

BUILDING FOUNDATION OF SOLIDARITY ACROSS PRISON WALLS: SPACES  
OF HORIZONTAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND TRANSFORMATIVE  
RESISTANCE WITHIN ENVIRONMENTS OF OPPRESSION, VIOLENCE, AND  
SOCIAL CONTROL

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

By

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## ABSTRACT

### BUILDING FOUNDATION OF SOLIDARITY ACROSS PRISON WALLS: SPACES OF HORIZONTAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND TRANSFORMATIVE RESISTANCE WITHIN ENVIRONMENTS OF OPPRESSION, VIOLENCE, AND SOCIAL CONTROL

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Feminist scholars and activists critique oppressive ideologies that construct the female criminal as “other” and many call for the abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex. I argue abolition is only possible if practiced in solidarity with people inside prison, without furthering oppressive ideologies, constructions of “other” and hierarchal interactions. This project, and the handbook that emerged from it, seeks to advance collective and horizontal knowledge production, resistance, and solidarity among activists inside and outside. Drawing upon a theoretical framework comprised of intersectional feminism and participatory action research, I worked directly with people inside Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF), those previously housed inside CCWF, and Justice Now, through on-site interviews and mail correspondence. Together, nine co-researchers and I assembled a handbook from inside, talking to those outside, in an effort to build solidarity with Bay Area anti-prison groups and across prison walls.

Key Terms: Horizontal Knowledge Production, Prison Abolition, Solidarity, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Intersectional Feminism, California Women’s Prisons, Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF), Justice Now.

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Vicki Page, Linda Richman, and Robert Richman created a solid foundation for this journey to occur. I especially want to thank my birth mother Linda Richman for her undying ability to answer the phone late at night, and for always believing in my ability to finish, for accepting my stressed-out self, and for treading through the academic jargon.

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## INTRODUCTION

California contains two of the largest women's prisons in the world, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) and Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW). The fecundity of prison expansion over the past thirty years is due to the implementation of certain laws and policies rooted in institutional oppression and legacies of slavery. These institutions that have flourished from these laws are part of what is referred to by critical scholar activists as the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) (Chandler 2010, Critical Resistance 2005, Davis 2003). Motivated by racism and profit, these structures perpetuate society's systems of advantages by targeting poor and racialized bodies (Alexander 2010, Chandler 2010, Crenshaw 2005, Davis 2003). Moreover, the PIC is used as the solution to contemporary inequalities—problems created by these very interlocking systems—and as Angela Davis argues, “disappearing” millions of people rather than directly addressing the inequalities. As such, I argue it is time to rethink the Prison Industrial Complex, extinguishing its existence through abolition with the direction, insight, and action of those inside prison.

This project seeks to further understand *how do we—activists inside and outside—work to create various forms of collective and horizontal knowledge production and resistance? And, how do we work collaboratively to fight the system without furthering oppressive ideologies, constructions of “other”, and hierarchal interactions?* This handbook implements approaches to these questions that focus on individual and

communal “transformation” rather than research approaches for the sake of knowledge itself (Weis 2004: 96).

I employed a participatory action research (PAR) framework because it recognizes the intellectual power of knowledge production from the bottom of social hierarchies and realizes the most valuable research comes from those experiencing the oppression. I explored the ways this framework offers research rooted in social justice while simultaneously being aware that free people working in solidarity with individuals inside women’s prisons have both strengths and limitations, since they are never occupying truly equal footing. Resistance is ever present from inside these institutions and in order to work toward abolition, I argue that activists must move forward and work collaboratively and horizontally with those inside prison. This project ideologically, theoretically, and pragmatically manifested as a handbook serving as a “living” tool, intended for those interested in working in solidarity across prison walls.

This project is a working methodology, meaning the handbook itself is a theoretical approach to improve people’s lives through research. Working with marginalized populations, I strived to seek the deepest ethical frameworks I could implement. The nine co-researchers and I interrogated hierarchal relations, paying particular attention to not invisibilize the underlying academic aspects to this research. As the facilitator of this project I want to acknowledge the five years of prison visits, friendship building, and trust that directly inspired this handbook. I worked collaboratively to produce a handbook challenging crime and punishment’s myths and stereotypes in order to fight across prison walls for the rights of those in lockdown.

This handbook is meant to inspire counter-hegemonic knowledge production and is designed to serve as a tool for those outside wanting to collaborate in solidarity across prison walls in a forward movement toward abolition and collective action. The grounding elements of this project strive to confront the myriad avenues in which those housed in women's prisons are lacking rights to personhood, including the ways in which female prisoners are dehumanized and invisibilized, by underscoring their humanity and agency as well as their interconnected forms of resistance and survival. Meaning, this project works against inequality, violence, and social control. The priority is not only to expose the injustices of the PIC, but also to engage the reader/activist to critically reflect upon their own constructions of crime and punishment. I encourage the activist/social change agent to locate this interrogation outside the confines of crime and punishment binaries of right and wrong in order to place it within their own social positioning, and to understand how they collide and collude with, and are affected by, the PIC within their social positioning. Most importantly this handbook aims to inspire avenues for the reader/activist to engage in transformative change individually and collectively, situated in solidarity and abolition.

This project, originally intended for anti-prison groups who facilitate internships and work directly with people inside, is also useful for people working toward social change and in challenging society's ideas of crime and punishment. I chose to produce a project/handbook that works toward creating research that will be an integral part of the prison abolition movement and used as a tool for those wanting to challenge themselves on constructions of solidarity. I explored how, in the name of solidarity, people on the

outside can work horizontally with those inside. This exploration serves to bridge gaps in understanding abolition by exploring, challenging, and interrogating traditional research processes. This handbook pays acute attention to positionality, self-reflection, and recognition of agency with a deep commitment to working against stereotypes and oppression, an active methodology striving to produce counter-hegemonic narratives of those locked away inside the PIC.

This handbook is a “living” framework accessible through a Microsoft Word document. With this in mind I specifically did not create a PDF; instead I kept this document open and accessible to ensure non-profits and grassroots organizers who function on very little to no money are able to navigate this document for their specific needs. I envision this handbook growing over the years in depth as well as specifics pertaining to individual groups—hence the “living” dynamic. I see this handbook cultivating growth and knowledge into the long haul of organizing with those inside, building upon the ongoing abolition process. I do not intend to rearticulate an already well-articulated abolition movement. Instead, I attempt to pick up the tail end already in motion. Working as a prison solidarity activist I explore what drives inmates to band together and to self-advocate, and to become cognizant of how activists can work in solidarity to further prisoners’ resistance across prison walls.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

## Systemic Institutional Oppression and the Prison Industrial Complex

***“Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social program of our time.”***

***-Angela Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?***

This literature review traces the complicated political landscape that forcefully weaves itself throughout the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) and the arguments for its abolition. Using intersectional feminist and critical race theories I map out threads of continuity between legacies of slavery, systemic institutional oppression, the war on drugs, intersections of gender and race, prison reform, and prison abolition: imagining the unimaginable and mapping the gap of “well-intentioned” vs. solidarity. These histories highlight specific social and political histories that reside in the foundation of the PIC. Currently there are many definitions of the PIC; for clarity I employ Critical Resistance’s definition:

A complicated system situated at the intersection of governmental and private interests that uses prisons as the solution to social, political, and economic problems. The PIC depends upon the oppressive systems of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. It includes human rights violations, the death penalty, industry and labor issues, policing, courts, media, community powerlessness, the imprisonment of political prisoners, and the elimination of dissent (Critical Resistance 2005: 1).

Like systems of power, privilege, and oppression themselves, all of the aforementioned are institutionalized in, operated through, and are “rationalized” by theories and ideologies constructed and disseminated by privileged members of dominant U.S. institutions such as the state. By the state, I mean (but not limited to) the legal system, military, police, academia, and the mainstream media (Hartmann 2005; Law 2009; Roberts 1997; Shaylor 2007). Interrogating how systemic power and privilege work in perpetuating systemic oppression both institutionally and individually, I lay out my argument for abolition. Without actively uprooting institutionalized oppression and fully extinguishing the PIC, this monster will continue. Many scholar activists argue that abolition understanding must occur from both sides and collectively/horizontally with the direction and insight of those inside prison. If the abolition movement moves forward without the experience from inside, implementing the strategies will be impossible. However, I argue there are little to no tangible tools for implementing and challenging collective/horizontal understanding and practice across prison walls. The first step for collective/horizontal abolition requires a deep historical understanding of the PIC in order to counter socially constructed hegemonic narratives that result in oppressing and criminalizing. This includes but is not limited to exposing and deconstructing representations of the “other” that are created by members of privileged social groups in dominant US social institutions to “justify” the punishment model and the PIC.

