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Learning to Live:
Social Death, Redemptive Practices, and Theological Education
in a Women's Prison

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

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By Rachelle Renee Green

In 2009, the Certificate in Theological Studies program (Theology) began as the first academic theological program for women in prison. The program promoted the formation of leadership skills, self-dignity, and social awareness amidst a US criminal punishment system that is fundamentally intertwined in and sustained by the processes and practices of social death. Social death is the state or condition of not being accepted and treated as fully human and its practices function toward the calculated and purposeful destruction of human dignity. This dissertation explores the lives of students in the Theology program in an attempt to understand what good theological education is in a prison steeped in social death practices.

Student experiences suggest that ultimately, the good of theological education in prison rests in its ability to participate in God's work of redeeming life in the presence of social death. This project shows how critical theological education engaged in a prison classroom that embraces redemptive practices transforms contexts of social death into contexts that value and sustain human life. The redemptive practices of coming together, considering one another, choosing names, critical questioning, and creating theology are just some of the many practices that seek to redeem life in prison. These practices form the substance of redemptive pedagogy that can in turn shape a redemptive community.

I contend that redemptive practices free students from the totalizing effects of social death and cultivate skills for analyzing and responding to the systems that oppress them. In a prison classroom, redemptive practices are political because they cultivate critical agency and support beliefs in the ability of incarcerated students to be positive agents in their own healing and futuring. Redemptive practices are the saving work in critical theological education in prison ushering in God's redemptive reality. The good of theological education in prison and for the future is in its willingness to conceive of itself as a life-saving practice opening its doors to a wider, more diverse, and more expansive group of human beings committed to learning so they might live.

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"I'm not in prison when I'm in Theology." – Briar

"The theology program saved my life." – Aminah

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Theology and Living Dead

"Listen: Prison is like bearing witness to your own death. Think about it. People fear dying because they have no control over it, right? And they fear death because they have no idea what it will be like. Coming to prison is a lot like dying. You watch the world close in on you and you watch as your family fills the gap at home that your absence creates. It's like being dead *and knowing that you're dead.*"[1]

That is Cate speaking, her green eyes lighting up as she makes the connection between what she is reading in her Theology, Death, and Dying class and her life in a women's prison in Georgia. In that moment, it becomes clear to Cate and to me that being in prison is like being dead and that prison produces a consciousness in its inhabitants regarding the ways they are perceived as non-existent. For some of the incarcerated, this is an awareness they have known their entire lives. But for someone like Cate who grew up with two parents in a middle-class suburban neighborhood, who went to college and had a career, who never did drugs or got into trouble before her crime, this consciousness is new and startling. Being incarcerated yielded an awareness for Cate of her new absence from the wider social structures that once gave her life meaning. The carceral experience gave her a mindful awareness of the limitations placed on her humanity and on the humanity of the 2.3 million other people living in prison.

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[1] These are the words spoken to me by a student of theology in a woman's prison in Georgia. We were discussing pastoral perspectives on dealing with death and dying and she quickly took what could have been approached as an abstract chapter in a book about pastoral care and made it live in the concrete reality of her carceral environment. Taken from field notes.

Millions of people in the United States are housed in carceral institutions: state and federal prisons, juvenile correctional facilities, local and Indian Country jails, as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the US territories.[2] Incarceration is just one piece of the larger pie of correctional control: there are another 840,000 people on parole and a staggering 3.7 million people on probation. Taken as a whole, the US Justice System controls almost 7 million people. To put that into perspective, that is roughly the combined population of Rhode Island, Montana, Delaware, South Dakota, North Dakota, Alaska, Vermont, Wyoming, and the nation's capital District of Columbia. Seven million living dead.

In the opening classroom exchange, Cate was describing the experience of living dead, of living while being treated as if she had already died. She was referring not to a physical death but rather to a social death, a condition and process of not being treated as fully human. Yet while the social death experienced in incarceration is undeniably oppressive, there are students like Cate who decide not to let social death kill them. They resist the determinizing influence of social death and instead reconstruct a vision of life inside. They decide to live while they are behind concrete walls, to be born again—not in a religious way necessarily, though religion often plays a role in it, but in how they make a life for themselves. They memorize a correctional number the way they memorized the spelling of their name in childhood. They form families, discover gifts and abilities,

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[2] Prison Policy Initiative and Peter Wagner and Wendy Sawyer, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2018," accessed June 4, 2018, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018.html. Almost 2.3 million people are housed in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1,852 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories.

dream of futures beyond the walls. They learn beekeeping, welding, wood-working, and cosmetology. They get their GEDs and, when possible, an associate degree. And some, like Cate, study theology.

Cate and her colleagues create and critique theology while living dead. They exegete ancient texts, translate Old Testament passages from Hebrew into English, write spiritual autobiographies, and construct theological analyses of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. They study trauma and healing and non-violence and restorative justice. They put prophets in conversation with rappers, sinners in conversation with saints. With their voices and their bodies, they do theology. With death and reminders of death all around, they decide to live.

Cate's attitude prompted me to wonder what theological education has to do with the act of living in a place where people treat you as if you are dead.

In Christian communities, academic theological education is traditionally understood as professional education for clergy or teachers. Like much of modern education, its emphasis on learning is toward skill development for professional work. But few of the living dead of whom I speak want to become pastors or religious scholars. Furthermore, some of the students in this Georgia prison are not religious, and still they study theology. Students studying theology in this prison are doing so for other reasons, reasons connected to their attempt to live some notion of a good life in prison. In the absence of traditional goals that shape the identity of theological education today and in the face of a prison-industrial culture focused on social death, this project asks: *What good is theological education in prison?*

Though recent years have seen a rise in theological research focused on criminal justice, there is little critical literature about religion and education in prison and even

less literature about theology in prison. This is striking first because religion and education have been constitutive of the prison system since it began, and second, because there continues to be a rise in prison education programs offered by seminaries. Despite the growing number of theologically-informed educational offerings in prison, there is little guidance for understanding what these programs are doing, how students engage them, and what practices of religious education the programs should value. Of the literature that does exist, little seeks the wisdom of incarcerated students in understanding the goals and practices of theological education. This dissertation responds to this gap by offering a practical theological perspective on theological education as shaped by students of theological education in prison. Like all projects in practical theology, it seeks improved practice not just for the improvement of theological education in prisons but for theological education practices in multiple arenas.

By listening intently to the narratives and experiences of students engaging in theological education in prison, I present stories of students who constantly face and yet manage to resist the dehumanizing threats of the mechanisms of social death. They regularly fear social rejection, physical and mental deterioration, and a loss of human dignity, yet they embrace strategies of resistance to survive them. With constant affronts to their humanity, students incarcerated at a North Georgia prison engage theological education as a way of surviving prison and living into a redemptive vision of life in confinement.

These students remind us that ultimately, the good of theological education in prison, and perhaps anywhere, does not lie primarily in the traditionally conceptualized goal of forming "professionals" for ministry in prison or elsewhere. Such a functionalist objective impoverishes our ability to imagine a wider public and a deeper and more

fundamentally life-giving pursuit of theological exploration. Instead, the good of theological education in prison, and hopefully elsewhere, lies in its ability to participate in God's work of redeeming life (interior life, intellectual life, political life, and social life) in the presence of social death. Inspired by the lives and wisdom of the students at Arrendale, I argue against the idea that critical, theological reflection and analysis is a luxury or reward of privilege, suggesting instead that the meaning-making significance of critical inquiry and theological reflection in community is fundamental to living and being—that it is necessary for surviving contexts of social death and confinement. The good news is that theological education—critical discourse, reflection, and praxis about God, humanity, and the world—can participate in God's redeeming work by creating alternative spaces and conditions for human beings to survive, transform, and flourish despite social death.

Theological Education in Prison

Theological education did not enter prisons in an accredited form until the 1980s when New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) started the Master in Professional Studies (MPS) program at Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, NY. By theological education, I am referring to the academic discipline of theological study that seminaries and universities most often provide for the professional preparation of students for ministry. In 1982, NYTS began the first accredited master's degree program offered inside any prison in the United States.

The MPS program is a fully accredited graduate professional degree. Enrolled students complete an intensive one-year, thirty-six credit-hour course of study entirely within the walls of Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Each year since its inception the

program has offered academic theological study to fifteen men serving long-term prison sentences. Those who apply and are accepted already hold an accredited undergraduate college degree; they submit a full application including letters of recommendation and meet all of the requirements of standard NYTS admission. The men attend classes five days a week for three hours a day studying Old and New Testament, foundations of ministry, church history, theology, ethics, pastoral care and counseling, religious education, and program design and administration. Instruction is provided by the Seminary's faculty and, according to the description provided by NYTS, courses are designed to be "relevant to the prison environment, with a strong emphasis on spiritual integration, community accountability, and service to others."[3] In addition to course work, students perform field-education work with the program director and serve as peer counselors, chaplains' assistants, or tutors in one of the educational programs offered at Sing Sing. Since its inception, more than four hundred incarcerated students have earned their MPS degree.

The MPS program is praised by its graduates for being a site of personal and communal transformation, and by the correctional department for reducing violence and contributing to the process of rehabilitation. According to a testimony from MPS graduate Ron Walden, MPS prepares students for professional service:

> It is a post-college degree that prepares its graduates for professional service—service not only in churches and other Christian ministries but also in Muslim and Jewish and Rastifarian and other settings—not only in faith-based programs and organizations, but in secular social-service projects as well—not only in neighborhoods in New York State when our

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[3] "Master of Professional Studies," New York Theological Seminary, August 28, 2011, http://www.nyts.edu/prospective-students/academic-programs/master-of-professional-studies/.

alumni come home, but also and above all in the correctional system while they are still inside.[4]

The goal of the Master of Professional Studies (MPS) program at Sing Sing is the cultivation of religious leaders within prison and beyond. It operates within the traditional functionalist, clerical model characteristic of most seminaries as it prepares students for the professional service of ministry. Many students who have been released use their training in ministry to lead churches and other social service venues, several working for prison reform. However, the main purpose of the MPS program is the transformation of life inside carceral institutions. Graduates are equipped to work as chaplain assistants, peer counselors, or tutors throughout the New York correctional system.

New York Theological Seminary was the first to bring theology and formal higher education into prison and it was far from the last. Several religious higher education programs have emerged in prisons since the MPS program.[5] They bring opportunities

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[4] Testimony given by Ron William Walden on November 29, 2012. Printed online at the NYTS website: http://www.nyts.edu/2012/11/28/testimony-submitted-to-the-nys-assembly-standing-committee-on-correction-concerning-the-mps-degree-program-offered-at-sing-sing-correctional-facility/

[5] In 1995, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary began a program offering a Bachelor of Arts degree in Christian ministry in Angola Prison in Louisiana. Designed to develop missionaries, the program is claimed to have helped reduce violence at Angola and alter its identity as one of America's bloodiest prisons. In 2009, NOBTS extended its program to Georgia in a men's facility. In 2017, it began offering an associate's program at Whitworth Prison for Women in Georgia. In 2007, Columbia International University started its Prison Initiative that offers an accredited Associate of Arts degree from CIU and trains inmates in the South Carolina Department of Corrections to serve as chaplains' assistants upon completion. They extended the program to women in 2012. In 2011, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary started a bachelor's degree program at Darrington Prison in Texas. Students graduate to become assistant chaplains, ministers, and mentors in the Texas correctional system. In 2015, Calvin Theological Seminary in and Calvin College formed the Calvin Prison Initiative that provides a Christian liberal arts education to inmates at Handlon Prison in Michigan. The five-year program results in a Bachelor of Arts degree from Calvin College. In 2014, Appalachian Bible College partnered with the correctional department to start Mount Olive Bible College inside the Mount Olive Correctional Complex in West Virginia. It offers inmates the opportunity to receive a bachelor's degree in Bible/Theology and Pastoral Ministry. In 2017, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary began offering a Bachelor of Arts degree in pastoral ministry in Nash Correctional Institution in Nashville, NC to train students to minister in the context of the North Carolina prison system.

for incarcerated students to obtain bachelor and associate degrees in Christian ministry and certificates in pastoral leadership. These programs have this in common: they all attest to an intentional desire to equip students to provide professional Christian service inside the prison for personal and communal transformation. They have something else in common: almost all are housed in male institutions. It would take almost thirty years after the MPS program began before theological education would find its way to a women's prison.[6] It happened in 2009 at a women's prison in Georgia.

Georgia and the Certificate in Theological Studies Program

The state of Georgia has the fifth highest incarceration rate in the nation.[7] Nationally, one in thirty-one adults is under correctional supervision. In Georgia, the number is one in thirteen. There are about 175,000 people under carceral supervision at any given time: 20,000 on parole, an overwhelming 120,000 on probation, and 52,000–53,000 in prisons and jails. About nine percent or 3,500 people in the prison population are women.[8] In Georgia, women are incarcerated at a rate of 181 per every 100,000 residents (compared to 133 per 100,000 nationally) and they are the state's fastest growing offender population. Women are housed in ten institutions around the

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[6] For many years, prisons offered religious programming such as Kairos and Prison Fellowship in women's prisons. These programs have not, however, offered degrees or certificates in academic theological education, nor are they traditionally led by seminaries or divinity schools.

[7] According to a 2018 comparison of incarceration rates per 100,000 people. Georgia ranks fifth behind Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, and District of Columbia. Georgia's incarceration rate is more than four times higher than other developed countries including the UK, Portugal, Canada, France, etc. For more information, see Prison Policy Initiative 2018 States of Incarceration: The Global Context.

[8] Statistics provided by Georgia Department of Corrections Female Offenders Fact Sheet published in 2016.

state with the largest institution being the Lee Arrendale State Prison, which houses more than 1,800 women.

The majority of women in Georgia prisons are white (58 percent), but as is true nationally, black women are over-represented at 40 percent.[9] The average woman[10] is young when she arrives in prison, most often just twenty-four years old.[11] She was likely employed before becoming incarcerated (48 percent), and her education varies (44 percent with some high school education, 36 percent HS graduate/GED, 13 percent with some college education). She likely has children. Though over 65 percent of women report having children, chaplains who work in the prisons claim that this reported number is lower than reality. One chaplain estimates the number to be closer to 80 percent.[12] Though Georgia does not report this statistic, national data suggests (and personal experience in prison confirms) that she is more likely than her male counterparts to identify as lesbian or bisexual. A recent study revealed that a third of incarcerated women identify as lesbian or bisexual, compared to less than ten percent of men. The same study found that lesbian and bisexual women are likely to receive longer sentences than their heterosexual peers.[13]

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[9] This statistic is in line with national averages that further emphasize that among women, incarceration is not indiscriminate. According to the 2018 Prison Policy Report on Women's Mass Incarceration, incarcerated women are 53 percent White, 29 percent Black, 14 percent Hispanic, 2.5 percent American Indian and Alaskan Native, 0.9 percent Asian, and 0.4 percent Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, nationally. This does not include women housed in immigration centers.

[10] The following statistics used to construct the profile of a Georgia incarcerated woman are based on the January 2015 and February 2018 Inmate Statistical profiles provided by the Georgia Department of Corrections in their Inmate Facts factsheets.

[11] The average age of admission is thirty-four but the most frequent is twenty-four.

[12] According to the Prison Policy's report on Mass Incarceration 2018, 80 percent does reflect the national statistic on women who are mothers in the US jail population.

[13] While it is not in the scope of this project to explore the full intersectional impacts of sexuality and ethnicity on women's incarceration, I must state that sexual fluidity and gender "nonconformity" are

Once incarcerated, her time in prison will not be short. On average, she will spend twenty-three years there. She is likely imprisoned for a violent crime (45 percent), a property crime (25 percent), or a drug crime (21 percent), but even these categories are so broad as to be misleading. A violent crime may include the use of drugs and a drug crime may include property crime. She has had more than her fair share of experience with abuse and trauma: sexual, physical, and emotional. And she is likely Christian, with almost 97 percent of incarcerated women reporting that they were raised or currently identify as Christian.[14]

The Certificate in Theological Studies (CTS) program began in 2009 as a compromise. For years, Chaplain Susan Bishop and Dr. Elizabeth Bounds dreamed of a post-secondary education program for women that would allow women to earn a college degree while in prison. They were familiar with the statistics on higher education programs in prison and of the prison system's priority to extend educational opportunities to men over women.[15] Chaplain Bishop and Dr. Bounds tried to offer post-

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frequent expressions among students in the Theology program. Due to the openness of the Theology program toward self-expression and self-naming, the program has seen a rise in students applying who openly identity as gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender. These categories are fluid and changing in women's carceral contexts and more work is needed to understand better the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons in women's confinement. For information that does exist on national statistics, see Prison Policy report on Women's Mass Incarceration 2018 and American Journal of Public Health article "Incarceration Rates and Traits of Sexual Minorities in the United States: National Inmate Survey, 2011–2012" 2017 Feb; 107(2):267–273.

[14] Experience with people in prison leads me to believe this number is inaccurate. I suspect that, given the religiosity of the Southern location of the prison, there is a belief among incarcerated persons that identifying as Christian "looks better" to a parole board. Among Theology students, a little more than half identify as Christian currently with a growing number of students expressing changed or changing religious affiliation over the course of their incarceration. I call this a bricolage approach to religiosity; students create a faith system out of what is available to them that best helps them survive the circumstances at hand.

[15] Extensive research demonstrates that recidivism rates decline significantly with higher education. Despite the evidence, the US government in 1994 under the Clinton Administration eliminated inmate eligibility for Pell Grants which gave inmates access to higher education opportunities. As public funding ended, all but eight of the 350 college programs in prisons ended by 1995. Over the years, publicly

secondary programming at the prison for women. The obstacles would prove too great to overcome.[16] With a spirit of administrative imagination, Bounds suggested they try a certificate program instead. A certificate program could provide higher academic engagement without the strict requirements of a degree-granting program. In 2007, Bounds and Bishop began the work to start a theological certificate program for women. Over the next two years, these two women partnered with the Atlanta Theological Association to secure funding and support for their vision. They, along with others, visited the program at Sing Sing and a BA program in Bedford Hills for Women. And Chaplain Bishop visited the NOBTS program in Louisiana. For two years, they planned and envisioned, and in January 2009, seventeen women formed the inaugural class of students in CTS.

As a certificate program, CTS operates with similar goals to a professional program like NYTS's MPS but is modeled more on a continuing education model. According to Bounds and Bishop, a continuing education model would enable a significant number of incarcerated women with no post-secondary education to participate. In its pragmatism, the CTS program opened theological education to a wide array of students who otherwise would not be eligible. With only a high school diploma or GED, students without a negative disciplinary record could complete an application to study theology in prison. The application process includes a written essay and a recommendation from prison staff. Applicants are then interviewed and each year,

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accessible higher education in prisons has been scarce with the exception of programs offered by privately funded institutions like colleges and universities.

[16] Bounds and Bishop faced challenges finding a college or university that would offer credit to inmate populations especially without access to the Pell Grants. In addition, the standards of admission at many of the schools in the Atlanta area would be too high a hurdle for the majority of incarcerated students to clear.

twenty-five are admitted into the program. To receive a certificate in theological studies, students complete one year of course work which includes two foundation courses, an introduction to the Bible, and a foundational course in theology, followed by three elective courses and a capstone or cumulative project. At the completion of the requirements, students, in cap and gown, and to the sound of "Pomp and Circumstance," graduate in front of family and teachers with a certificate in theological studies.

The CTS program in Georgia, like the MPS program in New York, began with a goal of preparing students to become leaders in prison.[17] The stated *telos* or aim of the certificate program was to train [students] to act as lay leaders in and outside of prison. Another goal of the program was to help students get jobs upon release, though the program was not explicit about how this would happen. The CTS program was intended to operate with the same functionalist commitment as traditional theological education. In reality, CTS has not functioned that way. Perhaps due to structural limitations at a women's prison, students of CTS do not become prison chaplains or formalized peer mentors. Instead, the program has focused on the stated goals of preparing students for improved academic contribution. Instructors and administrators voiced several goals of the program that have been summarized in three categories: academic development, theological development, and psychosocial development. Academic goals were to

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[17] In addition to working with incarcerated students, CTS was designed to provide doctoral students with "unique" teaching opportunities and MDiv students with formative experiences for congregational leadership. Class offerings over the years include: The Gospel of Mark, Biblical Perspectives on Criminal Justice, Reading the Bible from a Woman's Perspective, World Religions, Bonhoeffer, and Restorative Justice, each taught by doctoral or seminary MDiv students. The variety of electives and changing teachers quarter after quarter make CTS the most dynamic program at Arrendale with a constant stream of new faces and offerings in a context of mundaneness.

improve critical thinking and writing skills and focused more on helping students learn how to think than on what to think so that students could think well for and of themselves. Theological goals included developing a personal deliberative and reflective theology. Psychosocial goals included the formation of spaces of trust and communities of support inside prison in order to build self-respect and lessen anxiety. Interestingly, instructors or administrators did not mention an explicit goal of spiritual or faith formation among students.

Students stated their goals for the program quite simply: they wanted to learn more about the Bible, to remain mentally active, to better themselves, and to make something of their time. Their goals were both theological and interpersonal, concerning their inner, personal development.

From the beginning, there was tension between the stated goals and the reality of prison. Academic levels of students varied, and instructors soon realized the overwhelming need to balance the desire for academic rigor in correcting not only flaws in thinking but also in grammar and writing, with the need for affirmation and for building students' self-esteem. The need for affirmation and the need for spaces of conversation and trust were the primary focus of most instructors, before but not instead of academic preparation. The early days of CTS exposed a need in the curriculum to highlight and respond to the psychological and social needs that come from living in prison.

Since its inception, CTS graduated more than 190 students. Unlike Georgia statistics might lead you to believe, 97 percent are not Christian. The majority of students currently or in the past identify as Christian, but the program has seen a growing number of Muslim, Jewish, atheist, agnostic, and searching students.

The number of students that kept returning year after year required the development of another program, the Advanced Certificate in Theological Studies (ACTS). For this second certificate students completed an additional year of electives including a course in advanced research and writing. The culminating project was an in-depth research paper. To date, more than thirty students have completed the advanced program. And still students continue to take classes. One student, Joan, who has been in the program since it began, has received both certificates and continues to take classes. To date, she has completed more than sixty courses in theological studies. What is it about theology that keeps students like Joan returning?

In considering this question, it is important to note that the certificate program is not a program in basic education, liberal arts, or humanities but in theology. To the organizers of this program, theology matters. Through theology, the founders saw an avenue for academic preparation, personal development, and leadership. While it was unclear in the beginning what students would think of theology, if the years of returning students suggest anything, it is that theology has come to mean something in prison to them as well, that it has something to do with how some of them choose to construct a life while incarcerated.

Focusing on the program at CTS helps us to see how theological education functions outside of the traditional goals. The success of the CTS program shows that the good of theological education is not solely or even perhaps primarily about the end goal of professional preparation. Rather, the success derives from the goods internal to the process of theological education itself – goods more often associated with human dignity and flourishing, with living a good life. I suspect that further investigation into the programs at Sing Sing and elsewhere will show that even without a job at the end of

the program, the practice of doing theology in community is life-giving in a place

marked by so much death.

Social Death and Living Dead in a Women's Prison

Most people know very little about the causes and conditions of imprisonment for

women. There are approximately 1.2 million women under the control of the US

correctional system, of whom about 250,000 are incarcerated.[18] The US accounts for

more than 30 percent of the world's incarcerated women but has only 4 percent of the

world's population of women. An overwhelming focus on men's incarceration has

hidden from view the significant and growing issue of women's carceral confinement.

Ten percent of the US carceral population is women but culture is replete with

images of black men as criminals, the media generally painting a picture of American

prisons with brushstrokes of black and brown on a canvas of masculinity. Even the

efforts of social reformers and prison abolitionists paint with the same colors. The

prominence of documentaries like *Slavery by Another Name* and *13th*, popular literature

such as *The New Jim Crow* and *Just Mercy*, and most criminological studies center the

experiences of men and focus on men of color. There is justification for this. Ninety

percent of all incarcerated peoples are male, and an overwhelming and unjust

percentage are men of color.[19] But these realities of the criminal justice system obscure a

more complicated image – an image that includes women.

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[18] "Fact Sheet: Incarcerated Women and Girls," The Sentencing Project, November 2015, 1.

[19] According to the Prison Policy Initiative Report on racial disparities published in 2016, black men and women are disproportionately represented in prison. However, in terms of sheer numbers, white men and women still account for over 47 percent of the jail population (blacks 35 percent) and 33.6 percent of the prison population (blacks 35.4 percent). There is a sizeable number of white men in prison. However, the public imagination of a prisoner is typically that of a black man. Black men are,

Women's state prison populations have grown 834 percent over nearly forty years — more than double the pace of the growth among men. This growth is due largely to changes in law enforcement and sentencing under the "War on Drugs" and the "tough on crime" political climate of the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, incarceration for violent offenses has been the single most powerful driver of state prison growth over the past four decades. Incarceration for violent offenses accounts for about a third of the total growth of women's state prison populations since 1978, and more than half of the more recent growth since 2000.

A 2005 study found that 98 percent of women in jails had been exposed to trauma during their lifetime and 74 percent had drug or alcohol problems.[20] Statistics show that a large proportion of justice-involved women have abused substances or have engaged in criminal behavior while under the influence and/or to support their drug use. More than two-thirds of women in state prisons meet the criteria for drug dependence or abuse, and about half were using drugs at the time of the offense for which they were incarcerated.[21] Many women use drugs to self-medicate in response to victimization and trauma, and this can lead to justice system involvement: "substance use among justice involved women may be motivated by a desire to cope with or mask unpleasant emotions stemming from traumatic experiences and ensuing mental health

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subsequently, disproportionately given higher sentences. Black people account for a stark 56.4 percent of sentences of life without parole, compared to 33.5 percent for whites. For more information, visit .

[20] B.L. Green, J. Miranda, A. Daroowalla, and J. Siddique, "Trauma Exposure, Mental Health Functioning, and Program Needs of Women in Jail," *Crime and Delinquency*, 51 (1) (2005): 133–151.

[21] Becki Ney, Rachelle Ramirez, and Marylyn Van Dieten, Eds., *Ten Truths That Matter When Working with Justice Involved Women* (National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women: 2012), 2.

problems."[22] In the state of Georgia, 73 percent of incarcerated women report having some sort of mental health condition requiring at minimum outpatient treatment (compared to only 36 percent of men). Of the 73 percent of women, three-quarters also met the criteria for substance dependence or abuse, and more than two-thirds (68 percent) had a history of physical or sexual abuse.[23] Treatment for the wide degree of trauma and mental health problems is often inadequate or unavailable in prisons.

On the surface, explanations of drugs and violence tempt one to paint a simple picture of women's incarceration. But such simple, broad-brush depictions do a disservice to the reality of women's incarceration.[24]

The rise in women's incarceration rates is linked to a long history of the criminalization of women's survival behaviors.[25] Women in prison are more likely to have participated in illegal activity out of a desire to survive physically, emotionally, and/or economically. Research has found that many women on the social and economic margins of society struggle to survive outside of legitimate enterprises, and that this is what brings them into contact with the criminal justice system. As a result, the most

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[22] Ney et al., p. 2. See also Bloom and Covington, *Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Women Offenders*.

[23] From the Georgia Department of Corrections 2018 Inmate Statistical Profile.

[24] Prison Policy Initiative, "The Gender Divide: Tracking Women's State Prison Growth," accessed June 4, 2018, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html.

[25] According to "The Gender Divide: Tracking Women's State Prison Growth," a Prison Policy report by Wendy Sawyer published on January 9, 2018, states continue to "widen the net" of criminal justice involvement by criminalizing women's responses to gender-based abuse and discrimination. While the overcriminalization of drug use and peripheral involvement in drug networks has driven women's prison growth, other policy changes have led to mandatory or "dual" arrests for fighting back against domestic violence, increasing criminalization of school-aged girls' misbehavior — including survival efforts like running away — and the criminalization of women who support themselves through sex work.

common pathways to prison for women are based on survival of abuse, poverty, and addiction. Drugs, violence, trauma, and survival construct the complicated fabric of women's carceral experience.

Social death is the state or condition of not being accepted and treated as fully human by wider society. It is a brutally exacerbated condition of violence that makes certain subjects permanently ineligible for personhood. Social death occurs through systematic and persistent psychological processes of exclusion, rejection, degradation, and neglect with internal and external effects, changing how people view themselves and how society views them. The mechanisms of social death are intentional; their goal – to unmake a person, to render a human being as nonbeing. The practice of social death is an affront to the fundamentally relational nature of what it means to be human. It distorts the character of both the persons perpetuating it and experiencing it.

Social death is a theological problem; metaphorically and intentionally it erases the *imago dei* and removes that which unites us all as creatures of God. Its processes disrupt and distort human beingness and have been used historically to justify treating certain segments of the population as less than human. In social death, there is no social image of a good life for those being degraded. Social death creates a class of nonbeings whereby even the idea of a good life for them seems antithetical to their nature – social death makes the idea of goodness for certain people seem absurd.

Social death should not be synonymous with punishment, but in incarceration, it is. The prison system purportedly operates from a just punishment philosophy, claiming goals of rehabilitation and reform. However, US criminal punishment practices are fundamentally intertwined in and sustained by the processes and practices of social death, creating, sustaining, and perpetuating conditions for the justifiable mistreatment

and neglect of those convicted of crime. In its most charitable light, just punishment is the imposition of a penalty as retribution for an offense where this imposition serves a disciplinary goal of righting wrong behavior. Punishment, in this sense, is a corrective pedagogy rooted in the intrinsic value of and potential in the life of the person who committed the wrong. Just punishment believes there can be a good life lived beyond a wrong act. Social death and our prison practices, however, stand in contrast to these notions of just punishment. The condition of social death requires persistent processes of intentional dehumanization and intentional invisibility. Operating within US prison culture, these practices function toward the calculated and purposeful destruction of human dignity. They are death-dealing.

Throughout this project, I will use the terms social death and living dead to describe the experience of incarceration. They are derived from the testimonies of students in CTS, like Cate, who equate coming to prison with a form of death. By using the term living dead, I am necessarily holding in tension death and life. I am refusing to forget the loss of life, possibility, and relationship that occurs in imprisonment. And I am recognizing that this loss does not determine the future. Instead the term affirms that one is able to live in the midst of death. For to live is to be in relationship, to produce, to dream, to accomplish.

I use the term living dead intentionally to recognize incarcerated students' agency and decision to live after the loss of life as they have known it. Living becomes the dominant and most important aspect of the term. The experience of incarceration may be death-dealing, but death does not always win. Living is the gospel message in the student stories. In the midst of the worst experiences of their lives, these students offer

stories of survival, resistance, and growth. What makes their living so remarkable is that it occurs in the condition of social death.

Bringing together the concept of social death and imprisonment is not new. In her work investigating the MPS program with men in prison, Kaia Stern describes the experience of incarceration as a form of social death. She writes that "the incarcerated individual, no longer belonging to civic community, has minimal social existence outside of the totalizing institution of the prison and, therefore, she or he can be defined as a socially dead person."[26] Social death seeks to transform people into non-beings by removing the relational networks constitutive of human meaning and dignity. Used by historians of slavery and the Holocaust, the term social death refers to the condition of not being considered as fully human. It is akin to what practical theologian Greg Ellison refers to as being cut dead but still alive. To be cut dead means to be deliberately ignored as a form of punishment. The cut dead, according to Ellison, are categorically unseen and unheard, invisibilized and muted.[27] Being cut dead has physical and psychological effects, which can lead to a person not acknowledging their own voice and body. For Ellison, being cut dead is not only something that happens to a person; it is also something that can be internalized and self-inflicted. To be *living dead* means to know the experience of social death and of being cut dead personally.

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[26] Kaia Stern, *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education and Healing* (London: Routledge, 2014), 111.

[27] Ellison (2011) defines being unheard and unseen as *muteness* and *invisibilty*. Muteness is related to silencing that occurs either by outside forces or by internal repression. Invisibility refers to that which is not an object of sight which he suggests is related to an unexamined life (chapter 1). Invisibility is relates to the complicit acceptance of a limiting identity and the failure to risk the required self-scrutiny to know one's own humanity (p. 3).

The term *living dead* attempts to describe the resilience of life in the midst of absurd and systematically dehumanizing or life altering circumstances. Though the ongoing experience of death does not go away, the good news—the gospel—is that living is possible even in the face of death.

What might theological education have to do in a world framed by death, trauma, and the criminalization of survival? In order to find answers to these questions, I did what practical theologians do: I listened.

Methodology: With Ears to Hear Incarcerated Students

It is written, the theologian is one who prays. This effort in practical theology is a spiritual act, my way of praying through research, seeking divine wisdom for the transformation of death-dealing contexts for the livelihood of God's people. At its heart, this is a project of listening and observing, seeking to understand the good of theological education practices in prison. The task of the Practical Theologian is "to excavate particular situations and to explore the nature and faithfulness of the practices that take place within them. Such an exploration ... enables the Practical Theologian to inhabit a unique and vital role within the process of theological reflection and development."[28] Writing as an administrator and educator in prison, for me this work is "reflexive, even autobiographical," in line with the broader literature on prison education.[29] Though this study in some ways resembles ethnography that "connects personal experience with an area of knowledge ... located between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority

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[28] John Swinton, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 5th edition (London: SCM, 2011).

[29] Howard S. Davidson, *Schooling in a "Total Institution": Critical Perspectives on Prison Education*, Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), xv.

of cultural analysis," it is more appropriate to identify this research simply as qualitative.[30] There is a depth to the carceral experience that I do not and cannot know as someone who moves freely in and out of the prison space. As a practical theologian, my task is to listen and observe, to bear witness to the stories and experiences of the students in Theology knowing that they are, at best, only a small and incomplete portion of their truth.

Human experience is my primary source of theological reflection. I do theology with the assumption that there is a biographical and narrative dimension to the theological task and from the assumption the belief that life teaches.[31] I come from a black Baptist Christian tradition where theological inquiry is dialogical – both derived from and distributed through story and biography. "If you want to know how God moves in the world, read (auto)biographies," a former pastor often told me. I believe that we come to understand the work of God not only through Scripture but also through paying attention to human life in its mundaneness and its complexity; through observing and listening; through discerning how the Spirit of God it as work in our midst. My life and the lives of others are central and necessary to the theological task. In this way, I read human lives the way I read the stories of Lazarus or Mary or Esther in the biblical texts, as human conduits of God's revelation.

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[30] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2000), 455.

[31] For more on the narrative dimension of theology, see Amos Yong (p. 2) *The Dialogical Spirit: Christian Reason and Theological Method in the Third Millennium* (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co, 2015). He also argues here that Christian theology is empowered by dialogical activity (p. 283).

Both the Christian scriptures and social sciences work together in this project to elucidate human experience.[32] The authority of Scripture is implicit in this text as it undergirds how I read the stories, how I relate to students, and how I discern my role as researcher. Just as the Spirit enlivens the reading of Scripture such that truth is communicated new and fresh upon each reading, so too is the Spirit at work communicating truth in human stories. Through human experience illuminated through dialogue with social sciences, God reveals something about God's self and God's desire for the world, about tenacity, grit, survival, and joy. Human lives are pedagogically relevant to a Christian wanting to live a more faithful life as a cocreator of God's goodness in the land of the living. The task of the theologian is thereby to pay attention to life.

My interpretive theological work begins with eschatology in mind -- with God's hope for the world. I situate this eschatological vision in two places. One place is in the biblical accounts of God's hopes for the world evidenced in God's liberation of oppressed peoples, God's diminishing of hurt and harm, and in the promise of eternal hopefulness in God's love. A second place is in the eschatological visions communicated through student's hopes for a good life. My search for this goodness is a search for God's presence, for the gospel. I contend that God is found in students' stories of persistence

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[32] Amos Yong (2015) argues that science and religion are complementary – since all truth is God's truth—and advocates for a theological method that supports the quest to discern this complementarity and allow for the dynamism of truth claims to be made evident by the Spirit in the world. This necessarily rejects the science/religion split and refuses to relegate religious and theological discourse to the private sphere while allowing science to remain the "de facto lingua franca" in contemporary discourse (10). Yong also argues that dialogue with others informs faithful Christian praxis. "Faithful living means, in part, being able to flourish with others, and such flourishing requires that we know our neighbors in order that we can develop common cause toward a more just and humane world" (285).

and survival and in their decision and ability to create and live a good life in contexts of constraint.

My primary area of concern in this project is located in the divine-human encounter; in how humans participate with God to bring about God's desires for the world. I believe that wherever God is found calling people back to life, there is human work to be done to participate with God in this redemptive project. This research seeks to better understand the human responsibility in God's redeeming work, in how we participate with God as cocreators of God's salvific desires on earth. Consider the biblical story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead as a metaphor for human redemptive work. Jesus calls Lazarus back to life from death. *The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:44 NASB)* Jesus performs the divine work of by calling Lazarus from death back to life. But the story does not end with God's work in Christ, but rather it begins there. The community around Lazarus is told to help, to unbind him and let him go. The community is responsible for helping Lazarus live again, to live more fully. This is the theological task here – to discern where God is calling people counted as dead back to life and to understand what is required from the community to help them live more fully.

I approached this project with the commitments of a liberationist practical theologian. Katherine Turpin in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* describes liberationist practical theology as a type of practical theology that focuses on situations of oppression and suffering in order to construct a praxis that reduces harm.[33] As a form

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[33] Turpin, Katherine, "Liberationist Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, edited by Kathleen Cahalan and Gordon Mikoski (2014).

of practical theology, it is an academic discipline that examines and reflects on religious practices in order to understand the theology that is enacted in those practices and in order to consider how theological theory and theological practices can be more fully aligned, changed, or improved. But its liberation focus examines the practices of or on behalf of oppressed communities to consider how theological practices and theories and social structures can be improved. Liberationist practical theology acknowledges its deep rootedness in and indebtedness to the liberation theology tradition by utilizing its methodologies and embracing similar commitments. Practical theology can thus be understood as part of a wider academic movement, which treats contemporary human experience as worthy of sustained analysis and critical reflection.

Liberationist practical theologians are more likely to focus on human agency in partnership with God, by drawing heavily on social ethics and political theologies.[34] As scholars in the field suggest, "the critical engagement with lived experience does not just require working with particular accounts or stories of contemporary experiences or issues and relating them to theological ideas and traditions. It also involves using non-theological academic disciplines that provide a wider theoretical context in which that

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[34] Some characteristics shared by the vast majority of practical theologians are (1) reflection upon lived contemporary experience; (2) the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach; (3) critical dialogue between theological norms and contemporary experience; (4) a preference for liberal or radical models of theology; and (5) the need for theoretical and practical transformation.[34] Liberationist practical theology holds the common commitments of rich contextual grounding and analysis, correlative dialogue between human experience and normative strands of the Christian tradition and concrete proposals for renewed and transformed practice. However, liberationist practical theologians tend to focus on public praxis and the public arena extending their contexts of study beyond traditional ecclesial settings or communities of faith. The CTS program is not a community of Christian students, but it is a context of students yearning to make meaning of their lives with varying degrees of openness to discourse about God and the spiritual world.

experience can be understood."[35] As such, my theological conversation partners in addition to student voices will come from liberationist theologians, ethicists, and pedagogues committed to deepening our understanding of hardship, suffering, and survival and pointing us toward more hopeful futures. I have chosen practical theology as a methodology because practical theologians are interested in what traditional theological norms can do to help in understanding a particular experience or issue. However, they are equally concerned to see whether there are ways in which contemporary experience might lead to the revision of theological concepts or other related practices, such as the practice of theological education in prison and beyond.

While not much has been written explicitly outlining a liberationist practical theological method, I have derived methodological commitments from liberationist theologians and pedagogues, particularly womanist and mujerista practices in research and theological writing and critical theoretical practices in education. As specific types of liberation theologies, these approaches historically and presently focus on privileging the concrete lived experiences of women of historically marginalized and misconstrued identities in hopes of transforming conditions of life on one hand, and of critiquing, challenging, and amending scholarship in the dominant academic culture on the other hand. As such, I lift up three commitments from these approaches to inform this work. First, in line with womanist and *mujerista* methodologies, this project privileges experiences of marginalized women and communities as the starting point for theological reflection and advocates for a reconsideration of epistemological privilege in

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[35] David Ford and Rachel Muers, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd edition, edited by David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 411.

theological inquiry and discourse. Second, in line with womanist and *mujerista* themes, this project is explicitly concerned with survival as it relates to well-being and liberation. Third, in accord with womanist and *mujerista* praxiological traditions, this project employs a liberative praxis—the process by which commitments to humanization are practiced and embodied in both the research methods and the writing. This liberative praxis shaped not only the way I approached research with students but also how I have chosen to communicate their wisdom. I explore each commitment in more depth below.

