1999). Presumably this domain is constructed based on the interest of preserving power and dominance to those who already possess American political, economic, and social control (Roberts, 2008). Depending on the markets in which one participates, production and exchange dictate the way in which one becomes intelligible to the state, privileging some and criminalizing others. Foucault defines the criminal as:

...nothing other than absolutely anyone whomsoever. The criminal, any person, is treated only as anyone whomsoever who invests in an action, expects a profit from it, and who accepts the risk of a loss. From this point of view, the criminal is and must remain nothing more than this. (p.91)

However, in the campaign against Black women in the 1980's which created justification for divestment in social welfare programs, the state strategically created a group of people who had limited access to social institutions and exacerbated their already vulnerable economic situations by reducing funding on which they relied to subsist. This example contests the notion that the criminal is, "anyone whomsoever," and implies that in fact, the state strategically crafted an ideological shift that criminalized Black women living in economically marginalized communities. Foucault's final assertion that the criminal must remain simply and matter of factly defined could be reflective of the state's interest to create markets designed for the sole capitalization of the state, while at the same time utilizing covert strategies. It's necessary that meaning about criminalized groups be constructed in such a way as to create the illusion that



crime is equally enforced and equitably defined. This illusion, then, masks anti-Black racism. An example in support of this assertion can be found in the colorblind rhetoric of neoliberal capitalist market participation.

**Neoliberal production of criminalized markets.** An analysis of criminalized participation in neoliberal societies juxtaposed against the divestment of social welfare will allow for a critical reading of formerly incarcerated Black women's participation within criminalized markets. In the Birth of Biopolitics, a critique of neoliberalism, Michel Foucault (1979), introduces the neoliberal economic subject as homo economicus:

...the man of exchange, the partner, one of the two partners in the process of exchange. And this homo economicus, partner of exchange, entails of course, an analysis in terms of utility of what he is himself, a breakdown of his behavior and ways of doing things... to a problematic of needs... which leads to the process of exchange... Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself." (p. 225)

According to Foucault's analysis of the economic subject that is rendered intelligible in a neoliberal society, such a subject has needs and on the very basis of meeting those needs for survival, will participate in market economies. It is through economic participation (the extent to which one exchanges and/or acquires money) that an individual is rendered intelligible to the state within neoliberal paradigms. Furthermore, one's participation in market economies is dictated by that which she/he has available to her/himself--one's human capital (Foucault, 1999). It is important to note here, that not all economies are rewarded equally by the state. For example, the state does not reward sex work in the same way that it rewards financial advising. Foucault describes two subjects, homo economicus and homo criminalis, which distinguish

between participation in legal markets and illegal markets as well as those who are criminalized and those who are not (Foucault, 1999).

The economic subject's participation in market economies is determined by his or her investment in his or her own respective human capital. In The Birth of Biopolitics, the two core elements of human capital are, "innate elements and the question of the improvement of genetics ...[and] acquired elements." (Foucault, 1999, p. 216) In short, human capital speaks to one's investment in oneself, one's ability to invest in social capital, and one's access to social institutions which will enhance one's ability to acquire personal wealth. Thus, it follows that one owns one's human capital and is free to invest in it in anyway one chooses. If one is to squander his or her human capital, neoliberal philosophy supports that his or her social outcome is simply a result of the individual failure to properly and fully invest in his or her human capital. It is not that the state contributed to the creation of a context wherein that individual was prevented from investing in her/his human capital in ways that would support the maximization of wealth in institutions deemed acceptable by the state. Philosophies of meritocracy assume that if one works hard one will profit and achieve success despite structural barriers. Structural factors have the potential to contribute to vulnerable financial circumstances or exclusion from traditional markets for some social groups. Despite these structural factors, an individual is responsible for her choices, which ostensibly in aggregate will determine her social and economic outcomes. For example, it is constructed that Black women who received welfare assistance in the 1980's needed financial support because they were inherently lazy and dysfunctional. Historically exploitative systems, like colonialism, systemic rape, or slavery, that thrived on the exploitation of Black women are absolved of any responsibility in this regard (Davis, 2005).

The ideas of meritocracy and personal responsibility are persuasive in that they both provide the illusion that all individuals have an opportunity to achieve economic well-being in neoliberal societies, based on the presumption that failure is not indicative of a general systemic dysfunction, but instead due to an internal individual failure. At the same time, this illusion of meritocracy and personal responsibility has the potential to keep individuals striving to achieve social economic norms (i.e.- “The American Dream”), despite negative experiences and histories with traditional American systems and institutions. Conversely, these notions leave unchallenged the prevalent belief that individuals who have acquired personal wealth and have achieved “The American Dream” have done so based on their own individual effort and merit, not social, economic, and/or gender privileges.

Neoliberal policy purports to provide the possibility for all individuals to maximize human happiness through the opportunity to achieve economic freedom. This social, economic, and political discourse is deeply inscribed in American culture. Coupled with the hypercharged criminalization of Black women, and colorblind racism, neoliberal capitalist philosophies create significant ideological challenges for prison abolitionists and anti-incarceration activists. Despite the covert and deleterious nature of neoliberal ideology, it shapes abolition analyses of the effects of the PIC on Black women’s lives.

### **Negative Effects of the PIC on Black Women**

“The more we gave in and complied, the worse they treated us.” ~Rosa Parks

Secondary to the neoliberal paradigm, Black women have come to be incarcerated as a consequence of an ideological shift around criminality, a divestment in social welfare, and isolation from participation in traditional market economies. In this sense it can be argued that neoliberal processes of criminalization and market creation both exclude Black women from

participation in traditional markets and criminalize markets to which they have access and can maximize their human capital. These points and others support the assertion that neoliberal capitalism is a dominating system that has the potential to minimize Black women's agency like many other historical anti-black systems. An analysis of the effects of the PIC on Black women living in economically disenfranchised situations will demonstrate the degree to which their ability to self determine their social, economic, and interpersonal outcomes can be shaped by American systems and institutions (Alexander, 2010; Roberts, 2008).

As has already been mentioned in this thesis, many anti-incarceration scholars demand an end to present prison practices because of the striking similarities between contemporary incarceration and historical racist institutions like slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and Black Codes (Alexander, 2010, Davis, 2003, 2005; James, 2007; Sudbury, 2005; Wacquant, 2002). These institutions all yielded economic benefits to the state and enforced white supremacy, while at the same time further economically and socially disenfranchising Black communities. Similar social, economic, and interpersonal effects can be found in the lives of Black women who have become intertwined in the PIC. Examples that illuminate the way in which neoliberal policy capitalizes on and further re-inscribes economic disenfranchisement of Black women can be found in employment statistics and the educational rates of women who become incarcerated.

It is significant to note that more than 70 percent of women who become incarcerated report that they had experienced sexual abuse or sexual assault prior to becoming incarcerated (Bush-Baskette, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 1996; Richie, 2012). Moreover, women in prison are three times more likely to have experienced sexual abuse than women who have never been incarcerated (Beck & Harrison, 2007, Freudenburg, 2002). Studies show that approximately 88 percent of women in prison report having been sexually abused (including rape) prior to

incarceration (Human Rights Watch, 1996; Freudenburg, 2002). The sexual abuse histories of women in prisons are significant because they create the conditions for drug charges and other criminalized behaviors like prostitution for which women are likely to be imprisoned (Moss, 2005, Davis, 2003). Amid, rapidly rising prison rates for women (800 percent since 1970), the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice (2009) estimates that nearly two-thirds of women in prison are incarcerated for non-violent offenses including drug crimes and prostitution.

This background information becomes relevant when considering how Black women become incarcerated within a neoliberal paradigm in which there is currently a disinvestment of social services; increasingly this divestment has meant that much needed professional health care has gone underfunded. As Richie (2012) notes, "...almost none [of incarcerated Black women] have had long-term mental health care" (conference presentation January 27, 2012). The effects of sexual assaults and childhood sexual abuse can be pervasive and relate to participation in criminalized behavior for which Black women become incarcerated. Many women who experience sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, (PTSD) which is associated with effects like severe depression, anxiety, flashbacks, and low self-esteem (West, 2007). Furthermore, stigma that is often associated with sexual abuse can often cause internalized guilt and shame. West (1999) states:

...shame can eat away at the women's self-hood...the multi-edged shame that is generated in Black women victim-survivors of intimate violence is a powerful covert weapon of domination. It can train women to locate the deprecating social stigmas and culpability for the violence against them with their own identities.

The way in which Black women can experience sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse is not removed from broader systemic violence. In the case of Black women who may be

abused, self-blame for sexual victimization can be engendered by negative stereotypes that portray Black women as hypersexual or as unworthy of protection and respect (West, 1999). Furthermore, the silence that characterizes responses to sexual abuse can be compounded by a general (and substantiated) distrust of police and social services, and even further aggravated by the pressure to not to contribute to further racial degradation of Black communities (West, 1999; Richie, 1996).

Given these severe instances of abuse, coupled with insufficient access to mental health care, it seems logical that many women who have been sexually abused and are without access to mental health care would develop alternative coping mechanisms in response to sexual trauma. In a study about collateral consequences of incarceration for Black women, Jones (2005) states, “These women’s efforts to deal with the various forms of violence in their lives made them even more vulnerable of mass incarceration that is fueled by a federally sponsored war on drugs that targets Black people.” (p.127)

This quote suggests and supports the argument that the divestment in social services with the consequence being incarceration resonates with an interaction between race, incarceration, gender, and profit. The development that Jones describes is another example of the way in which Black women living in economically distressed situations within neoliberal capitalist paradigms can be excluded from professional mental health care yet the alternative method they have adopted to cope has been criminalized.

### **Education & Employment**

Increasingly, education has become linked with prisons and neoliberal capitalist goals. More than 65 percent of women who are incarcerated have not graduated from high school (Bush-Baskette, 2012). The militarization of public schools in economically distressed

communities of color is significant here (Meiners & Quinn, 2011). The presence of armed security guards, surveillance technology, and criminal consequences for behavior infractions have served to create an environment in which young students of color face criminal consequences for misbehaving in school. Much of the literature on the school-to-prison pipeline relates to young Black and Latino boys, although Black girls also have disproportionately high rates of school expulsion (Crenshaw, 2012). In a prime example of the extent to which young Black girls can be criminalized within educational environments, a six year old, Selasia Johnson, was handcuffed and arrested for having a temper tantrum in her kindergarten classroom (Change.org, 2012). Prison abolitionists assert that these developments are strategic shifts in discourse and praxis that support the PIC.

No Child Left Behind, a federal policy with the stated goal of, “Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged,” and its dependency on standardized test scores to determine funding has resulted in a drastic shift in the nature of public education (Mathis, 2003). The pressure to achieve passing test scores has in many cases resulted in scenarios where teachers spend the majority of classroom time preparing students for the standardized exams. Failing test scores have been used to demonize public schools in communities of color and in many cases do students a disservice. These resultant school closings in communities of color have ultimately undergirded a growing charter movement. The charter school movement serves neoliberal capitalist interests of privatization. Furthermore, these transformations in public school education could be perceived as creating a system of domination to the extent that they reinforce capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchal values to the exclusion of multiple cultural, racial, and sexual values (Bricca, 2011). An example of this is the critical ethnic studies ban in Arizona. White male politicians spearheaded a successful campaign to ban Latino and Black history in

high schools despite the fact that graduation rates increased among Latino and Black students who attended those classes (Bricca, 2011). Some could argue that one's connection to her history could be empowering and that the ban in Arizona and other recent developments in public education could be linked to Harvey's assertion that neoliberal capitalism is, more than anything, an effort to restore class domination.