Individuals and socially constructed racial groups are often “othered” by interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression through constructed fear (Said 1994). “Othering” is a tactic—used by those who overtly and covertly benefit from

systemic power, privilege, and oppression—to define, construct, exclude, marginalize, and portray groups through misrepresented theories, images, and ideas that place them outside the dominant narrative constructing them as inferior, threatening, subordinate, and at times less than human. Moreover, “othered” groups are characterized as innately unequal, or undeserving of equality, or deserving of violence and discrimination because of individual “choice.” But social hegemony often constructs as “choice” what are really unequally surveilled and oppressed subjugated experiences, and blaming “choice” renders invisible the systemic institutional oppressions that directly influence the same hegemonic constructions of “choice.” Here, “othering” operates on the historical basis of racism, patriarchy, classism, and all interlocking systems of power, privilege and oppression. Slavery<sup>1</sup> and its aftermath, and later the War on Drugs, are excellent examples of the “othering” dynamic. They produce and perpetuate fear that results in “othering” poor and/or people of color populations (Hartmann 2005). This fear process is strategically produced and driven politically, socially, and culturally through the PIC.

Angela Y. Davis, a leading abolitionist theorist, author, and activist since the 1960s, highlights the gross oppressive ideologies that the PIC is now built on but that

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<sup>1</sup> US slavery legally condoned one race owning another as property. White supremacy constructed the African American body as a tool working to dehumanize and control African-American populations. The 13<sup>th</sup> amendment appeared to abolish slavery—with a significant exception: “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.” Subsequent to the amendment’s ratification several southern states devised “Black Codes” criminalizing African Americans who were free. Vagrancy, unemployment, or interpreted gestures were probable cause for arrest if you were African-American. Black codes filled prisons with recently freed slaves. This systematic process of criminalization provided a copious labor supply and was quickly utilized by previous slave owners through chain gangs and convict lease programs (Davis 2003).

simultaneously perpetuate themselves under the dubious consolidation of crime, punishment, and public safety (Davis 2003). Davis brings our attention to the human faces disappeared in today's PIC by elucidating the histories of institutional oppression that directly influence and perpetuate "othering" tactics. She argues that today's hegemonic discourses on crime and punishment create the conditions that allow for the disappearance of large numbers of people who systemically experience gross human rights violations. Unrelenting legislative rhetoric for bigger-better prisons perpetuates the incarceration machine without addressing the growing social problems in our communities.

### Legacies of Slavery and Economic Histories Built Into The Prison Industrial Complex

Legacies of slavery, inner city economic collapse,<sup>2</sup> and backlash to civil rights<sup>3</sup> all have roots within today's imprisonment apparatus. Attempts to understand and critique

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<sup>2</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s factory jobs began to disappear from the US while the 1970s witnessed multinational corporations outsourcing their labor at unprecedented levels. Lesser skilled labor jobs were decimated by the highly educated and elite technological era that followed this outsourcing and eventually leading to inner-city collapse. (Alexander 2010: 49-51).

<sup>3</sup> Post civil-rights, public debate shifted from segregation into crime. Law and order failed to uproot racism systemically and institutionally; instead racism and systems of advantages were buried under the empty promises of civil rights (Alexander 2010: 41-2).

the plethora of factors driving the PIC are often simplified into the confines of profit-driven narratives. Linking the political economy of slavery and its continued legacies of influence along race and class lines to that of incarceration, Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues that the California government used prison expansion as the geographic solution to socio-economic problems (Gilmore 2007). With false promises of employment, the California government bought up discarded agricultural and factory land to replace the suffering economies of dying industries with prison towns. This strategy emerged out of President Ronald Reagan's war on social services and poverty, culminating in the prison boom of the 90s, when a new prison or jail opened every fifteen days. Two decades later, research found that this prison panacea continued the economic instability that plagued the rural landscape. Gilmore links this reality to race, "Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Prison expansion is a new iteration of this theme" (Gilmore 2007, 247). The physical placement of prisons within this new economy served to perpetuate historical positioning of classes against racist constructions that subjugated people of color. The PIC continues to enforce the constructions of race,<sup>4</sup> thus perpetuating a racial underclass.

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<sup>4</sup> Historically race was brutally enforced by the state. This forcing of "white" values is key to divide and conquer the labor force is an important key to unraveling our racist history. As different cultures began to give birth to a new generation of mixed offspring the construction of white was vehemently protected by property and voting rights. Elite classes secured control of the economic, judicial, and political systems implementing racist laws to enforce social economic divides. For example, children legally following their mother's condition so any child of an enslaved mother, even if the father was "white," was legally kept from European wealth.

This class-based reality and its permanent racial underclass follow individuals outside of their sentencing. Michelle Alexander argues the salient point that many states revoke citizen rights once someone is convicted, and subsequently render the “criminal” as a permanent fixture of the felon underclass. Access to voting, jury participation, housing, employment, and social benefits (financial aid and food stamps) are denied to those labeled felons, furthering the racial caste system that permeates this country (Alexander 2010).

Further complicating the reality of prisons in our cultural landscape, Alexander explores the role of “colorblindness.” She points to the legacy of a society uncomfortable with confronting unconscious judgments and deep-seated fears towards African-Americans. While this of course continues, it has also metamorphosed into judgments and fear toward the condemned criminals, who are often poor and people of color. Alexander calls this iteration “plantations to penitentiaries,” arguing a lack of understanding of this legacy’s effect on today’s criminal landscape allows it to be perpetuated virtually unrestricted and uninterrogated; she points to how activists and scholars often fail to explore the implications of a “racial caste system.” The U.S. government’s “War On Drugs” reinforces the racial caste system.

### War On Drugs

*“The point of the War On Drugs is to declare war on certain peoples.”*

**-Kimberle Crenshaw 2006**

The “War On Drugs” gave birth to mass incarceration. Drug laws seemingly absent of racial bias in fact target people of color and poor communities. For example, despite the same active ingredient involved in crack and cocaine, sentencing laws directly target subjugated racial and social economic populations over others. A five-year sentence is mandated for five grams of crack cocaine, however 500 grams of powder cocaine mandates an equal sentencing (Law 2009: 3). When race is used to define what a drug is and the response to it, institutional oppression is at work. Alexander explains the racialized process of this war:

President Ronald Reagan officially announced the current drug war in 1982, before crack became an issue in the media or a crisis in poor black neighborhoods. A few years after the drug war was declared, crack began to spread rapidly in the poor black neighborhoods of Los Angeles and later emerged in cities across the country. The Reagan administration hired staff to publicize the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 as part of a strategic effort to build public and legislative support for the war. The media campaign was an extraordinary success. Almost overnight, the media was saturated with images of black “crack whores,” “crack dealers,” and “crack babies”—images that seemed to confirm the worst negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents. The media bonanza surrounding the “new demon drug” helped to catapult the War on Drugs from an ambitious federal policy to an actual war. (2010: 5)

Mainstream Media, Academia, and the State amped-up theories & representations of the “Other” to target & scapegoat poor populations of color for the social, political and economic ills of the day and rationalize the “War on Drugs.”

Crenshaw highlights how crime and punishment narratives around drug use is further complicated when women are sentenced under these laws for being an accomplice

to their male partner (2006). The number of men who are sentenced with their female counterpart yet either receive lighter sentencing or walk free because of knowledge and ability to debrief (turn-in) others with incriminating evidence or names, leaves their female partners to serve time—alone (Crenshaw 2006, Davis 2003, Roberts 1997). The “War On Drugs” directly feeds the PIC’s structural and ideological workings to create a racial underclass.

In order to bring to light the marginalized subordinate experiences of those who are targeted and surveilled by the PIC and whose stories go untold, it is crucial to trace and highlight the distinctive threads that interweave individual lives and whole communities to manufacture devastating realities. The web of contemporary relationships between the legacies of slavery, the War on Drugs, and the PIC, function today through the historically infested institutions that confine and punish society’s subjugated voices. The PIC is not a solution but a consequence to victimizing and targeting through society’s current belief in the criminal justice system as the answer to societal problems (Alexander 2010; Crenshaw 2006; Davis 2003). In order to break this cycle and fully understand these intersections, people interested in unraveling criminal hegemony must bring those who are “othered” into the center of the analysis.

#### Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

***“Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color.”***

**-Frederick Douglass, *The North Star* 1848**

The United States now has five percent of the world's population and twenty-five percent of its prisoners (Gawande 2009: 8). The U.S. imprisons African-American women three times more than Latino women and six times more than white women, with nearly a million women in legal custody in immigration centers, county jails, and state prisons (Dignity 2007: 1). The PIC, influenced by systemic, institutional, and individual racism, works as a machine, using crime and punishment to reinforce ideas of white supremacy, rendering people in lockdown invisible (Davis 2003). The PIC machine is particularly potent when coupled with the dominant patriarchal structure found both inside and outside women's prisons. California has the largest population of female prisoners in the U.S., housed within the two largest prisons in the world—Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) and Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW). The foul and misunderstood realities prisoners face are a true measurement of the patriarchal society in which we live (Chandler, 2010). Most people inside women's prisons are mothers, with 60% living with their children upon arrest. Most of these inmates were convicted of property or drug violations—crimes of survival in a class-based capitalist society (Dignity 2007: 1). Women, as the primary caretakers of the home and family, may be driven by poverty and societal pressures to engage in more crimes of survival. Often these include but are not limited to prostitution, pick pocketing, shoplifting, robbing and trafficking drugs. Stealing or hustling is seen as necessary for survival, but more importantly for the survival of their family, because of the economic and/or societal problems they face. It's important to understand that some of women's crimes, such as

crimes of survival or being an accomplice to their male counterpart, can arise from difficult circumstances within a patriarchal society at large. It's imperative that we understand the ways class, race, and gender collide when deconstructing those "criminalized" inside women's prisons.