Qualitative Research and Epistemological Privilege

A significant methodological claim of this project is that deep understanding of the good of theological education in prison must come from the lives and experiences of incarcerated students. This necessarily requires qualitative research. Far too much research and scholarly contribution about incarcerated peoples has been performed *for* and not *with* the incarcerated.[36] When qualitative methods have been used, they tend to focus on highlighting the lived experiences of the incarcerated as the starting or launching point for the researcher to offer critical reflection and recommendation. This approach restricts the contribution of lived experiences to anecdotal description and can fail to consider the wisdom of the subjects beyond practical, daily wisdom. As such, another methodological claim of this project is that experiential knowledge is valuable not only as a descriptive contribution but also as a normative one. The wisdom from the lived experiences of incarcerated students provides us with critical wisdom about

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[36] This is an observation echoed throughout a growing mass of literature on prison studies and from formerly incarcerated persons themselves.

theology and theological education as well as critical wisdom about systems and structures that confine, and the practices employed to resist them.

In order not to continue the history of manipulative research practices with incarcerated populations, it was important that this project employ liberative qualitative research that recognizes the moral agency of the incarcerated student. Scholar Melanie Harris describes this commitment as a particularly womanist commitment:

> In addition to honoring the theological ideas and constructs from scholars in the dominant culture, womanist religious thought centers the voices, experiences, theological reflections, and moral systems that come from "ordinary" women of African descent. Such knowledge, from mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, partners, and wives, contributes to a new womanist epistemology – that is, a theory of the nature of knowledge – that debunks myths circulating in the dominant culture about the ability of women of African descent to be moral agents.[37]

Historically, knowledge that emerges from communities of color has been discounted or labeled as subjugated knowledge. Harris highlights how womanist scholars resist this classification and reinterpret what counts as sources of knowledge. Womanist methodologies provide us with a model for asserting the epistemological privilege of incarcerated students as a valuable partner with dominant culture, not as a subjugated or diminished afterthought.

Knowledge from incarcerated peoples has been absent as a site of theological inquiry, suggesting that in addition to power, innocence and piety are foundational qualities of Christian epistemological privilege. This project challenges that assumption. The incarcerated students I have engaged in this study are guilty of crime. They have committed murder, fraud, violence, assault, endangerment, and theft, among other

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[37] Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, 1st edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 50.

social ills. Though complex systems and structures contribute to environments that make crime possible, I will not make a victimological turn to argue that unjust systems and structures are solely to blame for these actions. These students are guilty of crime, yet they are still sites of critical, valuable theological wisdom, insight, knowledge, intellect, and grace. It is my hope that these "ordinary" students contribute to a new epistemology that debunks myths circulating in dominant discourse about the ability of incarcerated people to be moral agents and contributors of theological wisdom. The epistemological privilege of the incarcerated is thereby not based on the moral or intellectual superiority of the oppressed,[38] but rather on their ability to see and understand from different vantage points, those that better understand survival, resistance, and the intricacies and absurdities of domination and systems of oppression and colonization.

Gathering the wisdom of CTS students required a variety of methods. Patricia Hill Collins, in her work to articulate core themes of Black feminine consciousness, argues for an alternative epistemology or way of producing and validating knowledge that includes alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations.[39] Subsequently, I explore sites of knowledge as varied as Collins recommends: communal stories gathered from semi-structured

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[38] Argument made by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz as she advocates for an epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed in *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology (1993)*.

[39] Collins provides a book-length treatment of epistemological truth concerns among oppressed peoples in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Contradictions of Modernity; v. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). See also Collin's chapter "Black Feminist Epistemology" in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2009).

focus groups, individual interviews, drawings, homework assignments, classroom conversations about everyday life, and other relevant creative expression including music and performance. Through these works, incarcerated students convey the community's consciousness of values which enable them to survive prison and find meaning. They also provide us with a different imagination for theological education. Through liberative qualitative research, the voices and expertise of the often unseen and unheard take epistemic priority.

The primary mode of information gathering occurred in focus groups. Over the course of several months, the research team of myself and two other scholars met with 29 students in the CTS program. There were four to six students in each group and we followed a semi-structured discussion guide. The groups were chosen deliberately to ensure that we had a representative sample of the diversity of the program including diversity of age, sentence length, time in program, and religious affiliation. For the purpose of this project, I have chosen to focus my analysis primarily on the responses from the lifer-students, those who are serving life sentences. Students serving life-sentences were more likely to envision life apart from the traditional economic vocational categories, more likely to imagine life in terms of who they will become rather than what they will do as a job.

In order to bring together multiple qualitative accounts, I followed the basic techniques of meta-ethnography as used by mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz. Meta-ethnography provides a process for synthesizing multiple ethnographic data sources without collapsing difference. I use this same method to bring together the qualitative data gathered from multiple sources. It is an inductive and interpretive bringing together of multiple accounts to identify similarities and differences. It is less

an aggregation of data than it is an interpretation of data that presents individual stories as sufficient and whole. Where ideas are similar, they are highlighted without being forced to fit a pre-identified mold. As such, I use an emic approach to interpreting student stories, one that tries not to judge the understanding or practices of students and tries not to make them fit traditional theological or pious categories. The meta-ethnography process has four basic moves. First, I gathered information from various accounts, as previously mentioned. Second, I read the data repeatedly to identify commonalities and differences. Third, I identified key ideas that emerged. Fourth and finally, I joined the similarities together to create generative themes of ideas that were most important. These generative themes guide the direction of each chapter.

Generative Themes

The second commitment of this project is to allow dialogue and generative themes to guide the process and production. Critical pedagogue Paulo Freire writes that:

> We must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears – programs which at times in fact increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness. It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, not to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world. Educational and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk either of "banking" or of preaching to the desert.[40]

Freire is concerned with educators who use language that neither resonates with their audiences nor reflects the lives and experiences of their students. To speak with

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[40] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New revised 20th-Anniversary edition (New York: Continuum, 1993), 96.

rather than for the students of CTS requires that I speak in language that reflects their concerns, hopes, and commitments. One example that I will carry on from this point is in the term Theology. The students in the CTS program refer to the program simply as Theology.

I have chosen to let the generative themes that emerge from the research guide my reflections and the subsequent chapter foci. Generative themes are what arises out of human beings' orientations to the world at a given time and place. They reflect the overarching concerns in a language that reflects the thematic universe of the audience. Meta-qualitative analysis identified three central generative themes this project will explore. These themes are (social) death, survival, and life (growth). As such, this project must understand theological education as an act of survival in the midst of constant threats of social death for the purpose of improved life. Social death, survival, and life become significant theological and pedagogical categories that this project explores.

Liberative Praxis

The third commitment of this project is that qualitative research methods must embody a liberative praxis, meaning that it must bring about transformation for the good of the students. I was insistent that any research on the good of theological education must not cause harm to or undue stress for the students. I was concerned that the research would seem instrumentalizing and self-serving. Incarcerated people are considered to be a vulnerable population, according to research ethics. This is because historically, incarcerated persons have been subjected to research many times with no way of resisting or of knowing how the research will be used.

Knowing that qualitative research can restrict, dominate, and further oppress, this project is committed to a liberative praxis that resists the tendency to speak on behalf of the other. Freire asserts that "because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation in which some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another." He goes on to add that the domination implicit in dialogue should be "that of the world by the dialoguers; it is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind.[41] This research sought to create conditions in which students could name the world for themselves.

One way that I attempt liberative praxis in naming is to refer to incarcerated persons in Theology simply as students. I do not use the terms inmate, prisoner, or criminal. These terms base identity on past criminal action or present carceral conditions. Instead, I use the term student as a descriptor both of what they are as participants in the Theology program and as a broad term used to describe all people in theological education. It is a leveling term used to describe the condition of learning, reflecting, and seeking understanding.

As a liberative endeavor, the focus groups and other research methods were carried out as spaces of grace, spaces of humanization. Freire writes that "to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it."[42] Because the prison is a context of dehumanization, humanization became the primary liberative goal of this research. Whether students were in conversation groups or being asked to share their work, all

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[41] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 89.

[42] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88.

was done with the goal of humanization. Students shared that in prison "nobody cares what we think," so the practice of gathering students to talk about their opinions and experiences was an act of humanizing praxis.

The type of openness and depth of wisdom I gathered in this research was only possible because of the depth of dialogue I was able to have with the students. This was made possible only because of the long relationships I have with the students. I have been working with CTS for more than seven years. I neither could nor should have done this work without the long relationship I had with these students. Unlike research methods that require a stance of distance or impartiality, the methods of research informed by liberation theologians and pedagogues suggests that relationships are fundamental to epistemological depth. Freire writes that "dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and recreation, is not possible if it is not infused with love."[43] This project does not pretend any sort of impartiality. It is a project of sincere love and deep involvement within a community. I have been working on and off with this program for seven years, for the past two I have been the program's director. I have a vested interest in the liberation of these students, an interest that Freire calls a prerequisite for liberative praxis. My relationship with the students is a complicated one, however. I am not an insider. I do not know the experience of incarceration the way they do. I also do not know the experience of the Theology program the way they do. They are students in the program; I have facilitated and directed the program. I operate in multiple worlds, as an ally with them in the program, as an advocate for them to the

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[43] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 89.

outside world, and as a complicated and often conflicted liaison between the prison and

the students. My relationship with the students governs my concern and my

commitments to their liberation. On this topic, Freire writes:

> As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it
> must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of
> freedom; otherwise, it is not love. Only by abolishing the situation of
> oppression is it possible to restore the love which that situation made
> impossible. If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love
> people—I cannot enter into dialogue.[44]

For Freire, dialogue is the only way to know anything true. It is an act of love,

humility, and faith. As an act of humility, it requires the ability to be vulnerable and risk

being wrong. It requires me to be silent at times but also to speak knowing that as a

partner in this community, my words and contributions are required of me as a sign of

respect for the agency of the students. Humility in dialogue requires that I risk being

displaced and hurt in the process of seeking understanding and seeking the good of the

students. The reality is that the Theology program was designed for and not with

incarcerated students. By embarking on qualitative research and sincere dialogue, I was

opening myself to the truth not only of the good of the program, but also to the places

where the program has mis-stepped and contributed to dehumanization even as it

sought to humanize. As an act of faith, dialogue requires me to believe in humankind's

ability to create and recreate even in the midst of social death. In the words of Freire, it

is a "faith in their vocation to be more fully human" that compels me to listen intently

for the wisdom that will guide us to more hopeful futures.[45] The dialogue required in

qualitative research requires contexts of mutual trust, hope, and critical thinking. As

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[44] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 89–90.

[45] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 90.

liberative praxis, it is deeply relational because only then can we know if we are doing the good that we seek to do.

Chapter Movements

The following chapters explore social death as a theological and pedagogical problem. Chapter two begins by exploring the context in which the Theology program operates -- a US women's prison. Using students' stories and experiences, I highlight three dimensions of the prison experience: social death, survival, and living (good life). Each of these dimensions gives us the concepts and concerns to which theological education must respond. Seeking to understand how we ended up with a prison system rooted in social death practices, chapters three and four make a historical turn. In chapter three, I explore and name dominant myths about women that shaped historical societal views about women's incarceration and reformation. The dominant myths are the fallen woman, the dark lady, and the true woman. These myths crystallize into racialized, gendered, and class-specific treatment of women convicted of crime. Chapter four then centers on the historical practices of women's prisons, showing how racialized and gendered myths about women shaped the educational, labor, and religious practices in prison. Early prisons for women operated with a formational goal rooted in white, middle-class myths of true womanhood. Women who did not fit this narrative were not afforded access to certain work or educational opportunities related to an image of a good life or a narrative of redemption.

In chapter five, I draw connections between the prison practices of the past and the dehumanizing prison practices of today. I then, constructively, name the counter-practices employed by women resisting social death in prison today. These practices are

what I call redemptive practices, practices that redeem human life in the face of the prison mechanisms of social death. Within theological education, students engage several redemptive practices including coming together, considering one another, critical questioning, and creating theology. These practices reclaim human dignity in the face of persistent degradation. They are political acts. This exploration of the past and present shows the complicated interrelation of contextual analysis, history, and human practices, and demonstrates the importance of understanding and investigating both the current and historical dimensions of context and practice.

The interplay between historical myths and practice are praxiologically oriented toward improved theological education practice. As such, the final chapter concludes with a vision of employing redemptive pedagogies in theological education in and beyond the prison classroom to address holistic student well-being. This broader and more life-giving vision of theological education widens the scope of possibilities for where theological study can occur and who can benefit and contribute to its breadth. The final chapter attempts to show how the experience of incarceration, of living dead, fundamentally shapes how might understand and approach theological education. Feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp challenges research on theological education to consider more than the large, macro questions of aims and purposes. Instead, she invites scholarship that will be sensitive to the issues of particularity and contextuality in theological education. Chopp writes that "before we can move forward to speak about the general aims of theological education, I think we must speak about specific practices and particular subjects."[46] Chopp continues her charge by recommending a "return to

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[46] Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education*, 1st edition. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), xi.

the concrete," a relocation of our investigation "from the abstract to the practical reality of our situation."[47] This project takes Chopp's charge seriously and wagers that by studying theological education in prison, we come to know something of the good of theological study for all human life.

The Significance of Living Dead and the Politics of Goodness

A major premise of this work is that theological education is good in as much as it contributes to a good life for those pursuing it. In the context of crime and punishment, however, a good life creates a theological and ethical conundrum. What is a good life for those experiencing social death? Should people in prison have anything good? The dominant ethos in current prison culture answers no. "They don't believe we deserve anything – they do not think we deserve to be happy," one student remarked. Prison is a place of punishment by way of social death and goodness is incompatible to those who believe that people in prison do not deserve any good.

To pursue a good life in prison is a politically charged act of resistance. It is how students claim their right to a good life even in punishment. A good life, for them, is a fundamental quality of human dignity. While wrongdoing can diminish its scope, no crime or wrongdoing can destroy the fundamental desire to live a life of flourishing. To proceed with this project, I urge the reader to hold together two images of humanity: the image of the human person as a beloved creature of God and the image of the human person as sinner against God. These images are inextricably linked. The desire for a good life is housed in the image of the person as beloved creature of God. While the legal consequences of crime places constraints on how this life is lived out, the desire for a

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[47] Chopp, *Saving Work*, 12.

good life remains. Incarcerated students remind us that each person has an intrinsic

worth and is endowed with a dignity that must never be abridged or assaulted the way

that social death does. To desire a good life in prison is to believe that the beloved

creatureliness in which we are made remains even while living dead.[48]

We live with a constrained imagination regarding inmates and theological

education. We need a counter-memory, a different way of imagining theological

education and a different way of imagining the living dead who pursue it. This project

constructs what Emilie Townes calls a counter-memory in order to dismantle the

fantastic hegemonic imagination at work in our social imaginations regarding who

theological education is for and who can be active and creative agents of theology. The

fantastic hegemonic imagination plays with history and memory to engender

characterizations and stereotypes of groups of people. It is an imagination that makes us

fear prisons and reject formerly incarcerated peoples from our neighborhoods, jobs, and

churches. It serves to hold systemic, structural evil in place and uses a politicized sense

of history and memory to create and shape its worldview.[49] It affects all of us because it

is deeply embedded in our culture. Counter-memory, according to Townes, is a

methodological strategy that helps combat the iconization of identity. In this work,

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[48] I am grounding these assertions on a positive theological anthropology deduced from Serene Jones' portraits of humanity. The two mentioned here, Human Beings as Beloved Creatures of God and Human Beings as Sinners against God, suggests that even though human beings sin, they are not essentially bad or of no value, neither are they of accidental existence (144). Jones defines sin as a state not an act (149). To be in sin is thereby to live in a state that opposes God's will for flourishing. In this regard, social death is a state of sin. Jones maintains, however, that sin is parasitic and not able to destroy what God created as good. The portrait of the human being as sinner does not replace the portrait of human being as beloved creature though it does radically affect it. Though sin alters the characteristics of humanity as beloved creatures of God, at the end of the day, "the baseline truth" of our lives is still goodness (149). See Jones 2003.

[49] For a full treatment of counter-memory and fantastic hegemonic imagination, see Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 21.

counter-memory seeks to combat the iconization of criminal identity and disrupt the invisibility of the incarcerated and the clerical paradigm of theological education. At the heart of this investigation is an inquiry into the good of theological education in the world today.

Theological education at Arrendale is a self-reflective, redemptive practice that better prepares students for life in community. Theology is a journey of asking big questions, sitting with ambiguity, being in relation with those who are different and doing so with respect; it engenders dispositions of humility, inquiry, and openness. It "wins one time" to think about one's wholeness, freedom, and flourishing: mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional completeness. Theology is freedom to be one's self, a reclamation of the life threatened by social death. The choosing of theological education in prison is an act of radical, life-affirming agency. It is a choice to live a better life in prison, a life that points toward goodness. Through the stories and witness of the students in the CTS program, we will see how theological education creates spaces for the realm of God to be made known even in the midst of living-death.

If incarcerated students can engage theological education as a redemptive practice in incarceration, where else might theological education be needed in its redemptive mission? This is the question that theological educators should sit with as I call for liberative theological education to manifest itself as a redemptive practice in broader contexts, to hold space for people who are surviving social death in its various forms that they might live into a Christian vision of redemptive flourishing. By attending to the lived experiences of students engaged in theological education in prison, we begin to (re)consider the redemptive power of theological education and imagine new publics, visions, and purposes for theological education in the seminary and beyond.

CHAPTER TWO

Living Dead: The Psychosocial Context of Theological Education in Prison

On the first page there was only one word in large, bold print: **SHAME**. I turned

the page to see a clean and crisp image of a prison drawn in black ink on white paper

(see figure 1). I knew whose work it was before I read the name. Claira and I are about

the same age.[50] But the year that I graduated college and moved to Southern Ohio to

begin my professional career, Claira left behind in Georgia her infant daughter to spend

her life in prison. I met Claira years ago, a cheerful, quiet, yet pensive student in the

Theology program. What I was reading was Claira's work, an artfully crafted and

precisely illustrated story of her most transformative life moment:

> I struggled to believe I was really there. It was like I had died in a little
> courtroom. Yet, I was still breathing; a shell of myself. It was like the weight of
> my sentence had buried me alive and, in the aftermath, I was shredded and
> suspended in time. The prison was another universe where the Earth had stopped
> turning and the grass didn't grow. I was lost. I was certain my life was over or at
> least on some infinite pause.
>
> Years went by.
>
> Eventually it occurred to me that time was still moving, and I was actually alive;
> that these awful days full of grief and gruel were still days, days that had to
> matter in the grander scheme of things. My life SUCKED! but it was still a life I
> had to learn to live.
>
> I made some friends. I went to school. I got a better job. [...]
>
> It is phenomenal that after so much oppression and loss I could get comfortable
> in the routine of things. Being in prison was always awful. But it had gotten
> easier. I felt like I belonged to a community, in a world I cared about. I felt
> respected and loved. But it's as if some cosmic force never fails to swoop down
> and remind me of some bigger truth…

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[50] All names of students are pseudonyms they chose at the time of their participation in the
research project.

I must remember that I am being punished, perpetually … For two decades there will be a punishment and if I, for even a moment forget, I will be reminded … Shame is what they're after. It has sunk down into the very core of my being. It hangs in my clothes. It sleeps in my body. I am wholly defined by guilt and shame. The system pivots between being punitive and restorative and for the sake of rehabilitation inundates me with words like Character, Integrity, and Valor! … but never utters a thing about Dignity.

Claira's story points to a larger truth about the context of imprisonment in the United States. Even as incarcerated people earnestly attempt to create a life worth living, their efforts are constantly met with obstacles designed to degrade and dehumanize them. According to Claira, the purpose is to remind them of their shame. I begin with Claira's story because through it we come to see the central concerns and the challenging context out of which a Theology program in prison operates – a context where the living are treated as if they are already dead.

Figure 1: Claira's drawing of prison
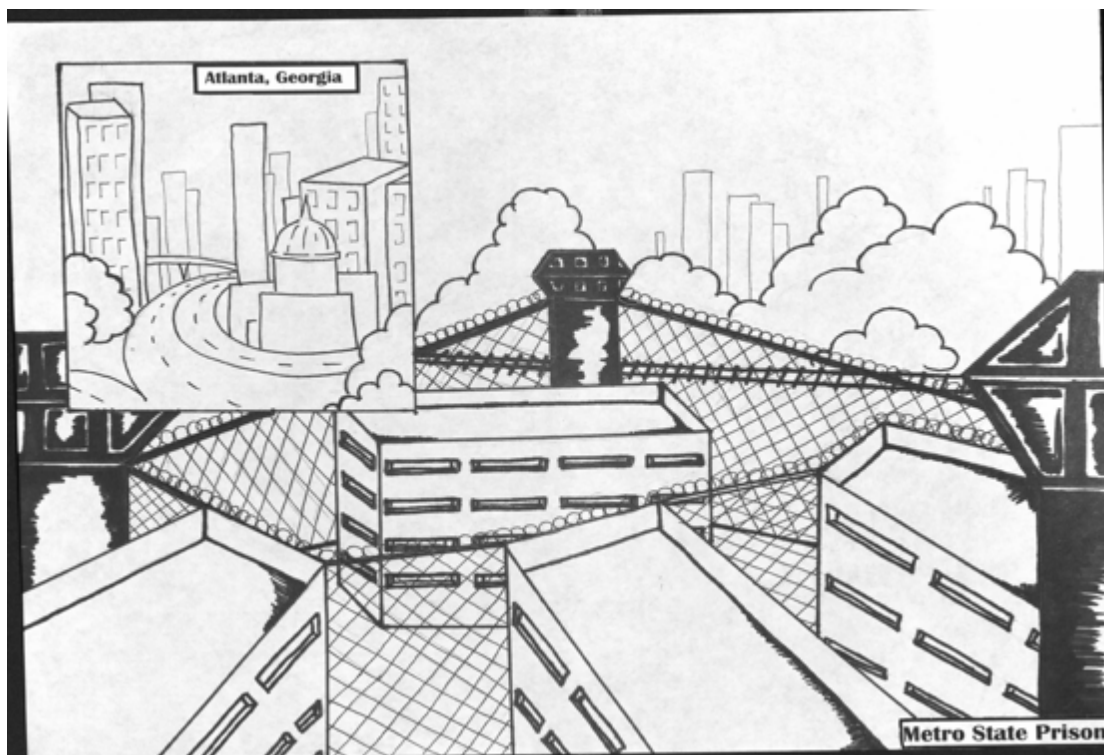
In the tradition of liberative educational practice, this chapter seeks to understand the world in which students reside and the conditions they must endure and resist as they engage in the practice of theological education in prison. The ultimate aim is to understand better the concerns to which the Theology program must respond. As such, this chapter explores and names the context of incarceration as a context of the living-dead. The living-dead are those who are physically alive but are intentionally treated as less than full citizens; in all meaningful ways, they have been rendered invisible to society. They are effectively dead to public considerations, academic theologies, and social practices. By dead, I do not mean physical or clinical death but rather social death. Social death occurs when a person is intentionally rejected, ostracized, or excluded from social contexts of relational meaning with the intent of inflicting psychological harm.

Social death is not just one concern that theological education must address in prison; it is the fundamental concern. Social death results from intentional social exclusion, degradation, and neglect. While its mechanisms affect all incarcerated peoples, social death practices have a pronounced impact on those with prison sentences that are longer than twenty years. The majority of students in the Theology program are these long-term inmates. Moreover, in the history of the program, approximately one-third of the students have been lifers (students with life sentences) like Claira. For students in Theology, fear of physical death is not the primary, pervasive fear.[51] Fear of social death is.

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[51] The threat of physical harm in prison is real even if exaggerated. Much of our social imagination about prisons is informed by the realities of male carceral institutions where the threat of bodily harm is high, or by popular television shows like Orange is the New Black. But in reality, a person is far less likely

Social Death

In many contexts around the world, social ostracism is the most extreme form of punishment, so much so that death is often used as a fitting metaphor for the condition.[52] In 1897, psychologist William James shed light on the relationship between death and ostracism in his book, *The Principles of Psychology*. There, James named the condition of being intentionally ignored and excluded as being "cut dead." A colloquial term, to be "cut dead" is the act of being snubbed, ignored, and rejected, the impact of which has deep psychological consequences. A person who is consistently cut dead by other human beings becomes conscious of the undoing of their own humanity. In 2009, scholar Gregory Ellison in his work, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, revisits this theme from James' work and argues definitively that for the vulnerable and marginalized, to be cut dead is worse than physical death.[53] For Ellison, to cut someone dead means to refuse to acknowledge them as human beings, and bears an intent to punish. Focusing on the histories and experiences of African American men in the United Sates, Ellison demonstrates how the forced muteness and invisibility of a population stigmatizes them,

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to die by violence in prison. In a fourteen-year study of inmate deaths, approximately 89 percent of state prisoners that died during that time died of illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and liver disease. In total, 96 percent of these deaths were of men. (Margaret Noonan, "Mortality in State Prisons, 2001–2014," 2016, 22). A person in prison is more likely to die from suicide than to be killed by accident or homicide. The fear of physical death derives more from popular perception than from actual statistics. During the time of my research, there were at minimum three deaths at the prison, one by illness, one by drug overdose, and one by suicide. Even if physical death is rare, it looms large in prison, reminding students of the fragility of life. Though death by violence is rare, the growing occurrence of gang violence has increased student fear of bodily harm. I knew firsthand of two accounts of physical assault during the year of this research both toward students in Theology. One was attributed to gang violence and our student was eventually shipped to another prison for her safety.

[52] Kipling D. Williams, Joseph P. Forgas, and William von Hippel, eds., *The Social Outcast: Ostracism, Social Exclusion, Rejection, and Bullying* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 23.

[53] Gregory C. Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013).

leaving them with limited opportunities for growth and a heightened proclivity toward

incarceration. Ellison argues that, with their thoughts and physical selves

unacknowledged, these men are prone to hopelessness and instability and can begin to

exist in society as if they are already dead. This concept of "cut dead" is an appropriate

theoretical accompaniment for understanding how social death operates because it links

human degradation with an intent to punish. Using the language of James and Ellison, I

contend that social death operates by cutting people dead--rejecting them, ignoring

them, silencing them--with deep and devastating psychological consequences. For this

reason, social death is a helpful theoretical framework for understanding the profound

mistreatment and loss experienced in incarceration.

 The term social death has been used across a wide array of disciplines to denote a

condition of great social loss and disconnection. First used in social science in 1967, the

concept was used to describe when living people were treated as if they were already

deceased. Neither clinical nor physical death adequately captured this type of life-

altering condition. Scholars have continued to use the term to connote an array of

death-like conditions:

> Thus the general trend among scholars using the social death concept is to use it when a person/group has experienced extreme and profound loss. Death studies and gerontology concentrate on loss of role, of social identity, of social capital and of social networks; refugee studies examine displacement, social exclusion, loss of citizenship, of economic capital and of access to resources; slavery studies look at interplay of power dynamics and examine the loss of cultural capital and of links across the generations, on which genocide studies also draw.[54]

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[54] Jana Králová, "What Is Social Death?," *Contemporary Social Science* 10, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 236.

As a conceptual framework, social death conveys the experience of profound loss in all contexts. In contexts explored in death studies and gerontology, social death is expressed as something that happens to human beings, something over which we have little control. In contexts like refugee studies and slavery, however, social death is not inevitable but intentional. Within the history of slavery, the stark and grave results of the intentionality of social death is laid bare.

Social Death: In Slavery and Incarceration

In 1982, Orlando Patterson, a noted scholar of the history of slavery in the United States, used the concept of social death to describe the intentional process of dehumanizing African peoples through the practices of slavery. Patterson observed that as African people were removed from their home contexts, the process of dehumanization included removing all markers of identity including language, clothing, kinship, and status. With markers of identity stripped, African peoples were forcibly placed into a new context governed by new rules, which they had no agency in forming or reforming. Patterson argued that, separated from society, enslaved persons existed socially and legally only through their masters. Enslaved persons were given the status of nonbeings. Patterson describes social death as both a state of being and a process. As a state of being, social death is defined as "a state of existential non-personhood; a condition of being in existence and non-existence simultaneously."[55] This definition captures the intent behind the term living dead. It holds onto the tension of simultaneously being alive but socially non-existent.

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[55] A. Elizabeth Stearns, Rick Swanson, and Stephanie Etie, "The Walking Dead? Assessing Social Death among Long-Term Prisoners," *Corrections*, November 21, 2017, 13.

As a process, social death is the devolution of humanity that occurs when human beings are taken from one context and violently inserted into another and treated as nonbeings. Social death begins, according to Patterson, by removing persons from their known relational contexts and it is deepened by persistently limiting, controlling, and destroying relational contexts that are formed. Relational contexts are where humans know and are known, where we receive protection and care, and where we are given the opportunity to grow and flourish. Removing a person from social contexts of value leaves a void in the community and creates a void in the person removed.

Scholars of prison studies and mass incarceration see similarities between Patterson's portrayal of the process of social death in slavery and that same process in incarceration.[56]

> If Patterson's "master" is replaced with the "Prison Industrial Complex," we see the same process of social death taking place. The prisoner is divorced from society and absorbed into a penal community after having been issued symbols of his or her new non-status, such as nondescript shoes and a uniform. Appearance, including hair, is strictly regulated, as are the slaves Patterson describes. The prisoner, stripped of previous identity, role, and power, is now subject to the absolute authority of the justice system much the same as slaves are subject to the absolute authority of their masters. In addition, the prisoner and slave both cannot hope to regain the life they have left, in the sense that they are no longer who they were.[57]

Like enslaved persons, incarcerated persons are often treated with nonbeing status and exist as outsiders in a marginal state between (social) death and living. There is a sense of permanence to this state of being in that, like slaves, incarcerated persons cannot regain the life they left, at least not in the same manner. Labeled as convicted

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[56] For an exploration of social death in the context of theological education in men's prisons, see Kaia Stern's *Voices from American Prisons* (2014).

[57] Stearns, Swanson, and Etie, "The Walking Dead?," 2.

felons or ex-cons, they continue to be excluded, rejected, or ostracized, one of "the most devastating experiences a person can endure."[58]

Another critical step in the process of social death, according to Patterson, involves removing a person from the physical spaces that contextualize life. At incarceration, most people are sent to a prison far from where they lived. For women in particular, the distance from home is often greater because there are generally fewer women's carceral facilities in each state. Furthermore, prisons like the one in north Georgia tend to be set in rural locations. Since 1980, the majority of new prisons built to accommodate the expanding U.S. prison population have been placed in non-metropolitan areas, such that the majority of prisoners are now housed in rural America.[59] People in prison have replaced farmers as the leading population in rural America. These rural contexts become the new home for those incarcerated, many of whom once lived in more metropolitan areas. What results is the loss of the physical places, sounds, and images that once shaped their lives.

The process of social death does not just involve removing persons from the relationships and locations that give life meaning; it also involves placing persons into a new context where markers of one's previous life have been intentionally erased or distorted in order to be redefined by a new authority. In the penal system, symbols of individuality and identity are removed in favor of symbols of uniformity and homogeneity. For example, the penal code requires that all inmates are referred to by last name. The use of nick-names or preferred names are a violation. Regardless of one's

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[58] Williams, Forgas, and von Hippel, *The Social Outcast*, xix.

[59] Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind, *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment* (New York: New Press, 2002), 198.

native tongue, English must be spoken at all times. Tan colored uniforms must be worn; shirts tucked in, department approved shoes worn, hair placed in a ponytail or off the neck at all times. All markers of individual expression become regulated by the department of corrections. This new penal community is designed to remove occasions for self-directed agency. Matters of choice as basic as aesthetic agency are predefined by the penal system.

In the new penal community, "prisoners" become subject to the absolute authority of the justice system. Criminal justice scholars suggest that the removal of social markers of meaning and identity are a necessary precursor for this shift in power to occur.[60] Stripping people of what gives them a sense of purpose, meaning, and confidence creates a proverbial blank slate necessary for "prisoners" to adopt this new authority system. In this way, social death becomes necessary for the penal project to be successful.

Both in the contexts of slavery and incarceration, social death is something that humans do to one another. It is an intentional act, a purposeful denial of another person's humanity and the systematic degradation of their dignity for the purposes of power and punishment. The insidious nature of social death in slavery has led theologians to name slavery as one of America's original sins.[61] But in the case of incarceration, the relationship between punishment and responsibility often clouds a

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[60] Stearns, Swanson, and Etie make this point in "The Walking Dead?" (2017).

[61] I refer to public theologian Jim Wallis' book *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*. Wallis argues that sin is not just slavery, but the "deliberate dehumanizing and debasing" of African-Americans. Wallis also argues that, "slavery never ended, it just evolved," saying that "mass incarceration is the current evolution of slavery." He also notes that the "deliberate disenfranchisement" of prisoners, gerrymandering, and other forms of voter suppression are tactics used to keep certain "demographics from changing America."

similar naming. People are incarcerated because they have broken a prescribed legal code and are found liable. Consequently, prison is designed as a place of punishment and correction at worst, rehabilitation and reformation at best. A person is in prison mostly for self-inflicted reasons. Yet the concept of social death and its ritual degradation begs us to wonder why we cannot seem to hold people accountable for wrongdoing without systematically disenfranchising and degrading them to the point of rendering them less than fully human. Social death is not to be conflated with punishment for wrong-doing. Social death is more insidious, evil, and sinful.

Whether scholars refer to social death in contexts of slavery or incarceration, there are three key features that are common among them, each feature capturing a dimension of profound loss. [62] The three types of loss are loss of social identity, loss of social connectedness, and the loss associated with bodily disintegration.

<u>A loss of social identity and the "need to find myself"</u>

As a type of punishment in Ancient Roman law, the status of *homo sacer*[63] was given to signify the absolute loss of a person's value. People who were deemed as *homo sacer* could be killed without consequence; their vulnerability and associated stigma often leaving them socially abandoned. As a form of punishment, "the exclusion of the criminal from the community seems to cost them their humanity and leave them as nothing more than bare life, something monstrous that exists between the animal and

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[62] For an in-depth discussion of the history of the concept and its overall theoretical framework, see Králová, "What Is Social Death?" (2015)

[63] *Homo sacer* is Latin for "the sacred man" or "the accursed man." The meaning of the term *sacer* in Ancient Roman religion is not fully congruent with the meaning it took after Christianization, which was sacred. In early Roman religion, *sacer* denotes anything "set apart" from common society and encompasses both the senses of "hallowed" and "cursed." For more on the ancient definitions, see the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Brill p. 3233).

the human, also referred to as subhuman."[64] This bare life or loss of social identity is the

act of dehumanization or the negation of personhood. Philosopher Agamben elucidates:

> [Homo sacer] has been excluded from the religious community and from
> all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his *gens*, nor … can he
> perform any juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is
> reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that
> anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself
> only in perpetual flight or a foreign land.[65]

We can already see the scaffolding for social death in Agamben's definition.

Excluded from all communal life and ability to effect change, homo sacer can only save

himself by losing himself, literally, by fleeing and becoming socially nonexistent. The

experience of incarceration makes the incarcerated into modern homo sacer, reduced to

a bare life.

The loss of social identity is the loss of a person's sense of self, the loss of an

understanding of who they are in relation to others. It is an individual, intrapersonal

sense of loss. Among students in prison, this often manifests itself as a need to "find

myself." Frequent declarations of "I need to work on myself," or that "you need to figure

yourself out" suggest that students feel the loss of social identity in prison. One student,

who came to prison as a juvenile, fears that she has no idea of how to live a real life

because she has never had responsibility for anything. Other students offered similar

fears of no longer knowing who they are in relation to the "real world." Expressed as

concerns of whether or not they would be conceived as "normal," students are burdened

by a need to protect themselves proactively, particularly their identity and their dignity.

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[64] Benjamin Noys, *The Culture of Death* (Oxford, UK; New York: Berg, 2005), 19.

[65] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 183.

They become committed to a process of reclaiming a social identity for themselves.[66] The prison system capitalizes on the loss of social identity by offering courses to help students reconstruct a vision of a self. However, this vision according to student perspective, is prescribed by the department of corrections to create good inmates more than it focuses on helping students create a good life.

A loss of social connectedness and the "need to find people I can trust"

If a loss of social identity is a personal, inner loss of meaning, a loss of social connectedness is a relational, interpersonal sense of loss. Psychologist Kipling Williams studies the impact of ostracism and rejection and contends that a loss of social connectedness has the unique capacity to threaten one's sense of meaningful life. According to Williams, ostracism, rejection, and exclusion, as constituents of social death, threaten the four fundamental needs of humanity: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. In the absence of belonging, control, and esteem, Williams suggests that a life of meaning is difficult to discern.[67] People who experience social death are often limited in their access to traditional sources of meaning such as

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[66] A system designed to control and conform strips subjects of personal agency and subsequently personhood. According to liberative scholar Paulo Freire, our ontological vocation as human beings is humanization – the process of becoming more fully human (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970). Conversely prison pedagogy (according to teacher and critical pedagogue Eduardo Lopez) focuses on discipline, surveillance, and control, rendering its students servile to a system of domination (*Teaching Against Prison Pedagogy*, 2002). In her work, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks conceptually refers to prison as a "place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility."

[67] For an in-depth treatment of Kipling's argument, see Kipling D. Williams, Joseph P. Forgas, and William von Hippel, eds., *The Social Outcast: Ostracism, Social Exclusion, Rejection, and Bullying* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005).

significant work and education. Moreover, because life-meaning and purpose are often communally discerned, to remove the relationships necessary for discernment creates the conditions for meaning to be elusive. To render a human being as non-being is the ultimate goal of social death and since human beings are fundamentally social creatures, the loss of meaningful social connections and roles is critically detrimental to human well-being.

Williams indicates that people react to threats to fundamental human needs in three phases. In the immediate phase, the reaction is physical. The body experiences a range of emotions including physical pain, hurt feelings, and mood disorders. These experiences can manifest as depression, anger, violence, and illness. These physical manifestations of pain are embodied responses to social death. Following this immediate phase, people in the short-term response phase attempt to regain the needs lost in social exclusion. They strengthen bonds with others, make self-affirmations, take control, and maintain cultural barriers. This short-term phase is filled with optimism and hope that individual actions and drive can resist further loss to fundamental needs. However, Williams observed a different reaction among those who face long-term, persistent threats of exclusion. In the long-term phase, people begin to internalize the loss of fundamental needs. Some begin to self-isolate, choosing to be alone out of distrust and self-protection. There is a higher degree of learned helplessness whereby people become more dependent on institutions to exert control and they relinquish the need for personal choice and agency. Self-esteem declines in this period and there are often increased thoughts of suicide. Life loses the hopefulness of the short-term phase and faces the stark and brutal reality of embodying the status of nonbeing.

Williams' work on the impact of ostracism on individuals is a helpful analytical tool for understanding the moves and shifts of carceral life. Take Claira's story again as an example. In the immediate phase, Claira *felt* the impact of social disconnection—she felt "buried alive" and "shredded." Other students in Theology share similar testimonies of feelings of despair, anger, and depression in the first several years of incarceration. They remember responding violently, "staying in trouble," and getting into fights. They also remember turning inward and isolating themselves, failing to make connections with anyone. Like Claira, after some time students move from the physiological despair of incarceration into the short-term phase of seeking to reconstruct the needs that were lost. Like Claira, many begin to make friends, go to school, and get a job, each an effort respectively to reconstruct belonging, self-esteem, and a meaningful existence. There is a hopefulness in this stage, a sense that something can be done to recreate life in prison. This is the stage that most students are in when they come to Theology.

Unfortunately, threats of social death do not end after at the initial moments of incarceration; they persist throughout the carceral experience. Each time a much-expected family visitation day is canceled, or a best friend is released, the need for belonging is fractured. Each time a student is abruptly and without warning moved from one dorm to another or from one prison to another, the need for control over one's environment is ruptured. Each time the parole board listens to all of the progress a person has made while in prison yet denies the request for parole as if those efforts were insignificant, self-esteem is shattered. With constant rejections and reminders of punishment, trying to construct a meaningful existence can seem futile. Students in the long-term phase of Williams' model can lose hope and self-isolate again. They can resort to violence out of anger or fall into depression. Theology students in this phase can be

inconsistent in their attendance. Fortunately, Williams' phases are not unidirectional. Students whose self-esteem is diminished by the environment can find a sense of hope again. They can move from the long-term phase back into the behaviors of the short-term phase.

