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### Transformation as Desistance Inside: Temporality and Identity Reconstruction Among Men with Life Sentences

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Transformation as Desistance Inside: Temporality and Identity Reconstruction Among Men with  
Life Sentences

by

Richard Stover

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Sociology

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation of desistance strategies among men sentenced to life in prison in a medium security prison in Pennsylvania. *Desistance* here is defined as the process leading to the cessation of formally deviant behavior (Laub and Sampson 2001). Drawing from life history narrative interviews conducted inside a medium security prison, I argue that desistance is intrinsically tied to how inmates conceptualize themselves within the institutional context of the prison and can be expanded to include people who are still incarcerated. I build off of Peggy Giordano and colleague's symbolic interactionist perspective on desistance and expand it to chart how men with life sentences order their criminal past selves and operationalize their transformed present selves (2002: 990). Inmate narratives espouse a view of self that morphs over time, not dissimilar to Erving Goffman's notion of the *moral career*, except inmates term the process "*transformation*," which is at odds with the rehabilitative paradigm of the institution and is more of a causal mechanism for identity change (1961: 14).

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis represents the culmination of two years of research conducted with long-term incarcerated male inmates at a medium security prison in central Pennsylvania. Life history narrative interviews were conducted after establishing rapport with research subjects in an unconventional, albeit effective, setting: we were classmates in a university *inside-out* class. Emerging organically from informal classroom conversations, I became interested in the concept of *transformation* among long-term inmates, as the presumptive incentives for seeking behavioral change (i.e., the prospect of release from confinement) are absent in these men's situations. A major theme emerging from this research is the understanding that *transformation* in prison can be framed as a type of secular salvation from a criminal past self through a mechanism of reflection brought about by a combination of isolation and trauma. The prior (criminal) self is *saved* to the extent that an inmate can jettison their past identity and adopt a new pro-social, charitable, and non-violent one. This thesis contributes to the sociological literature on incarceration by providing a robust definition of self-*transformation* in the context of life sentences.

I conducted semi-structured life history narrative interviews among 22 men with life or long terms sentences (at least 10 years). These interviews lasted an average of 1.5 hours. I took notes by hand and chose not to record audio of the interviews. The interviews took place in an attorney's room in the prison's visiting space. The room was small, with one table and two chairs, and was soundproof as well as difficult to see into. Some interviews lasted beyond 3 hours, and some lasted less than an hour. I worked from a general list of questions, which targeted specific points of time in across the lifespan. My questions referenced their childhood,

family, economic (in)security, living conditions, neighborhoods, schools, mentors and teachers, gangs, drug use, the committed crime or crimes, interactions with the criminal justice system and the police, entering prison, living in prison, routine in prison, friendships in prison, interactions with staff and administrators, whether they feel they have “transformed” and what that process looks like for them, isolation, solitary confinement, mental illness, prison culture, and a host of other questions. No respondent dropped out of an interview.

In chapter 1 I move through literature that is pertinent to rising incarceration rates in the United States, identity conception and presentation among incarcerated populations, and make the argument as to why this research is poised to fill in a gap in modern prison studies. Chapter 2 is an in-depth description of how this study came to be, how I met my respondents, navigating the prison system as a researcher, and why the interviews were difficult to conduct. Chapters 3-6 are case studies of men who present the clearest examples of *transformation*, and how they personally define and operationalize it. Collectively, these case studies construct a narrative of *transformation* as simultaneously self-generated and yet inherently social because of the nature of the prison. In my conclusion I extrapolate why this information is sociologically significant and why the issues of the lifer are symptomatic of larger social ills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Emergence of the U.S. Incarceration System*