Intersectional feminist scholars elucidate the unsettling fact that women's prisons house the fastest-growing incarcerated population. This gendered targeting collides with intersections of race and poverty to render prisons socially sanctioned spaces for locking away society's "others." Analyzing the myriad and conflicting ways that subjects become "criminals" reveals the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression operating invisibly through discursive constructions of crime and punishment discourse (Foucault 1979). Intersectional feminists interrogate multiple and conflicting intersections such as race, class, gender identity, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, age, and ability to identify the fluid, diverse, and evolving subject positions that situate some under unfair surveillance. Kimberle Crenshaw, a leading voice of Critical Race Theory,<sup>5</sup> recognizes' how intersections of subordinated identities make poor and women of color disproportionately vulnerable to incarceration and higher rates of violence (Crenshaw 2006). She argues that a deep understanding of these intersections strengthens our ability to dissect the social and economic disparities responsible for the growing population in women's prisons. Prisoners constitute some of the most voiceless and vulnerable populations in the U.S. Many current feminist scholars critique the oppressive ideologies

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<sup>5</sup> Critical Race Theory looks at how racial differences and power are produced and maintained, particularly within the legal context and also in American society at large (Crenshaw et al 1995: viii).

that construct the female criminal as “other,” calling for abolition of the PIC as the only answer to solving the immense injustice associated with it (Davis 2003, Chandler 2010, Critical Resistance 2005).

Kimberle Crenshaw argues that in order to understand incarceration we must include lenses of state power, race, class, and gender experiences. Because gendered violence results in so many individuals locked inside racialized women’s prisons, and so many intersections of identities are included in these individuals, we must use an intersectional analysis for deconstructing the PIC (Crenshaw, 2006). Realizing how persistently criminalization targets certain women’s bodies through abject constructions of “other” criminalized and racialized bodies helps us to understand the ways oppressions are used as a wedge to divide people. By contrast, focusing on the subject position in isolation leads to incomplete understandings of the ways oppression is layered, both overtly and silently. Unraveling the multiple interlocking levels of domination stemming from the societal configuration of racism, classism, and patriarchy, as well as heterosexism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia and “othering” (Anderson and Collins 2007, 5) is crucial to understanding the deeply layered injustices built into the PIC.

Cynthia Chandler, a co-founder of Justice Now, explains that in recent years, prison abolition groups have gained acute awareness about the lack of non-binary gender resources (heteronormative constructions of women) inside women’s prisons. This dynamic leads to further misogynistic viewpoints and leaves many inmates in great danger. The binary construction of gender outside prison walls is severely heightened behind prison walls. Outlawing male guards in the cavity search process and focusing on

the rights of “women” prisoners has served to invisibilize many other forms of violence for the people inside these institutions (Chandler 2010). Laws that support binary ideas of women prisoners as victims and male guards as abusers, perpetuate the invisibility of gender-variant identities. People housed in women’s prisons do not all identify as women as related to the accepted feminine construction. Because of this, many abolitionists refer to individuals inside women’s prisons as *people in women’s prisons* rather than *women*. Not so overtly recognized or accepted is the fact that women also abuse women and cavity searches performed by women can be just as dangerous as searches by male guards. Justice Now argues that cavity searches must be outlawed entirely, not the construction of one gender over another who performs the inherently violent act (Chandler 2010). These constructions of right and wrong prove how binary laws based within specific gender roles leave prisoners at risk of sexual violence.

Gender Response Strategies (GRS) is the new buzzword within the PIC reformist movement (Braz 2006). Recently, GRS has proposed creating transgender boutique prisons. These prisons isolate people by administrations’ perceived gender identities. This appears to be a step in the right direction because of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) acknowledging transgender identities, which gives agency to non-binary genders. Boutique approaches, or specialized gender, culture, or race specific institutions, are still prison expansion hidden under the guise of “prison reform.” Proposed solutions that aim to make tiny steps instead of steps toward the entire system simply fail those inside. We cannot legalize compassion. Oppressions intersect

deep inside the PIC: working toward prison abolition—not prison reform—is the only way to uproot institutionalized inequalities (Braz, 2006).

### Failed Prison Reform

*“You and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth.”*

**-Frederick Douglass, speech 1865**

Over the PIC’s 200-year history, the legacy of reformist attempts created a litany of promises that continue to go unfulfilled (Alexander 2010, Davis 2003, Chandler 2010, Critical Resistance 2005). Historically, attempts to reform the prison system failed because they were insufficient in addressing the wider issues of systemic oppression, inequality, and state violence. Instead of addressing inequality in housing, employment, and education the PIC sets out to “reform” those deemed criminal. This inability to uproot institutional oppression, instead disguised under reforming those who broke the law, ultimately strengthens the foundation of harm inside the PIC, further perpetuating oppression and systems of advantages both inside and out.<sup>6</sup> Striving toward

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<sup>6</sup> Systems of advantages are not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals (Tatum 1997: 12).

transparency, we must interrogate the interdependency between the institutions of the PIC and the state. Because history is not linear or static, holding the state (traditional government, corporations, lobbyists, religious right, and corporate media) accountable for the ways in which it consents to and perpetuates systems of advantages is crucial. These systems function without overt racism, normalizing it within society's collective mindset. However, access to better schools, housing, and jobs is starkly divided by racial and socio-economic positioning (Tatum 1997: 12). Turning a nuanced intersectional lens on historically situated oppressions exposes today's homogenous mainstream discourses around those deemed "other," and the targeting of particularly racialized, gendered, and classed groups—those without systemic privilege.

It is important to trace the fact that California's dubious "get tough on crime" rhetoric imposed on poor and people of color communities, juxtaposed against their unwillingness to reach these same communities with prenatal or healthy options around reproductive issues. This highlights government's priorities while simultaneously ignoring the effects that systems of advantage have on these same communities. Confronting criminal (in)justice issues separate from systems of advantages results in histories vacated of the dangerous intersections of power, privilege, and oppression that affect the subordinate experience. Without interrogating such systems, which shape marginalized economies, social rhetoric, and political policies enforced upon poor and people of color, targeted interconnected relationships between power, privilege, oppression and the PIC will continue (Hartmann 2005).

Both reformers and abolitionists want to reduce the daily harm that people inside prison experience. Reformists tend to stop here though. Abolitionists on the other hand reach further into the social fabric in order to unveil these interlocking systems of oppression that mutually reinforce each other through normalization and violence. Instead of the debunked “tough on crime” ideologies, leading anti-prison scholars and activists call for the abolition of the PIC as the only answer to uproot its oppressive and violent legacies; they advocate working toward transforming society’s deep-rooted inequalities (Davis 2003, Shaylor and Chandler 2005, Critical Resistance 2005). People seeking to uproot the PIC understand that *both* socially constructed systems *and* their very real institutionally inflicted material consequences are responsible for structurally marginalized social groups. We need to reach beyond simply focusing on the outer layer of the PIC and instead deconstruct the core by shifting from traditional approaches of punishment to envisioning something new altogether (Shaylor 2007: 120).

### Visualizing a World Without Prisons

***“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change”***

**-Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider***

Reformist attempts effectively invisibilize racial hostility. Because public displays of hate and violence are generally unacceptable, the prisons have to take on this role. Michelle Alexander points out, “Racial violence has been rationalized, legitimated, and channeled through our criminal justice system: it is expressed as police brutality, solitary confinement, and the discriminatory and arbitrary imposition of the death penalty” (Alexander 2010, 197). A vast range of intellectual thinkers and activists both inside and outside prison, have organized multiple national conferences to address this very point. Critical Resistance in 1998 and 2008 (CR10) both in Oakland, California, represents powerful examples. In 1998, working directly with people inside prison, the conference set out to popularize the term Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) and articulate future abolitionist strategies to envision a world without prisons (Chandler 2010). This organizing across prison walls, across anti-violence movements, and across academia inspires many approaches to abolition and fuels a meaningful focus on specific strategies through constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse that shows the ways that prisons affect everyone, either directly or indirectly.

The state’s ultimate democratic power over its residents lies within the PIC (Davis 2008). Because of the power relationships that play out on women’s bodies, the collateral consequences of classism affect one’s chances of imprisonment (Crenshaw 2006). Because unequal surveillance and the War on Drugs result from systemic and individual racism, the risk factors and collateral consequences produce what Alexander calls a “racial caste system;” uprooting this racial caste system requires abolition.

The outcome of abolition demands a lengthy process of change within the confluences of the social, political, and economic factors that fuel today's PIC. Looking towards the future, abolitionists seek short-, medium-, and long-term solutions over a 100-year framework to encompass and address the myriad aspects required for steadfast solidarity with those inside. A homogenized replacement of the current system is not what abolitionists want. Instead, utilizing many solutions to the myriad problems is what abolition requires of us. Of crucial importance is addressing social problems through refusing to rely upon models that isolate and punish those marginalized and unjustly targeted (Critical Resistance 2005, Davis 2003).