A supportive community is crucial for the transition between despair and hope to continue to occur.[68] In a research study, psychologists divided a group of people into three sections: Future Belonging, Future Alone, and Future Misfortune.[69] The Future Belonging group are told that their future would include meaningful, affirming relationships. The Future Alone group, by contrast, were told that they would be alone with no meaningful relationships. The Future Misfortune group was told that they would have meaningful relationships but would face enormous amounts of hurt and pain. Participants who anticipated a future devoid of meaningful relationships gave up significantly faster than participants in all other conditions. Furthermore, self-regulation became impaired, diminishing the ability of persons to make good choices for themselves. The ability to persevere in face of difficulty also declined, causing people to quit sooner on frustrating tasks. Finally, their ability to regulate attention was reduced. Participants who were told they would end up alone later in life performed significantly

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[68] While this concept will be explored in subsequent chapters, it is worth highlighting that social death can be ameliorated or mitigated by practices that give students the feeling of being connected to the outside world. One key practice is visitation by outsiders. Studies show that more than visits by family members, the most helpful visits are from those who do not have any familial sense of responsibility to visit. Psychologists posit that "inmates who receive visits from individuals who are not necessarily socially obligated to visit conceptualize their connectedness with the outside world at higher than average levels" (Stearns et al., 12). When a visit is perceived as outside the constraints of duty, studies suggest that those visits yield higher amounts of satisfaction and contribute to greater degrees of worthiness. In this respect, outsiders have a positive impact on the social self-esteem of those living in incarceration.

[69] Roy F. Baumeister and C. Nathan Dewall, "The Inner Dimension of Social Exclusion: Intelligent Thought and Self-Regulation Among Rejected Persons," in *The Social Outcast: Ostracism, Social Exclusion, Rejection, and Bullying*, by Kipling D. Williams (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 53–73.

worse than participants who believed their future would be filled with many meaningful relationships. They even performed worse that those who were told their lives would be filled with misfortune. The thought of ending up alone was far worse than a life of hardship. Results from this study indicate that anticipated social exclusion produces a dramatic drop in intelligent performance. Social exclusion impairs cognitive processes that require active volition, such as logical reasoning, yet leaves intact the automatic and overlearned responses (such as rote memory). Without the hope of a meaningful future with meaningful relationships, people are often left to do little more than be obedient to rules. Without a supportive community and belief in the presence of meaningful relationships, students in prison are more likely to remain in despair, despondency, depression, and distrust.

A loss of bodily integration and the need to "use my mind"

Although scholarship on social death tends to focus on the impact on the physical body, students at Arrendale are overwhelmingly concerned with the state of their minds. The mind, in more ways than the physical body, is where students can exercise autonomy. They feel in control of the ways they can use their minds to grow, learn, and accomplish and they fear what would happen if they lost this ability. This fear of mental decay is linked to concerns about psychological disintegration that manifests as concerns about deterioration and colonization.

Deterioration refers to the physical and mental decline of incarcerated persons over time. It can manifest physically in illness and mentally in perceived loss of intellectual acuity. "Use it or lose it" is a common refrain among students concerned that

if they do not put their minds to active, positive use, they might literally lose their minds or "go crazy."[70] Colonization of the mind, however, is a psychological state where students feel they are losing mental control to prison authoritative powers. A mind becomes colonized in prison when subjects become dependent on institutional forces such that they lose interest in the outside world and begin to think of themselves as "prisoner." Colonization is the normalization and acceptance of living dead. Students fear that long-term exposure to the regimentation and loss of autonomy inherent in the prison environment will impair their capacity to function normally during prison and after release.[71] During our research, one student expressed with concern that "before Theology, I hadn't used my academic brain in over fourteen years … when I get out, I don't want to speak to someone and they know I was in prison … I'm afraid that I have a sign on my forehead stamped 'Felon.'" Students fear that after having been told for years what to do, they will be unable to think for themselves. In his own research, criminology scholar Timothy Flanagan reports that incarcerated persons "hope that the day would never arrive when they would stop questioning the rules and regulations that are perceived as petty."[72] A paramount fear according to Flanagan's sources and the Theology students is that a day will come when they will accept the identification of prisoner without protest and that they will lose themselves and that the threats to their fundamental humanity will prevail, rendering them an object of the prison.

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[70] This reference to "going crazy" also relates to concerns about mental health. Statistics on women in prison show that more than 80 percent of incarcerated women enter prison with some form of mental health diagnosis. Of the students in the Theology program, several have shared stories about their reactions to mental health medication and the prevalence of mental health diagnosis in prison.

[71] Timothy J. Flanagan, "Dealing With Long-Term Confinement: Adaptive Strategies and Perspectives Among Long-Term Prisoners," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 8, no. 2 (June 1981): 219.

[72] Flanagan, *Dealing with Long-Term Confinement,* 215.

In an exchange with Claira and her colleagues during the course of this research, an unexpected conversation ensued about dreams that illustrates the depth of prison colonial concern. "Our dreams are plagued by prison," Claira remarked. Fellow Theology student Ilillana interjected eagerly, "I have a dream where I'm a little kid in kindergarten, but I have to get back for count. Or I'm traveling and there's a time difference and I won't make it back in time for count."[73] The other students in the room affirm this experience. They go on to state how even their early memories are plagued by prison, with Ilillana adding that she "has to remember she wasn't born in prison … It's hard to have a dream that's not prison-related." This conversation belies how prison becomes internalized, even subconsciously. Prison distorts cognitive processing such that even memories become tainted with the stench of prison rule. Claira and Ilillana's suggestion that prison literally distorts dreams and memories is a testament to the impact of its colonizing power.

The idea that social death and dehumanization are necessary elements of punishment is at the heart of prison practice. The New York state penitentiary, in the early nineteenth century, declared the following:

> Convicts were to "receive no letter or intelligence from or concerning their friends, or any information on any subject out of prison." Relatives were not permitted to visit with an inmate and he, in turn, was not allowed to correspond with them. "The prisoner," a Sing-Sing chaplain of this period recalled, "was taught to consider himself dead to all without the prison walls." And the warden himself repeated this analogy when instructing new convicts on their situation. "It is true," he told them in 1826, "that while confined here you can have no

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[73] In the Federal Bureau of Prisons, count refers to the designated times throughout the day when prison officials gather all inmates in their designated locations to count each person manually. Outside of the fences and gates, counts are the next most important security feature as they show prison officials whether all persons are accounted for. Prison residents are often required to return to their dorms or official place of designation (work, school, etc.) and stand in line to be counted. Activity and movement are restricted until count "clears" or all prison residents are accounted for.

intelligence concerning relatives or friends … You are to be literally buried from the world."[74]

Death is the dominant way humans think about remedying crime. In the history of crime, physical death was a leading form of punishment. But the humanitarian shift away from physical death toward the process of social death suggests that human response to crime merely shifted from one form of physical termination to another insidious form of social and psychological assault, one that also threatens the life of those it holds in its grasp. According to the words from the NY penitentiary, prisons were designed to be an experience of death, a death that ostracizes persons from wider social connections and ejects them from the social order.

Social death is a misfortune unlike any other. It seems to violate the very purpose for which the human psyche is designed – to be with others, to have meaningful connection. While the human psyche is designed with elaborate mechanisms that help it obtain and maintain belongingness, the process of social death weakens these mechanisms. Social death among the incarcerated instills a fear of lost relationships and a permanent feeling of non-existence, of never fitting in again outside of prison and of fitting in too well inside. In order to hold onto humanity in the face of social death, Theology students must resist the threats of colonization and deterioration and maintain hope that some version of a good life is possible, even in prison. Yet there is often no vision of flourishing or conception of a good life for a person in prison that is not dictated by the prison system itself.

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[74] David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971), 95.

The lives and stories of students in Theology suggest that to be cut dead is not an inevitable physical death sentence. Though the process of being cut dead is destructive, it does not have to destroy fundamentally. There can be life after being cut down. This is the hopefulness in Ellison's work and the hope for the living-dead who are studying theology in prison. Though social death threatens to distort and diminish, though there are constant reminders of punishment, there are people like the men Ellison writes about and people like Claira who decide to live again.

For Claira and her colleagues, the realization of "still being alive" is the first step toward hopeful living in prison. It is the good news. However, it is a life one must learn to live in the constant presence of death, primarily social death. To be cut dead or to experience the process of social death is the contextual reality of life in imprisonment. It is the context out of which students like Claira both live and engage in theological education.

But people like Claira do have visions of a good life. They have their own visions of flourishing even though death threatens at every turn. Though the mechanisms of social death seek to render a person nonhuman to the wider world and to themselves, those who are living dead historically have found ways to resist the determinism of social death. They learn to live again.

Survival

If social death names the primary goal of prison practice, then survival names the primary goal of Theology students. By survival, I mean a strategy of living that one enacts when life itself or quality of life is threatened. At base definition, survival is the state of continuing to live in spite of a difficult circumstance; when what one considers

fundamental to their living and being is threatened. It is not merely a response to physical threat but to psychological threat as well. Surviving is an act of resistance and includes the many ways that people struggle with and defy the dehumanizing threats of social isolation and mental decay. Survival is often a reactionary stance when a person is constantly responding to a world framed by difficult circumstances. But survival can also be a forward-looking stance where persons emboldened by a hoped-for reality live pragmatically into the future. The student-lifers, perhaps more than others, recognize the importance of choosing survival as a physical and psychological stance. For these lifer students, survival is a protective mode through which they guard their psychosocial needs, but it is also a creative mode in which, through wit and determination, they live in a system not designed for good life. Survival is their process of re-establishing and reclaiming the dignity of humanity.

Darwinian theory suggests that the best chance of survival is to adapt to one's environment. But for these students and others confronted with social death, to adapt to one's environment would be the dissolution of the self, to die a slow internal death. Though the physical body may live, the soul and that which makes a person authentic ceases to exist. To survive death-dealing contexts like prison, the more life-giving strategy is to demand one's humanity and embrace a form of subversive nonconformity. Consider Claira: When she decided that life was still worth living, she employed strategies to give life meaning – strategies I am naming as social death survival skills. Social death survival skills meet fundamental human needs of belonging, meaningful existence, and control. Each of the following strategies reclaims, re-establishes, or re-imagines the social and psychological needs that have been constrained or lost in imprisonment.

Survival Skill #1: Make Friends, Re-establish Social Networks

If social death practices threaten the fundamental human need of belonging, the survival response to this threat is to reestablish social connection. This was the first thing Claira did after she realized that she wanted her life to have greater meaning. But making friends in prison is not without its challenges. Even people in prison have to deconstruct their own internalized myths about incarcerated people. Take Hope, for example.[75] This wiry, salt-and-pepper haired woman confessed in conversation that when she was sentenced to prison, she was so confused. She never believed someone like herself would be in prison because prison was for violent, manipulative, drug-addicted criminals; not someone like her with a job and a family. Hope came to prison distrustful of the people around her. While some of this distrust was warranted, she also came to realize that there were incredibly gifted and intelligent people in her dorm, who worked with her as bee-keepers, and in Theology. As Hope's encounters with roommates, coworkers, and classmates disrupted the stereotypes she held about inmates, she made friends and increased her sense of belonging and her feelings of safety.

In addition to friendship, students re-establish social connections by forming family. Family formation connotes a more intimate connection. In the absence of birth-families, spouses, or significant others, students recreate family structures inside. Older students adopt younger students in a mother-daughter relationship. Students find "wives" and "husbands" and "sisters" and "brothers." They even find children. An older student declared that she never had children outside of prison but inside, she had

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[75] Hope is a student pseudonym chosen for this research. The name is capitalized to distinguish from other uses of the word.

several. Younger students who do not have children before coming to prison and whose prison sentence precludes them from ever having them, find ways of "having children" as well. They befriend students with young children on the outside and become "aunts" and "uncles" from inside. They share pictures and visitations so that outside family members become intermingled in the new creation of networks of belonging inside. Surviving prison requires this art of forming community out of fragmentation.

Many efforts to re-establish social connections are constructive such that they that promote trust, safety, and well-being. But there are ample opportunities for social connections to be destructive. Destructive networks might provide networks of trust and safety, but they do so as a threat to common well-being. Here, I am thinking about the increased gang affiliation in prison. Students in search of belonging and safety may feel drawn to gang affiliation even if they were not part of a gang outside of prison. These gangs provide a wide network of belonging, a sense of purpose, and an oft needed element of security in prison. They are destructive, however, when these relational networks promote harm of others and of one's self. This rationale also applies to the high incidents of domestic abuse in prison. Students in search of belonging and meaning can find themselves in harmful and abusive romantic relationships. Such relationships provide an illusion of belonging and care manifesting in possessive and controlling harm. Forming social networks to regain a sense of belonging is important, but wisdom is needed to know which networks will support life and which networks will eventually feed the death-dealing mechanisms of social death.

Recreated social networks in prison can be sources of good, but they can be fragile and used as a source of punishment and control. "We're actually really good friends – besties – but we don't talk about it. If someone finds out that we're close and

they get mad at one of us, they can report us to an officer, lie about something, and get one of us moved to another dorm or even shipped to another prison. We finally live in the same dorm, I don't want to mess that up, so we only talk this much on Friday's when we're in Theology." This confession given one day after class highlights the fear and protective nature with which students treat their relationships. Relationships in prison are a form of capital and if someone wants to harm another person, harming, disrupting, and destroying relationships become means to do so. In addition to friendship and familial connections, intimate relations form a third type of relational creation. As inmates, students do not have the legal ability to consent to any form of physical, sexual, or intimate act, even with loved ones inside prison. Same-sex relationships are viewed as a violation of prison policy and are punishable, causing some students to keep these relationships secret or become hyper-protective of them.

Relationships are important but fragile, and they require not only people of trust but places and spaces where these relationships can be fostered and supported. Theology operates as one of these spaces. Students take Theology both to find social connection and to reinforce ones already present. For students like Morgen, Theology is the place where her first trusting connections were formed. Morgen was in the second class of Theology students. It was early in her sentence and she was still fuming with anger. She recalls that she acted distant and hard, and that she didn't talk to anyone. She told us that she originally signed up for Theology because the Chaplain, discerning her anger, recommended it. She obliged the Chaplain only as a means of passing time. But Morgen would soon find something unexpected. "I found out that it was like a closeness there between women in the program; we missed seeing each other every week. A dedication formed, and I started to bond with people." Morgen admits that the

bonds she was making with teachers and students in the program were confusing

emotionally. There is a common phrase in the prison – No Personal Dealings. Personal

dealings typically refer to business transactions but can refer to preferential treatment

between an employee and an offender. According to the Georgia Department of

Corrections, a personal dealing is "any unofficial personal transactions, dealings,

relationships or contacts or any unofficial business transactions, dealings, relationships

or contacts with an offender that have not been properly approved in writing by the

appropriate Division Director or Designee."[76] For Morgen, the types of close bonds she

was making within the program seemed wrong. She interpreted personal dealings as any

close relationship—"that's personal dealings, and you're not supposed to do that, it'll get

you in trouble." But Morgen went on to describe that she felt love and compassion from

the program, and she started having compassion for other people. At first, Morgen was

conflicted with her new-found feelings. She did not want to care or to be cared for. But

then the anniversary of Morgen's daughter's death occurred. It was on a Friday and

Morgen was in Theology. She was permitted to stay in class over lunch that day and was

able to talk to Theology volunteers and classmates about what she was feeling: her hurt,

sadness, anger, and confusion. That was a turning point for Morgen. In Theology, she

found a community where she could talk without being judged. The person who was

once angry and distant found a place of love and compassion. Morgen's story is not

uncommon.

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[76] From the Georgia Department of Corrections Standard Operating Procedures, reference number IV014-0001, page 4, effective 12/15/06.

Survival Skill #2: Stay Busy, Resist Deterioration and Decay

Claira's first strategy in reclaiming life was to make friends. Her second strategy was to get busy by going to school and getting a job. Students and criminologists alike contend that one of the most effective ways to endure prison is to stay active. This desire to stay busy is a direct way of resisting the feared decay and deterioration of stagnancy and idleness. There are many forms of busyness in prison. In a positive sense, there are constructive forms of busyness such as work details, educational programs such as GED, Charter School, or college-level classes, or any of the various groups offered by the chaplaincy and counseling departments: Bible Study, choir, or behavioral improvement programs. There are also destructive forms of busyness such as participating in gang-related provocations or violence. While these sorts of activities give a person something to do in prison, according to students these activities tear a person down and they disrupt any sense of peacefulness that might be possible for the community. These sorts of destructive activities, while seemingly motivational, eventually lead to the same death, deterioration, and decay as does mere idleness. Those surviving the mechanisms of social death must discern between these constructive and destructive forms of busyness and must choose the types of busyness that will improve quality of life and give life greater meaning or at least not deter one from it. Education and work were considered constructive forms of busyness to Claira and her colleagues.

For student-lifers in particular, choosing constructive forms of busyness is an action in using time for one's benefit and not solely for one's punishment. Time can be viewed as an enemy in prison, as something that stands between a student and their physical freedom. For those with life sentences, time is a constant reminder of what they have lost and may never have again. Yet I have heard many times the phrase, "Use time,

don't let time use you." Choosing constructive forms of staying busy is one way that students exert agency over time. It is how they reframe time from being a reminder of punishment to be a source of potential development and a site of possibility. If merely serving time in a prison operating with social death practices leads to deterioration and decay, then staying busy is one way that students exert power over time. It is their response to the latent stagnancy of serving prison time.

Busyness has both extrinsic and intrinsic value. For students seeking parole, staying busy is a way of showing the parole board how they used their time well in prison. Students hope the parole board will judge their busyness as a sign of changed behavior and of their commitment to be a fruitful and contributing member of the community upon release. These are external goods of staying busy in prison. But there are also goods internal to the practice itself that may never have an impact on one's parole hearing or sentence length. Student-lifers, for instance, emphasize the importance of staying busy as a way of survival beyond an end goal of physical freedom. Staying busy by going to school, for example, is a form of self-improvement and allows students to create, produce, grow, and change. These actions contribute to a process of becoming a better self. When actions are used to improve the self, time is being used well. Staying busy contributes to one's life even if the systems and structures of the prison are set against it.

Busyness can become distorted in life as it can in prison. Psychologists and sociologists lament human obsession with busyness as an avoidance strategy that keeps people from dealing with the deeper conditions of life. While this may be true, in a context of constant threat, avoidance may be the only healthy strategy available. In the absence of community and resources to help assist someone with processing the hurt

and pain of their condition, staying busy is a protective measure to sustain life. Staying busy is a way of warding off the psychosocial damage of the weightiness of long prison sentences. In this respect, for long-time students staying busy is an effective strategy for surviving in prison.

Despite the effectiveness, staying busy is not easily embraced by students with long or life sentences. Most long-time inmates are restricted from getting meaningful work and sometimes from participating in educational programming when space is limited. In a conversation with Ilillana, she was adamant that the reason for the lack of opportunity for student-lifers is directly related to their perceived worth by society. "They think you're gonna die in here anyway, why waste it on you." The prison views constructive methods of staying busy —education, work, and other programs—as goods that are valued only as much as the person receiving them is able to contribute to wider social networks of worth. To deny student-lifers educational and vocational options suggests that education and work are goods that would be wasted on people who will die in prison, people who will not be able to use those goods in service to or to contribute to society. This is a fundamentally instrumental notion of education and work and one that does not consider the inner life or intrinsic needs of the student.

Beneath the desire to stay busy is the hope that if busyness can redeem time, then perhaps it can also redeem living in prison and have the potential to give life meaning. "When you have something to do, it gives you a reason to get up in the morning. The days go faster," one student remarked. Prison does not have enough opportunities for constructive forms of busyness, and statistics show that while over 90 percent of prisons have educational and chaplaincy programs, on average only two percent of inmates are

able to participate. This leaves the majority of people in prison with few means to improve their lives.

The desire for busyness to give life meaning is a deeply held belief in American culture. Americans have historically found meaning in their work and conversely also work to find meaning. This is also true in carceral spaces. Even in the midst of prison, students still yearn for activities that help frame life. Traditional methods of finding meaning in work, education, and spiritual practices hold true in prison. Through work especially, students begin to identify themselves with their ability to be creative and productive. Through education, they begin to see themselves as growing. In addition to work and education, the pursuit of spiritual and self-help practices also shapes busyness. Practices such as attending Bible Studies, parenting classes, or Thinking for Change[77] contribute to a sense of personal growth and improvement.

Staying busy and maintaining trusting, healthy social networks in prison are two core survival skills needed to resist the psychosocial effects of imprisonment. Particularly for student-lifers, these skills require a third ability. They require a sort of wisdom and wit necessary to navigate the prison culture and use resources not meant for life, for survival. Students call this third strategy finagling.

Survival Skill #3: Finagle, Make a Way Out of No Way

On the day that Claira shared her story with the group, she asserted that "oftentimes we have to work around the edges to get ourselves into programs, to be

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[77] Thinking for a Change 4.0 (T4C) is an integrated cognitive behavioral change program authored by Jack Bush, Ph.D., Barry Glick, Ph.D., and Juliana Taymans, Ph.D., under a cooperative agreement with the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). T4C incorporates research from cognitive restructuring theory, social skills development, and the learning and use of problem-solving skills. See "Thinking for a Change." *National Institute of Corrections*, nicic.gov/thinking-for-a-change.

productive, to get an education. It's cliché but I'll say it, we've done it by our own bootstraps to get details. Most lifers get their way into a trade—we finagle. There is no help from the system, we learn to overcome obstacles through persistence."

Finagle. The word became popular as an Americanism in the 1920s and connotes meanings such as: obtaining, arranging, achieving something by indirect, sometimes deceitful methods, to use devious or dishonest measures to achieve one's ends. The word is often associated with the word cheat. An early definition of "finagle" meant "to cheat at cards" and "to manage by trickery or sharp practice."[78] Despite its overwhelmingly negative connotations, student-lifers unanimously name the skill of finagling as key to surviving in prison. It is how students exert control in seemingly uncontrollable situations. Also referred to as circumnavigating or conning the system, students suggest that the only way to survive a death-dealing system is to reinterpret the system to make it work on your behalf. Sometimes called playing the system, finagling is the cornerstone on which all other strategies rest.

As I understand Claira, to finagle is to manipulate present conditions in order to engineer new or alternative, better options. It is how students insist on their humanity and resist the colonizing threat of a constant lack of agency. Claira recounted, exasperatingly, that the prison does not care about the humanity and dignity of the inmates. Caring about human dignity is something students have to do for themselves as a way of resisting the dehumanization inherent in prison practice. To assert one's humanity by using the system against itself is the definition of finagling; it is a sort of manipulation.

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[78] Definitions of finagle used here are derived from various uses according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2019).

There exists in society a myth that criminals are all master-manipulators who are not to be trusted. As a volunteer in prison, I was warned multiple times to be careful of the manipulative behavior of inmates. I was told that criminals were skilled at and would manipulate my emotions to get me to break rules on their behalf. The prison philosophy on manipulation paints it broadly as a vice, a deformity of character in inmates. To manipulate, accordingly, is to participate in criminal behavior. Vilifying manipulation is another example of how the system criminalizes survival behavior. What Claira and her colleagues suggest instead is that there are some practices of manipulation that are not focused on crime but on surviving. Thus, when manipulation is oriented toward survival, it is not a vice but a virtue. As such, finagling is a core resistance strategy focused on securing fundamental human needs.

There are many ways to finagle or work the system for one's benefit. One dominant tactic used by students is the subversive tactic of embracing stereotypes. As Claira describes it, "Sometimes, you have to throw a tantrum." Another student named Arabella added that she cries, and Harold said that he threatens to "start acting like he used to, to start doing stupid stuff, acting out to get attention." By finagling through emotions, students engender a pragmatic use of stereotypes and fear to get the desired end result. Let me expound.

Two dominant myths about criminals are that criminals are violent and that women criminals in particular are emotionally erratic. Harold, who identifies and presents himself as male, told us how he threatens to "act like I used to" when he needs something. Others' fear of Harold as a violent inmate and their desire to appease his violence will often get Harold what he needs. Harold admits that he seldom has any intention of actually being violent but, as Harold affirmed, it is sometimes the only way

to get things done. Arabella takes a different approach. She feeds off the stereotype of the uncontrollable, emotional woman: she cries. "Officers hate tears, they hate when women cry." Arabella admits that she has used crying as a strategy to accomplish goals as far ranging as being assigned to a new, safer dorm to getting much needed toilet paper. Both Harold and Arabella use the fear of themselves against the system. Arabella added that she realized that her use of emotions to manipulate the system would not work as well if she were a man. She recognized and used the advantage of gendered myths to meet her fundamental human needs. Students use crying, violence, and manipulation to meet their needs, the basic needs of adequate clothing or hot water and the higher order needs related to a meaningful existence found through work and education. Harold and Arabella suggest that in order to survive, one must finagle and learn how to embody and employ stereotypes meant to dehumanize to demand humanity instead.

The survival disposition of finagling has deep religious and cultural roots in the image of a trickster. In mythology, and in the study of folklore and religion, a trickster is a character in a story, a god, goddess, spirit, man, woman, or anthropomorphic animal which exhibits a great degree of intellect or secret knowledge and uses it to play tricks or otherwise disobey normal rules and conventional behavior. A trickster is one who is able to change the course of events by taking definitive action using whatever power is available to him or her via trickery. Moreover, a trickster has low or a relative lower social status, prohibiting gain or advancement through means available to others so that

a trickster has to employ wit and cunning to achieve their desired ends.[79] The trickster

embodies a disposition of wisdom that requires the ability to evaluate rules and

procedures of institutions through a hermeneutic of suspicion for a better quality of life.

If a trickster finagles the system by exhibiting a degree of intellect about the system,

then the ability to analyze motivations, systems, and structures are crucial for the

wisdom of a trickster. A trickster intellect requires the skills of social analysis and quick

interpretation. Identifying finagling with a goddess attribute of the trickster attempts to

redefine it as a witty, intellectually skillful strategy of survival.

Social connection, constructive forms of mental development, and the social

analysis of finagling are three core survival skills sought and cultivated by students in

the Theology program, skills needed to survive the social death mechanisms of prison. A

Theology program committed to student survival will encourage students to assess these

strategies critically, and to deconstruct and reconstruct them so that they promote

healthy relationships, growth, and achievement. A Theology program that seeks human

well-being must create spaces for human relationships to be formed, intellectual and

interior life to be sparked, and it must cultivate the trickster qualities of critical thinking

and social analysis. As I stated in the introduction, the Theology program has become

something beyond its intended goal of forming students for professional service in

prison. While I will expound this in more detail in chapter five, I contend here that the

Theology program has been formed and shaped by student survival skills such that the

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[79] Chi Wai Chan, "The Ultimate Trickster in the Story of Tamar from a Feminist Perspective," *Feminist Theology* 24, no. 1 (September 2015): 93. For more on the trickster, see Essex, 1999; Jackson, 2002; Niditch, 1987.

program nurtures and cultivates the very skills needed to survive prison and even, miraculously, to contribute to some notion of a good life there.

A Good Life

The gospel message according to Theology students is this: that some version of a good life is possible in prison. It sounds incongruous for anyone to live a good life in an environment of social death. Yet history is replete with stories of people who successfully struggle to preserve family, faith, community ties, and human dignity, despite domination and subjugation. The pursuit and experience of a good life occurs not because of the process of social death but in spite of it. Believing that a good life is possible and deserved is the orienting vision that sustains their survival practices, that emboldens students with the strength to resist the constant reminders of shame and diminution in value.

Over the course of this research, I asked different students to imagine someone taking a picture of their good life and framing and titling it. I then asked that they draw these pictures. After several minutes of silence except for the sound of colored pencils scratching crisp, white paper, they would share their images. Three themes emerged. The first theme was family. Being with people they loved was the dominant hope as almost every drawing included family and significant others. The second theme was possibility. These images expressed the desires for growth and transformation. The third theme was freedom. For these students, these themes of relationships, possibility, and freedom are their trinitarian hopes of a good life.

Relationships: "Surrounded by my Family"

Scott went first. Holding her 8.5 x 11 paper in her hand, she rotated the image from right to left so we could see the title written in all caps at the top of the page: FAMILY <u>VACATIONS</u>. It was an image of a beach, the sand taking up the bottom third of the page, the water drawn in various shades of blue scallops across the middle. There were six people floating in the ocean. Scott, her mother, father, and siblings. All six people were smiling. As she explained her picture, Scott reminisced: "Vacations growing up were fun. We were able to be children and my parents enjoyed being parents. We always went to the beach and our parents showed us how to ride a rollercoaster. We didn't know that we actually had it pretty good as a black middle-class family." The joy with which Scott recounted her past memory of family would be shared several times over the course of these discussions. Time and again students shared images with titles such as Happiness, Importance, Unconditional Love, and Memories—each image telling a deeper story of the important relationships that constituted a good life. These pictures included parents, grandparents, siblings, and in a few instances, spouses. For many, these pictures included their children. One student shared an image that included twelve people: "It's me and my husband in the center surrounded by my son and his kids, my daughter and her kids – having family picnics." Another student described her image with a caveat, "I don't think there would be room for me to include everyone, there are a lot of people in the family picture. Grandma is in here, cooking, and there are people playing in the water." A good life is undoubtedly a life that includes a variety of relationships of deep importance.

A picture drawn by Morgen serves as a visual representation of the degree to which family and intergenerational relationships are important here (see figure 2).

Calling the image "My Happy Place," Morgen excitedly described the scene, ending with a morsel of regret. "I'm eating dinner with my whole entire family; even my son is home (he is currently in basic training to go into the Navy). I took things like this for granted, I was always working." Like so many students, family relationships are central to a good life for Morgen. But the loss of being with her own family made it difficult for Morgen to make connections when she arrived in prison.

When Morgen first came to prison, she self-isolated, barely speaking for the first several years. She was angry. Morgen came to prison with a thirty-year life sentence. After years of being despondent, she enrolled in Theology. "I found out that it was like a closeness there ... I started to bond with people ... I felt love and compassion from the program and I just started having compassion for people." When Morgen started to feel the closeness of relationships in Theology, she opened herself up to deeper relationships in prison. Morgen now considers it her personal work to reach out to others, to help people live better lives in prison.

The recurring images of family and important relationships reinforces the need for social connectedness in the pursuit of a good life. For students in prison, relationships with outside loved ones are maintained as much as possible. New relationships are also created inside prison, in places like a Theology program.

Figure 2 – An image of a good life, family
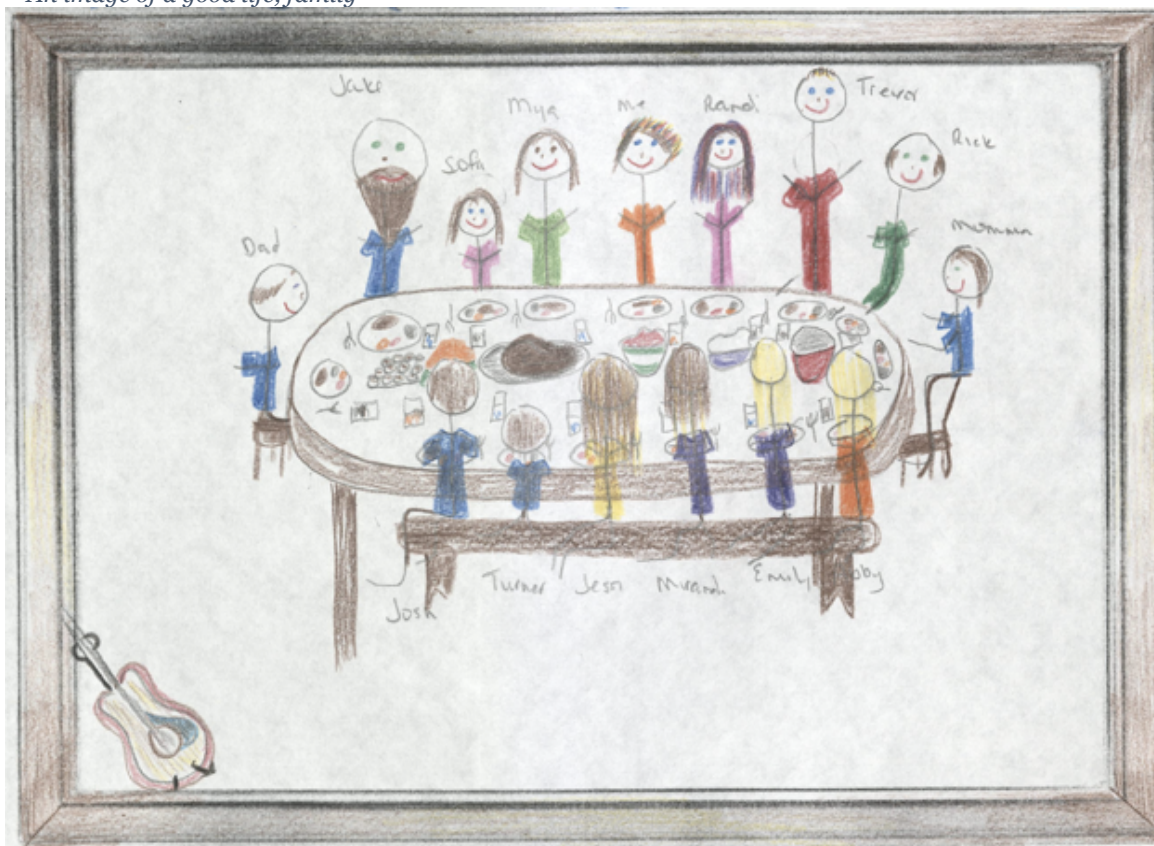
Possibility: "Let's Go"

On another day and in another room, another image was shared that captures our second generative theme of possibility. After a brief moment of hesitation, Ilillana presented an image of a rollercoaster and titled it "Let's Go" (see figure 3). "At first, I couldn't think of a specific time of a good life for me—it's hard to think of a perfect life, I feel like sometimes I was born here, like I've been here my whole life. But this is an ideal. I drew this because to me a perfect life is always moving." For this student, a good life is not stagnant. It is dynamic. Another student echoed this desire saying, "I always want to be blooming; [in] a constitutional state of growing." I hold this statement together with an image from another student of seeds transformed into a flower. Students yearn for the possibility to grow, develop, and change. It is a hope that life

continues beyond the present condition, that there are possibilities beyond prison and beyond the past. Whether moving with unpredictable ups and downs as with the rollercoaster, or blooming like a flower, students declare that a good life is active, energetic, and moving.

Figure 3 – Ilillana's image of a good life
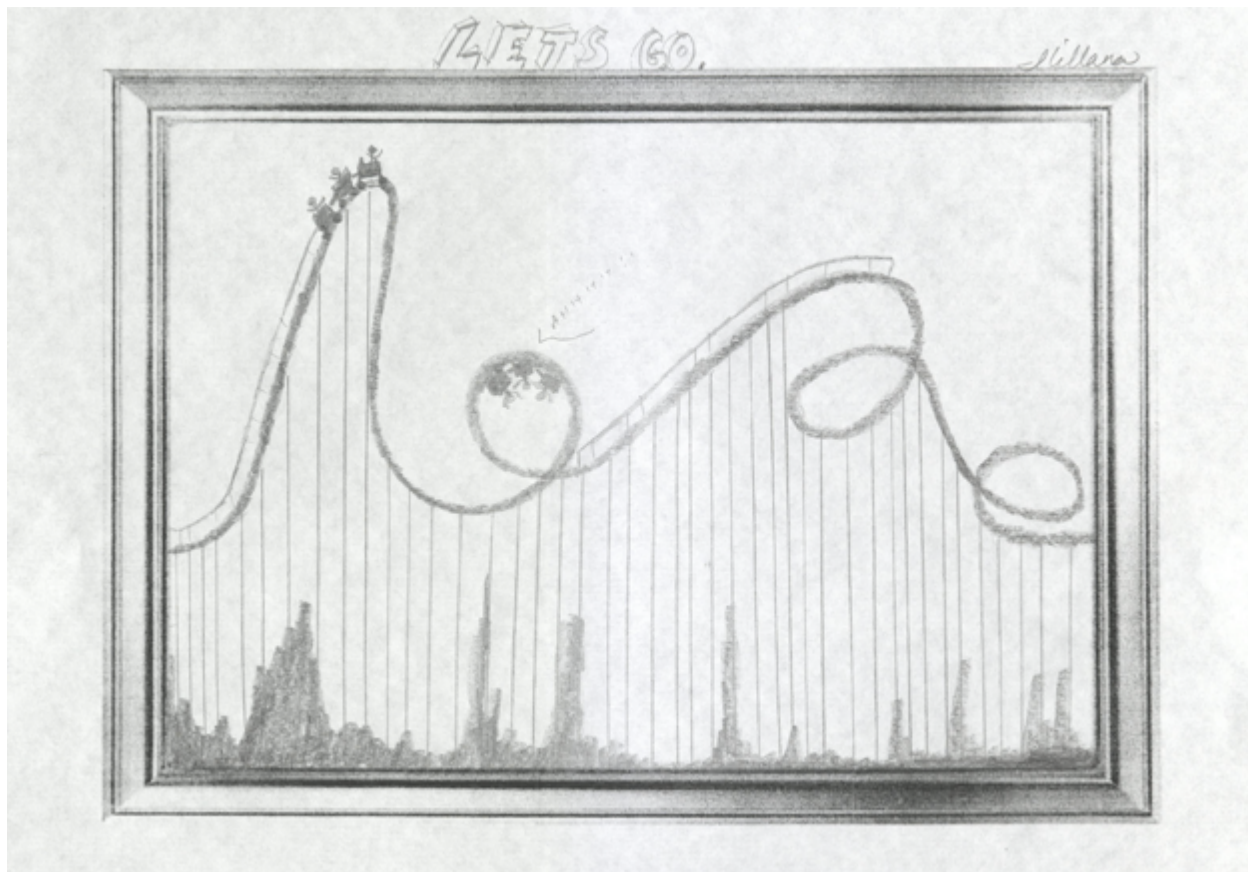
A good life in prison must be generative. With knowledge of the underlying fears of mental decay and deterioration, the images of the rollercoaster and blooming flower serve as a visual depiction of students' desire for continued mobility and advancement. A long-term student declared emphatically that "a good life is a life where anything is possible, where a child believes they could grow up to be president." To live a good life in prison requires the audacity to believe in possibilities beyond present circumstances and

the courage to conjecture about a world other than the one of profound constraint in which they live.

A student by the name of Moon entered the criminal justice system at the age of fifteen. Too young to have experienced higher education or a career, Moon has had limited experiences of being responsible for her own life. Orphaned in Honduras, Moon was raised in foster homes in the United States before committing a crime that resulted in a sentence of life in prison. Moon found the audacity to believe in the possibility of a future through her educational experiences in prison. She received her GED while in prison and for the first time believed that she could achieve something. She then enrolled in Theology and now has dreams of one day getting a college degree. For Moon and many others, the need to believe in possibilities for growth and achievement are related to the need to (re)define their social identities apart from the identity of criminal. It is a project of defining the self as a human being capable of change and accomplishments.

Freedom: "Free From Everything"

On the same afternoon that Ilillana drew her rollercoaster, Harold found my question about a good life perplexing. After a minute, Harold said aloud, *"*I'm stuck. I can't think of anything.*"* Harold had had a difficult life before coming to prison suggesting more than once that prison saved his life. "My mom was glad I went to prison because she no longer had to worry where I was." Like a growing number of students in this women's prison, Harold does not identity as female. Slouched down in his chair, he scrunched his face in thought. He stared off into the distance, like a person waiting for someone to arrive but wondering if they would. Harold found the task of imaging a good

life difficult. Nevertheless, he drew his hope. Harold labeled his picture "Free From Everything" and divided the page into two sections (see figure 4). On the left side of the page the word prison is written in all caps. The word free is written eighteen times in various colors on this side of the page. In the corner is a smiling figure holding a green balloon, waiting at the gate to leave. On the other side of the page, however, there are no bars. It is an image of two suns shining from each top corner. There is a rainbow in the middle of the page and a figure standing at the bottom, smiling. In the white space between the rainbow and the sun are several words: freedom in mind, freedom in peace, freedom within self, freedom to love, God freedom. Harold declared that "the left is my life right now until I parole, the right is to come, but also something I am cultivating currently, it's what I am trying to reach, what I am working on."

