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## “For Us, By Us”: Professionalization and Witnessing in New Orleans

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Bard

“For Us, By Us”: Professionalization and Witnessing in New Orleans

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Virginia Claire Sperka

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2018



I dedicate this project to the staff, the members of the organization and the formerly incarcerated community in New Orleans. This project could not have been possible without the help and time of the amazing folks working in criminal justice reform in Louisiana. I could never do justice to the sense of energy, intelligence, compassion and perseverance you all radiate.

It has truly been an honor.

“No surrender, no retreat”

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To my professors for your encouragement, your questions and for the infinite knowledge you have bestowed upon me  
Laura, Sophia, Yuka, Duff, Jonah, and Diana

To the city and people of New Orleans, may your spirit never sink

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## Experienced Advocates of New Orleans: The Office<sup>1</sup>

### Staff

**Lawrence**, Executive Director, from New Orleans, incarcerated over two decades as an innocent man, a founder of the Angola Special Civics Project, father and grandfather

**Nico**, Co-Executive Director, from St. Louis, Missouri, incarcerated over two decades, a founder of the Angola Special Civics Project, father and grandfather

**Neil** Deputy Director, from Rhode Island, incarcerated for twelve years, worked in criminal justice reform in RI, father

**Jacqueline**, Organizer, from New Orleans, cumulatively incarcerated for twelve years, mother of five, grandmother

**William**, Organizer, from New Orleans, incarcerated for seventeen years, taught himself to read while incarcerated, a founder of the Angola Special Civics Project

**Erica**, from New Orleans, Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice Coordinator, formerly incarcerated, mother of Isaiah

**Helen**, from New Jersey, Staff Attorney, worked in the juvenile and criminal justice system for over twenty years, mother of Remi

**Uchenna**, from Baltimore, Maryland, IT Coordinator, organizer and activist (no longer an employee)

**Darius**, supermember (not technically staff), formerly incarcerated, director of Project Detour, father

### Bard Interns

**Claire** from Virginia, Anthropology senior and author

**Charlie** from California, Photography junior

**Luis** from California, lives in greater New Orleans area, Political Science junior

**Michele** from New Orleans, BECNO graduate, Sociology sophomore

**Nessa** from Maryland, lives in New Orleans, BECNO graduate, Sociology sophomore

**Olivia** from Connecticut, Biology junior

**Sage** from New Jersey, Sociology junior

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<sup>1</sup> Organization names and all names are pseudonyms except mine.



## Introduction

This ethnography is not about the criminal justice system, but seeks to look at the banality of the lives of formerly incarcerated people as an entry into a deeper discussion. An exploration of their identities and work is helpful in resisting minimizing portrayals of incarcerated peoples. When I decided on EANO for my senior project, I thought about the kind of curiosities I have about approaching the broader issues of our penal system from this angle. What would my research contribute to this conversation? After studying criminalization, state power, and prisons through many lenses in my classes, it seems that mass incarceration has been established as a problem in countless books and other popular media portrayals. Michelle Alexander wrote her bestselling book, *The New Jim Crow*, and Neil has a photo hanging over his desk of a picture of Lawrence, Michelle Alexander, and him together. Alexander as an expert in the mainstream is a triumph for their cause and yet there are things about the book that I question. Why did it become a bestselling book? Veiled concern for prison issues and the othering of prison culture is presented to a wide audience in shows like *Orange is the New Black* or *Prison Break*. Playing a character in *OITNB*, an African-American actress talked in an interview about her experiences at Julliard and working on Broadway as comparable to prison and helpful for her role as an incarcerated woman (Brooks, 2016). In discourses and imagery including this example, prison is made a spectacle and a metaphor used to essentialize every institutional space as the same. I aim to argue the opposite. Not only are institutional spaces different, but prisons and criminal justice systems are also diverse institutions as diverse as the formerly incarcerated population

We know, or we try to forget, that mass incarceration is a massive issue. I don't need to reinvent the prison narrative or write down every experience I heard from people about life on

the inside. I didn't want to simply regurgitate what people usually focus on while missing complex and interesting paths of inquiry that may not fit dominant narratives of prison. Mass incarceration is evident, and I asked myself before my research: what are people doing about it? That is a much more difficult, messy, and broad question. The formerly incarcerated staff at EANO uses their prison narratives constantly already. They now live as organizers and advocates moving beyond their life as an "inmate" or people's interest in them solely as inmates. The formerly incarcerated people on EANO's staff are Americans working in non-profit organizations. They bridge the worlds between formerly incarcerated communities, reform-based non-profit circles, and the state's institutions.

#### Bard New Orleans Exchange and EANO

Bard students found the New Orleans EANO through Neil, the deputy director. My friends leading the project met him at an intern mixer at a bar in Mid-City. The Bard New Orleans Exchange was originally about Katrina recovery and then working for a charter school that Bard students helped build. The school changed charters, and the leaders saw an opportunity for other work in New Orleans. Instead of creating a new program, we decided to dedicate our time and our valuable skills as college students to an organization that already works to make change in the city. EANO was that organization. Experienced Advocates of New Orleans is an organization that looks to "restor[e] full human and civil rights" to those directly impacted by the criminal justice system, particularly formerly incarcerated people (FIP). They address this broadly through civic engagement and policy reform. Their website claims that they "build people power," "restore rights," and "reform policies." This refers to their three pronged strategy for change in working on community education and leadership development, acting as advocates for those who are having their rights violated, and to work with legislation in order to make these

changes happen on a larger scale.

Liza and Sam persuaded me to join the project working with a new organization for five weeks in the summer of 2016. EANO was still working out the lease with the Catholic Church that owned the property. As a result, EANO's staff worked in the cafeteria of the converted former school now used as office spaces. The first summer we served as interns at EANO the staff was small: Lawrence, the executive director, Neil, the deputy director, Sara, communications director and Jacqueline, organizer, the two latter being hired a day before. Each of the six interns worked with one or more staff members as an assistant, doing the work of research, data collection, and outreach via phone. Their lawyer, Helen would drop in and work pro-bono to help with the EANO v. Louisiana lawsuit to get voting rights for people on parole or probation.

The next summer, the Bard New Orleans Exchange returned to EANO. Olivia, Charlie, and Sage drove three days to get to New Orleans from New York and I drove for two days from Virginia. The rest of the group had already been home in Louisiana for a week: Michelle, Nessa, and Luis. Olivia, Sage, and I were returning to work with EANO, but it was the first time for the four other interns. This was my main research trip during the summer of 2017. I continued my internship for three more weeks while conducting research and interviews after the Bard interns had left.

The group scrambled to get everyone dressed, fed and ready to go to the office. The drive was short from our house by the Fairgrounds to the offices. Whoever had the aux cord played Erykah Badu or Frank Ocean as we went straight down Fortin, took a left onto Gentilly, and a left on Broad past the hot dog stand. We passed through the intersection of St. Bernard and Broad where we lived last summer across from the Walgreens, where everything is locked up

and the Triangle Deli, where a shooting took place. We turn right onto St. Bernard. We drove by Church's Chicken, Buttermilk Drop bakery, the bad Manchu's and Rally's before we came to the Catholic Church and the various buildings around it. There was an abandoned brick office building to the left, but this trip it had been reduced to nothing, now it was an empty lot.

This building used to be a Catholic school and its gym and large bathrooms are the only reminders, but it has been refurbished to be used as rented spaces for a variety of community businesses: a daycare, a basketball camp, driver's education. We opened the door and took an immediate right to shuffle into the elevator before we touched the button for the third floor to get to EANO's offices. The atrium space added to the front of the building was open and you could see all the way down to the lobby from over the railing. We walked down the hallway to open the doors to the next section of the building. EANO's main office is a substantial room with two entryways and eight desks with a large table in the middle. They have two other smaller offices for staff. The office's hallway connected to a huge room with high ceilings, windows, and couches, like a library with no books. A door on the right opened to the small kitchen used primarily by EANO. The red pillars were quite beautiful, with matching red and blue couches, itchy like those in a doctor's office. The big windows looked out onto the street and neighborhood. You could see downtown buildings and skyscrapers in the background towering over a sea of trees and roofs and chimneys. Down below, many of the houses were blighted<sup>2</sup> and there was a yard full of busted cars. People sat on their porches, and the vines crept up on an abandoned half rotted out house with Tyvec visible, an indication of partial attempts to save the home.

The sky was dark that day and rain clouds moved in as we listened to the music Nessa

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<sup>2</sup> Blighted is a term to describe condemned and abandoned properties that are commonly connected to Katrina, but these properties were already an issue before 2005 that was worsened by the storm and lack of funding.

puts on. One of the newest staff members at EANO, Erica's baby son, Isaiah, babbled behind me. The sound of a revving engine faded in and out while I saw lighting in the sky above this swamp city. The leaves began to blow in the wind violently between the electric lines that crisscrossed over the horizon. The janitor, Rickey, yelled at some of the interns for having our feet on the low tables. He was always complaining to Helen or Jacqueline or saying horrible puns and rarely doing his job. Isaiah ran into the room with keys jingling in his hand and one shoe on. He walked behind the couch, and I lost sight of him as he slipped. I stood up, walked over and he was lying on the ground wide-eyed with no tears. I looked at the time, it was 11 o'clock, and the rain was about to break. The tension in the atmosphere was palpable as the room darkened. The gloom seeped into the room. Lawrence walked in and turned on the lights. Olivia and I were discussing and brainstorming about how we would divvy up the work and data entry. We were supposedly researching, but I didn't know what was going on behind everyone's laptops. Rain poured down on the city and the buildings in the CBD, central business district, disappeared behind the mist. The thunder made the ground and building shake. We had an impromptu meeting with Uchenna, Helen and William, and eventually Jacqueline and Erica to debrief about the monthly meeting the night before. EANO is "membership-based" and holds monthly gatherings for dinner, discussion, and space for people to voice issues within a group of formerly incarcerated people, their family, their friends, and allies to the movement.

Every time the Bard interns return to New Orleans, EANO has grown and shifted. We have worked and continued to come back to see their transition from a grassroots community non-profit to a more full-fledged organization and its definition is constantly in flux. On my trip last in January of 2017, we met even more new staff. Uchenna and Helen are not formerly incarcerated, but allies and experienced in this work. Uchenna specializes in IT work, but he has

many other valuable skills as an organizer, a strategist, and someone with experience in this kind of work. Helen, one of the few white staff members, was recently hired full time as the staff attorney and her son, Remi, was often sitting in the office listening to music or playing a game. Her status as not formerly incarcerated is specifically necessary, because formerly incarcerated people cannot practice law in Louisiana. William, who was a member of the Angola Special Civics Project and EANO, was also hired as a statewide organizer and would frequently travel across the state. He had also been involved in other activist and direct service organizations. Jacqueline was now working on organizing in New Orleans. Nico was also part of the same group of men in Angola and he was hired to work as co-executive director while representing EANO in Baton Rouge. All of the staff have experience in organizing, activism, and non-profit work that they bring to the table. They are in the business of advocacy.

Coming back to EANO the summer of 2017, it was so good to hug and see everyone, and to meet the new staff members. Erica works on crime victims and crime survivors rights as a formerly incarcerated person. Of course, it was great to see all the staff. Uchenna and Helen were leading the training for the new system of data entry, but Jacqueline was there to see us and talk about what she's working on. A lot of our work was with the Louisiana Campaign for Democracy, or LCD, which was an outreach effort to get contacts for people who may want to get involved in EANO. Uchenna and Helen outlined our basic duties: to input data for LCD into the database, call LCD contacts, sit by the phone to take messages, canvass, and complete three special projects. We also learned a new system of data entry with EANO's outdated database site that Uchenna structured and had spent hundreds of hours working on. The special projects were to first write the chapter guidelines for how EANO would work in other parts of Louisiana and how it would function. Second, we had to write a report about incarcerated women and girls for

EANO to publish along with a booklet with graphics. The third project was to help them plan the Women's March for December. This trip would prove to be the most difficult in workload, but we were willing to take on a challenge.

### Angola Special Civics Project and Louisiana

EANO started in prison and has its origins within the criminal justice system and, then, successfully moved to the outside. These men overcame the limits of incarceration to create something that would go on to survive and flourish. The "creation story" of EANO is unique, a story of the underdog and overcoming barriers. While in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Lawrence and other men including William and Nico came together to form the Angola Special Civics Project. They had symposiums, seminars, discussions, a printing press, and a publication called *The Angolite*. Lawrence worked in the law library and became a jailhouse lawyer. The men of the ASCP conducted a comparative study and research project about the differences in states' criminal justice system and legal codes. This was how they recognized and uncovered the fact that Louisiana is an outlier in their trends of incarceration, policing, and sentencing. They saw the extremes within the system, but also the possibility, in other states, of a better system. Using the methods of "research, political education, electoral organizing, and coalition building," they made ASCP an effective and unique group (Pelot-Hobbs 2013, 199). Eventually, they wrote and put forward legislation about parole for inmates sentenced to life without parole while in prison with the help of a legislative representative they met at a "Lifers" banquet, but the bill did not make it out of committee. This was truly the beginning of EANO, and its beginnings in the men's prison is both part of its legitimacy and a clear sign of its gendered origin produced through the men's privileged accessibility to information that was not allowed in Louisiana's women's prisons, which are notably absent from the narrative of Louisiana's history of mass

incarceration.

Lawrence was released from prison in 2003 and eventually was exonerated due to his proven innocence. He immediately set up EANO. For many years, it functioned as a much smaller volunteer-based organization. The staff included Lawrence and one or two other staff members, but at first they did not have the funding to pay the staff full time. The definition of EANO has been in transition as they moved away from this earlier community, member-based group to receiving grants and funding opportunities for full time staff. EANO now had access to new modes for advocacy and activism. But before I tell the story of the present, I want to inform the reader of an overview of the context and history of Louisiana's criminal justice system.

New Orleans has the highest rate of incarceration in the world along with the rest of Louisiana (Quigley 2016). While interning at EANO, I learned snippets and stories about the conditions in Louisiana and the United States that led to the issues EANO combats. I follow them on Facebook and recently one of their staff members shared a link to an article explaining the question of Louisiana's high incarceration rate from a geographical and historical perspective. As this is not my specific purview of research, I make use of the author's presented narrative as it begins to frame the environments, systems, actors, politics, and histories their work engages with and confronts. The author, Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, is a scholar of American Studies and Geography. She wrote a piece specifically about the Angola Special Civics Project that draws from interviews with Lawrence, and on their publication, *The Angolite*, to analyze the significance of incarcerated activism (Pelot-Hobbs 2013). I think historical context is important especially in the legacy of institutions and state power.

Issues in the Louisiana criminal justice system did not begin in the twentieth century, but are rooted in histories of slavery, colonial rule by the French and Spanish, and patterns of



exploitation. The crisis in the twentieth century revolved around the state's only prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, or better known as Angola. The namesake comes from when the property was a plantation before the state bought the land in 1901 (Pelot-Hobbs 2013, 199). Angola is also the name of a country in southern Africa, where some of Louisiana's first slaves came from. Conditions in this prison commonly referred to as the bloodiest prison in the nation worsened in the 1970s including the frequent stabbings, escapes, "medical neglect, unsafe facilities, religious discrimination, racial segregation, and overcrowding" (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). As a result of the mismanagement and issues with Angola, the state's penal system along with parish jails were now "under the jurisdiction of federal court orders" (Pelot-Hobbs, 2018). In response to a court order requiring the reduction of Angola's prison population, the DOC averted this issue by de-centralizing Angola using smaller prisons (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). The DOC rushed to convert state property including schools, hospitals, and even a decommissioned navy ship into new prisons. Parish jails were facing their own issues. The plan for decentralizing Angola forced parish facilities to house hundreds of people who could not be transferred, which caused tension for local sheriffs. In a moment of hope in the chaotic situation, DOC Secretary Elayn Hunt, who now has a facility named after him, and Angola Warden C. Paul Phelps, advocated along with Angola's incarcerated activists to respond to overcrowding with the early release of prisoners (Pelot-Hobbs 2018).

The New Orleans D.A. and other actors stood in their way. District Attorney Harry Connick's career rested on the rhetoric of "racialized tough on crime policies." Connick did not consider early release as an option (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). Using the media, he would regularly attack DOC officials for 'softer' policies in and approaches to incarceration. While federal court orders continued to roll in, Connick called for "more punitive policies," worked with the New

Orleans Police Department to gain more funding, and “personally drafted numerous draconian crime bills that instituted mandatory sentencing [while] reducing good time and parole eligibility” (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). This increased arrest rates, created harsher sentencing, and decreased those being paroled, which intensified overcrowding issues (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). Federal court judges and parish politicians along with many others caused an increase in tension between state and local officials. By the end of the 1970s, Louisiana’s politicians presented their solution to overcrowding as extensive construction to accommodate the large population (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). From a population of 3,550 people in 1975 to 8,661 people in 1980, Angola now contained thousands of new beds. The state built three new prisons. As the Angola Special Civics Project and other incarcerated activists argued, they knew that growing the carceral system would not “fix” the situation, but perpetuate even more overcrowding (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). The cycle of overcrowding repeated itself as yet again parish jails overflowed all across the state. The situation in New Orleans was so dire in the summer of 1983 that the current sheriff erected a tent jail to accommodate the overcrowding (Pelot-Hobbs 2018).

What once seemed to be a temporary issue in the 1970s, overcrowding was only increasing. The issues of the 1980s and continued efforts to pass punitive crime bills showed that Louisiana was being faced with a structural issue (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). When some parish officials felt forced to release prisoners to meet the federal court order limits, the media and politicians used fear-mongering tactics and attacked the local politicians for “letting ‘criminals’ loose into the streets” (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). Even in the state budget, the current governor, David Treen, prioritized jail construction over education, healthcare, and levees in order to ensure that no judge would feel compelled to release someone back into society further feeding into the panic (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). Sheriffs seeking to build up their parish facilities aligned with tough-

on-crime political mentalities as well as the economic conditions confronted by the state. In 1975, when the parishes first took in state prisoners, the low per diem for every prisoner, \$4.50, made it a financial burden to help with overcrowding. But the ongoing crisis now allowed the Sheriffs and local officials to successfully petition the state to increase the per diem to \$18.25 by 1980 (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). The financial needs of the state and the penal system saw the per diem system met the financial needs of the broader state as well as another avenue for financing the penal system (Pelot-Hobbs 2018).

The DOC budget ballooned and throughout the years Louisiana continued to struggle with finding funding, but after the fiscal crisis in the 1980s, state actors turned to debt-financing (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). But alongside its inability to afford prison-operating costs, this solution was impractical if not irresponsible. Activists and advocates continued to offer their own solutions via a process of decarceration and mass parole like other states had instituted (Pelot-Hobbs, 2018). Instead, Louisiana yet again relied heavily on the parish jails as a better option. It cost less to house them locally than in state prisons. With this new scheme, Louisiana created “multi-decade cooperation endeavor agreements” between the DOC and many mostly rural parishes to house most of the state’s inmates (Pelot-Hobbs, 2018). “What had started out as a temporary spatial fix had become the long-term geographic solution to prison overcrowding” (Pelot-Hobbs, 2018).