Abolition ideology includes strategies that aim to put a halt to prison expansion through moratoriums, severely reducing the numbers behind bars by decarceration, and reallocation of surpluses of money that result from decarceration into treatment centers that address addiction problems rather than punish them (Davis 2003, Shaylor and Chandler 2005, Law 2009). Cassandra Shaylor, a long time anti-prison activist and co-founder of Justice Now, challenges abolitionists to commit to social critique and ethical sensibility each step of the way. This necessitates an acute attention to ideas and strategies proposed by individuals *inside* prison (Shaylor 2007, 115).

The strategy of decarceration interrogates the reasons why vast numbers of people are behind bars for non-violent drug convictions and demands the immediate massive decrease in incarcerated populations through the release of non-violent drug offenders. Releasing many of the non-violent people in lockdown will allow much of the PIC's vast resources to be reallocated into shifting local economies that are dubiously entangled

within the criminal (in)justice system into other avenues of public health and wellbeing, as well as being able to address the necessity of many communities to engage street economies for survival (Alexander 2010, Davis 2003, Law 2009, Roberts 1997). Davis speaks to the counter-hegemonic shifts required for decarceration:

Disarticulating crime and punishment, race and punishment and gender and punishment; developing a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation instead of retribution and punishment, and a constellation of free community based drug, alcohol, mental health and domestic violence treatment programs; using the funding currently spent on prisons to establish job, living wage and community recreations programs; contesting racial profiling and other practices of social domination that result in race and class based disparities in arrest and imprisonment rates—in other words, decriminalizing communities that have been criminalized because of their race and class; and finally, disallowing economic and pro-profit relationships among policing and correction systems, transnational corporations, media conglomerates, guard’s unions, the courts, and law-makers (2003: 112-113).

Although many abolitionists agree with the decarceration of non-violent drug convictions, many also recognize the possibility that reading “violence” against “non-violence” could continue the processes that “others” people affected by the PIC (Chandler 2010). Decarceration requires intervention and the creation of alternatives that shift the center away from the current reliance and acceptance on prisons as the solution to social problems. Because some violence goes unreported there must be examples all around us that implement alternative modes to the PIC. For example, communities most commonly targeted and surveilled by the criminal system are the least likely to call 911 for help. Acknowledging the agency within these communities and their necessity to work outside the conventional system, offers spaces for solidarity and for understanding

subjugated methods of community responsibility in regards to violence. Abolitionists seek to embrace everyone in the community in order to reduce vulnerability and harm through adhering to collective action and a thorough understanding of power relationships as requirements when tackling these larger social issues.

Abolition raises the question: how to make prison critique a larger task? Many abolitionists suggest language as a tool. Dualistic constructions of innocent/guilty, violent/non-violent, victim/justice, and safety/punishment force us into binary solutions. Crime and punishment pedagogy must be challenged. *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists* highlights the power of words and asks people to dissect meaning, use honest language, and define word choice in order to create counter-hegemonic narratives (Critical Resistance 2005: 10). The institution uses the term inmate, criminal, and prisoner; using “people in lockdown” honestly depicts the reality of those inside prison without blaming them. Asking *whom* the language addresses, who it is accessible to and used by, helps us to read between the lines and against the grain. These are some of the literary arguments that have come to define abolitionist theory, but we must not forget on-the-ground anti-PIC everyday movement building and the individuals resisting from inside the prison system.

The Gap of ‘Well-Intentioned’ vs. Solidarity

***“Working collectively to confront difference, to expand our awareness of sex, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination, of the ways we reinforce and perpetuate those structures, is the context in which we learn the true meaning of solidarity.”***

***-bell hooks, *Feminism: A Transformational Politic.****

Justice Now (JN), an abolitionist legal non-profit working with people inside women’s prisons, is an excellent model for genuine solidarity. Providing direct legal services, fighting reformist legislation, and challenging the PIC’s destruction of women’s reproductive capacity, they work collaboratively with people inside to create peer-education booklets for surviving incarceration. JN is a unique example of an organization creating solidarity through multiple lenses. Their structure places people inside women’s prisons at the center of their organizing; their governing board is made up of people currently incarcerated, previously incarcerated, family members of those incarcerated, students, lawyers, and legal scholars. Through placing the voices most affected by the policy at the forefront of their decision-making, their bottom-up approach offers an effective model of solidarity work that is firmly rooted in social justice. The decision to include current and former prisoners on the governing board has far-reaching consequences in shaping their perspectives. This is a structure virtually absent within the PIC, and instead works to offer mediums that recognize agency of those inside.

Most abolition literature calls for the inclusion, inspirations, directions, and visions of those inside. “Solidarity is in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse

communities” (Mohanty 2004: 7). Highlighting “the state’s” power to govern people in lockdown, many argue that scholars and activists must organize collaboratively and horizontally with prisoners and thus recognize the human rights, dignity, agency, and resistance that are alive and well behind bars. I argue it is not enough to rely on strategies that “give voice” or “find ears,” but instead advocate implementing strategies that create collaborative horizontal knowledge production toward abolition. Resistance is ever-present from inside these institutions, yet there are few on-the-ground practical examples of how to work horizontally in abolition literature. I link academic theory with on-the-ground practice through a participatory action research approach (PAR). PAR recognizes the intellectual power of knowledge production from the bottom of social hierarchies, realizing the best research comes from those experiencing the oppression. In an attempt to create a practical example of this gap, I coalesce in a handbook; strategies that strive toward horizontal action and collective solidarity. Hence, the importance of this project as a power, privilege, and oppression lens, strategies of shifting the center, self-reflexive analysis, and coalition and solidarity politics. Because resistance is ever-present from inside these institutions, yet there are few practical examples of how to work horizontally, this handbook sets out to connect across prison walls collaboratively and horizontally in solidarity with those in lockdown.

## EPISTEMOLOGY/METHODOLOGY/METHODS

Participatory Action Research (PAR): Intersecting and Overlapping Epistemological, Methods, and Methodological Approaches to Research, Coalition, and Activism Across Prison Walls.

This collaborative project serves to elucidate the ways in which specific choices of theoretical frameworks and activist approaches shape whose knowledge is produced and the outcome of influences of that production. Meaning, constantly focusing on the outcome of our activist endeavors misses the attention needed to dissect the process itself, requiring a step back to the praxis of the solidarity work abolition activists engage in (Freire 1993). Drawing upon participatory action research (PAR) and intersectional feminist (IF) frameworks, this chapter describes the epistemology, methodology, and methods employed during the creation of the project/handbook. The ineffectiveness of exploring the epistemology, methods, and methodology in a linear fashion further highlights the capacity of PAR to recognize the interconnected relationships between these schools of thought and the strength in engaging with them simultaneously.

Recognizing the production, regulation, and normalization of the PIC in the U.S. lend itself to exploring the politics of space and resistance. Attempting to disrupt criminalization hegemony, I strive to recognize the agency of those in lockdown through a PAR project inside the PIC and of those recently re-entering the “free” world post sentencing. Not wanting to claim authority over prisoners’ lives, I work as a bridge—joining people in lockdown and those outside, as well as activism and academia into a

cohesive handbook. If executed sensitively this bridge represents solidarity with those locked behind bars.

The unique opportunity of talking directly with prisoners allows me to form working relationships explored through feminist objectivity, which enables subjects to define their history, reality, and identity, without concealing the fact that our positions will never be on equal footing (hooks 1989: 1). Feminist standpoint is a fundamental piece in my research, permitting me not to assume explicit positioning either socially or politically, but instead allowing me to pay particular attention to systemic oppression while critically interrogating how that oppression works to further dominant paradigms (Hill Collins 2000).

Traditional approaches validate research that is directed, decided, and conducted by the researchers themselves, thus naturalizing top down approaches. By questioning these traditional approaches to research, feminist epistemology looks at the process of knowledge production through the research relationship itself, recognizing knowledge that is situated within lived experience and outside of scientific truth (Hesse-Biber 2004). I intentionally employ the term co-researchers as an act to further create horizontal spaces of solidarity, as opposed to traditional top-down “researcher” and “researched” terms. However, I do not mean to suggest this horizontal participation approach means equal; thus I practice self-reflexivity within my epistemological approach.

## Epistemology

According to Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, “An epistemology is a ‘theory of knowledge’ and a philosophical theory that represents a fundamental belief system about who can be a knower and what can be known” (Hesse-Biber 2005: 5). Striving to reach beyond external power, privilege, and oppression analysis, feminist epistemology offers a self-reflexive approach to conducting research. Self-reflexive research requires the facilitator to employ the same external intersectional lens used to recognize, examine, and transform interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression onto themselves—internally. In order to recognize biases and the differences of each position of the co-researchers, this approach strives toward transparency. I, Sam McEwen Page, am a white-of-European-descent, educated, middle-class, cisgender female, queer, gender-variant, anti-oppression activist. These social locations intersect privilege and oppression simultaneously. Within the matrix of oppression and resistance, I am a recipient of benefits and disadvantages, whether I want them or not. In addressing my privilege and the ways it operates, I want to acknowledge that I approached this project with the notion that theory is created collectively (Mohanty 2004: 7). I work against claiming authority over this project and I aim to pay acute attention to working against my assumptions of what kinds of research projects are needed, in order for the handbook to be directed by the co-researchers. I prioritize the input of those affected by the PIC throughout the handbook process within the elements of design, access, and creation, alongside their voices and situated knowledge.