Figure 4 – Harold's image of a good life

Freedom for Harold is simultaneously already and not yet, something that is real on both sides of his page, in the present and in the future. "I'm free within myself. There's nothing in prison that can make me feel not free anymore. I set my mind on freedom, take my mind on the other side." Harold suggests that while physical freedom is a feature of good living, a person can live into forms of freedom even in the absence of physical liberation.

The idea that freedom is not synonymous with physical liberation came up frequently throughout my conversations. A lively conversation ensued one afternoon when a student asserted that people "outside" are not necessarily free. Another student added that even before coming to prison, she felt trapped. "I'm a recovering addict and my whole family is recovering addicts, so I was trapped at home as well." Others suggested that "inmates" are often freer than the officers. When probed to explain, students suggested that many officers are miserable. "They hate their jobs, suffer from all sorts of personal issues, and feel trapped in their lives." Several students testified that they have used their time "inside" to be self-reflective and figure out what they want from their life. They have a greater sense of what true joy and happiness is like and they can experience that joy even in prison. They understand freedom as a psychological state, a state of the mind, predominantly because this is the realm where students feel they have the most control. They cannot control their physical freedom, but they can and do maintain a sense of agency over their psychological and emotional freedom.

Not every student is willing to adopt such an optimistic portrayal of freedom in prison. One of the few students in Theology who has a life sentence without the possibility of parole argues differently. For Aminah, a good life is not possible in prison because freedom is not possible. Like all students, Aminah agrees that a good life

requires freedom. But for Aminah, there is no freedom without physical liberation that

allows for people to be physically present with their loved ones. While Aminah can

create connections of meaningful relationships inside, there are only a few residents of

the prison who will not eventually be paroled and leave. Aminah is plagued with the

reality that no matter how much effort she puts into creating a good life, it will always be

disrupted. Another student describes it this way:

> I can re-create a version of [a good life] here, in a way, and most people try to. You adopt friends and family and build relationships, celebrate and mark time together in ways that seem normal. And with food and hygiene stuff you can improvise, can create nice meals—if you work at it, you can get comfortable, some things can be controlled. But there's something looming, it's generic, a false version of reality, and it's that this is just an imitation of what real life is. Sometimes it's fulfilling, and sometimes it's just a hollow, depressing outline of a longing that can never be fulfilled.

A good life may be possible in prison, but it is always at best incomplete. While a

good life can and does include relationships of love and support, possibilities for growth,

and experienced freedom, these qualities of life are constantly threatened. What is

created in prison is a simulacrum of what it might be to live fully or to live in

wholeness.[80] While Aminah might reject the notion that a good life is possible, her

actions suggest that a life worth living might be. Aminah is one of the most respected

persons in Theology and in the prison. She has been an encourager to teacher and

student alike and has been a source of continuity, encouragement, and support for many

of her peers. Aminah herself is a central factor in creating an environment for others to

live a good life in prison.

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[80] To live fully is what theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz (1993) contends is the hope of humanity, particularly among those facing struggle and oppression. True liberation and salvation include the ability to live fully as human beings in the world. Ethicist Emilie Townes (2006) suggests that it is in the relational matrix where wholeness can be found.

It is important to hold onto the tension between Harold's image of a good life and Aminah's insistence that it is not possible in prison. Harold's image propels us to continue to take little steps toward liberation even as we face social death. Aminah's image compels us to take steps to dismantle the process of social death itself. For both students, the belief in a good life sustains and emboldens their survival practices. For Harold, it provides him with a vision to work toward, to actualize in the here and now. For Aminah, it provides her with a constant reminder of what is wrong with incarceration and gives her the requisite discomfort to refuse colonization.

The created life in prison is not to be confused with delusional optimism. It is pragmatic, rooted in a realism that recognizes the limits of its practice. Students want to feel safe, be happy, have relationships of trust, and to believe that possibilities exist for their lives. While the prison constantly disrupts these efforts and tries to strip them of their significance, they are still good. Yet students press forward, recognizing the limits of their hopes but pursuing a good life in spite of them. They let the hopes fuel their practices of survival and engage theological education in their pursuit of this good life. A good life in prison is something that is created out of survival in the constant presence of social death threats. It is a decision to make life matter in a place that treats you as if your life does not matter. Whatever good theological study seeks must come from the understanding of the interplay between death, survival, and life in prison.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with Claira's story as a condensed and powerful testimonial about the journey from social death to learning to live a good life in prison. When Claira was sentenced to prison, she literally felt like she had died. She was shredded, no longer

a full or complete version of herself, but a shell of something she did not yet understand. She felt as if time had stopped and if all growth had ceased, both hers and creation itself. It was when Claira realized that she was still living and when she made a conscious decision to live and not die that she began to construct a life for herself. Claira remade her life by forming trusting relationships and engaging in educational and vocational activities that gave her a sense of purpose and meaning. Those activities allowed Claira to survive the constraint assaults of degradation from the social death practices of the prison.

Through the work of psychologists and social scientists Kipling Williams and Orlando Patterson, I showed how Claira's experience of incarceration followed the patterns of social death. Social death describes the state and process of being perpetually excluded; in existence and non-existence simultaneously. Social death distorts and attempts to destroy fundamental qualities of humanhood: belonging, identity, and a sense of purpose. I named the act of living in the midst of social death as living dead to further signify the condition of being alive but treated as if you are dead. Theology students reminded us that social death need not be a physical death sentence. There can be life after social death.

Through stories from Claira and her colleagues, I showed how students survive social death practices through survival skills of making friends, staying busy, and finagling. Each skill is linked to the reclamation of human beingness and dignity threatened by social death: relationships and belonging, identity and meaning, and a sense of purpose and agency. Finally, in the exploration of student ideas about a good life, I explored the orienting vision that supports students' efforts to survive social death.

Through their stories, students name relationships, possibilities, and freedom as the

cornerstones of a good life and the basis of their survival practices.

      I introduced the concept of social death in this chapter first to describe students'

experiences of incarceration and to root them in a larger conceptual framework for

understanding the depth of destruction occurring in carceral spaces. The second reason

for naming social death explicitly is to point to the fundamental concern to which

theological education must respond and to name social death as the pedagogical context

in which the Theology program operates. From here we can explore how the Theology

program functions: how students engage it to resist social death practices, survive

incarceration, and point toward a good life in prison. We will do this more fully in

chapters five and six. First, however, I want to explore how we ended up with a prison

system rooted in social death that treats certain living human beings as if they are

already dead. Chapters three and four take a historical turn and explore how myths

about women (chapter 3) shaped prison practices around punishment and reformation

(chapter 4).

CHAPTER THREE

Fallen Women: Myths that Shape Female Carceral Practices

I spent too much time worried about what to wear. Definitely not the engagement ring that was still too loose around my finger. Simple pearl stud earrings would suffice. Black pants. Grey top. Modest and muted. You do not want to be flashy or parade your aesthetic choices before these women. This is what I told myself, my inner voice sounding more like the volunteer trainer from the department of corrections. Do not tempt them with jewelry or incite them with your appearance, I recall the person saying as they warned me of the prospect of inappropriate attraction from the inmates. "Remember, they are in prison for a reason," the trainer said with utmost seriousness, "they will try to manipulate you." So, I tried to make myself as plain as possible. This is how I spent the night preparing for my first day teaching theology at a women's prison in Georgia.

The next morning, as I stood at the front of a barren class waiting for students to arrive, I fidgeted. I was not sure if I should sit or stand. How should I greet them? What would they be like? Will I be safe in this room alone? I decided that a smile would have to suffice as an initial greeting. Simple, modest, muted—I stood and waited. The room was tense, but I was the only one in it. White cinder block walls surrounded me. The wall to my right was lined with windows, the glass clouded with age. I opened the white blinds covering the windows to let in what little light that I could. The room faced a small cement courtyard. Several feet away was another brick wall. On the wall to my left were two doors, both locked automatically when closed. If I closed the doors from the

inside, no one could get in without a key. In a few minutes, I would be in here with twenty-five incarcerated students. The seriousness of the place created knots in my stomach. This was prison.

Before I saw them, I heard their laughter. Amidst chatter and intermittent greetings, it sounded like joy. And then they began to enter. Bright purples, blues, and pinks of various depths painted eyes, nails, and lips. Intricate braids, twists, and plaits adorned the kinky, coily, straight, and curly. Buzz cuts and fades from dusty blonde to deep brunette. And there was jewelry – rings and earrings. They came into the class full of laughter and color and life. And the knots in my stomach twisted, but this time out of my own shame.

I realized how much I feared these women whom I had never met. I was ashamed that though I was educated in and committed to social justice, somewhere deep down I too believed the same images of the incarcerated person that have captured public imagination. From the local news to cinematic portrayals, I have been breathing in toxic messages about the incarcerated, and as much as I would want to deny it, my own body betrayed me as I tensed at the students' arrival. I became ashamed because I believed the stereotypes—that these women were criminals, thieves, master-manipulators, lewd and sexually aggressive, con artists. I also feared that I believed many were merely victims, poorly educated women in need of dedicated volunteers who would come and offer care and relief. In spite of all that I knew about the inequities of the US criminal justice system and in spite all of my Christian love and charity, I believed the stereotypes and the myths. I wondered what other messages had sunk so deeply into me and how these messages and myths, if not reflected upon and not challenged, would affect the practice of teaching and learning in this prison classroom.

I begin this chapter with a story about me because myths are more our problem than the person about whom we construct the myths. Myths say something about what we believe, what our deep desires are, and what we want out of the world. My early and deep feelings of fear and distrust toward the students in prison suggested to me that there was something wrong with what I believed, what I desired, and what I wanted out of the world. Wanting to explore the depths of the myths I inherited, this chapter takes a methodological shift and examines the history of women's prisons in America. While I do not expect history to fully explain what I was feeling, I do believe that historical analysis will shed light on the historical antecedents that surround contemporary discourse around criminalized women.

The following two chapters work together not to construct a comprehensive history of women's prisons as much as they work to create a condensed portrait of the competing, dichotomous claims about women that have and continue to shape prison social death practices. In this chapter, I investigate the central theological and cultural myths that form the myth of an incarcerated woman and shape public attitude and performance toward justifying her eventual social death. Chief among the myths are the deeply religious and socially potent archetypes of the true and fallen woman. By making explicit how women were understood *Christianly* and culturally in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, I hope to make obvious the connections between our religious imagination concerning incarcerated women and our carceral and pedagogical practices related to possibilities for her redemption. Moreover, I bring into view the web of complex moral and pedagogical challenges in which we still find ourselves entangled today. This chapter is part historical narrative, an attempt to expose problematic aspects of current prison practice by means of the historical genetics of its presuppositions. By

its conclusion, we begin to see how the social death of criminalized women becomes normalized and justified in US prison practice.

Dichotomous Narratives

The first independent women's prison in the US did not emerge until the middles of the nineteenth century. Before this time, the small number of convicted women were packed into male institutions, usually occupying but a single room in the local penitentiary. Public records testify that these women were viewed with "a special degree of aversion and despair."[81] They were called unredeemable; outside the reach of reformation; beyond the grasp of hope. This negative portrayal of criminalized women was rooted in two dominant nineteenth-century archetypes about women: the true woman and her antithesis, the fallen woman. With lineage as old as scripture, these archetypes influence discourse about and practices concerning women: both the innocent and the criminal. In nineteenth century America, the dominant middle-class culture upheld the stereotypical assumptions that white women were either virtuous angels or wayward temptresses, ruined creatures with little chance for redemption. What this created was a rigid "angel or demon" dichotomy, Madonna or whore. This myth is pervasive and powerful because it serves as the scaffolding upon which the myth of the female criminal is constructed. As myths go, we will see how our beliefs about criminal women are directly linked to how we respond to them; who we understand a criminal woman to be shapes who we think she can become and how we go about helping her get there.

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[81] Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930*, Women and Culture Series (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 17.

True Womanhood

American historian Barbara Welter analyzed popular nineteenth-century women's magazines. In her research, she stumbled across a term that magazine writers used as frequently "as writers on religion used the term God."[82] The phrase Welter noticed again and again was "true womanhood." According to Welter, the term was used to communicate the revered status of women as bearers of American purity and religious sobriety. Welter writes: "If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic."[83] The true woman was America's moral compass; America's moral barometer. In her analysis, Welter identifies four cardinal virtues by which a true woman judges herself and is judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society: the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[84] These virtues are foundational in understanding the myth of a true woman and subsequently also of her antithesis.

First, concerning piety. In an 1830 publication, Welter observes how the author features religion or piety as essential to a woman's virtue. Listed first in a series of necessary virtues, piety is defined as including "faith, devotion, resignation, and that love and gratitude to God, which stimulates us to inquire his will, and perform it."[85]

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[82] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (July 1, 1966): 152.

[83] Welter, "T*he Cult of True Womanhood,"* 152. Here the author alludes to the racialized aspect of the true and fallen woman archetypes. I will address this in greater detail later in this chapter.

[84] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (July 1, 1966): 152.

[85] *The Young Lady's Book: A Manual of Elegant Recreations, Exercises, and Pursuits* (London: Vizetelly, Branston, and Co., 1829), 25.

Piety, accordingly, is related to one's submission, affection, kindness, and forbearance. It is a virtue enacted toward God. Subsequently, a woman's refusal to live a pious life is viewed as a refusal to live into the will of God for her life – a sin. Though piety requires an inner disposition toward God, it manifests itself in one's outer life. Therefore, the life of a pious individual can be judged by spectators. A true woman could be identified through actions that reflect an inner orientation to God. For women in particular, this included the public display of consequent virtues of purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

Welter writes that purity is "as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as un-natural and unfeminine."[86] By purity, the prevailing value system of nineteenth-century America most often meant sexual purity. Referred to as her virtue or her treasure, a woman's sexual purity was elevated with mythic powers. Welter recounts a segment from a women's magazine article entitled "Woman the Creature of God and the Manufacturer of Society" in which purity is described as woman's "greatest gift and chief means of discharging her duty to save the world: Purity is the highest beauty—the true pole-star which is to guide humanity aright in its long, varied, and perilous voyage."[87] Though sex and sexuality are considered private, almost taboo matters, a woman's sexuality takes on very public and political significance in the concept of true womanhood. A woman's sexual purity is the means by which she justifies herself as valuable to the moral fate of the United States. It is how she situates herself in the vocation of ensuring American exceptionalism. It is related to piety in that it is her

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[86] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 154.

[87] Welter, "*The Cult of True Womanhood,*" 157.

natural, divinely ordered state of being. However, it is distinct as a virtue for the weight

that nineteenth-century America places on a woman's chastity in her youth, and

modesty in her married life. The maintenance of a woman's purity is her duty not only

to God but to society. It is where the myth of true womanhood situates a woman's social

and political value.

The third virtue of true womanhood is submissiveness or obedience. The guide

book for young women has this to say about submission and obedience:

> Obedience is so much demanded in the female character, that many
> persons have conceived it was the one virtue called for in woman, as it
> must be deemed by all to be such in a child … It is, however, certain, that
> in whatever situation of life a woman is placed, from her cradle to her
> grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and
> humility of mind, are required from her; and the most highly-gifted cannot
> quit the path thus pointed out by habit, nature, and religion, without
> injury to her own character. [88]

This segment of the guidebook characterizes obedience as essential to a woman's

character. To act without it is a defilement of her moral constitution. Obedience

is an action (pliability of temper) as much as it is a disposition of thought

(humility of mind). It is a virtue that is essential to a woman's being from

childhood through adulthood. The definition of a true woman allows for no

conception of a life that is not obedient and submissive to authority. A woman as

an individuated self does not possess authority over her own life. As a child, she is

under the authority of adults, as an adult woman, she is under the authority of

the men or caregivers in her life. This is essential to the true woman myth – both

her actions and her thoughts are to be obedient to and submissive to authority.

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[88] *The Young Lady's Book*, 28.

When this does not occur, her lack of obedience is understood as a deficiency in character and duty. To elucidate this point, the guide book states the following:

> There are, however, gay and buoyant spirits, haughty and self-willed minds, even among the softer sex, that are not otherwise ill-disposed, who feel obedience a difficult task, and are ready to question wisdom, or analyze the rights, of "all in authority over them." To such, I would urge this virtue as a religious duty...[89]

If obedience and submission are biologically engendered categories, then a woman who fails to exhibit these virtues is biologically defective. Disobedient or non-submissive behaviors are thereby unnatural and unfeminine. The journal highlights two types of women's disobedience that are evident of defective character: one is questioning wisdom and the other is analyzing the rights of those with authority over them.[90] The virtues of submission and obedience uphold the captivity of a woman's analytical mind to authority. Neither a woman's actions nor her thoughts are to challenge the perspective or rights of those in power over her. Instead, we understand in the final virtue that her actions and thoughts are to focus on her role as home-maker.

The fourth virtue, domesticity, is among the virtues most prized by the women's magazines. Taking care of the home and keeping it pure is a woman's greatest and most noble vocation. It is her highest purpose and her governing telos for being. In her home, a woman finds safety and the true location of her greatest work: the care and salvation of her husband and children. Reading these virtues with the benefit of history, we can deduce that the myth of true womanhood needed a domain to situate the myth of a

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[89] *The Young Lady's Book*, 28.

[90] These virtues are synonymous with a trickster intellect, critical thinking, and social analysis, yet are deemed unnatural and defiant by the standards of Victorian true womanhood.

woman's place of power. Taking care of the home became the realm in which a woman's agency and mind could function without threat of moral corruption and without thwarting the divine order of the world. According to historian Sherri Broder, "true women did not participate in the labor force but devoted themselves instead to cultivating a moral environment in which to nurture children. In theory, market activity threatened women's morality; exposure to the vicissitudes of wage-work threatened the definition of women as selfless moral agents rather than calculating economic ones."[91] True womanhood became synonymous with the middle class.

The true woman archetype described by Welter illuminates a mythic reality that shaped women's perceptions and practices. I use the term myth as the literary scholar Nina Auerbach defines it as "a shaping principle, not only of fictions, but of lives as well."[92] Auerbach suggests that the oft forgotten myth does indeed shape human stories; that fiction shapes biography. Though the myth of a true woman was more a cultural fantasy than it was descriptive of the majority of women, as a cultural myth, it gave shape in Auerbach's words, to "the lives that are history's substance."[93] A cultural myth thrives in large part because it lives below the formulated surface of its age. Though rarely do such myths crystallize into explicit gospel or precept, the true woman myth did in many ways. It was public, pervasive, and persuasive, used in sermons and magazines, newspaper reports, and the fictional novel. A true woman was the nineteenth-century ideal and was promoted by all such media.

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[91] Sherri Broder, *Tramps, Unfit Mothers, and Neglected Children Negotiating the Family in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 25.

[92] Nina Auerbach, "The Rise of the Fallen Woman," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 1 (1980): 3.

[93] Auerbach, *The Rise of the Fallen Woman*, 3.

We can see in the virtues of piety and purity a framework out of which nineteenth-century America might understand the role of religion in the lives of women. Religion served to maintain a myth of a woman as mild in temper and humble in action. It provided the blueprint for who and how a woman should be and the practices and resources to help her maintain her chastity and devotion both to God and to those in power over her. Religion reinforced hierarchical power structures with myths of divine creation. It also made any challenges to said power structure a challenge to God's self.

It is in the virtue of submission/obedience that we begin to see most clearly the tension between the myth of true womanhood and the role of education. There is little room for an image of a self-willed, critical, educated mind in the myth of a true woman. The author of the *Young Lady's Book* writes that "mental improvement should always be made conducive to moral advancement: to render a young woman wise and good, to prepare her mind for the duties and trials of life, is the great purpose of education. Accomplishments … must always be considered as secondary objects, when compared with those virtues which form the character and influence the power of woman in society."[94] Education, however it was to be understood, must serve the goals of piety, purity, and submission and all of this in relation to the final virtue, domesticity. The debate over women's education posed the question of whether a "finished" education detracted from the practice of housewifely arts. According to Welter, this proved to be a case of semantics, for a true woman's education was never "finished" until she was instructed in the gentle science of homemaking.[95] Even female seminaries were quick to

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[94] *The Young Lady's Book*, 23.

[95] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 166.

defend themselves against any suspicion of interfering with the role which God had

assigned to women. They hoped to enlarge and deepen that role, but not to change its

setting. At the Young Ladies' Seminary and Collegiate Institute in Monroe City,

Michigan, the catalogue states that while few of its graduates would be likely "to fill the

learned professions," they were called to other scenes of "usefulness and honor"; the

average woman is to be "the presiding genius of love" in the home, where she is to "give

a correct and elevated literary taste to her children, and to assume that influential

station that she ought to possess as the companion of an educated man."[96] A woman's

academic instruction was not to interfere with her role as "emperor of the home" or

challenge her relation to authority. Whatever education a woman received was subject

to her identity as a true woman.

If a woman does not exhibit the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and

domesticity, a woman is no woman at all, according to Welter's analysis, but a member

of "some lower order."[97] Welter records that a woman who fails to live up to true

womanhood was a "fallen angel, unworthy of the celestial company of her sex."[98] As a

fallen angel, a fallen woman is placed into the same category as the satan, the archetypal

fallen angel. As satanic and demonic, a fallen woman carries the curse of sin in her

identity. No longer is she by nature devoted to God; instead, she takes on a position with

the demonic, as adversary of God and adversary of society. Because no one ever talks of

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[96] In "The Cult of Womanhood." p. 168, Welter quotes from *The Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of the Young Ladies' Seminary and Collegiate Institute* (Monroe City, 1855), pp. 18, 19.

[97] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 154.

[98] Welter, "*The Cult of True Womanhood,*" 154.

redeeming demons, only of casting them out, punishment becomes the only adequate response to her presence. Social death becomes her end. The fallen women of the nineteenth-century American imagination are the very women who fill its carceral spaces of jails and prisons. One way to understand the pervasive social desire to punish these criminal women is to consider how criminal women are understood *Christianly* and culturally in nineteenth-century America. They are not the true women of Welter's analysis. These are women fallen from grace, ruined women who are less than who they are divinely created and ordained to be.

Fallenness in Nineteenth-Century Protestant Thought

Theological Foundations

The concept of fallenness is religious in origin. The theological milieu of the United States during Farnham's experiment, particularly in the Northeast, was heavily influenced by reformed, pietistic theological perspectives. In Augustinian theology, the concept of fallenness derives from the act of original sin. It is the sin of Adam and Eve's deliberate disobedience of God's commands. Adam is guilty of a weakness of will, tempted to sin by the fully-agential, self-willed or easily duped, naïve woman. The sin is total, corrupting the very core of humanity and there is no remedy of human means. It is only rectified by divine grace. Protestant theology stresses the importance of the will in acts of sin and emphasizes that no amount of repentance enables us to transcend our fallen state. It is only by a divine intervention of grace that we are redeemed.

A theology of justification or salvation by grace is how reformed theology understands the remedy for sin. According to Augustine, justification is progressive and an act of God alone. However, humans participate in the process of justification through

our knowledge of human depravity as communicated in Scripture. It is only in the knowledge of our own utter worthlessness as made possible through Scripture that we can, by grace, turn to God and find true life. Knowledge of our depravity functions as a part of human transformation, but the remedy for our fallen nature is found solely in God.[99] What emerges in public life is the idea that the realization of our fallen and sinful state will lead us to shame. Recognition of our guilt should not leave us in the misery of our own sin, but turn us to God in humility. In religious justifications of prison, punishment serves the goal of bringing a sinner to the realization of her shame, guilt, and misery. Religious instruction was the primary means by which persons were made aware of their sinful state so that they might be transformed. When properly provoked to turn to God, penitent criminals would, in theory, embrace a counter-life of piety and purity.

In ways similar to Calvinist pietism, the revival movements of the nineteenth century stressed this perfectionist theology that held out the idea of individual and social salvation.[100] However, the new movements put greater emphasis on individual action as a response to conversion. Once aware of one's utter worthlessness, converts were instructed to turn to a life of service to God in gratitude. The preached word and the reading of scripture were central to this realization. As such, the word of God and

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[99] Proponents of Calvinism suggest that knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are mutually connected. According to Calvin, without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God (*Institutes* 1.1, 35). Moreover, in becoming aware of our "poverty" and "miserable ruin," we expose our human lack and insufficiency (1.1, 36). As such, knowledge of self, i.e. of our own "ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity … depravity and corruption" prompts us to seek that which is good, to seek the fullness, abundance, and purity of God (1.1, 36).

[100] Freedman (1981) attributes the growth of benevolent reform movements of the mid-nineteenth century to the religious revivals and changing theological impulses brought about by the Second Great Awakening. See *Their Sister's Keepers*, chapter 2.

the laws set forth in it served an overall purpose of modeling for humans a life of purity. Used pedagogically, Scripture shows the depth of our depravity and its inescapability, and this leads us into despair. By accusing us, the law prompts us to seek grace. The teachings of Christianity thereby act as a bridle on human evil inclinations, a sort of tutor leading the unregenerate to Christ.[101] When used in the formation of inner character, the teachings of Christianity not only change the inner being of a believer (purity, piety) but also urge believers to do good works.

The Second Great Awakening marked an important shift in the understanding of this dynamic, and in American religious life more broadly. Many early American religious groups in the Calvinist tradition had emphasized the deep depravity of human beings and believed they could only be saved through the grace of God. The new evangelical movement, however, placed greater emphasis on humans' ability to change their situation for the better. By stressing that individuals could assert their free will in choosing to be saved and by suggesting that salvation was open to all human beings, the Second Great Awakening embraced a more optimistic view of the human condition.[102] The repeated and varied revivals of these several decades helped make the United States a much more deeply Protestant nation than it had been before.

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[101] These ideas reflect Calvin's teaching in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on how God uses the law. The first function is to show God's righteousness that humans may see their own imperfections and sinfulness (2.7.6), the second function is as a deterrent for evil that "by the fear of punishment" civil order might be secured (2.7.10), and the third function is to urge believers "on in well-doing" (2.7.12-13).

[102] "Religious Transformation and the Second Great Awakening." *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, www.ushistory.org/us/22c.asp.

Cultural Analysis

Like other religious terms (i.e. redemption), fallenness is rearticulated in secular and scientific paradigms that contain a depth of meaning socially and culturally apart from or in addition to its religious meaning. Culturally, a fallen woman is a fluid term designating "prostitutes, unmarried women who engage in sexual relations with men, victims of seduction, adulteresses, as well as variously delinquent lower-class women."[103] More than a religious term, negative views of fallen women were deeply entrenched in literary and popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Victorian culture. Though the Victorian era emerged as a European phenomenon, American Victorianism was an offshoot of this period and occurred in the United States, chiefly in heavily populated regions in New England and the Deep South. The fallen woman was a central figure in what scholar Nina Auerbach calls the Victorian cultural imagination. In this imaginary, there are three cherished Victorian institutions: the family, the patriarchal state, and God the Father. The role of the woman was to serve the maintenance of this system, to be the care-giver and educator of the family, to be submissive to male authority, and to live out her nature as one religiously devoted to God. The Victorian cultural imagination promulgated the dominant myth that the true woman was one who maintained these cherished institutions and her antithesis was one who, either by intent or neglect, threatened it. As such, a fallen woman is a woman who does not live up to or embody cultural and religious expectations of womanhood. Instead of honoring and revering the institution of family, patriarchy, and God the Father, the mythic fallen woman is believed to view them as constraints.

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[103] Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 2.

Auerbach suggests that the most powerful, if least acknowledged, creation of the Victorian cultural imagination was the "explosively mobile, magic woman, who breaks the boundaries of family within which her society restricts her."[104] She is mobile because she finds ways out of her constraints either through agential action (for which she must be punished) or a weakness of will (from which she must be rescued). She is magic because she casts a sort of spell on men and other women, causing moral decline wherever she goes.

Literary scholar Amanda Anderson, who studies depictions of fallenness in Victorian culture, calls it "a wide umbrella term" that traverses class lines and signifies an assortment of culturally forbidden behaviors and degraded conditions. "Fallen" was a fluid term not only given to women who were arrested, convicted, or imprisoned for "offenses against chastity, decency, or public order,"[105] but used also to designate "prostitutes, unmarried women who engaged in sexual relations with men, victims of seduction, adulteresses, as well as variously delinquent lower-class women."[106] Though any class of woman can "fall," we will later see that public belief in a woman's rehabilitative ability falls more decisively within class lines (as well as race and sexual orientation). Anderson suggests, however, that despite various depictions of fallenness in Victorian culture, there are two central features of a fallen woman's depiction that remain consistent: attenuated autonomy and fractured identity.[107]

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[104] Nina Auerbach, "The Rise of the Fallen Woman," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 1 (1980): 1.

[105] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 14.

[106] Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, 2.

[107] Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces,* 2.

The first, attenuated autonomy, is weakened or diminished sense of agency. Autonomy is commonly understood as a presupposition to moral agency and is constitutive of virtues such as responsibility, dignity, and self-esteem. In philosophical writings, autonomy is closely linked to the concept of a person as a moral being. Attenuated autonomy is thereby autonomy that falls short of that which is expected of a "normal" subject's decision-making ability. The weakened or diminished ability has implications for one's ability to be responsible, dignified, or have a healthy sense of self-esteem. Though a fallen woman may exhibit agency, according to the Victorian imaginary, it is deformed and thus not trustworthy. A person with attenuated autonomy is not trusted to make good decisions for themselves. They are viewed as somewhat childlike in their ability to reason. Any effort to reform a fallen woman, if reform is believed possible, would require attention to her moral character.

In addition, Anderson argues that fractured identity is a mainstay in depictions of fallen women in nineteenth-century culture. While Anderson does not state whether she is alluding to fractured identity in the way psychologists use the term, it is helpful to mention that fractured identity is a theory social scientists use to make sense of the impact of trauma on a person's identity development.[108] It suggests a social event, or series of events, during one's childhood or adolescence that results in a fracturing of the personality. The term 'fracture' refers to a small breakage of the personality which is often not visible to the outside world. Fragmentation often happens in adolescent years. Social scientists have for a long time theorized that deviants in society are a production

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[108] One example is Stephen T. Holmes, Richard Tewksbury, and Ronald M. Holmes, "Fractured Identity Syndrome: A New Theory of Serial Murder," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, no. Vol. 15 No. 3 (August 1999): 262–272. Here, Holmes et al., explore the history of social identity and fractured identity as it relates to criminal justice scholarship by focusing particularly on serial murder.

of some kind of traumatization in life. For a few, these traumatic events are a precursor to a life of crime and delinquency and mental health issues. Interestingly, many of the depictions of fallen women allude to instances of trauma or chronic social pressure as a form of trauma.

Cultural depictions of fallen women in the early nineteenth century characterized them as "a permanent subcategory, no longer redeemable through repentance or rejoining."[109] Shunned by women and men alike, there is no earthly redemption for a fallen woman. Using Auerbach's analysis, this is connected to the "one constant element in the myth of the fallen woman, reaching back to the Old Testament … the absolute transforming power of the fall."[110] The *fall*, according to Victorian myth, destroys a woman leaving little to no room for reform, redemption, or correction. Moreover, Auerbach observes that generally "the fallen woman must die at the end of her story."[111] The literary imagination leaves little to no room for a redeemed fallen woman. The only remedy for a fallen woman's plight is her removal from the story. In social terms, removal from society (social death by imprisonment) serves the same goal.

In addition to the literary world, the world of social science in the nineteenth century is likewise helpful in understanding the cultural context of fallenness. English philosopher John Stuart Mill is often called upon to present various perspectives of Victorian culture. Early in the nineteenth century, Mill turned his attention to the moral

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[109] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 14.

[110] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 160.

[111] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 161.

sciences, applying social scientific methods to human behavior in an effort to understand whether human behavior is indeed predictable and thus alterable.

There are two dominant schools of thought on the topic in nineteenth-century science. The materialist school of thought espoused a radical conception of character formation whereby human character was primarily the product of external environments.[112] One influential thinker of this type, Robert Owen, writes in his 1812 *Essays on the Formation of Human Character* that a person's character is "chiefly created by his predecessors; that they give him, or may give him, his ideas and habits, which are the powers that govern and direct his conduct. Man, therefore, never did, nor is it possible he ever can, form his own character."[113] For materialists who follow Owen's line of thought, a person has no control over their character formation and thus cannot be praised or blamed for their behavior or situation in life. In fact, Owen writes that "the true and sole origin of evil" is the belief that one can form one's own character.[114] Because character is formed by one's environment, the way to ensure right character in an individual is to place them in the proper environmental conditions – physical, moral, and social.[115]

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[112] Anderson summarizes the scope of the materialist influence on social scientific thought concerning moral character in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*. There, she records that materialists included the utilitarians, the followers of the doctrine of necessity, the Owenites, the positivists: all those who conceived of character as externally determined and were eager to apply scientific methods to the study of human character and were optimistic about reform. In contrast, the idealists included Coleridge, Carlyle, James Martineau, and all those generally under the influence of German romanticism and idealism who subscribed to a notion of character as self-created. They found materialists' scientific methods morally repugnant.

[113] Robert Owen, *Essays on the Formation of the Human Character* (London: WStrange, 1834), 18.

[114] Owen, *Essays*, 18.

[115] For Owen in particular, those who act in roles of governing (e.g. national leaders, educators, etc.) should serve as "omnipotent predecessors who mold and shape the characters of those they govern."[115] Though Owen does not write in detail about how adult education might function in this

Mill, like many social scientists of the time, wrestled with whether or not human morality is hopelessly determined or can be reformed, externally determined or self-created. This tension between free-will and determinism appeared throughout Victorian literature. Mill attempted to hold on to this tension by presenting a model that acknowledged the contextual impact of culture (formed, made) while suggesting that the individual plays a role in regulating and cultivating his or her own character. Mill placed the accent on self-cultivation or "the internal culture of the individual."[116] By doing so, he sought to balance character as formed (externally) yet also as re-formable (by internal motivation). For Mill, character was formed through moral agency, which is the human capacity to "modify our character *if we wish.*"[117] If we bring Mill's concept of moral agency to the discussion of fallenness, then a woman's inability to take ownership of her character is a sign of her insufficient desire to change.

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process, he does make detailed accounts of the role of youth education. Owen writes that children ought to be taught to read, write, and reason well. But they must also be taught to understand. In addition, girls are to be taught to "sew, cut out and make up useful family garments; and, after acquiring sufficient knowledge of these, they are to attend in rotation in the public kitchen and eating rooms, to learn to prepare wholesome food in economical manner, and to keep a house neat and well arranged."[115] Owen's materialist reforms promote the type of paternalistic projects of reform that would characterize treatment of fallen women.

Another prominent view of moral character formation came from the idealists who understood character as self-created. Reform schools provide a good example of an idealist education. Reform schools typically seek to train students that need further instruction in character development, creating or strengthening morals and values in each of the students, all while teaching the basic core curriculum that is taught in a typical school. In idealism, the aim of education is to discover and develop each individual's abilities and full moral excellence in order to serve society. The curricular emphasis is subject matter of the mind: literature, history, philosophy, and religion. Teaching methods focus on handling ideas through lecture, discussion, and Socratic dialogue (a method of teaching that uses questioning to help students discover and clarify knowledge). Introspection, intuition, insight, and whole-part logic are used to bring to consciousness the forms or concepts which are latent in the mind. Character is developed through imitating examples and heroes, but character is developed primarily through the choice and agency of the individual.

[116] Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, 32.

[117] Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, 33.

Though neither Mill nor his scientific counterparts used the term fallenness in their discourse about moral character, we can see how the category was significant in nineteenth-century thought. Human character becomes a concern for both social and individual responsibility. While society is culpable for deformed character on one hand, an individual is also culpable on the other. According to Anderson, Victorian rhetoric of fallenness thereby serves as "a charged cultural site for some of the more acute anxieties about agency, character, and reform."[118] In discourse about fallenness, nineteenth-century thought wrestles with the moral world of women. We are confronted with the dichotomous narratives of femininity: true vs fallen; the dichotomous narratives of causes of crime: weakness of character or deficiency of will; and the dichotomous narrative of remedy: punish or reform. These dichotomous narratives serve as the structural framework out of which nineteenth-century America constructs one of its myths of the criminal woman.

Constructing Myths of The Criminal Woman

The myths of the true and fallen woman create the narrative landscape out of which the early criminal woman is imagined. Early female carceral institutions are formed and shaped by these myths, both in how they interpret them and how they choose to respond to them. A woman sentenced for crime is depicted as a fallen woman and the cause of her criminal identity wavers between a deficiency of character and a weakness of will and agential defiance. She is either depraved beyond repair, deserving only of punishment, or a victim of weakness, reformable through practices that enhance the virtues of piety and submission. What follows is a narrative construction of the

[118] Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces,* 65.

incarcerated woman presented as a myth. It is a pseudo-fictional caricature of the type of woman that American society sought to incarcerate.

The Fallen Woman as Criminal

> *She is known only by what she is not. She is not pure, not pious, not submissive, not obedient, not domestic. She is not true but a false depiction of what a woman should be. She does not live into her divinely ordered role as moral guide of her home. She is not the Madonna. She is not an angel. Sometimes, she is weak, like a child, unable to make good decisions for herself. Sometimes, she is self-willed, unnaturally defiant, like an evil one. Some say she can change, can be reformed by the efforts of religious and moral instruction. Others say that she is corrupt to the core, worthy of nothing more than punishment. She is fallen. She is criminal.*

This brief narrative explores the imaginative world of nineteenth century thought. It relies on the stark, contrasting comparisons between true womanhood and her fallen counterpart. The overwhelming popularity of the true woman creates an environment in which her antithesis is hated. Any virtue that does promote true womanhood is devalued and criminalized.

A central element in the myth of the incarcerated woman is the cause of her criminality. Here, two sets of relationships must be explored. The first is the relationship between human character and human will. Religious and cultural understandings of fallenness identify the cause of fallenness in different ways. Theological precedents suggest that a person's fallen nature results from a deficiency of the will, a weakness that is most fully made known in Scripture. Deficiency of the will is a matter of one's desire and requires learning to subjugate one's desires (will) to the will of God. Social science understands fallenness as a moral problem, a deficiency of mental qualities that form one's character. Culturally, morality can be shaped through punishment and efforts of reform such as education and religious instruction. The myth

of the incarcerated woman is a myth that holds unresolved the tension between character and will, morality and desire.

The second set of relationships that must be explored is that between weakness and agency. The myth of the fallen woman contributes to the myth of the incarcerated woman the notion of attenuated agency. Here, an incarcerated woman can be seen as lacking the mental or moral capacity to make right decisions. Her mental and moral weakness is likened to that of a child, in need of the oversight and control of someone placed in power over her. Alternatively, some incarcerated women are seen as fully agential in their crime, self-willed even. They are viewed as unnaturally defiant to authority. In such cases, a woman's agency is reason for her punishment. Likewise, she needs oversight and control, but not like a child, like that of a true criminal. Social reformers differ in how they understand the role that women play in their own crime. The tension between a criminal woman as weak or self-willed is not resolved but vacillates between acts of infantilizing women (the weak) or punishing them more harshly than men (self-willed).

Finally, the myth of the incarcerated woman depicted above suggests that there is an idea of reformation present. Rooted in the division between the true and fallen, the only solution for a fallen woman is to adopt the pro-social behaviors of true womanhood. Religion and education serve this primary goal when they foster virtues of piety, purity, obedience, and domesticity. There remains, however, the idea that punishment also serves a role in this reformation. Primarily for the strong-willed, punishment might be enrolled to break the ill-structured will. The myth also suggests that any criminal woman who does not live into the virtues of true womanhood is not

reformed and indeed is perhaps beyond hope and outside the realm of redemption. She becomes a prime candidate for exclusion, rejection, and social death.

The Dark Lady: Dark Bodies, Darker Myths

The myth of the fallen woman might suggest that all criminal women were viewed similarly. A state of fallenness suggests that there was a higher place from which the subject fell, that there was once a state of goodness that had been ruined. There are women, however, who were never given the benefit of an elevated beginning, of a natural state of goodness from which to become corrupted. While the myth of the fallen woman exposes gendered and class-based inequities in the treatment of women, it does not adequately addressed the racial dynamics operative in early prison formation. In nineteenth-century America, black women were not viewed as fallen because they were never elevated to a state from which to fall. They were already viewed socially as low and debased.