Louisiana was given the title of the highest incarceration rate in the nation in the late 1990s when about half of the state’s inmates were behind bars in parish jails. The Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) with over seven thousand beds was the largest facility in the state (Pelot Hobbs 2018). State inmates represented three thousand of those in OPP while the other four thousand were made up of people awaiting trial who could not afford exorbitant bail bonds, people serving

municipal offenses, juveniles, and INS immigrant prisoners (Pelot Hobbs 2018). Many of these people were targets of intensified police crackdowns in the 1990s even as officially most crime was in decline. “The escalation of fear-based, racially-coded news media” framed the issue as a top priority and risk to the tourist economy (Pelot-Hobbs, 2018). With cooperation from the Mayor and Police Superintendent, the NOPD reinforced the city with a form of “community policing” that targeted the surveillance of housing projects, the French Quarter, and the “Downtown Development District” (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). “This spatial strategy for law enforcement illuminated the interlaced primacy of “sanitizing” the city’s tourist epicenters of the homeless, youth, queer and trans people, and sex workers as well as containing and controlling Black working class spaces” (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). These tactics effectively filled OPP to its highest capacity by August 29, 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit the city and many inmates were abandoned by the state in flooding cells for months (Pelot-Hobbs 2018).

Since then, community organizing continues to bring attention to the crisis of mass incarceration in Louisiana. Improvements were being made at the local level in New Orleans including a rebuilding of OPP on a smaller scale, the creation of the Independent Police Monitor’s Office, the Department of Justice’s implementation of a consent decree on the NOPD and legislative reforms by EANO (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). But the road to more permanent reform is long and difficult. The Public Defenders office is pitifully underfunded and up against politicians seeking to further undermine any reforms made. Even when action is taken in tempering policing tactics, politicians and political actors find loopholes in their restrictions. Pelot-Hobbs’ narrative may seem bleak, but I am reminded of a mantra William and the staff would often shout in call and response. “No surrender.” “No retreat.”

Situated knowledges

Donna Haraway's term "situated knowledges" is key to understanding why this ethnography does not aim to be comprehensive (1988). All knowledge is produced, has a history, and is affected by the individual's positioning as well as the positioning of the object of research. I had worked for EANO on two trips before I did my research or even knew I was going to pursue this for my senior project. This was both to my advantage, because I already had a strong relationship with the staff. To my disadvantage, I did not have a key "discovery" phase of research, because of my previous assumptions and experiences. Partially due to my loyalty to EANO and my idealization of their work, I had difficulty critically analyzing the organization or moving past. I had to tread carefully in researching a vulnerable population, FIPs. In my research, I sought to be true to what they said and how they said it, while reflecting on why. As an ethnographer, I acknowledge the inescapable power dynamics that are a part of both the privileged institutions and disciplines I am invoking. I wield ethnographic authority as someone who gazes on the interlocutors and extracts ideas out of my perceptions.

For this project, I wish to preface my project with the aspects I could not address or had to suspend for analysis and my argument. I use the term FIP frequently as a literary representative. I use FIP to denote the FIP staff at EANO and the FIPs that are involved with the organization. This shorthand is not meant to make broad statements about the entire population. The issue of racial politics in America, and Louisiana especially, is woven through all the power dynamics in the organization and in their work. Race is not a biological category, but a social construct we create. We should not deny the manifestations of racial interactions and identities, but remove ideas of biological determinism that frequently affect racial ideas. I use the term, people of color (POC), not to simplify the range of identities associated and not associated with self-identifying terms of race, but to recognize the many cultural intersections and nuances of

people who call New Orleans their home. In the spaces, I was working whiteness was the marked category. This contrasts with the general population and general ways marked and unmarked categories work. I was a marked person in POC spaces, but I still benefited from the privileges of my whiteness. Though race inflected every interaction, race was a complex category that we rarely talked about directly. I want to acknowledge that this was an aspect of their work, but I did not pursue this fully in my research.

As a white woman, all the opinions, lenses, and perceptions are from my viewpoint as both an outsider and in some ways an insider as an intern. This project is from the eyes of someone who has never been incarcerated and isn't directly impacted by mass incarceration. I cannot capture the experience, opinions, and ideas of the staff and community of EANO as they see them, and these are my interpretations of their interpretations and how they interact. This in no way replaces or tries to recreate the people I worked with, but wishes to tease out the broader ideas behind their work via our interactions. Uchenna and Helen, who I worked with the most, heavily influenced my research and ideas. My critiques and observations of EANO spoke to the perceptions and concerns they saw and the environment they had been experiencing for months. Their narratives about EANO were convincing to me. As my key interlocutors, they influenced the way I saw the office not only by what was said, but what wasn't said and the undertones to the staff's performances and narrativizing. I cannot hide how their ideas and conversation influenced the way I perceived the office. As I present this narrative, constructed from the conversations and narratives of people at EANO, it is important to remember that all acts of remembering are also acts of forgetting. I do not and cannot present everything I saw, heard, learned, or thought. This is the nature of our world, but we lose sight of the fact that what we do remember and what we do forget is political and situated

Bettie Julie's introduction to *Women Without Class* is an important text to consider in light of this project and my position vis-a-vis the project. Coming from a feminist perspective, Julie discusses the trope of white women studying women of color. White feminism often assumes essential similarities within a group of women, Bettie argues, while ignoring important differences (Bettie 2003, 23). In attempting to temper this pitfall of essentializing, white feminism produced another form of essentializing, but now reduced in the broad category of "otherness" (Bettie 2003, 23). All others are defined as the same and alike in this essentializing of the "other" that reinforces dichotomies. Many feminists portrayed and perpetuated the idea that women of color "were/are represented by cultural outsiders in ways that portrayed them as eternal victims" (Bettie 2003, 23). These lenses of study denied women of color selfhood and placed them as having no agency, while also pointing to their static positions coming from the idea that religion, tradition, and patriarchy over determined their lives (Bettie 2003, 24). The "others" are "made into the bearers of unexplained categories" being emptied of any existence or individuality outside of the categories (Bettie 2003, 24). These tendencies come from the idea that white feminists were using the lives of "other" women as a way to prove their own universal theories of feminism (Bettie 2003, 24). White women wanted to show how we are similar to women of color. Elizabeth Spelman has explained, "women of color have been distrustful of white women who point to similarities between them when it seems politically expedient to do so and to dissimilarities when it does not" (Bettie 2003, 24).

Bettie offers complexity to the ways class, gender, and race has been talked about. While my ethnography is not totally about women of color, in my analysis, I do look at gender as constitutive of the institution. In light of my context, there is a similar tendency to victimize FIPs or currently incarcerated people, which both perpetuates their subjugation and removes structural

possibilities for agency. This is a common trope in prison narratives and discourses around “prisoners.” Bettie explains how this default position as victim is limiting in representing and discussing the issues and narratives FIPs face, in my case. Bettie helps me address how we write about people that are typically written about as victims and moving past this essentialization.

I think this points to many things I struggled with in my research and that I found problematic in what I was doing. To begin with, the very idea of anthropology and ethnography is rooted in elite institution. Academia has strong and visible power dynamics with its subjects of study in every discipline. The relationships between the ethnographer and the interlocutor are skewed in favor of the ethnographer as the producer of knowledge. This power dynamic is inherent in the positioning of the researcher and the idea that they are going to extract something from a group or person for their own academic interests. Anthropology in academia, from my perspective, has few practical advantages outside elite institutions. I acknowledge my ethnographic privilege of controlling a gaze. I have a level of authority as a researcher and wield power in interpreting their narratives in a way that may not match up with their own ideas. This is even more complicated with my identifiers as a young, white, middle class, liberal arts college student. Even the ability to have an unpaid internship is a huge privilege that I can spare time to travel and not have to worry about financially supporting myself. College students fit the unpaid intern role more easily, but still you have to be able to give your time and resources. I think it is important to use the privilege we have to try to contribute in constructive ways. I took in to consideration as I was writing about EANO that I was working in exchange for my research. I dedicated myself intensely to the job and stayed much longer than I anticipated. This was possible partially because Helen offered her house to me while Remi, her son, was on vacation. What participants get in return for their participation is usually simply the information for their



own interests. The exchange of labor for information in my case was maybe not direct, but I would consider it a better balance than many other relationships between the researchers and the researched. Being an intern and volunteering my time gave me this confidence in confronting the intellectual exploitation implicit in the dynamics of an ethnographer and an interlocutor. In an effort to protect the identities of my interlocutors and decrease the negative impacts of my research, I use pseudonyms for all names, names of organizations, and other identifying information.

From one perspective, you could ask why I would need to write an ethnography about EANO's staff, when they can best speak for themselves. I hope that I can show how I am not speaking or even trying to speak for them, but I represent them from my perspective and tease out what is so significant and radical about their work and them as individuals. I offer simply an expansion and situated analysis of what the staff do and how. That being said, after all my research and all the things I collected, the real challenge was deciding what I would use and what topics and stories I would not pursue in maintaining a meaningful argument. The nature of this project required me to critically analyze EANO. EANO deserves and is ripe for an anthropological analysis, which inevitably is only via my experiences, interpretations, and positionality.

#### Poisonous knowledge and anticipated interpellation

To introduce how I developed my ethnographic topic and the questions I asked, I rely upon Veena Das' ideas about the centrality of every day life as a key site of analysis. In an interview, Kim Turcot DiFruscia records Das' insights about ordinary life: "There is a long history of thinking that ordinary life does not require work in order to be maintained, that it has the force of habit and that it will therefore go on sustaining itself" (Turcot DiFruscia 2010, 137).

Ethnography is not simply about portraying “authentic” representations or speaking for interlocutors, but asks questions about the things we take for granted, the things we don't question, and the things that go unnoticed. Like many people, the staff of EANO sees their lives as seamless and that what they do just happens, that the things they say and do are obvious. What may appear like an independent and unchanging identity is actually a series of complex moving parts. Das continues that those who argue agency is best detected at moments of resistance or transgressions overlook the possibility in the ordinary “because of the presumption that ordinary life just goes on into the kind of flux in which it is not obvious that the act of actual agency could be located” (Turcot DiFruscia 2010, 137). Das sees “everyday as a kind of achievement, not just a part of habit” (Turcot DiFruscia 2010, 137). I want to ask and inspect, in EANO and with the staff, questions of the every day. But it also points to why the everyday happenings of the office and the details of their lives are relevant in considering how they construct their “everyday life” and how the long work days, in their own way, show the agency the staff exercise.

In her book about the lives of women after the Partition of India in 1945, Veena Das introduces the idea of a “witness” and “poisonous knowledge.” I draw from her analysis of people who have experienced something traumatic that has imparted onto them “poisonous knowledge,” which alters aspects of their lives because of that experience. She describes this as weaving of trauma into their every day lives, which she denotes as the important site to observe this change. Das’ “witness” and theoretical framework help me to articulate the impressions I have about how the staff make EANO effective. This also goes back into what can be located and what is significant and agentive at the scale of the “normal.” Her terminology is useful in my project in discussing the importance of prison capital and prison narratives for formerly incarcerated people, how FIPs bring their past experiences into the present, and what a person is

left with after their incarceration.

In understanding the strategies of EANO's staff, I have also found it helpful to rely on Summerson Carr's research about a drug rehab outpatient center's board of supervisor meetings that began to have "client" representatives (2009). In that essay, Carr borrows and alters Althusser's idea of interpellation, the act of being hailed by the state as a subject when responding to the state's hail. She observes how some women representing the other clients of the program would adopt and mirror the language and positioning they learn and utilize in group therapy sessions. In maintaining this rhetoric and these protocols for engagement across institutional settings, Carr sees one representative respond like she is expected to and call on the other members on the board to address her as the position she has been limited to as a "client" or a "drug addict" (Carr 2009, 319). Carr calls this "anticipatory interpellation," when the clients do not need to be hailed by the state or institution to respond like a subject of it (2009, 317). This idea is helpful in teasing out the complex and utilitarian identity politics at work for the staff. It also helps me describe how, through a mirroring of institutional language and positions provided for them by the state, the staff also engage in a kind of anticipatory interpellation in various ways in their work to gain a platform to speak. Carr's theory helps her analyze the ways one representative who engaged in anticipatory interpellation successfully acquired more resources for her own needs. The agency, voice, and space gained through this process in EANO's work is made beneficial despite the adoption of institutional language and the appearance of conforming to the state.

EANO claims that it is a membership-based organization, but this does not mean that they gain most of their support and help for their work from members. In trying to understand how the staff makes EANO successful, I wonder what kind of power they used to pass

legislation among other things. Multiple meanings abound when I say power: the power of prison narratives, narratives in general, the power to move, educate, and engage people, the power of performance, representative power and emotional power. As a “grassroots” organization, they do not have the kind of community engagement and involvement that directly translates to the success of the organization. They don’t succeed through input from their members. This leads me to ask where they get power and support, and how they manage to be successful without people power. I argue that the organization is sustained and furthered by the staff’s own power through performance, narrativizing, and witnessing. The positions they access and their power as a witness is what gains EANO the support of government actors and audiences. The power of their organization is rooted in their positions as formerly incarcerated people (FIP) that allow them to act as witnesses. When they invoke the “For Us, By Us” sentiment, they acknowledge what makes EANO operate: the staff. This led me to ask questions about how they maintain this work, why they got into this work, and how “change” happens.

My analysis is broken up into three chapters with excerpts from my field notes as transitional vignettes. The first chapter details what EANO does in “fighting mass incarceration” on a day-to-day basis. I analyze the process of professionalization the formerly incarcerated staff undergoes as a way to translate their personal narratives to their many publics. This translation into professional legibility legitimizes their organization, as I will show in the use of language, acronyms, interns, and their legislative work. After examining this process of professionalization and discussing the tensions in this process for the staff, I find frictions between being a professional and being an “FIP.” The complex relationship between these two identities, FIP and professional, is fleshed out more in the final chapter. I argue that the status of FIP is actively invoked to ground the staff’s authority as professionals. They gain access to new positionings

such as a professional FIP and a professional witness.

The second chapter centers on one staff member, Jacqueline, and her perspectives as the first formerly incarcerated woman hired by EANO. It also discusses the compartmentalizing of issues affecting currently and formerly incarcerated women and girls into the category of “Women’s Issues.” This was most evident in the women’s incarceration report the Bard interns wrote. Jacqueline’s stories as a staff member and individual help me begin to talk about the significance, benefits, and difficulties of being a formerly incarcerated person (FIP) working in criminal justice reform. I argue and analyze in the second chapter how Jacqueline inhabits, transitions, and shifts between multiple identities and how this is key to accomplishing her work while also helping her to deal with the stresses of the job. Jacqueline’s use of language and command of multiple identities show how, through the process of anticipatory interpellation, she uses the positioning to her advantage and subverts the limitations to gain a platform. Carr’s interlocutors call this process “flipping the script” and refer to their adoption of the expected rhetoric and language as a way to shift power dynamics and positionings. I show how Jacqueline has her own methods of flipping the script that she utilizes for representation and as an “efficacious mode of politics” in the workspaces of EANO (Carr 2009, 327). Performance is a key feature of how she expresses her identities, narrativizes her experiences and the way she flips the script. Drawing on the discourse around performance studies, I will define performance as a way of comprehending how humans produce culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world as well as an act of the imagination, a method of critique, and a politics of intervention (Madison, accessed April 15, 2018).

The third chapter expands out from Jacqueline to consider other staff members’ negotiation of multiple identities and the poisonous knowledge they all have. “Poisonous

knowledge” is a phrase Veena Das uses in her analysis of the Partition in India as a way to discuss how traumatic events do not remain as memories, but are brought into the present as “poisonous knowledge” of the trauma that changes the way they relate to others. This section investigates what the repeated colloquial phrase “For Us, By Us” means and how it is used to condense the complexities of this work. Focusing on the kinds of poisonous knowledge the staff share and how they carry their FIP status in the present, Das’ terms assist me in discussing how they diffuse their past trauma in the every day. Beyond that, this chapter presents staff examples of the kind of witnessing, poisonous knowledge, and multiple identities, including the professional that they utilize. Ultimately, this leads me to argue that the complexity and differences within the FIP community affect the kind of witnesses they can be and how effective their work will be while discussing the shifting of identities as key to their success and survival as advocates.

In this project, I hope to show what makes the staff’s work possible, and also the many ways they are resisting institutional powers by commanding them. Their types of resistance are explained best by my use of anticipated interpellation from Carr. These are formerly incarcerated people (FIPs), a key distinction that, like Das’ concept of poisonous knowledge is not merely a memory. The staff of EANO reincorporates their status as incarcerated into the present. They reframe their relation to their past and allow for their past experiences to be exploited in effective ways. Nico said to me, “We couldn’t have dreamed that this time last year that we would have been this successful.” EANO transitions and adapts as a relatively recent organization. The structure of the work they do, their own involvement, and the frictions encountered point to its status as a burgeoning institution. This is merely the beginning of their work.

*We were taking a trip to Louisiana's state capitol, Baton Rouge, with the EANO staff and members. When I reflected on our last trip to see legislation signed on June 2016, their strange state motto "Unity, Justice, Confidence" popped into my head. We all woke up early and drove to the office, but the front doors were locked. Then Albert Woodfox, who endured the longest period of solitary confinement, forty-three years, in American history, opened the door. We greeted the men, other EANO members and FIPs, in the lobby. A chipper Lawrence rolled in saying, "The bus is here. There's donuts and juice." We boarded the bus they hired to provide transportation. The event was originally scheduled for the day before, but it was delayed a day because a shooting occurred at a congressional baseball practice that included a Louisiana representative. Jacqueline and many people planned to be free that day, but could not make it to the rescheduled date.*

*I tried to nap on the worn bus seats with multicolored upholstered fabric until we arrived at the capitol. Albert was sitting in the back and as he got up he said, "Looks like everybody had a nice nap." Off the bus, the June sun beat down as we began to walk around. The event was not taking place in the huge capitol building with the large statues in front, but a smaller building. We walked to the left to a building next to the road. As we went around to the entrance, we saw a truck parked under the expansive overhanging roof. From the smells and steam emanating from the grill, they were cooking all kinds of food. When we entered the building, we walked straight back into a smaller room where the signing took place. The room became so packed with people lining the walls and everywhere tightly packed in craning their necks to see. There were a few speeches, and my eyes almost rolled out of their sockets as I listened to these politicians uplift their own "difficult" work. They were simply doing their job, but felt they deserved so much praise. The formerly incarcerated men we came with sat in the very back row. They were not acknowledged. Only Lawrence is individually acknowledged. Not EANO, but for the organization, the two are interchangeable. The staff often refrain "You get what you can."*

*When the speeches were over, the signing happened. Everyone crowded around the table at the front where the governor signed his name with multiple pens for each letter of his name. People stood up and created a wall of bodies and phones leaning over each other to get a shot. I stayed in my seat. When we came out, there was a jazz trio playing and the food was being served. They had fried shrimp, steamed shrimp and fried oysters along with pans of vegetables, and cornbread muffins. After we ate and the majority of the suits and politicians were gone, the speeches began from our people. Many groups were a part of this success, sending people to the capital and supporting the cause in relation to advocacy and community engagement all throughout the legislative session. A lot of hard work, dedication, and organization went into these reform bills, and they wished to recognize each other within their own circle. The shout-outs are long as Lawrence tried to uplift all the people that were a part of this 30-year-long journey that began when they decided to write legislation while incarcerated. When our people were done, we all went outside to take a huge group picture. Everyone was wearing blue "Louisianans for Prison Alternatives" or suits and dresses. As we walked out, I saw a man taking out the trash, and I read the back of his strange overalls, "INMATE." The reality of where we were hit me as I remembered how the capital buildings use prison labor for all kinds of menial tasks. Even after these accomplishments, there was still so far to go, and that is essentially the takeaway from the speeches: this is the beginning. I smiled at him, said hello and asked him how he was doing. He smiled back and with a hint of excitement he said he was good. The trip back to New Orleans felt long. -June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

## Chapter One: Professionalization of EANO

EANO defines their political platform and their political agenda on their website. These materials are a key site in exploring what the organization does and why this is vital to their success as well as the seemingly contradictory realms they navigate. EANO seeks to end mass incarceration while also taking on organizational and institutional characteristics. To reform and undo the penal state that perpetuates mass incarceration is to engage in politically charged action against state institutions. EANO aims to work against the state's structures, but at the same time they work within the state's institutions, like promoting voting. Voting is just the tip of the iceberg in the ways EANO collaborates with and cooperates within the state. They are engaging in contradictory structures of organizational power and radical direct action and advocacy. Investigating them is key to understanding what EANO does and the intersecting spaces its work inhabits.

