Governig Bodies // Governing Souls:
Female incarceration, “rehabilitation,”
and promising radical strategies

Foreword // To the reader:

This is a zine about the social control of marginalized women in the United States.

There are many forms of social control that regulate the lives of women, but I focus primarily on the tools of governance used by the criminal processing system (known to some as the criminal (in)justice system). I discuss the soft arm of the prison industrial complex and its role in controlling criminalized women through mandated, community-based “rehabilitation” programs. In the first part of this zine, I talk about what state-sponsored rehabilitation looks like, why it’s problematic, and why prison abolitionists (and everyone else) should be very wary of it. Cages are just one form of state control; the carceral landscape is now far more diffused, pervasive, and expansive than ever before.

The second part of the zine explores some promising strategies to facilitate radical forms of empowerment instead of furthering oppressive systems through state-mandated rehabilitation programs. My experience of organizing with women in prison has been instrumental to my reimagining of what healing work can look like for those who have been marginalized and criminalized. Our popular education curriculum facilitates the development of political identities, is steered and controlled by women on the “inside,” and builds a meaningful community of women who are connecting with one another and with outside social movements.

Partly personal musings, but mostly critical

engagement, this zine will hopefully give you ideas on how to (and why you should) circumvent state solutions to state-generated problems.

I am a white cis female that comes from a working poor family, and who now has some cultural capital from being a graduate student and a radical activist. Although I draw upon a diverse range of literatures and liberatory struggles, my personal standpoint is heavily influenced by my identities and background. This zine, my research, and my activism are inspired by my early years of drug addiction, my entanglement with the system, and a period of incarceration in a county jail on the east coast. Although I cannot speak for everyone, nor do I want to, my work is deeply grounded in personal experience and in prison-related activism.

If you have questions // suggestions // criticisms, email firehawk666@riseup.net

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Female incarceration

Women have long been ignored in conversations about mass incarceration and punishment. Although they comprise a smaller amount of the jail and prison population in the United States when compared to men, women have higher *rates of increase* in the incarcerated population. That is, over a 30 year period, we have seen a 400% increase in the amount of women we are warehousing in jails and prisons around the nation (and an 800% increase for Black women), compared to an almost 300% increase for men. Instead of getting a metaphorical "slap on the wrist" or any other form of state leniency, women are equally subject to the state's tough-on-crime approach. They are getting lengthier sentences for relatively petty offenses, and this is largely a result of the war on drugs and all of the draconian laws that came with it, like mandatory minimums and the three strikes and you're out laws.

Women aren't using drugs more than they were 20 or 30 years ago; instead, poor communities (specifically low-income Black and Latino communities) are getting policed more, women's drug use is being *detected* more, and they are being sentenced much more frequently than ever before. The burden disproportionately falls on Black women. They have experienced the highest increase in prison rates, and there is a direct link between that burden and the crack-cocaine hype of the 1980s. The sensationalized scare tactics of that era were heavily racialized and focused on the "threat" of the inner city (read: Black people), but those scare tactics were also gendered. Black mothers were considered to be the immoral propagators of a future generation

of "crack babies," a population of children who would trouble the social system with heightened medical needs, lower IQs and therefore greater educational needs, and possibly future criminality. We now know from long-term research that crack in utero doesn't disadvantage children or communities, POVERTY does. The fear mongering that centered on inner-city bodies, especially Black mothers, was integral to the creation of draconian sentencing laws and in sustaining the so-called war on drugs.

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I am a product of the system.

My introduction to the system was fairly minor at first. My over-controlling, abusive military dad snitched on me after he found my stash of marijuana. I was 16 and he thought the best way to intervene would be to call the cops, instead of having a conversation with me. My dad was a law-and-order type of asshole, the kind of guy who thinks that punitive discipline can correct rebellious teenage behavior that is, more often than not, something that folks mature out of. The cops gave me a summons for my appearance in court.

I lived in a city in New England that had severe raced and classed tensions, predominantly between working-poor Puerto Ricans and middle-

upper class Irish. Walking into the courtroom as a young white girl, although I had no class privilege, assured me the easy route to unsupervised probation for 6 months. My rendezvous with the courts didn't end there, though. My home quickly dissolved into a very unsafe situation, and after I fled to a lover's house when I was 17, I started to dabble in the world of heroin.

My drug use escalated. Quickly. By the age of 18 I was snorting heroin, and, several arrests later and a short stint in the county jail, I graduated to intravenous injection. My partner had become severely abusive, and it seemed the only thing that kept me in a violent situation was a partnership that orbited around dope and getting money for dope. I had a 5-year run with both shitty abusive relationships - the batterer and the heroin. I was jobless, homeless, and running in rough neighborhoods with heavy police presence. Needless to say I racked up 25 charges or so, including several counts of possession of illegal substances, resisting arrest, larceny, and even assault and battery. The A & B was when I tried to defend myself against and escape from two security guards who had grabbed me by my legs and arms and hoisted my body mid-air after I tried to

shoplift a few DVDs. My privileges had been exhausted by the time of my final arrest, and I was given a year in the county jail, a mandated 6-month stay at a halfway house upon my release, mandated AA, and two years of probation.