Interrogating the deep interlocking threads of producing knowledge, I choose PAR because it allows me to work not only collectively but also horizontally. Collective action doesn't simply happen out of geographic convenience but out of shared practices, values, beliefs, cultures, politics, experiences, histories, geography, and relationships that offer a shared group space of "belonging." However, if power isn't transparent, horizontal knowledge isn't obtainable (Generation Five, 2005).

Feminist epistemology's interrogation of truth and knowledge offers me a clear lens to explore, dissect, and question the ways I approach horizontal prison solidarity across prison walls. Feminist epistemology calls for the implementation of feminist standpoint and feminist objectivity. This provides a crucial step, due to the acute attention paid to not objectifying people in lock down. Because the researcher and the researched are on different planes, feminist standpoint (Hill Collins 2000) approaches deconstruct hierarchal structures and refrain from reproducing oppressive paradigms (Hesse-Biber 2004: 12). My role as facilitator between two audiences works to inform those who are "free" while acting in solidarity with those behind bars, thus creating an intricate dynamic. I paid particular attention to keep from stripping prisoners of their agency while informing those who want to work in solidarity with them. As the facilitator, I work as a bridge to acknowledge prisoners within their strategies of resistance—it is not to force them to work within mine or teach them how, what, or when. Forgoing this step potentially renders invisible the forms of resistance already in place. Here, my choices of methodology and methods serve as guides on this path as facilitator.

## Methodology of Hope

This project/handbook is a four-year culmination of a collaborative journey across prison walls. In 2007, I began working with Bar None, a grassroots prison solidarity group located in Arcata, CA. This work included building relationships, documenting human rights violations, and disseminating resources across prison walls with individuals inside Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP) and Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF). Simultaneously, this work unraveled the hegemonic crime and punishment knot I was force-fed throughout my life. This unraveling entailed constant attention to the constructions of “criminal” that naturalize and blame the “other.” Instead, I interrogated the plethora of ways in which “criminal” is socially produced and economically benefited, and the oppressive legacies that operate within today’s criminal discourse.

In order to frame this process within the abolition and anti-violence movements, I look to Generations FIVE, a non-profit and leader in the transformative justice approach. Generation FIVE works to end child sexual abuse in individuals, families, and communities through survivor and bystander leadership development, community prevention and intervention, public action, and cross-movement building. They define Transformative Justice:

Transformative justice is premised on the idea that individual justice and collective liberation are equally important, mutually supportive, and fundamentally intertwined—the achievement of one is impossible without the achievement of the other. Liberation of relationships, communities, and society

liberated from legacies of violence and colonialization (2007). This grassroots movement is born out of the state's lacking ability to provide justice and recognize the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression on individual and community levels.

I believe community liberation and transformation is required to break the crime and punishment silence. This requires acute attention paid to the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression of each individual involved within the movement.

Grounded theory believes in research that discovers theory, instead of scientific approaches that start with a theory with an intention to prove it (Berg 2009).

Accompanied with PAR these approaches set forth on a path of research for social justice. "Compared to other types of researchers, the participatory researcher is more dependent on those from whom the data come, has less control over the research process, and has more pressure to work from other people's definition of the situation" (Fisher 2005: 181). Reaching the end of my first year of graduate school, my thesis titled *Eugenics in Lockdown* was set in motion. Meaning that my thesis committee was on board, my literature review was written, and I had an internship with Justice Now (JN), a non-profit actively fighting for the reproductive justice of those in lockdown. Justice Now has an extensive analysis on the PIC as a current-day legalized eugenic practice. My JN internship offered me weekly prison visits, where employing grounded theory I explored with those inside CCWF how they wanted to argue that *the physical location of the PIC worked as an active agent in eugenic practices by housing poor and women of color during their reproductive years*. At my first visit inside CCWF, I learned an

extensive survey had just negatively flooded the emotional and psychological realm of those inside. This survey, facilitated by Justice Now, had required people inside to intimately detail their personal experience with reproductive capacity under lockdown. Due to the emotional trauma inflicted by this survey, people inside CCWF were not interested in participating in *Eugenics in Lockdown* project. Instead the reality facing people inside was massive budget cuts. Extreme boredom was deeply penetrating the mental health inside, because California state budget cuts directly reduced access to programs. These programs include, but are not limited to, stress management, education, and art. The state's decision to cut the number of correctional officers employed left inmates locked inside cells daily with nothing to do for endless hours. These dark hours inside prison left people in need of projects, ways of being creative, and avenues for engaging, in order to cut through the stagnant void. With the help of zigzagging or the back and forth encouraged by grounded theory and PAR frameworks, the co-researchers and I negotiated what kind of research project would best suit the needs of people inside—not mine (Creswell 2007: 64). This is the exact point where I can locate the engagement of the PAR process, letting go of “my” project, working horizontally, and becoming a facilitator instead of a researcher. I employ PAR because the frameworks we employ directly affect the knowledge we produce.

Approaching interviewees as co-researchers, PAR works to create horizontal workspaces with all participants toward social change. By horizontal I mean PAR's approaches include participation *with* not *for* communities, recognizing the power and social insight that arise from bottom-up approaches. PAR strives to bridge research and

theory with political action while simultaneously giving the people studied power over the research (Fisher 2005: 178). From dispelling political hegemony to exposing counter-experiences, I believe PAR opens new spaces within academia, bridging traditionally absent voices with the powerful influence that academia holds. I use this foundation to approach knowledge production in hopes of re-appropriating it for transformation of individual attitudes, values, personalities, and cultures. Paying particular attention to working against creating concepts of individual criminal narratives, I strive to offer challenging questions set within a dialogue to question the PIC systemically, thus working toward problem-solving instead of problematizing (Fisher 2005: 184). I worked with co-researchers to not simply state the power, privilege, and oppression dynamics but to move beyond, seeking creative problem solving solutions. Going further than academic expertise, PAR places the tools of research into the hands of those experiencing the oppression (Weis 2004). Approaching this work with an intersectional lens, I believe I am a good candidate for this research because over the past four years I've formed relationships with people inside maximum-security prisons in California. However, the lacking lived experience forces me to explore alternate methods to aid in producing more inclusive truths.

### Methods Employed For Collaborating Across Prison Walls

Lois Weis says, "PAR is a mixed method approach having a unique epistemological perspective heavily embedded within feminist and postcolonial

theoretical approaches focusing on research for “transformation” rather than research for the sake of knowledge itself” (Weis 2004: 96). Using a PAR framework and working directly with prisoners at Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF), those formally housed at CCWF, and Justice Now, I employed methods of research that best fit this project. I collected data through surveys (APPENDIX A), extensive mail correspondence, and on-site interviews to interrogate approaches to solidarity across prison walls, working against extractive approaches to research. I asked what the co-researchers wanted.

In 2008, with California Prison Focus (CPF)—an abolitionist non-profit that investigates and exposes human rights abuses with the goal of ending long-term isolation, medical neglect, and all forms of discrimination—I started exploratory interviews inside women’s prisons. Here, I began building relationships with individuals inside CCWF through CPF’s subgroup Dignity For Women Campaign (DFWC). For years DFWC worked inside CCWF and VSPW on various issues regarding gender, the stopping of rape (cavity searches), and the ability to feminize inside prison. Upon my first visit I quickly realized DFWC focused heavily on the rights of women constructed in a feminine-gender manner, thus invisibilizing masculine-presenting folks. Worse, I came to realize their approach to end cavity searches was based in outlawing male correctional officers rather than ending the practice itself. To say the least, DFWC has a bad reputation amongst people inside. The individuals I met with heavily schooled me on their needs and campaign interests, which are rooted in ending institutional oppression outside third-wave feminist approaches. When I use the phrase third-world feminism, I mean: the construction of feminism that embodies a single narrative of what women, or

those constructed as women need, want, and desire. Instead, I was enlightened on the vastly conflicting needs of those inside women's prisons, thus deepening my ability to understand the plethora of identities inside. I visited both CCWP and VSPW and asked what it is people inside wanted. Over the next year I visited CCWF two times, building relationships inside. With the inclusion of mail correspondence and my research interest into what solidarity and women's prison issues were, I met Cynthia Chandler, the co-founder of Justice Now (JN).