The website of EANO tells us about their political platform and their complicated relation with the state as well as the multiple translations of their work. When you Google EANO, the Google tab for the business comes up and the first photo featured is of Bard students with the staff when we filed a lawsuit the summer of 2016. I'm not sure how this came to be the picture, but how can I deny the political capital that the Bard interns evoke and is expressed in how our images are used. Clicking on the link to their website, a clean interface with the title of EANO at the top centered in a bar of white is presented. Below are the tabs for "Who We Are," "What We Do," "Join Us," "Resources," "Blog," and "Donate." A square of their signature shade of blue takes up the screen with their logo presented along with their subtitle "From Chains to Change" running horizontally off the vertical logo of EANO. Under this is a call to



action in capital letters in a thin white font: “The time to end mass incarceration is now.”

Below, another piece of media, a video, about their lawsuit for voting rights is embedded and the tagline is “EANO V. Louisiana. Unchaining the Vote.”

Despite these clear declarations of what EANO does, the description can sometimes be intangible, abstract, and oversimplified through the production of media for their website. The narrative they present online is complicated by what happens in the workplace and when these goals manifest. Neil presented it one way as “you know what we are against, but figuring out what we are for...I don’t know.” They are fighting against mass incarceration and for the rights of incarcerated peoples. The website has been a relatively recent standardization of their core values, and I have less experience using this wording for outreach. On their website, under “What We Do,” are three drop-down boxes defining the work they do: “we build people power, we restore rights, and we reform policies.” The tab on “rights” leads to the categories they address including crime survivors’ rights, employment rights, housing rights, medical rights, and voting rights. In employment, housing, medical, and voting rights, EANO helps to change the way these rights and opportunities are continually denied to formerly incarcerated or convicted peoples. Medical rights also refer to access to reliable and affordable health care both for those in and out of prison. I am not completely certain what is meant by crime survivors’ rights as this is a new aspect of their work, but I think it refers to the vulnerabilities a crime “victim” is exposed to. These topics have been a standardization of the ambiguous goals that may describe their purpose, but not how the goals will be accomplished. I appreciate their simple and concise wording that is meant to be accessible and educate a wide variety of audiences.

In fleshing out what these clean statements mean, I want to try to describe what they invoke in “what we do.” “We build people power” denotes the emphasis on growing a “network

of formerly incarcerated people and their allies.” They refer here to their grassroots status as an organization. They seek to engage community members and citizens of Louisiana to hold their representatives accountable. They want to politicize and activate the voices and rhetorics to engage with governmental bodies and actors. Our outreach campaign, Louisiana Campaign for Democracy, is an example of building people power by calling the family and friends of incarcerated people. “We are the people who know the trauma of incarceration firsthand.” This point evokes the importance of the embodied knowledge and the poisonous knowledge that comes from their trauma of incarceration. The narratives and performances of these positionings and identities are a tool they activate; “we then use our collective and personal stories to drive the conversation around the necessity of restoring our rights.” This sentence is an example of the process of using poisonous knowledge, specifically the knowledge of the stripping of human and civil rights of incarcerated and convicted peoples. Continuing with the importance of restoring these rights, the organization shows how this denial of basic rights hinders the success of formerly incarcerated people. In showing how they will integrate this system of reform, EANO says that formerly incarcerated people’s expertise should be central to the reform of policies at all levels of government.

Engaging with these different actors and goals, the contradictory aspects of their work, being both institutionally inspired as well as relying on anti-state action, make more sense when they are brought together by the organization itself as the common ground. EANO caters to various methods of engagement and a range of audiences. With each context the definitions, ideas, and rhetorics shift. At their many sites of work and depending on who is speaking, the details of “what we do” can be different and told from distinctive positions. EANO staff recently attended the first conference of the Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted People and Families

Movement in Oakland, CA. On their website, they also have adopted the movement's 14-point platform that was collectively written by the staff along with those attending the conference.

Addressing government institutions, this platform begins with a dense political position about what they see is wrong about the criminal justice system and structural inequalities more broadly:

All of us have human rights that are being abused by the criminal justice system. We believe that imprisonment or conviction on a felony charge should not result in a lifelong violation of our basic rights as human beings, either while we are on probation, in prison, or as we make the transition from prison back into our communities. We are firmly committed to prioritizing De-Entry<sup>3</sup> over Re-Entry, and oppose the concept of a Rehabilitative Industrial Complex<sup>4</sup> that grows along with prisons. All efforts to educate, assist, and empower our communities should be within the context of eliminating human cages as a mainstream livelihood.

This is one way they articulate what they do. These goals encompass important points about every stage of the system including a “Bill of Rights”-esque proclamation of their long-term goals. The language and content is distinctive from other narratives of EANO's work. Situated from the position of FIPs, it may be the most “radical” or direct statement against mass incarceration in EANO's rhetoric. The platform also draws on these institutional and political formats of description. This language is acquired through prison discourse, through discussions with people working in prison reform, non-governmental organizations, and governmental bodies joined at the site of EANO. Their 14-points take the form of “We demand...” a series of prescriptions, ranging from the “equality and opportunity for all people,” “the right to vote,” “respect and dignity for our children,” “community development, not prison profit,” and “proper medical treatment.” The other points state the importance of the “end” of “immigration detention

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<sup>3</sup> De-entry over Re-entry is a phrase that challenges the idea that reforming re-entry is crucial, when ultimately they want people to stop entering the criminal justice system.

<sup>4</sup> This refers to a trend in reform that moves away from prisons, but outsources alternatives to prisons as essentially a new disguised Prison Industrial Complex where the system of profit and exploitation by private companies continues.

and deportation,” “racial profiling inside prison and in our communities,” “extortion and slavery,” “cruel and unusual punishment,” and “the incarceration of our children.” The only two points that don’t follow a pattern are “human contact is a human right” and “free our political prisoners.” All of this shows more than criminal justice reform, but an ideology about both the system and the state born out of this FIP movement. What is significant about this description is the language’s legibility and accessibility. The language used is not easily understood by those outside the FIP community and some pockets of criminal justice reform.

EANO’s work is multi-sited and must translate and present what it does in a variety of ways. They must code switch between rhetorics, languages, and tones depending on what field they are working on and whom they are addressing. The above excerpt is one representation and manifestation of their work that is transmitted through various types of media including their website, their newsletter, handouts, phone calls, and social media.

When we contact people or they hear about EANO, many immediately think EANO can provide legal counsel or help them as individuals with the issues addressed in their FICPFM-adopted statement. Many organizations involved in community engagement are categorized as “direct service” organizations that provide “direct” support in a variety of ways. Direct service refers to helping and supporting individuals and communities directly through economic support, resources, legal support, job training, housing, bail, and the various other ways convicted peoples and marginalized populations need support. Direct services are similar to social services work. Early in their career in activism, the group of older organizers have created direct service programs and organizations. For example, Lawrence and William were involved with Cease Fire, a campaign and program to end gun violence. Their direct service organizations still have a community presence, but now these organizers have shifted from direct services to policy change

and community engagement. EANO staff created the First 72+ -a kind of halfway house for men to stay, to get medical attention at the FIT clinic there, and to receive assistance with acquiring other services in their first seventy-two hours out of prison, a vulnerable time. But the idea that what EANO does has nothing to do with direct services or things that help one person individually makes it a hard thing to sell and intangible to these peoples' lives who would most likely not directly benefit from the policy work they are doing or if it did, it would not be obvious.

EANO staff members go through a process of professionalization to establish authority in criminal justice reform, navigate the many spaces, and translate their experiences to other groups and bodies. It involves many steps and is not so much a single event, but a process. In considering how this process of multi-sited and multiple audience work functions, I will explore how EANO uses a process of professionalization. I will argue that this process of professionalization is one method that the FIP staff use to legitimize their organization, create new spaces, translate their experiences to multiple legible forms, and commodify the embodied knowledge of FIPs for their target audiences. I will point to four sites of the process of professionalization and offer an analysis of the language and acronyms, interns, staff stress and legislative work that contributes to this process. As formerly incarcerated people, legislative bodies, policy conversations, and the world of politics are exclusive and not as accessible to them as other citizens. If an FIP remains under community supervision, they cannot vote. There is a process of breaking this boundary that is one contribution to EANO's relative success. This is one facet of "professionalization," which happens in a variety of ways to legitimize EANO and its actors as well as their authority in these matters of criminal justice reform. The elected officials don't ask people or provide a platform to gain information about valuable reform from

the perspective of someone who has experienced being in the system. This erasure has changed to a degree with the rise of EANO's staff as professional witnesses and advocates, now having a relationship and dialogue with the Governor, the Secretary of Corrections, and the Mayor-elect of New Orleans among many other state actors. It happens on many fronts in EANO including through rhetoric, work culture, organizational policy, hierarchy, relationships with institutional bodies and the daily functions of the office. Analyzing this process will lead me to discuss the methodology and philosophy behind their work and why this process of professionalization is key to their vision. I will also use Summerson Carr's theory of "anticipated interpellation" to show how this leaning in to and mirroring of professionalism and other institutional rhetoric is advantageous for the success of EANO in gaining political capital.

#### The state and anticipated interpellation

As an organization known for its grassroots community of FIPs, EANO deals with language and terms in their work that is assumed commonly known in the internal FIP spaces. But to activate and engage people, the staff has to translate their experiences to those outside of the FIP community. Much of what EANO does can be summed up in the effectiveness and abilities of the staff to narrate their own position and perform these identities to outsiders, encompassing multiple audiences. To analyze their strategies of narration, I will use Summerson Carr's article about a drug rehab outpatient center's board of supervisors meetings that include a representative "client" or patient of the center (Carr 2009, 317). In discussing a linguistic and structural professionalization, I want to introduce Carr's term: anticipated interpellation. Carr builds on Althusser's term 'interpellation,' which is the process of the state hailing you and making you a subject of the state through your recognition of their hail. Carr is broadly discussing what it means to include disadvantaged and marginalized populations as

representatives in an administrative setting for the program they are enrolled in (Carr 2009, 317). In these instances, she offers the idea of “anticipatory interpellation” to discuss the way one representative succeeded in securing resources and having her concerns met by “faithfully represent[ing] the very terms in which she could represent” (Carr 2009, 327). The representatives respond as is expected in these advisory meetings, offering the authorities to refer to them as their position. The “clients” in the drug rehab program respond “like addicts across institutional settings” using the rules and rhetoric they learned in therapy as a way to communicate in all situations (Carr 2009, 319). Through this process, the clients adopt institutional logic, language, and knowledge of the importance of using this rhetoric to call upon “powerful others” to address you as such (Carr 2009, 319). In using this language and positioning, they affectively hail those that hailed them (Carr 2009, 327). EANO staff in entering and inhabiting these powerful spaces of legislative and judicial government, community spaces, and public events are engaging in a similar process as Carr’s interlocutors. EANO’s staff uses the position of the FIP, the addict in Carr’s case, as a way to strategically use their narratives and gain recognition. Using this position repositions them not as “outsiders,” but, through the established ways of speaking in and inhabiting this position, they gain entry into systems of power they can now take advantage of for their own goals. In engaging with the legal, judicial, and legislative bodies in Louisiana, EANO’s staff uses anticipated interpellation and the mirroring of expectations in the space as a way to enter the space and thus gain a platform to speak. For the staff, it may seem like an unconscious process of the shifting of phrases and tone in certain settings that legitimizes their authority in a particular subject position, that claims a platform.

The most obvious example of EANO’s complex relationship to the state is their interaction with the Department of Corrections in gaining data and contacts for those

incarcerated and on community supervision. In an almost ironic injection of institutional data and involvement, many of their campaigns for community engagement used contact information provided by the DOC and set up a relay of information from their rosters. They used this data to reach out to those in prison or to those under community supervision. They asked for their loved ones' information. Then outreach efforts would focus on these families and friends in an effort to get them involved in changing the Department of Corrections policies and Louisiana's laws. The viability or accuracy of this information was also interesting in that it was hit or miss. I once opened a letter where a man explained that he used a fake name when he was incarcerated that was still being used by the DOC, but provided us with his actual name. His non-institutionalized name was kept secret. The reliability of the information depended on a repressive and coercive relationship between subject and state. EANO recently moved beyond getting lists from the DOC and gained permission to access the prisons and pass out the surveys directly to the prisoners. That was in Angola, Louisiana State Penitentiary, but some prisons were not as cooperative at the local level. Jacqueline had a nightmare situation trying to figure out what happened to a thousand pieces of mail sent to a facility that said they did not receive them while the post office insisted it was delivered.

Along with the exchange of information, EANO began to take on institutional attributes through this process of professionalization and an organizational-level form of anticipated interpellation. Individual staff members would take on the rhetoric and use their identity as a formerly incarcerated person while the organization also started to legitimize itself through an "organizing" and legitimizing of their brand and work culture. The first summer we were there, they did a complete makeover of the brand and aesthetic of the information and platforms. They used to have a messy, complicated logo that was created by combining ideas presented by



members of EANO years ago. It was a grassroots created logo that was unhelpful to the kind of organization they wanted to create and present to others. They hired a professional graphic artist to design the new logo. The new aesthetic focused around a shade of blue and the Helvetica font. She turned EANO into a vertical box with “EA” at the top and “NO” underneath. It was a simple and bold logo, but it caused some issues in pronunciation. A professional and uniform branding was necessary for EANO to move from its earlier manifestation as a grassroots organization into a fully-fledged, legible organization in the New Orleans’ political sphere.

### Ordinary language

I will argue that EANO’s language, organizational vocabulary, and the practice of acronyms is a key example of professionalization and is important in legitimizing their work. E.A.N.O. was originally named “Ex-Offender Advocates of New Orleans.” They changed the name half way through the first summer I interned. “Ex-Offender” implied that all incarcerated people were “offenders.” This is false as we see in the case of Lawrence, the director and one of the founders, who was incarcerated for over twenty years for a crime he did not commit. They changed it to “Experienced Advocates of New Orleans,” softening the language, while slightly confusing its own purpose. Off hand, the name does not immediately bring criminal justice reform to your mind. Like many nonprofits, EANO and its allies have a set of vocabulary, mostly acronyms, to formalize and make transferable the larger ideas behind the letters. “FIP” stands for formerly incarcerated person or people. “JLWOP”s are Juvenile Lifers without Parole. “FICPFM” designates the Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People & Families Movement. When we first started working there, Neil handed us a list of the many acronyms and what they designated in the various spheres of their work. With this list, I could see both the way the terms

were obscured behind the letter and formalized. The acronyms and the utilization of these uniform terms in their work is part of a process of professionalization.

In the same way that the change from Ex-Offender to Experienced obscures what EANO does, the acronyms are a part of professionalization in obscuring and formalizing the long terms they deal with daily. FIP is less intimidating and less serious than ‘formerly incarcerated person.’ The obscuring and formalizing behind acronyms is key to professionalization. Their activism is made legible as an established organization approaching institutional status. The acronyms hide what are difficult terms. They represent politically contentious meanings that are partially adopted from legal terms as privileged language of those working in criminal justice. It is easier to say JLWOP than verbally confront juvenile lifers without parole. Acronyms make “Juvenile Lifer without parole” ordinary in collapsing the meanings to make it a less cumbersome term. This sense of ordinariness is also an aspect of professionalization, because even if they are FIPs, they must make EANO function like a job or any other workspace. But this can cause frictions and confusion both for staff and outsiders, and making things ordinary begins to step towards ways of normalizing these concepts and the realities of incarcerated and convicted peoples.

Simultaneously, this process of professionalization begins to create tensions between the communities they want to help and the connections they forge with various institutions and organizations. Their contradictory goals come into some conflict in how their multiple audiences cannot always find a common ground in EANO. They manage this both by their shifting multiple positions and identities and by obscuring what EANO actually does. This is obscured in part by its vague definition and the fact that it lays at the intersection of multi-sited work, involving the government, the public, and the formerly incarcerated community. The professionalization is

supposed to be ultimately for the long-term benefit of these communities, but in the short term it gains professional capital to elevate its status and power as an entity.

The process of professionalization is made visible in the actions of the staff in subtle and overlapping ways involving positionings. In the constant shifting between the position as an FIP, as an advocate, as a witness, and as an individual, the staff now also acquires the positioning of the professional. An ironic example of this is how Neil once relayed to the office that when he called another organization that he was interested in finding more about, “I used my white person voice.” This comment pointed to his wish to separate himself from his whiteness and his labeling of the switching between roles as an FIP and a professional, what he equates as a “white person” in the public imagination. He used this special inflection to investigate the organization that was interested in working with EANO, and he found out they do not hire formerly incarcerated people. In putting on this positioning that was communicated through language and tone, he was obscuring his own multiple positions and taking on one that could be seen as a more “trustworthy” subject. It also is a slip up that may equate professionalization to whiteness.

#### Interns and political capital

As I thought more about this professionalization, I realized that the interns were inextricably a part of this process. I used to wonder about what it meant for them to be FIP-oriented while assigning the interns tasks that made us into EANO’s foot soldiers in canvassing, contacting others, attending events, and being photographed. We were representing an FIP-run organization to people in the local communities and Louisiana from our positions as primarily white liberal arts students from the Northeast. We were asked to write guidelines for chapters of EANO to spread through the rest of the state. We were the first voices they would hear from EANO and our ability to connect to people over the phone was not as effective for many reasons.

Frequently, people would hang up immediately on me or other interns as soon as they heard our voice, our tone, and assumed something about the nature of the call, anything from asking for money or, in general, wasting their time. Our politeness and professional manners were not assumed to be part of a grassroots criminal justice reform organization. The first step was getting them to answer the number. Most of our cell phone area codes are not from Louisiana. But the next challenge was to get them to stay on the phone and to peak their interest in EANO. They would frequently be suspicious of how we knew their name, their address, or any of their information.

The interns are part of EANO's process of professionalization in taking on duties to the staff while also representing professional and institutional capital. Some of the most important work in language and rhetoric was being given to us, because the staff lacks the time to work on it themselves. As much as I thought originally that in some ways "outsider" interns hinder communication, I realized that our modes of communication are key to the organization they are trying to create. We were able to invoke these professional tones and languages and our experiences in elite institutional settings. When a new intern I trained first made a call, Jacqueline and Helen were impressed at her phone manner and skills that were clear, precocious and polite. Jacqueline said, "She's good, she's like Claire!" This professional rhetoric was further cemented by our involvement as their interns, a system of labor already referring to institutional, organizational and professional cultures. What I originally thought as a contradiction in their ideology and the way they operate is actually a system operating primarily not to make strong, relatable communications to the public, but to further the process of professionalism. Nothing is more professional in the American imagination than having someone answer the phones for you.