Black women's experiences of crime and punishment in the US differed from that of their white counterparts. As women's carceral institutions formed, black women were not their primary inmates. Before the Civil War, there were very few black women in prisons in the North or the South. In the North, this was because numerically there were few free black women in the overall population. In the South, black people were controlled under the penal practices of slavery; penal practices we might recall from chapter two that are already steeped in social death practices. After the Civil War, increasing numbers of black women would come under the jurisdiction of law enforcement both in the North and South. Scholar Nicole Rafter reminds us that "who goes to prison and for how long are more a function of shifting concepts of justice [and]

varying attitudes toward the possibility of rehabilitation."[119] A person's rehabilitative possibility dictates what type of institution she will inhabit and what types of religious and educational practices she will experience. If she is young and white, someone in whom prison reformers and missionaries can see a semblance of themselves, she is sentenced to a reformatory or avoids prison altogether. But if she is a woman in whom the reformers cannot see even a glimpse of themselves, let alone an image of God, she inhabits alternative spaces in the history of women's incarceration. This is particularly the case if she is black. Rafter suggests that differential treatment *of* women in the criminal justice system initially stems from the common belief that "a female criminal [i]s far worse than any male, depraved beyond redemption."[120] However, differential treatment *among* women stems from a myth that goes beyond that of the division between true and fallen women.

In nineteenth-century culture, there is another narrative that captures the imagination—that of the dark lady. The fair and dark lady archetypes are deeply embedded in Western literature, art, and culture and provide another set of myths upon which a racialized female criminality is constructed. According to this narrative motif, the dark lady is the worst kind of woman. She is deficient in character by design rather than by circumstance. The fair lady archetype maps neatly onto the true woman of American myth. She is usually white, rosy-skinned with blonde hair and blue eyes, and is an adolescent or virginal figure, while the dark lady usually appears as darker-skinned, more fuller-figured brunette. The fair lady is angelic; the dark lady is a

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[119] Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons, 1800-1935* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1985), 107.

[120] Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 12–13.

temptress. The dark lady is dangerous, strong, erotic, and evil, a direct contrast to the obedient, chaste, domestic and often child-like fair lady. By nature, the dark lady lacks the virtues of true womanhood and is not deemed worthy or capable of developing them.

In a post-civil war America, the myth of the dark lady becomes racialized and easily becomes synonymous with dark bodies. Black, female bodies come to represent the total darkness and depravity of the fallen woman archetype. Historian of southern carceral practice, Talitha LeFlouria, argues that social ideologies operative in the US distinguish black women as "criminal by genetic design – a true monster prone to commit barbaric acts of cruelty."[121] Cultural tropes of the Sapphire and Jezebel further perpetuate how black women are villainized as hyper-sexualized and particular immoral or even amoral. Black women were not seen as ruined women who were once virtuous and tainted with sin, but as essentially deficient from the beginning.

In addition, and in contradiction, black women are hyper-masculinized. Social scientists of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America argued that black women are less feminine and thus more masculine than white women. Many white reformers regarded black women as "too much like men to be fully adapted to the domestic model that form[s] the foundation of the women's reformatory."[122] Rafter points out that black women were disadvantaged because of race and gain[ed] no benefit from being

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[121] Talitha L. LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill [North Carolina]: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 45.

[122] Ashley G. Blackburn, Shannon K. Fowler, and Joycelyn M. Pollock, eds., *Prisons: Today and Tomorrow* (Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2014), 28.

female.[123] The myth of the black woman as naturally criminal resulted in a penal philosophy fixed on punishment. Subsequently, social death was from the beginning, the goal of penal practices for black women.

The myth of the black woman criminal perpetuates an image of black women as either perennial prostitute or masculinized, outraged criminal. Like the fallen woman of Victorian mythology, she is promiscuous and leads good white men astray. Yet she is by nature different from her white female counterparts. She is *more* prone to violence and *more* sexually destructive. She lacks even the imprint of morality needed for reform. The needs and concerns of black women convicted of crime become secondary to those of white women.

> Social scientists studying the history of female incarceration write:
>
> The prototypical reformatory inmate would be a young white girl of working-class background; her crime might entail little more than sexual autonomy, though this would be viewed as the earmark of prostitution. Black girls, even those convicted of minor offenses, would be routinely shunted off to custodial prisons, including the brutal custodial plantation prisons of the South, on the racist grounds that they were not as morally developed as white girls. … reformatories were meant for novices in crime whose characters were presumed ripe for redemption. The object in both cases was to save those deemed valuable enough to warrant an investment of resources, not to reclaim hardened and essentially worthless criminals.[124]

In short, white reformers deemed black women convicted of crime to be hardened and worthless criminals and therefore insufficiently valuable to warrant the resources of redemption. The operative nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative explaining the condition of black women refuses to accept socioeconomic or even psychological duress

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[123] Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 143.

[124] Blackburn, Fowler, and Pollock, *Prisons: Today and Tomorrow*, 28.

as credible reasons for their behaviors. The narrative cast black female criminality as "an irredeemable race trait"[125] and black female bodies as by nature irredeemable, as lacking even the potential of reform.

Shifting Images

The religious revivals and the changing social landscape of nineteenth-century America resulted in a growing number of Christian women who began to see the salvation of fallen women as their vocation—their act of Christian service. In the nineteenth century, the social stigma around criminal women was strong enough to create a perceivable barrier between so-called pure, white women and their fallen counterparts. Belief in fallen women's total depravity sustained a barrier that kept Christian women from initially advocating on her behalf. Of this tension, Estelle Freedman writes:

> Pure women had to surmount an ideological barrier before they reached out to female prisoners. The line that separated the pure woman from the fallen demarcated privilege on one side and degradation on the other. By not crossing that line, pure women could retain their class privilege at the expense of their outcast fallen sisters. However, these two groups of women remained separated only if pure women agreed that the boundary dividing the pure and the fallen, a class division, was stronger than the sexual division between women and men.[126]

The unpassable line between pure and fallen women remained intact until the middle of the century when two events occurred. One event was the growing numbers of women in carceral control and the other event was the emergence among "pure women" of a sense of vocational calling. This sense of vocational calling was largely spurred by

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[125] LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 45.

[126] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 20–21.

the evangelical revivals following the Second Great Awakening. With their message of

optimism and perfectionism, newly converted women understood their Christian

vocation to be the elimination of sin from themselves and society. The result was a faith

that promoted social reforms of various kinds including prison reform. At the core of the

evangelical Protestantism that dominated during the Second Great Awakening was a

belief in the efficacy of human action in achieving both conversion and salvation. The

impact was substantial. Women who experienced revivals became "agents for the

moralization of their families and friends, empowered with a new-found sense of moral

authority … Religion inculcated a belief in progress, in the abilities of social reforms to

perfect society. It generated a special role for American women as the arbiters of

morality and leaders in social reform projects."[127] Increasing numbers of women began

to see themselves as divinely-ordained leaders of social change.

A late century historical example that sheds light on the pervasiveness of this

mission comes from an 1896 sermon delivered by Methodist revivalist Sam Jones. One

March afternoon in Georgia, over eight thousand women and girls pressed into a

tabernacle to hear him, one of the south's most famous preachers. These women—

Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists—came to hear a special sermon for the women

of Atlanta. Jones offered this message to the women:

> There are no less than fifteen hundred women that are ruined in this city. Every
> ruined woman is not only a wreck to herself, but is a menace to every home in
> this city, and no true Christian woman can hold her peace when work like this is

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[127] Historian Graham Warder contends that many preachers of the Second Great Awakening rejected much of Calvinist theology but instead asserted that individuals had the power to change their lives to assure their own salvation. This empowered women with the moral authority to advocate for social transformation beyond their homes. See "Religion In Nineteenth-Century America." Social Welfare History Project, 7 Apr. 2017, socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/religious/religion-nineteenth-century-america/. Estelle Freedman makes a similar point in chapter 2 of *Their Sister's Keepers* (1981).

going on. A lost woman is the hardest of all beings to bring back to purity and virtue, and when she is brought back, it is a difficult job to keep her true. But there is no more Christlike work tha[n] this. Of all the blighted characters none are more literally drowned in sin than the lost women of this city, and there is… no more delicate [a] task than that of rescuing them.[128]

Jones' message is not unique to southern women, but it does convey a ubiquitous message evident in other parts of the United States where so-called true women were galvanized around efforts to rescue fallen women. Jones' sermon highlights a pervasive public belief about women who fail to exhibit the virtues of true womanhood – piety, purity, obedience, and domesticity; these women are not just a threat to themselves, they are a contaminant to the city and a destructive force to society. Though their condition seemed bleak, Jones suggests that reformation, albeit difficult to secure, is indeed possible. Not only is it possible, but it is a responsibility and a Christian duty, specifically for true Christian women. Jones presents the rescue of fallen women, or women who lack the virtues of true women, as some of the most Christlike work that a woman can endure. Jones' sermon contributes to the moral superiority of true womanhood and deepens the myth that reformation for fallen women necessarily includes inculcation in the virtue of purity.

According to historian Talitha LeFlouria's research, the South had its own women reformers bent on inculcating middle-class values in working-class women that paralleled the motivations of Northern reform women. Black women reformers such as Helen Pitts Douglass and Mary Church Terrell advocated for prison reform often without the support of white reformers, leaving middle-class black women to forge a

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[128] From an Atlanta newspaper recounting the sermons of a local minister, Sam Jones, "Story of Rescue from Many Lips, " The Atlanta Constitution (1881–1945), Mar 26, 1896, 5.

separate crusade for racial justice. Educated and higher-class black women were aggrieved at the malignant discourse surrounding black femininity. They rejected social images of black women as naturally erotic, depraved, and criminal and worked to improve the image of black womanhood. The National Association of Colored Women (NACW), led by Mary Church Terrell and Olivia Davidson, engineered a campaign in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to "reclaim the lowly, illiterate, and even the vicious" members of their race.[129]

Jones' sermon in 1896 and the mission of the NACW reverberate with a conviction that characterizes American carceral culture: fallen women needed true women to save them. The dichotomy between the true and fallen, the innocent and the criminal had deepened. There were those in need of salvation and those who could provide it. A missionary zeal, a perceived calling perhaps, inspired and motivated willing women to consider the criminals in their midst and to try to rescue them. Fallen women became the focus of women's organizations like the Christian Temperance Union and the Salvation Army. Women's mission societies and public organizations formed to rescue and protect these women, to bring them to a life of respectable womanhood.

The religious designation of women as a public, moral authority found resonance in a post-WWI world. WWI increased the number of women occupying roles in the public sphere. Traditional institutions such as the church, family, and community were no longer the only places women could exist. Increasing numbers of women found themselves living outside of the confines of these designated spaces, creating a social presence that was counter to Victorian standards of the home as the lone "woman's

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[129] LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 52.

place." For the first time, women not only experienced moral authority but also social authority.

Simultaneously and perhaps consequently, female morality became more rigidly enforced. As the moral reform swept America, religiously motivated women advocated for the virtues of true womanhood to be enforced, specifically through the law. Non-conforming women were arrested and jailed for social offenses such as vagary, promiscuity, and drunkenness. Nonconformity to middle-class values of respectability and domesticity became adjudicated as criminal offenses. The rise in the social reform efforts of women and the moral policing of womanhood are linked. Women who enjoyed increased access to the public sphere in the war years, increased education in women's universities, and increased religious involvement in the wake of the Protestant revivalist movements, wanted to protect and advance the freedom of women to participate in the moral and political project of society. Religiously motivated women saw the immoral condition of non-conforming women as a condition for leadership. True women were not only religiously empowered but also socially empowered to lead the reform of fallen women. True women saw an increase in leadership in the public sphere at the expense of (and on the back of) her fallen sister. The idea and conditions of fallen women became the focal point both for the church and for social reformers – as instrumental means to an end. For the religiously motivated, fallen women became the subject of her missionary zeal; for the social reformer, a subject of supervision and a means for social leadership.

The fallen woman became a primary focus of concern for true women. The latter's efforts to reform, rescue, and redeem the fallen bring into view the many questions with which these early reformers wrestled. Was fallenness a defect of character or a

deficiency of will? Was it innate—a natural inclination of certain women or was it causal—the result of systems and structures that created conditions for her ruin? Was a fallen woman fully agential in her behavior and thus not a victim but a criminal, evil even? Was a fallen woman merely weak of will, needing the grace of God to save her? How reformers answered these questions had direct implications for how they approached their work with criminal women.

Fallen and Dark in the 21st Century

The myths of the fallen and dark criminal woman endured throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, shaping the formation of carceral practices of punishment and reform and complicating the role of religion and education toward these goals. Prison reformers would continue to question the role of religion and education in the formational goals of convicted women. Prison reformers and advocates continued to question how and what types of labor, learning, piety, and punishment could shape a criminal into a true woman. What role did these practices have in the formation of dark ladies? To what was she being formed, or was she only being punished? The image of the true woman as the goal of prison formation would be critiqued and challenged into the twentieth century even as it was deepened by religious zeal and commitments. Still today these myths shape prison practices and public attitudes toward incarcerated women.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a story about my own feelings toward incarcerated women, feelings that were at the time formed and shaped by a culture that paints criminalized women as manipulative, sexualized, conniving, and deserving of

punishment. I embarked on a methodologically risky journey to see if in the history of the formation of women's prisons, I could learn something about my present-day feelings. While I did not (and cannot) with rigorous certainty prove a causal connection or direct link between how criminalized women were viewed in 1844 to how women in prison are treated today, I did come to realize that my initial feelings about incarcerated women were not new but rather enduring beliefs about incarcerated women that have persisted for centuries.

Through an analysis of the religious and culturally pervasive ideas of the fallen woman and the dark lady, I showed how gendered and racialized myths about a woman's agency and piety shaped ideas about her redemption and punishment and formed the scaffolding upon which social death practices toward her were justified. Barbara Welter's analysis of true womanhood and Amanda Anderson's cultural analysis of fallenness together show how a woman with attenuated autonomy, who did not acquiesce to obedience and submissiveness, was beyond the scope of redemption. Social death was her requisite end. Likewise, Talitha LeFlouria along with Orlando Patterson's work on social death in slavery further elucidated how the treatment of criminalized black women specifically and southern penal practices generally were steeped in social death practices from the beginning.

There was no place for a self-willed, self-named, fully agential "criminal" woman in the history of prison formation. Criminal women were by nature morally deficient, exhibiting an attenuated autonomy. They lacked the virtues and disposition by nurture (reformable white women) or by nature (black and minoritized women) for making good decisions for their lives. They could not be trusted with their own lives or their own

redemption. If they were proven beyond the scope of redemption or if reformatory practices did not reform them, then social death became their justifiable end.

This chapter explored myths as shaping principles -- shaping cultural acceptance of social death practices toward criminalized women. In my opening story, I suspected that my own internalized feelings about incarcerated women would, if not reflected upon, impact my teaching practices. In chapter four, I continue the historical investigation into the work of early women's prison reformers to see how they wrestled with prevailing myths about criminal women and how their own beliefs about incarcerated women shaped their educational and religious practices toward reform or punishment.

CHAPTER FOUR

Prison Practices: Punishment and Reform in the First Women's Prisons

It was our last class together. We had just finished covering the emotionally charged writings of Mary Daly, bell hooks, and Delores Williams. I could sense the electricity in the room. Comfortable with their critical and theological voices, they were not afraid to express themselves and I was no longer afraid of them. They spoke with clarity and conviction as they read their Prison Manifestos aloud. They critiqued the injustices of the US prison system and raged against the social ills of poverty, racism, and sexism. They spoke of God-given human dignity and their own divine image. They demanded equitable treatment and fair living conditions. They envisioned a better world for themselves. But as the classroom emptied and I prepared to leave, I thought to myself: *What have I done?*

The theology program at Arrendale operates with a commitment to liberative pedagogy which has *conscientization* as one of its goals. *Conscientization* is the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. In the theology program, I witnessed how theological learning encouraged students to develop such an awareness and cultivate a sense of moral freedom, an awareness of reality influenced by the imagination of alternative possibilities. Students were encouraged to speak back to reality, and demand—if at first only in word—that it change. Students saw themselves as truth-tellers, God as Divine-Empowerer, and the world as alterable. The students articulated alternative images of themselves and of their conceivable work in the world. And it was good.

Finding the confidence to speak truth and bring about change are admirable qualities elsewhere, but in prison they can be dangerous and lead to lockdown, or worse, a parole denial. I was confronted with the stark contrast between the ideal of education as an act of self-actualization and critical engagement with the power systems of the world, and the reality of a prison system as a place of punishment. Could an educational program that promoted an image of incarcerated students as critically reflective and agential exist compatibly within the US prison system?

The history of women's prison reform is a history that grapples with this question. Through an exploration of the early practices of women's prisons, we begin to identify the practices and philosophies that form the prison culture we find ourselves in today.

In the Beginning

Before the 1840s, women were less likely to face imprisonment except in cases of violent crimes.[130] The small number of convicted women were packed into male institutions, usually occupying but a single room in the local penitentiary. Public records testify that these women were viewed with "a special degree of aversion and despair."[131] They were called unredeemable; outside the reach of reformation; beyond the grasp of hope. There were no programs for these women – often not even a matron assigned to care for their needs. The squalid conditions created places of turmoil. After investigators published accounts of the sordid circumstances, the conditions of incarcerated women

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[130] Women were, however, jailed for crimes against public order such as petty street crimes and violation of moral or sexual codes. Imprisonment in penitentiaries was limited to violent crimes and was comparatively low in number compared to male incarceration populations.

[131] Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930*, Women and Culture Series (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 17.

became the focal point for attention from religious communities and social reformers. In 1823, Quakers in Philadelphia became the first Americans to attend to the needs of imprisoned women.[132]

It was 1844 when the first purpose-built women's prison emerged. The women's section of Mount Pleasant Prison in New York, the institution popularly known as Sing Sing, was constructed and Eliza Farnham was appointed to the post of matron. Eliza Farnham was twenty-nine years old when she assumed her role. As matron, she was responsible for setting the tone of life in Mt. Pleasant. She began her mission by adopting many of the theories and practices devised by Quaker prison reformer Elizabeth Fry of London. While Farnham embraced many of the same dispositions as Fry, she departed from Fry's model in distinct and what would become controversial ways. Unbeknownst to Farnham at the time, she would begin in America what would become a long-standing effort in women's prison reform, one that would wrestle with competing ideas about the personhood of women, the causes of criminality, the goal of prison, and the appropriate educational methods to reach these goals. Through the early models of prison work established by these women, we see the beginnings of a long and contentious territorial battle between the roles of piety and of punishment, between religious instruction and other forms of education in the life of women's prisons.

Fry and Farnham

Elizabeth Gurney Fry, sometimes referred to as the "angel of prisons," was an English prison reformer and devout Quaker who worked for women's prison reform in

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[132] Quakers at Arch State Prison

England in the early nineteenth century. She was one of the founders of the Association for the Reformation of the Female Prisoners, an association which consisted of motivated women who attended to the needs of the criminal women at Newgate, a carceral institution of horrid conditions. The association partnered with other women's associations to form the British Ladies' Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners in 1821. In her work, Fry became a leader in providing instruction particularly to women who wanted to work with the incarcerated *of their same sex*. American reformers would come to view Fry's work at Newgate as a model for women's prison reform. Fry's reform introduced into Newgate and subsequently the realm of replicable reform options: the gendered separation of men and women prisoners, paid work for inmates, women guards for women prisoners, and the housing of criminals based on their crimes.

Fry believed that women criminals could only be reformed if they were set apart from men and were supervised and taught by virtuous women. She recorded her thoughts on the matter as well as detailed instructions for the association women in her 1827 guidebook, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners*. There, Fry writes that "many a poor prisoner, under their fostering care, has become changed, —rescued from a condition of depravity and wretchedness, and restored to happiness, as a useful and respectable member of the community."[133] By *their fostering care* Fry is referring to individual, compassionate, consistent care provided by the association women volunteers. According to Fry, the women who supervised and educated prisoners must be motivated by Christian charity and

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[133] Elizabeth Gurney Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners* (London: John & Arthur Arch, Cornhill, 1827), 4.

adherents of pious character. Discipline was an important element in Fry's understanding of prison, but it was a discipline best provided and modeled by women.

Labor and learning were also important in Fry's conception of prison. Fry supported paid work for inmates. Fry believed that employment aided in the work of prison discipline by giving inmates something constructive to do with their time. Hard labor, according to Fry, is part of the reforming discipline and "forms an important part of the system of punishment."[134] Yet this labor should be demanded of women only with strict limitations, for "the female character is seldom improved by such rough and laborious occupation." After a short time of hard labor, women should instead prepare to enter into higher classes and be provided with employment to fit the duties of domestic life which will allow them to maintain themselves after release. The type of work should reflect the class of the criminal. The higher the class, the "lighter and more comfortable ought to be her labor."[135] Fry's employment practices supported the goals of domesticity and shaped women to fulfill typical gendered roles of nineteenth-century Europe. Concerning education, however, Fry encouraged inmate to inmate mutual instruction whereby learned inmates would teach the "lower classes." In cases where inmates were deficient in reading and writing skills, Fry advocated for inmates with adequate preparation to teach inmates without. While it may seem trivial, compared to prison models that rely solely on outside educators, Fry's model encourages not only inmate academic learning, but supports the ability of inmates themselves to teach. Fry's

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[134] Fry, *Observations*, 50.

[135] Fry, *Observations*, 51.

model advocated for structured programs of "discipline, cleanliness, education, work, and religious instruction," but the principal program was religious discipline.[136]

Religious instruction was chief among Fry's programmatic foci at Newgate. A devout Quaker, Fry believed in the centrality of faith for the uplift of the criminal. Fry writes: "much good may be effected by instructing the female criminals individually in the truths of the Christian religion … The influence of this private religious instruction is powerful, and I have long observed that the greatest change for the better generally takes place in those prisoners, over whom has been exercised the most of this pious Christian care."[137] It was of vital importance for Fry not only what prisoners studied, but by whom they were instructed. In her writings, Fry divides the responsibilities of Christian instruction between two entities: the prison chaplain and women volunteers.

The prison chaplain, according to Fry, was a critical member of the correctional team whose chief duty was to lead worship. Fry suggested that all prisoners attend worship regularly, at least once a week, if not more. In addition, the prison chaplain was the one to communicate with each woman individually to "lead them into the paths of virtue, religion and peace."[138] Fry insisted that the women in her association not interfere with the work of the chaplain. The chaplain (who was always male) was expected to be a person of true piety, and his position was elevated above all others.

Nevertheless, Fry submitted that there was some work better suited for the ladies who visited the prison. She believed that some of the moral and religious instruction

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[136] Clarice Feinman, *Women in the Criminal Justice System*, 2nd edition (New York: Praeger, 1985), 134.

[137] Fry, *Observations*, 44.

[138] Fry, *Observations*, 42.

necessary for female criminals was best received from *members of their own sex*. In addition to "private matters," Fry urged the women volunteers to assist prisoners in their religious life. They were instructed to gather prisoners daily and read to them from the Holy Scripture. Of particular commendation were the "clear and simple" sections of Scripture especially from the New Testament and the Psalms directing the attention of the prisoners to "those passages which proclaim the salvation offered to lost mankind though a crucified Redeemer, and which are calculated to revive the buried hopes of even the very worst of sinners."[139] It was advised that, under the care of the women volunteers, prisoners would read through the whole New Testament chapter by chapter and would pray daily. In addition to Scripture, prisoners were encouraged to read from "judiciously selected tracts and other religious books" while committing to memory "some of our best hymns … and various passages of the Bible itself."[140] Religious instruction was central to life at Newgate. While the chaplain held primary responsibility for the Christian care of the women, Fry intimates that it was the presence of women, pious in character who, through compassion and patience, were able to lead the prisoners to a life of reformation.

Fry's model did not just include religious instruction, however. Fry also recommended education in other matters. She suggested that all inmates be taught to "read, write, and cipher, as well as to make a ready and profitable use of the needle."[141] Prisoners were given a small supply of books, not only of a religious nature but of a

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[139] Fry, *Observations*, 43.

[140] Fry, *Observations*, 44.

[141] Fry, *Observations*, 46.

"generally instructive nature … to turn the channel of their thoughts, to improve not only their habits, but their tastes, and, by every possible means, to raise their intellectual and moral, as well as their religious standard."[142] Fry's model allowed for additional intellectual stimuli as long as they served the overall purpose of instruction consistent with a life of domesticity and a religious standard of piety.

Fry's model produced at least two enduring legacies that will be critiqued and carried out in subsequent years of women's prison's reform efforts. I am suggesting that these legacies are related to the relationship between social death practices and how religion and education function in women's prisons. One remnant of Fry's model is a class-based understanding of education and labor. Education and labor in prison was, from the beginning, already a gendered construct with its emphasis on domestic labor and preparation for "true womanhood." However, Fry insisted that labor and education should reflect the class of the inmate. This class-based understanding of labor and education institutionalized the idea that higher class individuals deserved lighter labor and more access to education. Lower class individuals would receive less. We will see this theme emerge again in later reform efforts.

The second remnant of Fry's model is the belief that religious instruction and punishment were both central and compatible to the reformative project. Religious instruction was central to Fry's model to raise the moral and intellectual standards of inmates. Like punishment, Fry's model treats religious instruction as a pedagogical tool in the formation of discipline. Because criminal women were victims of a weak will, discipline and obedience would lead to her restitution. Religious instruction and

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[142] Fry, *Observations*, 46–47.

punishment practices that teach obedience, discipline, and submission were thereby crucial to reforming a weak-willed criminal woman and acceptable to the prison ethos of the day. Fry's overall model became a blueprint for American women's prison reform: separation of men and women, gendered and class-based practices of care and punishment, and religious instruction as primary to other forms of educational instruction in the formation of discipline.

<u>Farnham's Adoptions and Adaptations</u>

One of the first to adopt and adapt Fry's model in the US was Eliza Farnham, matron of Mt. Pleasant Prison in New York. Farnham began her work in 1844 at Mt. Pleasant Prison by adopting the gendered practices of Fry's model but with greater emphasis on maternal care and communal formation, and non-punitive rehabilitation. Farnham fashioned Mt. Pleasant into a homelike atmosphere with matrons "setting examples as mother figures for their errant daughters."[143] Farnham's maternal approach was described as one that took pleasure in working with "low-down children of circumstances less fortunate than our own" and lifting them out of the pits into which they had fallen.[144] More than Fry's model, Farnham insisted that Mt. Pleasant resemble a home environment. Farnham believed that prison should resemble the environments inmates should aspire to, not the pits from which they came. Likewise, Farnham rejected solitary models and advocated for more communal spaces and better living conditions.

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[143] Feinman, *Women in the Criminal Justice System*, 134. See also Georgiana B. Kirby, *Years of Experience: An Autobiographical Narrative* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 190–211.

[144] Feinman, 134.

Where Fry's model maintained a place for punishment as it pertained to discipline, Farnham's did not. Instead, Farnham was highly motivated by a commitment to the science of phrenology and character development. During her first year as matron, Farnham edited *The Rationale of Crime*, a book written by Englishman Marmaduke Sampson.[145] Sampson concluded that crime could be attributed to the dominance or weakness of particular areas of the brain thus making crime treatable through the stimulation of the weak areas of the brain. For example, Sampson and Farnham argue that a lack of proper education was a common reason for crime. Education would thereby be critical in reforming a weak mind. Punishment, however, was utterly irrelevant to the rehabilitation of crime.

Education was central to Farnham's model but not necessarily religious instruction. Farnham's educational model was innovative and controversial for the time. The women-prisoners were encouraged to read in and out of their cells with Farnham herself reading to them. Farnham did not read primarily from the Bible, but from scientific texts and from novels. Scholar Janet Floyd recounts:

> Nothing of this kind had previously been available at Sing Sing in terms of either instruction or book supply. Farnham was certainly at the forefront in introducing books with no explicit religious content. She was especially unusual in choosing Dickens; where fiction was allowed to prisoners during this period, it took the form of "moral tales." There was also a diminution of religious instruction, the mainstay of rehabilitative practice at this time. There were morning lectures and Farnham invited speakers such as Margaret Fuller to address the prisoners. Negative reaction was not slow to emerge. [146]

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[145] Marmaduke B. Sampson, *Rationale of Crime: Marmaduke B. Sampson's "Treatise on Criminal Jurisprudence Considered in Relation to Cerebral Organization.,"* Patterson Smith Series in Criminology, Law Enforcement, and Social Problems; Publication No. 174 (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1973).

[146] Janet Floyd, "Dislocations of the Self: Eliza Farnham at Sing Sing Prison," *Journal of American Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006): 313.

Farnham's methods were a clear departure from Fry's prioritizing of religious instruction. It is unclear how Farnham understood the role of religious instruction precisely. It was neither forbidden nor discouraged. But the decisions Farnham made to include non-religious educative materials put her at odds with the dominant pedagogical philosophy of US prisons and put her at odds with the chaplaincy department.

By the end of 1845, Farnham was in open conflict with the prison chaplain who was responsible both for the supply of books to the prison library and for the spiritual guidance of the women. By de-emphasizing religion in favor of other humanitarian and scientific forms of education, the chaplain argued that Farnham had failed to recognize the centrality of religion in the work of reformation. It was not that religion was unimportant to Farnham, but it did not constitute the only or even the central role in her methods toward rehabilitation, and this challenged the authority of the prison chaplain as chief of rehabilitative design.

Farnham's methods not only caused tension within religious sectors, they also put her at odds with prison departmental officials. In 1845, Farnham's focus on communal life led her to abolish the rule of silence that dominated the prison system, challenging the notion that social interaction between prisoners led to "mutual contamination."[147] Instead, she encouraged quasi-domestic communal spaces whereby prisoners would work and study in public spaces outside of the privatized seclusion of individual cells. Prison officials felt that Farnham's educational emphasis was too soft

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[147] Floyd, *Dislocations of the Self,* 314.

and did not fit with the overall punitive need of prison. Farnham's educative goal was deemed at odds with the goal of punishment.

Farnham's arguments with the prison chaplain over books and prison officials over prisoner speech must be set against a scene of ideological strife within Sing Sing and the wider controversy in New York over the possibility of rehabilitation. According to Floyd, "most of those active and powerful in designing the regime of new institutions like Sing Sing during the 1840s were men who emphasized the punitive work of prisons and favored regimes of extreme, even militaristic, regulation."[148] Farnham's educative goal of rehabilitation was totally at odds with the punitive *telos* of prison. In a time in which rehabilitation of women was a minority report within prison officials, Farnham found little support for her endeavors. By 1847, just three years into her tenure, Farnham's efforts were coming to an embattled end. She was forced to resign in 1848.

The history of Farnham's model leaves us with two relevant themes about prisons and reform. First, Farnham's model suggests that communal formation might be central to a reformative project, but it is at odds with punitive projects that operate on social death practices. More than was evidenced in Fry's work, Farnham's model advocated for prisons to be communal, home-like spaces that promoted healthy relationships between and among inmates and staff. This focus on community informed both the physical aesthetic of the prison and the pedagogical practices of teaching and learning. The communal focus of Farnham's model provides a different model of prison than the social death practices of isolation before. However, Farnham's communal practices were rejected as being "too soft" and thereby incompatible with punishment.

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[148] Floyd, *Dislocations of the Self,* 315.

Second, Farnham's model sheds new light on the relationship between religious instruction and punishment in early women's carceral spaces. In Fry's model, religious instruction was compatible with punishment because both were used in the formation of discipline, a virtue necessary in the reformation of a weak-willed incarcerated woman. However, in Farnham's model, the problem was not a weak will but weak mental abilities. If religious instruction was primarily understood as a tool for the moral formation of the will and not one of intellectual formation, then one can understand why Farnham did not think religious instruction was central to the reformative project. Fry and Farnham's models give us two pictures of different ways of thinking about the problem of crime and the role of religious instruction in its reformation.

The discord brought about by Farnham's model reveals the underlying yet pervasive tension in prison philosophy and practice between punishment and piety. As women's carceral institutions formed, they immediately become entangled in this dilemma: what is the goal of the prison – to punish or reform? And what role does education and religion play in these efforts? Even if one could agree that education and religion were important in prison, what type of education would be valued? To what end? And why was religious instruction not seen as antithetical to or a threat to the goals of punishment? Though Farnham's experiment was short lived, the brief successes that she did have would inspire other reformers. She created a model that would be studied, critiqued, and adapted by reformers interested in the rehabilitation of incarcerated women. The history of women's incarceration can be seen as a project perpetually trying to sort out these distinctions.

The myth of a true woman would remain a powerful guiding force for prison reform in the years following Farnham's initial experiment. A strong reliance on the role

of religious instruction would support the development of the virtues of piety and purity, and educational offerings that promoted submission and domesticity would prevail. A reliance on true womanhood is seen in Fry and Farnham's depiction of the type of women best suited to work with criminal women and in the virtues they sought to form in the inmates. Interestingly, Farnham's experiment was deemed "too soft" for the punitive goal of the prison system. But there is no mention that Fry's religious instruction was given the same type of judgment, suggesting instead that religious instruction was more commensurate with punitive goals than were the less religiously motivated practices of Farnham. Farnham's model failed not because it did not advocate a vision of true womanhood, but because it did not create one that fit within a framework of punishment. Religious instruction, however, was compatible with punishment.

Rise of Women's Reformatories

The first separate women's carceral institutions were the Indiana Women's Prison (1873), the Reformatory Prison for Women in Massachusetts (1877), the New York House of Refuge (1887) and the Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women in NY (1901). These early institutions were operated by Christian reformers who increasingly viewed women convicted of crimes as victims of unjust social structures. The goal of these early reformatories was to restore the true womanhood of these fallen women. Progressive reformers of the twentieth century remained committed to the Victorian ideals of piety and purity but they challenged the domesticated goals of the early reformatories. Meanwhile, custodial institutions continued to house women not deemed worthy of reform. These institutions operated with a goal of punishment. By the end of

the twentieth century, the reformatory impulse would mostly wane, leaving traces of their gendered practices to live on in a custodial framework focused on punishment.

The practices of these early institutions portray what author Cristina Rathbone calls "the long dance of confusion" over what exactly the United States should do with female prisoners. Rathbone argues that prison reform has and continues to be "one step forward, one step backward; two steps forward, two steps back."[149] Early women's carceral reformers find themselves caught in a contentious dance between piety and punishment.

Early Christian Reformers and Shifting Analysis of the Fall

The first women's reformatories emerged in the social climate of late nineteenth century America. By the 1870s, women reformers had risen in public authority, occupying professional roles on state correctional boards and institutions. Reformers like Abby Gibbons joined forces with other reformers to campaign for separate women's prisons, to be run by women. Of the thirty active American women reformers in the early nineteenth century, the majority were from middle- and upper-class Protestant families in the Northeast. They were liberal, about a third were Quaker, many of the others were Unitarian, and nearly all were abolitionists and feminists. Many of these women were educated in all-female institutions or held memberships in women's missionary, benevolent, or antislavery societies. According to Estelle Freedman, these "sisterhoods intensified female identity and a woman's sense of her own mission."[150] The

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[149] Cristina Rathbone, *A World Apart: Women, Prison, and Life behind Bars*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Random House, 2005), 134.

[150] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 24.

combination of religious and social zeal to rescue fallen women with the growing success of women's independent institutions of leadership created an environment ripe for independent women's carceral reform. Women in particular were empowered to rid society of the sins of moral impurity. Strands of perfectionist theology suggested that individual and social transformation was not only possible but could be secured by increased human devotion to the work of Christ.

Early reformers wanted to improve the conditions of women's prisons, not question the entire notion of the prison system. Early reformers operated with social feminist convictions, not to be confused with the political feminism that was characteristic of the twentieth century. Social feminism sought to expand female moral guardianship from the home to society. It did not challenge the notion of a woman's sphere but instead expanded its influence. As Freedman writes, "like temperance advocates, social purity leaders, and settlement house founders, the postwar prison reformers believed in women's separate sphere and superior morality."[151] Many of these early reformers operated with "faith in the existence of a separate woman's sphere and the basic efficacy of the social institutions they sought to reform."[152] Like the separate but equal racial ideology, social feminists advocated for separate women's institutions based on concepts of innate sexual differences between men and women. Social feminism argued that women have unique virtues that should be embodied in social policy and carceral practices.

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[151] Freedman, *Their Sister's Keepers,* 39.

[152] Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 45.

Women reformers did, however, question the overarching conception of a fallen woman as evil and beyond hope. Such deterministic analyses of crime did not fit a perfectionist narrative. Thus, early Christian reformers shifted their focus from an individual analysis of fallenness to a more nuanced structural one informed by a different imagination of the fall and of the purposes of religion and education. Early Christian reformers reimagined the cause of a woman's fall by making her a victim rather than an agent. Needing to demythologize the idea that some women are by nature inclined to evil, early reformers shifted the mythic tale of the fallen woman from one who causes social downfall to one who is the victim of it.

Many of the early prison reformers believed that societal forces created the conditions for women's delinquency and tended toward social rather than individual analysis of crime. Nina Auerbach writes that "to redeem the fallen woman from degradation, sympathetic critics … turned from the denunciations of epic and myth to the more flexible reality of history," one that suggested a more nuanced narrative of fallenness.[153] Auerbach's claim is confirmed historically, as during this time fallen woman are often portrayed as "beaten-down prostitute … defined economically rather than morally, emitting no special aura of destruction and doom but joining the poor seamstress and the shabby-genteel governess in the ranks of capitalist victims."[154] A woman jailed or incarcerated for crimes against chastity was viewed as a victim of economic injustice. She was not promiscuous due to her self-willed, defiant sexuality. Rather, she was a victim of attenuated autonomy, weak because of social

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[153] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 157.

[154] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 158.

disenfranchisement. Her decision-making ability was negatively affected by social pressure not because of innate, biological deficiency. Viewing fallen women as victims of society engendered in reformers a feeling of sympathy that characterized late nineteenth-century prison reform.

Reformers claimed that fallen women were victims of two particular forces: economic and sexual exploitation. As such, any path to redemption must necessarily include tools for economic self-sufficiency and freedom from harm by the hands of men, husbands and others. Inspired by such convictions, early women reformers advocated for alternative models of women's prisons based on three principles: separation from men, provision of differential, feminine care, and control over women's prisons by female staff and management.[155] The early reformatories furthered the legacies of Fry and Farnham by combining feminist goals of preventing men's exploitation of women with social feminist methods of extending the women's sphere to encompass correctional institutions. Leaders of these institutions used evangelical religion, education, and discipline to restore the womanhood of the residents.[156] Furthering the Victorian ideal, early reformers utilized training programs to foster the virtues of true womanhood—purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness—extending middle-class women's socialization to fallen women while also promoting a message of self-sufficiency.[157] According to Rafter, reformers hoped to "recast offenders in their own

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[155] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 46.

[156] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 55.

[157] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers,* 54.

image, to have them embrace the values (though not assume the social station) of the lady."[158]

The majority of women sentenced to these early reformatories were white, native born, and young moral offenders (less than 25 years old). Nearly two-thirds were married, and the crimes were typically minor, mostly for drunkenness and prostitution (violation of chastity laws). These women fit the reformers' definition of fallen women in need of aid, allowing reformers to portray imprisoned women as untapped resources who had within them "the cherished qualities of piety and purity," core virtues of true womanhood.[159] This victimized image of fallen women formed the myth that shaped reformatory prison practices.

Practices of the First Prison Reformatories

Quaker minister Sarah J. Smith was the first superintendent of the Indiana Women's Prison, making her the first female superintendent of any prison in the United States. Smith, who was already working as a social reformer on behalf of "abandoned women," continued the religious uplift of her former rescue work as superintendent.[160] She, along with Quaker reformer Rhoda Coffin, advocated for the separate institute after witnessing the suffering and abuse of women housed in male prisons. Smith had her own vision of prison for women, a vision that would lead to "restored womanhood" and provide women with the tools needed to re-enter society and care for themselves. Smith's institution operated with two goals: restoration of the womanhood of the

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[158] Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 175.

[159] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 53.

[160] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 77.

criminal and self-sufficiency. As the first women's reformatory, the Indiana Women's Prison resembled the models set forth by Fry and Farnham, primarily in its inculcation of Victorian religious and cultural ideals.