JN has an extensive analysis on solidarity through working with people inside for ten years and the inclusion of prisoners as board members. During my first year of the Environment and Community graduate program I was fortunate enough to obtain grants that allowed me to organize a speaker series event at HSU with Cynthia Chandler and Misty Rojo. When I approached Ms. Chandler about the possibility of speaking to their unique approaches to solidarity, she immediately inquired about the possibility of bringing in Misty Rojo, a paroled board member. I had met Ms. Rojo inside CCWF; now struggling with re-entry, she was touring college campuses and speaking about her experience inside prison. This event, "Democracy Across Prison Walls," opened my eyes to the deep level of commitment required by activist interested in queer and feminist issues. Through the overrepresentation of queer and female bodies in lockdown, brutal human rights violations, queerphobia, and the severe destruction of families caused by imprisonment, I understood the depth of institutional oppression operating inside these prisons. Ms. Chandler, deflecting any sense of expertise, refers people to seek answers from voices inside first. Ms. Rojo's talk included resistance inside on a

survival, psychological, and cultural level. My ability to articulate solidarity and resistance was profoundly deepened through the relationships formed during this event, and my thesis grew into a focused *Eugenics in Lockdown*, fighting for the reproductive rights of those inside women's prisons.

Working across prison walls is dangerous, thus demanding specific attentions paid to the realities of safety for those inside. Administrative retaliation in prison is a dangerous reality for the co-researchers on this project. All mail correspondence is subject to surveillance by prison administration. Agreeing to meet with outside groups known to be sympathetic to prisoners can result in verbal, physical, sexual, spiritual, and/or psychological retaliation. In order to minimize this as much as possible, I followed the lead of the co-researchers. Knowing all mail is tampered with and an unreliable source of personal information, I made it a priority to commit to the prison visits. Overall I participated in eight prison visits to CCWF, but only two of those were explicit handbook co-researching visits. The first six visits, based in grounded theory, were spent researching another project eventually culminating in the handbook "Unraveling Lockdown."

Dilemmas of collaborating under surveillance include unpredictable retaliation, rampant violence, and possible influence on paroling. Lacking this analysis could result in furthering domination and oppression. Working towards transparency, I critically and analytically engage with people inside over these possibilities in order to strive towards safety and support throughout this project. Transparent communication between the co-researchers and I is another particular attention required for this project.

Many people inside prison lack a formal education and/or learn from a plethora of different mediums. Similar to folks outside of prison, there are folks inside who articulate themselves best on paper, those whose ability to get their points across lies in verbal interactions, and those who require a lot of trust-building through all mediums before they feel safe sharing at all. Attempting to create spaces across each strength, I wrote letters, sent in surveys, and collaborated through personal visits. I want to note that people inside CCWF are very creative and if someone struggles within the reading and writing realm, they employ others to assist them; however that does not mean they best articulate through verbal visits. PAR and grounded theory proved useful tools for navigating space in regards to survival, retaliation, and different learning styles.

Grounded theory and mixed methods are the most fitting data-collecting processes for my complex human-based research. Traditional linear avenues of obtaining data don't allow for these multiple methods and do not properly support my methodologies, nor do they accept subtle variations within the ongoing human experience (Denzin 2005: 21). Grounded theory and social justice require attentiveness to ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status, hierarchy, and individual and collective rights and obligations (Charmaz 2005: 510). In working towards situated research and approaching it as a two-way learning exchange, I believe grounded theory offers an effective avenue for a horizontal approach toward social justice. Interviews offer insight to the overwhelming oppression that is often invisible when using a single voice of authority (Berg 2009). Focusing on questions that glean information, rather than specific responses, served to further encourage truth seeking instead of

definitive answers (Forsyth 1998: 5). Incorporating these methods within the interview process aids in supporting and bridging this research with people inside women prisons and prison abolition groups working toward self-advocacy, solidarity, and resistance.

During my internship with JN, I collaborated with prisoners and ex-prisoners from CCWF in Chowchilla, CA. I collected ten testimonies, seven inside CCWF and three paroled outside individuals. Due to surveillance and the hardship it presents, the interviews were priceless to the project/handbook. Orchestrating legal visits inside CCWF requires extensive bureaucracy. Weeks beforehand, my legal clearance with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) was required. This included sending faxes, making calls, corresponding with each inmate, and navigating legal paperwork. The JN internship allowed me prison visits with the co-researchers without having to navigate the bureaucracy. Justice Now, including post internship into March 2011, conducted every detail required by CCWF.

Outside of the bureaucratic attention required for a visit, travel logistics are another hurdle. During my internship JN took care of these logistics; however Chowchilla is an eight-hour drive from Arcata, meaning that outside the internship I had to plan and fund hotels, gas, and time off. I am grateful to both the Environment and Community small grant and the Women's Enrichment Fund for financially supporting my visits to Los Angeles and CCWF outside the JN internship.

Once inside CCWF, collaborating is a logistical nightmare orchestrated by the administration. Upon arrival, visiting with co-researchers inside prison is limited to one hour. Due to the friendships dynamics that transpire throughout this process, one hour

offers little time for getting to the research itself. These limited meetings occur in a large visiting room with several round tables and chairs. The administration allows us to meet with one co-researcher at a time while COs walk around the visiting room listening to our discussions. Meaning, acute awareness to the surveillance of our conversation impacts what and how we navigate this space. The visiting rooms were equipped with vending machines and I always offered to buy the co-researchers a drink and food. Witnessing Marie Bandrup, a co-researcher, enjoy her first orange in eight years, made tangible the freedom I experience day to day, my endless options, and the access I have to fresh foods and vegetables. This was not to be taken for granted. Interview closure requires transition; asking about the mental and physical state of the co-researcher before returning to their cell requires time and awareness of emotional sensitivities outside the project itself. Also, knowing my personal boundaries kept me from making empty promises. My personal transition from prison visits induced a 24-hour inability to confront society, crowds, or public. My mental health required me to intentionally process the trauma I witnessed. These are crucial steps to navigating the stability of long-haul solidarity I am engaging in.

Over the four years of meeting and interviewing inside prison, I was fortunate to meet up with three people now living in the “free” world. This handbook includes three paroled co-researchers’ voices: Misty Rojo, Theresa Martinez, and Beverly Henry “Chopper,” each struggling with re-entry at the time of this project. I met with these co-researchers twice outside of prison to work directly on the handbook. Ms. Rojo, Ms. Martinez, and Chopper were politically active inside prison and lived in lockdown for

years at CCWF. All three co-researchers currently live in Los Angeles, CA. The joy and celebration of hugging Ms. Rojo, Ms. Martinez, and Chopper in street clothes outside of prison in the “free” world inspired a great sense of relief. These visits varied between two-and-a-half and five hours long. Once the high of meeting in the “free” world settled, we caught up on the details of the re-entry reality. Punishment outside of sentencing follows people post prison (Alexander 2010). This grim reality threw a dark shadow over the sunshine of “freedom” due to the myriad obstacles these individuals faced day-to-day.

My first outside interview with Misty Rojo took me to Compton. I borrowed a friend’s car and navigated my way through the LA highway system from Hollywood to Compton. In anticipation of collaborating with Misty Rojo, I wondered how she fared on the outside. Picking her up was a joyous occasion; we hugged and laughed as we headed out for food. Ms. Rojo wanted to eat at I-HOP, mentioning she often had brunch there before she was imprisoned. Settling into a booth, I asked if the presence of an audio recorder would disrupt the flow of our conversation; she obliged, speaking to its usefulness. It was a Sunday morning and the restaurant was bustling with churchgoers. Opening her menu, Ms. Rojo peeked over the top and commented on how strange it was to be taken out to eat while interviewing, due to the similarity to the vending machine formality we practiced inside prison. Getting to the survey and questions I had prepared, we awkwardly talked over the bustling Sunday IHOP crowd into the recorder. The realities Ms. Rojo faced during re-entry appeared destined to ruin her, yet she rose above. Empowered and feisty, Ms. Rojo’s inspiration to collaborate and fight anti-sterilization

legislation was visceral. Refusing to submit, Ms. Rojo smiled and swore—LOUDLY—inside I-HOP, owning her identity and survival of prison life. She made it out, paroled, and continues to fight and struggle—seeking justice for all. As the meeting came to a natural close, I mentioned the Watts Towers, inquiring about the history and location. Ms. Rojo offered to accompany me there.

We drove alongside the metro for miles through Compton on our way to Watts. It was clear when we crossed into Watts because now the streets were lined with projects, huge buildings that reminded me of prisons due to the lacking green spaces, porches, and beauty. Ms. Rojo pointed to each project, teaching me the names as we drove past. Dodging toilets, mattresses, and debris in the streets as the rain fell I noticed most buildings were abandoned. Shoved under the awnings, people and their life belongings huddled to keep dry. Lots of shopping carts, sleeping bags, and men squeeze together with nowhere else to go. Arriving at the tower we got out to take a look. The Watts Towers hover over a slab of concrete, creating a community space amongst an invisibilized neighborhood. Here, music, food, and community amalgamate within a broken neighborhood. While I drove Ms. Rojo home she pointed to a tiny house in the middle of this project-riddled city. “There” she says, “There is the house I paroled in and there (pointing across the street) is the crack front liquor store.” This story is an example of many I came across when researching the subject; seeing, feeling, and understanding the tangible reality of re-entry life deeply impacted me on a visceral level.