Any moments that we were directly involved with or focused on, I examined for motivations in professionalizing and further legitimizing the organization. Many times we simply would act as “bodies” and show up to support, wearing our EANO shirts. But not just any bodies: privileged and in some ways specially marked in subtle and obvious ways that we were not part of this community. This was never clearer than the January we were photographed at a couple of events and ended up in three publications. Our embodied capital is marked and used to convey something about an organization and its claims to legitimacy in an institutional setting.

Before sending out emails, Jacqueline would sometimes ask whoever was in the office, Helen, me or another intern, to skim it over. This is something that is useful in the flurry of writing and multiple responsibilities at work and home that can fatigue anyone. After seeing this and reading her emails to the postmaster of the local post office or to the members about an event reminder, I wondered if there was anything else happening behind the obvious spell checking and use of an extra set of eyes. I also saw how this small request of our gaze was a way to make sure she was maintaining a “professional” tone in emails. Jacqueline said she has been learning to ask for help and ask questions with help from William, who will never hesitate. Jacqueline was asking for assistance in maintaining her professional identity and online persona through electronic mail.

Thinking about the switching between languages seen in these examples of Neil’s “white voice,” the interns’ politeness on the phone, and Jacqueline’s tone in emails brings me back to the point that EANO can be presented in various forms. This switching and translating is necessary in this multi-sited work in the same way that it is necessary for us all, and especially the staff, to switch between positionings as we can see most clearly in the language they use.

#### Staff friction

I want to analyze how the staff express their own tensions in the job that can show us how this process of professionalization is continuous, recent, and can lead to shifting definitions of the work, their positions, their goals, and their image. Simultaneously, we see how this process of professionalization can come into conflict with their own personal goals and methods for change. Professionalization is helping to gain representative power and legitimacy in these powerful spaces, but it is not as much directed at the communities EANO represents or claims to work for. As much as their website may present them as organized, streamlined, and multi-sited, the realities of their work can sometimes fall short of the way they present themselves due to the frictions caused by professionalization and the complexity of their work.

I asked each of the staff what the most difficult part of this job is. Jacqueline expressed the tension in “not being able to help right away.” She tells me she has come to realize this work takes time. She wants to help people right now, and it is hard to face the fact that it doesn’t work this way. EANO is not direct services. Her idea for outreach or a new plan of community engagement is events, parties, and things that draw people in like food and music. In her opinion, it is important to get people into EANO’s spaces first to connect with them. Here we see how EANO’s responsibilities to the community are, by definition, not “direct” and they work between many groups. Jacqueline feels most strongly about community engagement and may feel slightly self-conscious about how difficult this can be. It is not the only goal of EANO and, as a small organization, they must juggle them, sometimes the goals are more balanced than other times.

Helen spoke about the vague definitions of their positions that do not define fully the scope or specifics of their jobs. There is a lack of strong leadership from her perspective as she has been the executive director of three policy and advocacy groups focusing on juvenile justice. “I have had to step into all these roles and holes around our jobs,” she expresses frustration.

Lawrence and Helen have known each other for eighteen years. She mentions how Jacqueline and Lawrence both engage in activities, like taking people to sign up for public housing or speaking at a parole board, which are direct services. In these instances, they are acting more strictly as an advocate, but the line between Jacqueline at EANO's and the advocate Jacqueline is indistinguishable. The positions and campaigns of EANO change quickly and the shuffling of employees and duties can leave huge holes in the workload. Helen also sees how Jacqueline and Lawrence juggle their multiple responsibilities even when this falls out of EANO's official purview. They must switch between their identities and duties to both perform as organizational staff members and to help those who are not as fortunate in this legal minefield.

Helen calls it the "nature of the beast" when you see people who need help and cannot help them. The staff "sees" others from their position in the organization. This is a position partially outside the gaze of the state, because of its cooperation and collaboration with state actors. Like the adoption of institutional rhetoric and their ideology of policy change, the scale of the organization's work is privileged in their claim to institutional change. They are not working officially at the scale of formerly and currently incarcerated people. They do not provide direct services. The systems Jacqueline, Lawrence, Neil, Nico, and William are engaging with allow them to have this institutional obscuring of their statuses as FIPs that is reconfigured as a witness to be used in large-scale reform involving the legitimacy of the state.

In engaging with the government and other institutions at this scale, EANO's staff goes through a shift in the kind of relationship they have to the state. Through the professionalization and institutional rhetoric used to legitimize EANO, being a part of this organization provides economic stability that greatly reduces their vulnerabilities to stigma and a corrosive relationship to the state. As persons formerly institutionalized by the state of Louisiana and the Department of

Corrections, they were under repressive state authority. This has shifted, as they have become professional “FIP”s as well as advocates for EANO in public and governmental spaces.

Still, they learn to say no, which may come off as contradictory to the kind of organization and community they are fostering. People call us all the time asking for help to find housing, help with getting their loved one out of prison, or legal advice. We skirt the line of directing them to resources, information and “direct services.” EANO has to sacrifice that kind of work and support to focus on the system on a larger scale. If Helen could make major changes, she would focus on being a “true membership-based organization.” Helen tells me “that we need to actually be from the ground up” and meet these expectations for grassroots organizing. She refers to the narrative they present as opposed to the reality of how their organization focuses when she tells me “we may pretend that we are [a grassroots organization] but we are all top down.” She references the structure of the organization, the hierarchy, and the way they function in relation to the populations involved in EANO, which is very little in terms of decision making. She directly is pointing to the gaps in their work due to their multi-sited work, multiple audiences, and multiple directions for focusing energy and time.

Uchenna had an enlightening critique of one campaign that he shows is not only borrowing from the tactics of powerful others, but is also a problematic professionalized campaign. Our vague “Louisiana Campaign for Democracy” was originally a way to reach out to loved ones of currently and formerly incarcerated people to tell them about the organization. Neil created it along with the help of a third party analyst company. I had never thought that much of it, but from having to work on the project I saw the many issues it had and the inefficient parts of it. One day in a strategic meeting with the interns, he illuminated his critiques of the mail-based surveys part of the campaign. The “LCD” comprised of sending surveys to prison asking for the



contact information of those supporting them on the outside. We would contact the loved ones from the information given on the surveys and try to get them interested and involved in the organization. He said it was a failed method that we still dealt with. It was a way to get contacts, but the rate of success of these outreaches is hard to gauge. Being the ones making the calls, the interns could see how from eighty contacts you might get three people to agree to come to a meeting. Uchenna said that mail and mailings are inherently part of white supremacist strategies. The authority of the mail, and it as an apparatus, can be distressing to communities who may not even want to check the mail. Whether it is bills or notices, the mail usually does not bear good news for some people. It is not trusted as it represents these pathways of soft authority that have real life consequences. White supremacists used mailings for their own outreach. Many other factors contribute to the ineffectiveness of mailing including the need for a stable address. People who are economically unstable or recently released from prison are forced to move frequently. He says this problem is echoed in EANO's reliance on phones for outreach, because not all people who are economically disadvantaged have a phone. They may lose their cell service frequently because of an inability to pay for what is not a basic need. We had to figure out ways to quickly reassure them that they should stay on the line to speak with us. People would act hostile towards you, not want to talk to you, wonder why and how you got their number, be busy at work, suspicious, and upset possibly in hearing news about someone they know who is incarcerated. All of these barriers to effective outreach contributed to the difficulty of implementing this strategy. The reliability of the information we received was sometimes low and that occurred especially with information from the Department of Corrections for people on community supervision. EANO's presentation of itself in the LCD is a key site to show the melding of their multiple and overlapping ways of outreach and targets for outreach. They are

using professional methods and institutional data as a way to reach community members, and the loved ones of incarcerated people. Though not entirely in opposition, they represent dichotomous worlds, one frequently marginalizing the other. Powerful institutional bodies have unequal power dynamics with FIPs, communities of POC and low-income people.

Uchenna's vision for improving EANO's outreach efforts and organizing was a plan he formulated, but was not considered by the rest of the staff. He made a more tangible and realistic attempt to bridge the gaps in their multiple sites of work as the LCD was failing slowly. He developed a sophisticated radical organizing plan that would try to invest into the members' involvement. It would start with a huge outreach effort, and it would transition into political education and leadership development for members. The next stage would be "mobilizing" and "activating" the members. Uchenna says that EANO's philosophy of change is using legal means to refine the system. Uchenna attempts to use his knowledge of more radical community organizing strategies in bridging the unequal and aggressive aspects of the LCD. But none of the staff were interested in pursuing this. Uchenna, having experience as an organizer and training organizers, said that when people figure out what organizing "really is," which is hard work that requires a lot of stamina, organization, strategy and time, they are not willing to commit to the task. Getting people "involved" can sometimes feel like pulling teeth.

Helen, referring to Lawrence's comments that he is seldom stressed in this work, describes how William, Nico, and Lawrence have the attitude of "go along, get along" that she sees as a method of shushing tension in the organization. Like many FIPs who have been incarcerated for decades, the patience they have is beyond anything I could ever muster. Lawrence in our interview says that for him all of these staff tensions and organizational issues are irrelevant, because it is about reaching their goals for reform. I did not say this, but I thought

to myself that if you don't care about the way you get there, how do you know you are going to reach these goals? These comments are interesting in pointing to how this deep patience is not helping the rest of the staff. As they have expressed, there is much to be wanted in strategic planning and management of programs that should be more malleable and flexible to their multi-sited work. In the suturing of both community engagement and professionalization of EANO in their organization and Lawrence's resolute mind, the disconnect is obscured in assuming that EANO's presence is all that is needed to bridge the gaps of communication and interaction between these populations of state actors and those in unstable socio-economic situations like FIPs.

#### Legislation and policy

EANO's legislative and policy objectives are one of the most visible and direct aspects of their engagement with professionalizing and the state. When we attend a legal hearing, city council meeting, strategic meeting, event, or protest, our staff always steps up to speak and represent EANO as well as offering their personal stories to contribute to the conversation. One of the first things out of their mouth after their name and EANO is "I am formerly incarcerated," and I have heard countless snippets of their stories they craft together in these moments to grip people and use small things to speak volumes about their experiences. One such example was when Lawrence discussed at a community education meeting how his wife Ms. Anita would get mad at him for not turning off the lights. When they visited Angola the next time, Lawrence showed Ms. Anita that he hadn't controlled light switches in over two decades. The guards used keys to operated light switches in Angola. Incarcerated people were and are so far removed from the world, public spaces, and time. I am reminded of this in these moments about adjusting to the mundane parts of life that one would never think about. Formerly incarcerated people are

witnesses to the difficulties and tensions that arise when unlearning institutionalized behaviors. Lawrence is acting as an advocate and speaking as an individual about his personal experiences. Their work in legislative policy is possibly the most obvious example of Carr's anticipated interpellation as the staff is adopting state language and institutional pathways to access these groups. In providing the successes they have had, I will show samples of the policy work they have completed while we were in New Orleans. Our first ever day at EANO in the summer of 2016 was a trip to Baton Rouge for a signing of legislation they helped get passed. It was called "Ban the Box" and referred to the boxes on job applications that ask if you have ever been convicted of a felony. EANO staff pushed for this in government job applications. This does not mean that you never tell your prospective employees, but it isn't used as a way to immediately reject people based on their criminal record alone. The "results" or "successes" of their work is hard to gauge even when legislation is passed. After lots of editing of the bill that can sometimes weaken the legislation, Lawrence tells me "the devil is in the details," we cannot know how that law or policy will be interpreted, enforced, or used by criminal justice actors. But, as Nico said to me, they never thought they would be this successful. These were huge wins for the organization and movement in gaining attention for these issues. The first step is to make EANO and FIPs visible and begin a conversation in public spaces including in legislation.

For almost two years now, EANO has been going through a process of appeals to the federal courts with a lawsuit against the state of Louisiana for voting rights. The 1974 Constitution states that no one can vote "while under an order of imprisonment for conviction of a felony," and the right to vote is restored "upon termination of state and federal supervision." This vague wording has been used in practice to ban those on parole or probation from the right to vote despite no longer being imprisoned. It is a strange and insidious loophole that greatly

decreases the political power of formerly incarcerated people and their concerns. Over 70,000 residents of Louisiana would gain voting rights if the lawsuit succeeded.

At the local level, EANO along with the OPPRC had been working on a “municipal bail reform ordinance.” The policies for bail essentially made OPP a debtor’s prison and these reforms were meant to help this growing problem. Municipal offences are low level crimes and some unnecessarily require detainment. Another issue is that this detainment is prolonged and disproportionately affects low-income people, POC, and homeless people when they are unable to pay exorbitant bails. This detainment can also occur without the person being charged with anything, something that is unconstitutional, but an epidemic in the culture of OPP. Recently, a story circulated about a man being released after spending eight years in prison for a nonviolent drug case while *awaiting* trial. The next January when we returned, City Council no longer put off the vote on the ordinance. After allowing members of the community, including members of grassroots nonprofits, to come and speak on the issue, the council passed the ordinance. It aimed to create a faster turn over for trial dates and charges from judges. While reducing the amount of people detained, it also worked on the derailment this detainment could have on a person’s life. Many people lose their jobs, homes, and leave behind children unexpectedly and unnecessarily due to their economic situation.

The packet of bills proposed by the Justice Reinvestment Task Force affected several parts of the criminal justice system. I use<sup>5</sup> a handout given to us on the day we rode to Baton Rouge for the signing by Neil. Despite its no-nonsense language, it is difficult to understand. There are many assumptions being made by Neil as well as his difficulties in communicating to

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<sup>5</sup> Some of this success was due to the establishment of a sister organization with 501(c)(4) non-profit status that allowed them to directly endorse candidates and lobby politicians, but I did not include this in my research.

others both in speech and writing. I will not deny that these bills are easy to summarize and his vague descriptions may tell me much more than the actual language of the bill, but I present the packet of bills from his lens to offer an example of the multiple moving parts we dealt with.

Some huge victories were gained this past summer including the elimination of banning people convicted of drug charges from access to Food Stamps and suspending child support payments while a person is incarcerated to reduce an expensive accumulation. A needle exchange will be set up in an effort to prioritize public health over excessive punishments for people who use illegal drugs. A system of communication between the Department of Corrections and the Secretary of State will be established when a person is off supervision and has the right to vote to take the burden of paperwork off the individual that effectively limited people's ability to vote. For public colleges and universities, a new system will no longer ask an applicant about their criminal history until after they have been accepted, which decreases barriers to higher education and discrimination against people with convictions. A woman from Louisiana submitted a bill to the state legislature regarding "provisional" occupational licenses in some fields for people with criminal convictions. Her trepidation in coming to the state legislature with issues that personally affected her ability to gain employment or own a business ended when this bill was passed. These next bills were described in a handout as more vague victories as opposed to the former bills that had been passed without any snags or drastic alterations in revision. A new system of Medical Furlough will allow prisoners with "limited mobility" to nursing homes or other such facilities, but unlike Medical Parole, this system is barred to those on Death Row. A huge change in parole eligibility happened with a bill that allows everyone serving time for non-violent crimes the chance for parole after serving twenty-five percent of their sentence, reduced from thirty-three percent. This bill also addressed a small

population of people, about one hundred and fifty, who in the 1970s were sentenced to Life with parole eligibility. The law then changed to not allow Lifers parole eligibility despite this population having such sentences. The bill restores their original eligibility. Another step in the right direction with possible frictions is that those sentenced to juvenile life without parole will be eligible after serving twenty-five years. But the District Attorney can still seek “the other death penalty” or life without parole. These are a handful of bills that were passed, not including those immediately shot down, like a proposal to make New Orleans a sanctuary city.

It is a smattering of reform that is only the beginning while also making evident the multiple stages of incarceration that must be reformulated and restructured. These bills target the juvenile justice system, prison sentences, parole eligibility and a myriad of problems that people with convictions face after they leave prison. This shows one way that EANO’s work is reform-wise multi-sited in their simultaneous addressing of not only these bills, but the other initiatives I highlighted. Bail reforms and sentencing is one site before the issues of official incarceration. Another focus of their work is the conditions, facilities, and resources in prison. Issues with being released from prison, re-entry, and the challenges formerly incarcerated people face on the outside is still yet another site of their work. In trying to reform at diverse sites and levels, the idea of EANO’s work expands and is blurred by the massive amount of issues they face in reform.

These questions about reform strategy start to enter an interesting idea about time and the slow pace of this work. Lawrence, Jacqueline, William, and Nico frequently use the analogy of “chip, chip, chip, chipping away” at the system’s decades old entrenched punitive, racist, and marginalizing system of criminalization and detention. The perspective Lawrence, Nico, William, Jacqueline, Albert Woodfox, and all incarcerated people who have spent too many days

in prison is unique in the way they are both removed from time and able to overcome time through the building of strong patience. They waited for two decades to get out of prison; they know this fight is just beginning. In the long run, I understand Lawrence's patience, his commitment to work hard, and his absolute ideals for the organization. Lawrence is an especially humble man, frequently saying he is simply a "vehicle" for the voices of currently and formerly incarcerated people.



*One day, Jacqueline asked to have a meeting with the group, minus Luis, so it was just the girls and Helen. Sitting on the couches, Jacqueline explained that we are like her daughters and we are under her protection. She turned to me and said “can I tell them?” I was confused at what she was talking about and nodded. Jacqueline said that at the monthly meeting last night someone told her that I needed to wear a bra. I was shocked. She commented on Nessa’s wardrobe because the way a man leered at Nessa while we were canvassing. Jacqueline told us that in certain spaces we need to wear clothing that doesn’t make us a “target.” This included “booty shorts” that Jacqueline said Nessa was wearing. The issue of my braless attire did not end here, but I was confronted again by Lawrence’s wife, who offered me professional clothes as a vehicle to tell me “I needed to wear a bra.” When a new intern was being trained, she asked about the dress code and Jacqueline immediately responded, “you need to wear a bra.” I thought about how gender dynamics in the office worked to create this situation. These two women were policing my body, and the bodies of the other interns, using the rhetoric of protection. I never protested or told them how horrible these comments made me feel. Something that was supposed to make me safe, their advice, actually had the effect of making me feel unsafe. It was and is part of my identity and my own idea of “real” to not wear a bra.*

*–June 12, 2017*

## Chapter Two: Her Stories, Narratives, and Performances

The organization has a specifically gendered history that mirrors the way women are erased in narratives of mass incarceration. Interrogating the exposed structure of gender dynamics is important in seeing how narratives and identities are constructed in this space in relation to one another. Formerly incarcerated women's groups and other women-focused non-profits in the community think of EANO as a “boys club.” The organization was formed in a gendered criminal justice system, specifically in a men’s prison. While a default male incarcerated person is the imagined victim of mass incarceration, the comparatively lower numbers of incarcerated women is used as a justification to not legitimately focus or expend resources on that part of the system. Women face distinctive problems during incarceration and their chances to organize while inside are non-existent. The resources are gendered while incarcerated and after incarceration. There is no transitional housing for formerly incarcerated women in New Orleans.