While the American system of incarceration is a longstanding and unifying concern of both academic and public discourse, the desistance patterns of *lifers* (i.e., those serving life sentences) remain underexplored. The purpose of this study is to help fill this gap. Beginning in the 1970s, the U.S. inmate population increased more than six-fold and now rests at over seven million people. In our current carceral state, approximately one in every 31 adults is under some form of state supervision, e.g., incarceration, probation, or parole (Gottschalk 2011:483). Multiple studies define the causes of mass incarceration from both historical and sociological perspectives (Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013; Eason 2012; Gottschalk 2011; Hooks et al. 2004; Phelps 2011; Western et al. 2010), but social psychological accounts of inmates' *perceptions* of what leads to behavioral change – which is arguably the ultimate purpose of confinement, however distorted – remain relatively sparse, especially for lifers. The alarmingly high percentage of inmates currently serving life sentences in Pennsylvania – currently 12 percent of the state's 46,000 inmates (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections 2019)<sup>1</sup> – implies that this gap is nontrivial and motivates the Pennsylvania penal system as an ideal site for such a study.

Mass incarceration has been called by many names: “the penal order” (Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013:1378), “the culture of control” (Garland 2001), “the New Jim Crow” (Alexander, 2010), among others. The essence of mass incarceration, however, is relatively

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<sup>1</sup> This is an average of both male and female inmates with life sentences. The percentage of males serving life sentences in Pennsylvania is 12.3%.

agreed upon. I follow Campbell and Schoenfeld (2013) and define mass incarceration as “the new order ... characterized by a set of ideas, including that the purpose of prison is incapacitation and retribution, that criminals are the ‘other’ and not worthy of redemption, and that being labeled soft on crime is the ultimate political liability” (1379). This political liability stems from the United States’ decentralized type of federalism and the relative weakness of its political parties, which in turn motivate leaders to turn toward populist inclinations of harsh punishment; contrasting this, societies with more centralized state power allow for milder punishments (Campbell & Schoenfeld 2013; Caplow & Simon 1999; Hooks et al. 2004; Phelps 2011).

Part of understanding the context of this work is to frame the rise of American incarceration within the discipline of sociology, which has a long history of tying rises in incarceration rates to broader social fluxuations (Caplow & Simon 1999:66). Émile Durkheim’s classical perspective on crime, which laid important foundations for American criminology and sociology more broadly, is necessarily functionalist: when criminals commit crimes they violate the social norms of the society and punishment is the natural reaction to that deviance (1964). While Durkheim’s perspective has tremendous merits, it does not consider changing political motivations for incarceration over time. Economic restructuring beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw developments that would restructure the economic opportunities of uneducated young males and “expand the pool of people most likely to be attracted to crime as an economic option,” which complicates Durkheim’s formulation (Caplow & Simon 1999). Further, this economic restructuring has disproportionately targeted communities of color in impoverished inner-city areas and rural working class bastions where industries like coal and steel used to provide steady, well-paying jobs, effectively perpetuating a racialized and class-based system for incarceration



(Karl L Alexander, Doris R Entwistle, and Linda Steffel Olson 2014; MacLeod 2009; Silva 2019; Wilson 1996). The high degree of economic inequality in the United States – a system disproportionately hindering people of color – constitutes a spurious driver of both crime *and* punishment: economic restructuring has created an environment where those who are disadvantaged are more likely to be exposed to the illicit economy – and crime in general – as a valid and accessible way to provide for themselves and their families (Anderson 1999; Goffman 2014). Unfortunately, they are also disproportionately likely to be punished with long-term sentences as a consequence.

*Desistance Inside: Temporality and Moral Career Among Lifers*

For this project, I frame desistance as a developmental process, similar to Laub and Sampson (2001), who define it as “the causal process that supports the termination of offending”, as well as the “continued state of nonoffending” (11). However, my definition differs from most research, which studies desistance within the context of re-entering populations. I study those still in prison and without immediate prospects for release, which has important theoretical implications for defining desistance (e.g., the need to do so without a light at the end of the carceral tunnel). The theoretical backbone for this study comes from Giordano et al. (2002), who present a symbolic interactionist perspective on desistance to explain the underpinnings of the experience of transformative behavior. This perspective “emphasize[s] the actor’s own role in creatively and selectively appropriating elements in the environment,” which they call “hooks for change” (992). These “hooks” are things “that will serve well as catalysts for lasting change when they energize rather fundamental shifts in identity and changes in the meaning and

desirability of deviant/criminal behavior itself” (992). This theory complements Emily Meanwell’s (2013) notion of the “symbolically reconstructed past” among homeless shelter residents, wherein how vulnerable residents within an institutional context situate themselves within said institutional context is inherently intertwined with what that individual feels is pertinent to their survival (440). I argue that what desistance looks like for my sample – men sentenced to life in prison or at least ten years – is directly tied to how they symbolically reconstruct their past selves within the institutional context. Further, they do not use the institutional language of rehabilitation to describe their progression. Instead, they use the language of *transformation* to create and foster a view of personal change which both implicitly and explicitly profanes the language of the rehabilitative model.