The following day I meet up with Beverly Henry, or “Chopper.” Standing tall at 61 years old, this African-American woman wears her hair in short tight curls and sports

gold playboy earrings, purple baggy t-shirt covered in black daggers, jeans, and Crocs—100% character. Making everyone around her laugh, Chopper says whatever she thinks, appearing to enjoy life and what it has to offer. Before I met up with her I reflected on her role inside prison. Chopper is a natural leader, full of charisma and strength. I wondered if this role translated on the outside. Living in a substance-abuse-free house, that character I first met inside prison was thriving on the outside. Again, Chopper had settled into her leader role, making people laugh along the way. Hidden beneath the surface of this reality is a HIV+ 61-year-old woman trying to exist on \$840 a month and with the possibility of the state ending her access to the substance-free home—any minute. The excitement of reaching the end of parole also means the end of access to state assistance and the expectation of finding new avenues for obtaining fundamentals such as prescriptions, housing, and counseling.

Given the sheer obstacles people re-entering society face, it's a miracle that anyone survives. But they do and they go on day-to-day, inspired and resisting throughout. I chose to highlight Ms. Rojo's and Chopper's stories in order to recognize the agency of those struggling with re-entry and the psychological resistance alive inside these individuals. Following people outside of prison and supporting their re-entry process is a gap in the anti-prison movement, lacking support and resources. The systems of advantages and institutionalized racism that aim to destroy those once convicted directly strive to rip apart one's personhood and humanity; however, the co-researchers' resistance and ability to fight prevails. I am humbled by the resiliency,

inspiration, and inextinguishable fire among these individuals who took part in the creation of this handbook.

The collective amalgamation of information through mail correspondence, surveys, and interviews, which required years of trust and friendship building across prison walls, is alive inside this handbook. The horizontal strategies I employed in order to recognize the agency in those labeled “other” included: shifting the center, honoring different styles of knowledge production, learning, listening, participating, asking questions, engaging, comforting, and communicating. In order to recognize my role as the facilitator, I want to claim my hand in navigating the process of the design layout of *Unraveling Lockdown*. I worked against inserting my language and ideas so as to not colonize the material and against further subjugating the voices of those inside. I rearranged the design layout for clarity and access, but did not play a heavy hand in the material developed for this booklet. This resulted in a profound section about trauma and PTSD as result of incarceration. The birth of this section, whose importance was unbeknown of importance to me, is one of the most significant outcomes I witnessed as the facilitator. This is working collaboratively and horizontally across prison walls.

## CONCLUSION

### Discussions For The Long Haul

I write this final chapter in a moment of surging emotion. It's day 19 of the Pelican Bay Hunger Strike that commenced on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. Over 6,500 prisoners are participating in the strike protesting torturous conditions of imprisonment across the state of California.<sup>7</sup> I'm sad to report the media and California Department of Corrections (CDC) are not responding to the demands of the prisoners. The hunger strikers' commitment is eminent, meaning death is before us. This moment of organizing with family members and activists throughout the state of California casts a net of electrifying resistance with far-reaching possibilities. The immediacy of the strike sparks new hope in the belief in our collective ability to change lives, transform ourselves, and nurture our environments within this tangible moment of abolitionist history. Tracing the threads of historical abolition resistance from slavery into today's 21<sup>st</sup> century abolition movement offers an understanding into the long-haul perspectives required by future movements.

Resistance is often framed as violent. Relegating our understanding to a one-dimensional lens leads us into binary options of right or wrong and/or violent or non-violent. These forms are often constructed as specific physical acts of aggression and/or protest. Using the subjugated perspectives to interrogate the vast intersecting mediums resistance exists within works to recognize resistance outside of riots and public displays of dissent. Understanding that resistance occurs physically, psychologically, rhetorically,

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<sup>7</sup> <http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/the-prisoners-demands-2/>

literally, individually, and collectively helps us to recognize the plethora of tools of resistance through vast levels of consciousness. It is important to highlight these forms in order to help us recognize the agency of those criminalized and victimized, while also recognizing resistance exists within emotional and psychological dimensions throughout time.

Surrounded by radical commitment and an energy that inspires a visceral desire for change, I look to what sustains the long haul within abolition frameworks. Reflecting upon five years of my personal journey within this collective mindset, the handbook project across prison walls, and a desire to understand how to move forward, I find two questions resurfacing. First, *how do we create strategic points of entry that weaken the system?* And second, *how do we create new ways of challenging systemic oppression (Borrow 2011)?* In this final chapter I lay out what I understand to be important tools of resistance for addressing these questions.

The use of an intersectional lens is integral because abolition aims to end violence for everyone—not just some. Striving to recognize, understand, and name how violence and trauma affect individuals and entire communities through myriad avenues, including witnessing and recognizing generationally inherited violence from the PIC must be in the consciousness of our organizing dialogues. Tim'm West folds a piece of paper in half several times as a metaphor to describe the effects violence has on individuals and communities. Striving to confront violence in our lives, we slowly open the folds, smoothing out the creases; however even the most profound work does not entirely get rid of the deep creases folds create (West 2011). Experiencing, inheriting, or witnessing

the violent impact of the PIC requires us to acknowledge these everlasting traumatic residues and to find mediums for using our voice and speaking as evidence, “yes: we do exist” and we are not hegemonic discourses.

Fredrick Douglass, an iconic abolitionist writer and activist, disrupts social hegemony through challenging notions of slaves as inherently violent men. If Douglass simply retold the violence he endured under slavery, he would leave the reader with a narrative absent of agency; instead he challenges this construction by relaying the moment he fights back physically and psychologically. Douglass writes, “Mr. Covey [slave owner] seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and, as I did so, I rose” (Davis 2010: 187). Douglass successfully narrates the violence he endured under the reins of slavery but also recognizes his own agency by sharing the physical and psychological resistance he summoned. The account recognizes Douglass’ transformation as an active agent rather than as the often socially constructed black man whose violence is inherent and without choice. Anticipating Tim’ m West’s folded paper metaphor, Douglass recognized the agency within the remaining creases. This pivotal moment helps the reader dissect the violence of the incident from the social construction of a slave as passive.

This point of agency born in the act of the violence is narrated as liberation; the tables have turned and transformation is tangible. Fighting Mr. Covey offers psychological and physical freedom simultaneously; it offers Douglass a psychological

unshackling within the physical interaction. The extent of mental and physical violence bestowed on Douglass by his master Mr. Covey over a year's time and his subjugation by the institution of slavery didn't break Douglass—instead it pushed him into psychological liberation. Douglass describes the power he evoked; “It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (Davis 2010: 188). Understanding the vast degrees in which liberation exists and functions allows us to further our work in 21<sup>st</sup> century abolition.

Unraveling the differences between anti-slavery abolition and anti-prison abolition movements helps us to deepen our ability to articulate the need for 21<sup>st</sup> century abolition. Because social hegemony constructs slavery as already abolished—when, as we discussed, it was not, truly—institutional oppression is further invisibilized. Contemporary abolitionists must work on highlighting the legacies of slavery build into the PIC in order to avoid furthering these legacies. This work should detail avenues for change that iterate and visibilize that *yes*, those inside do exist and possess agency. In Douglass' book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he shares with the reader his direct physical and psychological experience with violence under slavery: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood” (Douglass 2010: 188). The contemporary hunger strike evokes Douglass' “rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom” due to the agency and the psychological resistance taken where seemingly no resistance space is available. This psychological liberation

must occur in tandem with new, direct, and creative tools to weaken the system while challenging systemic oppression.

Tracing the legacies of Douglass' narrative over the past 150 years offers activists an insight to the ways we limit ourselves within our *own* constructions of resistance. It's important to recognize how the PIC "others" and/or blames those inside for the violence they experienced. The ability Douglass has to disrupt "othering" lies within his psychological liberation. Slavery is a state-sanctioned institution that legalizes one human owning another and is rooted in deep institutional oppression. These legacies of slavery still have strong contemporary footholds today inside the PIC.

Recognizing the agency within the folds of West's metaphor is a powerful way to engage with trauma and oppression. Creating tools that bridge social movements and explore new avenues of freedom requires particular attention to the ways we construct identities. Action toward solidarity requires a collective movement in building coalition and confronting differences, while expanding our awareness to recognize what is invisibilized. Highlighting the agency of those subjugated by oppression requires an envisioning of solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. The deeper we address and unravel this, the more uprooting that occurs. Issues of identity and representation in the face of institutional inequalities can mean the difference between life and death. At times, survival alone within egregious violence can be the resistance. Angela Davis, a 21<sup>st</sup> century abolitionist, says, "Philosophical understandings of freedom with histories of black political struggle and cultural production resonate with

contemporary efforts to extend and enlarge the meaning of freedom” (Davis 2010: 30-31). Again, finding avenues that simultaneously work against institutional oppression and toward liberation is key to the long haul.