Given Foucault's analysis of neoliberal processes of criminalization and market creation, labor (or lack thereof) is a central motivator for participation in criminalized behavior. Eighty-two percent of women who have become incarcerated were unemployed at the time of arrest. Furthermore, if women do not have gainful employment in traditional job settings, then it could increase the likelihood that they would interpret their bodies as human capital and participate in sex work and drug economies, which are criminalized markets. Gilmore indicates that in the late 1980's, California's prison rate rose 400 percent and that 50 percent of the prisoners did not have steady employment in the year prior to becoming incarcerated and that over 80 percent of incarcerated individuals utilized a public defender, indicating that the majority of the individuals sentenced to prison were Black and Latino and from working class backgrounds. These statistics illustrate the ways in which exclusion from full participation in traditional mainstream work creates situations in which one becomes, "an entrepreneur of himself" and creates economies around drugs and sex trade, which ultimately increases one's likelihood of becoming incarcerated (Foucault, 1979 p. 79).

As a result of incarceration for felonious charges, many Black women are politically and socially marginalized through restricted access to voting, federal loans, public housing, and social assistance (Sokoloff, 2007). Frequent and multiple forms of policing, poor educational programs in prisons, minimal substance abuse treatment and barriers to securing housing,



employment, and custody of children upon re-entry into their communities are all examples of barriers created by the PIC for Black women (Davis, 2005, Meiners, 2010, Sokoloff, 2007). The barriers to full political and social participation for Black women, also create challenges for their children and their communities by the extraction of both human and economic resources.

The disenfranchisement of thousands of formerly incarcerated Black women significantly can be understood as civil death. Marable (2011) states:

The individual who has been convicted of a felony serves time, and successfully completes parole nevertheless continues to be penalized at every turn. He/she is penalized in the labor force, being denied certain jobs because of a criminal record. He/she has little direct access or influence on the decision-making processes of the political system. He/she may be employed and pay taxes, assuming all of the normal responsibilities of other citizens, yet may be temporarily or permanently barred from the one activity that defines citizenship itself- voting. (p. 113)

Marable's definition brings to light the ways in which formerly incarcerated Black women are silenced and denied political agency. Apart from the denial of political agency, formerly incarcerated Black women's social agency (i.e.- ability to self-determine life outcomes) is greatly decreased because of the restricted access to social institutions that assist with funding for college and affordable housing, which presents Black women with further isolation from traditional American institutions. For these reasons, formerly incarcerated Black women's understandings of their participation in criminalized behavior within a neoliberal paradigm and the PIC is crucial to the continued building of a strong vibrant prison abolition movement.

### **The PIC and The Role of Racial Identity in Movement-Building**

“Prison is the modern day manifestation of the plantation. The antebellum plantation ethos of dehumanization was marked by master-slave relations revolving about sexual terror and domination, beatings, regimentation of bodies, exploited labor, denial of religious and cultural practices, substandard food, health care, and housing, forced migration, isolation in “lockdown” for punishment and control, denial of birth family and kin.” ~Joy James, 2005, p. xxiii

#### **Prison Abolitionist Analyses of the PIC**

There are 2.5 million people currently incarcerated in the United States (Davis, 2005; Richie, 2012; Taylor, 2012). The United States incarcerates more people than any nation in the world. Statistics show that the majority of individuals who are incarcerated are Black and Latino (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Sudbury, 2009). In the United States, Black women constitute two-thirds of the women who are incarcerated. Black women are two times more likely to be incarcerated than Latinas and nearly four times more likely to be incarcerated than white women (Alfred & Chlup, 2009). The disproportionate incarceration of Black women has catalyzed significant research and analysis grounded in prison abolition and anti-incarceration perspectives that have revealed political, economic, and social factors that contribute to Black women having become one of the most represented groups in prisons (Davis 2012; Richie, 2012; Roberts, 2008, 2012). The prison industrial complex has emerged to describe how mass incarceration of people of color can occur despite a decrease in crime rates (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007).

Prison abolition analyses of the PIC identify the ways in which neoliberal philosophies like meritocracy, privatization, personal responsibility and disinvestment in social services translate from political economic philosophy into lived experiences for Black women. Although,

the majority of prison abolition analyses of the PIC have been conducted on the level of politics and economics, prison abolition is relevant to formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions of responsibility for incarceration because these analyses implicate U.S. systems and institutions for Black women becoming incarcerated (or somehow entangled with the criminal legal system). This suggests that Black women who become incarcerated might also consider the ways in which their lives could have been shaped by political and economic developments that are outside of their control. Furthermore, prison abolitionists offer alternatives to incarceration that align with radical anti-capitalist Black feminist ideology. While the current body of prison abolition research has provided a strong foundation for anti-incarceration movement-building, formerly incarcerated Black women's voices and experiences have been under represented in this work.

There is ample research on the PIC and various associated consequences of the PIC which focuses on the most prominent work from prison abolitionists who follow a radical Black feminist tradition. In this sense, the prison abolitionists who are discussed in this thesis focus attention on Black women or women of color generally, take a critical perspective on capitalism and use anti-racist and anti-sexist methods for movement building.

There are a few primary analyses of the flaws inherent in the PIC drive arguments that support prison abolition. While the underlying assumption of prisons is associated with correction or rehabilitation of those incarcerated, many practices are de-humanizing and counterproductive to preparing individuals to live well in American society (Davis, 2005, Gilmore, 2007). As noted earlier, Davis has compared contemporary prison models to American plantation slavery. This comparison holds true with regard to the amount of Black people whose freedoms and civil rights have been disenfranchised through conviction and incarceration, and also speaks to the de-humanizing ways in which individuals who are incarcerated are treated.

Sudbury offers an analysis of the ways in which the U.S. prison model, like slavery, has become a global industry. Countries like South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have replicated policies and practices which emulate the American PIC, including versions of the “War on Drugs” (Sudbury, 2009). In addition to the replication of the PIC in other countries, a burgeoning goods and supplies market has emerged in the U.S. This market includes the development and marketing of surveillance technology, prison supply expositions (Richie, 1996, Sudbury, 2009). With industrial development, the prison system becomes inseparable from capitalist interest, prisoners come to represent profits, and Black bodies, in particular, become commodified (Davis, 2005, Sudbury, 2004).

The feminization and racialization of poverty has contributed to the global increase of the incarceration of women of color. Ruthie Gilmore (2007) asserts that the prisons have represented a catch-all solution to crises created by increasing poverty, homelessness, and economic despair. She suggests that crime is subjective and the parameters around crime are fluid depending on the state’s needs. Gilmore acknowledges that the current prison practices disproportionately impact women, people of color, and working class whites (2007).

Despite the demographics of individuals who become incarcerated, the academy has been a primary site of prison abolition and anti-prison activism within the last decade (Sudbury, 2009). Through publications, lectures, and significant community organizing, some abolitionist goals have been achieved, like decarceration and decriminalization of marijuana in some states and counties (Meiners & Quinn, 2011; Richie, 2012; Sudbury, 2009). Although any advancement towards prison abolition and dismantling the PIC is notable, most of the activism to achieve these small gains has taken place on policy levels through grassroots efforts by dedicated scholar-activists, community members, and community organizations (Richie, 2012). By and

large, the work to disrupt the “self-evident” logic of prisons has been most accessible to individuals in privileged spaces, not necessarily individuals who are most affected by the PIC, specifically formerly incarcerated Black women (Davis, 2005; p.93). The potential for formerly incarcerated Black women to internalize responsibility for becoming incarcerated despite the amount of research which supports that systems collude to create disproportionate rates of Black women who become incarcerated is problematic. Many studies reveal the negative effects that Black women experience as a result of the PIC, which information could potentially politicize Black women’s perceptions of the criminal legal system, better prepare Black women to resist the PIC, and ultimately inspire Black women to participate in and inform prison abolition movement-building

While scholar-activists argue that prison abolition movement -building must continue, there is debate about the role that racial identity should play in movement-building. One approach to identity politics within the context of prison abolition seems to have arisen from the lessons learned from the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights movements. Davis (2005) states, “Identity by itself has never been an adequate criterion around which communities of struggle could be organized--not even during those periods when we imagined identity as the most powerful engine of movements.” (p.100) While Davis affirms the complexities of identities and the fallible qualities of identity-based politics, she does not completely dismiss the importance of racial identity as a viable basis on which to organize.

Another perspective on the role of racial identity in the prison-abolition movement-building seems to be consistent with colorblind ideology, Gilmore (2007) urges researchers, activists, and scholars to:

...quit the divisions old and new that trap us in doomed methods of analysis and action...Sadly, even anti-racists organizing to renovate commonsense division by objectifying certain kinds of people put into a pre-given category that then automatically gets oppressed. (243)

Substantial evidence exists which supports that the PIC operates with anti-Black racism and disproportionately affects Black women. Gilmore's recommendation to researchers, scholars, and activists seems to focus on political economy rather than the PIC in the lives of individuals who are affected by the PIC. This perspective seems to overlook, perhaps, even dismiss, a historical legacy of anti-black racism and the role that personal/individual liberation and healing can play in movement-building. Furthermore, this argument suggests that by researching and organizing on particular racialized identities, one is actually reinscribing those categories and seems to ignore that the American government has taken calculated steps and engaged in racist practice to oppress distinctly (based on identity, albeit constructed) different social groups. These racist logics have different effects in the respective communities and are internalized differently (Pyke, 2010). These positions on the role of racial identity sideline analyses of individual perceptions of identity within the context of the PIC and how those perceptions inform one's inclination to participate in prison abolition movement-building or to internalize responsibility for having become incarcerated.

There are prison abolitionist scholar activists whose work is grounded in gendered racialized identity based politics. This research has primarily served to complicate narratives about Black women who become incarcerated. Sudbury and Richie argue that anti-black racism in gendered forms is at the center of neoliberal capitalist economic development and that Black

women and women of color absolutely should be at the center of organizing the prison abolition movement. Sudbury (2005) states:

Increasingly Black women and women of color are the raw material that fuel the prison industrial complex as scapegoats of tough-on-crime rhetoric; targets of drug busting operations that generate millions for police, customs and military budgets; or workers sewing and assembling electronics in prison workshops. (177)

Significant work has been done to illustrate the ways in which race, gender, and class collude to create particular experiences for Black women in the PIC. Specifically, Richie's (1996) gender entrapment theory best illustrates the distinct complexities of some Black women who become incarcerated. The theory of gender entrapment suggests that the particular meaning created around Black female racialized and gendered identity shapes the behaviors, experiences, and perceptions that can contribute to the ways in which one experiences oppressive situations. Also, this meaning has the potential to inform one's perceptions of her participation in criminalized behavior.

Plea bargaining also plays a role in the oppression of Black women. In the review of formerly incarcerated/incarcerated Black women's narratives there is a trend in which many women state that they had been trafficking drugs for their boyfriends. After being arrested, women could be offered plea bargains and the opportunity to provide information about their boyfriends, who play more significant roles in the drug trade, in exchange for a lesser sentence. There are multiple examples of Black women who refuse to "snitch" on their boyfriends even though their loyalty in not disclosing information about their boyfriends was not reciprocated by their boyfriends. As a result Black women's racialized and gendered loyalty can be exploited by the criminal legal system. So, in this case, Black women's perceptions of themselves as Black

women within Black communities is integral to the state's ability to criminalize and incarcerate Black women.

This point about racialized and gendered identities can also be applied in transnational analyses. Julia Sudbury (2005) examines the ways in which women living in the global south become entrapped by the effects of neoliberal capitalist trade de-regulation and shrinking social service sectors. Sudbury (2005) describes the situations of limited agency in which many Black women globally find themselves as a result of recent economic restructuring.

Even where these women do find employment, low wages, driven down by multinational corporations in search of ever greater profit margins and kept low by governments unwilling to set a living minimum wage for fear of losing foreign investment, mean that they cannot earn a sufficient income to support their families. The failure of the legal economy to provide adequate means for women's survival is the key incentive for those who chose to enter the drug trade as couriers. (p.175)

That Black women find themselves in similar subjectivities globally also supports the assertion that while transracial solidarities are important and will be necessary to dismantle the PIC, a multi-level approach to systemic anti-black racism will also be vital to dismantling the PIC. The work of Richie and Sudbury has begun to identify the situations in which Black women's identities as women, mothers and partners influence their agency to participate in criminalized behaviors. Further research that explores Black women's perceptions of the systemic processes which have informed their identities and participation in criminalized behavior is necessary. A potential outcome of this research could be movement-building strategies that politicize formerly incarcerated Black women and Black girls and women who are vulnerable to becoming incarcerated. In this way, the voices and experiences of Black women



could inform current prison abolition movement-building strategies which focus on systemic issues.