What we are dealing with is a profound cognitive *transformation* that is informed primarily through social networks and other basic changes in personal dispositions, broadly implying that the *transformation* process is both *structural* and *agentic*. The idea of hooks is one such way that cognitive *transformations* are furnished, but hooks must also provide an attractive replacement candidate for the individual’s current self, and this is why the *transformation* process is inherently social. Further, another crucial aspect of how this cognitive *transformation* is successful is a shift in the actor’s conception of the value of the deviant behavior or lifestyle. If this conception is changed, then the actor no longer sees criminal behavior as beneficial, exciting, or worthy of the risk involved. Giordano et al. (2002) refer to this cognitive change as “the capstone,” the final, permanent shift away from criminal behavior (1002).

Temporality is a central concept to the process of *transformation* insofar as the narrativization and meaning of the past changes as one traverses the future. Goffman (1961) notably defined the moral career (with respect to time) as “the regular sequences of changes that

career entails in the person's self" (128). Career in this sense means the general *progression* of time as individuals experience it, whereas moral entails the changes in the selfhood of the individual as they move through myriad interactions, institutions, and social and cultural fluctuations. This framework is helpful for understanding social lived experience as a series of moments of identity management, and individuals living with stigma or inside of institutions that are concerned with control are in a continuous mode of identity work (Meanwell 2013). For the purposes of this study, the institutional self, or the self which is presented or expected within the context of the prison are always in tension with the self that is actively felt within the individual.

Perhaps the most important theoretical distillations of Goffman's *Asylums* are the concepts of the total institution and the mortification of self (1961). A key defining feature of total institutions is the "handling of many human needs by bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people... is the key fact of total institutions" (Goffman 1961: 6). Certainly, this is true of prisons. In order to effectively subdue and be able organize these blocks of people, the total institution must impose a death of the self upon the inmate: "his self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified" (Goffman 1961: 14). Goffman (1961) outlines the stages of which the self has mortification imposed upon itself, one of those being a period upon entrance where the inmate is not allowed to have visitors, resulting in a "role dispossession" (14). This process is where the social role the inmate experienced prior to incarceration is replaced by the role of the inmate; further, this concept could be called the "civil death" of the inmate, whereby status of any sort of antecedent role in a community is lost (1961:14–16).

Goffman's theory of the total institution – while central for framing this study – is limited insofar as it does not account for the structural antecedents inscribed on the minds and bodies of these men upon prison entry, i.e., the *habitus*, to borrow language from Pierre Bourdieu (1984).

The “prepatient phase” that Goffman posits relies on the notion that people entering into prison have a clearly felt sense of self. However, all of my respondents, except for one, detailed living conditions and economic circumstances that contributed to a keenly felt sense of precarity. This precarity made it so that they were constantly moving, being assaulted, dealing with relatives who had serious mental health and/or addiction issues, and bouncing in and out of consistency without recourse. Many of the men describe that they “had to grow up too quick,” leading to a kind of listless, unmoored existence leading to a phenomenon of not having a clear sense of identity, a kind of no-self. A major recurrent theme emerging from this study is the direct effect of *the streets* on identity formation and corresponding feelings of emotional numbness. This is not to say that the men I interviewed saw themselves as without feeling or non-cognizant. Rather, the chaos of the street became the chaos of the self and this internalization of disadvantaged, traumatic environment is also incarcerated with these men.