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We have a racist and classist system that locks up more women now than ever before. What is more, the vast majority of women who are incarcerated, or tangled up with the system in some way, have been subject to many abuses in their childhood and adult years. Our culture is one that is rooted in violence and exploitation that affects <u>everyone</u> in different ways. For women, transgendered folks (especially trans women), and many queered bodies, the connection between physical/sexual abuses, and drug use, sex work, and other criminalized lifestyles are very strong and more relevant than for cis-gendered heteronormative men. This isn't to be confused with the fact that many drug users, sex workers, and social deviants of all sorts are entirely comfortable with their hobbies and do not deem their lifestyles problematic. The problem lies with the state mechanisms that apply prohibitionist tactics and drive behaviors underground into unsafe situations for people who don't have much cultural protection against such forces. Criminalization can exacerbate vulnerabilities and further contribute to trapping women/womyn/queers into a perpetual cycle of violence.

There are more than 2.7 million children in the U.S. who currently have one or more parent

incarcerated, and almost 2/3 of the women incarcerated in state prisons are mothers. Imprisoned mothers have an especially high likelihood that they were the primary guardian before they were sentenced. Some are able to place their child(ren) into kinship care, although that often leads to further strain to a mother's familial relationships and most certainly introduces financial burdens to the family or kin who take the child(ren). If mothers don't have family or safe conditions to place their child(ren), social services will intervene and place the kid(s) in an already overcrowded and problematic foster care system. With the 1997 passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, a mother's parental rights may be lost as little as 15 months after separation, which does not look promising, considering the average sentence length is now 18 months for women (median sentence length is 60 months). Children whose parent(s) are in jail or prison often struggle with the separation and they also have much higher rates of getting involved with the juvenile/criminal processing systems later on.

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After the first couple of months of constant dope sickness and getting some relief for my compromised liver (hepatitis C), I got into a comfortable routine in jail. I worked a laundry job, got paid in stamps and hygiene products to smuggle commissary goods to women's boos who lived in other units, tutored friends who were studying for

their GED, played spades, and had a lot of free time to get to know my pod-mates. Going to jail was a significant turning point in my life. I witnessed several friends lose custody of their children during their stay. I had a couple of friends sign adoption papers because the state determined they were permanently incapable of ever reuniting with their children. Although I couldn't fully understand the horrors of such a situation as a childless person, I was forever changed when I comforted my friend L after she was forced to relinquish custody and lost her son forever because of a string of petty, nonviolent crack cocaine -related incidents.

The amount of collective trauma resonating in that women's pod was substantial. All of the women I met, including myself, had many awful stories of abuse, suffering, and violence. Most of us had only marginally healed from any of those traumas, and it was especially hard to recover in the sterile and hostile institution that we temporarily called home. Criminalized women often have issues with drug use/overuse/abuse that are intertwined with their past mistreatments, and our so-called criminal activity is often a direct product of trying to cope with those abuses. These coping mechanisms, although oftentimes minor and

nonviolent, carry all the stigmatizations of being cast as criminal. The criminal processing system regarded us as irredeemable sinners, irrational junkies, and unruly deviants. Most of the time, we treated each other with care and the belief that, despite the major setbacks of being locked up, we would triumphantly regain control over our lives.

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"Rehabilitation"

The unprecedented expansion of the carceral state in the United States, primarily mechanized through draconian mandatory sentencing laws and justified by the "war on drugs" has resulted in an astounding increase in women sent to jails and prisons. Consequently the widening net of the criminal processing system in all its forms (jails, prisons, parole, probation, diversion programs), has captured more women, disproportionately poor women and Black and Latina women, than ever before. This dilemma has prompted feminist scholars, practitioners, and many liberal activists to rightfully critique the mechanisms that lock up women who have extremely high rates of mental health and substance use issues, past and/or ongoing abuses, and a lack of adequate vocational and educational training. These advocates argue that criminalized women couldn't possibly get their needs met in a jail or prison setting. And so, alternatives to incarceration are often touted as the best solution. Many so-called experts proclaim that, instead of

sentencing women to jail/prison, women need to be sentenced to community-based therapeutic programs that will more adequately meet women's needs.

Yet, reducing the amount of people in prison is a simplistic solution. The prison is just *one* site of regulation amongst a diverse assemblage of state controls in women's lives. We must be critical of the "soft" forms of state power that still employ tools of coercion and control, no matter how much more attractive community corrections may be when compared to the looming monster that is the prison state. It is problematic to uncritically defer to state-sponsored and state-controlled therapeutic programs. State power will just be reconfigured, diffused, and harder to untangle, and all the while, will still exercise control upon marginalized women's lives. This new shift in the carceral landscape, as our country moves towards a "smart on crime" approach to crime control (i.e. utilize prisons less, use community corrections more... because it's cheaper), is what led me to do research at a so-called "alternative," women-based, trauma-informed, community reentry center for women on probation or parole. My ongoing 4-year strong ethnography has led me to some interesting conclusions.