## **Methods**

### **Conducting Research with Black Women**

After witnessing the five women of the Changing Minds Campaign hold themselves responsible for having become incarcerated despite evidence that white women are convicted less often for the same crimes, it seemed clear to me that formerly incarcerated Black women might have particular experiences which influence their internalization of responsibility in the face of institutional racism. Both the notion of internalized responsibility, and statistics demonstrating that Black women are one of the highest represented groups in prisons convinced me that further inquiry into formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions about their experiences with criminalized behavior and incarceration could be beneficial to Black women and anti-prison movement-building. (Corbado, 2012; Richie, 2012; Roberts, 2012)

The body of work which engages Black women's voices about their perceptions of incarceration includes poetry, creative fiction, dramatic readings, autobiographies, biographies, documentaries, and life history narratives. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) define life histories as, "a retrospective first-person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context." (p.4) Because the research questions of this thesis address formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions of their experiences with dominant social institutions, life histories would allow for a deep reading into the women's lives from childhood through the time of the interview and would provide information about the women's lives that would be pertinent to my research topics. Specifically, "Individual life stories are very much embedded in social relationships and structures and they are expressed in culturally specific forms...they

provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and collective forces and institutions beyond the individual.” (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008; p. 3).

Additionally, qualitative methods are consistent with Black feminist approaches to scholarly inquiry (Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett, 2003). The women were the center of analysis and their voices informed knowledge production.

To delve further into the perceptions of formerly incarcerated Black women, I conducted an analysis of published life history narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women grounded in Black feminist theory. In this analysis I endeavored to explore formerly incarcerated Black women’s racial consciousness, conceptions of crime, legal understandings of the PIC, and relationships to institutions, internalized oppression, and political analyses. To accomplish these research goals, I selected six formerly incarcerated Black women’s narratives from two published sources. One source was an online source. The other source was an academic text. Selecting narratives from these sources were relevant to this research in that the sources included several narratives of formerly incarcerated Black women and each source had an ideological foundation grounded in racialized and gendered critiques of the prison system (Womenandprison.org, 2011; Johnson, 2004).

Given that I am conducting an analysis of already existing narratives, there are limitations to my research design. I did not have firsthand access to the women’s body language, their full personalities, and could not approach them with follow up questions. Additionally, I was not able to create the initial questions which guided the life history interviews. All of these factors could have allowed me to provide a more nuanced analysis. Conducting in depth interviews with formerly incarcerated Black women would have been my preferred method of collecting data.

However, two experiences early in my research process led me to believe that engaging with published life history narratives would be the best method for my research at this stage.

In my time as a volunteer with the Changing Minds Campaign, I approached two women with whom I was developing relationships and asked if they would be willing to do a preliminary interview with me. Each declined. Vicky declined because she had just become employed by a large corporation and had been fearful that the information she provided in an interview could somehow jeopardize her employment. She also indicated that she was unsure of what the benefit would be of her sharing her views and experiences in an interview. The other person Ann, declined to do a preliminary interview with me because she felt it would be too painful to open the wounds from having been incarcerated. Each woman's concerns were valid and perhaps representative of many formerly incarcerated Black women's attitudes. My age and social identity could have played a role in the women's reluctance to participate in an interview with me. I am about 15-20 years younger than each of the women and I am bi-racial and have lighter skin than each woman. Also, they were aware of my association with a well-respected university in the city which could have given the women a perception of my socio-economic status and educational privilege. These perceived differences could have created a sense of distrust and/or discomfort for the women (Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett, 2003).

### **Data Collection**

Given the women's reluctance, I changed my method. I found two sources that included life histories of formerly incarcerated Black women. From these two sources, I chose six narratives to analyze. One source includes narratives from the American Southwest and the other source includes women primarily from Chicago. The crimes for which the women became incarcerated, time served, and age of first incarceration also varied. It is important to mention

that while the women's experiences, thoughts, and perceptions varied, the women's interviews contributed to overarching projects of the author and organization. It is likely that the ideological foundation of each source contributed to the interview questions and the women's responses. A brief summary of each source follows.

*Inner Lives* is part of an academic project authored by Paula C. Johnson. Her analysis begins with an historical perspective of incarceration and Black women in America. Her work includes the narratives of women involved with prison in multiple capacities. She includes the narratives of Black women who at the time of the interviews were incarcerated, Black women who were formerly incarcerated at the time of the interview, and individuals who work within the criminal legal system and are advocates for Black women and anti-prison activism. The book was published in 2004.

Womenandprison.org is a website that endeavors to "Make visible incarcerated women's experiences." (www.womenandprison.org, 2012). Womenandprison.org is part of a larger project, Beyondmedia.com whose mission is to "...tell the stories of underserved and underrepresented women, youth, and communities." (www.beyondmedia.org, 2012). Using multiple mediums, beyondmedia.org raises awareness about women's experiences with incarceration and provides space and resources for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women's stories to be told. The website is updated on a regular basis with new sources and narratives.

**procedure.** In my preliminary research, I read through every life history of the formerly incarcerated Black women included in the academic text. I found the online source later in my research process and did the same with each posted narrative of formerly incarcerated Black women. The analytic guide that I created was grounded in my theoretical foundations.

Specifically, the coding scheme and analytic questions endeavored to explore the extent to which the women internalized responsibility for becoming incarcerated in ways that were consistent with neoliberal ideology about Black women and incarceration (i.e. meritocracy, personal responsibility, individualism, drug usage, etc.).

The data analysis was designed to code responses according to four themes: identifying racism, legal procedure understandings, institutional access and resources, and conceptions of crime. These themes are consistent with neoliberalism and this design allowed for synthesizing information that women disclosed throughout their narratives. There were four primary questions, with each having about three sub-questions (See Appendix A). The primary questions were:

- 1) How does this woman perceive race within the context of institutions that comprise the PIC (education, employment, social services, law enforcement, etc.)?
- 2) How does this woman perceive reasons for her participation (how does she take ownership and/or admit fault) in criminalized behavior?
- 3) Does this woman internalize neoliberal logic (meritocracy, personal responsibility, etc.)?
- 4) Does this woman engage any political discourse about race and incarceration?

After I began my thesis research, I read through each narrative twice, then a third time while completing the analytic guide for each respective narrative. I read through each narrative a fourth time as I wrote the analysis section that follows. After the pool of potential narratives was identified, I selected the six narratives that would be used in my research. These narratives were from women who were incarcerated for crimes that took place from the 1980's to 2011. This

timing is consistent with the ideological shift around drug policy and Black women living in urban settings, which characterized the “War on Drugs”. From this analysis, I selected illustrative quotes that provided further insight into the research questions of this thesis. These quotations were used to develop themes that elaborate on the original research questions of this analysis.

*data analysis.* In the analysis that follows, I discuss several themes that emerged from the women’s narratives. Drawing directly from the women’s narratives, I develop a response to each of my research questions. 1) How do the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study perceive their participation in criminalized behavior? 2) To what extent do the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study perceive institutional racism to have influenced their experiences with the criminal legal system? 3) What are the ways in which the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study participate in resistance against Black women becoming incarcerated? Before turning to my analysis, it will be useful here to provide background information about each of the women’s lives. While half of the women’s names are authentic and half are pseudonyms in the original sources, I have created pseudonyms for all of the women in the interest of consistency and protecting their privacy.

**Johna**- lived with her grandmother, was molested beginning at age 5, did not attend high school, began prostitution at age 15, her first time becoming incarcerated was at age 15, experienced multiple physical assaults, had drug dependency.

**Jennifer**- grew up in multiple foster care situations, was sexually molested at age 12, first became incarcerated in 1995 and was incarcerated five times in total for drug trafficking and prostitution charges, did not attend high school, witnessed domestic violence.

**Tasha-** was adopted, introduced into child prostitution at age 12, attended school until age 14, became pregnant at age 14, had drug addiction, became incarcerated between ages of 20-30 on prostitution charges, is HIV positive.

**Ursula-** was raised by her biological mother, became pregnant and dropped out of high school in twelfth grade, had temporary employment as a nurse's assistant, had drug dependency, was incarcerated for drug trafficking

**Mary-** dropped out of high school and received GED, worked as exotic dancer, experienced physical and emotional abuse, was incarcerated on manslaughter charges

**Judy-** was raised by biological parents, went to juvenile detention at age 16, did not attend high school, witnessed domestic violence, was incarcerated during her early twenties for check forgery, had drug addiction, was incarcerated four times in total on multiple charges.

I include these sensitive, and unsettling histories not to sensationalize, pathologize, or to portray the women as victims. Rather, I include this information because it is relevant in analyzing the degree to which the women were agents in "choosing" or determining their life outcomes prior to having become incarcerated. In addition, this history is important in analyzing what forms of oppression might be influencing the women's perceptions of their participation in criminalized behavior.

## Analysis

### **How do the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study perceive their participation in criminalized behavior?**

The point of departure for this thesis was the discussion of the possibility that the women of the Changing Minds Campaign had internalized sole responsibility for incarceration despite evidence of systemic racism and oppression. A deeper look into the six women's narratives in this research indicates that more often than not, women both internalized some responsibility and had some level of political analysis about why and how they (and other Black women) had become incarcerated. However, the question remains: what implications do formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions have for prison abolition movement-building? Formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions of their participation in criminalized behavior and incarceration illustrate the connection between one's perception of her experience and the activism in which she participates.

In this research, there were many examples of the ways in which particular institutions negatively impacted the lives of the Black women in this study. As one component in a movement that seeks to dismantle the PIC, I argue that it is vital for Black women in these cases to resist dominant systems. For instance, regarding the context of marriage, Mary felt it was her duty as a woman to submit to her husband. This subordination was compounded by racial ideology which encouraged her to focus on the racial oppression that her husband experienced, while neglecting her own well-being. All of the women had been employed in non-traditional markets (three were involved in sex work, one involved in erotic dancing, two were in the drug trade). None of the women completed high school (two did not complete their first year, one dropped out during her senior year, two did not specify when or why they did not finish



traditional high school, but mentioned that they received their GED). There are multiple examples of the ways in which institutions did not serve the women in this study and in many cases had negative effects in their lives and made it increasingly likely that they would become incarcerated. While my study is based on a small sample of formerly incarcerated Black women, research indicates that institutions take on similar roles in the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women generally (Roberts, 2008).

Given the strong documentation of factors that contribute to Black women becoming incarcerated, it was surprising to me that the women in my research did not have more politicized perceptions about how they had become incarcerated. At the same time, it also seemed logical that colorblind racial discourse and general neoliberal ideology could prevent the formulation of politicized analyses. As has been noted in earlier sections of this thesis, oppressive conditions that some Black women experience are embedded within larger contexts of capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchy, a dominating system which creates the conditions of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism for particular social groups in this society. Therefore, the lives of the women in this research provide clear examples of internalized responsibility that are interconnected with other forms of internalized oppression, including sexism, racism, and classism.

As the women related their participation in criminalized behavior to instances of violence or particular social losses, it would be overly simplistic to analyze the women's perceptions of incarceration with an either/or framework. Perhaps more accurately, it seemed that the meaning made about incarceration by the women in this research was reflective of the women's ability to negotiate multiple losses and difficult circumstances. Furthermore, it seemed that some of the

significance of internalizing responsibility for some of the women in this research was about accepting the reality of that outcome so as to survive.

### **Endangered Black Male Narratives & Politics of Loyalty**

It is common for Black women who have become incarcerated to have experienced some form of domestic or intimate violence prior to becoming incarcerated. In this study, all six of the women had such experiences or witnessed them prior to becoming incarcerated. Nationally, 70 percent of women have experienced abuse prior to becoming incarcerated (Richie, 2012).