Religious instruction and education in domesticity remained central pedagogical tools both for restoring womanhood and for self-sufficiency. Prison aesthetics, education, and religion all served to advance these goals. The criminal women under Smith's supervision were welcomed into a decorated room complete with bedspread, curtains, and flowers. Women were given a Bible and a hymn book for both religious instruction and personal devotion to advance their piety. The women mainly worked on laundry, sewing, and knitting, though some did industrial work.

Like the models set forth by Fry and Farnham, the Indiana Women's Prison focused on integrating prisoners into Victorian gender roles, training them to "occupy the position assigned to them by God, viz., wives, mothers, and educators of children."[161] To train a woman in the ways of domestic life meant to prepare a criminal woman for a life of domestic service upon release. As one of the few employment avenues available to an uplifted, fallen woman, domestic service was a primary means of achieving self-sufficiency for formerly incarcerated women. The other prominent means was that of marriage.

The second female institution that opened in Framingham, Massachusetts in 1877 distinguished itself less as a prison and more as a reform institution. From 1880 to 1882, Eliza Mosher served as superintendent of the Framingham prison. The reformatory was described as a place of transformation; it "was not designed for

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[161] From the Indiana Women's Prison 1876 annual report.

imprisonment alone, but for reformation … It would be a starting point in their existence for all eternity, a pause in this earthly life, a time for reflection, an opportunity for new principles to be formed, holy restitutions to be made, in the strength that God alone can give."[162] This new reformatory was idealized as a monastery or a moral retreat, described as a place set apart, a place where new habits, principles, and character might be formed. The reformatory institute was understood as a religious institution of sorts where a woman not only reflected upon her life but compensated for her previous actions. At the center of this transformative work was God.

Mosher was herself a religious woman, often joining the chaplain to read Scripture and pray with the women housed at the reformatory. However, Mosher, like other contemporary reformers, tended toward social analysis to explain criminal behavior. A former physician at the institution, Mosher recorded many of her thoughts concerning the women she served, often citing disease, alcoholism, or venereal disease as causes of moral deformation. While not much has been written about Mosher's daily practices at Framingham, it is clear that she valued both religion and education in the transformative work of the reformatory.

Perhaps it was Mosher's religious commitments that caused her to advocate for respect and dignity for the incarcerated women. Under Mosher's watch, she insisted the inmates be referred to as "women" or "the ladies" to indicate a level of respect. She also sought to bridge the divide between the incarcerated and the free, often recruiting outside volunteers to provide individual teaching and training to the women. In addition to religiously motivated volunteers, Mosher invited feminists, social reformers, and

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[162] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 89.

political officials to speak with the women. She is credited with beginning the practice of inviting students and professors from nearby Wellesley College to visit prisoners. For Mosher, religious instruction was vital to the human reflective work needed for transformation, but so too was the critical, educational work of politicians, feminists, and women from local universities who had been educated in the liberal arts.

Mosher's focus on transformation by way of religious and educational access was met with disdain by those in political office. In 1882, a governor who had little sympathy for women prisoners made life difficult for Mosher. Not understanding or appreciating Mosher's approach to crime and correction, the governor encouraged Mosher's resignation after just two years. Mosher was succeeded by Clara Barton, whose short-term efforts continued Mosher's work to expand educational access. Then came Ellen Cheney Johnson, who held the longest supervising position at Framingham (1884–1899). She became a spokesperson for women's prison reform throughout the country.

Ellen Johnson differed most from her predecessors in that she saw no contradiction between reformation and discipline. Johnson designed Framingham around a theme of "training for self-control."[163] If crime was a result of a deficient will, discipline, control, and obedience became the dominating forces in Johnson's method of reform. For Johnson, religion served the purpose of fostering obedience. For example, in the chapel at Framingham, Johnson hung a painting of an image entitled *Christ and the Erring Woman*, that she hoped would instill a lesson of forgiveness and mercy in the women to whom she referred in her 1887 annual report as "a downcast, but not forsaken

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[163] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 76.

sisterhood."[164] Unlike Mosher or Barton before her, Johnson developed a model of religion and education that was compatible with the dominant prison ethos of punishment and control.

Johnson's focus on discipline, punishment, and self-control was in line with traditional penal philosophies of nineteenth-century America. Like Fry, punishment and rehabilitation were mutual companions in Johnson's reformatory model. Religious instruction served to awaken criminal women to their errancy, and prison discipline shaped them into self-controlled and self-sufficient women. Regarding education, Johnson maintained a strict hierarchy in which only those in the highest divisions had access to books and other privileges. She increased the number of solitary cells for punishment and did away with recreation. Instead, inmates participated mostly in domestic and outdoor work, doing laundry, whitewashing walls, painting buildings, and taking care of prison grounds. These programs were less about training than they were about moral treatment – work to keep the mind uplifted. Though Johnson showed some interest in training for less traditional tasks, training in domesticity dominated.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the carceral practices for women's institutions focused on reforming the fallen into visions of true women and equipping them for a life of domestic submission or servitude as their primary means of self-sufficiency. Religion and education initially served moral goals—to support the formation of the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity; to reinforce or reconstruct the virtues of true womanhood. However, as reformers became more aware of the social analysis of crime, they insisted that reformative practices not only restore

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[164] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 131.

womanhood but also support the self-sufficiency of the women. Education was no longer merely about character or virtue; it must also provide women with a means of economic support. As a result, religion and education often supported the formation of virtues that promoted marriage or domestic service. A description of the New York House of Refuge captured this reality: it is "not a prison ... but an educational institution [promising to] give such moral and religious training as will induce [inmates'] to form a good character and such training in domestic work as will eventually enable them to find employment, secure good homes, and be self-supporting."[165] The criminal justice system became a mechanism both for punishing women who did not conform to bourgeois definitions of femininity and a reformatory for correcting them.

The carceral practices of the early reformatories were based on a restrictive concept of true womanhood that imposed a limited definition of femininity and required women to conform to a stricter sexual morality than that expected of men. Joanne Belknap, in her analysis of historical writings about these early reformatories, writes that education in reformatories included such characteristics as "self-restraint," "religious instruction," "purity," and "hygiene." One historical article noted that the educational system for the prisoners should include "some academic work," but also training in appreciating beauty in "nature, art or character," and that "patriotism and Americanism should be inculcated into their daily lives."[166] The goal of the reformatory movement was the rescue and reform of fallen women by institutionalizing bourgeois standards of female propriety. Moreover, creators of women's reformatories turned to

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[165] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 89.

[166] Joanna Belknap, "'Offending Women': A Double Entendre," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 100, no. 3, (n.d.): 1076.

the juvenile system for models of working with women in carceral contexts. A new image of the white female offender emerged in the North. No longer was she beyond redemption, she was a fallen woman who was more like a child than an agential adult.

The early women's reformatories in the North created a legacy of feminized prison discipline and introduced into state prisons for women a program of rehabilitation predicated on middle-class definitions of lady-like behavior. These practices became the model for the Northern reformatory movement in the United States. The beginning of the twentieth century, however, brought a shift in women's prison reform.

Progressive Reformers and New Models of Correction

Not all reformers accepted the sexual ideology or penal methods of nineteenth-century reformers. While the nineteenth century reformers shared backgrounds of religious training, education, female associations, and marital status, twentieth-century reformers were more likely to be single, divorced, or separated. They were highly educated; several attended Eastern colleges and had advanced graduate degrees. Almost all worked for pay and half actively supported the suffrage movement. There were three key differences between early and progressive reformers. First, unlike the early reformers who valued domesticity and female moral superiority, the progressive twentieth-century reformers questioned the implications of gender essentialism. Second, fewer women in the progressive movement had a religious impulse to convert fallen women and instead approached criminal women as professional clients or subjects of research.[167] They regarded the work of prison supervision as a form of

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[167] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 110.

treatment rather than of punishment. Third, progressive reformers, even more than early reformers, argued for an economic interpretation of crime and embraced a new penology that focused on a multifactor approach including family life, education, and economic conditions. Perhaps the most fundamental difference among the reformers was the progressive insistence on economic causes of a woman's fall and the overwhelming insistence that the goal of reformation was self-sufficiency above all other needs.

Progressives agreed with several of the environmental sources of women's crime as previously identified by early reformers: poverty, lack of education, and low paying work. However, they more firmly situated the remedy for these ills in education that led to self-sufficiency. Progressive reformers questioned whether the practices of early reformers aided or hindered the formation of virtues beneficial for life outside of prison. These reformers drew distinctions between a good prisoner (obedient, dependent, infantile) and a good, productive citizen (ability to work, provide for self, be self-sustaining). The practices of the early reformers were viewed with suspicion as developing the former – good prisoners. The progressive era reformers saw themselves as developing the latter.

Practices of Progressive Reform

Progressive reformers pursued two lines of prison innovation at the outset of the twentieth century—one in design, the other in education. Like Farnham's model before, some reformatories focused on the communal life in prison and adopted a cottage system to transcend the physical limitations of traditional prison space and better model life on the outside. Women were permitted outdoor work, recreation, and were

incentivized with the possibility of early parole for good behavior. The idea behind such innovation was that physical space was vital to a person's reform; that how a person lived affected who they would become.

A leader in the educational reforms of the progressive era was Katherine Bement Davis, superintendent of the Bedford Hills Reformatory in New York. She wrote that reformatories should be "a purely educational institution teaching suitable industries. To these reformatories only women should be committed who are mentally capable of being trained to lead a self-supporting life."[168] Progressive reformers like Davis challenged domesticity as the dominant pedagogical model and re-introduced academic and industrial training. Davis, like Farnham before her, contended that education for those who are mentally capable should train for self-sufficiency. Davis adapted progressive educational models that shared teaching and learning responsibilities with inmates. She also advocated for relevant subject matter to be taught.[169] She encouraged volunteers from local colleges and universities to teach and be present with the inmates. Finally, Davis instituted half-day vocational training to prepare women for life beyond the prison.

Despite the approaches to progressive prison reform, twentieth-century prisons still fell short of meeting their new penology goal of preparing inmates for life beyond the institution. Many of the efforts, while improving life inside the prison, still did little for prisoner's lives after their release. Davis and her contemporaries criticized traditional mechanisms that "trained good prisoners" but did not prepare inmates for

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[168] *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology: Official Organ of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* (Northwestern University Press, 1914), 407.

[169] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 133.

life outside institutional walls.[170] Progressive era reformers thus became convinced that prison alone could not resolve the problems many of the women were facing. If early reformers concentrated on uplifting the fallen woman, progressive reformers sought new ways to prevent her fall.

Progressive reformers began advocating for extra-institutional reforms to help keep women out of prison in the first place. A woman's organization called Big Sister developed in several cities designed to offer "social hygiene instruction, recreation, and home placement for delinquent girls" to decrease the number of young women arrested for crimes of vagrancy.[171] In addition, separate women's courts were established in New York and other cities to "centralize preventative services."[172] For women convicted of crime, reformers advocated for probation instead of incarceration and probation officers often recommended women to alternative "approved homes" such as Waverly House or Magdalene Homes. Many of these homes were run by women social reformers and advanced the same Victorian ideals of true womanhood and self-sufficiency.

Though a noble and notable project, progressive extra-institutional reforms had unforeseen negative consequences, as their success turned prisons into "institutions of last resort" – places where the worst cases were sent. The vision of early reformers began to fall apart. No longer were female institutions havens for the young, white, fallen women who were ready for redemption. Overcrowding, under-appropriation, and increased sentencing of "difficult inmates" created seemingly unsurmountable obstacles

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[170] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers,* 130.

[171] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 127.

[172] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 128.

to the project of reform. As prisons became a place of last resort, the numbers of immigrant, non-white, and sexually non-conforming women increased. As an act of scapegoating, prison reformers blamed institutional failures on the growing numbers of "blacks and lesbians."[173]

Custodial Institutions & Practices of Punishment

The rescue and redeem model of the women's reformatory movement was predicated on an idea that certain types of fallen women were reformable; that they had already within them a certain set of virtues which merely needed to be developed, recaptured, and trained by true and virtuous women. All criminalized women, however, were not included in this romantic picture. There were certain women of whom true women imagined no commonalities and for whom the Victorian myth of true womanhood did not apply. I am primarily speaking of black women.[174] The so-called true woman did not extend her arms to her darker sister.

Black Southern Reformers

The conditions of black female prisoners in the South did not produce a reform movement equal to the northern movement. However, black reformers and social critics did embark on a Southern effort to improve the carceral conditions of Southern women, especially black women. Historian Cheryl Hicks suggests that paternalistic responses to women were not just practices of white women reformers but also of black women reformers. For Hicks, the legacy of enslavement conjoined notions of racial inferiority

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[173] Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 140.

[174] Some non-conforming white women were also deemed outside the possibility of reform, but nearly all black women fit this category.

and immorality that prompted reformers—black and white—to embark on a "civilizing mission." The black elite and middle class imagined their task as "racial uplift."[175] Like the Northern reformers, Southern women did not mirror the class conditions of the women they sought to help. Southern black reformers were highly educated and better representative of middle-class values. The culture of true womanhood functioned in black social life as respectability. Like true womanhood, Black reformers' calls for respectability advocated for middle-class economic and theological values of conformity and chastity as markers of a woman's value. Like the northern reformers, some African American reformers focused on sexual purity and gender conformity as the focus of criminal reform while others focused on progressive, economic means of reform.[176] Both types of reformers found themselves confronted with the reality of the Southern custodial prison.

Custodial Institutions and Practices of Reform

Unlike reformatories that were structured around reformative practices, custodial institutions like state penitentiaries were structured around punishment, containment, and control. Reformatories and custodial institutions were split along racial lines. During the age of women's carceral development, Black women were seldom sentenced to reformatories but were relegated instead to custodial institutions where black women accounted for 64.5% of the population in custodial prisons (compared to

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[175] Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010), 8.

[176] Renowned scholar and criminologist, W.E.B. DuBois, emphasized sociological rather than biological variables to explain Negro crime. DuBois rejected the notion that criminality was an innate racial characteristic and instead fostered a counter discourse centering on the "depressed social, material, and economic conditions of black life." (See LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 54). DuBois' ideal promulgated middle-class socialization as the dominant model for racial advancement.

11.9% of the reformatory population). Reformatories were predominantly white and preferred only to work with women "worthy of reform," while custodial institutions housed large number of black and non-conforming white women and were the dominant model of female incarceration in the South.

Custodial institutions existed throughout the United States, but the South proved to be "a hothouse" for the worst aspects of it.[177] Six independent female custodial institutions were founded between 1870 and 1935. Unlike men's custodial institutions, female custodial prisons "seldom had a fulltime physician, chaplain, or teacher … and they furnished fewer programs and job opportunities."[178] Custodial institutions, unlike reformatories, were primarily concerned with punishment. They were a convenient storage system for individuals who were no longer (or perhaps never) defined as members of the body politic. Significantly, black women who were essentially excluded from the women's reformatory movement, were sent in large numbers to these custodial prisons, including plantation prisons. In these settings, African-American women were often treated as brutally as their male counterparts.

After the Civil War, the southern penitentiary filled with newly freed blacks. Penal servitude became the new way for replicating the social death techniques of slavery in a postbellum America. Early practices of female incarceration in the South involved women laboring alongside men in coal mines and railroads. In 1868, Georgia started its convict leasing system. Unlike the brick and mortar prison systems in the North, this model of imprisonment was without literal walls. It was composed of

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[177] Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 97.

[178] Rafter, *Partial Justice,* 92.

independently operated lease camps governed by private contractors. In the convict lease system, female convicts were forced to "simulate black masculinity and to conform to male-centric modes of labor and dress" all while still being viewed by their custodians as sexually available.[179] The deplorable conditions of convict leasing were the catalyst for Georgia's early penal reform efforts. By the mid 1880s, reformers began to take note of carceral conditions in Georgia, with social reformer and criminologist Frances Kellor stating, "in no states [is] there evidence of such brutality to women" as in Georgia. Black women reformers such as Ida B Wells and Georgia-born educator Selena Sloan Butler were vocal about the inhumane and barbarous conditions in the leasing system. By 1899, Georgia shifted from the convict lease system to a state operated prison farm in which the state oversaw female convicts working on state-owned farms. The Georgia State Prison Farm was the state's first active residential public incarcerative facility developed after the Civil War. Though promoting a message of humanitarianism, the state system operated in the same ways that the private lease camps did, as for-profit carceral entities. Conditions were often just as inhumane.

Southern states were apathetic about prisoner rehabilitation and health. Historical documents suggest a dehumanizing environment that failed to provide educational or rehabilitative programs. These institutions also failed to protect inmates from violence. Between 1868 and 1908, Georgia subjected more than 2000 men and women to the harsh conditions of penal servitude in leasing camps. Of the 2000 persons subjected, 90 percent were black males. While women accounted for low numbers overall, it is striking that 98 percent of the female population in lease camps were

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[179] LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 103.

black.[180] While women in Northern prisons were subject to forced feminization, women in Southern prisons, particularly black women, were constantly defeminized, leaving female prisoners wrestling to "preserve their female identity."[181] Treated as men, women in custodial institutions were expected to work. Labor more than education or religious instruction was the dominant penal commitment.

The discrepancy in black women's incarceration is largely due to two reasons, both predicated on racism. First, black women over-indexed in women's prison populations because white women were more likely to be "screened out" of the system. Whether white women were sentenced to alternative homes with more reformatory goals or dismissed from the crime altogether they, more than black women, were provided with ways to avert imprisonment. A second reason for the over-indexing of black women in prison was located in the social imagination concerning black women. A late nineteenth-century Chicago newspaper wrote that "the hardest of the woman prisoners to make impression on is the negro. Their ignorance of an immoral act is deeper than that of the white women, and it is extremely hard to reach their moral sensibilities."[182] Unlike the white woman who fell into ruin, the Black woman was deemed as fundamentally morally debased. Black criminal women were described as "creatures free from care" and "creatures of the lowest type of human degradation."[183] Black women were not human but creatures that lacked moral constitution. According

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[180] LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 10.

[181] LeFlouria, Chained in Silence, 91.

[182] "Few Women Among the Prisoners of the County Jail," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872–1922), Sep 06, 1903, 1.

[183] "Sang and Danced in Prison," *The Atlanta Constitution* (1881–1945), Feb 11, 1898.

to the American social imagination, Black women did not contain within them the same moral virtues that white women had. There was nothing in them to restore.

Reforming the Unreformable?

If dark bodies were unredeemable by nature, then what project would religion and education serve in custodial institutions? A form of this question was a topic of discussion in Detroit in 1885 at the National Prison Association meeting, America's oldest and largest association for correctional practitioners.[184] During the meeting, the warden took a question from a man from North Carolina who asked, "I want to know what the opinion in the North was – what was its experience—of the effect of education on the colored people in relation to crime." The warden of the renowned Sing Sing Prison in New York replied:

> If you educate above the station, and there is no outlet for the education so given, the person drifts into crime. It is so in New York City. There are hundreds of men in prison from New York for no other reason that that they were educated too highly and became ashamed of the business of their fathers. This is not an argument for less but different education. What this country needs now is not an education of the brain so much as skilled labor. Men's hands ought to be educated as well as their heads. This must be done.[185]

According to the dominant penal philosophy of the time, education should involve the training of the mind and body in forms of labor that would prevent and deter crime. Concerning black people specifically, education in labor was the most humane and responsible offering. To educate for any reason other than useful labor would be

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[184] The organization was founded in 1870 by Congregationalist minister and reformer Enoch Cobb Wines, the organization brought together people working on shaping and reforming carceral spaces in the nineteenth century. Former US President Rutherford B. Hayes was the organization's first president from 1883 to 1893.

[185] "The Last Day, " Detroit Free Press (1858–1922), Oct 22, 1885, 8.

doing a disservice to the person, leading them further into a life of crime. Education, as a project of correction, required knowing the proper type of education to provide each class of person.

By the 1940s, there were clear racial differences in how labor and education functioned among incarcerated women in the South. At a prison in Reidsville, Georgia, public statements recounted that "inmates of this division are better used in ways to utilize their efforts to the greatest advantage." This meant that Negro women were put in the field "picking vegetables" and did light washing while white women did the cooking, sewing, etc.[186] Racism abounded in Northern reformatories where black women were few in number. Programming and educational opportunities catered to white femininity. At reformatories with integrated but tracked educational programs, blacks were more likely to be classified as low grade. In custodial institutions, whites were more likely to get "soft" office jobs while black women were almost exclusively assigned to laborious tasks. Rafter notes that "nearly all aspects of treatment, then, were shaped by attitudes that devalued blacks."[187] Women who did not fit the scope of true womanhood were provided with education for the sake of labor. Unlike the fallen woman who worked for self-sufficiency, black women criminals worked as punishment and for the benefit of the institution. Prisons trained women for a life of station-specific self-sufficiency. Reformatories offered white women a chance at redemption. Custodial institutions trained black women for a life of subjugation.

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[186] Russell Rhoden, "State Moves Women Prisoners into New Building in Tattnall, " The Atlanta Constitution (1881–1945), Jun 30, 1940, 1.

[187] Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 154–55.

Merging Institutions, Merging Myths

Custodial and reformatory prisons merged in the 1930s[188] when states that at one time could afford both institutions no longer found it fiscally possible to do so. The early goals of reforming wayward women gave way to a new, less virtuous goal of social control and the self-preservation of society. Women's prisons shifted from being sites of individual regeneration and treatment to being places of punishment and social isolation. Whether the institution was called penitentiary, reformatory, custodial institution, or prison, women's carceral institutions by the middle of the twentieth century were dominated by traditional methods of prison discipline.

Despite the emergence of a single institution, distinct legacies and myths from each institution survived. The legacy of differential treatment based on gender and class survived from the reformatories including a belief that religious instruction and punishment practices that shaped obedience and submission were vital to the reformative project. From the custodial institutions, we retained a focus on punishment and retribution and the belief that some people are not capable of or deserving of educational and vocational development. We still live the contradictions and challenges

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[188] Most of what has been written about the history of female incarceration focuses on the origins of women's prisons through the 1930s. After the 1930s, prisons became less likely to publish reports on their efforts and inner workings. However, legislation and contextual social movements allow us to piece together a changing landscape in female incarceration in the latter part of the twentieth century. The 1970s was a hotbed of social activism and political change. Likely spurred by the civil rights movement and rising political feminism, women challenged the inequality of women's prison environments. Legislation was passed to improve women's living conditions to better reflect the opportunities provided to men in prison including granting equitable access in programming and increasing academic and vocational opportunities. Unfortunately, drastic cuts in programming and correctional practices were made in men's prisons during this time, negatively impacting the success of the legislation for women. Beginning in the 1970s, US prison populations began to soar behind anti-drug legislation, while funding for correctional programming declined.

of this merger, particularly the tension around the purpose of religion and education in prison.

If custodial institutions sought punishment and obedience and reformatories sought redemption and self-sufficiency, then a merged system struggled with balancing the work of these two goals. This manifested in a struggle around formation. What is prison forming people to become? If religion and education serve the goals of formation, what virtues must be formed? In our current criminal justice system, we are wrestling with a contradiction of values, claiming the formation of virtues for self-sufficiency but enacting the formation of virtues of obedience and submission. It is no surprise then that there is an identity crisis of sorts within our criminal justice practices, particularly around the meaning and purposes of education, work, and faith.

The myths about incarcerated women continue to shape prison approaches to punishment and reform. They shape the tensions between programs for self-sufficiency and labor for production. They shape the ways that incarcerated women remain invisible, somehow less feminine and more sinful. They shape how female bodies and black bodies are criminalized by the very nature of their being. And they shape the ambiguity around the role of religion and education in the project of incarceration. Myths continue to shape the practice of education, religion, and labor in prison. The dissolution of the Pell Grant in the 1990s, which allowed people who are incarcerated to go to college, suggests that incarcerated peoples are not worthy of higher education. Religious instruction that is catechetical in nature is welcome in prison as long as it promotes a sense of piety and obedience; and labor remains a complicated form of punishment and control, a way for people incarcerated to serve the institution that oppresses them.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a scene from a Theology classroom, a scene that left me uncomfortable not because I thought the students' agential voices were wrong, but because I thought their strong voices might bring them harm in prison. I asked if an educational program that promoted an image of incarcerated students as critically reflective and agential could exist compatibly within the US prison system. The history of prison reform practices suggests that the answer has historically been no.

Prison models where punishment was central to reform, like the models advocated by Elizabeth Fry and Ellen Cheney Johnson, have been the lasting models of prison practice in the US. Religious instruction that was compatible with punishment in these models was instruction that promoted inmate obedience, submission, and discipline. Educational practices that were not linked to punishment, practices like those promoted by Eliza Farnham or Eliza Mosher were most often denounced as "too soft" for the rehabilitation of inmates. Farnham and Mosher both believed that punishment was not central to reform. Education, however, was central to reforming the intellectual capacities necessary for a life of well-being and self-sufficiency. Farnham was unclear whether or not religious instruction served any purpose in the development of women's agency. Mosher, however, planted a seed that religion and education together could promote human dignity and lead to inmate transformation. Mosher's approach was rejected however because it did not create a model where religious instruction served the goal of punishment and obedience. The history of women's prison reform practices shows that critical educational practices have always been a threat to the formational goals of the prison.

In the following chapter, I explore contemporary prison practices and how the Theology program sits uncomfortably and subversively in their midst. I offer a constructive account of counter-practices embraced and nurtured in the Theology program, practices that resist social death and redeem life in prison.

CHAPTER FIVE

Redeeming Life: Redemptive Practices and Theological Education

They were awakened at 5:30 a.m. with a surprise inspection. After they dressed, they waited and watched as officers came through each room rummaging through their belongings, looking for contraband and violations. Whether they found any or not, officers left each room in complete disarray, each person's belongings scattered across the concrete floor. When the inspection was clear, each resident moved quickly to reassemble their rooms, making sure to gather their belongings before they were stolen by an opportunistic bystander. With rooms reassembled, students in Theology waited to be called out for their 7:40 a.m. class, but when the time approached, the dorm officer would not release them. "Are we ever getting out of here?" one person said, exasperated. The dorm officer looked up slowly from the papers he was reading and calmly if not gruffly responded, "Y'all offenders just gotta wait." So, they continued to wait. After twenty more minutes, another student asked the officer again, "Are we having classes today?"

Meanwhile five volunteers were standing in line outside the prison. Up since 5:30 a.m. ourselves, we met at the carpool location at 6:30 a.m. to make it to the prison by 7:30 a.m. We lined up outside the front entrance and waited. Employees who needed to clock-in were ushered in ahead of us. It was 7:50 a.m. before we made it to the security desk. We removed our shoes and jackets and placed them along with our clear backpacks onto a conveyor belt as if we were at the airport preparing for travel. Our destination this morning, however, was the school hall in the state prison and it was

proving as cumbersome to reach as a trip out of the country. The officer opened my backpack full of graded papers, freshly copied articles for next week's homework and sundry other items needed for teaching. I held my breath as I had done countless times before, praying that this particular officer would not look too closely at the reading assignments or examine the texts. I could never with assurance predict what they would deem "unacceptable" reading for the prison. As we walked through the metal detectors and re-assembled ourselves, we were finally in prison. We proceeded through no fewer than eight locked gates and doors, the sounds of jangling keys and clacking iron forming the soundtrack to our journey inside. It was after 8 a.m. when we finally got to the school—and it was silent. There were no students. We soon learned that there was no officer to let students in. So, like our students, we waited.

When an officer finally arrived, he sent a radio message to the dorms to announce that there would indeed be school classes today. Some officers in some dorms relayed the message to students, others did not. The students who did not lose hope and go back to bed, were finally, almost three hours after they arose, released to come to class. They arrived in spurts, those from the closest dorms arriving first. The school hall filled with the sounds of chatter, laughter, and greetings from people happy finally to be free to come to class. They entered the classroom, relieved if not exhausted at the journey, and it was only 8:30 a.m. in the morning.

As the students settled into their seats, we got started the way we always did – with one word. "When I call your name, please share one word that describes how you are feeling, how you are entering the space, or a hope for our time today." Fly: Energized, Storm: Tired, Baldwin: Curious, Fierce: just-trying-to-make-it. "Jessica?" I called Jessica's name knowing that she was not in the room. "Has anyone seen or talked

to Jessica?" I asked. "What dorm is she in?" someone asked. F2. "Sue, you're in F2

right?" Sue, who just entered class responded, "Yes, Jessica has a medical appointment

this morning. She will be here second-track but she gave me her homework to turn in."

"Laura?" I likewise called Laura's name knowing she was not in the room. "What

about Laura? Has anyone talked to Laura this week?" No one seemed to know where

Laura was this morning. "Will anyone see Laura this week?" I asked. Students looked

around the room at each other. I added, "Who can make it a point to see Laura this

week?" "I should," one student remarked. "I'll make sure she gets the homework and

stuff for the week." "Thank you and let her know we missed her today." I then asked the

other instructor in the room how he felt today. "Accomplished! After the obstacles it

seems like we all went through to get in today, I'd say we're winning already." We all

laughed agreeably. He then asked the same question of me. "Hopeful." Then we began

class.

The first activity students engaged that day was a written reflection they prepared

for homework. The topic was "What the Bible means to me."[189] With reflections in hand,

they opened class by sharing their writing in small groups. They practiced listening to

one another's stories, found commonalities, pointed out differences, and wrote on the

board all of the ways the Bible is understood in this gathering: the Word of God, a tool

used for control, instruction for living, history, fiction, hope. We left those words on the

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[189] Biblical Foundations is the first class new students take each year. Over the years, this has proven to be an effective place to begin the doing of theology. Students come to theological study familiar, at least nominally, with the Bible. They either have memories of it thanks to growing up in church or because they recall it gracing the mantle of their grandparents' home. Some utilize it in Bible studies in prison. Whatever the case, almost everyone, regardless of their religious affiliation, has experienced the Bible throughout the process of incarceration. Whether it was family quoting scripture or the well-intended volunteers who came to share the gospel in jail, Bible talk is familiar even if not understood. We begin with popular knowledge (cf. Freire 1993), the self-reflexive activity of naming one's relationship to and view of the Bible. We value this knowledge as the starting point for doing biblical exploration.

board to remind us throughout class that the Bible means different things to each of us. It was with respect for these differences and a curiosity about how they functioned in our lives that we proceeded with the activities for the day.

The focus for the class was the book of Genesis. Instead of just reading, we decided to act out the text.[190] We split the class into two groups and assigned each the task of enacting one of the creation stories. What could have been a quick activity turned into a stage production. Students asked the other teacher and me to wait in the hall while they prepared for the performance. I heard movement, people running around to find props and make impromptu costumes. When we were finally brought back into class, a performance of Genesis ensued, and we learned not just with our ears but with our eyes and our whole bodies what it felt like to create.[191]

Acting out the text allowed for what Courtney Goto calls revelatory experiencing to emerge in which students mediated knowledge with their bodies and came to see elements of the creation story they had never seen before.[192] We transitioned from the production to critical reflection about what it meant to have two creation stories in

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[190] One of the pedagogical commitments in the Theology classroom is to practice multiple ways of learning. By acting out instead of merely reading the text, we engaged the bodily kinesthetics (Gardner 1983) learning style which acknowledges and promotes a person's ability to process information physically through bodily movement and expression. This particular activity is bibliodrama a form of interpretive play used in Christian education where the biblical text is used as a platform for investigation (Pitzele 1998).

[191] The feeling of creation here is a liberating act. The theatrical performance of the biblical text allows for students to be what Augusto Boal calls receptors of the production; where they are active participants in the production, individually and communally. Boal asserts that this embodied dramaturgy moves the oppressed from silent receivers to protagonists asserting agency. He labels this practice the *poetics of the oppressed*. See Boal 1985: chapter 4.

[192] Practical theologians describe play as embodied theology. Courtney T. Goto (2016) asserts that there is realized knowledge and wisdom that is discerned through bodily play. In addition, Jaco Hamman (2012) argues that play fosters and enriches faith, deepens hope, and can help us to love our neighbors and ourselves by minimizing conflict and opening new possibilities for being in relationship (p. 42).

Genesis – why the original authors may have crafted these stories, why the choosers of the biblical canon kept them, how they might have been received by the original audiences and what they might mean for us today.[193] "This is really interesting," one student remarked. "If we had talked about this in church growing up, I may never have left." There was such energy in the room: laughter, movement, grace. What began as an exhausting start to the day was now transformed into a wonderful moment of tenacity, creativity, and life.

One student, face scrunched up, added, "I don't know about all of this creation myth stuff. I still believe the Bible is God's Word and cannot be wrong." "Thank you for adding this perspective," I responded. "Why is naming the Bible as God's word important to you ... or anyone else here who holds this commitment? Why is it important that the Bible never be wrong?" A conversation followed about how the Bible functioned in different student's lives. They began to share memories of parents and grandparents, pastors and Sunday School teachers when someone started to tell a story about their experiences with the Bible in the county jail.[194] Fifteen minutes into this back and forth reflexive experience, a voice emerged from the hall "EMERGENCY COUNT!" The sound startled us, calling us back from whatever this room had become. The officer,

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[193] These three ways of thinking about the text come from the three worlds of the text, a contextual approach to reading scripture where students explore the world behind the text (historical context), the world of the text (literary context), the world in front of the text (contemporary context). The world behind the text includes the context in which a text arose—historical situations, the world of the authors and their communities. The world of the text includes the structures of narrative, characterization and use of language. The world in front of the text is that imaginative dialogue in which the reader interacts with the text in the effort to understand it. All three worlds are intimately interconnected, but it is a helpful model for understanding the different aspects and, thus, different approaches of each dimension (p. 129). For more on the worlds of the text, see Kille 2002.

[194] There are fewer programming resources in jails than in prisons. However, there are many religious volunteers (predominantly Christian) who come to jails to lead Bible studies, prayer groups, pass out tracts, etc.

never acknowledging myself or the other teacher poked his head in the door, "back to the dorms!" leaving as quickly as he came to tell the next room. Disappointed but not surprised, students packed up their belongings. Class was ending an hour early. "So much for the rest of that discussion!" I agreed, hoping it would continue in the dorms between roommates and friends. We all packed up and walked out of the classroom together. They returned to their dorms and we made the journey back through no fewer than eight locked gates with the sounds of jangling keys and clanging iron serenading us out of prison to return again next week.

The previous scene is paradigmatic of how most classes begin in prison: slow, unpredictable, and full of obstacles that must be overcome – and of how they can end: abrupt, unexpected, and unfinished. What may appear to the casual observer simply to be logistical obstacles that come with a lack of appropriately scheduled institutional resources (available officer) is something more insidious to the students trying to get to class: "They do this all the time. They don't care about our education. This place talks about reformation but they don't care about anything that helps us improve our life. They just don't care ... And they make it hard for volunteers too. They want y'all to give up but don't give up. Keep persevering. We appreciate it!" According to the students, the difficulties experienced trying to get to class are indicative of the value the institution places on their learning and development. Students believe that if their lives truly mattered, the institution would do more to make their learning possible and accessible.

Theology class, each week, attempts to disrupt this message. As a participant with students in the classroom, I myself have witnessed and felt the transformative and transcendent nature of being together in the classroom. It *feels* different. Once the door closes and class begins, our bodies change. They relax. No longer concerned with the

gaze of an officer, we are simply together. Students express this sensation as "feeling normal." The practices engaged together in the theological classroom are life-giving and life-affirming in the death dealing context of prison. The theology classroom becomes a site of normalized humanity and it is good.

Practices

Theology and education are intertwined in practices. In Christian discourse, practices are defined as corporately produced and shared actions that address "fundamental human needs and conditions."[195] While this definition has been used in Christian practical theology to describe Christian practices, its definition is sufficiently far-reaching to be relevant in multireligious contexts. The practices embraced in the prison Theology classroom are not necessarily Christian or religious practices.[196] Christian practices, according to Craig Dykstra, are not activities we do to make something spiritual happen, nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God.

> Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us. They are

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[195] Dykstra and Bass (*Practicing Theology 2002*) define practices as such (p. 18) and suggest that broadly speaking, practices are derived from social activities common to a particular context. In the prison, it is less helpful to make a distinction in this multi-religious context between Christian and non-Christian practices; the definition is allusive and not necessary. What is more important and helpful is that people of all faith traditions or no faith tradition can embrace and enact these practices from their standpoint. For these reasons, I refer to these as pedagogical practices and not Christian practices.

[196] If Christian practices are practices that Christian people do over time, and the Theology classroom is comprised of students across the religious spectrum, then it would be disingenuous to use the term Christian to refer to their practices. Practices in and of themselves are not religious. Human beings are religious. Dykstra and Bass (*Practicing Theology* 2002) expanded the notion of Christian practice to mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world (p. 18). In *Practicing Our Faith*, they identified a broad list of Christian practices that suggest a way of life. However, others use practice even more broadly to mean any socially meaningful action. Kathryn Tanner uses practice this way and recognizes the improvisational character of practice and the way that practices involve a wide array of people in the construction of meaning, not just the intellectually or socially elite (pp. 228-242). Both Dykstra and Bass and Tanner's emphasis on practice suggest that practices are constituent elements in a way of life that becomes incarnate when human beings live in light of and in response to God's gift of life abundant (p. 21).

places where the power of God is experienced. In the end, these are not ultimately our practices but forms of participation in the practice of God.[197]

As pedagogical practices of critical theological education, the practices engaged in the Theology classroom are corporately produced practices that students & teachers do together in the classroom that shape a way of life that extends beyond the classroom. This way of life has the capacity to address the fundamental human needs of the persons engaging in the practices—needs of belonging, meaning, and control. In this light, these practices mediate God's goodness and grace, places where the power of God can be experienced. Most of the educational practices engaged in this multi-religious classroom are not religious practices, yet when understood theologically they are part of the liberating practice of God. Mary McClintock Fulkerson argues that "correct beliefs cannot be the indication of the theo-centric referent or theological nature of such work. If anything is an indirect 'sign,' it will be altered social relations that can be said to testify to Divine Presence."[198] In prison, these practices alter social relations as they resist and transform the degrading and dehumanizing social death practices of imprisonment.

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[197] Craig R. Dykstra, "What Are Christian Practices? | Practicing Our Faith," Practicing Our Faith, February 6, 2013, http://www.practicingourfaith.org/what-are-christian-practices.html.

[198] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Ethnography: A Gift to Theology and Ethics," Practical matters a transdisciplinary multimedia journal of religious practices and practical theology., 2013, http://practicalmattersjournal.org/2013/03/01/ethnography-gift/.

Prison Practice and Pedagogy

The practices of social death together shape a prison pedagogy fixed on

dehumanization.[199] Débora Bunker contends that we can identify embedded

assumptions about a community by observing its pedagogical practices.[200]

Prison pedagogy refers to the knowledge, values, and social relations mediated by prison

practices, provoking us to ask what values, knowledge, and social relations prison

practices mediate to incarcerated students?

Chapter two explored the similarities between the practices of social death used

in slavery and those used in incarceration. In both cases, the process of social death

includes practices of removing persons from familiar contexts and inserting them into a

new context governed by new rules and systems of authoritative power, degrading

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[199] Pedagogy concerns more than methods and techniques in a school classroom. It also refers to the formational practices and philosophies of institutions that shape behavior and perception. Pedagogy, as Henry Giroux maintains, is a form of ideological and cultural production that implies the construction and organization of knowledge, values, and social relations. For more on Giroux's politicized understanding of pedagogy and his efforts to broaden the discussion of public pedagogy into wider social discourse, see Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992). For Giroux, critical pedagogy is first and foremost a practice and not a method. It is not merely a skill, technique, or an *a priori* method that can be applied regardless of context. It is a disposition and practice that acknowledges the relationship between power and knowledge and necessarily involves matters of justice, ethics, and values as they exist in the concrete experiences of people's lives. Likewise, critical pedagogy is both theoretical and practical. It is theory in as much as it provides a framework for analyzing and responding to power, yet it is practical because it always values the lived experiences of people as its starting point. In addition, critical pedagogy is both moral and political. It is moral because it is concerned with how people define who they are and how they relate to others, and it is political because its goal is to provide pedagogical practices for learners to develop the skills and knowledge needed to address the limits of justice in a democratic society (O*n Critical Pedagogy*). In this way, critical pedagogy is also ethical. Giroux understands pedagogy as part of an on-going process of "individual and collective struggle over knowledge, desire, values, social relations, and political agency" (*On Critical Pedagogy*). As such, pedagogy is related to the never-ending work of helping people develop a meaningful life. Finally, critical pedagogy is transformative in the political sense. In *Pedagogy of the Depressed*, Giroux situates critical pedagogy within "a broader ethical and political project wedded to furthering social and economic justice" (3). It necessarily leads to active participation in the public sphere toward justice and improved life. Giroux's understanding of critical pedagogy places it in the realm of social justice, thereby enlarging its scope outside of the classroom.