First, penal institutions are clearly becoming more decentralized and using a variety of "reintegrative" surveillance techniques to monitor the 5 million people who are on probation, parole, or sentenced to "alternative" sanctions. Surveillance techniques are used to monitor those people, primarily operationalized through religious organizations, privatized halfway houses (clients pay to be there), and non-profit reentry centers.

Essentially, probationers or parolees are mandated to one or more of these agencies and they *must* successfully complete or graduate in order to avoid going to jail or prison and violating their stipulations. The element of coercion is very strong in all of these auxiliary agencies, despite the desire by many probationers/parolees to truly overcome their personal issues.

Second, the discourses at these "alternative" organizations are very troubling. Although these organizations truly want to help and facilitate the recovery process, they also absorb (to varying extents) the narratives of the prison system and our neoliberal risk society. Neoliberalism is often thought of in economic terms – a shift away from Keynesian social welfare policies and towards corporate welfarism and a decrease in the social safety nets that are meant to prevent hunger and homelessness, for example. But neoliberalism also has a strong presence in cultural narratives, including an increasing discursive vilification for the poor, for undocumented immigrants, for street drug users, and for those labeled criminal. Neoliberalism promotes the idea that certain people are undeserving of assistance, that they have created their own ill predicaments, and that with enough motivation, these invalids can help themselves. In other words, neoliberalism obscures social contexts and erases history. Many contemporary social institutions, from the criminal processing system to social work agencies, often adopt neoliberal frameworks that shift responsibility for social welfare from the state and on to individuals. This process of "responsibilization" ultimately abdicates state accountability for providing communities relief

from the deleterious effects of social problems such as poverty, even though the state is responsible for inflicting these problems. The discursive emphasis of the responsibilization process stresses that individuals make better life choices and become self-regulating agents in order to curb their own criminal behavior and to transcend the conditions that cause criminality. Responsibilizing forms of governance aim to shape the subjectivity of the targeted individual primarily through mobilizing the individual to shape her or himself according to the state's interests.

Third, by using a gendered lens to analyze this process, it becomes very clear that governing technologies are based on claims made about criminalized women's lives, needs, and desires. Overlapping discourses are found in the nexus between penal and welfare systems, as a disproportionate amount of criminalized women are also entangled with child protective services. State-mandated therapeutic models, including drug treatment, parenting classes, and cognitive behavioral classes, operate on the assumed incompetency of criminalized mothers to self-manage their lives and the duty of the state to deliver these interventions, with the threat of terminating parental rights for noncompliance. These "alternating forms of coercive control" are especially problematic considering the overrepresentation of families of color and indigenous families in both systems.

The intersections between state power, gendered knowledges, and therapeutic interventions are dependent upon socio-historical contexts. During the era of welfare reform in the 1990s, the

assumption was that criminalized women's problems were a result of being overly reliant on state support, and so rehabilitation often focused on establishing economic independence and a "strong" work ethic among clients. Now that substance use issues and therapeutic approaches are emphasized, we see rehabilitation centers placing priority on *psychologically* regulating women. The emphasis is now placed on women to identify their own risky behaviors, to manage their "out of control" emotional selves, and to fix their unruly urges for indulgence in "unhealthy" relationships in order to solve their problems.

Fourth, contemporary treatment modalities are framed by neoliberal ideas of individual failures in a so-called "bootstrap" meritocratic society. Many reintegrative programs for criminalized women are based on cognitive behavioral treatment models, the same approaches that are dominantly embraced by the psychiatry, psychology, and social work disciplines. Some would argue for the value of cognitive therapy in changing self-perceptions and laying the foundation for transformative "redemption scripts" and alternative identities. In practice, these cognitive restructuration models also promote rational self-management, with the assumption that criminality is caused by a woman's inability to think logically, reason appropriately, and to make rational decisions. For women-centered programs, this type of therapy is articulated through the language of "empowerment," based on the notion that disadvantaged women have become powerless and lack the self-esteem needed to make substantive changes in their lives. This psychologized

conceptualization of women's empowerment is also premised on the belief that prolonged low-self esteem leads to more risky behaviors and an inability to self-manage and make "appropriate" choices. These individualized interpretations operate alongside the neoliberal discourse of responsibility as a way to highlight individual choice and downplay the social structures and relationships in which female offenders are embedded. Moreover, women's problems are framed as resulting from a failure to be responsible for their "disorderly" lives, thus obscuring the realities of past and/or current victimization and gendered, raced, and classed inequalities.

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On my release date, a jail therapist drove me from the jail to my new home for the next 8 months - a halfway house for women with substance abuse issues. The house had 20 women at any one given time, including spots for women and their young children. Since I was in a state that had public funds for halfway house stints, I didn't have to pay anything to stay there, besides a portion of my food stamps each month. At this point, I was 22 years of age with 5 years of heavy substance use under my belt, and subsequently was well acquainted with the world of rehabilitation and drug treatment programs. The halfway house was a heavily regimented, long-term

inpatient program that tried to teach us about healthy relationships, emotional and relational triggers, relapse prevention skills, and general life skills to help us reintegrate into conventional society.