It is important to mention that a well-founded distrust of American institutions exists in many economically depressed Black communities that can prevent women from reporting instances of domestic violence to authorities (West, 1999). It is also common for Black women to withhold information about domestic violence in Black communities in an effort to not validate claims about dysfunction in Black families. The three women who became incarcerated as a result of participation in criminalized behavior with male partners had a profound consciousness about the ways in which gendered expectations and intimate violence contribute to Black women becoming incarcerated.

*The common denominators in women's experiences were violence and abuse in relationships and substance abuse. Of course, there was economic deprivation. (Mary)*

*A lot of times I think it's the story that our moms told us when we were little girls that one day some man is going to come and take us away into the sunset and at some point or another, dad didn't do it, nobody did it for us, but we kept believing that some way, somehow Prince Charming was going to show up and take us away. And then some of us don't like Prince Charming at all. (Johna)*

*A lot of the women in prison have been on crack, heroin, or other drugs. Some of them have been raped and abused by stepfathers, fathers, or brothers. Some of them have been pimped by their own mothers, so that their mothers could get drugs. So you have some women who just didn't care, and just went their own way, but you also have women who were set on the wrong path by those who were supposed to protect them. (Ursula)*

The women in the study who include analyses of how Black women become incarcerated, in summary, perceive the internalization of traditional gender roles, intra-racial community politics of loyalty, and economic survival to be central to Black women's participation in criminalized behavior. Traditional gender roles and intra-racial politics of loyalty relate to Black women's participation in criminalized behavior insofar as the gendered expectations were intertwined with the women's self-perceptions and identities as Black women; furthermore, the women generally attached positive meaning to their fulfillment of these expectations. It seems that women were under the impression that they would have been positively rewarded by society in the form of upward mobility and within their communities in the form of praise and positive regard.

It seems reasonable that in each of the women's cases their beliefs about gender politics became somewhat more politicized after they experienced the outcome of incarceration. Women's lives are embedded within cultural discourse that promotes patriarchal values. For example, regarding how Black women become incarcerated, much of the analysis focuses on the familial and community level rather than Black women's individual decisions. Mary mentions, "economic deprivation" which is reflective of a politicized structural analysis.

Three of the women in this study, in particular, perceive their internalization of traditional gender roles to be directly related to their participation in criminalized behavior for

which they were ultimately incarcerated. Intra-racial community politics of loyalty, Christian conceptions of marriage, and perceived economic benefits of heterosexual partnership factored into the women's decision to enter into partnerships with men which ultimately led to the women becoming incarcerated.

Five of the six women in this research were incarcerated for charges relating to men. Two of these women were incarcerated for charges that directly related to their male partners' behavior and each articulate a strong politics of intra-racial community loyalty. Investigating an intra-racial community politics of loyalty evidences the importance of intersectional analyses in the lives of formerly incarcerated Black women as the expectation that Black women remain loyal to Black men despite their own gendered oppression and misogyny in their communities, presents a double standard that is both gendered and racialized.

The intra-racial community politics of loyalty present in the two women's experiences in this study are an outgrowth of the myth that Black males' experiences of racial oppression are worse than the racial oppression experienced by Black women. This myth can be referred to as the, 'Endangered Black Male Narrative' (EBMN) (Crenshaw, 2012). This overarching effect of the EBMN is reflected in some of the women's narratives. This marginalization of Black women's lives and Black women's internalization of the EBMN can have an effect on Black women's participation in criminalized behavior and ultimate incarceration despite abusive or dismissive behaviors from men. A participant in this study commented,

*I think a lot of Black women are locked up because they don't know anything. The cops think that the women know something just because they are in the car with the boyfriend, but the boyfriends never tell the women what's going on. The cops wanted me to be a snitch, but I*

*refused because I had morals and principles-loyalty. If I had agreed to snitch, they would have dropped the charges. (Ursula)*

Ursula's statement illustrates the way in which the criminal legal system capitalizes on women's internalization of a politics of loyalty by offering them plea bargains. In Ursula's case, she was in the drug trade with the man who was her boyfriend at the time. She does not relate her participation in the drug trade to her relationship with her boyfriend. Rather, the reason why she has become incarcerated for a longer sentence is because the state prosecutor offered her a plea bargain, which she refused. The plea bargain would have required Ursula to indict her boyfriend, which out of a sense of loyalty, she did not accept. In return for her refusal, Ursula was sentenced to twenty years. That Black women are often incarcerated on charges related to the men in their lives indicates there is an additional avenue by which the criminal legal system relies on anti-black racism to populate prisons and fuel operations which disproportionately target Black women.

Ursula was originally convicted on charges that were part of an undercover set-up by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Undercover federal police officers entered her apartment and asked her to cook cocaine into crack. She did and was arrested shortly thereafter. The way in which Ursula was set-up foregrounds the extent to which federal policing agencies will strategize to incarcerate Black women and Black men. Additionally, Ursula's claim that the state's attorney targets girlfriends of men involved in the drug trade illustrates an additional avenue by which the criminal legal system capitalizes on racial constructions to justify incarcerating Black women.

It is hard to evaluate the significance that Ursula's boyfriend plays in her life. However, it seems that this vulnerability created by the intersection of loyalty politics and the criminal legal system could be prevented if plea bargains were illegal, if it were illegal for the DEA to set-up

people, and if people who play minor roles in drug trade do not become incarcerated. But, also, it seems that if Ursula had been socialized to believe in women's value outside of romantic relationships with men, the outcome of the plea bargain could have been different. Furthermore, if Ursula had been able to secure mainstream employment, then she may not have been vulnerable to participating in the drug trade.

Apart from plea bargains, traditional gender roles can relate to Black women's becoming incarcerated to the extent that these roles could encourage a woman to minimize the severity of an abusive relationship. Also, the politics that govern beliefs in endangered Black male narratives could contribute to a woman's perception that placing her needs second to her male partner's needs is beneficial to their relationship and by extension, Black communities.

*...I fell right in with that relationship and began working with him and supporting him...I was trying to hang in there with my man and put up with his stuff and love him...I found myself constantly compensating or overcompensating to my detriment. (Mary)*

In contrast to my analysis above, traditional gender roles can also impact women who deviate from an accepted gender norm. Particularly, women who participate in sex work and/or similar professions can experience stigma and shame. Early in her narrative, Mary mentions that she worked as an erotic dancer to pay for college. Although she considered herself an attractive woman, she states that she did not have high self esteem. Her statement that she had, "compensated and overcompensated," could be related to the fact that she felt inferior to her husband because she had come from a financially distressed background, had to do erotic dancing to pay for college, had only completed a high school degree and he was a well-paid doctor. In her attempts to over-compensate for her low self-esteem, she was subjected to an

abusive situation from which she had to protect herself, killed her husband, and was incarcerated on manslaughter charges.

Theorists like Beth Richie (1996) and Dorothy Roberts (2008) offer analyses which illustrate the ways in which Black women's participation in criminalized behavior often can be linked to intimate partner violence, gender socialization, and institutional impacts on Black women's lives. Moreover, scholar-activists like Davis (2003), Gilmore (2007), and Sudbury (2009) examine political and economic factors which create situations wherein Black women are more likely to participate in criminalized behavior than women of other social identities. The themes examined by these scholars indicate some specific factors. For example, four of the six women in this study state that they had been molested as children. All of the women mentioned having experienced and /or witnessed intimate partner violence in their childhood homes or adult lives. Additionally, three of the six women in this study worked in the sex trade; all of them began sex work under the age of 20. One woman was introduced to sex work at the age of 12 and was prostituted by her mother. One woman in this study worked as a nude dancer to support herself through college. While the women discuss the violence they experienced while working in the sex trade, they also discuss the ways in which making money and exerting sexual power over men gave them a sense of agency in their lives. Yet, in the end, after having been incarcerated and leaving sex work behind, they admit that had they had alternative options, their lives would have had better outcomes. In four of the women's narratives, it is apparent that sex work was central to their participation in criminalized behavior and to their identities. For example, consider the following remarks:

*...because of my molestation, that the only way I could make it was through my body because actually that's what they were taking from me all the time anyway. So it had to be important, sex had to be important. (Johna)*

Johna's experience with sexual abuse indicates the way in which early experiences with childhood sexual abuse can shape a young Black girl's perception about her potential life outcomes; this is particularly relevant for young Black girls who live in economically strained situations who are isolated from a strong support network in school and at home. In this sense, the encompassing nature of the molestation Johna experienced is likely to have gone unproblematized and perhaps normalized in her household. Thus, Johna learned at an early age the value of exchanging her body for money.

### **Neoliberal Market Creation & Conceptions of Personal Wealth**

Neoliberal concepts of acquiring individual wealth and material items as a form of liberation were embedded within some of the women's narratives. These ideas appeared to be internalized by some of the women in this study and provided incentive for participating in sex work, a criminalized market.

*Actually, I didn't think about it because it was...glamorous. It was money, the furs, the cars. Here I am, 13 years old, 14 years old with a pocketful of money. I could go in a store and buy anything I want without anybody saying nothing to me. It was okay because I thought that was the way it was supposed to be. (Tasha)*

In the abovementioned statements, Tasha elaborates on how acquiring money and material items made her feel as though she had independence and freedom, despite the reality that the bottom line of her work depended on men who would pay for her services. The statements show how capitalist dreams of materialism and acquiring individual wealth informed



her participation in sex work and gave her a sense of accomplishment. However, her work and acquisition of money and material items depended on the extent to which she was able to exchange her sexual services, as will be noted later in this section, often came at the expense of her physical, psychological well-being, and the risk of incarceration.

Of the women who experienced sexual trauma early in life, none mentioned that they had had access to mental health care. Rather, a common occurrence in the women's stories was that they felt as though they could tell no one about the abuse, and some of the women mentioned that they did not understand the abuse or how to stop it.

*The molester's had control, I was afraid to tell, I was afraid if I told my grandmother, she'd hurt somebody and I'd lose her. So I was protecting everybody. I was protecting my molesters, my grandmother, I protected everybody but myself. (Johna)*

First and foremost this statement is indicative of Johna's fragile support network. She lived with her grandmother starting at the age of six after her mother died. Her grandmother was an alcoholic which impacted her ability to care for Johna. Johna mentions that she was molested often, beginning at the age of six. When she first learned about women who do sex work, she was 15 and saw no difference between the molestation she'd been experiencing and the work that prostitutes did in exchange for money and/or nice things. She began sex work at age 15. This transition from living in an environment where molestation took place often and became normalized into sex work where Johna was rewarded for sex, is an example of the way in which young girls who are sexually abused and have a weak support network could perceive sex work to be a viable path to increase their influence over their life circumstances despite the criminalized and violent implications of the work.

Given Johna's statement about why she did not confide in anyone about the sexual abuse taking place, it seems that she internalized a politics of loyalty that taught her to put the well-being of others before her own. The responsibility for stopping sexual abuse should not be put on the child who is being abused. Rather, communities in which children live should be supportive of their protection and safety. Childhood sexual abuse takes place in all communities and is not restricted to particular class, race, or sexual orientations (West, 1999). However, socio-economic class often can significantly impact one's access to mental health treatment which would allow the victim-survivor to develop healthy coping strategies to heal and/or manage the trauma of abuse.