There is a trend of more men working in criminal justice reform and EANO is a clear example. Jacqueline was filling this disparity. She was the first formerly incarcerated woman that EANO hired. She represents their focus on “women’s issues.” She was meant to perform the narrative of formerly and currently incarcerated women and their concerns. Using Summerson Carr and Veena Das to explore how identity is used in Jacqueline’s life, I expand their analyses to show how she inhabits shifting, layered, and *multiple* identities and positionings. Along with institutional rhetoric from the state and from EANO as an organization, she was part of creating these multiple identities. Broadening the claims of Carr, Jacqueline resists essentialization through a performative embrace of these categorical and limiting identities by “flipping the script,” or the rhetoric, to her advantage (Carr 2009, 327).

### Inhabiting Identities

Jacqueline didn't know this kind of work (criminal justice reform) was happening until she worked at the VERA Institute. They were offering a paid internship through public housing, HANO, to those directly impacted. "Impacted" is a vague term that in this context meant those directly impacted by the criminal justice system or mass incarceration, including incarcerated people, their families, and people involved with the criminal justice system. Jacqueline has always lived in public housing and heard about the internship fifteen months after she was released from prison. VERA had reviewed their policy on hiring people with criminal backgrounds. After a successful interview, they told her she was hired because of the way she talked to them and simply had a conversation. "I didn't just say what they wanted to hear. I was *always as I am*, which is sometimes detrimental to me," she told me. For Jacqueline, she said it wasn't a job. Later, she was hired full time for three years with VERA.

Jacqueline was chosen because of her perceived "authenticity" in filling a job for "directly impacted" people. As a formerly incarcerated person, she is also placed in the category of "impacted." It is key to point out that VERA, a criminal justice reform organization, did not allow formerly incarcerated people to work there before this internship. The hypocrisy is clear in these older hiring policies that, even when seemingly on the side of reform and an ally to the movement, they still are not willing to hire FIPs in the workplace. She was to be their token "impacted" person on staff, if only for a brief time. After her three-year contract was over, she left the organization. The space at VERA for Jacqueline was directly tied to her status as impacted and formerly incarcerated.

In considering the implications of this kind of hiring rationale, I want to look at Summerson Carr's studies of an intensive outpatient drug treatment program for women and the

advisory board meetings inclusion of what is called a “client representative” (Carr 2009, 317). One woman in the program is selected to serve as a “representative” on the board for many reasons. One key reason is the organization’s definition of “empowerment.” Carr explains how this empowerment is more of an idealized re-naming of self-help and self-reliance that is similar to rhetoric around President Clinton’s downsizing of the U.S. welfare state (Carr 2009, 322). Claiming that they should shift from entitlement to empowerment, in reality this coincided with the privatization of public services and the shift of responsibility to the individual (Carr 2009, 322). Empowerment rhetoric is one way an individual internalizes institutional ideas.

In her observations of the board meeting interactions, Carr underlines the tendency for U.S. institutions to not outright silence actors, but “assign ways of speaking to the identities they forge and...[use] preestablish[ed] ways of hearing the people” (Carr 2009, 317). She describes this phenomenon as “anticipatory interpellation” (Carr 2009, 319). In an institutional site, Carr explains that this rhetoric about identity is used by authoritative bodies to manage ideas about who can faithfully represent what (Carr 2009, 319). VERA defined the role of impacted that Jacqueline fit, because of her performance in the interview of an expected authenticity. With this performance and narrative as an impacted person, Jacqueline is a part of VERA’s management of representation in their workplace.

Borrowing from Carr’s discussion of representation, in anticipation Jacqueline performs and, by extension, changes the roles she is positioned in by VERA. Carr’s analysis centers on the concept of interpellation, but expands Louis Althusser’s concept to talk about authoritative power and subject positioning that is relevant to Jacqueline’s interview with VERA. Interpellation is a process where the state hails an individual and makes one recognize its authority (Carr 2009, 326). By responding to their hailing, the individual is transformed into a

subject of the state (Carr 2009, 326). Althusser's classic example is when a police officer, an arm of the state, calls out to you and you stop immediately. In the act of turning around to respond, you are interpellated as a subject, recognizing the police officer's authority. Carr uses this term to denote when the subject responds "like addicts" across institutional settings and "call[s] on powerful others to address them as such" (Carr 2009, 319). Using the metaphor, the individual goes up to the police officer and introduces themselves as a subject. Carr adds anticipatory to the front of interpellation that I tend to think of as the internalization of the state and institutional power, where one introduces themselves as the state expects. When Jacqueline says it wasn't a job, she is identifying with her performance of being "impacted" that she maintains is her unfiltered "true" self. Both comments, *always as I am* and *it's not a job* speak to the embrace of the performance she gave in the interview that was being recalled and performed for me. By giving the impression of her unwavering singularity as a person and erasing the performance of this through these comments, we see markers of anticipated interpellation. She adopts and internalizes the institutional rhetoric when she inhabits these positionings, as impacted or formerly incarcerated, that have been constructed to restrict her ability to speak and be heard. The anticipatory quality restricts her from seeing herself outside of the identity she is placing herself in and performing.

The difference between Carr's work and mine lies in the scale of involvement this representative power has as well as the terms of the institution. EANO is an organization, which has similar properties as an institution, but its roots began with a group of incarcerated men. There isn't an overt authoritarian feeling or narrative between the staff in the same way. With this power of representation expanded to be all formerly and currently incarcerated people in Louisiana, their demands are far reaching and at the level of legislation and community

leadership. In my case, the tensions within the population of FIPs and tensions about representative power shows a more complex situation than Carr's. These relationships and positions still nod to the adoption of their institutionalized roles. Through incarceration, they have internalized rhetoric, ideologies, and practices in a prison environment, some are harder than others to identity, let alone unlearn. Ian Hacking's term "looping" is helpful in thinking about the processes through which positionings and identities are formed and inhabited. Hacking posits, "people classified in a certain way tend to conform or grow into the ways that they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways, so that classifications and descriptions have to be constantly revised" (Hacking 1995, 21). These internalized ideas about identities that incarcerated people have had to grow into, such as their DOC number, are recreated by their performance of this identity and positioning, but also are part of changing this idea because they reproduce it.

Using Carr's discussion, we see how both VERA and Jacqueline construct the category of the impacted person to be a certain way. Jacqueline refers to her personality "as I always am" in the interview that got her the job. Invoking a sense of 'real', she describes her static personality that she claims does not change from the public to the private to her job. Through anticipated interpellation, the institution defines what is expected of this position: an approved and imagined performance of an impacted woman. Jacqueline as a part of the process of looping, also re-iterates and re-defines what she considers "impacted." Diverting from Carr's analysis, Jacqueline in some ways benefited from this positioning as impacted to get the job at VERA. Anticipated interpellation does not fully describe the importance of identities and positionings in the context of EANO and its staff.

"Women's Issues"

Continuing Jacqueline's career in criminal justice reform, the story of how she came to work at EANO frames the organization as a "home" for FIPs. At meetings about criminal justice reform around the city, Jacqueline kept bumping elbows with Lawrence, our executive director and the face of EANO. While attending two hour-long meetings about re-entry, she said she would only heard the word "women" once. She started to make her concerns for the erasure of women in this kind of work known. At one meeting, Lawrence approached her saying that "I hear you, there's nobody fighting for y'all, maybe you need to start fighting for y'all." He left saying, "You need to come on home." Jacqueline didn't know what he meant until a few months later Neil, our deputy director, approached her about a job. She was shocked and when she left VERA and came to EANO, Lawrence said 'Welcome home.' She finally realized what he meant: "come be a part of people just like you and do the work for people just like you." Grinning ear to ear I respond, "Wow, that's magical." Jacqueline quips back, "He deep, right?" laughing.

Jacqueline would work on the compartmentalized "women's issues" that could only be taken on by a woman in this marked section for gendered issues. Jacqueline represented the 'token' woman on staff to address the problems of her fellow currently and formerly incarcerated women as well as their diversity of representation. Her narrative was all about being a woman, a mother, a sister, and a formerly incarcerated person catering her performance depending on the audience. She uses and offers up the position and status given to her by the state, which is one site of interpellation. As a nonprofit they could call themselves advocates for prison reform, but it is important to point to their experience by using the identity of formerly incarcerated person. Both perpetuate them as FIPs. A question I have is if they ever stop being a formerly incarcerated person? I am confident that Jacqueline would say no. Her relationship with the state did not end when she left prison, but her punishment marks her both in society and in her job.

Formerly incarcerated people continue to be marginalized for having served time or been convicted in ways that affect their ability to access food stamps, housing, jobs, certifications, education, and careers. In this specific case, we see Jacqueline not being discriminated for her past and her incarceration, but that this experience is an asset in her work. Still she is held within this position that clearly links her personal identity to the identity she forged after incarceration about her experience. Her identity as an FIP and a woman is commodified for both her own use and the use of the organization.

The staff asked the Bard interns to write a report about women's incarceration "generally." We were working on three special projects, but the second project was a group effort for all seven of us. They gave us almost no clear boundaries and at first I was confused as to what they meant about a "report:" what format is this, what is the tone, what is the intent, who is the audience? We seemed to always circle back in our brainstorming about who is going to read this. In a meeting, they told us that the plan was to release the report at an event that was supposed to build awareness and hype for the larger event in December, what we first called colloquially the Women's March. We changed the name to Formerly and Currently Incarcerated Women and Girls' Day. In the end, the report was about thirty pages. Our research was coming both from online sources, other criminal justice reform organizations, and real interviews we had with formerly incarcerated women to help us decide and to get some ideas of what our focus should be. This research is valued, the testimonial, the witness in their own words is commodified to raise awareness as well as getting people interested in EANO. We recorded interviews and gathered the experiences of Jacqueline, Erica, Jada, who works in educational reform, and others on their experiences. Nessa spearheaded the interviews as she has previous experience doing this kind of work with a local reporter. In a meeting with the staff, after



throwing out all the topics we were thinking about including, Jacqueline identified trauma, health care and “motherhood/womanhood” as the most important topics for her personally. The interview we created for the report was where I heard Jacqueline tell one version of her life story in the wandering way stories are told, not chronologically. The questions we asked grasped for a more whole narrative about the experiences of these women through stages in their life. The narrative was emphasized as being almost in some ways a more “reliable” source, in the context of EANO’s ideals. This is reflected in how we organized and researched women’s incarceration. We did not begin with statistics and descriptions of women’s facilities, but at the beginning of all of these stories. Bluntly, what happened or was a factor in why this person was incarcerated? What led them to be in these circumstances? In answering or attempting to approach these complex questions, we wanted to show the story of these people beyond their crime and the beginning of their record with the state. We looked for the gritty narrative we expected, but Louisiana’s treatment of incarcerated women and women in sentencing shocked us all. There were small things that you wouldn’t even think of. Where do you put your pads when you go to work in the fields on your period? Or do pregnant women receive specialized care? And why was resistance not as common in women’s prisons?

#### A story from notes and recordings

I present Jacqueline’s story, organized and presented in two-dimensional text below. EANO’s community values the story. Stories about incarceration are usually given space to be told. This format and formalization of our interview with Jacqueline can never capture the full bodied, non-verbal, rhythmic, emphatic performance of a narrative told to others over and over again in multiple ways. In this format, we also cannot see how the story alters slightly over time and through wear, as all stories do. In keeping with the imagined incarcerated women, the report

presented a narrative that was expected, that was tragic at points, if not simply bleak. We regurgitated the issues of the quintessential marginalized woman, and her “woman’s issues.” Inevitably, they all refer to her body and its vulnerability: as a mother, as someone with chronic physical and emotional pain, as a victim of trauma. I present this narrative as significant in my fieldwork and as a small introduction to the lives and realities of the formerly incarcerated community in Louisiana. The surface and testimony is important to me and to this work when these groups have been historically silenced. The story’s inclusion speaks to the reversal of this silencing and erasure, but also to the narratives that perpetuate the victimizing of formerly incarcerated women and women of color that may seem inescapable in the narrativizing of women’s experiences.

*Jacqueline grew up and lived in the Calliope public housing project, now Marrero Commons in New Orleans. The old 1,500 units of Calliope were demolished and replaced by forty units for mixed income families. A sort of gentrification occurred, but she told us that the poverty was the same. She lived with her mom and her sister, who was younger and sick frequently, suffering from sickle cell anemia. Her mom was always working and not around a lot. When we asked her if she felt safe growing up she said “I felt safe because I knew the outlaws” and people wouldn’t bother with her. She saw violence between people in the unit a lot. We asked her about what she spent her time doing as a kid. As a younger teen, she would sneak out and get into “craziness,” smoke weed, play cards and compete over the cutest boy. There were no programs, no sports, and she said they created their own entertainment. Jacqueline said she was an honor roll student. We wondered if anyone had ever tried to help her. Her reply was that everyone was having hard times, it was normal for people to struggle and that people looked up to her because they thought she didn’t have it as bad as everyone else. At thirteen, she saw her mother continue to struggle to support the family. Because she was one to always venture out further than her sister, she became the dope-dealer’s little sister. Eventually, she became the first female drug dealer in the complex and decided to drop out, because she saw the money that could be made. She told us that she justified it to herself by saying she was helping her mom out. In reality, Jacqueline enjoyed the excitement of just being a part of something. At sixteen, she had her oldest son. When she would get arrested and taken to OPP, Orleans Parish Prison (technically a jail), she would call her friends, who were always older, to get her out. In that period of her life she said if described in one word it would be: existing. She said it was like existing each day not even understanding what a future was. Not living, just existing, she told us. “I saw poverty, oppression, others existing, and I really thought that's what life was.”*

*At twenty-four, she was sentenced to a short stint while pregnant with her youngest child and-lacking prenatal care gave birth to her prematurely while incarcerated. The special treatment she received was a bottom bunk and extra nutrition comprised of graham crackers and*

*milk. Jacqueline didn't drink milk. We asked her how she spent her time in prison: "most of the time I was in my room." She would play cards, but didn't go out on the yard a lot. She told us she was in a different place mentally as she would watch the craziness going on out in the yard. Sometimes she would watch TV, but mostly she did her own thing. At LCIW, the guards they came in contact with the most were black women, with white women holding ranking positions, and three white men in administration. We asked her about the way she was treated. She responded that she didn't get a lot of bad treatment, but was more often a witness to others receiving it. If she was treated unfairly, she was not afraid to speak to a higher rank or file a complaint. When we asked what the result of the complaints were she said they did nothing, but the administration knew that she was one that would "put pen on it." Another result of the complaints is retaliation from the guards. The guard someone complained about could write that same person up for "bogus shit." But then it's your word against theirs and they are going to believe the guard over the inmate. Even if the guard is blatantly lying. At the end of the day you're just an inmate to them. There is absolutely no privacy while incarcerated, as you lived with either one or two other people. In jails, you would have to take a shower in an open space with all the other women. In prisons, there are showers with a stall and curtain, but that flimsy piece of plastic is a façade. Jacqueline told us that if a guard wanted to do their rounds, they would just come around and rip the shower curtain open with no hesitation or permission.*

*Resistance didn't happen because Jacqueline told us that women's prisons are run with ink pens and there are a lot of rules. If you get a report or a write up, things can be taken from you. She talked about how women are less likely to risk losing visiting privileges or phone calls, because they have more to lose, being mothers. "We tend to accept the bullshit." When we asked her about what happened to her kids during her incarceration, she told us that the first time her seventeen-year-old niece was living with her. She said her kids were left to raise themselves. They would live with her Mom, and her grandmother or her aunt would collect benefits for them. She added that those benefits weren't actually being used on the children. She told us frankly that when you force your family to raise your children that's not something they signed up for. There is anger, resentment, and bitterness that would sometimes translate into her family telling her children that she was no good. "Mama bashing" was how she described it. Her niece became the head of the family of three boys and two girls, sixteen, fourteen, twelve, eleven, ten. Eight months into her seven-year sentence, Katrina hits. We asked where they went and she said she didn't know what had happened, if they were alive or dead until four months later. She remembered her aunt's number in Mississippi and called out of the blue to hear her sister answer the phone. Her family had left to Mississippi and they didn't know what had happened to her either.*

*In 2007, she remembers them visiting her and being crazy emotional. Seeing her children leave after the visit was a lot for her. Leaving without their mother was a lot for her kids. She was absent from their life for seven years, and said it was a lot. "Shit, it's still hard!" When children are left to fend for themselves, Jacqueline told us, they start getting into street life, going to prison, and having street beef. "And then [I] come home, I'm walking a completely*

*different life.” She has adults now that rely on her for support, but not for advice. Two of her sons are formerly incarcerated and all three have been victims of gun violence. She talked about the cycle of it, children learn from seeing. Jacqueline was 40 years old when she found out she could go to college. It took a professor who taught a program while she was incarcerated to tell her she should think about college. But there she said it was a struggle, she wasn’t in her environment. We asked her if there was anything that happened to her that she wishes hadn’t: “I wish I had known that my life could have been better and that there were other options.”*

*We asked Jacqueline if racism has anything to do with her incarceration she laughed after saying absolutely. “I was serving time with white women, who had manslaughter charges and were serving less time than I was for shoplifting.” At the time, Jacqueline was dealing with drug abuse, economic stress, and trauma. “I needed to go somewhere, but there was no where else for me to go.” The population of white women within the prison has been rising, but Jacqueline says that that’s because they never went. Jacqueline would talk with the other inmates because that was one of the few things you could do. “There was no room to deal with trauma.” When Jacqueline’s sister died of sickle cell anemia, she was allowed to cry and not be locked up, because the administration knew that she wasn’t a problem inmate. She told us she screamed. If anyone else were acting this way, they would have been given a sedative and put in protective custody. She was also going to be allowed to attend the funeral of her sister, but the day of Hurricane Gustav happened. “I never had my last viewing of my sister.”*

*She says that we need to understand that white men, who have no clue what a white woman, let alone what a black woman, needs have designed our system. The prison was run by untrained people to maintain custody and control, “the ‘care’ doesn’t exist.” Jacqueline talked about how prison is not designed for rehabilitation, but rather it is up to you to rehabilitate yourself. They are not concerned with the individuals, you have your own problems, and you deal with it. People end up back in prison because there is nothing out here for them to survive with. They release people not concerned with what happens to them, assuming and expecting that it is someone else’s problem and they have family. Some have nothing to come home to and you have no resources. “Maybe your family is tired of your shit and they ask you not to come around their way.” Jacqueline says then you do what you know, you survive, whatever that looks like, shoplifting, prostitution. “You go shack up with a man that beats your ass at breakfast, lunch and dinner, but he’s got a roof over your head, he’s paying the bills and what happens one day when he comes home and you don’t feel like getting your ass beat today and you grab a butter knife, close your eyes, now he’s dead, and now, guess what, you’re back in jail.”*

*Three years before Jacqueline was released from her last and longest stint in prison, she completed re-entry preparation, because the administration had made a mistake and told her she was going to be released earlier than she had knowledge of. She sent grievances to them before doing re-entry, asking them to double-check her sentence. When they finally responded, they told her they were trained professionals, who knew what they were doing, and that she needed to stop writing them. Then three weeks before the first out date they had given her, they told her that she still has three and a half more years to serve. When she was finally released her niece picked her*

*up along with her youngest and oldest daughter. "I had absolutely nothing, not even a change of underwear." She told us getting out of prison, she felt lost. She didn't even recognize the city having been gone for so long. "I felt rushed, to get my life back in order, whatever that meant. I just felt this overwhelming desire and need to have my own place." She wanted a job, but didn't know what kind and her back issues started, which scared her. She first went to Delgado Community College in New Orleans before finding the only job she could on a moving truck. But Jacqueline knew that even her worse day out here was going to be so much better than her best day in prison. We asked her about how she got from there to here. Jacqueline says that God put people in her life to help her. The two classes she failed while at Delgado, algebra classes, were the only ones she chose without asking God what she needed. One class she failed simply because she didn't know that she was supposed to withdrawal or what that was.*

*Everyday Jacqueline goes back to the place where she grew up and they all know her. They've seen her change from the person she used to be and the person she is now. She goes to show them that it is possible and that there is another way to live. Jacqueline told us that the women she left behind push her to do this work and she thinks about them every day. "My story isn't unique, it happens every day, it's still happening." She emphasized this point of "everyday."*

#### "Flipping the script"

After hearing her story through my translation, I want to analyze the themes, significance, and context of the narrative. Jacqueline's story on one level is about being a witness to incarceration, racism, sexism, and poverty. This story is one she does not leave in the past and, in some ways, cannot leave in the past, but brings into the present. This performance evokes her past in the present and reconstitutes a narrative in overlapping experiences of the past and present. Jacqueline's story at the end, she said, is not unique, but Jacqueline as an individual is unique. She shows the space of detachment between herself and her story. She has worked to create this space for usage of the narrative, but another possibility is that in order for her to be a self-advocate she must have distance from her past. This distance and detachment allows for the mobilization of her experiences and space away from a possibly corrosive use and frequency of narrative that reminds her of past trauma.