One of Goffman’s more pointed examples of how the total institution subverts inmates’ selves is as follows: “total institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actor and those in his presence that he has some command over his world – that he is a person with “adult” self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action” (1961:43). This was the effect that entrance into prison had upon the majority of my participants, namely that their entire sense of self as they had honed it in the outside world was subverted by the ability of the prison to put them into a situation where they as though they are completely not in control of their surroundings.

Similar to but not mutually exclusive to the mortification of the self, Sykes puts forward the deprivation model of imprisonment in *Society of Captives* (1958). There are many deprivations in prison according to Sykes, including the deprivation of liberty, the deprivation of

goods and services, the deprivation of heterosexual relationships, the deprivation of autonomy, and the deprivation of security (1958:65–78). Although this study is more than 60 years old and prisons have changed in many ways, Sykes theoretical contribution of the deprivation model is foundational and influenced future researchers to expand upon it. The deprivation model posits that identity inside of prison is created as a direct result of the deprivations of the institution, or more succinctly, that the inmate is socialized solely by the rules and cultural norms of the facility.

In contrast to Goffman’s theory of the mortification of self, the importation model of behavior has also been heavily discussed in criminological literature (Hugh Francis Cline, 1966; Thomas, 1975, 1977; Thomas & Foster, 1973). In effect, the importation model suggests that instead of the inmate being completely socialized by the prison, the inmate brings with them many of their attitudes and cultural leanings from the outside and asserts their autonomy by employing these attitudes in the face of deprivation. The self is not shed, in fact one could argue it is honed by the adversity forced upon it by the institution. The importation model is necessarily more dynamic and allows for the whole of the normative system espoused by the inmate to be considered, as opposed to holding to the more rigid structure of the structural-functionalist deprivation model.

*Prison Studies: On Socialization, Behavior, and the “Eclipse”*

Wacquant (2002) puts forward an economic theory of the rise of the carceral apparatus rooted in class-conflict: “the gradual replacement of the social-welfare regulation of poverty... by its treatment through an emerging *carceral-assistential continuum* interlinking and

intermingling the practices, categories, and discourses of ‘workfare’ with those of a hypertrophic and hyperactive criminal justice apparatus” (2002: 382, emphasis in original). In the same article, Waquant goes on to emphasize that the carceral apparatus is primarily trained on poor, working class America, “namely, the colored subproletariat of the big cities, the unskilled and precarious fractions of the working class, and those who... reject poverty wages... and turn instead to the informal commerce of the city streets” (Wacquant 2002:382).

Wacquant continues by lauding the studies mentioned above as landmark prison studies but laments the lack of similarly rich prison studies in the modern era. Where prisons used to be open places where researchers had relatively unrestricted access and were even seen as a positive force within the institution, “the jettisoning of the philosophy of rehabilitation and the turnaround toward the criminalization of poverty... aimed at containment of the lower classes and stigmatized ethnic groups, the doors of penitentiaries were gradually closed to social researchers” (Wacquant 2002:384). This means that the crystallization of many ideations related to the prison system, including the devaluation of the prison as a facilitator of rehabilitation, was eliminated almost completely just as those studies were becoming more urgently needed to interrogate the rise of mass incarceration.

What is important to note here is that, except for criminological reports that give empirical credence to areas proxy to the prison itself (e.g. re-entry & recidivism), the social sciences have all but abandoned the investigation of the prison as an object of inquiry in and of itself. One needs to rely on the writings of inmates or journalists concerning the machinations of the prison, and these may be hard to come by for a myriad of reasons. This includes a lack of studies investigating cultural trends & patterns, organizational structure, and the lived experience of the inmate.

## BACKGROUND & METHODS

In order to investigate how men with life sentences structure their personal life narratives within the context of prison, specifically as it relates to the expressed process of *transformation*, I draw on qualitative data from semi-structured life-history narrative interviews with twenty-two inmates at a state prison in Pennsylvania. The motivation for this study came to me after participating in an Inside-Out class where I had interaction with a charitable organization within this prison, of which the board is comprised of lifers. I began to be interested in the process of personal *transformation* that they spoke of so frequently. I wondered what the process entailed, how they undertook this kind of process within the confines of a controlling and coercive setting, what kind of issues come up for them personally and in their peer groups, whether or not they had support from the institution, and even if they were being genuine in their description of the idea and process. These are men with life sentences, what could be their motivation for developing themselves socially and emotionally? I started out by interviewing them and then asking each of them to come up with a list of men that they interact with who they think would be good candidates for this project given their conception and criteria of *transformation*. The original 5 members of the charitable group gave me a list of 5 other men they knew. With the help of the prison's Superintendent, I was subsequently able to gain access to 18 additional men via this snowball sampling design.