All three of the victim-survivors in this study mentioned using street drugs as a means to cope with the effects of the unresolved trauma and the re-traumatization that sometimes accompanied sex work. The women's drug addiction was a collateral consequence of their experiences of abuse. A dislocated state induced by drug usage, removed from the painful realities of many of the violent experiences possible in sex work, enabled the women to participate in sex work. At the same time, dependency on drugs made the women vulnerable to further violence, and positioned them within a criminalized drug market in addition to a criminalized sex work market. Tasha's comments below illustrate this point:

*I can't be the first clean prostitute. You gonna tell me I can do what I do with those men and not use. You gotta be outta your damn mind...you know. (Tasha)*

*It just started getting to me, and I started drinking more and using more drugs in order to go out there. Then being drugged up or intoxicated, I couldn't protect myself or make the right decision because my head was clogged. So, I ended up a lot of times being beat up. I've been shot five times, I've been stabbed, and I've been knocked unconscious. And all of this started*

*happening at the end because being intoxicated or high off some drugs just to deal with the night ahead started getting me in trouble.”(Johna)*

Johna’s and Tasha’s statements illustrate how in their lives, drug dependency is a coping mechanism to deal with sex work which in their experiences can be considered as an effect of unresolved sexual trauma created a cycle of violence, abuse, and drug usage. In considering their experiences, Johna and Tasha make the connection between participating in sex work as a means of survival and drug usage as a means of survival in the sex trade, but also as a factor which kept them in the work.

Gendered systems of power often operate with a certain degree of normalization and invisibility as a result of the degree of heteronormativity in American society. These systems influence the behavior and self-perception that seemingly are individual choices and/or failures. However, gendered systems of power, as indicated by the women’s experiences greatly contribute to lived experiences and consequences.

**To what extent do the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study perceive systemic racism to have influenced their experiences with the criminal legal system and other institutions which comprise the PIC?**

In this section I focus on the women’s racial consciousness and political analysis of the roles that American systems and institutions have played in shaping their lives, leading to participation in criminalized behavior and incarceration. Prison abolitionist analyses of the PIC argue that institutions and systems collude to create disproportionate representations of Black women in prisons (Davis, 2005; Sudbury 2007). For example, in the lives of the women in this study, schools, foster care, notions of marriage, police agencies, and social services appear to be central and the women had varying responses to the effects of these systems in their lives,

particularly the degree to which they perceived the systems to have influenced their participation in criminalized behavior and/or their treatment in prison.

Similar to the gender consciousness expressed by Johna, women in this research also expressed racial consciousnesses when they discussed the ways in which discrimination against Black women was prevalent within the criminal legal system and was reflective of larger social structures.

*I want people to know that African American women are very much discriminated against in the Texas prison system. (Judy)*

*There were whites and other ethnic groups, but the majority that I saw were African American women. It doesn't mean that we commit a higher ratio of crime; its just the disparity in sentencing. The white girl gets probation and the sister gets ten years. It's the same with the brothers. As women in prison though, we're all the scum of the earth, we're throwaways.*

*(Mary)*

These statements indicate the women's awareness of institutional racism. Mary provides a detailed example of how institutional racism operates in the way in which Black women are treated in comparison to the ways in which white women are treated. She also indicates a politicized understanding of race when she mentions that Black men also experience institutional racism in similar ways as Black women. This observation denotes a collective understanding of institutional anti-black racism. By wanting people to know, Judy wants to draw attention to the injustices that are inherent in institutional racism.

### **Internalized Responsibility**

Five of the women in this study did not fully internalize guilt for their incarceration or fully blame systems and institutions for their participation in criminalized behavior. Rather, in

their narratives, there were examples of the women who held themselves accountable to a large extent for their criminalized activities, despite systemic factors which arguably could have been responsible for their participation in criminalized behavior for which they were incarcerated. There were also examples of women's critical consciousnesses and political analyses that are reflective of prison abolitionist analyses of the PIC. Although these five demonstrated a combination of understandings and attitudes, one woman in this research did not engage in any critical consciousness or political analysis about the ways in which systems could have influenced her participation in criminalized behavior.

The women's perceptions of the extent to which systems and institutions influenced their participation in criminalized behavior and incarceration is evident in their articulations of internalized guilt, political analyses, and critical consciousnesses about the criminal legal system. In the next two sections, I will examine elements of women's narratives that reflect a sense of responsibility, as well as illustrate the ways in which some women take ownership over their behavior and choices. Then, I will explore the women's critical consciousnesses and political analyses.

Neoliberal concepts of choice and personal responsibility could create a social context wherein Black women blame themselves for participation in criminalized behavior. Within a neoliberal context wherein personal responsibility is promoted as the primary avenue towards liberation, it seems logical that women who have experienced extreme confinement would adopt a sense of responsibility in an effort to affirm a sense of individuality and personal agency. However, internalizing guilt for their incarceration has implications that could cause detriment to Black women whose lives are affected by incarceration. For example, women who assert that

prison was a positive experience for them could be seen as reinforcing the legitimacy of the prison as a constructive means of rehabilitation. In this regard, Mary commented:

*Regardless of the circumstances, I had killed somebody. So, having served time in prison was good for me because I needed to reconcile it. If you steal something or break it, it can be replaced or paid for, but you cannot replace a human life if you take it. That's why I'm really glad that I did that time. I spent four years, and it was long while I was doing it, but in hindsight, it was a mere four years. It was good for me. (Mary)*

*I didn't resist the whole experience. I didn't fight, I didn't blame, I didn't externalize. I wasn't mad at anybody. I realized, I had to figure out, how did I get myself into this mess, and more importantly, how am I going to get myself out of it. Then I began to work on myself. I started studying. (Mary)*

In this statement, Mary states twice that serving time in prison was good for her. On one occasion, she states that she was glad to have done the time. Although Mary expresses remorse about killing her husband, a both/and approach would be important in analyzing her case. By expressing appreciation for her prison sentence, I am left wondering if the notion that prison is an effective form of rehabilitation will continue to go unchallenged. Unlike the other women in this study, Mary was not convicted on charges related to drugs or sex work. She was convicted for manslaughter. She killed her husband in self-defense in a domestic violence incident. It is seemingly reasonable that one would need to spend significant time resolving and/or coming to terms with her actions after having ended the life of a significant other. Despite that Mary has been incarcerated for manslaughter, racial disparities in the sentencing for domestic abuse related crimes exist. White women are incarcerated less often than Black women on charges relating to domestic abuse (Richie, 2012).

Analyses of neoliberal processes of criminalization, the PIC, and Black women's historical relationship to white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy debunk the myth that the disproportionate number of Black women who are incarcerated is related to Black women's inherent propensity for crime. Rather, political, economic, and social elements combine to create a context wherein Black women are criminalized and positioned along pathways that lead to participation in criminalized behavior and incarceration (Davis, 2005; Gilmore, 2007; Richie, 1996; Sudbury, 2005, 2007). Yet Mary does not discuss her situation within the context of systems or institutions. Instead, in this one element of her narrative, she adopts an individualist response in which she implicates only herself for having arrived in the situation that led to her incarceration. This statement is a clear example of how neoliberal philosophies of individualism and personal responsibility frame women's perceptions of incarceration and their participation in criminalized behavior. Given the PIC and Black feminist frameworks, I am concerned that these perceptions could be detrimental to formerly incarcerated Black women's agency and the development of an institutional systemic analysis.

One problem highlighted by this research is that, by internalizing oppression, the problem of incarceration and structural anti-black racism is displaced from institutions to the women themselves. Problem displacement has the potential to create scenarios in which formerly incarcerated Black women's resistance and/or inclination to challenge unjust systems could be suppressed. Additionally, when systems are not held accountable for racially unjust practices, they have the potential to undermine prison abolitionist movement-building efforts. Furthermore, individualist assumptions of responsibility are likely to fail to hold the criminal legal system accountable for gendered racialized bias.

Another form of meaning making that sidelines the issue of systemic accountability is spiritual meaning making about the outcome of one's life after one is involved with the criminal legal system. While not directly associated with neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility and individualism, spiritual meaning making patterns about one's experience in prison also have the potential to reinforce the legitimacy of prisons as an effective form of rehabilitation. It also misses the opportunity to hold accountable employees of the criminal legal system whose personal racial biases could affect their sentencing practices (Davis, 2010). For example, see Ursula's comments below.

*When I went before the next judge, the prosecution said, "in all my thirty years I have never seen anything like this happen. I said, maybe in all your thirty years you never met a person that believed that God would work it out. And that is how I left it. The judge asked me how I felt about the situation and I told her that I knew that God didn't make mistakes and that God brought me through. (Ursula)*

Ursula made this statement to the trial judge. The potential impact of this statement on the judge is troubling, although it is understandable that one might place one's trust in a transcendental God for the purposes of managing anxiety in a stressful, uncertain moment. Ursula received a twenty year sentence. Since the judge asked for Ursula's opinion about her situation, Ursula had an opportunity to advocate for herself. Had she been able to make a claim to the judge that appealed to a sense of justice, perhaps the outcome would have been different. There is no guarantee that the judge would have been persuaded to make a different decision. However, it could have been an opportunity for Ursula to advocate for herself in a manner that might have created some accountability with the criminal legal system for racially-biased practices. Although, under neoliberal and colorblind racial paradigms, it seems unreasonable that



Ursula would confront the judge about racial discrimination, it is my vision for the future that Black women who are involved with the criminal legal system will feel affirmed in using politicized analyses to hold the criminal legal system accountable at multiple levels.

### **Internalized Responsibility & Individual Perceived Benefits of Incarceration**

To take ownership of one's choices and life experiences seems to have had multiple effects for some of the formerly incarcerated Black women in this research. Holding oneself individually responsible for one's actions has the potential to create a sense of personal empowerment, in that a woman can believe that she, an individual with agency, has taken control in her life. At the same time, assuming responsibility for one's participation can obscure a larger socio-political and economic context which contributes to Black women becoming incarcerated.

*There are a lot of Black women locked up, but sometimes we do it to ourselves. (Ursula)*

This statement clearly indicates that Ursula believes that in some cases, Black women are responsible for having become incarcerated. While it may be true that some Black women are responsible for making choices which directly lead to prison, analyses of the PIC and neoliberal processes of criminalization assert that political, economic, and social factors create and contribute to the vast majority of Black women becoming incarcerated. This statement is consistent with neoliberal logic about personal responsibility and furthers an American tradition of blaming individuals. It also allows systems and institutions to remain unaccountable for racial and gender discrimination.

*I did not value education at that time [in elementary school]. I was a little slow in learning and I don't remember anyone sitting down with me to make sure that my homework was done or identifying reading or spelling problems...At a very young age, I set myself up for a troublesome teenage life. I experimented with alcohol and cigarettes... (Judy)*

In this statement, Judy makes the connection between her disengagement from school and her eventual participation in criminalized behavior. Perhaps Judy did not value education when she was in elementary school. However, she mentions that she had difficulty learning, but received no additional support. Judy's experience may be related to recent national developments in education that institutionalize standardized tests which are connected to a school's funding which means that teachers spend more time "teaching to the test" rather than engaging students and providing additional support when necessary.

*The patience and tolerance I acquired in prison has enabled me to endure the multiple demands and responsibilities I face on a daily basis. I am African American woman working in a field mainly reserved for caucasian males. (Judy).*

In this statement, Judy adopts almost verbatim the justifications for and goals of prisons. She connects her experience to having learned responsibility. Her statement also implies that she has developed interpersonal strength as a result of having been incarcerated. While Judy may have acquired patience and tolerance in prison, it is possible that there are many other ways in which she could have learned responsibility. I have to believe that it would have been more constructive for Judy to have learned those life lessons under circumstances other than incarceration. For instance, in school or athletics, or a part-time job during high school, however, all of these possibilities depend on institutions which have historically marginalized poor Black girls and women.

Focused on survival, the women demonstrated an additional dimension of the intersections of internalized oppressions. A lack of access and a sense of entitlement to basic and decent resources was also present in the women's narratives and could be a result of larger intersecting oppressions. Lack of entitlement was most clearly illustrated when the women

discussed their experiences in school and public social services. For example, Judy did not graduate high school and she perceived herself to be responsible because she was “disinterested.” So, rather than asserting that the schools had failed her and should have made it a priority to encourage her engagement, she comes to the conclusion that a problem within her led to her inability to finish school. Judy also was sent to juvenile detention as a teenager. While in detention, she learned about street drugs and began to use them. While Judy points out that the presence of drugs contravened the purpose of juvenile detention, she did not appreciate that she should have been provided a better environment in which to “rehabilitate”. It is my vision for social change that Black women whose lives are impacted by the PIC, develop an oppositional stance towards institutions which had adverse effects in their lives and demand equal access to resources.