This all of course is really, really useful for a lot of folks who find themselves in such situations. As a young woman who has had complex and compounded traumas with a heavy reliance on drugs to cope with her reality, I was in desperate need of healing. I was in even more desperate need of finding a supportive community who could relate to my struggles and provide emotional outlets for the immense amount of pain that I needed to identify and to release. I certainly found some of that with the women I lived with, although there were limitations to building a stable and secure community. The turnover rate at the house was very high. Some women left in the middle of the night, with no explanation or clues as to where they went. Others brazenly used drugs or drank alcohol and were asked to leave because they violated the rules. A friend of mine, E, had gone out on an overnight pass and fatally overdosed on heroin. She was 20 years old, and at her funeral, her mom was nodding out (presumably from painkillers or heroin) right next to E's open

casket.

Despite the unstable environment at the house, I did find solace in many of my relationships with my housemates. Additionally, I formed many profound, long-lasting friendships with people I met at the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings that I was mandated to go to. I was excited about finding a community of intentionally sober folks who, for at least a few of them, had the appearance of having happy and content lives. I wanted that. Badly. I wanted to envision myself in a better circumstance than shoplifting for smack during the day and sleeping in parking garages by night. So, I found a sponsor, who is still a good friend to this day, and I worked the 12 steps (see AA's website for more details on the 12 steps).

Between the treatment regimen at the halfway house and the 12 steps from AA, I was barraged with messages about what made my brain and my person abnormal and why it was wrong to "blame" anything other than my deviant thinking patterns. In doing recovery exercises that were meant to connect my anger with my innermost fears, the microscopic therapeutic gaze directs itself at my <u>reactions</u> to any given situation, rather than at the situation itself. To be more concrete,

I held much longstanding resentment toward my father whom subjected me to years of abuse and terror. I talked about this with my sponsor and with my counselors, in an attempt to partially explain my harmful drug-addled young adult years, and I was often told that I should focus on taking responsibility for my own behaviors. The abuse was in the past and had no bearing for my present actions. Sure, my father might have been a jerk, but he did not control my life or steer me in the direction of drug addiction. Instead, I should focus on owning my own behaviors by first admitting that I have a drug problem, that I am powerless over that drug problem and I am prone to irrational behaviors, and that it is only through submitting to a Higher Power that I can gain back my power.

Now, let me make a few things clear. I don't wish to turn this into a zine that is anti-rehabilitation, or anti-Alcoholics Anonymous, or even anti-religion. In fact, I gained <u>a lot</u> and greatly benefited by surrounding myself with sober folks in an environment of mutual support. AA was very crucial for me in my early recovery because I was a shell of a person who wasn't sure why or what she should live for. But, now that I am more than 10 years sober, removed from the world of recovery

talk, and heavily politicized, I have realized a few things. I am very much justified in the anger that I hold towards my father. I don't let that anger control my life, but I do understand how systematic traumas and abuses led me to find instantaneous relief. Drugs surely aren't the only way to quell the pain, but they are <u>one</u> way to cope with internalized classism, as well as a culture of silence and of victim blaming. Many other people problematically use drugs in an attempt to deal with the pains and consequences of living in a violent society.

I don't wish to relieve myself (or anyone) of being accountable for the mistakes and harms I caused others through my drug use. When I think about my past, I certainly would not want to be recast as a victim. But neither do I want to be vilified for personal traumas or systemic abuses. In my later recovery years, I am now holding myself personally accountable for certain things while also contextualizing my life and acknowledging the realities of structural and interpersonal violences.

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<u>My Research on Gendered Rehabilitation</u>

Four years after being released from jail, I

entered a sociology graduate program to study narratives of recovery at a women's rehabilitation center. I started my journey of trudging through the hierarchy and elitism of the ivory tower because I found that education was, and still is, the best tool for my personal empowerment. Secondly, I had a notion that my scholarly achievements could be a form of activism and that I could concretely change the political and governmental landscapes that effect marginalized women's lives. I've since drastically changed my mind about the type of activism I want to do and <u>how</u> I want to engage with my communities, but nonetheless I am near completion of my graduate student career, and I have found some interesting things along the way.

For more than five years, I've volunteered, mentored, and researched at a community-based women's outpatient rehabilitation program. The Transformation Center (TTC), a pseudonym for the program, serves an exclusively female population. They started over 30 years ago as a social work – type agency that offered resources to drug using sex workers. With the help of money through governmental grants and philanthropic private donors, the non-profit agency now provides crucial resources to any woman who is disadvantaged by incarceration, poverty, homelessness, and/or HIV/AIDS. Care/case managers try to link their clients to other services that can provide housing or help with education or employment. On-site, the staff offers mental health counseling and substance abuse treatment.