The narrative is constructed and formed by us all in the process of questioning, writing, and narrativizing. This begins to confront ideas of "real." In the interview, she is performing the

narrative she wanted to present in light of our report and because of the group of women she was with: Nessa, Michelle, Olivia, and I. To readily access this performance as a witness and a formerly incarcerated woman, she must create space between the stories, her own personal cultivated past, and her as an individual. On this other level, the story through my transcription is taking on the narrative I organized it to be like. Why do we seek, almost fetishize, this type of “real” narrative, when it is so obviously a performance by Jacqueline through my eyes. This treatment of the subject can be seen when we asked whether she felt safe growing up. A question I don’t know if I would ask any another person that also feeds into a narrative of a bleak existence in public housing as a poor person in Louisiana that is true for some. We asked her if people tried to help her as if we were confused how someone didn’t see the trajectory she was on or that all she needed was one helping person to stop her from going down this ‘pre-destined’ path. The looping of narrative and identity is a group effort by the whole organization.

As EANO’s Lead Organizer, she has a charisma that makes her a powerful speaker and advocate. The way Jacqueline speaks in many tones and from multiple perspectives fluently with intent and full-bodied presence is part of the power she emits as a speaker, a performer, and a representative. The way she can communicate and engage with a group or an individual is a true gift. We all love Jacqueline, because of this and so much more, the person we see in our memories and the way that she has impacted each of us through her presence, personality, and actions. This feeling is the environment she creates and places her audience in through her performance of narrative. In an interview with me, she said, “I’m a people person, people truly gravitate towards me.” It is an energy she exudes almost effortlessly that proves she is a force to be reckoned with. It is performative, something she has honed and developed to assert herself in spaces that she had been erased from, overlooked over the course of her life in many instances.

In our interview, one of the first things she said, and frequently says, was “I’m a formerly incarcerated African-American woman who fights daily for my place in this work, right?” Carr’s anticipated interpolation is seen here where Jacqueline defines herself, offers her introduction by this assigned positioning.

Despite the context Jacqueline inhabits in EANO, when working in public spaces as an extension of EANO, her identity is not recognized in the same way, so she uses performance to overcome this. She expressed a need to continually represent herself and reassert herself in spaces that this work brings you into contact with: judges, cops, legislators, attorneys, city council members, that in Louisiana are historically and, still continue to be dominated by, patriarchal, white, (and wealthy) populations. In introducing and performing this role, *she* is reinscribing institutional power when she speaks (Carr 2009, 317). Meaning that groups she is usually excluded from as a woman, an African-American, and a formerly incarcerated person are only accessed by identifying herself as a hailed subject of the state. In these spaces, her positioning already has expectations for performance and pre-established ways of hearing (Carr 2009, 317). She expressed the disjunction between the agency men have in entering and being comfortable in spaces. She elaborated: “I mean to have access to committees and meetings that men could just walk in, but if I just walk in, I’m looked at like ‘why is she here.’” These spaces, despite her institutionalized position as an FIP, can be hostile environments. She was frequently one of maybe two women in the room at these events. She described how these spaces of community organizing, representation, and privileged information were difficult for her to be heard: “And if I have an opinion, you know it is overshadowed and its over-talked and decompressed.” Her input when she voices her opinions and asserts herself calling out the lack of formerly incarcerated women being represented in these spaces is another example of

anticipatory interpellation. She struggled to find the right word to describe the deconstructing of her opinions in conversation that works to silence and dismiss her ideas and her presence. But in this case, being dismissive and hostile to Jacqueline showed how she could attempt to enter these spaces with this institutionalized position, but this did not mean that she would consistently be able to participate in an effective way without friction.

Hearing how Jacqueline considers her work can demonstrate how the compartmentalizing of women's issues is not simply forced upon her, but co-produced. Jacqueline does not pause for me to unpack her words and continues, almost answering why she thinks *women* are dismissed in these spaces or something that she has sensed is inappropriate from the reactions of others. "You know a lot of times, women, we speak from emotion because we carry such a heavy burden of, you know, being a mother, being a grandmother, being a wife, a girlfriend or whatever, partner and also being a caretaker, a nurturer, being trusting, being a friend you know all of those things on a daily basis." Jacqueline does not hide her emotions. She says how she feels, and she does not hold back, which is part of her performance as a woman representing the collective experiences of "impacted" women. At a panel of women working for women and girls involved in the criminal justice system, Jacqueline introduced herself and spoke about how she just started a New Orleans chapter of a nationwide convicted women's group. She spoke to the sisterhood and bond she has and the way she can express herself in these spaces. "I'm here to laugh and shout and be loud and moan and groan when I'm with my sisterhood," "I'm very emotional, go hard or go home." This sisterhood is much more than her friends, but also the women "she left behind," something that she refers to frequently, and the women she is the "voice of" and "fighting for." The stakes on her performance of the role are increased as she takes on the narrative of an almost omnipotent, essentialized figurehead for "women's issues." This category



is a way these issues of gender disparity in the criminal justice system are placed in positions with assigned ways of being represented, speaking, and listened to. Her exclamation of how she acts when she is with her sisterhood is in direct conflict with her claim that she is “always as I am.”

In coming back to the prickly issue of “real,” another use of Carr’s anticipated interpellation is how these positionings can essentialize an idea of “authentic” identities, such as in this case of FIPs. There is an idea of sisterhood and brotherhood in the FIP community, but I think something not addressed enough at work was how not all FIPs share a similar experience, especially across state lines. Neil was incarcerated in Rhode Island, which is in contrast to being incarcerated in Louisiana like most of the FIP staff. There are hierarchies and power dynamics within the FIP community just like any group of people. Jacqueline is an intrusive representative of the “Overlooked” population of formerly and currently incarcerated women. Various manifestations of race, gender, political beliefs, sexual expressions, religion, conviction, status, and disabilities make FIPs a diverse group and difficult to essentialize in this way. The representative is simply that, not necessarily an active or wielding person by default. The performances of this representation and their narratives from an institutional point of view can be seen as interchangeable, all drawing on an embodied experience. This positioning and interpellation downplays the diversity of people, experiences, situations, opinions, values and politics in this broad category. What about people who would never tell you right after their name that they are formerly incarcerated? The organization plays into this in the ways it tries to look at the collective as a way of obscuring political decisions to pursue specific areas of work and focus, like legislative work that assumes to assist if not target men more than it does women or other gendered FIPs.

Notwithstanding the possibility for structural essentializing in an imagined narrative, in Jacqueline's case examining Summerson Carr's term in relation to the inhabiting of positions can tease at the subversive agency accessed. Carr's analysis of interpellation is not completely pessimistic as she argues that the embrace of this identity and position does not totally remove the ability to be agentive in these authoritative bodies (Carr 2009, 327). Breaking with the behavior of previous client representatives, one of her interlocutors used the designated language, ways of speaking, and institutional knowledge she had gained as a kind of self-knowledge to beat the board members at their own game (Carr 2009, 326). By using these restrictive, but still recognized positionings, her embrace of it leads her to speak up to the board members, eventually gaining their support for her own needs. The clients called this "flipping the script," which points to the importance of the performance of this position and identity to make the system work for the individual (Carr 2009, 327). Their language is strategic, replicating the ways of speaking from the "superiors" that used this interpellation. These rules of language try to contain the agency and representative power of the clients (Carr 2009, 321). The resistance is slight, and not what would traditionally be thought of as subversive against these institutional barriers. By their exposure to these institutionalized bodies and knowledge, the clients can effectively hail, or interpellate, those who hailed them ultimately shifting power dynamics in the process.

Looking at this interpretation and use of interpellation in relation to Jacqueline's narratives and positionings, we can see an example of Jacqueline "flipping the script" to gain advantages. When applied back to Jacqueline's stories, Carr's more optimistic analysis about the use of interpellation in institutional settings can be seen in the way that Jacqueline has used her status and performance as a formerly incarcerated person to secure employment. These jobs can

partition and divide her abilities depending on the position or separate her as a token example of a formerly incarcerated woman. Jacqueline subverts this through the embrace of the very phenomena that has been attached to her: her identity in institutional terms. While incarcerated, she talked about when she was treated poorly; she would use the pathways of complaints in the prison. We see her using the same system of being “written up” used by the guards for misconduct that can also be used to make complaints against them. The guards knew she was one that would “flip the script” and write back, even if nothing came about from the complaints. In the hostile environment, this small action is an attempt to hail the guards that so often hail her by her DOC number twice a day.

It is not easy to be the only formerly incarcerated woman to focus on “women’s issues” within this organization. As this token woman, Jacqueline is placed in a position, within the institution of the organization, where there is an expected, assumed, and perpetuated notion that she is only valuable in relation to these “Women’s Issues.” The staff would have never had us write a report about men and boys incarceration “in general.” The woman is in the marked category with issues and vulnerabilities being underlined to address to this erasure. Similar to the example of Jacqueline’s status as “impacted,” she has been interpellated into the organization and enjoys specializing in this chosen category that is assigned and expected by a formerly incarcerated woman. She is here to talk about motherhood, childbirth, her menstruation experiences, her trauma, and perform the role that EANO needs her to occupy. It in some effect places her in an apolitical realm that she in response makes very political through her performances and narratives. She first says her name, and then she says she is a formerly incarcerated woman; it’s like her subtitle, but also clearly states the narrative she is performing. These pre-established ways of being a part of a group you were once excluded from, before

EANO had no female organizers or FIPs, show how these constraints, assumed identities, ways of speaking, performing, and the consumption of that performance can be perpetuated in the name of “empowerment” to possibly benefit the individual.

Like Carr expands on Althusser’s theory, I want to develop Carr’s analysis further by looking at Jacqueline’s use of *identities* as a woman, impacted, and formerly incarcerated. I see formerly institutionalized bodies representing themselves in relation and in dialogue with the institutions that incarcerated them while also forging new representations, flipping the script, that create and allow for not only new realities, but multiple positionings (Carr 2009, 327). Carr shows the limitations of positioning, but in my site I see a shifting between multiple and layered positionings to the benefit of the individual and as a way to escape being essentialized and limited in one category. This leads me to question what are the possibilities or complications in having multiple positions. Some are created through the borrowing of institutional language, but ultimately the EANO staff is creating these identities together as a group. On an individual level what does it mean to be a representative, an FIP, an impacted person, a New Orleanian, an advocate, a community leader, a woman, and an individual? Jacqueline uses the methods of looping as a way to disrupt the limitations of singular identity while also developing her ways of “flipping the script” to inhabit overlapping positions and identities.

*Jacqueline and I called eighty LCD contacts to invite them a few days before the meeting. We called it a Community Education meeting and its purpose was to create a space where our people, our members, and those in the community could learn about the packet of legislation that was passed and what it means for them. The day of the event we prepared gathering supplies and working out logistics. While I worked on another project, I listened to Jacqueline and Erica talk about church in the office. Neil walked in with his headphones on, wearing a white tank top with the 'Absolut' vodka logo in rainbow on the front and long basketball shorts as he shuffled in his Adidas sneakers. Lawrence's wife, Anita, was arguing with someone about watering the plants in the office. Neil and Helen were discussing the plan tonight at the community meeting. They argued over who should speak and about what. Nico and Lawrence came in talking about some guy at the capital that was all "puffed up" and questioned their reasons for being there. He asked them where they were going and they replied they were meeting with the Secretary of Corrections. The pretentious government worker was dumbfounded. Nico said that this employee does not have the authority to attend meetings in that wing. Lawrence said he is glad that Nico said something because they need to let people know, "we don't need you." After the meeting, Lawrence and Nico established a great relationship with the Secretary. I spent the rest of the day setting up the room, the chairs, the handouts and the signs directing people through the maze of the school. Someone came early and I had to be posted outside the room to sign people in. I greeted everyone and asked them for their contact information. Michelle, her mom, and Nessa, all showed up along with our regulars and many new faces. We had a fine turnout, which made Uchenna frustrated. He wanted the event to fail to make evident to the staff that the method was flawed. His logic was that if the staff sees positive results, they won't see the need of altering their methods. Later reviewing the sign in sheet the next day, we calculated that out of the eighty calls we made six of those people came. I proposed that on the sign-in sheet we ask where you heard about the meeting for next time.*

*I sat down to hear about the legislation that at that time I knew little about. I quickly got up for the coffee and cookies to the left on the counter. Erica started the meeting off introducing herself and the crime survivors part of our work. Neil then took over to get into the details of the legislation. Bernadette broke the ice for the open communication in the room when she spoke about not understanding her formerly incarcerated husband and the stress on their relationship. Bernadette expressed how it was difficult to live with him, but she did not want to leave him. After that people began to shout out their experiences and questions. We laughed together and people discussed with one another. When the event was finally over and the sun went down, we started cleaning up and vacating the common area. The rooms plunged into darkness as the last staff left and I flicked the light switch for the large atrium and hallways. My friends and I trickled out. It was a long day. I exhaled. –July 13, 2017*

### **Chapter Three: Witnesses to Poisonous Knowledge**

EANO began on the inside and continued to grow into an organization on the outside. One characteristic of EANO that has distinguished it from other criminal justice reform organizations is their claim of being the only one founded and staffed by formerly incarcerated people. This is the foundation of their brand, their ideology, and the type of work they do in Louisiana. I will explore how this relationship to identity plays out in the every day for the FIP staff. This claim already has looseness to it because the staff is not entirely made up of formerly incarcerated people, but FIPs occupy a privileged space in the organization.

The staff, and organization, straddle and bridge many sites in New Orleans that require them to shift through spaces using multiple performative identities and positionings. EANO lays at the intersection of the formerly incarcerated population involved in criminal justice reform and community based non-profits that address the system from multiple access points such as juveniles, police practices, jail conditions, fair housing. They also seek to communicate and engage the public, local communities, their leaders, and people not involved in reform, yet. On top of that, EANO is engaging with multiple bodies of the state including the New Orleans city council, mayor, sheriff, judges, criminal and municipal courthouses, legislative representatives, and politicians from all over Louisiana, the Department of Corrections (colloquially referred to as DOC), the governor, and Louisiana's House and Senate. I highlight this both to show its multi-sited situation and as one of the contributing factors to the complex positionings EANO FIP staff inhabit. The multiple positioning is on one level because of the nature of using your individual experiences and performing a private self in the public sphere. To balance these roles that rely so heavily on performance, we see how multiple positionings are important in the

context of EANO's broad scope. The staff becomes flexible with their identities and their performance of specific narratives they wish to emphasize to accomplish their goals.

The language of how they identify themselves is important and most frequently their status as a formerly incarcerated person is either said directly or inferred from a coded reference to Angola or "the inside." FIP is an acronym for formerly incarcerated person, a term I will use much more than they use in the workplace. The FIP is in some ways an unmarked category when speaking colloquially around the office, but outside of our work environment, it becomes a marked category when they introduce themselves as such. This is to both identify their representative power and their power as witness. It was a category of persons I had never heard of before I worked with the organization. But now it is intrinsic to conversations about the criminal justice system in Louisiana that continues to affect the lives of people who were incarcerated. Like Carr's analysis, they are relying on partially institutional language and partially their own re-crafting and re-claiming of this language. This chapter will explore the authority and knowledge the FIP staff use in their work and how they use their vulnerabilities practically.

### Multiple identities

Expanding on Jacqueline's ability to inhabit multiple positionings, I will argue how this FIP-founded organization is sustained through the FIPs use of multiple identities in navigating their public and private lives, the discourses and audiences they are engaging with, and possible harms in their work. Multiple positionings tie into another analysis of EANO via Veena Das who explores the weaving of trauma into the every day. The weaving refers to the women's assimilation of violence into their daily lives. One way that this assimilation manifests is in Das' idea of "poisonous knowledge." Knowledge of the acts held by victims and actors involved in

India's Partition see not a traumatic memory, but a type of knowledge that is part of the present. For the women Das focuses on, this poisonous knowledge shaped the way they related to and existed with others. Part of what makes it poisonous knowledge is that it is shared. Everyone, including you, know that this horrible trauma and act occurred. Poisonous knowledge is knowledge gained only through experiences of suffering. The poisonous knowledge becomes woven into the daily life of the women and their relationships. These moments of suffering are assimilated through the adoption of poisonous knowledge that transforms the memories of trauma into a means of speaking as a witness and creating a new positioning as witness. Borrowing Veena Das' concepts of "witness" and "poisonous knowledge," I will argue that this weaving is another way to theoretically visualize the multiple, layered, and necessary positionings the EANO staff inhabit while also addresses how the EANO staff sustain their narratives and performances of incarceration that limits corrosive effects of commodifying these narratives.

In exploring the mechanisms of their work, I point to the ways witnessing poisonous knowledge is used in advocacy. Das explores how the witness becomes such through this process of weaving trauma into the daily life specifically the influence of "poisonous knowledge." The relationship between the past and present that Das explains about weaving in this case is one way the staff can use their performance of narratives and embodied experience for broader social and political "change." Das' analysis helps to nuance and identify the significance of the labor the FIP staff does every day on themselves and in their own "ordinary" lives that becomes indistinguishable from the labor they contribute to EANO. I chose the level of the individual and the everyday experiences I had in the office to show how their personal lives are folded into the organization.



The position of witness is another part of the staff's multiple identities. I want to expand more on Das' discussion of the witness in the context of the FIP staff and why they all use the position of witness. The witness is another of the multiple positions that the staff can use, which Das provides as a more theoretically optimistic analysis. This is similar to how Carr shows the flipping of the script and their gains through adopting institutional identities and rhetoric. The witness, like many of these positions, is also constructed both by the staff and their audiences who hear their "testimonies." Das' analysis of the witness can also speak to how past trauma is transformed and plays a direct role in both their performances and their choice to become an FIP working in criminal justice. Differing from Das' definition, witnessing, in this context, is more than experiencing, because it refers to how you use the poisonous knowledge from your experiences and create claims to embodied authority as an observer. For the FIPs, they claimed their gaze and poisonous knowledge of the state while incarcerated to now use this in testimony.