A lack of a sense of entitlement is a theme that underlies the women’s meaning making about how they became incarcerated. It seems possible that this lack of access could be influenced by the women’s original marginalization within dominant social institutions; for example, five of the women grew up knowing their mothers, but had many transitions in caretakers, and all participated in non-traditional job markets. Given these factors, coupled with a general negative representation of Black women in mainstream society make it easy to understand how some of the women could perceive themselves as undeserving of or not entitled to resources to which dominant society has nearly unchallenged access.

### **Critical Consciousness & Political Analyses**

Black women’s incarceration and participation in criminalized behavior has been highly politicized. With developments like the War on Drugs, strategic criminalization and policing of markets, and the globalization of the PIC, there are macro level operations which contribute to

and inform the disproportionate incarceration of Black women globally (Davis, 2005; Gilmore, 2007; Sudbury 2005). While much of this analysis is conducted in academia or politically-backed research centers, some of the women in this study have critiques of the prison system and are conscious of the contradictions embedded within the prison industry. Furthermore, many of the Black women in this study have a politicized understanding of Black womanhood. Five of the women identify collectively with other Black women and have analyses about disparities in treatment based on racial biases. For some of the women, these analyses are supported by a racial consciousness which enables them to identify where the lives of Black women intersect with American institutional logic and social norms.

While none of the women in this study used academic jargon to discuss the themes that have been discussed in the literature review of this thesis (like endangered Black male narratives, discrimination in plea bargains, and politics of loyalty), some of the analyses of Black women's participation in criminalized behavior are descriptive of neoliberal processes of market creation and criminalization. For example,

*So, she's gotta get a minimum wage job if she exits prostitution. She can't get public housing because they don't let people with felonies get public housing. She can't get a PELL grant because she's got that felony against her. And chances are she's got children and she's trying to get out of prostitution. What do you think her options are to stop? (Johna)*

In this statement, Johna describes the logic behind neoliberal processes of criminalized market creation. She describes social death when she discusses the consequences for being convicted of a felony and the options one is left with when one is restricted from accessing many social service benefits like school loans and federal grants. Johna invokes a hypothetical example about a woman with children whose most viable option to generate an income which will allow

her to meet all of her financial needs is the sex trade. Underlying this example is a critique of heteropatriarchal capitalism which creates few spaces for women to be lucratively compensated and in those spaces, women are required to exchange sexual services for money. Johna has a critical consciousness about the PIC and the politics which sustain its operation.

*We got dancers, we got the strip clubs, we got the sex phones, we got the street prostitution which is what everyone focuses on when they want to say, 'We are putting a dent in crime and we got the prostitutes on the run.' ...But we've got all sorts of sex going on Chicago, we've got escort services, etc. And actually, prostitution is billions and billions of dollars and street prostitution is maybe only like 5% of that. (Johna)*

In this statement, Johna describes, the way in which street prostitution is criminalized despite its overall impact on the sex industry. She also alludes to the role that politicians play in creating a senseless cycle of criminalization of sex workers when she asserts that the women simply need services and other support to survive. She exposes the contradiction of a billion dollar sex industry and the amount of effort and resources expended to criminalize and lock up street sex workers. In considering the values which govern the systems of policing and control, Johna expresses a gender consciousness. She states:

*But then you have the cops that seem more serious about prostitutes than they should. And those are the ones you have to be careful about, because those are the ones that have a stick up their butt. You have to be very careful with those...I'm just saying, I know a lot of girls that have been hurt. Girls that have come up missing. And I've known cops that are just unusually mean to women just for prostituting...But they were just really excessively abusive to women. I guess it's just like men period. (Johna)*

In this statement, Johna continues her analysis of the contradictions common within the criminal legal system. By stating that ‘maybe it’s men period,’ she’s noting a system of male privilege that positions men over women and in some instances that privileging is maintained through a devaluation of women that expressed through violence. While not stated explicitly, her comment addresses patriarchal notions of power and illustrates the way in which police officers are often left to their own discretion when interacting with individuals who they come across while working.

Johna provides a great example of the type of analysis I think could be constructive for Black women who are advocating for change. Her knowledge of the criminal legal system is thorough and she has a critical analysis about how Black women enter into sex work and are criminalized for participating in sex work. While at no point does she deny that she participated in criminalized behavior, she also does not focus on individual women and choices. Rather, her analysis focuses on the system which creates contexts and subjectivities for Black women that make participation in criminalized behavior likely. This approach to Black women’s incarceration is beneficial both in that Johna as an individual does not experience the negative effects associated with internalized oppression and she directly implicates the criminal legal system in Black women becoming incarcerated.

Patriarchal notions of power also impacted the women in this study on individual levels. A general devaluing of Black womanhood and misrepresentation of Black women is one strategy used to justify many forms of oppression against Black women. Because these images and devaluations have become normalized in mainstream society, simply to be able to identify the effects of these images can be considered a form of racialized gender consciousness. Ursula stated:

*My mother taught us to respect ourselves as women. She also wanted us to remember that beauty is not only on the outside; it's on the inside too.*

This statement indicates that Ursula was made aware of the ways in which institutions such as media could shape perceptions of Black women which could in turn influence the way that Black women feel about themselves. Thus, it's likely that Ursula's mother encouraged her to think about beauty outside of mainstream norms.

### **What are the ways in which formerly incarcerated Black women participate in resistance against Black women becoming incarcerated?**

#### **Resistance, Activism, & Resilience**

As indicated in previous sections of this thesis, many of the Black women in this research and those who have participated in other studies exercised limited agency when it came to participation in criminalized behavior (Richie, 2012; Sudbury, 2005). Institutions, systems, and family dynamics can influence Black women's trajectory towards incarceration. For example, three of the women in this study experienced childhood sexual abuse that was prevalent and normalized in their households and became involved in sex work in their teenage years. However, while there is much evidence to suggest the presence of racial, gender, and economic oppression in the lives of formerly incarcerated Black women, the women in this study are multi-dimensional and express agency, self-determination, and control over their lives in various ways. To reflect the complexity with which the Black women in this research resist oppression, I will utilize Traci West's (1999) definition of resistance, "...any sign of dissent with the consuming effects of intimate and social violence." (p.123).

In the first part of this analysis, I discussed the ways in which women's participation in criminalized behavior was intertwined with and perhaps inseparable (at the time) from intimate

violence, sexual abuse, relationships with men, and drugs. Despite the extent to which the violence may have been pervasive in their lives, the women in this research participated in resistance in multiple ways. Many of the women shared their stories with other women who were in situations that could likely lead to incarceration. Some women chose helping professions and others began to organize in their communities. It is also important to mention that education, self-care, and self improvement can also be considered activism. This section discusses examples which illustrate resistance, activism, and resilience.

When women were in situations of confinement, their resistance spoke volumes. The women's resistance held systems accountable and often had empowering effects for the women. In this regard, Judy stated:

*The officers were mean and rough when they searched under your breast, between your legs, thighs, and crotch. When male officers came into the women's dorms, they also did searches. We began to complain and filed grievances to no avail. (Judy)*

In this example, Judy challenges systematic measures to address a problem within the criminal legal system. Rather than internalize or accept the violations, Judy associated the problem with officers in the system. By pursuing a systemic solution, Judy located the problem with abusive actors within the prison institution. Because she was incarcerated at the time she filed grievances, she was subject to retaliation and further abuse by prison guards. This act of resistance took courage.

Such resistance impacted the prison system and/or held institutions accountable for the way in which they treated Black women, which had empowering effects for individuals.

*During my trial, I felt like I was being railroaded. So I began going to the County Jail Law Library. (Judy)*



Judy disagreed with how she was being treated in court. She educated herself on the rules regulations of the court to be able to determine if she had grounds on which to challenge the way she had been treated. As noted by Ursula's perception of how Black women become incarcerated, she noted that one way is that, "Black women don't know what's going on." Given that a lack of awareness of systemic processes can make Black women vulnerable to oppression, then educating oneself can be profoundly valuable. With knowledge of the criminal legal system processes, Judy could potentially educate others with whom she was in contact in prison and in her community.

Another form of resistance that was prevalent among the women in this study was collective activism. Three of the women in this study participated in activism with organizations that impacted women on a grassroots level. The motivation for activism often started with a critical understanding of the factors which led one to become incarcerated and a desire to prevent the same things from happening to other women. Johna stated:

*The beauty of that [familiarity in multiple social circles] is that I'm still able to make things happen. My life today is so simple and so great that I have the opportunity to reach out to other women who have been through the same thing that I have, or similar things, and reach out to them and help them and give them an example and let them see that they don't have to live like that anymore...To me, not telling my story and not helping women today through what happened to me is like leaving another woman in a gutter. Somebody has to let them know that it doesn't have to be like that for the rest of their life.*

This statement illustrates a sense of solidarity with other women who have been or are involved in the sex trade. Johna perceives activism as necessary and important. By not sharing

her insights with other women, Johna believes that she would be abandoning women and leaving them vulnerable to further abuse and dismissive treatment.

Individual activism and reaching women on a personal level was important to the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study. All six of the women in this study gave advice to women who could be on pathways to becoming incarcerated. Some of them participated in activism on a broader structural level which allowed them to impact policy and implement programs that improved the quality of life of women in prison. For example, two of the participants commented as follows:

*We started our organization, Count the Cost, in 1994. Our warden allowed us to start our program while we were still in prison. She allowed us to do groups, and she brought in counselors and therapists to do some work with the women. Our group went to group homes and alternative schools. (Mary)*

*I am in the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, I sit on a committee called P.A.R.T. which is the Prostitution Awareness Round Table where we come up with solutions for women in prostitution, how to exit prostitution, and how to change policies in prostitution, because we feel that most of the policies towards prostitutes are one-sided...So I sit on a committee where we try and change the policies for women. (Johna)*

The above quotes are illustrative of activism which has the potential to impact some root causes of Black women becoming incarcerated. By developing curriculum in alternative schools, Mary is attempting to raise consciousness about the consequences of participation in criminalized behavior with young people before they could potentially enter into the criminal

legal system. Johna's policy advocacy allows her to inform the policies which govern the criminal legal system's sentencing practices.

In light of the violence, economic hardship, and racial marginalization of the women's lives in this study, it is a powerful act of resistance to live a healthy life. All of the women in this research have engaged processes of healing and recovery during and following their incarceration. Many of the women give credit for their resilience to community-based services. For many of the women, their experiences with incarceration caused them to reflect on what led them to become incarcerated; many of the women concluded that a lack of self-confidence and self-determination contributed to their problems.

*I'm actually getting an identity to who Tasha is because Tasha never had a chance to have an identity because I got in the lifestyle at such a young age I never knew who Tasha was. But I'm learning about Tasha today and who she is. (Tasha)*

Women also articulated resilience through descriptions of the powerful transitions they made after focusing on changing their self-perception and outlook on their possibilities in life. Johna and Tasha share some insight:

*What I do today is tell my story to let other women know that there is hope. And I have a job, and I have a family, and yes, I am married. I'm married today. I have a life. I love my life today. (Johna)*

*What is my life like now...I have a fiancé. I have 2 years 7 months clean now...I have a lot of peace in my life right now. Nothing is perfect. I still have a lot of things I have to work on, but I'm getting there. (Tasha)*

hooks (1995) states, "Assimilation is the strategy that has provided social legitimation...It is a strategy deeply rooted in the ideology of white supremacy and its advocates

urge Black people... to better absorb their values, their way of life.” (p.126) While hooks discusses assimilation on an individual level, her point can be applied to Tasha’s and Johna’s sense of resilience. hooks offers a framework in which incarceration could be the strategy rooted in white supremacist ideology, also neoliberal ideology. Johna’s and Tasha’s participation in traditional institutions and attaching meaning to narratives about success indicate that the prison as a normalizing institution, was successful in making it logical for Johna and Tasha to assimilate into traditional capitalist markets. This process is similar to neoliberal processes of criminalization and PIC pathways to prison. Neoliberal capitalism can create oppressive situations for formerly incarcerated Black women. There are few non-criminalized market options for financial subsistence available outside of mainstream markets which reinforce capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchal values (hooks, 1995). Regarding Johna and Tasha’s participation in dominant social institutions post-incarceration, there seems to be a lack of accountability for the ways in which the normalization of these institutions has relied on gendered anti-Black racist messages and the exclusion of some Black women. Holding institutions accountable for the ways in which they create particular subjectivities for Black women seems to be an important goal in the process of dismantling the PIC.