TTC is a popular agency in the city, and they have established collaborative connections with local probation and parole officers in order to offer free

outpatient therapeutic services to those women who are mandated to rehabilitation but who cannot afford an inpatient alternative. Although the center works with the criminal processing system, it also disassociates itself from traditional tough-on-crime logics by emphasizing its trauma-informed approach and its harm reduction philosophy. TTC vehemently opposes the harsh ways that the criminal processing system operates by arguing that females with histories of trauma need a caring, gentle, and relational approach if they are to be receptive to treatment. In addition, the center does not tout an abstinence-only model, and instead, when care managers craft a treatment plan for a client, they work to *minimize* the consequences of risky behavior instead of eradicating them. Staff members at TTC use the harm reduction approach to deal with behaviors that are considered to be damaging, such as associating with abusive partners, using/abusing substances, and not attending therapy. Staff members ideally want their participant base to entirely desist from negative and criminal behaviors, yet they realize that abstinence may not be immediately achievable. Staff members are more concerned with providing support and exposing women to therapy while they take small steps towards the desired end goal of abstinence.

On the surface, TTC appears to be a refreshingly feminist-leaning agency amidst a sea of punitive, law and order institutions that are based in Reagan-era ideas about criminality and personal responsibility. Yet I was curious about how TTC operated in a larger constellation of neoliberal institutions, especially given its working relationships with the courts and with local parole

agencies. Were they entirely antagonistic to the criminal (in)justice system? Or, did they on some level share and duplicate some of the discourses and ideologies about criminality? We know that state actors often articulate criminality as being a result of poor choices, as opposed to systemic disadvantages such as concentrated poverty or gendered violence. This meritocratic model of "choice" has influenced bootstrap narratives about self-determination, and I wondered to what extent, if any, TTC bought into this. So, I interviewed the staff members at TTC and observed classes to get a better idea of what they thought about the sources of and solutions for women's criminality.

"They had no choice but to turn to crime"

When I directly asked staff members at TTC about *why* some women turned to crime, they openly rejected the idea that women just "chose" to engage in illegal and sometimes dangerous behaviors. According to staff members, their clients at the center face many adverse situational and structural factors – which greatly limit their ability to control their lives. For example, one staff member I spoke with said that:

> "We have a *ton* of women here who have experienced abuse, rape, incest, and things like that… we determined that 100% of our women have experienced trauma on some level. Not a whole lot of trauma done to the self is done without a root. Trauma usually comes from outside the person, from outside the body, usually from someone with power. There are reasons they behave the way they do based on what has happened to them."

All of the staff members I spoke with (9 in total) agreed that trauma was a primary driving factor in women's lives, and that women often had little choice but to turn to crime as a survival technique to manage the constraints of poverty, abuse, and racial and gender discrimination. The staff members also mentioned the disempowerment that comes from the criminal justice system itself and the punitive ideologies found in our broader cultural climate. The challenge, then, for agency staff is to provide support and care for women amidst many structural barriers and collective traumas.

The rehabilitation project

Rehabilitation at TTC hinges on staff members' beliefs that women reentrants have been gravely affected by years of subjugation and by their own participation in criminal and other risky behaviors. As part of "the rehabilitation project," staff members state that participants need to learn how to restore themselves to stability by changing unhealthy thoughts, emotions, and attitudes. The focus of the project becomes an internal one, where emphasis is placed on changing participants' perceptions of themselves and of the world. When I asked one staff member how she approaches treatment, she said:

> "In any situation, where we're trying to solve a problem, there are some things that we can control, and some things that we can't. Often what we find is that there is a large majority of things in our lives that are in somebody else's hands, and we obviously have no control over those things. We can only control what we ourselves choose to do, and so that is what I work towards in getting people to see, okay, what can *you* do in this

> situation?"

Staff members' general advice given to participants is to recognize what they do and do not have control over in their lives and to focus on the elements that the women can change. Generally, staff members instruct participants that the external circumstances that give rise to women's criminality are uncontrollable and cannot be changed. Any direct resistance to institutional discrimination or court mandates, participants are told, would be an exercise in futility. Instead, staff members state that participants should focus on inwardly changing so that they can either accommodate the uncontrollable aspects of their situation more comfortably, or make use of their limited choices in healthy and positive ways.

During one class on stress management in recovery, the facilitator focused on issues of personal control and choice:

> "We can't change our culture, we can't change our environment, we can't change our family; these stressors are out of our control… But we *can* change our emotions about stress. They [*the stressors*] don't have to dictate our recovery. Recovery is the only thing we can control, so let's learn how to take control."

The lesson, then, becomes one of *disempowerment;* the participants are instructed that they are powerless over external circumstances. The rehabilitation project becomes about engaging with a woman's psyche to help her navigate the confines of structural and situational disadvantages, but it is *not* about

changing those circumstances. Personal choice is emphasized as the primary ingredient in the empowerment process.