In tandem, understanding the legacies of slavery paralleled with histories of resistance is needed in abolitionist movements. Today (September 13, 2011), the abolition community marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Attica prison uprising. Every day for a week, educational events, film screenings, and teach-ins occupy radical bookstores and activist spaces throughout the Bay Area, aspiring to create spaces for engaging and inspiring abolitionist strategies in celebration, memory, and resistance. Abolitionist frameworks are in motion; however, the divide between this community and the larger activist community is vast. In order to envision new ways for transforming situations, it’s necessary to push us and others to not simply identify connected oppression and legacies but to reach further into the analysis. To bridge the gaps in coalition and forward movements and for unique approaches to accountability, I suggest looking to Generation 5’s three core beliefs of transformative justice (TJ):

1. Individual justice and collective liberation are equally important, mutually supportive, and fundamentally intertwined—the achievement of one is impossible without the achievement of the other.
2. The conditions that allow violence to occur must be transformed in order to achieve justice in individual instances of violence. Therefore, Transformative Justice is a both a liberating politic and an approach for securing justice.
3. State and systemic responses to violence, including the criminal legal system and child welfare agencies, not only fail to advance individual and collective justice but also condone and perpetuate cycles of violence. Therefore transformative justice seeks responses that do not rely on the system for answers (Generation Five 2011: 5).

Transformative Justice incorporates working with those who caused the harm without relying on the state for answers and exploring avenues that shift the focus from punishment into seeking answers for the reasons behind the harm caused. Challenging crime with harm narratives within frameworks that recognize institutional oppression helps in shifting narratives that blame and “other.” Envisioning harm frameworks outside of crime and punishment narratives allows us to separate and understand what individual change looks like within a system of violence. As activists we must revisit criminology hegemony and seek ways to do this work in the spirit of community and liberation, while paying acute attention to agency of the individual and community involved.

As I write this chapter I’ve received word that Marie Bandrup (a co-researcher on this handbook) passed inside prison. I am alternately overwhelmed by grief, rage, and numbness; a vessel unable to process the intensity of this work and the deep-seated oppressions influencing painful stories. However, this work is a collaborative process rooted in a history that is multigenerational, amplifying the fight for abolition. I am inspired by the collective fecundity. Physically opening and reading letters from those actively striking highlights the importance of taking power where seemingly no power exists. The hunger strike is an act of resistance, a period where people re-envision and re-structure their lives. Activists must seek to locate avenues that highlight the ways in which we need each other across prison walls in order to end violence. This approach includes bringing those inside prison into our narratives and finding ways of articulating together what we desire. Because it can be easy to articulate what we *don’t* want, we

especially need to further our ability to articulate and envision tangible abolitionist strategies that we *do* want: the very concept of a world without violence; a world that does not rely upon law enforcement as an answer to confronting violence, crime, and addiction in our communities. Attempting to mediate the space between oppression and freedom, we have to strategically create collective strategies towards community accountability with clarity, analysis, generosity, and fierceness. Here, creative problem solving, flexibility, and courage are imperative. Challenging our path while accepting the differences of direction will create unity with ongoing constructive critical analysis in an attempt to strengthen our force.

I hope this handbook inspires people to take solidarity seriously, working across prison walls in an act toward self-determination, individual transformation, and accountability in order to be a part of something bigger than oneself. The work explored inside this handbook is meant to unleash an imagination that inspires abundance, sparks creativity, and finds moments to take risks, thus cracking open the confines of prison, allowing the sunshine in and the oppression to escape. The individual drive to fight for one's rights when no rights seem obtainable connects one to the collective mindset—sparking a fire of resistance consciously and physically. Naming the vast levels of resistance—at the conscious, physical, emotional, and psychological levels—allows a deep understanding into the myriad avenues within which resistance operates. Its ability to penetrate the psychological, physical, rhetorical, literal, individual, and collective realms helps us to unravel the subjugated imprisoned experiences, in the name of the long haul toward total abolition of the PIC.

## EPILOGUE

## Fertile Ground

I put the final touches on this project amidst the Occupy movement. What is now being constructed as a bubble is in fact tied to years, decades, even centuries of tyranny in this country. After years of my own frustration over the seeming unwillingness of Americans to give up their evenings and organize against the war, I bear witness to a movement of the people spending their evenings at general assembly meetings, marches, and speak-outs. This is not a movement driven by a sub-culture of socially constructed radicals, but a movement led by a deep understanding of injustice touching the lives of 99% of U.S. residents. The night following the Occupy Oakland raids and rampant police brutality, 2000 plus people came to consensus in support of a general strike set for November 2, 2011. The community aligned itself with the teamsters, and teachers, and the houseless. After the despicable police brutality that shamelessly occurred on October 25, 2011, there was a speak-out. I witnessed community members suffering from the loss of a child, husband, and/or friend to police brutality share their trauma with hundreds of people. I witnessed the community creating a space and opening their hearts to the collective trauma coming from living in Oakland, CA. The 1%'s tactics of pitting the underclass against itself aren't working; instead unification is rampant in our towns and cities across the U.S. Walking around Oakland, hope is in the air. It's nearly impossible to walk into a store and dodge a conversation of "the Occupy spirit." Seeping into society's streets and alleyways, discussions of "*what does it all mean?*" fill the air. The

process of navigating conversations makes us strong, powerful, and dynamic. My hopes are high for the long haul of the Occupy movement.

The people of Occupy Oakland are aligning themselves with prisoners and including them in the 99% dialogue. I am inspired by the rich connections bridging the Pelican Bay Hunger Strike and the Occupy movement. Recently, I attended the book release of *Voices From Inside* at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. There, a panel discussion comprised of lawyers, writers, and former prisoners narrated the incredible hoops they jumped through in order to interview people inside women's prisons, which enabled the publishing of prisoners' stories. Theresa Martinez, a co-researcher on the project/handbook *Unraveling Lockdown: A Participatory Action Handbook to Working Collectively Across Prison Walls In a Move to End Mass Incarceration*, sits on the panel. Ms. Martinez, whom I interviewed inside prison and is now free and amidst the post sentencing struggles of re-entry, shared her experience. I watched the crowd respond to her story, wiping tears and shaking their heads no. Ms. Martinez is published, this crowd came to hear her speak, and the connection between the PIC and society are deepening in this moment. Many questions were asked about abolition and the invisibilized realities people inside prison and people struggling with re-entry process face. I see the light turning on, I see the connections being made, and I see the possibilities of hope at the book release and on the streets of Oakland.

My journey of facilitating the handbook *Unraveling Lockdown* gave light to the need for new innovative avenues for engaging with participatory research. Due to the profound access and mediums for change this handbook generated, I want to encourage

an activist research project building off what started here. A booklet interrogating the everlasting affects of trauma and PTSD from incarceration that explores how to navigate mental health inside prison is in deep need. I envision this booklet joining forces with new radical approaches to mental health liberation from outside with those inside, thus strengthening solidarity across prison walls. The Generative Somatic movement,<sup>8</sup> started by Stacy Haines, a co-founder of Generation Five, strives to address the psycho-biological trauma from oppression and violence that manifests in our bodies. Movements such as Generative Somatic should shift to include incarcerated populations into the narrative—creating tools and approaches accessible across prison walls *are* possible. A second activist research project exists within environmental justice. A new trend in environmental movements is to shift campaigns to community-centered approaches; however, the inclusion of incarcerated voices is yet to exist. I believe this shift, with the inclusion of voices from inside, would have far-reaching affects. Creating avenues for organizing that recognize the agency of those incarcerated in our communities and shifting the center in our social, environmental, physical, psychological, and spiritual efforts is imperative to solidarity across prison walls.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.somaticsandtrauma.org/approach.html>

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## APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS I AM LOOKING TO ANSWER AND UNDERSTAND ABOUT  
WORKING ACROSS PRISON WALLS

This work depends on your voices. The more details and examples you can provide, the deeper this work can go. Personal stories and experiences, if you feel comfortable, are very much appreciated. Again, thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire and if you need more space please feel free to use the back side or another piece of paper.

What is your legal name?

What name do you prefer?

What is your CDCR #?

What is your housing #?

How do you identify or not identify in regards to gender?

How do you identify in regards to race?

How do you identify in regards to ability either physically and/or mentally?

Are there other self-identities your wish to share and/or include?

How old are you?

How long have you been incarcerated?

How long have you been working with Justice Now?

Are you a Justice Now board member?

What projects have you participated in with Justice Now?

Can you please elaborate on your experiences of working on these projects focusing on the process not just the outcomes will deepen the understanding of this.

How do you define solidarity?

How do you define reproductive justice?

What outside organizations have you worked with during your time at CCWF?

What have you learned from working with outside groups? Please be specific, details are appreciated.

Is your experience working with Justice Now different than working with other outside organizations? If so, how?

Tell me your experience of meeting Justice Now.

Why did you decide to work with Justice Now?

Why do you continue working with Justice Now?

What hasn't worked when organizing with outside groups and/or Justice Now and why?

How do you define success?

How do you define empowerment?

How do you define charity?

What do you see as the most important things to address when working with outside organizations? If you were to put together a "how to" book of outside groups working with those inside prison what do you think would be the most important points to cover and address? What chapters would you include? For example, I think the importance of a common language would be a chapter.

Is there anything else you want to share? Do you have any questions? Do you have any concerns?