Tasha and Johna’s descriptions of the state of their lives post-incarceration are compelling. In these descriptions, they associate having traditional jobs, being married, having degrees, and having families with success and living well. Pursuing lives outside of the institutions of formal education, traditional job markets, and heterosexual monogamy (marriage) was what led the women to become incarcerated. Neither Johna or Tasha, prior to incarceration, completed high school, worked in a traditional job market, and/or was married. This powerful example of women’s post incarceration self-determination does not come without complexities

and perhaps even contradictions. That is, according to socialist Black feminists and prison abolitionists, institutions of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism subordinate and create oppressive subjectivities for Black women (Combahee River Collective, 2005; Davis, 2005; hooks 1995; Roberts, 2008). That assimilation into the very systems and institutions which positioned the women to become incarcerated reflect assimilationist approaches to racial, economic, and gendered inequality could be reflective of socialist Black feminist claims that capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchal institutions are oppressive to Black women, and ultimately suggest that the PIC was successful in “normalizing” the women’s behavior and market participation (hooks, 1995). The impact of assimilation in the cases of formerly incarcerated Black women could be that “normal” mainstream behavior would validate the perception that prisons are an effective form of rehabilitation (despite Johna’s disagreement with the efficacy of prisons as a form of rehabilitation). This notion of resilience could also mean that Black women are participating in, and accommodating to, systems which are oppressive. It has the potential to undermine Black feminist theories and prison abolitionist perspectives, and raises the question of whether or not internalization of mainstream norms are ever positive for Black women.

In each of these statements, the women are enthusiastic about the changes they have made in their lives. The women were happy to have achieved stability and peace in their lives. It also seems that the conditions which allowed them peace and stability are consistent with social norms that prior to incarceration, they were not in a position to meet.

### **Spiritual Meaning Making & Activism**

Another intriguing example of the way in which perceptions of incarceration relate to activism is spiritual meaning making. Two women in this research used spiritual determinism to

make meaning of their incarceration and resistance. Mary and Ursula were sentenced for charges related to their male partners' criminal activities (Mary-manslaughter; Ursula-drug trade) and each woman attributed coming to terms with their incarceration to spirituality.

Mary developed a program called "Count the Cost" that informs youth of the potential consequences for breaking the law. Ursula expresses resistance as self-love. Each of these forms of resistance focus on the individual. A sole focus on individuals, however, may be incomplete. From my perspective, focusing solely on encouraging young people to make "good decisions" risks reinforcing the myth that all individuals have "free choice" and that incarceration is a consequence of one's individual choices—a perspective that marginalizes processes and practices of institutions, systems, class, and race. Furthermore, there is an inherent risk or perhaps accommodationist compromise in teaching youth to make good decisions, when that discourse aligns with the logic of neoliberalism and the PIC. More specifically, this approach encourages young people to work within the criminal legal system, despite its racially biased practice and evidence of profit-based motivation for prisons. This approach to activism does not directly challenge systems and institutions concerning their role in mass incarceration, nor does it inspire alignment with prison abolition among young people who could be vulnerable to becoming incarcerated. In my opinion, a more balanced approach to this type of education, could be one in which teaches young people about the inequalities on which the American criminal legal systems is founded and combines teaching them to survive in the system while at the same time encourages them to strategize ways to dismantle the PIC.

In an earlier section, Ursula mentions that she has become incarcerated because God decided that it was best for her. From my perspective, this analysis is problematic. Her analysis fails to acknowledge that individual persons, such as the judge in her case or the DEA agent who

arrested her, had the power to influence the outcome of her life by deciding that her punishment would be incarceration. When discussing resistance post-incarceration, Ursula mentions that she lives her life drug free and asserts her worthiness as a child of God. While self-valuation can certainly be considered an act of resistance with regard to negative stereotypes about Black women, from a structural analysis, spiritual determination, does not place the locus of responsibility of systems and institutions. This logic could be deployed into transformative resistance by appealing to humanist arguments. It also creates the potential for essentialist arguments that support her worthiness of peace and healing because it embraces Christian values, not because all people, deserve human rights and respect. Additionally, Christianity can also be considered a dominating system that supports white supremacist heteropatriarchy (hooks, 1995; West, 1999).

If the six women in this research and the women of the Changing Minds Campaign are any indication of formerly incarcerated Black women generally, then a focus on politicizing Black women's perceptions of incarceration could be important in prison-abolition movement-building. The possibility of further aligning formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions with prison abolition creates an important juncture for movement-building.

### Conclusion

“Remember the racism which took away our homes and our livelihood and which sought to steal away our humanity. Remember also our will to live, to hold fast to that which marks us as human beings...” ~District Six Museum

“Anti-Black Racism is like a gateway drug” ~ Tricia Rose

Although some of the women’s responses illustrated strong political analyses, further resistance against the PIC will be necessary to ultimately dismantle it. To end the disproportionate incarceration of Black women, minimize internalized oppression, and dismantle the PIC, increased racial consciousness will be necessary on individual and systemic levels. A conversation I had with a formerly incarcerated Black woman at a large symposium on race, gender, and incarceration illustrates the nuanced importance of undoing internalized oppression guided by a prison abolition analysis. When telling her about this project, Tina Reynolds responded, “I did that [internalized responsibility]! Why did I do that? But I had no political analysis. It wasn’t until I saw the expansion of prisons and prison populations that I saw it was a project against us, against me.” (Personal conversation, January 12, 2012). Her statement illustrates the transformative potential of being introduced to a political analysis about race, gender, and incarceration. In this section, I suggest that prison abolition can hold liberatory potential for formerly incarcerated Black women and Black women who are vulnerable to becoming incarcerated. Additionally, I offer policy and programming recommendations that I believe, if pursued, could be avenues that lead to the undoing of internalized oppression and the dismantling of the PIC.



## Undoing Internalized Oppression

All of the women identified in this research endured difficult struggles and were survivors of multiple forms of violence. The value of the women feeling peaceful about their lives' outcomes is indisputable. Nonetheless, that the women have internalized logic of success and assimilated into institutions that support neoliberal, capitalist, white supremacist, and heteropatriarchal values, results in situations where systems and institutions are left unaccountable. The systems which, in many cases, created such circumstances for the women in this research are not likely to change without significant pressure from an organized movement that is populated with a critical mass of people (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2005). Given that there is a camp of prison abolitionists that follow a tradition of Black feminist organized resistance, it is likely that prison abolition could be the central ideology of this movement. It is also likely that with a politicized analysis about the effects of the PIC, formerly incarcerated Black women, as they are currently the most affected female population affected by the PIC, could constitute a critical mass to advocate for prison abolition. However, I argue that the prison abolition movement must begin with undoing internalized oppression and building politicized analyses among formerly incarcerated Black women and Black women (and other groups) who are vulnerable to becoming incarcerated to ultimately disrupt the "self-evident" logic of prisons.

In this research, each of the women's scenarios present interesting connections between the women's perceptions of why and how they become incarcerated and their participation in activism and resistance. As the most affected female population in the prison system, the significance of analyzing Black women's perceptions of incarceration is that the potential for formerly incarcerated Black women to participate in prison abolition movement building could be impactful in advocating for prison abolition. However, it is unlikely that if formerly

incarcerated Black women's perceptions of incarceration legitimize prisons as an effective rehabilitative method, assimilate to white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal markets, or perceive incarceration to be the result of spiritual determinism, that they would ideologically connect with prison abolitionist perspectives. These perceptions could be instructive for prison abolition movement-building. Specifically, how can the prison abolition movement develop effective methods that encourage formerly incarcerated Black women to undo and resist internalized oppression? Additionally, how can prison abolition allow formerly incarcerated Black women's experiences to further shape movement-building?

To begin to explore possible solutions to the questions I have raised, I will return to the notion of internalized oppression and its role in maintaining systems of oppression. Internalized oppression is a fluid, yet insidious state of consciousness that may manifest in an individual's presentation and self-concept. Pyke (2010) defines internalized oppression as, "the subjection of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them." (p.26) In the case of Black individuals, Bailey & Terrell (2011) define internalized racial oppression as, "the process by which Black people accept and internalize the dominant white culture's oppressive actions and beliefs towards them." (p.221) Put more simply, internalized oppression is, "the belief in negative attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about oneself as a minority group member and about one's minority group" (Szymanski & Stewart, 2010, p.34).

Internalized oppression is both reflective of, and constitutive of, living in and having been socialized within the social, political, and economic constructs created by white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy and is crucial to maintaining systems of domination (Bailey & Terrell, 2011; hooks, 1995; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). In this sense, American institutions and systems are significantly implicated in the women's perceptions of incarceration

and participation in criminalized behavior. The impact of internalized oppression can closely relate to one's perceived identity, and has the potential to limit one's perceived sense of social agency and/or ability to determine one's social outcomes. In the case of formerly incarcerated Black women, the effects of internalized racism have the potential to suppress resistance and other forms of challenging the logic of American systems and contesting the conditions of their lived experiences (i.e.- demanding equitable treatment from the state).

In part, the effects of internalized oppression are profound because the normalization of systems of domination operate largely unrecognized by most individuals (Bailey & Terrell, 2010; Pyke, 2010). Internalization is a necessary component of maintaining systems of domination because individuals are not socialized to recognize that domination is occurring. To counteract systems that become normalized and operate with a degree of invisibility, a critical politicization of consciousness is necessary to catalyze resistance against systems of domination. It is also important to note that in order to maintain racialized and gendered systems of domination, individuals of dominant groups must also internalize a sense of entitlement or superiority. Therefore, raising racial consciousness, in the interest of dismantling the PIC, could operate on individual and systemic levels.

One avenue for Black women living within systems of domination to resist the deleterious effects of internalized oppression would be to develop a racial consciousness (Ledwith, 2005; Stewart-Brush, 2011). Racial consciousness could be one avenue of creating recognition about racist systems and the ways in which systems of domination operate.

According to Paula Stewart Brush (2001):

Race Consciousness denotes a politicized, oppositional consciousness of race and racism.

Race consciousness means knowing that and how the personal is political, that and how the

possibilities of one's existence are enmeshed with social conditions. It further means that race is understood as a central constituent of identity, that race is, or becomes, recognized as a basis of domination or privilege, and that racism becomes a point of resistance. (p.171)

For formerly incarcerated Black women, racial consciousness would manifest in a politicized understanding of their gendered racial identities within the context of the American criminal legal system, of the meaning of Blackness within political economic systems, and be able to name the ways in which institutional racism has impacted their lives. Systemically, a politicized racial consciousness could result in active rejection of colorblind racial ideology that is evidenced in policy measures (on which I will elaborate in the following sections). Furthermore, given that meaning around race is constructed and often grounded in media and political campaigns, an overall shift in the racial consciousness of American political economics will be necessary to end internalized oppression, disproportionate incarceration of Black women, and to ultimately dismantle the PIC.

It is important to note that all of the women in this research express happiness and peace with their lives post-incarceration. One could engage in theoretical debates about the meaning of happiness and the value of peaceful resolution within oppressive systems, but for the sake of women's daily lived realities, it is important to question the value of politicization if it impedes a woman's happiness and peaceful daily realities. Formerly incarcerated Black women could be an influential, radicalized mass of people post incarceration. However, as my findings have shown, the women in this research have, to some extent, internalized gender or racial oppression. By and large the women did not implicate the criminal legal system or the PIC despite evidence of racial discrimination. In the next section, I explore several policy changes that could positively impact Black women's lives prior to becoming incarcerated and ultimately shift racial

paradigms. Both the shift in racial paradigms and structurally resolving some of the social problems for which many Black women become incarcerated could be pivotal in eliminating internalized oppression and in dismantling the PIC.