[200] Jack L. Seymour et al., *Educating for Redemptive Community: Essays in Honor of Jack Seymour and Margaret Ann Crain* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 88.

naming conventions, and the regulation of bodily aesthetics such as clothing and hairstyles. This new way of living is imparted through practices intended to deform persons into nonbeings or property. These practices are designed to limit, control, and/or destroy qualities constitutive of full humanity, such as human dignity and agency. In the prison, these death-dealing practices masquerade as standard protocol, but the nature of these quotidian and mundane practices is to punish, degrade, dehumanize, shame, and ultimately to control. In liberationist pedagogical frameworks, the task of the student and educator in working for liberation in a prison setting is to know, name, and understand these practices so they may be analyzed, resisted, and transformed in the classroom. Consider the opening narrative of this chapter. From that brief account, I highlight three prison practices that mediate messages of limited agency and convey desired goals of obedience and unquestioned submission: random inspections, having to wait without being acknowledged, and being counted.

The random morning inspection that started the students' day might have been unexpected but it was not uncommon. Inspections occur frequently, so often in fact that when asked what one thing would make a good life possible in prison, students exclaimed "no inspections!" From the standpoint of the prison, inspections are designed to enforce policies and to keep the prison safe and free of contraband like drugs and weapons. While safety can be promoted through inspections, most inspections feel like a disrespectful violation of human dignity. The disruptive and disorderly process of inspection intentionally disregards the rights of students to ownership of property. At the whim of an officer, a precious photograph or a long-fretted over written paper for class can be destroyed without explanation and without any apology. For students, inspections unsettle and upset any sense of normalcy or stability. They connote to

students that their property is perpetually under the control of the Department of Corrections. The students own nothing and nothing they think they own is worth anything in the sight of the institution. Anything can be destroyed. How much effort do you put into your assignments if they can be destroyed?

The second practice students endure is waiting without being acknowledged. When students waited for Theology class but were not released, they were not given any information as to why they were not released, whether they would ever be released, or when they might expect to get to class. It is a frequent occurrence in prison for students to be given no information about when, where, or what is affecting their lives. They are forced to wait. The lack of consistency and unpredictability in waiting sometimes without knowing why you are waiting or when you will be permitted to move perpetuates feelings of uncertainty and dis-ease. Some students give up and "go back to bed." Waiting without acknowledgement challenges students' resolve to be committed, prepared, and engaged. Imagine that you have awakened at 5:30 a.m. for the past two Fridays only for officers to deny you leave to go to the school hall for class. How often would you continue to persevere for a class that may or may not happen?

Another practice that students regularly endure is count. Count refers to the systematic and frequent occurrence of gathering all residents of the prison in respective locations to be counted by officers. Count is said to "clear" when the final count in the institution matches the number of inmates on record as residing in the prison. In the opening story, emergency count is called because the numbers did not match that day and everyone had to return to their dorms for another count. As a volunteer, I seldom witness count except each year on graduation day. A morning count occurs during the graduation lunch celebration each year. While outside guests, family, and friends and

enjoying the celebration with students, officers require all inmates to line up in the middle of the room. They are asked to be silent while all of us outsiders watch; we are reminded that we are in a prison and that these students we are celebrating are inmates. The process of counting, like inspections, is a common disruption, so much so that Ilillana and her colleagues told stories about dreaming about count. The body is present in count, but inmates are asked not to speak. Like chattel, they are to be seen and not heard. Count signals that the most important thing in prison is surveillance and monitoring, that what is valued is their physical body as property/ownership and nothing else.

These three practices: random inspection, waiting without being acknowledged or knowing what is going on, and count normalize disruption and inconsistency in the lives of students. They do so in efforts to limit agency and promote unquestioned obedience. These practices suggest that submission without question is the desired pedagogical goal of prison practice. The three practices cast bodies as objects to be disciplined, controlled and contained. Affective and relational needs are negated.[201] The waiting and disruption signal to students that their lives and livelihood are not important, that their development and growth is insignificant and meaningless to the prison system. These mediated messages are not unique to this Georgia prison, but pervasive throughout the US prison punishment complex. A formerly incarcerated

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[201] Freire (1993) – the body is fundamental in the process of knowing. For Freire, the importance of the body is indisputable; "the body moves, acts, rememorizes the struggle for its liberation; the body, in sum, desires, points out, announces, protests, curves itself, rises, designs and remakes the world… I think it's absurd to separate the rigorous acts of knowing the world from the body." Embodied learning resists the devaluation of the body as a site of constructive knowledge and wisdom by the prison system.

student recorded these words in a manuscript about the pervasive destructive of prison

pedagogy:

> The Department of Corrections is what sociologists refer to as a "total institution." The goal of this kind of institution is to control most aspects of the incarcerated citizen's life. As a total institution, therefore, the D.O.C. is rule-oriented. It deemphasizes choice, offers no explanation for orders barked, rigidly applies its rules, will not keep incarcerated residents in the loop, and requires residents to just "do as you're told." We are stripped of all meaningful identity, reduced to a number, and stamped with the non-authoritative label "felon." Moreover, it is no secret that the one goal of the system is to perpetuate the existence of a non-dominant group. Prison is a dehumanizing environment, to say the least.[202]

Prison practices pose significant pedagogical problems for teaching, learning, and doing

theology in prison. These degrading and deforming practices foster misshapen identity

and mediate destructive meaning. The primary pedagogical goal of teaching in contexts

of social death is to resist and transform the persistent messages of degradation,

insignificance, and unworthiness, and to create spaces for the cultivation of human

agency and reflection.

If social death is mediated and realized through practices of degradation,

deformation, and humanization, liberating students from social death requires counter

practices that resist human disgrace and alienation. If theological education seeks to do

good in prison, it must have as its goal the pursuit of practices that counter social death,

or what I call redemptive practices. Redemptive practices mediate traces of God's

redemptive presence, redeeming and affirming life in contexts of social death. Examples

of redemptive practices are evidenced in the lives and testimonies of students in

Theology.

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[202] Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson, *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*, First edition. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 224.

Redemption and Prison Theology

"I heard a lot about redemption growing up,
but I never once heard a definition." —Hope

There is no one definition of redemption.[203] It is polydoxical, used in a multitude

of ways culturally, religiously, and politically. At best, we can and should name relative

meanings of redemption that are operative in specific contexts. Prison and the criminal

justice system as a whole have a strong and shaping influence in how redemption is

understood. Thus, while there is no single meaning of redemption among residents in

prison, there are meanings of redemption that are prominent here, meanings that are

contextual to the prison, formed and influenced by prison pedagogy.

"To me, redemption is change, when you're not what you used to be, and you

know you're redeemed when the parole board says you are ready to go home." An older

student, Ms. Q, offered these words during a classroom discussion on redemption. Hope

offered a description she remembered from growing up in church; "redemption is

something that comes later. We act in right ways in the present so that we can live a

redeemed life in a future after-life." Ilillana offered another: "*they* want us to be

redeemed now and all they care about is time. We can only redeem ourselves with doing

time." These responses reflect significant and complicated realities about the way

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[203] David Kelsey writes that there are three factors that contribute to why there is no single, unified definition of redemption: first, Kelsey argues that what redemption concretely means for Christians is relative to the concrete particularities of the situations and events that cry out for redemption. The centrality of the concrete situation is of paramount importance when trying to understand what is meant by redemption, and because the meaning is relative to these situations, no one meaning covers all cases. Second, there are various meanings of redemption within Christian discourse such that there is no single theological meaning of the word. Third, in modern culture, particularly in contexts of crime and punishment, redemption and related terms are used colloquially in a variety of ways. Kelsey suggests that some of these colloquial uses are extended metaphorically in Christian talk about God's relating to the world redemptively in Jesus Christ. With the varied and wide-ranging uses of the word, there is no single use but rather many contextually relevant uses. For Kelsey's full explication, see *Imagining Redemption*, 1st edition. See Kelsey 2005: 2–3.

redemption is used and understood in prison. They raise significant questions about the nature of redemption: if it is something that happens now or after this life, if a person can redeem themselves with good actions and behavior or only with serving time, if God or human being bestow one's redemption. For Ms. Q and Ilillana, redemption is a state of change or transformation that can be or is expected to be achieved in the present life but for Hope, redemption is a state of being that happens eschatologically such that one is not fully redeemed until she gets to heaven. This eschatological dimension of redemption does not abdicate human responsibility and action in the present. According to Hope, one secures the promise of redemption in the afterlife by virtue of one's actions in this present life. Together, these accounts portray the muddied and manipulative nature of redemption talk in prison. What follows are three dominant ideas about redemption operating in this context.

First, redemption in prison is radically dependent on human responsibility. Each student testimony suggests that redemption is something for which the individual is responsible. Often expressed as "redeeming myself," students convey a heightened sense of accountability regarding their redemption. This over-reliance on human responsibility in the work of redemption is related to one of the ways David Kelsey suggests redemption is predominantly understood in modern culture as "making up for."[204] Kelsey contends that cultural use of redemption most often connotes the process of an individual acting in ways that make up for, redress, repair, or compensate for a past bad performance. This is the dominant usage of redemption talk in criminal justice contexts when parole boards, judges, and society evaluate persons convicted of crime. A

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[204] David H. Kelsey, *Imagining Redemption*, 1st edition. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 16.

prison sentence becomes a way of compensating for a wrongdoing such that redemption is made possible when a person has adequately compensated for wrong behavior.

The conflation of individual human responsibility and redemption can generate despair in inmates serving life and long-term sentences as they struggle to understand whether and how they might ever know what it means to be redeemed. Redemption in prison is something that an individual must prove through their actions structuring redemption as an *a posteriori* reality. This radically individualistic and anthropocentric account of redemption places the onus of redemption first and foremost in the hands of the person who has committed the crime, the person in need of redemption. She is responsible for redeeming herself but is given little to no control or power to access the resources needed to actualize this redemption.

A second understanding of redemption operative in student testimonies is that redemption is conditional and transactional. According to students, redemption in prison culture operates on an if-then proposition. If you do *this,* then you will be redeemed. *This* can be anything from getting an education, to getting a job, to staying discipline free, to serving your prescribed amount of years in confinement. The problem with the conditional and transactional nature of redemption is that the rules of engagement are never made clear. Students never know how much is required of them for them to be redeemed; they are never confident that they can consistently prove their redemption. One student said it this way: "What if the redemptive value of my crime is too high to pay? What good is redemption then?"

A prison-defined understanding of redemption pedagogically teaches that the only good of human practices is in their instrumental ability to secure redemption as judged by the criminal justice system. Redemption is conditioned on good works that

are transactionally equivalent to the crime they committed. To those serving life sentences without parole, this understanding of redemption can and often does preclude them from the possibility of being redeemed. It calls into question the meaning of good works, education, and other practices if they hold no instrumental value toward the criminal justice system naming or solidifying one's redemption.

A third observation from student testimonies suggests that redemption is adjudicated by external parties. According to each account, the work of redemption occurs through practices employed by the person in need of redemption or recompense. Neither God nor other human beings can do the actions needed for one to be redeemed. However, God and other human beings are the ones who judge and decide if one's redemption is actualized and effective. In prison, the parole board is the dominant human group that adjudicates redemption. Yet Hope's eschatological understanding of redemption challenges reliance solely on human adjudication of redemption and shifts the genus of redemption from human hands to God's. If the parole board is not the adjudicator of one's redemptive life, then incarcerated persons with life sentences can locate value in human practices outside of the possibility for parole.

The ethos of the prison operates and thrives within a conditional and transactional conception of individualistic anthropocentric redemption. The inmate is responsible for redeeming themselves and they will realize this redemption in the present, if the parole board is merciful, or in the after-life if God is. The problem with this conception of a radically individualistic notion of redemption is that it leaves no room for structural or communal responsibility. It places the responsibility for healing and transformation on the person convicted of crime, offering little to no help in their efforts. Furthermore, redemption that is predominantly transactional leaves little room

for forgiveness and mercy in our conception of justice, suggesting that a good life of human dignity is one that must be earned. A prison-informed definition of redemption turns prison policies and the parole board into god(s) that are neither omniscient nor benevolent.[205]

A prison-shaped conception of redemption poses significant pedagogical and theological challenges. Pedagogically, it suggests that the goods of education and employment reside in their instrumental abilities to lead to realized freedom in parole. The parole board becomes the adjudicator of what counts toward redemption and persons who are likely to be paroled have higher redemptive value than those who are not. Theologically, the pseudo-religious redemptive language in prison masks the prison's desired reality as God's redemptive reality. This type of redemption language serves a prison agenda of control and manipulation that shapes subjects toward submissive obedience to the prison; it is redemption talk that perpetuates mechanisms of social death. In order for redemption to make an earthly and everyday difference in contexts of social death, there needs to be an understanding of redemption that sustains and flourishes life in the presence of social death. What is needed is a more life-giving understanding of redemption that holds together human responsibility with God's redemptive desire for the world.

A more life-giving understanding of redemption can be found in the original meaning of redemption used in Hebrew scripture where redemption refers neither to life after death nor to a millennial hope, but rather to a very concrete act of freeing

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[205] This is why David Kelsey rejects the conflation of redemption with human action. For Kelsey, at best humans can minister or help with coping, but human actions cannot redeem. Kelsey locates redemption solely within God's divine work. See Kelsey 2005: 26–30.

slaves from bondage.[206] This structural understanding of redemption as liberation from

present conditions of bondage is prominent in liberation theologies. In Black theology,

liberation, salvation, and redemption are used interchangeably. Redemption is always

connected to earthly liberation from oppressive, dehumanizing forces. Any promise of

future redemption without subsequent struggle against forces of oppression in the

present is fatalistic hope and death-dealing.[207] In womanist theology, redemption is

never only individualistic but always concerns social reality and communities.[208]

Liberation theology contributes to an understanding of redemption that is more life-

giving in prison where redemption is conceptualized as the diminishing of harm and

oppression for the restoration of human dignity and relationality as God's redemptive

desire for the world. A criminal justice focus on reciprocity and individual responsibility

shapes an understanding of redemption that is incompatible with a liberative

framework. A liberative understanding of redemption politicizes redemption language

in prison and challenges prison pedagogy that teaches that redemption is solely human

work and that designates human systems as the ultimate adjudicator and arbitrator.

Informed by a liberative theological logic of redemption, a student who takes matters

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[206] In her work on feminist theological perspectives on redemption, Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that ancient understandings of redemption operative in the Hebrew scriptures define redemption socially as liberation from bondage. Redemption was perceived as a this-worldly social definition that was largely egalitarian, overcoming gender and class hierarchy. In the New Testament, two distinct shifts occur, one was from a social definition to an individualistic, other-worldly definition; the second was from an egalitarian definition to one that reinforced gender hierarchy. See Ruether 1998: 11–13.

[207] For more on this relationship, see Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979).

[208] For Womanist perspectives on redemption, liberation, and social salvation, see Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series; No. 79 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1993) and Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

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into her own hands and makes the everyday, quotidian practices of prison life work toward her own liberation can be said to be doing redemptive work. She finagles her way to an earthly and spiritual redemption and resists the need for a parole board or society to name her redemption worthy. She creates her own redemptive reality and she calls it good.

Consider Hope again. While she knows it may be impossible to atone fully for crimes committed, she believes that by improving the lives of others one is able to redeem oneself, improving where one has failed in the past. To experience redemption is to have this opportunity to feel human again by doing good works in order to make a difference in the world. Redemptive action is an individual undertaking with social implications. Hope's understanding is socially focused without omitting personal agency and responsibility. Her eschatological understanding of redemption prevents her from thinking that the work of redemption is solely a human endeavor. In God, she finds a source in which to ground her action and her optimism. Ultimately, Hope reminds us that although redemption is not solely human work, redemption is also not something outside of human work. We participate socially and relationally in bringing about glimpses of God's redemptive vision for the world.

In prison, human agency in the work of redemption is vitally important. In contexts of social death, students are stripped of their ability to govern their own lives. Mechanisms of social death seek to control and limit them, to degrade and disenfranchise. Though prison-informed redemption speech is radically individualistic and transactional, its ability to be actualized is false. Prison-informed conceptions of redemption depend on human responsibility without the promise of human agency. Students want to know how they can participate in and experience a redeemed life. They

want an experience of redemption that is not dependent on a parole board or the afterlife. These students want to be active agents, participating in God's act of redeeming themselves and the world in ways that humanize and build self-esteem. This is where redemptive *practices* become significant as ways of engagement that allow students to contribute to their own and others' earthly salvation, freedom, and restitution.

Redemptive Practices

The concept of redemptive practices is rooted in a liberative theological understanding of redemption where redemption is both something that God does and something in which humans choose to participate and to accept. With God and humans as agents and copartners in redemptive work, redemption is both something people receive and something people enact. It is not an otherworldly concept, but a concept rooted in the here and now. Redemption, as an on-going process of transforming trauma into healing, suffering into freedom, death into life, can be and must be experienced in part in the concrete experiences of everyday life. Human beings are responsible for discerning these experiences and for cultivating them. If redemption is freeing from alien, oppressive control, then embracing this concept of redemption in the prison politicizes redemption and condemns social practices of punishment that degrade and dehumanize.

Identifying redemptive practices requires an interpretive theological logic that assumes the diminishing of brokenness is an indirect sign of God's redemptive presence.[209] Redemptive practices in prison are those practices that diminish brokenness

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[209] Mary McClintock Fulkerson (2013) argues that it is not accurate theological speech but rather altered social conditions that testify to God's redeeming presence.

and promote the fullness of human life in contexts of social death. The theological classroom must recognize, nurture, and develop these practices so that redemption can be experienced as "grace unfolding in the community which reveals God's promise and the goal toward which God has everything moving."[210]

Redemptive practices allow students to experience a way of life that liberates them from the burden of shame, frees them from the degradation of dehumanization, and creates space for them to live into a vision of life beyond the confines and constraints of social death. These practices participate in God's act of redeeming the world by bringing about eschatological glimpses of a good life, a redeemed life, as best we can discern and interpret it. Redemptive practices mediate God's redemptive reality.[211] They perform an in-breaking of the world as it can be experienced in the here and now, even if sporadically. When practiced over time, they build up a resistance to oppression and cultivate the skills needed both to survive and to resist, eventually to talk back to the systems that confine and constrict human life. Redemptive practices allow participants to live into a vision of life informed by God's desire for goodness and justice even in the midst of punishment. These practices stand in contrast to practices that degrade, foster deprivation, abandonment, loss, and damnification. If prison pedagogy informed by social death practices thrives on degradation and deprivation, then redemptive practices must offer another way. They must stand in contrast and in opposition to the practices and pedagogies of social death. If the goal of punishment through social death is to create nonbeings, strip agency, and stagnate growth, then the

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[210] Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 130.

[211] Mary McClintock Fulkerson (2007) speaks of God's redemptive reality as that which can be discerned amidst the "banal and opaque realities of ordinary existence" (p. 7).

goals of redemptive practices must resist and transform these acts into practices that humanize, increase opportunities for agency, and contribute to opportunities for growth and human flourishing. Redemptive practices create and operate within alternative spaces in the prison, transforming classrooms into hush harbors and sanctuaries.[212] Redemptive practices are informed by a discerned vision of God's goodness and justice – a life we believe God desires for God's people.

Humanizing Qualities of Redemptive Pedagogical Practice

To redeem life, that is to free from structures of oppression in order to promote human well-being, redemptive practices must exhibit qualities that contribute to belonging, agency, and hope. These qualities might be referred to pedagogically as soul-making, liberating, and futuring qualities of redemptive practice. They not only describe the nature of the practices that students embrace in theological study, they are also pedagogical reminders of the theological significance of humanization in educational practice.

<u>Soul-making</u>

Redemptive practices are soul-making because they contribute to humanization. Instead of de-humanizing, they help to "make the soul," or to humanize. The term recalls an ancient understanding of how humans are formed and shaped. It suggests that there are events and practices in human life that form us into human beings. As a

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[212] In slavery, enslaved peoples gathered in secret to practice religious traditions free from the constraints and demands of the dominators. They were able to mix their African traditions with Christianity, to interpret Christianity for themselves, to name their experiences and to imagine a freedom beyond enslavement. Likewise, students in CTS gather in broad daylight to mix and interpret their religious experiences to interpret the system that confines them and to imagine a freedom from the oppression of social death. The classroom becomes a sanctuary or a place set apart where these experiences can happen free from the observation and surveillance of officers and administrators.

theological understanding of formation, soul-making perhaps more than Freire's humanization suggests a holistic and spiritually inclusive orientation to human development. While most scholarship has focused on the impact of trauma and unexplainable yet disastrous events as being formative or as contributing to soul-making, feminist scholarship has focused attention on the centrality of relationships to the process of soul-making.[213] Soul-making refers to the quest for human wholeness, well-being, desire for purpose and meaning in life, and it is rooted in relationship. Rosemary Radford Reuther describes soul-making as a "process of enhancing our capacities, both personally and socially, for sustaining just and loving relationality, of curbing and curing fear of and contempt for others and for ourselves."[214] As a process, it is both personal and social. It involves the slow maturation of a self-in-relation. It is both an individual, inward journey and a communal journey toward transformed relationships. This transformation is holistic, encompassing relationship to one's self, to one's immediate community, to creation, to society, to culture, to God. Educational practices that are soul-making tend to human relationality and the need for meaning making. They do this by cultivating opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal development and providing strategies and resources for critical reflection toward understanding.

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[213] Here I am referring to the work of philosopher of religion John Hick (1966) and his Irenaean "soul-making" theodicy in which he argues that God allows evil and suffering in the world in order to develop humans into virtuous creatures capable of following his will. Similarly, Simone Weil writes of the pedagogical value of evil and suffering in *Waiting for God* (1951).

[214] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, Introductions in Feminist Theology; 1 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 75.

Liberating

Redemptive practices are liberating because they free participants from the

totalizing effects of oppression, even if only momentarily. By participating in liberating

practices, students express that they "feel normal" and "feel like a human being again."

Pedagogically, liberating practices stand in contrast to practices of indoctrination or

subordination. In the concept of emancipatory learning, liberating practices focus on

enabling persons to recognize lacks or deficiencies so they may learn to repair and

transcend them. Emancipatory education seeks to equip students to understand the

history of the knowledge structures they are encountering, the paradigms structuring

thought, and the relation of these to human interests.[215] Practices that are liberating

participate in the praxiological process of identifying, naming, and transforming

conditions that distort, diminish, or delimit human possibility and potential.

The liberating nature of redemptive practice has both spiritual and social

dimensions. Emilie Townes asserts that the aim of liberation is "to restore a sense of self

to the oppressed" by cultivating a strong sense of pride and self-worth.[216] Accordingly,

the spiritual dimension of liberating practice "concentrates on the acquisition and

possession of power that enables the individual to be her or himself fully."[217] *To be fully*

human is the spiritual telos of liberating practice. Theology student Cate defines

redemption in a way that recognizes this liberating character, "redemption is becoming

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[215] The concept of emancipatory education has been popular among liberative pedagogues and educators. Scholarly contributions can be found from Greene (1978), Mezirow (1990), and Westfield (2008).

[216] Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series; No. 79 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1993), 198.

[217] Townes, *Womanist Justice,* 200.

the self you were meant to be." The social dimension of liberating practice is what

Townes calls "participation in the world."[218] It suggests that liberating qualities of

redemptive practice encourage participants to have concern not only for themselves but

also for others. Liberating practices develop the wherewithal to reject external

constraints that deny human dignity while freeing people to have concern for others.

Townes warns us against collapsing freedom and liberation.[219] Freedom is a state of

being while liberation is a process, dynamic and never ending. This is a helpful reminder

in thinking about the nature of redemptive practice. Redemptive practices alone do not

secure freedom, but they are dynamic agents in freedom's process.

<u>Futuring</u>

Finally, redemptive practices are *futuring* because they create a sense of

possibility, a future toward which to live. Maxine Greene calls theological education a

process of futuring rather than the insemination of ideas. By futuring, Greene means

going beyond the now and pointing toward future possibilities. Greene asserts that

"transformations are conceivable, that learning is stimulated by a sense of future

possibility and by a sense of what might be."[220] Futuring might imply a penchant toward

a functionalist goal-oriented understanding of education in which students embark on

the educational task in preparation for some future life. In the context of redeeming life,

futuring practices refer to the act of living and creating in the present what is hoped for

in the future. It is the act of living in the here and now based on one's hopes for the

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[218] Townes, *Womanist Justice,* 200.

[219] Townes, *Womanist Justice*, 201.

[220] Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 3–4.

future, not a delayed living. It is the experience of the future in the present – an in-breaking of one's hoped for existence in the present. It is a way of making the future hope present in the today. Futuring rejects what Freire calls a fatalistic liberation, a liberation to come as some sort of gift of progress.[221] Another way of thinking of futuring is as visionary pragmatism. According to Patricia Hill Collins, visionary pragmatism links caring, theoretical vision with informed, practical struggle. It is what allows oppressed people to envision lives of unrealized possibility in the midst of oppression and disenfranchisement.[222]

The central pedagogical focus of futuring is on the imagination, one's ability to imagine alternative possibilities for the future. However, a significant pedagogical challenge operative in contexts of social death is what Freire calls the education of longing. "Basically, it is very difficult to experience exile, to live with all the different longings—for one's town or city, one's country, family, relatives, a certain corner, certain meals—to *live* with longing, and educate it too. The education of longing has to do with the transcendence of a naively excessive optimism…"[223] Social death distorts reality either by over emphasizing an unrealistic optimism of "going home" or by cultivating a despair of never going home, of never being free. Where an awareness of physical death's presence might lead us to be eschatologically focused, an awareness of social death's constant presence urges us to focus on life now. To be present in the here and

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[221] Freire is making a connection between fatalistic intelligence and fatalistic liberation that denies authentic hope. See Freire 1994: 91.

[222] Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Contradictions of Modernity; v. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 188.

[223] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 25.

now, to live and practice in the present is a refusal to locate the telos of redemptive and liberating practice in the afterlife – in one's release from prison or one's entrance into heaven. Redemptive practices as futuring practices pull us back to the here and now, to the concrete reality of life lived in the present. They call us to discern the present, act in the present, and find value in the present moment. Futuring is more than an obsession with life to come: it is a preoccupation with making the future possible in the now, even if only partially and momentarily.

When soul-making, liberating, and futuring practices occur in the classroom, they are redemptive pedagogical practices. What follows are examples of redemptive practices operative in the Theology classroom at Arrendale.

Types of Redemptive Practices in the Prison Theology Classroom

The Theology classroom can transcend the concrete reality of the prison when it embraces practices that encourage humans to participate in God's redemptive project, liberating human suffering with experiences of grace. In contexts of social death, life-giving practices make people feel human again. They normalize life as embodied and relational and indict social death as a form of sin. They free people from the constraints of oppressive systems of alienation and degradation and cultivate within them an affirmation of human dignity and relationality. They humanize. In what follows, I expound on five of these practices expressed in the opening story. These practices are not exhaustive, but they are paradigmatic of the overall pedagogical disposition experienced and cultivated in Theology. These practices are: coming together, choosing names, considering one another, critical questioning, and creating theology.[224]

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[224] By considering first the practices of theological education instead of the content of theological education, the goal of theological study becomes more than an intellectual product in which students

Coming Together

Recall the opening story and how difficult it was physically to come to class in prison. The obstacles were numerous and the attempt to capture the difficulty inevitably obscures the magnitude and depth of harm of the pervasive and systematic attempts to thwart human gathering for education. Nonetheless the experience is fundamental to understanding this first redemptive practice: coming together.

In Theology, the practice of coming together is the intentional act of physically showing up to be with others. Showing up acknowledges and values the presence of physical bodies and calls these bodies good. In a system that does not value bodies for their goodness, coming together is the act of making one's body present to other bodies as an act of intentional presence. It conveys that each body and presence matters in the classroom. We reinforce the importance of presence pedagogically in the opening activity of calling each person's name, even those who are not there. In contrast with other contemporary educational settings that experiment with digital modes of gathering, the only way to be present to one another in prison is physically. The physical act of gathering takes effort and cultivates within an implicit pedagogical lesson that bodies matter – mine and others.

The practice of coming together is the practice of intentional community cultivation. Community formation is essential to the humanization project. It happens mysteriously and is so complex that it eludes formula. It does, however, happen over

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demonstrate mastery. Focusing on the practices engaged in theological study suggests that theological education is a process in which students and teachers engage to shape life. Theological study in prison must first attend to the life and social well-being of all experiencing the sin of social death practices.

time through "the power in small but important elements of being together."[225] These small but important elements might include physical touch, eye contact, hearing one another, reading body language, and developing care for one another as people listen to one another's stories.

Community formation practitioner Peter Block suggests that community precedes "from an expanding shared sense of belonging."[226] These communities are made up of people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives who are coming together over a shared belief in the possibility of healing and growth in prison. It is essential that this community bond over something more than its shared oppressed identity. In CTS, students' bond over shared humanness and common hopes for growth and accomplishment. Block goes on to suggest that communities are built from the assets and gifts of the citizens in places where people choose to come together to produce a desired future.[227] The future desired by Theology students is a future with meaning and purpose. In this sense, they are a community of practice. A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.[228] This definition reflects the fundamentally social nature of human learning. The thing they are learning to do, in this context, is to resist the threat of dehumanization and fulfill a desire for growth and development.

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[225] Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, Calif.: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 10.

[226] Block, *Community*, 9.

[227] Block, *Community*, 14.

[228] A community of practice is a group of people who share a craft or a profession. The concept was first proposed by cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger (1991). Wenger significantly expanded on the concept in his book *Communities of Practice* (1998).

The values structuring coming together are accountability, trust, and respect. Coming together in a prison classroom is one of the few places where students actively *choose* to cross boundaries of difference to be with and learn from one another. In most other places (dorm, work, etc.), students are forced together with little consultation. Though students complain about forced togetherness, they actively choose to be together with the diverse and disparate group of people who come to Theology.

Coming together in prison is an act of resistance and fortitude. It takes perseverance to combat the desire to stay inside, avoid guards, and to be targeted for getting an education. It is a risk. To be set apart educationally (as opposed to a gang or other grouping) presents challenges. One may be targeted for trying to improve one's life. Recall CJ's testimony of how guards treat her badly for having joy. Having a sense of worth can be cause for punishment. bell hooks reminds us that building community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must do to undermine harmful socialization, in our case, in the social death practices of imprisonment.[229] Within these actions, values emerge such as: the respect of bodies, trusting relationships, safety, common ground not sameness, accountability, and being seen. These values are the internal goods to the practice of coming together. They are good in and of themselves. Pedagogically, they are "humanizing relational pedagogies," a term Nancy Lynne Westfield uses to denote pedagogies that are incarnational and relational, pedagogies that seek justice.[230] Choosing to gather is a physical, somatic act that resists dehumanization and values life – both individual and collective. When coming together is viewed as fundamental to the

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[229] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 36.

[230] Westfield et. al. discusses the significance of humanizing relational pedagogies in *Being Black, Teaching Black* (2008).

project at hand, as part of the learning objectives so to speak, then a priority of simply

being together changes the pedagogical concerns. It matters that we are physically

present and attentive. It matters who and what is shared and how often this sharing

occurs. It matters that the arbitrary boundaries between "class" and "real life" remain

open, porous, and transgressed.

The act of intentional community formation implicit in the practice of coming

together shapes the prison classroom into what Evelyn Parker calls a redemptive

community:

> A redemptive community symbolizes daily living that ushers in justice and peace
> for all humankind, all creatures, and the earth. It offers salvation and freedom
> from death-dealing acts of racism, classism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and
> all other sins that physically destroy and psychologically debilitate God's good
> creation. A redemptive community, as empowered by the Holy Spirit, rescues,
> reclaims, and restores all of creation to God's gift of life that flourishes.[231]

Without coming together, this redemptive community could not be realized. This social

and relational practice is the cornerstone of redemptive living in prison.

Choosing Names

Recall again the opening scene from class in which I called the names of each

student: Fly, Storm, and Fierce. These are not the formally recognized names of anyone

residing at Arrendale. However, on the first day of class, we ask students two questions:

what they want to be called and what pronouns we should use. These acts are common

today in many university classrooms, but they are a particularly radical act in prison.

The official *modus operandi* of the Department of Corrections states that all inmates

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[231] Evelyn Parker, "A Pedagogy of Redemption with Incarcerated Girls," in *Educating for Redemptive Community*, ed. Jack L. Seymour et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 111.

must be referred to by their government-identifiable names. While this is fine for many students, there are those who have an aversion to their given name and prefer another. To honor this decision, we transgress the official rule and call students by the names they choose for themselves.

The practice of choosing names is a radical act of self-naming. Lifted up widely across liberation theologies and critical pedagogies, the act of self-naming is a liberative, emancipatory practice that acknowledges that freedom comes with the ability to name the self for one's self. The intrinsic value in naming is the affirmation in personal agency. Students engage in agential identity construction that allows them to name themselves apart from an inmate identity. They engage in a retrieval of individual uniqueness and an ownership of themselves. One student, whom I will call Darla, once claimed aloud, "You know who I am out there but in here, you can just call me Darla." In class, Darla was able to be a version of herself that was distinct from the person she was outside of the classroom. In class, she was not the guarded self that must always perform out of survival and that needed protection. She is able to live into a version of herself that she desires; emerging, embodying and enacting a hoped-for self.[232]

The practice of choosing names signals that not only can a person have the agency to choose the name they desire for themselves, they can also express agency in naming the world as they experience it. Freire contends that there is power in naming

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[232] The practice of choosing names can also refer to the act of naming one's experience. Theology is a praxis-oriented classroom. We begin with what's going on in the world, in their world.

one's context, and Maxine Greene argues that a naming praxis contributes to one's

becoming or humanization.[233]

Considering One Another

Considering one another is a practice of care and refers to the acts of listening to

and communicating with one another. "Theology is one of the only places to have a

decent conversation all week!" A Theology student offered these words once when I

asked her why she keeps attending classes though she graduated many years ago. This

student suggests that the ability to have a conversation about something important is

humanizing and constitutive of feeling normal. Another student suggested that Theology

opens up a depth of conversation that does not naturally occur in everyday life. "I've

been living with these people for a long time but never knew this much about them."

Considering one another goes beyond gossip and chatter and involves significant

conversations about matters of life and death. It is more than listening to other

opinions; it involves taking a view from a different standpoint and learning to appreciate

other perspectives. These are skills that are life-saving in contexts of social death.

The essential elements of considering one another are conversation and dialogue.

Katie Cannon observed that classrooms which function with a communal logos

necessarily promote dialectic-dialogic conversation.[234] bell hooks adds that conversation

is the "central location of pedagogy" and can promote humanization when it values and

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[233] Freire's concept of "naming the world" (1993: chapter 3) influenced scholars such as Greene (1988) who draw connections between naming and becoming.

[234] Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 7.

affirms the knowledge and wisdom present in the common vernacular of the students.[235]

Dialogue supports a relational pedagogy as it emphasizes relations between participants in the class (between students and between students and teachers). According to Freire, dialogue is fundamentally relational, refusing to let students "wither away in isolation."[236] It saves students from the fear of loneliness and abandonment and promotes a relation of empathy nourished by "love, humility, hope, faith and trust."[237] These virtues of love, humility, hope, faith, and trust are values intrinsic to dialogue.

Through conversation and dialogue, students practice hearing one another, understanding different viewpoints, and also speaking back in a way that acknowledges the other without suppressing the self. Mary Pellauer contends "[i]f there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories—listening to them and honoring and cherishing them, and asking them to become even more brightly beautiful than they already are."[238] In this regard, the practice of considering one another is a fundamental theological practice. Womanist and feminist theologians support this claim as they argue that "theology is shaped in dialogue between and among ourselves—who we are, what we are doing, together or separately, in concert or at odds with one another. The study of theology takes place in this dialogue, between and among ourselves, as well as

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[235] hooks argues that conversation is the central practice of democratic educators who seek to resist the devaluation of vernacular speech and popular knowledge. See hooks 2003: 44.

[236] Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 110.

[237] Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 1st U.S. paperback edition., Continuum Book. (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 45.

[238] Katie G. Cannon and Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985), 134.

between ourselves and the authors of the texts as we engage them in our disparate life situations in our common educational praxis."[239]

In considering one another, students learn to respect multiple types of knowledge and to see their knowledge and the knowledge of the community as valid and valuable both as sources of truth and as valid sources of critique. Students practice offering their reading of the world and they recognize that there are other ways of reading the world different from their own.[240] They, in turn, not only learn to recognize and deal with differences in the class, they are able to do so in their broader lives.

For example, in Biblical Foundations, we engage a historical critical reading and study of scripture. The first activity students do is to name what the Bible is to them and where these beliefs come from. Over the course of the quarter, we explore multiple ways of reading the text: the world behind, of, and in front of the text. One student, Briar, had this to offer:

> My grandfather always throws the Bible at me as if that is the only thing he can talk about. I think he does it because he wants to make sure I'm saved, whatever that means. I used to ignore him, but the last time I was able to have a conversation about Genesis. I told him there were two creation stories. He about lost it.

What was told as a humorous story is evidence of a deeper transformation in how Briar has used her study of the Bible both to consider her grandfather's standpoint and to challenge it. She was able both to consider his care for her as the impetus for his

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[239] Cannon and Mud Flower Collective, 141–42.

[240] Freire uses the phrase "reading of the world" to denote the initial content of education. The role of the progressive educator, accordingly, is to share their own readings of the world and to bring out the fact that there are other readings of the world different from the ones being offered. At times, the role of the educator is to antagonize the readings to deepen understanding and increase reflective awareness. For more, see Freire 1994: 102–103.

behavior but also to assert her own agency and knowledge into the conversation such that biblical speech was no longer one sided. Considering one another in dialogue, through conversation, and by working together creates a critical attitude.[241]

Critical Questioning

"What kind of person doesn't have questions," Creative Justice declared, more as a statement than a question. In saying that, "Church is no place to ask questions. That's why I'm glad there's Theology," Creative Justice (CJ) passionately conveyed her belief that questions are fundamental to human life. For CJ, however, her experiences of church suggested that church was no place to ask the sorts of questions she explored in theological study. CJ was expressing a significant truth captured by liberative pedagogues about the centrality and importance of questions to the project of humanization. Freire admonished educators that we cannot "as imaginative, curious beings, … cease to learn and to seek, to investigate the 'why' of things. We cannot exist without wondering about tomorrow, about what is 'going on,' and going on in favor of what, against what, against whom."[242] For Freire and for CJ, critical questions are fundamental to living.

Critical questioning refers to the deconstructive work of meaning-making and is fundamental to moral life. It gives rise to a critical consciousness that resists temptation toward the indifference, stagnancy, and decay that petrifies the human mind. The term critical refers to the human capacity for self-reflection and the task of engendering multiple ways of reading the world to expose systems and structures of power and

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[241] Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 45.

[242] Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 88.

relation. Critical also refers to consciousness-raising, awakening, or "perspectival grasping," a mode of moving outwards, coming in touch with the world. Critical questioning includes acts of "imagining, intuiting, remembering, believing, judging, conceiving, and (focally) perceiving."[243]

The consciousness shaped by critical questioning leads to what Greene and other philosophers have termed wide-awakeness. To be wide-awake is to perform the conscious endeavor to elevate one's life by becoming aware and intentional in action.[244] The goal of wide-awakeness, Greene insists, is to encourage students to pose "searching and significant questions with respect to what conditions them … to learn how to recognize mystification."[245] Wide-awakeness therefore has a "concreteness;" it is related to being in the world:

> By the term "wide-awakeness" we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. Only the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide. awake. It lives within its acts and its attention is exclusively directed to carrying its project into effect, to executing its plan. This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full awareness.[246]

Critical questioning is an active process of discernment and curiosity. In Theology, the dominant source of critical questioning is lived experience – students' lives and the contemporary world are the most poignant and frequently engaged site of critical questioning. In addition to reading the human web of life, students also engage

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[243] Greene, *Landscapes of Learning*, 14.

[244] For more on wide-awakeness, see Greene 1978 and 1988.

[245] Greene, *Landscapes of Learning*, 19.