There was one class I attended that illustrates this point in a profound way. In an anger management class, the topic was "cognitive self-change," or, changing one's perspective on troublesome situations. A Latina participant was struggling with this idea and told the facilitator that there are situations that are just plain "fucked up," and have nothing to do with one's headspace. She relayed an incident that happened while she was on a city bus: a young man aggressively called her a racial and gendered slur and she slapped him across the face. The white staff member told her she needed to think of a new way to respond to situations like that, like just turning the other cheek, but the participant was quite adamant that her reaction was appropriate. The participant said, "how am I supposed to ignore a dude who calls me a 'spic bitch'?" The staff member went on to address the class and said that women come to the center with "warped perceptions" and that they needed to change their thinking patterns and attitudes. The staff member failed to acknowledge the racist and sexist abuse that is a part of many participants' daily realities and advised the participant to ignore a hostile situation, which squarely places the blame upon the participant for defending herself. In these instances, staff members transform pervasive and daily struggles that complicate women's lives into personal problems of perception and "stinkin' thinkin'" that can and *should* be managed, dependent upon

a woman's willingness.

I find that the psy-complex that has come to dominate contemporary therapeutics (psychiatry, psychology, social work), especially for those programs that deal with, manage, and regulate criminalized women. The preoccupation is with cognitive restructuring, which is based on the belief that distorted thinking can keep a woman trapped in a cycle of abuse or drug addiction. The paradox is that the center *also* acknowledges the structures that push women into criminal activities. But, since the rehabilitation project posits that external factors *cannot be controlled or changed*, the focus for change remains on a woman's psyche.

TTC's rejection of the harsh punitive approach and its adoption of the harm-reduction model ultimately gives them explanatory power to assert that their participants have been given every opportunity to succeed. If the participants can't get better at this alternative, feminist-leaning agency, then staff members say that it is a reflection of unwillingness, a lack of determination, or personal irresponsibility. When failure occurs, the blame is placed solely on the participants for not accepting recovery into their lives, especially given that the center proclaims that they provide every opportunity for transformation with their soft and gentle approach. The accomplishment for the center is the use of the "soft" approach, as opposed to the "hard" techniques of the criminal processing system. Staff members view this approach as sufficient enough to inspire participants at the

center to change without necessarily tackling the complex issues that cause criminality.

By acknowledging the inequalities and power imbalances in society, staff members at TTC believe they are free of reproducing inequalities, while it is clear that this is not happening in practice. The alternative organizational identity proves to be an end in itself *instead of* a means for challenging and addressing inequities. The participants' problems are decontextualized and seen as a result of faulty self-determination in the process of treatment. The ultimate message that is being communicated to participants at the center, then, is that their failure in treatment is not due to ongoing marginalization arising from raced, classed, and gendered inequities, but rather from their lack of willpower to change their minds and hearts.

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Promising Radical Strategies

I know from my own experiences and my academic research that, the field of rehabilitation can be disempowering, especially for criminalized women. I also know for certain that state-run therapeutic programs in particular are very problematic. So, the question

that I often think of is, what can be done instead? I hold a very firm philosophical position that the state cannot solve the many problems that it creates; therefore, I am not interested in how we may make these programs better. This is certainly not a popular opinion among other academics or even among certain other activists. But as more people understand the deep flaws in the criminal injustice system, I hope that there will be more inspired and creative solutions that will emerge, rather than waiting for the state to fix itself.

In my desire to contribute to ongoing conversations about and to push for liberatory struggles against the prison industrial complex, I want to share my experiences with a project I've been working with inside a women's prison. Since I have to very carefully negotiate my working relationship with the prison administration, and not appear to have any activist agenda, I've decided to use a pseudonym for the project in this zine: Women's Education Circle (WEC).

The WEC is a class that concretely connects structural violences to interpersonal violences with the aim of empowering survivors and transforming communities (specifically in-

prison communities) to collectively heal and to change the conditions that maintain violence. Myself and another activist go to the WEC group once a week to hold classes. We are the "external" facilitators, and there are 6 currently incarcerated women who are the "internal" facilitators. They were trained for an entire year by 2 other activists to learn the class curriculum, and to also learn general group facilitation skills. One class cycle will typically have 2 external facilitators, 3 internal facilitators, and 13 participants.

The curriculum was developed specifically with incarcerated survivors of domestic/intimate partner/interpersonal violence in mind. And, while many liberals would heavily sympathize with a handful of the women who come to our group because they are incarcerated on self-defense cases where they either severely assaulted or killed their batterers, there are other women who may not garner as much emotive consideration. Many of the women in our class would say that while they certainly do have abuse and trauma in their pasts, they were <u>also</u> perpetrators of harms. Our class acknowledges that oftentimes, hurting people hurt other people, and that

disempowered people can sometimes exert control over others to feel powerful.

The content of our class examines power dynamics, webs of oppression, structural violence, and interpersonal violence. In any one two-hour class, we have on average 5 or 6 activities. We try to fairly distribute the labor between internal and external facilitators, so that one or two people are leading an exercise. We often use Theatre of the Oppressed (TO; see reading list at end of zine) activities in our classroom to illustrate concepts in fun, creative, and interactive ways. The purpose of these games is multi-fold. Contextualizing women's lives and interpersonal violence with a structural-political framework can be a heavy and triggering discussion. Depending on the exercise, TO allows us to explore concepts of power and control in nonverbal and visceral ways. There are moments when incarcerated survivors don't feel comfortable or able to verbalize their feelings, and TO image forums use the body to express emotions and physically release tensions. Also, TO exercises can tap in to our playful selves so that we remember to have fun with each other and to care for one another.