Veena Das' work, "The Act of Violence," is about the lives of women after the Partition in India in 1947. Her research is not about the event itself. She distinguishes her site of analysis from the idea that the events of the Partition, sexual, physical trauma and genocide, were in the present as recalled past events (Das 2000, 220). Das looks at how these traumas came to play out in everyday relations. These women's way of "being-with-others" and relation to family and others was brutally injured during the time of the Partition (Das 2000, 221). The experience of witnessing comes out of these moments that show how the past is intertwined with present not as a memory, but as "poisonous knowledge" gained through suffering (Das 2000, 221).

Though Das is specifically looking at kinship, her idea and analysis of narratives of trauma is one I wish to transplant to the idea of formerly incarcerated people. Incarceration is a type of trauma, which can also bring other traumas into the life of an incarcerated person. The

event of incarceration, similar and dissimilar to the national genocidal event, is one that changes one's relationship to the state, their family, their community, and themselves. Also similar to Das' analysis, my interlocutors are identified by their past incarceration as "formerly incarcerated people." For these FIPs, their past incarceration is not something they left behind, but has become infused into their everyday life. When they tell their stories, when they visit the prisons and the people they left behind, when they continue to identify with a part of their life that in some ways is over, in another way they are weaving these traumas from incarceration into their life. This first analysis led me to wonder how they perform their past so fluidly, but Das helps me complicate this.

The effect of witnessing incarceration is significant in the staff's choice to work in criminal justice reform. Another way to discuss Das' "poisonous knowledge" in this context is the choice each FIP made to reflect on their time in prison. Instead of completely ending that chapter of their life, after this experience and what they learned on the inside, they take their knowledge of incarceration, "poisonous knowledge" to work to change the system that incarcerated them. Part of poisonous knowledge is about how our state dehumanizes and degrades in so many ways those that break the law and are marginalized already in society. The experience of incarceration and the aftermath is transformed into a new way of relating to the state and other people while also imbuing the FIP staff with the poisonous knowledge of oppression and the knowledge of a system (not broken) that was constructed to incarcerate the masses of undesirables.

#### Multiple kinds of witnesses

Continuing to flesh out the complex identity politics at EANO, I apply the concepts from Das back onto the staff. One main difference between Das' context and where EANO is situated

is that the women she is speaking about only have a role in the private realm of society and have no access to an identity or role in the public. My interlocutors are navigating realms of the public, the private, and their organization with little specificity about where one ends or the other begins. The multiple realms point to another reason that the shifting of identities and positionings is necessary for FIPs who almost brand their private, individual self. They use their shifting identities to fluidly move between realms. Moreover, changing how we speak about incarceration and ending the victimization of FIPs, the term poisonous knowledge is much more theoretically productive than discussing trauma broadly. This idea of poisonous knowledge changes the way the events are perceived as wholly victimizing when the experience is used to reflect on their incarceration, detaching from the event. They still refer and perform the narratives of their incarceration, but this has been converted into poisonous knowledge that does not define their pasts totally. Providing the role as witness instead of FIP similarly opens up new agentive ways to discuss the complex embodied and poisonous knowledges being utilized by EANO staff without continuing the attachment to the past. An attachment to the past that is directly shown in the term “formerly incarcerated person.”

The staff shows the multiplicity of poisonous knowledges, experiences of incarceration, and abilities as witnesses. Expanding on Das’ new theoretical possibilities, I will argue that all forms of poisonous knowledge are not the same, similar to how all experiences of incarceration are not the same. I will show how their poisonous knowledge affects the kind of witness they can be and the effectiveness of their performance as witness. When I use the word “incarceration” am I referring to the experiences of millions being the same? Do they all come out with the same knowledge, poisonous or not? Does that mean they will have the insight to see the ways they could change the system? Do all formerly incarcerated people have the same goals to change the

system? In this, I want to point to a fallacy that all experiences of incarceration are the same that is reinforced through important but potentially generalizing ideas of brotherhood and sisterhood between FIPs that assumes a common ground, when maybe there isn't one. This transitions to how different experiences of incarceration garner different types of knowledge, various kinds of poisonous and institutional information.

The multiplicity and diversity in the experiences of those formerly incarcerated can sometimes cause friction as a community expands to an organization. This leads me to discuss the hierarchies and inequalities within the FIP community more broadly and at EANO. This hierarchy is more visible when formerly incarcerated people enable their identities and experiences to work in reform and policy. Interpersonal conflict and issues of communication would often interject themselves into the workspace and the work. I see tension from these interactions in one way coming from this difference in witnesses and their varied abilities to utilize their witnessing. Multiple hierarchies exist but one of them is certainly about how one mobilizes, and to what degree, their witnessing and poisonous knowledge to gain representative power and the power of representation. They must both gain the support of those they are representing, representative power, and the support of those they wish to influence through their authority as witness, power of representation.

#### Diffusing trauma

Examining the possibilities and vulnerabilities of the FIP staff opens up new ways to think about disrupting power dynamics. In thinking openly about what it means to have FIPs who identify with their narrative of incarceration and broadly work in the system of corrections, I want to consider how they take the violences of their life, a life more than not already built on harms and vulnerabilities. Instead of escaping it, they lean in (Das 2000, 221). Das calls it

assimilating the violence of their trauma and weaving it into their everyday life, in my case, like a job (Das 2000, 220; Turcot DiFruscia 2010, 144). I think Das provides the most salient space in her term “witness” to show a way to overcome the traumatic aspects of incarceration. The poisonous knowledge is not corrosive to their lives in the same way it might be for other formerly incarcerated people not involved in this work, and they may lack this knowledge altogether. They overcome this toxicity of trauma by converting their experiences, performing their expected roles, and acting as witness as a way to gain representative power of the community of FIPs and the power of representation to speak for them to powerful others (Carr 2009, 319). Das explains how this phenomenon and the attention to the every day dislocates dominant narratives and oppositions of victim/perpetrator and agency/oppression (Turcot DiFruscia 2010, 136). This allows a space for a re-negotiating of the relationship to the state and the department of corrections for example, which is how I see the possibility for these interactions to happen without resentment or friction. Das more broadly is acknowledging the witness, the subject, and the FIP as simultaneously powerful and vulnerable (Turcot DiFruscia 2010, 136). Power and vulnerability shifting simultaneously brings me back to multiple positionings and how this can circumvent unbalanced positionings through switching and layering, to offset either/or depending on the desired result. They can use their vulnerabilities to gain power, as well as gain representative power that is placed on the narrativization of their vulnerabilities, but through their exposure of power or vulnerability, they create another realm of a shifting relationship between the two that becomes virtually indistinguishable. We encounter their weaving of their multiple positionings sutured into one physical body, the weaving of their poisonous knowledge and witnessing into their every day, and the weaving of power and vulnerability that they command as witness.

The power and vulnerability of their positioning as witness is maintained through performance and narrativizing. When operating in these realms, testifying is still a performance, crafted from the language or rhetoric that is expected from the audience whether it is a community meeting, “impacted people,” City Council, an anti-fascism march, or the governor. Using their multiple positionings allows them to have shifting use of language that becomes an intertwined performance of the institutional or expected rhetoric, their status as formerly incarcerated, and their own adoption of these to appeal to their audience and call upon others to recognize and re-imagine what a formerly or currently incarcerated person is and could be like. They flip the script to forward their agenda as an organization and as a movement. Their status of witness is extremely prominent in these moments. Their physical presence is the vessel for all of these positionings, as a witness, as a FIP, as a POC, as an advocate, as a figurehead for the movement. Their palpable performance and embodied narrative root their act of witnessing in the body that has the imprints of their narrative. The embodied knowledge of the witness is in some ways irrefutable, which is why this performance is the most important one in forwarding their goals as advocates for reform.

Despite the advantages they may be able to reap, this does not erase or remedy their experiences and positioning as a former institutionalized person. They access their embodied experiences and the performance of their narrative to gain power and at a cost: years, decades removed from the outside world. Nico, our Co-executive Director, told me, “You had to go through something to get that title,” referring to the title of FIP. The witness has the ability to weave violences into the everyday, because they have transformed the category of trauma into poisonous knowledge. They navigate multiple and layered identities. It is not an easy task to wield representative power and the power of representation as an embodied characteristic. What

they gain through their sacrifice of a life where they could potentially forget the poisonous knowledge is the benefit of using their prison capital to gain employment in spaces that privilege FIPs and a platform to speak about this knowledge. They all have a level of stability that is buttressed by the job, something that is not easy for FIPs to do. They are discriminated against and stigmatized while facing issues like difficulty in finding stable housing and employment. This is one more practical reason for FIPs to use their poisonous knowledge as witness. They use their multiple positionings to benefit them in an effort to offset the stigma and adversity they may face. Looking at four individuals from EANO's staff and community, I will explore their multiple positionings, the kinds of poisonous knowledge they hold and how this affects the kind of witnesses and identities they can be through these theoretical lenses.

#### Darius

Darius is a "supermember" and part of EANO's community though not a staff member. The Bard interns first met Darius outside of Jacqueline's husband's fortieth birthday party in January of 2017. He also runs his own non-profit called "Project Detour," which seeks to mentor young men in his community in an effort to keep them out of prison. Darius's story of his incarceration shows how complicated the system is, how utterly chaotic and drawn out the process is. At sixteen, he was sentenced to two life sentences. In 1998, he was granted a new trial case due to new evidence, but wasn't re-sentenced until 2000. He got thirty-four years for two counts of second-degree murder or manslaughter. He would serve seventeen years in prison and the other seventeen years on parole. He was imprisoned from the age of sixteen to thirty-four, almost two decades. He cited 1994 as a year when New Orleans led the country in murder rate, which increased the closing of cases with convenient scapegoats like Louisiana's black men.

Now, six years out, he works in a re-entry program for young men that helps them gain job training in construction and other trades.

This narrative is one that comes from the new perspective, poisonous knowledge, through which he sees the world through after incarceration. He can identify the corruption that has become normalized and isn't an issue, but a structural system that maintains divisions of power, class, and race in New Orleans. He tells me about a fellow organizer he heard speaking about how we should stop investing money into the criminal justice system and use it to improve low-income communities and communities of color. These are the kind of insights that become part of the poisonous knowledge he continues to develop as he gazes at the state from a new perspective.

Darius says he *is* Project Detour, referencing how embodied and important this program is for him. The only support he has gained is his board of supervisors, and a lawyer that helped him file for 501(c)(3) status. He has only found one source of funding in the handful of years he has been working on developing this educational mentorship program for young people. He pays out of pocket for most of his programs to the point where halfway through a summer camp he had to shut it down because he had run out of money.

Darius started this nonprofit to try to help other "Dariuses" from going down the path he did. "No one else knows what you needed unless you know what you needed," he told me. In this instance, he is directly in the position as a formerly incarcerated person, referencing the embodied knowledge and insights he gained while incarcerated. He is also an FIP still on community supervision, under the state's custody, which limits what he can do, including voting, but also affects the kind of witness he can be. He is still serving his sentence even though physical walls no longer imprison him. The state's power, the stigma, and the limitations placed



on him could be one reason why he is not as effective as a witness to powerful others and the general public, but also begins to reveal what kind of witness is expected and accepted.

The knowledge Darius acquired while incarcerated being used as curriculum for his nonprofit is a type of anticipated interpellation. In discussing the kind of mentoring he hopes to do, he pointed out courses he took while incarcerated and during re-entry as well as curriculum he has been exposed to such as “critical thinking,” “transactional matters,” “basic etiquette,” “cultural teaching” and “conflict resolution.” This was his model curriculum for his mentees. Mentioning changes in personal reactions, he wishes to reshape how these young men and women deal with the issues they encounter in their daily lives. He wants to show them how to deal with their “brothers” without destroying them. He is giving them the information that he could only learn after being incarcerated, which speaks both to his internalization of these rhetorics.

He is a witness to institutional language and “training” that the state offers while in prison. While also using his position as witness, he tries to show his mentees that they do not need to go to prison. Instead they can learn from Darius how the state wants you to inhabit these positions as a subject of the state and learn the behavior and rhetoric that is expected. This is an anticipated interpellation. Darius wishes to relate through his experiences and to show his mentees how to perform and “be” legible as a subject of the state. Project Detour has him switching between his identity as an FIP, his experiences as witness, and his connection to the community as a leader. This is an extraordinary example of the adoption of institutional language and the internalization of rhetoric about how this pathway to prison can be stopped. The weaving of all of these positionings and identities is how he maneuvers through the limitations a single positioning can have. Using multiple positions gives him agency in this way, but also shows how

his poisonous knowledge is part of his everyday work in his community while also breaching and erasing the boundaries of his public and private life.

What is distinct about Project Detour is that despite Darius's dedication and perseverance to make the program work he faced setbacks including the outright dismantling of his efforts by authorities and continued to struggle to keep it going. This is in stark contrast with the other example of grassroots organizing I am familiar with, Lawrence and EANO. The success that EANO has had does not come easy and there are many factors that contribute to that, but for reasons I wish to explore Project Detour has not gained that same level of legitimacy or support. Darius's effectiveness as a witness is shaped by the crimes he committed, how legitimate powerful others see his experiences, and his status as a parolee. He has to create a particular kind of relationship with people in positions of authority and outside institutional authorities. His status as a parolee and his criminal record are used as barriers to undermine his embodied experience and the merit his poisonous knowledge has to offer. He is activating his role as witness and FIP in a distinctive way than the staff at EANO. Project Detour would be categorized as a direct service in helping young people. Darius' experiences of incarceration limited how he could use his experiences. This translates also to the type of witness he is: not focusing on legislation, he is a witness for his community and young people. Project Detour came out of these conditions and the kind of witness and work he wanted to do.

I asked Darius if he thought about how racism affected his life before and/or after prison. He responded that he never experienced racism until he came home. This new sensitivity he attributes to how much he read and learned and widened his mind, but I also see it as a marker of how the experience of prison, and the poisonous knowledge of the system unveiled the world in a new light when he returned. Darius shifts between multiple and layered positionings as an FIP,

a witness, a community leader, an individual, a New Orleanian, and a POC to circumvent both the limitations of a single positioning as well as minimizing the possible risks in each positioning. Coming back to how his work and organizing can benefit him besides the success of preventing other young men like Darius from becoming incarcerated, I see another possible benefit from his positionings. If nothing else, does his role politicize, educate, and affect those closest to him like his family and friends? Darius tells me that one regret he has is that those closest to him reject the work he does, meaning they also reject his role as witness and his use of his poisonous knowledge. They call him crazy, and he explains that they aren't used to the person he has become and the positive way that he now approaches his life. His brother and sister especially act this way. He finishes answering my question with a profound reflection, "I can stand on the City Hall steps and tell my story and breathe life into people, but I can't sit on my own sofa with my brother to help him straighten up his ways." Being an FIP has enabled Darius to do so much amazing work and drive change, but I always remind myself that this positioning and power as witness came at a cost. "What happened to me molded me, and I'm comfortable with that. I hated that I had to go through it, I dread it, but I'm through it. The long nights that I spent, I can never forget that. Those months and months I spent in isolation by myself, I never could forget that, never forget that."

#### Jacqueline

It is difficult to distinguish between Jacqueline's public and private life, which is a nod to her multiple layered and shifting identities. Blurring occurs as she performs her roles, identities, and narratives. I also see the blurring as an unexpected effect of the weaving of identities and poisonous knowledge into daily life, which is necessary in the sustainability of multiple positionings where boundaries dissolve internally. Lawrence told Jacqueline not "to carry work

home with her,” but understandably, she said “it is hard not to.” The work they are doing is not separate or happening to someone else. They are part of this fight along with their family, friends, and community that continues to be affected by the practices of harsh sentencing, institutionalized racism, and an archaic criminal justice system among many other issues. An example of how everyday violence intervenes itself in the office happened one day when Jacqueline was late. We were having a meeting and Jacqueline came in and just broke down. We sat in silence as she cried and told us what had happened. Over the weekend, Jacqueline’s son was taken to jail where he lives in Arkansas. Her niece’s sister, who is nineteen, was in a car wreck, “part of her brain had to be removed, and it looks like she is not going to make it.” A friend of Jacqueline’s child was shot that weekend. These are the type of things that interject themselves into our work because of the type of violence that is going on in Louisiana and the structural issues of the city. That same day we also heard that Erica’s cousin was shot. Das argues confronting trauma in daily life is a way it is processed. The trauma or violence is not seen as a memory, but these past experiences have so greatly affected the way Jacqueline relates to others and herself that they become part of the present. Weaving violence into the everyday is the method by which she continues her life after the reflections of her experiences. This story shows how this is a constantly re-defined and re-worked relationship. A relationship between how she responds to these violences and how it affects her work, as an individual and as an FIP. It also is an example of the blurriness where Jacqueline as an individual, her private life, is brought into her professional life, and the ‘public’ spaces in EANO. The identities are sutured into one body; Jacqueline contains layered identities and positionings.

For Jacqueline, the issues they are tackling are personal, having two sons who are formerly incarcerated and all three being victims of gun violence. While Jacqueline navigates

multiple spaces and shifting positionings, she sees it as difficult to try to draw a line at work between friendships and work relations. But she cannot separate her multiple selves neatly, nor distinguish between her work life and her personal life. The overlapping, layered, and multiple positionings work to enable Jacqueline to do work in different parts of her life, but she cannot see the multiplicity of others and still relies on strict definitions in relation to her co-workers. This leads to conflict and friction in the office that is much more about how Jacqueline and all of them relate, communicate, and see their realities than any direct attacks or malice. I think this points to another effect of poisonous knowledge, because her incarceration and experiences surrounding it changed the way she relates to others. It has corroded the way she relates to people who supervise her and she is sensitive to any changes in power dynamics that she may take as an aggressive action. I experienced this directly, and it is due most likely to the fact that I am a young white privileged woman. I felt unsure of how to deal with this coming from someone I love so much. But our relationship was never the same after she said in a staff meeting that I had been treating her differently since I started staying with Helen. Perhaps poisonous knowledge can sow strong notions of distrust that make it more difficult to engage or work with people when you are sensitive to things they, I, couldn't possibly comprehend. Authority is triggering for some formerly incarcerated people. Helen once said that if she went to prison, she probably wouldn't want anyone to tell her what to do either, referring to Jacqueline's reactions to Helen as her new supervisor. Race and class play a huge role in how these staff interactions or frictions play out especially in the FIP staff's overlapping personal and public lives weaved together.

When we asked how prison changed the way Jacqueline saw the system in the women's report interview, she gave us an example of the poisonous knowledge she learned while

incarcerated. “Oh my god,” she said, “it changed the way I see government, judges, police, district attorneys, even public defenders and crime.” Most importantly, it changed the way she wanted to live her life, because “[she] never wanted to be at the mercy of those people ever again.” We see how her experiences of authority in many forms, whether its lawyers, police or white people, are rooted in her identity and the way she perceives the state and the way they perceive her. This way of relating to others, part of poisonous knowledge, can potentially hinder her from creating cooperative relationships built on trust in the office. Even after all of the times Helen and she made up, and how much Helen swore that all she wanted to do was support her, the distrust was hard to let go. But Jacqueline could perform what was expected and what she expected for herself because of her ability to access multiple positionings.

Jacqueline’s shifting, multiple positionings and the energy she exerts in each of these positionings and contexts have affected how she functions. She expressed to me that between all of her roles she is sometimes left with no time for herself – her private self. These points of our conversations always made me think about the toll the work can take on them as individuals. In some ways, they sacrifice many aspects of a private life when they become a witness, which is if nothing else about an individual speaking to a public audience. Devoting both their identity and positioning as an FIP to a broader cause is a sacrifice and choice they made. It becomes their job to parcel out their experiences of poisonous knowledge and their narratives as witness to attract people in considering this population in a new light.