Western (2018) points out in his study of inmates in and released from prison in Massachusetts, "the first and highest hurdle to doing research in prison – [is] gaining the support of the Department of Correction" (2018:13). This was certainly the case for my study. The IRB was, justifiably, very stringent about the details, but we were able to address all concerns via a

few rounds of respectful negotiation.<sup>3</sup> All respondents were provided with consent forms, all survey instruments were thoroughly screened, and the methodological strategy was thoroughly reviewed.

While I built as many protections into my methodological design as I reasonably could, much of this was also ensured via the implementation of an empathically neutral interview strategy that was intentionally flexible (Patton 2002). I worked with respondents to collectively decide which topics of discussion were on and off limits, what depth of conversation was reasonable, etc. I also implemented record-keeping strategies that respondents found agreeable and that ensured the safety of their private information. Some of these practices included recording notes only by hand, using a secure scanner to make digital copies of my handwritten notes, and keeping digital and physical copies in a secure location. In addition to these strategies for securing the data, I also made sure that the incarcerated people I was interviewing were fully aware that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and they did not have to answer any questions I asked if they did not want to, and they did not have to stay in the interview if they did not want to. In the initial agreement with the Superintendent of the prison, I made sure that after the interview a psychological staff member was dispatched to respondent's block and followed up with them, to ensure the interview process did not prompt any undue emotional distress. Throughout the interview, I periodically asked if the respondent was doing okay emotionally, if the interview was going alright, how they were feeling about the questions I was asking, and other questions pertaining to their comfort. Providing autonomy to respondents is imperative when conducting ethnographic research with incarcerated populations. As Western

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<sup>3</sup> I mention the respectfulness of these review board negotiations to deconstruct the researcher – prison study review board dichotomy. In my experience, the officials I dealt with provided me with access and safety, which should be stated explicitly to their credit.



(2018) notes, prison research is a serious, sensitive undertaking. The stories and contexts are serious matters, the ramifications of mishandling the data is serious, and the ethical imperative of the researcher is perhaps as sensitive as a research setting can demand.

### *Data Collection and Approach*

I originally planned to record the interviews using a recording device provided by the prison, to download the recording from the device, and to take it home for transcription. To maintain confidentiality for my respondents, I modified my strategy to instead take handwritten notes, which would not be inspected before I left the facility. I had also secured an attorney's room, a soundproof space that is unobservable from the outside. My hope was that this atmosphere would provide a setting for my respondents to share things with me that they might not within earshot of prison officials. These things considered, I also committed to notify a staff member if the inmate mentioned any kind of criminal activity or mentioned that they were planning to be a harm to themselves or others.

The sample consisted of 22 men, 20 of which are currently serving life sentences, while the remaining two were serving "long-term" sentences. The median age of the sample was 42, and all had spent at least 10 consecutive years in prison.<sup>4</sup> The youngest man I interviewed was 27, while the oldest was 68. 14 (63%) of the men identified as African American, 3 (14%) as White, and 5 (23%) as Latino or Hispanic of any race. All interviews were conducted during the summer of 2019.

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<sup>4</sup> These years were not always all spent at the facility that I conducted this research in. Some had transferred in the recent past.