Our class is deeply rooted in popular education philosophies. We first believe that educational models that are intended to be truly liberatory and empowering should first deconstruct the student/teacher dichotomy. The classroom should hold space especially for oppressed and marginalized voices. Everyone's knowledge is honored as bringing great value to the classroom experience. We reject the banking model of teaching, in which one or two teachers hold knowledge/power over others, and deposit information unto passive recipients. We believe that no <u>one</u> person knows everything; rather, <u>together we know a lot</u>. We collaboratively work together to engage and challenge each other, and to co-create meanings while also collectivizing our knowledges/experiences.

Popular education pedagogy is radically different from other educational models, and interestingly, can be a challenge to implement in a <u>variety</u> of settings. But, facilitating this class in prison especially has its own set of unique obstacles. In our first cycle of the class, I got feedback from one of the internal facilitators that some of the participants were not happy that other incarcerated women were

teaching the curriculum. In fact, at least one person was so unhappy that she sent several "kites" (anonymous letters) to the program officer in the prison administration. I received a call from the officer asking me if our class was letting "offenders teach other offenders," which is a clear violation of prison rules.

This, of course, was a tricky situation. I had to appease prison administration concerns so that our class could continue to be held, but among the facilitators, we also felt it was important to continue in the tradition of popular education because that was the liberatory tenet that we were unwilling to sacrifice. I was able to frame our program to the administration in a way that assured them the external facilitators were the people who actually "controlled" the group. But the most important resolution that we had to find was in the group itself. In an utterly stifling and oppressive environment such as a prison, there are legitimate concerns about power dynamics among prisoners. The institution creates and perpetuates micro-level manipulations and coercion that we certainly did not want to mistakenly duplicate in our class. We first allowed for anonymous feedback at the end of

one class, and then had an open and transparent conversation about their concerns (and their praises!), as well as discussing what popular education meant for that group in particular. Since that conversation, we have noticed a marked difference in our class. Participation has increased greatly, and we have noticed more honesty and authenticity in our conversations.

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Transformative Justice

When I talk with people about the problem of criminalization and mass incarceration, most are genuinely interested in what alternative justice models are available. Many folks have a basic understanding of restorative justice (RJ) and believe in this process strongly. Indigenous communities have been practicing dialogue/talking circles to resolve conflicts and disputes for many years before western societies appropriated and named such practices as "restorative justice." I strongly agree with many of the foundations of RJ, such as the prioritization of healing for individual and community harms. RJ attempts to restore the integrity of both the perpetrator and

the victim/survivor in a holistic way.

But, I do find an equal amount of grave problems with the ways that dominant RJ practices are being used in the United States context. RJ is widely popular with criminal injustice and governmental agencies. Criminal injustice agencies are using RJ in coercive ways to divert offenders away from expensive incarceration outcomes. On the surface, this doesn't appear to be particularly problematic. But I wonder how revolutionary this process can truly be when it is practiced on individual levels and supervised by criminal injustice authorities? How much healing can a talking circle provide to either victim or offender when some of the stakeholders include law enforcement, prosecutors, and/or judges? RJ proposes that involving a few individual stakeholders is a way that can include the whole community, but how can this be done in our currently fragmented and politically immobilized society? How can we restore justice in an <u>unjust</u> society? Or, is it that we need to construct new socio-cultural conditions in which to map on more liberatory justice frameworks?

For those readers who are unfamiliar

with transformative justice: I want to introduce this justice model as a radically promising way to not only provide healing to the person/people who harmed and to the person/people who were harmed, but as a way to facilitate liberatory opportunities and to also transform the conditions that maintain violence and oppression. Generation FIVE has a helpful primer on this model (see: http://www.generationfive.org), and here they outline the foundations of transformative justice:

"Transformative justice [is] a liberatory approach to violence...[which] seeks safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, or State or systemic violence, including incarceration or policing.

Three (3) core beliefs:

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 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.

Transformative Justice seeks to provide people who

experience violence with immediate safety and long-term healing and reparations while holding people who commit violence accountable within and by their communities. This accountability includes stopping immediate abuse, making a commitment to not engage in future abuse, and offering reparations for past abuse. Such accountability requires on-going support and transformative healing for people who abuse."

After comparing my extensive research on state-sponsored therapeutic programs and my recent work with the Women's Education Circle, I have concluded that transformative projects and justice work need to be rooted in collective liberation. We need to use this work, along with other types of political action to effectively counteract the social conditions that perpetuate violence while also inspiring community action. Transformative justice concepts are still unfolding in my work, and I hope to expand upon these potential strategies more in the future. For now, I wonder:

How can we start to create and maintain more liberatory spaces, even in compromised situations, like in-prison classrooms?

How do we collectively respond to personal and community harms in ways that support both accountability and healing?

How can we build models of justice that also work towards collective liberation?

How do we make this type of work more sustainable in cultural contexts that are sometimes (or most of the times) adversarial to liberatory ideals?