[246] Alfred Schutz, *The Problem of Social Reality*, Schutz, Alfred, 1899-1959. Collected Papers ; 1 (The Hague: MNijhoff, 1962), 213.

in critical questioning through written texts and art. Students engage what is considered "traditional" academic theological texts, but they also and often times with more rigor and curiosity, practice theological reflection using other literary forms such as fiction novels and nonfiction autobiographical writing. These materials act as other "bodies" in the room, giving the class additional perspectives and experiences from which to reflect. Various modes of art have also been useful in this process. Music and film have been two additional sources of reflective content. All of these modes act as sites from which students can begin the process of critical questioning and reflection.

Critical questioning as a deconstructive work seeks to contribute to wide-awakeness by fostering the skills needed to see, name, analyze, and transform contexts. Greene argues that reflection requires that we be awake to the world and conscious of our own consciousness; that we embrace ambiguity and that we engage the process of thinking about our thinking. Though the prison is, in the words of bell hooks, "a context that was established to socialize [persons] to accept domination," students suggest that the critical questioning in Theology offers them space to practice alternative ways of thinking and living.[247]

Critical theological questions elude clear, quick answers, making them essential for understanding, surviving, and transforming contexts of social death and oppression. Theological questions are never exhaustive and always contextually driven. They provide persons resisting social death with a constant source of active, generative content. Questions create space for something new to emerge. Questioning is a futuring and liberating practice. "Questions that have the power to make a difference are ones

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[247] hooks, *Teaching Community*, 2.

that engage people in an intimate way, confront them with their freedom, and invite them to cocreate a future possibility," writes Block.[248] "The future is brought into the present when citizens engage each other through questions of possibility, commitment, dissent, and gifts."[249] In communal dialogue, questions require each person's participation to bring about meaning. As a source of spiritual intrapersonal development, critical questions inspire wrestling with personal belief and action, and they unsettle us. Finally, critical questioning leads to a critical awareness that is fundamental to the project of emancipatory education.[250]

Creating Theology

Creating theology stands in contrast to a practice of receiving theological information.[251] Instead, creating theology is a constructive and generative practice that students engage with their bodies and their own language.[252] The theologians of the Mud Flower Collective suggest that "to consume passively theologies produced by others is not to do theology … we have been discovering theology as a creative act that incorporates our present experience and is resourced by our roots—the traditions from

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[248] Block, *Community*, 105.

[249] Block, 101.

[250] Greene also argues that in addition to critical awareness, self-understanding and social commitment are fundamental to emancipatory education. These three together are reflective of redemptive practices commitments to cultivating contexts where meaning-making and community/belonging might be possible. See Greene 1978.

[251] Here I am suggesting that merely receiving theological information is a form of banking education, from the banking model of learning that Freire and critical pedagogues argue is a pedagogy of domination. See Freire 1993.

[252] Enabling students to develop *their* language and "not the authoritarian, sectarian gobbledygook of educators, but their own language—which, emerging from and returning upon their reality, serves to sketch out the conjectures, the designs, the anticipations of their new world." See Freire 1994: 30.

which we have come … the most important features of the creativity are that it is foundationally oriented toward justice and that it is relational in character."[253] The production of the Genesis creation stories described earlier in this chapter is an example of how students use their bodies and creativity to do theology in the theological classroom. Students also create in various art forms such as poetry, dance, spoken word, drawings, and even radio podcast. Theology here is something that is constructed more than something that is only read or memorized.

The central feature in the practice of creating theology is creativity. Practical theologian Courtney Goto defines creativity as "the capacity to make what exists into something new or enlivening to oneself. Where there is peace and freedom, creativity flourishes. However, creativity also assists in survival and resistance because it summons possibilities, grants agency, and fosters hope."[254] Even though forms of oppression place limits on creativity, Goto suggests that *critical creativity* is the "brightest hope for transformation."[255] What Goto points to is the dialectical tension between creativity and freedom. On one hand, creativity thrives in freedom. However, it also assists and persists in times of oppression, disenfranchisement, and confinement. Angie Titchen and Brendan Mccormack define critical creativity as a pedagogical strategy in which the assumptions of the critical paradigm are blended and balanced with the creative for the purpose of human flourishing. They suggest that human flourishing, in critical creativity, focuses on maximizing individuals' achievement of

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[253] Cannon and Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy*, 140–41.

[254] Courtney Goto, "Asian American Practical Theologies," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 32.

[255] Goto, "Asian American Practical Theologies," 44.

their potential for growth and development as they change the circumstances and relations of their lives.[256] The critical in critical creativity links the deconstructive work of critical questioning to the constructive work of creating theology. After the cognitive or embodied critique of de-constructing a context, situation, crisis, contradiction or dilemma, students then re-construct it for the purposes of transforming practice. This kind of reflective re-construction is a creative process that uses imagination and expression to access embodied, tacit knowing and blend embodied and imaginative knowing and meaning into cognitive critique.[257] Together, critical questioning and creativity form an embodied cognitive critique of practices of degradation, a way of deconstructing them and then reconstructing possibilities. When used to do theology, it helps students deconstruct and reconstruct belief systems about God, self, and others in ways that incorporate the traditions from which they come but that also point toward a future hope that begins to manifest as they create.

As a practice, creating theology is a relational task and often requires students to work together in its production, or to bear witness to what is produced. For example, each year new students present capstone projects to members of the Theology community. Dance, spoken word, and critical essays are applauded by the community. After each presentation, we hold space for anyone present to share what they appreciated about the work and how it inspired them. Creative expression from members of the community yields a fruitful and thought-provoking discourse that

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[256] Angie Titchen and Brendan Mccormack, "Dancing with Stones: Critical Creativity as Methodology for Human Flourishing," *Educational Action Research* 18, no. 4 (2010): 532.

[257] Titchen and Mccormack, "Dancing with Stones," 532.

makes theology live. The practice of creating theology in prison not only contributes to meaning-making, it also contributes to community-making and a sense of belonging.

The redemptive practices of coming together, considering one another, choosing names, critical questioning, and creating theology are just some of the many practices that seek to redeem life in the prison. These practices form the substance of redemptive pedagogy that can in turn shape a redemptive community. Evelyn Parker, in her work with incarcerated girls, identifies four elements of a redemptive pedagogy that adequately summarizes the pedagogical goal of redemptive practices. These practices facilitate embodiment of God's tangible grace, include activities that engage the whole body, engage in practices of critical questioning (emancipatory learning), and, in contexts of death and degradation, cultivate the experience of fun.[258] Redemptive practices stand in opposition to practices of social death and prison pedagogy. These practices seek to redeem life for those persons treated as if they are already dead by systems and powers of punishment. This makes redemptive practices dangerous in prison as they seek, by virtue of their practice, to challenge the nature and structure of social death practices that masquerade as a form of criminal justice.

The Politics of Theological Education in Prison

In 2019, I attended the inaugural graduation for a class of incarcerated students matriculating with their associate degree while in prison.[259] Half of the students graduating were current or former Theology students who credited Theology with

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[258] Seymour et al., *Educating for Redemptive Community*, 116–17.

[259] Only the second group of graduates (first among women) to receive a college degree since the dissolution of the Pell Grants in 1994.

preparing them for higher academic achievement. It was an encouraging graduation. I was particularly moved by the student speeches as they celebrated accomplishments and reflected on all they had overcome to succeed in prison. One of the student speakers, a devoted member of the Theology program, delivered a powerful and insightful speech that criticized the social systems that produce crime and limit opportunities for persons who are incarcerated to better themselves. She spoke boldly and honestly about the punitive philosophies of the criminal justice system and called for an ethic of reform and rehabilitation. Her speech was met with applause by most members of the audience—family guests and academic supporters like myself. But on the stage sat members of the parole board and of the department of corrections. They were not amused.

Near the end of the ceremony, one parole board member stood and after congratulating the students, proceeded to "correct" the critical nature of the student's speech. "We are a mercy board," he said. "Pray for us. Our jobs are difficult." He argued that the responsibility of the parole board was not only to witness to the great change and progress in the students graduating that day, but to remember their victims as well. He told them that they should be proud of their accomplishments, but they should also remember that none of it "makes your heart beat ... At the end of the day, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." He then proceeded to remove a piece of paper from a folder in his hand. He said that this paper was a parole form and it had someone's name on it. For context, it is customary when parole board members attend graduation to offer a graduating member their parole. The women graduating that day and their families in attendance sat in anticipation. Someone was going to go home. The parole board member proceeded to lift the paper in the air and call out a name, a name no one graduating that day recognized. The woman to be released was someone the department

asked to attend precisely to award her with the certificate. She had nothing to do with the graduation or with the guests. With tears in their eyes, the graduates realized that parole would not come for them that day. One student remarked afterward, "So if I don't believe in God like him, I am never getting out of prison?" "No," another remarked, "I've been a Christian my whole life and they won't let me out either." Religiosity and parole intertwined that day and I witnessed first-hand the manipulation of religiosity in prison.

The following Friday in Theology, graduation was all anyone wanted to talk about. I asked students what they thought about the parole board member's statements and actions. "They want us to bow to them like they are God, like they have our lives in their hands. They don't want us to fear God but to fear them. They want us to bow down to the prison as our savior. But I won't do it and if that means I can't get parole then I guess I'll just be here for a while." Mercy, fear of the Lord, and wisdom – the religiosity of the parole board was critically engaged in Theology such that a distinction was made between God and the "gods" of the parole board. According to students, religious language is often used in prison to manipulate and control. By studying theology critically, students like the graduation speaker develop skills to discern for speech for themselves and to speak back words of life and not death.

Between 1998 and 2015, Georgia had one woman on death row, Kelly Gissendaner. In 2010, Kelly became a student of the Theology program. I met Kelly in 2012 when she wanted to take a class I was teaching. For twelve weeks I met Kelly in a visitation room, just the two of us in an enclosed room surrounded by windows so the security officers in the next room could also see us. Kelly told me how much the Theology program meant to her, how it opened up a chance for her to meet Jürgen Moltmann after reading his works in class. Moltmann, who spent time in prison himself

from 1945 to 1948, began a written communication with Kelly and even visited the

prison as a graduation speaker the year Kelly received her certificate. On the day of her

graduation, Kelly offered the following reflection:

> From the start of the theology class I felt this hunger. Never have I had a
> hunger like this. I became hungry for theology. ... My reality is that I am
> the only female now on Georgia's death row. Theology is about growing in
> truth. ... I have placed my hope in the God I know now, the God whose
> promises are made known to me in the whole story of the life, the death,
> and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. ...I implore you not to allow prison to
> rob you of your dream and vision nor your dignity or self-worth. ... Know
> that suffering can be redeemed. There is only one who can bring a clean
> thing out of something unclean, or turn tragedy into a triumph, and a loser
> into a winner. When this miracle occurs ... our life is not wasted.
>
> The theology program has shown me that hope is still alive and that,
> despite a gate or a guillotine hovering over my head, I still possess the
> ability to prove that I am human. ... No matter the label attached to me, I
> have the capacity and the unstoppable desire to accomplish something
> positive and have a lasting impact. [260]

That day, Kelly told a crowd of on-lookers that contexts of social death can indeed be

transformed and human life can be redeemed. Kelly knew that it was unlikely that a

parole board would grant her the status of redemption, so she named it for herself.

Redeeming human life for Kelly meant transforming contexts of death into contexts that

named human life as worthy, that inspired dreams and futuring, and that fostered

human dignity. In Theology, Kelly found a community of people that affirmed human

life and, in that community, Kelly constructed an understanding of redemption beyond

the arbitration of a parole board. God in Jesus Christ redeems all persons surviving the

mechanisms of social death. God is said to redeem life by giving life meaning in places

where meaning and worthiness are threatened daily. Kelly constructed an

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[260] From Kelly Gissendaner's speech at Theology graduation 2011 where Jürgen Moltmann was
keynote speaker.

understanding of hope as a living power that gives her the agency to prove her humanity, to participate with God in her own redemption.

In the months leading to Kelly's execution, her theology was brought into question as members of the Department of Corrections wanted to know "what kind of theology is this?" Their way of thinking about Christian theology was not commensurate with the theology being espoused by Kelly. As a result, the theology program became a source of suspicion not because it was an educational program, but because it was a critical education program that equipped students with the resources and confidence to analyze religious speech and speak back in defense of their own lives.

Kelly's theology could not save her body from execution, but it did save her spirit from social death. Kelly's insistence that her life mattered was a witness in prison for other people who were surviving threats of meaninglessness. Her life witnessed to the redemptive power of hope. Kelly's last words are said to have been a song: "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."[261] Kelly's witness indicts criminal punishment practices that seek death -- physical and social. Until the very end, Kelly's theological voice gave hope to herself and to others and expressed signs of God's redemptive reality even in the presence of death. Through theological study, Kelly engaged in redemptive practices that gave her life meaning and opened doors for her to contribute to the lives of her colleagues in prison. She spoke life to them even as her physical life was required of her.

Theological study in prison encourages critique of the systems that oppress, particularly the criminal justice system. Theology, in this regard, is a political act that

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[261] As reported by the Atlanta Constitution Journal on September 30, 2015.

finds itself at odds with the desire of the prison (as expressed in chapter three) to produce good prisoners; remorseful, repenting, grateful inmates who are aware of their sin.[262] With Kelly's life as a testimony, theological study encourages students to confront the reality of their crime but also the reality of their oppression.

Conclusion

The story that opened this chapter, of students overcoming obstacles to get to Theology class and their transcendent experiences therein, displays both the dehumanizing and patronizing effects of prison practice and the counter, redemptive practices that engage life and well-being in the Theology class. Prison practices thrive on social death mechanisms that inhibit agential action, discouraging it even. Prison practices work to weaken agential abilities because they do not provide students with tools for appropriate decision making. Prison pedagogy seeks dependence, obedience, and unquestioned submission. Prison practices are often complexly intertwined with religious language in efforts to manipulate and control.

The Theology program, however, cultivates and fosters agency and belonging. Through practices such as coming together, choosing names, considering one another, critical questioning, and creating theology, students experience the diminishment of

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[262] Contemporary responses to the justification of theological education emerged from pragmatic and instrumental needs to warrant the presence of theological education in the contexts of American universities. What emerged was an institutional justification of theological study rooted in professionalism for universities and seminaries. While there has been little investigation into theological study in prisons, what has been written and reflected upon reveals the influence of the professional-piety legacy. What we are often left with is the justification of theological study that follows the earlier models that justifies theological study in light of the prison as institution. The study of theology in prison either promotes professional preparation (e.g. The Sing-Sing program in NY follows a professional model, training inmates to serve in prison) or it is related to personal piety and salvation. Tanya Erzen, in her book *God in Captivity (2017)*, for instance argues that religious programming in prison often follows a piety model that fulfills the needs of the prison to "make good prisoners."

brokenness and the fullness of human life even in a context framed by social death. These practices are redemptive because they free students from the totalizing effects of social death and cultivate skills for analyzing and responding to the systems that oppress them. Redemptive practices in Theology are political because they cultivate critical agency and reject harmful beliefs in the inability of incarcerated students to be positive agents in their own healing and futuring.

Critical theological understanding assists students in making a distinction between punishment and the sin of social death, between needing to be accountable for their crime and being unjustly assailed by oppressive, inhumane prison practices that systematically degrade and dehumanize. Theological study gives students tools to discern, analyze, and construct religious speech for themselves. In criminal justice contexts where religious concepts and punishment practices are intertwined, critical theological engagement that affirms human life and mediates God's redemptive reality over and against the prison's is a redemptive practice.

The next and final chapter explores what the study of theology in prison offers to the future of theological education both in prison and beyond.

CHAPTER SIX

Learning to Live: Toward a Redemptive Theological Education

The day Creative Justice (CJ) joined me to talk, it was raining dreadfully. The prison had a shortage of officers which made mobility difficult for everyone. CJ shuffled in, wet from the rain and the insufficiency of her tattered raincoat and state-mandated Crocs. She settled into her chair across from mine and we began to talk. She told me about her life, about her experimentation with drugs and churches and her spiritual journey. She talked to me about God, prison, and Theology. Wanting to get a sense of how CJ's views have changed over the years, I asked her if she could tell me who God was to her when she was a teenager. This is what she said:

> [God was] scary. I was afraid, doomed—he was there to destroy us. He was not loving. This view stayed the same for many years, until I was 25. I stayed away [from God] because I was afraid—I didn't understand until I was at a really bad place in life, going through things, forced to go back [to God] again. My mom told me you always have to go back to God.

> I've only smoked weed like once—okay, three times. I've smoked weed three times. And the third time was the charm—I knew I needed to do something! [Laughter] My mom sent me to Atlanta with my cousin, to a church in Forest Park that could get rid of the demon. I really liked the church, and the minister. But then my mom didn't like that: *it sounds like you're worshipping him and not God ... the Devil has his own ministers.* But I was defending my church. But then I did start to feel weird, it didn't make sense. The minister's wife would have us practicing speaking in tongues. And then the power went out one night during church, and with candles everywhere. My mom was like, *see?* So, there I go again, on my spiritual journey, with no spiritual at all.

> I used to be angry at God, tripping—when my mom would bring him up [on the phone], I would hang up. She'd say, *talk to God.* I'd say, I don't want to hear about God. And she would say *if you don't want to hear about God, you're not talking to me.* But I wanna hear what you have to say, I'd reply. I wanted her to talk to me and all she would say is *talk to God.* That's the only direction she would give me. Like, you're telling me the God answer, but I wanted the mommy answer.

"Why do you think your mom does this?" I asked.

CJ continued, "I don't think she wants that responsibility, she don't want to be responsible for nothing."

Wanting to explain further, she adds almost sympathetically, "She doesn't want to deal with emotion. There's a lot of stuff she avoids ... I have a different understanding now. But I want her to just be mom. I always come back to God—even when I've told everyone, including him, that I hate him. Then I say to God how are you going to help me? That's just what I know."

I asked CJ what God means to her now. "We were *not* friends after the [prison] sentence. I thought he wasn't a father but more like a husband who had messed up. I didn't feel like I deserved the sentence.[263] I could understand [the sentence] if I did bad things, but I worked, I didn't really do drugs. I fell out with God. I thought there would be a "mad moment" and then I would be forgiven."

"Do you feel like you have changed since being in prison?" I asked. She replied:

Yes. A lot of people leave here the same age they came in. But I've learned how to take responsibility. Usually I don't because of the consequences, but I am not afraid of consequences any more---getting here was the biggest consequence. I want to deal with [any consequences] now—not when I get out. I've learned how to deal with conflict, take responsibility, be mature. Before, I was too afraid and lashing out, putting things on other people. Now, I allow people to tell me about me. I accept constructive criticism; learn the value of it. I value the understanding of where others are coming from, of others' opinions and viewpoints. I have matured mentally and make better decisions.

CJ went on to share her thoughts about how other people can experience the changes she has experienced. "Surround yourself with certain people, be mindful of the people you associate with. Spend the least amount of time in the dorm as possible. Take

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[263] This was CJ's first and only criminal offense. She was sentenced to twenty years.

classes, do lots of groups, go to work. Start with yourself—come back to reality with

yourself, find inner discipline. A lot of us haven't."

"Has the Theology program contributed in any way to this work of change?"

> "Yes! Especially the people you pick to be in the Theology program; the kind of
> people it's good to be around. You may not know them, but I feel they're like me.
> I've found a new group of people I can associate with. [They] have great qualities;
> help me be a better me, help you through something bad. When you're going
> through things, you don't want a negative response. A lot of people will just beat
> someone up. Or sleep with another girl friend. Prison is an entertainment
> industry. You need to see the long-term, not just the short-term, consequences.
> Theology is different from the gossip and girlfriend drama. Everything I do, I'm
> thinking about when I get home. People in the program and the conversations
> help you think about life. Class helps you with that—kind of like you graduate
> from one level [of awareness] to another and learn to see some things different."

I asked CJ how she understands theology. She looked at me and then away as she

sought a response. After a long pause, she replied, "The study of [another long pause]

the journey, the things we learn, the different pit stops, not one belief or another. It's

like a shopping center or a long road trip with rest stops. You might believe one thing

one day, and the next day something else. It's an ongoing learning experience." CJ

smiles and adds, "My mom—she's proud of me. She might not use the word theology,

but she asks if I'm going to graduate every year."[264] [Laughter]

Finally, I asked CJ how she felt about God, now. "Of course [he's] still important.

I take God more seriously now. Someone in my dorm was like, 'I think I could give him

[God] another chance.' I don't think people really understand how big God is—you can

never really leave him." In this moment, I imagine CJ sounds like her mother.

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[264] Here, CJ is making reference to the theology graduation that happens each Spring. Her mother
attended both of CJ's graduations from the Basic and Advanced Certificate programs.

It was almost time for count and I had just one question left for CJ, "is God still mean?"

"Yes! [laughter] But I do know now that he is also kind and loving, and that's primary. He has standards, I get that. He's probably been to prison before [laughter]. God has to be rigid or we humans would run over him; that's what humans do."

CJ has been in the Theology program for more than two years and theological study for her has nothing to do with a job or preparation for ministry. It is about her life, her development, and her long spiritual journey that has often lacked "the spiritual." It is a place where she finds people like her, people who are trying to figure out life in the context of incarceration, people surviving social death and trying to imagine a world with a God who might be distinct and different from the God they encountered in God-talk before.

Creative Justice's story is a fitting story upon which to conclude. Hers is a life that has been filled with religious experiences, often confusing and complex yet unexamined. CJ used her time in prison and in Theology to examine her life with implications not just for her spiritual life but her relational life as well, with her mother, her fellow prison residents, with the other students in Theology, and with God. Theology is about life, CJ contends, about thinking differently. CJ admitted that she still has work to do in her spiritual journey, but I hope Theology helps every student do the type of reflective work CJ has done, the type of work that gives life meaning. CJ's story emphasizes the deeply personal and spiritual work of redemptive theological study.

Redemptive Theological Education and Implications for "Theology"

As a practical theological project, this project concludes with recommendations for theological education in prison. A critical theological education in prison can and should redeem religious and spiritual life from its cooptation by systems of domination. It should by virtue of its commitments create spaces for the meaning-making that is central to human life to occur. A redemptive mission at the heart of theological education in prison will engage redemptive practices to name, analyze, understand, and transform human life in its various dimensions toward the realization of God's redemptive reality. It will embrace redemptive pedagogies and cultivate soul-making, liberating, and futuring practices in the development of student's social, political, intellectual, and interior lives.

Social Life

A redemptive theological education in prison must repair the broken relationality that results from the mechanisms of social death and cultivate healthy opportunities for students to belong. In addition to coming together, the Theology program should focus on interpersonal skill develop as part of its mission to redeem human relationships, skills such as conflict transformation, dealing with difference respectfully, and learning how to live with strangers. For many students, prison was the first time they ever met someone from a different religious background. For nearly all, it was the first time they ever lived in such a diverse context across racial, religious, and sexual lines. "I never met anyone who wasn't Christian before I came to prison. Now my bunkmate is Muslim, and I want to know more about both Christianity and the Muslim faith," one student remarked when she described why she was interested in Theology. Not only do students come to theological study to learn about the God of their tradition, they come to learn

about other religions and other ways of conceiving of divine relation in the world. One reason they desire this skill in multi-religious understanding is so they will know how to be in relationship with people with radically different beliefs. Learning to listen to other opinions that are radically different from your own, and do so with care and respect, could make the difference between living a good life in a diverse and dynamic community, and living a dangerous one.

Redemptive theological education in prison that seeks to repair the breech of broken relationality should also consider extending its content to include skills in community formation and organizing. Equipping students with tools for how to transform communities in prison (i.e. dorms) helps extend the liberating and redemptive impact of Theology beyond the classroom and into the wider prison context. Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that even in our worst state, "we are not left without a trace of our 'imago Dei,' of our capacity for healthy and life-giving relationality."[265] Theological study in prison that takes its redemptive mission seriously will live into Ruether's assertion and extend opportunities for life-giving relationality through continued pedagogical commitments to social well-being and community wholeness.

Political Life

 A redemptive theological education in prison must be courageously subversive and equip students with the skills needed to analyze, resist, and transform the criminal justice system. Critical theological education should help students survive systems that use religious concepts to constrain them by equipping them with the tools for critical analysis, investigation, empathetic listening, and subservice speech. This can redeem

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[265] Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 74.

religious and spiritual life from the distortions of injustice and point toward God's redemptive reality. In Theology, it involves taking the criminal justice system as a locus of investigation, exploring the implicit and explicit theology of the system and practicing skills to resist, challenge, and transform these systems in subversive ways that promote student survival. It includes adding theological courses on law, politics, government, trauma, oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.

Students use theological study to make sense of their past, present, and possibilities for the future. It gives them space to reflect upon the religious and social language that has been used to condemn or sustain them. One recurring theme among some students was either a total distrust or a growing disillusionment with the criminal justice system. "When I got locked up, I lost faith in the justice system," one student remarked. Another student said that everything she ever believed about fairness and justice was a lie – that everything she thought she knew about the type of people who were in prison was false. Students are suspicious about the claims being made about them in the justice system. These claims are often expressed using religious language. A commitment to redeeming political life in prison involves equipping students with safe space to be critical, angry, and honest about the system that confines them. It also involves helping students learn how to be critical in a way that protects their well-being.

Intellectual Life

A redemptive theological education must attend to the human need for mental acuity and stimulation. It must not confuse a turn to pragmatic, practical matters with anti-intellectualism. There are intrinsic goods to intellectual academic work that is life-giving in prison. Students testify to the joy and sense of accomplishment they feel when

they learn new concepts such as Hebrew, ancient arithmetic, and hermeneutics. "I never knew I could write until I came to Theology," one student said. This student is now applying for her associate degree from a program offered at the prison. The writing, critical thinking, and analysis skills gained from the educational endeavor contribute to good life as much as they promote mental stimulation, a sense of self-esteem, and transferable skills. Intellectual pursuits build confidence and are a healthy way of coping with prison life and a way of redeeming time.

Cultivating a healthy intellectual life in prison requires honoring the multiple types of intelligences and using multiple learning styles. Educators committed to intellectual well-being recognize that different students have different intelligences where they are most comfortable expressing. One student expressed her need this way: "I like the arts and drawing, it's the only way I can deal with my life." Written theological papers are not the only way and perhaps not the best way for every student to make meaning of their world. A commitment to intellectual well-being involves learning the needs of the community and providing means for each person to actualize their potential.

Interior or Spiritual Life

Finally, a redemptive theological education in prison must attend to the interior or spiritual life. CJ's story is an example of how religious experience is often unexamined and complex. Critical theological reflection on one's life and journey are central to human meaning-making. Reflection activities are not in opposition to critical academic work but on the contrary, fundamental to critical, intellectual work. Continuing to support both written and embodied reflection work using stories and

story-linking processes, art, and play can lead to the reflection processes necessary to give life meaning in prison.

In order to resist the constant threat of dehumanization and degradation in US prisons, redemptive practices must be engaged again and again if they seek to have a positive formative impact. In the words of Nancy Bedford, they are "little moves against destructiveness" that allow for the participant to experience an eschatological glimpse of a redeemed life in the here and now.[266] Redemptive practices are an active, human way of participating in God's work of redeeming human life and the world. These practices involve a fluid, mysterious relationship between God and human action to bring about glimpses of hope in the midst of a broken and imperfect reality. They are concrete practices performed in the here and now with an eschatological hope that points to a future promise of a new creation.

Redemptive practices are the saving work in critical theological education in prison. They are common, mundane practices that on their own seem innocuous but when used by God, work together for good bringing about in-breakings of the gospel in contexts of death. Practices are ambiguous, fluid, improvisational, and open-ended.[267] They are undefined and always in process of re-formation, especially in a prison classrooms. But the gospel is that God works through these improvisational, quotidian practices to shape human lives.[268] How these practices actually free students and

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[266] Nancy E. Bedford, "Little Moves Against Destructiveness: Theology and the Practice of Discernment," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: William BEerdmans Pub, 2002), 158.

[267] Rebecca Chopp asserts that practices constructed piecemeal over the course of "the messy realities of social relations" rarely achieve consistency (*Saving Work*, 230).

[268] Chopp argues similarly that God works to shape human lives together in and through the ineradicably human character of their ordinary lives (*Saving Work*, 231).)

teachers, even if momentarily, from the alienation and degradation of prison life is a miracle. It is God's work – the grace and mystery of God's love enacted in the concrete flesh of being together. Pedagogies informed by a commitment to redemption cultivate spaces of in-breaking and operate from a vision of the classroom as an eschatological glimpse of hope.

A Redemptive Telos for the Future of Theological Education

Doing theology in prison has taught me that, as educators, we are always confronted with the task of resisting pedagogies of domination. In the prison, these practices are easier to acknowledge and resist. But dominator culture is everywhere "maintaining injustice, teaching fear and violence, teaching terrorism."[269] The intertwining of theology and education in prison produced different practices for theological education to consider, practices that shape and redeem life, that participate in God's work to redeem human dignity in contexts of oppression and degradation.[270] Social death practices foreclose opportunities for growth and development, and they are not just operative in prison settings. We must embrace a redemptive, justice-oriented vision to embolden our work as theological educators both in prison and beyond -- in the seminary, community, and church as we ask ourselves: What limiting situations might theological education be able to transform as part of God's redemptive work? What does God desire for theological education in this day and time?

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[269] hooks, *Teaching Community*, 8.

[270] Rebecca Chopp (1995: 113) urges readers to think of theological education as a process of the intertwining of theology and education in and through practices, within which different voices reflect and construct practices of theological education.

Educators embracing redemptive practices in the classroom are conveners; relational leaders creating spaces and experiences for others to engage liberating, soul-making and futuring practices in a world that desperately needs them. These are practices we do with students, not for them. We do, however, cultivate classroom spaces where these practices can be explored, examined, critically engaged and improved upon. Together, students and teachers participate in practices that are part of God's redeeming work to shape us, healing our alienation and brokenness. We all are students learning fresh with new grace and new mercies each day what it means to do justice, love God, walk humbly, and love one another. Educators do not create redemptive practices of theological education as much as they discern them and seek to cultivate stronger and deeper practices committed to survival and well-being.

The fundamental goal of theological education must be the doing of justice -- liberating people from and diminishing the power of structures of oppression. Responding to a call for justice, we must engage pedagogical practices that are concerned first and foremost with life, with redeeming life and creating spaces for the in-breaking of God's justice in the present. Our task is to help students discern this vision for themselves and then to create it to the best of their ability.

When I think of the living dead, I return again to the image of Lazarus jumping forth from the grave, stumbling, mumbling, and disoriented. The man who was once dead is now alive. But he is still covered in death, shrouded in grave garments. Though he is alive, his mobility and functioning are limited because he is entrapped by death-dealing realities. Jesus, seeing the restraints on his friend, does not tell Lazarus to free himself. Instead, he tells the community surrounding Lazarus to help. The community is told to unbind Lazarus that Lazarus might go forth.

This is how I imagine the scene of theological education in prison. We all, students and teachers alike, enter into classrooms bound by restraints, physical, emotional, spiritual, social … and our responsibility as educators and learners together is to unbind one another so that we might all live less restricted lives. Just as Lazarus's hands and feet were bound and his face was covered, so too do many of us enter into theological education bound by church hurt, physical and emotional trauma, and societal blinders. Our task as educators is to help students encounter religion freshly by removing the binders and lifting the veil, by helping students create distance between the God of the present and their past experiences of religiosity. Our hope is that students are free to own their personal encounter with God and religiosity apart from past hurt, past dogmatic experiences, and previous limitations.

I admit that at first, I only imagined the incarcerated students to be a type of Lazarus and I saw myself as a member of the community Jesus was asking to help. But throughout my time in Theology, I realized the many ways that I too am Lazarus and that the incarcerated students have been the community that removed the cloth from my face and the binds from my hands and feet so that I could go forth more compassionate, wiser, and more faithful in my pursuit of God's justice for the world.

I return to the question that brought me to this study, what good is theological education in prison? Critical theological education engaged in a prison classroom that embraces redemptive pedagogical practices transforms contexts of social death into contexts that value and sustain human life. Wherever human pain and violence are diminished, there is the in-breaking of God's redemptive reality. Theological education for the future must locate its theological telos in a redemptive vision to diminish harm

and participate in God's work to bring life to death-dealing contexts, hope to despair, and freedom to contexts of constraint.

The students at a North Georgia prison capture it best: "Theology [in prison] is more than just something to do [on Friday], it's a matter of life and death." The good of theological education in prison and for the future is in its willingness to conceive of itself as a life-saving practice opening its doors to a wider, more diverse, and more expansive group of human beings committed to learning so they might live.

Appendix: Program Description & Qualitative Method

The Certificate in Theological Studies at Arrendale State Prison for Women

The Certificate in Theological Studies (CTS) at Arrendale State Prison began in 2009 as a collaborative project of the chaplain's office and the Atlanta Theological Association (ATA), a consortium of the four major Protestant seminaries and schools of theology in the Atlanta region: McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, the Interdenominational Theological Center, Columbia Theological Seminary, and Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

The yearlong program is designed to offer selected inmates academic theological instruction that is ecumenical in scope and to train them to serve as lay religious leaders both in prison and after their release. CTS graduates receive a certificate from the ATA, similar to those that individual seminaries award for programs in lifelong learning. Because it is based on a continuing education model, the program is open to a significant number of inmates, including those with no post-secondary education. The program's other major goal is to provide unique teaching opportunities to seminary and Ph.D. students from the participating institutions, as well as formative experience for congregational leadership for M.Div. students.

The Academic Year

The CTS academic year consists of four quarters. Courses in the first two quarters concentrate on foundational knowledge and are taught by faculty at the ATA schools or by advanced Ph.D. candidates who have some familiarity with the prison context. The first quarter covers a twelve-week foundations course in the Bible (January – March), followed by a twelve-week foundations course in theology (April – June), both taught for four hours on Friday mornings. The next two quarters consist of a range of electives, scheduled for two hours per week, that are taught by faculty or Ph.D. and M.Div. students who work closely with a faculty mentor. Electives serve to reinforce material learned in foundations courses, as well as to deepen biblical and theological knowledge through various topics of interest, such as "Biblical Perspectives on Criminal Justice," "Contemporary Ethics and Women," "Psalms and Poetry," "Restorative Justice," "Womanist and Mujerista Theologies," "The Art of Spiritual Writing," "The Gospel of John," "Ancient Arithmetic," and "Prophetic Preaching." Students must complete a total of three electives, plus a final creative project integrating the material learned over the course of the year. Final projects have included preaching a sermon at the prison worship service, writing a devotional book for fellow inmates, leading a workshop on practices of restorative justice, original choreographed dance, song performances with theological reflection, and academic papers on a topic of interest. CTS also maintains a 1900-volume theology library at the prison, which gives students access to an array of classic and current works on scripture, theology, and ethics.

Program Goals for Students at Arrendale

The program goals for the students fall into two broad categories: (1) academic and theological development and (2) formation in leadership, self-dignity, and social awareness. Academic development includes familiarity with basic scriptural and theological information and concepts, as well as an understanding of the depth and breadth of streams of thought within the Christian tradition. Formation goals include increasing students' abilities to get jobs upon re-entry to society, preparing them for ministry in their communities, and helping them become lay leaders in church congregations. While fostering a supportive learning and spiritual community within the prison, the program develops critical thinking and writing skills that are necessary for both sets of goals—for articulating a deliberative theology and helping students resist negative characterizations placed upon them by society, other individuals, or themselves. The students in the program cite the simple experience of being cared for and thought about by people outside the prison as a significant benefit. In short, the program seeks to help incarcerated students think well for themselves and of themselves, all in a compassionate context of faith.

Qualitative Research Method

The research for this dissertation was part of a larger qualitative research project, The Good Life. The <u>primary aims</u> of this research project were to understand how theological learning in the Certificate in Theological Studies program shapes understanding of God, self, and world while incarcerated and to understand how theological learning contributes to or shapes conceptions of: well-being or flourishing, purpose or vocation, and identity markers such as mother, citizen, etc.

Interviews took place inside Lee Arrendale State Prison in an office, classroom or meeting room in the chaplaincy hall. Observation of class sessions took place at Lee Arrendale State Prison. All data collection took place within Lee Arrendale State Prison, where no electronic or recording devices were permitted. Therefore, instead of audio recording the in-person data, detailed handwritten notes were taken.

Interviewees were selected from current and former students in the CTS program who remain incarcerated. An informed consent process was used, and students were assured that participation in the research had no bearings on their status in the Theology program. High measures of confidentiality were used to protect students including the use of pseudonyms on all written documentation.

Focus Groups and selected follow up interviews was the foundation of the research method. In groups of 5-7, participants responded to questions designed to explore their motivations and experiences in the theology program. I followed up with select individuals for brief follow-up interviews for clarification. Each focus group was approximately 2 hours each.

Group #	Interview Type (# participated)
0	Test Group – First Year Students (5)
1	Focus Group – Rep Sample (6)
2	Focus Group – Rep Sample (4)
3	Focus Group – Lifers <10 years served (5)
4	Focus Group – Non-Christian (5)
5	Focus Group – Life University students
5	Focus Group – Lifers >10 years served (4)

Semi-structured life interviews. In order to get a more complete sense of how the theology program impacts a woman's life, I conducted a small number of in-depth semi-structured interviews of women who have completed at least the basic certificate. Participants responded to modified life history interview questions that are designed to explore their motivations and experiences in prison in general and in the theology program in particular.

Written responses.
Student speeches, homework assignments, and drawings were collected as part of this research. Consent was asked before using any written or drawn piece.

Focus Group Discussion Guide (example)
"Incarcerated Women's Theological Understanding of a Good Life"

1. **Introductions**

(warm up)
> Please introduce yourself and say in one word your experience in the theology program.

2. Image of a good life
(trying to see what virtues/values constitute a "good life"; interested if they are intrinsic or instrumental; also trying to see if these visions are situated in or outside of prison)
> a. Activity: We want you to make a personal collage of your vision of your good life [will have pictures, crayons, glue sticks]
> b. Discussion
> - where is God in this image? What does God look like / how does God function?
> - what role do you play in bringing about this good life? (responsibility/agency)
> - what role do others play in this vision? (relationships)
> - what role do you play in helping others have a good life? (relationships/agency)

3. In Prison
(want to understand "flourishing" or a "good life" in prison specifically)
> A. What does a good day in prison look like?
> B. What does a good life in prison look like?

4. CTS Program
(trying to understand how theological education contributes to a notion of a good life and what that is for the students in CTS; also trying to get at the uniqueness of theological education, what it does differently)
> - How does education help you achieve the vision of a good life in or beyond prison?
> - What about CTS, how does it help? Is it different from other educational programs?
> - Name an important moment in a class for you, what have been some of the most exciting/difficult ideas, classes or assignments? What has helped you learn? What has been hard to learn? What other things would you like to learn?
> - What does theology mean to you?

5. Flourishing
> (deepening and extending ideas about flourishing)
> - what words or images or metaphors are best used to describe a good life?
> - show words such as flourishing, wholeness, freedom
> --what does (or could) make this flourishing possible here? Name one step/action?

Semi-structured Interview Guide (example)
While these interviews will be conversational in style and flow, they will touch upon the key areas noted below, in the sequence presented.

Background
Let's start by talking about your earlier life….
Tell me about some dreams and hopes you had as child/young person
What was school like?
      Favorite class, teacher
      Best and worst memories of school
      Own reading
Was your family religious? Did they want you to be religious? Did you go to church?
What did you think about God when you were young? and how it has changed over life
      (could more specific questions re particular religion)

Prison Experience
Let's talk about your life here….
Tell me a little about what brought you to prison and your first months
In what ways do you think you have changed while in prison?
What kinds of classes/experiences have been important to you here? Why?
How have you overcome difficulties? Learned from difficulties?
Do you see yourself as a strong person? Why/why not?

Exploring Flourishing and Good Life
Now we are going to focus what is important to you about life and living…..
How would you describe a good life? (a life that is fulfilling and joyous for you—NOT necessarily in prison)
      Give me a specific example that helps me understand.
Talk about ways you can/cannot live this good life in prison
What are some of the major challenges? How have you or are you overcoming these challenges?
How does your understanding of a good life influence your perception of self? Of the world? Of God? Of the church?
How does your understanding of good life lead you to engage and/or disengage in the world around you? In what ways? Example?

Exploring Theological Education
Now I want to talk about the Certificate program a bit….
Tell me about an important idea you learned in the theological certificate
Tell me about a class that you particularly liked/disliked. Why?
Do you think about yourself and your life in any different ways because of your work in the certificate?

Wrapping Up
Has our conversation raised other issues you want to talk about?

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