For notetaking, I split the paper into two columns: in the left column I would write observational notes, that being what I saw around me and a general description of the temporal procession of events. In the right column I would write analytical notes, or notes written about the observational column, detailing how I perceived the setting around me, the people in front of me, and the idiosyncrasies I observed. When I returned from the prison, I would immediately make a copy of my hand-written notes and from that generate a set of field notes detailing the interview and the day in the prison in general. As I became more experienced interviewing in this setting, I would often elect to not take notes at all during interviews because I felt that it changed the dynamic of the conversation. I noticed that when I was taking notes, men would often slow their talking and stunt their thoughts out of concern for me keeping up. Not making eye contact had also made the situation less personal, and it made it more difficult to build a strong sense of trust. For 18 of the inside men I interviewed, this was my first time meeting them. I wanted to make the encounter feel as natural as possible.

For a large portion of the men in my study, this was the first time they were interviewed, and the concept of consent was foreign to them, especially given the nature of the institution in which they inhabit. The situation I presented to them essentially gave them a new form of power that 7 (32%) of them stated were uncomfortable exercising or were entirely unfamiliar with the idea. This in mind, I made sure to stress to them that they were indeed volunteering their time to me, that they did not have to answer any of the questions I ask if they do not want to, and that they could walk away at any time. I explained that while I was going to do my absolute best to protect and anonymize the narratives they share, I could not completely guarantee that their anonymity would be preserved. I explained the possibility that someone could read this work

and triangulate who it is I am talking about; understanding this, many chose to proceed regardless.

For various reasons, interviews frequently moved to an unstructured format, but I allowed for this flexibility, which uncovered useful information. Often, our conversations constituted the first opportunity respondents had since incarceration to speak with someone neutral, that is, someone who is not an inmate nor a staff. One of the men I interviewed had not had a single visitor in 6 years, and a fully predictable consequence was that he wanted to share parts of his story that transcended the original boundaries of this study. Under such psychologically uncommon circumstances, arbitrarily placing rigid structures on qualitative prison research is infeasible and in some cases could stimulate the precise forms of trauma that researchers and institutional review boards seek to avoid.

CASE STUDIES<sup>5</sup>*Louis: Transformation as Education*

I arrived at the prison at 8:30 AM, went through processing, walked down the long hallway toward the visiting room, entered and walked to the back where I have a room that says “official visiting” on it. The room is small, about 6x8, with a table in the middle and 4 plastic chairs, two on each side. The windows are slightly mirrored, so it is difficult to see in. I walk in and see Louis, alone and waiting for me. He gets up and daps me, saying “how you been, Rich?” simultaneously pulling me into an embrace. Louis is tall, about 6’, black, slim and fit looking. I tell him I’m good and that I’m really excited about this opportunity to interview the inside guys that I’ve been in class and think-tank meetings with one on one and without staff members looking over us. He says he’s excited too and that this is really unprecedented. In fact, to his knowledge, nothing like this has ever happened in this prison before. We move through the formalities, I explain the consent form and the purpose of the research, saying “it’s possible we will talk about some stuff that will bring up some trauma or bad feelings.” He replies coolly and confidently, “I doubt it.”

Louis was born in a working-class neighborhood in north Philadelphia in 1963. Both of his parents were present during his upbringing, and he has/had 3 siblings, one who passed in 2001 and two sisters whom he stays in contact with today. “I just got off the phone with one of them earlier, we talk a lot and share stories about our childhood memories.” His mother was from Georgia, and his father from Florida. Louis tells me that his parents “didn’t really know

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<sup>5</sup> I present four in-depth life history narratives as examples of “transformation.” The remainder of the interview data I collected will be used in a forthcoming manuscript.

how to deal with the neighborhood” when they moved north for work. The neighborhood was rough and “drug-infested”, filled with areas the locals called “shooting galleries” where people would publicly be shooting drugs intravenously. Although they were poor, his parents sent him to a private Catholic school, where Louis spent 8 years before he dropped out of school; Louis tells me he “always had this knack for wanting to learn things.” Although Louis’ family was strict, they were caring and did the best they could for their children. Regardless of this, Louis still had to walk through the neighborhood on his way to school. He was routinely robbed and began carrying a knife when he was young, after his brother told him that he needed to stick up for himself. He had to fight back against the people bullying him. Louis eventually became a good fighter. Louis’ brother was in the Avenue Gang, a local neighborhood gang that was small, but nevertheless his brother taught him the right way to carry himself in the neighborhood. The neighborhood was run by a larger gang, the Nation of Islam, who were very violent at this time.