Jacqueline says that at the end of the day she at least is trying to make sure that her family isn’t part of the problem, another kind of private role. She talked about how her sons may rely on her for monetary support; they do not rely on her for advice. After her re-entry, she became a changed person. She used a metaphor to describe how her three sons engage and

consider her work: there are two sides and a fence separating them. She has influenced them enough to get on the fence, but they are not ready to cross over to her side. As a witness in that moment of representative power, Jacqueline is in some ways immune to the everyday violence. But Jacqueline, as an individual and a mother, despite her involvement in this work, is still exposed in other ways to the systemic issues in POC communities.

### Lawrence

Lawrence's power as witness is the most significant and most widely respected and recognized. He was incarcerated for over two decades for a crime he did not commit. He is the founder of EANO and his poisonous knowledge and multiple positionings are one way that EANO became as successful as it did. Lawrence is an innocent man, but more than that he is humble, kind, funny, intelligent, and it is an honor to know him. This innocence that he gained through a process of exoneration is one way that makes him a different type of witness. It makes criminal justice reform more palatable to both the public and authoritative bodies when its leader is a man who was wrongfully imprisoned. This also speaks to how experiences of incarceration are diverse and one of the ways that power hierarchies manifest in the broader FIP community. To powerful others and state actors, his poisonous knowledge is one that has no drawbacks or "prejudices" because of his innocence, and this expanded the possibilities of his knowledge. He was like an uncompromised subject on the inside that for some, the public gaze and politicians, may make his position as witness even more privileged. He is more relatable in not being labeled or stigmatized (although obviously there are exceptions) as a criminal. He is the face of EANO, but constantly underlines himself as a "vehicle" for change and a representative for all "those that cannot speak for themselves," incarcerated people. This privilege is important in how people consume and categorize his position as witness. He is legitimized as a witness. But his specific

situation is what made EANO successful. Even if EANO is not directly acknowledged at events or legislative signings, Lawrence is always mentioned. Everyone in Angola knows him, and incarcerated men and women write him letters all the time. He is a powerful man, but is not overtly abusive of his power; to the contrary he takes a more hands off approach that is both helpful and unhelpful to the staff.

Lawrence is a key example of the weaving of multiple positions of identity, the weaving through the systems of power, and the weaving of poisonous knowledge into his everyday life. He tells me that “this is [his] life,” and a lot of this work revolves around the individual he is. He said it is intertwined, the work he does and the individual he is are one thing. Lawrence directly points to this multiple, layered, and interwoven positioning that he has mastered and sutured together in his physical form. When he talks about not being stressed, I see this as evidence of how successful his weaving of positioning and poisonous knowledge is to the degree that he can sustain this for many more years. Another possibility is that his status as innocent and exonerated makes these layered and multiple positionings not as corrosive, because the kind of poisonous knowledge he gained. Lawrence worked in the law library in Angola and read every book because there was no other way to let people know where to find certain information. There were also those who did not have access to the law library, and so Lawrence was a walking library himself, able to answer questions for others and help in massive ways. He became a jailhouse lawyer this way, which was the start of his career as an advocate for himself and others. I want to steer clear of an idealization of his situation, but I do think that he is a powerful witness and unique in what he has been able to accomplish because of that.

Lawrence acknowledges the privileged position of witness when he says one of his quotable lines: “Stand beside me, not in front of me.” More broadly, he is speaking to how this



capital of experience, prison capital, and the figure of the witness are at the forefront of their movement. In describing how EANO and witnesses spoke before the Louisiana legislature about an education bill for formerly incarcerated people, he says that their testimonies, their performances of poisonous knowledge, were recognized and something to be reckoned with. The votes were mostly against them until after the series of witnesses came before them to perform their role, including Neil and Jacqueline. He says that there was a massive change in the opinions of the representatives, and their power of witness “truly changed the tides.” He told me that speaking truth to power, as a witness, is what he does for a living.

On the last day all the Bard interns were here, we were having a special lunch, and I had a particularly interesting conversation. Lawrence came in saying, “We are going to eat soon as Helen rolls in.” Lawrence couldn’t wait for everyone to eat and had a snack at the table in the middle of the office across from me. I asked him if he ever stresses about work. He said he is “seldom stressed” as he opened the Doritos bag and started to dip it into a single serving of guacamole. Lawrence said he “doesn’t let too much bother” him, because “nine out of ten times you can’t do nothing about it.” He quoted the sobriety pledge: “accept the things you can’t change.” Lawrence enjoys doing this work, and he takes things “lightly” through it all. This job and working in grassroots criminal justice reform is “his calling,” Lawrence said. I asked him about where he divides his personal life from his work. “It’s all one thing,” he replied, and then added, “Saturday and Sunday are just the days we aren’t in the office.” He finished his snack and declared, “I done had my fill.” Lawrence snapped his fingers in an effort to shake off the cheese dust from the chips. He got up and walked towards the kitchen across the hallway saying he has to wash his Cheetos-covered hands. He is right -- Saturdays and Sundays are just the days we aren't in the office. This points to 1) the multi-site work they do at EANO, 2) their ability to

perform their individual self as well as a personification of EANO wherever they go, and 3) the vague definitions of work for EANO's staff and 4) that their multiple, layered positionings make them witnesses everywhere they go.

### Neil

Neil is our Deputy Director and began working with EANO six years ago. He is from Rhode Island where at eighteen he was sentenced to twelve years in prison. His positioning and experiences are in contrast with the other staff, especially because he is the only white formerly incarcerated person in the office. Beyond this, analyzing his narratives reveals both how he is a different type of witness and has a different type of poisonous knowledge. For many of the staff members, part of the poisonous knowledge they have is about the fact that many in their communities and families know they were in prison. They may not have the privilege to choose how they are perceived or categorized in public spaces and other bodies. Neil, on the other hand, has the privilege of whiteness that allows him to obscure or define his identity. I will argue that Neil's kind of witnessing, his poisonous knowledge, and his shifting identities show how being a part of the organization for Neil is more about finding place and community through anticipated interpellation while also using this narrative and FIP identity to obscure his privilege. To highlight why Neil had a more personal stake in being a part of the organization and being recognized as an FIP working in criminal justice reform, I will explore why he seeks this community and how this is unlike the other staff.

The sense of his story and the narrative he developed is best essentialized in a phrase he used in an interview, "[an] outsider of outsiders." He is a markedly different kind of witness than the other FIPs, but they all do share the witnessing of poverty and socio-economic issues despite the separate contexts. Something they don't share, though, is the kind of communities that are

extensive support systems. Neil never really knew his father and his mother was in and out of his life. Black communities, especially those in New Orleans, are strong in connections and critical in offering a place and sense of security, both figuratively and monetarily, for people of color. In resistance to powerful others, the restrictions placed on them by society, and marginalization through many apparatuses, communities of color and in the case of EANO's staff, black families, provide a security and safe space that Neil never had.

Another disconnect in the shared poisonous knowledges of the other staff is about the kinds of experiences they had while incarcerated. He said that prison was the only place where he felt a "sense of community." He was incarcerated in his home state and his own narrative about his time in prison is in stark contrast from the other staff incarcerated in Louisiana. He said that even though it sounds strange, prison was fun. He corrects himself saying it wasn't fun, but he "got a lot of worth out of prison." It was one of the first times in his life he felt he was part of a community. Prison was a place where he didn't feel alone and gained a sense of belonging that he had lacked. This is the poisonous knowledge he carries: that his experience in prison was both fulfilling of his need for a community as well as legitimizing his own narrative of marginalization through his access to the identity of an incarcerated and formerly incarcerated person. After serving 12 years, he was released into a world where "no one wanted [him] around," he had no friends or family, but got through this time via his connections from prison. Leaving his community in prison, being on the outside again, he was faced with the same problem: that he didn't have the family support to transition and nurture him through this difficult time.

It is important to understand the kind of poisonous knowledge Neil has and how he wields it, because it is not automatically known or assumed that he is formerly incarcerated and

this is both to his advantage sometimes and a difficult reminder of his status as an “outsider of the outsiders.” Neil’s shifting between identities is for different purposes and I would argue that he also can access and move through these positions more fluidly than the other staff when he wishes to. He has privileges in how he is seen as a subject of the state as a “white straight male.” But admitting to this privilege is a conflict because of the type of narratives he is cultivating surrounding his status as an FIP. As a white man, he is not considered the typical formerly incarcerated person, or his whiteness changes the expected narrative. His narrative, made possible and legible through EANO, begins to obscure his privilege both to others and himself. Neil’s layered and multiple positions as an FIP, a white man, a witness, and a legal expert cannot be separated, they are sutured into him as an individual. He continues to use all of these identities, but with varied results from the other staff because of his privilege. He shifts between his positionings to cater to his audience, downplaying the positionings he wishes to obscure. Due to his structural power as a white man, his multiple identities are more easily juggled and accepted as conceivable. He sees racial differences in the FIP community in some ways divisive without realizing their implications and power dynamics between them and beyond the common positioning they share as FIPs.

Ultimately, analyzing Neil’s narratives, poisonous knowledge, and witnessing shows the lack of shared experiences with the rest of the FIP staff. It also points to how important the organization, his poisonous knowledge, and identity as an FIP is in gaining power through the organization and the community of FIPs and allies it has fostered through coalitions in criminal justice reform. Unlike his fellow FIP staff, he lacks the familial support and roots they have in Louisiana while also lacking a legibility as an FIP that puts a higher stake on his goals and ideas about the FIP community as a way to regain the community he experienced in prison. When he

calls fellow FIPs “brother” and “sister,” both in person and on social media, he is using the language of an FIP brotherhood and sisterhood to invoke his status as an FIP and calling others to address him as such. Because his lacking visibility and legibility as an FIP, Neil engages in a process of anticipated interpellation in an effort to inhabit his identity as an FIP as well as for others to recognize and validate him as an FIP. His motivations for this are different from the other staff in that in addition to using his FIP identity to act as a witness and advocate, he also uses his position as an FIP to access, benefit from, and continually engage with the FIP community. His narrative and access to FIP identity is made possible through the organization in addition to his use of his poisonous knowledge and a process of anticipated interpellation to gain FIP status in order to obscure his privilege.

As I have shown in this chapter, “formerly incarcerated people” is a complex category. The staff uses the FIP identity, one of the many identities they inhabit, to create advantages in FIP-focused criminal justice reform spaces, like EANO. In performing their FIP identity, they can also gain representative power as an advocate-witness and the power of the witness. This process occurs when they narrativize and perform their poisonous knowledge as witness in many spaces and to many audiences. The FIP staff use structural positionings and institutional rhetoric to “flip the script” on the limitations they face as a formerly incarcerated person in institutional settings. By embracing and inhabiting this identity, in their everyday actions they also change and reproduce the identity in new and efficacious ways. The contexts of this work and the contexts of their lives as individuals call for the multiple identities they use in the same way as the FIP identity. They sustain the labor of performance, self-commodification, and witnessing by inhabiting and, further, re-defining their identities. I locate this reworking of institutionalized

identities as an embodied type of resistance in itself apart from their work in criminal justice reform.

My first experiences with EANO led me to a naïve overly enthusiasm about what it means to be and act like an FIP. The staff's advantages of using the FIP identity should not be confused with an idolizing or idealizing of the FIP category. This is an issue separate from removing the stigma associated with convicted peoples. I do not want to devalue the term of FIP, but I inherently can never know what it is like to be an FIP and thus see it from a distance. When I first came to work at EANO, I was so far removed from the contexts of the staff that I admired and romanticized them in a way that smoothed over the complexities of their lives and their work. I purposefully expressed this to Nico, one of the men in Angola with Lawrence, and our co-executive director, by saying, "You're like celebrities but no one else knows it." Nico quickly corrected me; he told me they aren't celebrities. "I hear people say that, a lot of people know us, but guess what? I had to spend twenty years in prison for people to get to know me." This quote speaks to how they use their vulnerability as an FIP to gain representative power, but also, that this power is gained through their vulnerability as FIPs.

Looking at the select stories about Darius, Neil, Lawrence, and Jacqueline, I argue that the FIP staff use multiple positionings, poisonous knowledge, and witnessing to navigate their work and to mitigate the tension placed on them as individuals. There are numerous ways that they weave and create their ordinary lives using these positionings as a way to circumvent and repurpose trauma. Converting trauma into poisonous knowledge, the FIP can also be the witness. But as every experience of incarceration is different, each FIP gains different kinds of poisonous knowledge. This speaks to the hierarchies within the FIP community not directly addressed by the staff, but that affect the kind of FIP, the kind of witness, and the kind of positionings they can

utilize. Not all witnesses can access the same representative power from their community and they all function as witnesses, but this is hinged on their level of power of representation. This chapter explored how the ideology of EANO based on the FIP community is sustained and played out in the daily lives of the individuals through their multiple positionings, weaving of poisonous knowledge and identities.

### Conclusion

*My last weeks at EANO were busy. My original plan to stay an extra week turned into three weeks as I spent every waking hour thinking about and working for EANO. I felt like I was finally ready to leave though. At the last meeting I had with Uchenna, Helen, Jacqueline, and William, I laid out everything I had been working on and what tasks remained so the new intern could take over. The meeting ended as Helen brought in a fruit tart and Chantilly cupcakes as my goodbye treat. When the Bard interns left, we had four two-foot long shrimp and fish po'boys. Everyone came in for some, but we were having trouble cutting the tart without a metal knife. We used a plastic one and made a mess of the tart, but everyone had a slice. I ate the left over goo from the tart straight off the dish. I went back to the office to make sure everything was in order. I shuffled the stacks of papers and surveys I had been working on for two months now. Sirens radiated through the streets, over the dull shake of the air conditioner. I am alone in the office. I leave a note on the bulletin board before I turn out the lights and close the doors:*

*“Thank you so much for everything that you do. I love y’all.”*

*–July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

A huge question I considered throughout my fieldwork was what part of the criminal justice systems EANO targeted to reform in terms of strategy. Do they focus on getting people out of prison or stop more people going into prison? If they work on both, these multiple types of reform could be contradictory. In other words, even after they present a specific philosophy of change, directly impacted advocates and policy reform, the question remains how these methods play out in the long run and on a larger scale. Uchenna had a thoughtful response to this question and told me this is a paradox he has been dealing with since he was eighteen. He asked me if I



had ever heard of the “Babies in the river” story. I replied with a quizzical look “no.” He said it is a story of choice in a hopeless situation.

There’s a group of people walking down by the side of the river and they see a baby river. They shout ‘oh my god that's a baby’ and another floats by followed by more and more babies in the river. Crying in the river, somebody jumps in and tries to save as many babies as possible. Another person goes towards the top of the river to see if they can stop it from happening in the first place. The question is what do you do?...It’s one thing to say we need to abolish prisons, but the people that have been in prison since they were teens, [focusing on releasing the geriatric populations] matters for them.

I articulated it as planning for the future, but dealing with the present. Do these sites of reform in the criminal justice system undermine each other in fundamentally having contradictory concepts of reform especially on the level of policy? Uchenna posited that another way to discuss this is “if we were back in the times of slavery, we would essentially be saying that slaves need better conditions. But the goal is to abolish slavery. Some people see that as an idealistic goal.”

Uchenna tells me, “Personally, I would run to the top” laughing after his matter-of-fact tone.

With this choice, he says he will have to also answer for not doing something in the meantime.

While historically the example of slavery is linked to incarceration similarly to policing in America collapsing of incarceration as another form of slavery stops any conversations about the fact that the slaves did nothing to become enslaved, but prison populations are accused of doing something. By not examining what contributes to people committing crimes and the processes of criminalization, we are not confronting the must larger issue behind mass incarceration: what does it mean to punish, how do we hold people accountable, how do we rehabilitate in a more effective way, how do we go beyond institutionalized types of “therapy,” and what will replace prisons when people commit or are accused of crimes? How do we address trauma and abuse in our society? The construct of the law as equally affecting everyone and claims of equal treatment in the judicial system contributes to the obscuring of how our criminal

justice system is part of larger structural ideologies that are never “subjective.” Discourse on policing, the state’s legitimate use of force, neoliberalism, and bodies that matter are aspects of the criminal justice system that hide behind the criminalization and vilification of some populations and individuals. Broaching this topic is something for a much larger ethnography.

In considering the questions I have and questions that have become clear to me through this research, I unfortunately did not get to complicate the criminalization of people and the inherent issues of institutional “punishment.” But due to my site of work and my questions, it was more appropriate and important to focus on the work people are currently doing and to not focus on them solely as formerly incarcerated people though you could argue that I also am guilty of this. The FIPs at EANO and those part of their community have been reproducing the rhetoric that they did something wrong and they had to atone for that behavior. For FIPs that spend long periods of time in prison, they are much less likely to find themselves back in jail. Institutional actors, even those claiming to help them, can engage with rhetorics that solidify the sense of punishment and what one “deserved” that leads to the FIPs internalization of this idea of punishment. In an essay about confronting the “paradox of punishment,” Daniel Karpowitz fleshes out why punishment has this moral significance while also maintaining the degradation of those being punished (2005, 305). Arguments that try to justify punishment frequently invoke the moral autonomy and the dignity of those subject to it (Karpowitz 2005, 306). The idea of punishment as an answer to preventing crime and upholding a subject’s moral autonomy obscures how “individual culpability coexists within broader political forms of responsibility” (Karpowitz 2005, 305). I did not have time to explore this at EANO.

Responding to the long-term nature of this work and Uchenna’s question of what we do in the meantime, the organization makes steps to further their ideas and narratives in multiple

contexts. While finding ways of established entry into the criminal justice system and onto political platforms, the organization must find a sustainable model for the future. The “chipping” away of barriers to FIPs and the ideologies surrounding mass incarceration will require time and institutions to survive far after their founders. What “we do” in the meantime is work on processes of professionalization, legitimization, and institutionalization of the organization that will insure the longevity of this movement and its goals.

I could have written five books about all of the things I learned and experienced. The aspects I focused on are informed by my own priorities in producing a “cleaned up” academic piece of writing to fulfill my graduation requirements. I am in some ways selling, reproducing, their story as well as my own as a lens into these worlds. But this is a risk we all take in creating situated knowledges (Haraway 1988).

My time at EANO changed the way I thought about crime, prison, politics, institutions, legality, advocacy, and agency. This project indirectly discussed the penal system via the every day work experiences of formerly incarcerated staff in a non-profit criminal justice reform organization. This project sought to explore the methods used to combat mass incarceration. I shared the story of how one organization structurally engaged with institutions to challenge the belief that FIPs are to remain absent from conversations about reform. Through their work on themselves, their use of performance, their multiple identities, their narrativization of their experiences, and the labor they contribute, the FIP staff at EANO create spaces for FIPs, wield the power of witness, and deny essentializations of their experience as victimizing. By their very existence as a community and growing institution, they confront and interrupt pathways of reform, power dynamics, and assumptions about the kind of activism allowed to historically marginalized populations. Uchenna relayed to me something one of his mentors frequently said:

once you try to change the system, you become a part of the system. FIPs and the staff of EANO interject their narratives, their acts of witnessing, and their multiple identities into institutional spaces to disrupt their exclusion and perceived marginality. Ultimately, I see Jacqueline, Neil, Lawrence, William, Nico, and Darius displaying their abilities to create new realities for themselves.

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