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Cameron Barker April 10, 2017

Motherhood Behind Bars: Motherhood, Identity, and Community in Prison

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Abstract

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By Cameron Barker

Mass incarceration has dominated conversations about criminal justice in recent years. This is a critical social justice issue and given that the United States has a higher per-captia rate of incarceration than any other nation in the world, it is clear that the situation in the American criminal justice system is unique. However, women have been marginalized in the conversation about criminal justice reform because, as only 7% of the total incarcerated population, they are very much a minority. Hopefully this snapshot of motherhood in prison will begin to shed light on a particular experience of incarceration that has been sequestered to the margins of the criminal justice dialogue. Feministic jurisprudence and gender specific criminal justice issues must not be lost within the larger narrative of mass incarceration. This thesis is not one that is designed to fully and comprehensively explain the experience of motherhood in prison. Instead, what is offered here is a description of the lives of a few dozen women who were pregnant while incarcerated in the fall of 2016 at Helms Facility. These women are individuals with unique experiences who actively defy being type cast as the typical, American, pregnant convict. I hope only that I do the women of Helms justice in retelling their experiences and that this thesis may help to unpack the trope that exists within American culture of a “convict.” This thesis seeks to shed light on the experience of motherhood in prison and how the identity of motherhood is constructed while a woman is incarcerated. This idea is incredibly broad, and it would be impossible to understand the construction of motherhood in prison without understanding many pieces that act synergistically to form this identity. These elements include the physical realities of being incarcerated, the life histories of women before they interact with the criminal justice system, the formation of individual identity, and the cultural conception of what it means to be a good mother, to name some of the most essential.

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Table of Contents

##### Introduction 1-6

##### Who is Incarcerated and Why? 7-24

##### Myself as an Instrument of Investigation and Human Subjects 25-32

##### A Basic Sketch of Daily Life and Circumstances 33-50

##### 

##### Power Structures 51-66

##### Individuality and the Basis of Community 67-77

##### Motherhood in Prison 78-96

##### Works Cited 97-99