### **Policy Recommendations**

None of the women in this research graduate from high school. All eventually received their GED's, however the traditional school institution was not supportive of their success. Additionally, education has increasingly become linked with neoliberalism and privatization. As opposed to continuing with the neoliberal trend of privatization, prison abolitionists and formerly incarcerated Black women could advocate for an equitable distribution of school funding and resources. For example, all property taxes (which are currently used to fund schools based on particular districts) could be pooled into one large fund and distributed to schools according to population and need. This measure would likely allow all schools to be sufficiently resourced, which could limit the number of schools that are closed in Black economically distressed communities under the justification of budget deficits. Furthermore, equitable funding would likely increase the resources which teachers could have at their disposal to keep students engaged.

Discourse created for the “War on Drugs” which was used in political campaigns by politicians, nearly single-handedly created a shift in the discourse around Black women, criminality, and social services. The “War on Drugs” used highly racialized and gendred language to launch that campaign and the same type of discourse is used presently to establish agendas that further serve the PIC. For example, Rahm Emmanuel’s “War against Violence” on the South side of Chicago demonstrates similar discursive outcomes. Creating policy that monitors and regulates the use of negatively racialized and gendered messages to advance

political campaigns. This action could be one pivotal aspect in a larger media justice effort that advocates for the destruction of all media representations which reproduce negative stereotypes that perpetuate gender and racial inequalities.

Overall, to dismantle the PIC and undo internalized oppression, a return to redistributive economics will be necessary. That is that the money which has been divested from social welfare and other previously publically funded programs need to be restored. Furthermore, prison abolitionists and formerly incarcerated Black women ought to advocate for policy which requires politicians to account for the social demographics of people who would be negatively impacted by any policy or law. If the impact were to be negative, this policy would require politicians to plan to also create compensation for this negative impact. If the impact were too great to be compensated, then the policy could not be passed into law. For example if the policies which led to the globalization of trade, under this suggested policy, would not pass because of the unemployment and joblessness it has caused for many Black people in America. Generally, this type of policy agenda could restore a people-centered government that gives way to a more equitable political economic system.

### **Program Recommendations to Politicize Individuals & Historicize Gendered Racial Inequality**

Half of the women in this research were sexually abused as children. All three women relate their experiences of abuse to their coerced participation in criminalized markets. Also, in the women's narratives there were many examples of internalized gender oppression. While the findings in this research are not scientifically generalizable, statistics show that 70 percent of women who become incarcerated have been sexually abused and/or assaulted prior to incarceration (Richie, 2012). Therefore, to better accommodate formerly incarcerated Black

women's experiences, a significant focus of abolition movement building should address trauma that results from childhood sexual abuse.

There is a large body of research on the effects of childhood sexual abuse and therapeutic models for resolving sexual trauma. It is not within the scope of this project to do a full review of that literature. However, it will be useful to make a few connections between what I have proposed and the themes that emerged in earlier sections of this thesis. This section is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to outline major themes and foci of curriculum and programming that could be developed in partnership with organizations whose missions align with prison abolition and work with incarcerated, formerly incarcerated individuals, or individuals who are vulnerable to becoming incarcerated. In Chicago, some examples of such organizations are the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce, Project Nia, and Girl Talk.

The women in this study experienced sexual abuse as children, adolescents, and adults. The value of addressing child sexual abuse as a strategy to encourage a politicized gendered racial consciousness could take place on multiple levels. First I propose a knowledge sharing strategy that would focus on raising gender consciousness in a way that challenges discourses about the "endangered Black male" which imply that Black women do not also experience violence that results from systemic racism. For example, Tasha was sexually abused beginning at age 5. In her narrative, she admitted that two of the factors which allowed the abuse to happen were her confusion about what was taking place and that there was no one in whom she could confide. Therefore, creating language and action steps for young girls (and people generally) who may be experiencing abuse and are in danger of becoming incarcerated could help to minimize the risks of sexual abuse and resulting trauma that could include internalized oppression. These steps could also be utilized for women who experience sexual violence within

institutions, for example in situations similar to Judy's experience of being sexually molested in prison.

Second, the women's experiences working in the sex trade bespeak the necessity of developing economic solutions that challenge capitalist markets. Of the four women in this study who participated in exotic dancing and/or sex work, each mentioned having had experiences of physical or emotional abuse within these work contexts. The women stated that they'd had few other options for earning an income. Education on alternative economic models could allow formerly incarcerated Black women to generate income in markets outside of traditional markets, but which are not yet criminalized, for example, cooperative living models and community gardening models. Furthermore, one strategy to minimize sexual violence and economic exploitation, could be for women to form women-led sex work collectives. This action would be done in the interest of allowing the women to exercise more control over the money they make and the ways in which they are treated by those receiving services.

Third, in programming that seeks to end childhood sexual abuse, it would be necessary to include transformative racial gender consciousness-raising models. For instance, both males and females need to be engaged in conversations and thought sharing about the negative effects of sexual abuse against women and girls. Furthermore, these gender consciousness-raising models should include much of the information that is researched and written about by Black feminists and prison abolitionists, for example, including the way in which domestic abuse can be symptomatic of systemic racism, the ways in which abusers manipulate, control, and shame those who they abuse. Vocabulary needs to be concrete and procedures that one could take to identify abuse and avoid abusive relationships need to be developed. Raising racial gender



consciousness among formerly incarcerated Black women, Black girls, and Black boys who could be vulnerable to incarceration could be empowering.

As U.S. society increasingly moves into a colorblind racial paradigm, it's likely that it will become more challenging to develop convincing arguments about systemic racial injustice. The second topic around which it would be important to develop curriculum and programming is racial consciousness.

Five of the women in this research stated that Black women were over-represented in and/or mistreated within the criminal legal system. However, these comments did not lead the women to articulate analyses about anti-black racism in other institutions that are part of the PIC and which contribute to mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Sudbury, 2005). Additionally, their analyses did not include a historical analysis of the development of mass incarceration.

Although significant research compares present prison practice to slavery and traces the development of mass incarceration to COINTELPRO in the Black Power Movement, and the introduction of crack into Compton and Harlem, and the intentional ghettoization of Black communities through redlining and economic divestment, by and large these examples of the state of racism are under-examined in public discourses (Olssen, 2011; Wacquant, 2002). Structural decisions of federal governmental agencies provide more extensive background on how Black women have been positioned to become incarcerated in large numbers. Historically situating structural anti-Black racism could be an effective tool for politicizing racial consciousness and could allow formerly incarcerated Black women to further resist internalized responsibility as it relates to the PIC. Moreover, this politicized historical understanding of

incarceration could engender radical resistance to the criminal legal system and American institutions generally.

To emphasize the importance of this type of historical racial consciousness, I will reference a narrative which I read in the preliminary review of narratives, but which was not among the narratives included in this research. A woman named, Bobbi, had been involved in Black radical political activism in the 1970's. She was wanted for plane hijacking and she was a fugitive on the run for sixteen years. Bobbi's perception of her incarceration was that it was an attempt by the U.S. government to repress political activism. While the point of including Bobbi's story is not to encourage individuals to replicate Bobbi's experience, the larger political context within which Bobbi understood her crime provides a model for formerly incarcerated Black women to consider their experiences.

It is also important to reveal specific examples of the ways in which neoliberal capitalist restructuring has relied on anti-black racism (Rose, 2012; Sudbury, 2009). For example, debunking the myth that the policies of the Clinton administration contributed to economic development in economically disenfranchised Black communities or revealing the ways in which Black women were portrayed as crack mothers to deploy the "War on Drugs" represent politicizing analyses which would allow individuals to resist internalizing responsibility for joblessness or addiction in some Black communities (Brown, 2009). Other examples of neoliberal capitalist anti-Black racism can be found in the increasing militarization of and disinvestment from public schools in Black communities. This information would allow formerly incarcerated Black women to better situate their experiences within structural developments over the last few decades and demonstrate the need for fervent political activism.

Additionally, it is important to expose gendered anti-Black racism as practiced by child welfare systems and other federal agencies. Revealing this logic would allow Black women to be armed with analyses to confront and resist racism when it is experienced during involvement with American systems and institutions that constitute the PIC.

An additional strategy to encourage politicized gendered racial consciousness would be to connect formerly incarcerated Black women to radical organizing models and historical examples of Black women's transformative activism. Mary works with youth. Johna works with sex workers and lobbies policy makers. Judy works in a law office. However, as I previously mentioned, these forms of activism perpetuate neoliberal concepts of individualism and responsibility. There are several examples of radical Black feminist organizing in American history. These examples are not highlighted in dominant Reconstruction, Black Power, or Civil Rights discourses. Providing access to this history could be empowering and allow Black women to see themselves as connected to powerful images in history and to a Black feminist tradition that was catalytic in creating systemic change.

The findings in this research about formerly incarcerated Black women's perceptions of incarceration and their examples of internalized oppression support the need to develop new avenues for prison abolition movement-building. Several scholar-activists have asserted the dire need for a movement to end mass incarceration and I suggest that addressing the internalized oppression as it relates to formerly incarcerated Black women's experiences with sexism, racism, classism, and the criminal legal system will need to be a central strategy to building this movement and ultimately dismantling the PIC. Furthermore, overarching conceptions of justice will need to be challenged, re-envisioned, and re-created.

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**Appendix**

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Details</b>
Name	
Identified source of income (work, job, etc.)	
Geographic location (city, neighborhood, etc.)	
Family Status (children, significant other, etc.)	
Education (elementary, high school, college, etc.)	
Racial identification (African-American, Black, etc.)	

<b>Racist/Racism Identification</b>	<b>Occurrence in Narrative</b>	<b>Total</b>
Words/phrases like: racist, racism, unfair, treated differently than, treated worse than, because I was/am Black, judged me, unequal, etc		

<b>Procedural/legal Understandings</b>	<b>Occurance in Narrative</b>	<b>Total</b>
Words/phrases like: violated, my rights, system, police, guilty, my attorney, evidence, etc.		

<b>Access to Institutions and/or Resources</b>	<b>Occurance in Narrative</b>	<b>Total</b>
Words/phrases like: school, education, healthcare, social services, welfare, job, unemployed, marriage, etc.		

Conceptions of Crime	Occurance in Narrative	Total
Words/phrases like: my fault, my responsibility, I had no other choice, guilty, innocent, etc.		

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS:

**How does this woman understand race in the context of American institutions that comprise the prison industrial complex?**

- What were/are the effects of American institutions (media, education, employment, social services, etc.) on this woman’s life? Does she relate those effects to her participation in criminalized behavior?
- What information does she provide regarding her socio-economic background and class standing at the time of her participation in criminalized behavior?

**How does this woman understand her participation (what are the ways in which this woman owns and admits fault for the crimes that she has committed) in criminalized behavior?**

- As an individualized act or choice? As resulting from or influenced by American systems and institutions?
- What are the reasons she has provided for participating in criminalized behavior?

- Does she contest the validity of the criminalization of the particular act in which she participated?
- Is the recollection of participation in criminalized behavior intertwined with critical perspectives of the criminal legal system and other American institutions?
- Does she attribute fault to another individual other than herself and/or a member of the criminal legal system?

**Does this woman have any internalized logic (meritocracy, personal responsibility, etc.) of American systems and institutions?**

- Does this woman's narrative discuss crime as resistance or lack of other options to survive?
- How has she articulated race and racism?
- How has she defined success?

**Does this woman's narrative engage any political discourse about race and incarceration?**

- Does this woman identify her experience with incarceration and criminal behavior collectively (with other Black women or women of color) or individually?
- Does this woman make historical links to racial dynamics in America (i.e.- civil rights movement, black liberation struggle, Jim Crow, slavery, black nationalism, black power movement, etc)