If you want more information about prison education/activism and curriculum building, please, please contact me! I'd love to share skills and ideas! firehawk666@riseup.net

Also contact me if you're interested in part 2 of this zine, which will explore more ideas about transformative justice and feature narratives and poetry from women in the WEC!

Further Reading:

Academic schmacademic:

*These sources are from academic journals which have closed access to folks without current student status. If you'd like to read these, but you can't access them, please email me: firehawk666@riseup.net

--Brown and Bloom (2009): Colonialism and carceral motherhood
--Hackett (2013): Transformative Visions: Governing through alternative practices and therapeutic interventions
--Haney (2010): Offending Women: Power, punishment, and the regulation of desire
--Hannah-Moffat (2000): Prisons that Empower: Neo-liberal governance in Canadian women's prisons
--McCorkel (2003): Embodied surveillance and the gendering of punishment

--McCorkel (2013): Breaking Women: Gender, race, and the new politics of imprisonment
--McKim (2008): Roxanne's Dress: Governing gender and marginality through addiction treatment
--Pollack (2007): "I'm just not good in relationships": Victimization discourses and the gendered regulation of criminalized women
--Pollack (2010): Labeling clients "risky": Social work and the neo-liberal welfare state
--Sered and Norton-Hawk (2011): Whose higher power? Criminalized women confront the twelve steps
--Tiger (2013): Judging Addicts: Drug courts and coercion in the justice system
--Wyse (2013): Rehabilitating Criminal Selves: Gendered strategies in community corrections

Radical and accessible readings:

Prison Abolition:
--Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex (2008) by The CR10 Publications Collective
--Are Prisons Obsolete? (2003) by Angela Davis
--Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists (2006): edited by Prison Research Education Action
--Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis (2008): by Christian Parenti
--The New Abolitionists: (Neo)slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings (2005): edited by Joy James
--Toward Transformative Justice (2007): Generation FIVE
--Working for Justice: A Handbook of Prison

Education and Activism (2013): edited by Stephen Hartnett, Eleanor Novek, and Jennifer Wood

Queers, Women, and Punishment:

--Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex (2011): edited by Eric Stanley and Nat Smith

--Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women (2009): by Victoria Law

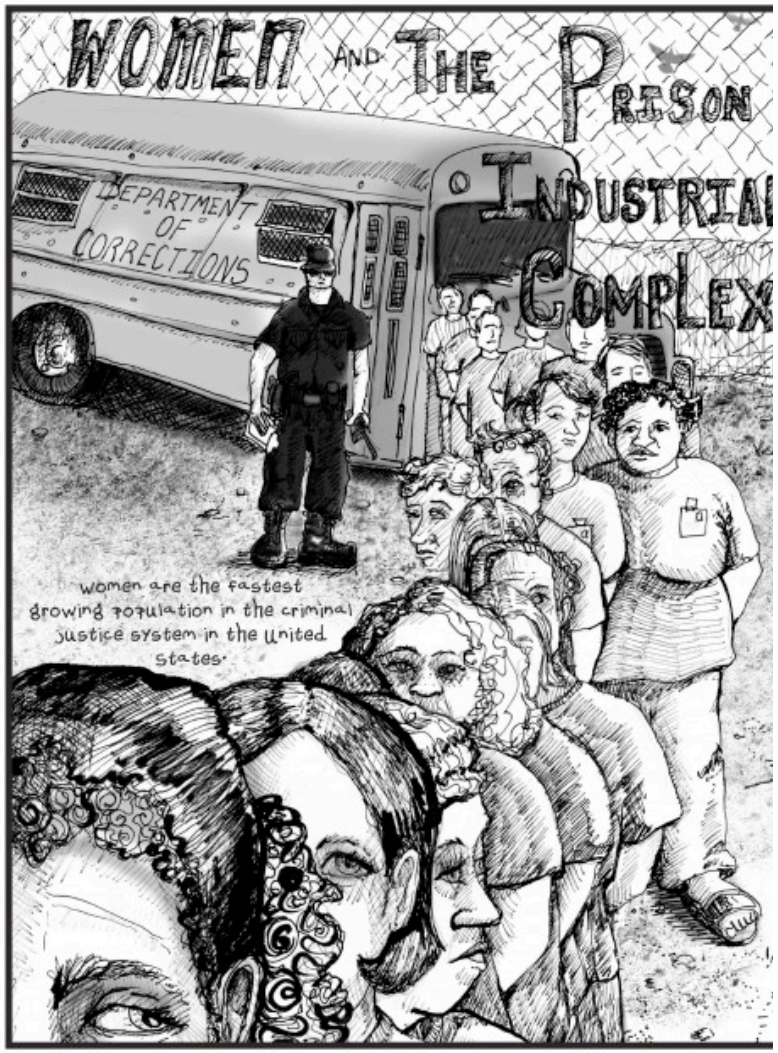
--Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States (2012): by Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock

Theatre and Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

--Games for Actors and Non-Actors (2002): by Augusto Boal

--Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970): by Paulo Freire

--Theatre of the Oppressed (1993): by Augusto Boal



Your struggle is my struggle.