Louis’ first encounter with the police was when he was 10 years old. He was in a situation where a white women’s pocketbook was stolen, and Louis happened to be in the area, so the police picked him up. They took him down to the station and demanded that he confess to doing the crime. Louis didn’t do the crime, and he maintained his innocence. The woman eventually showed up and said that “she left the pocketbook home.” Nevertheless, Louis had his first run in with the police, and it didn’t help the notion that in his neighborhood “we didn’t see the police as friends.” When Louis was 11 or 12, he was stabbed. Him and one of his friends were walking down the street and a kid was spitting out of his window. The kid’s spit hit his friend, and the friend got really pissed off and ran upstairs to fight the kid. Louis got in the middle of it, and the kid stabbed him 2 or 3 times on his back, up near the shoulder. The cuts weren’t deep, but this kind of violence was not out of the ordinary.

He also told me that he was routinely bullied in school, also leading to his brother telling him that he needs to fight the bullies and stick up for himself. Louis played basketball and was very strong and athletic, and he eventually became known in the neighborhood as a good fighter who moved well. He was routinely looked to for protection, especially with his friends who were females. He says he protected them, but “people also considered [him] fair minded.” In other words, Louis wouldn’t just walk around looking to start a fight, but if he was pushed or one of his friends was being bullied, he would fight for them. I get this feeling from Louis even now, that he would defend the ones he cares about and that he is level-headed. Simultaneously, he is a commanding presence, with fierce eyes, a furrowed brow and a deep, commanding voice. One would probably think that Louis is generally angry looking and bossy, as he uses an aggressive tone when he talks, although this is just normal for him. In addition, although his tone is serious, he speaks thoughtfully and always has something insightful to say, owing to that “fair-mindedness” that his friends said described him. He has an air of power about him, and his presence is definitely felt in the room. I could see quite easily how he would be an intimidating and also magnetic individual in his neighborhood.

I asked Louis what he did when he was a little older, around high school age, in his free time. He said that around that time he would hang out with his friends, play sports, smoke cigarettes and marijuana, and engage in small-time robberies. He told me that he and his friends started out by doing “strong arm robberies,” where he, being the strongest, would run up behind someone and hold their arms so they couldn’t move, then his friends would come up and “shoot their pockets,” taking whatever they found. Eventually, he and his friends graduated to bigger robbery schemes. They had a penchant for robbing check cashing places, and that is exactly how Louis got arrested the first time.

I asked him if he liked the feeling of knocking places off like that, and he said yes, and that he was good at it; “they called me Spiderman.” This is presumably because he was sneaky and could get over really easy on people. He told me that he liked the rush that he got when he thieved, that he was “addicted to the lifestyle.” When he got some money, he would blow it on girls, “little cars,” and other “dumb things,” saying he “never had this kind of money.” He said, “I never knew anything that gave me a rush like that,” but also that he “always thought he was going to die in the streets.”

We talked about how dangerous the lifestyle was, and how he had a lot of close calls. Louis tells me that this is a common lifestyle for youth growing up in inner-city areas, especially those in poverty. Certainly, it is something engrained in the popular consciousness, that poor, black inner-city males come from rough neighborhoods and that they engage in all kinds of illegal behavior. The picture of poverty that Louis paints is not something that was shocking to me, in fact I expected it. It doesn't seem out of the ordinary that a youth growing up in poverty would look around and see what other people were doing and then emulate that lifestyle because they think it will net them money and reputation. Louis continually argued against Eli Anderson's decent and street categories in *Code of the Street*, which we read in our inside-out class in Fall 2018. He said that his family was decent but that he did things that were street, so they are not hard categories and therefore not valid for classification.

One of Louis' older sisters “took care of us because my parents were working so much.” Louis didn't go too much into this, but it's not hard to imagine an older sibling being responsible for their younger siblings when the parents are away. Perhaps this also owed to Louis' mother's sense of dread, that she had to work and couldn't be home to look after her children. I can imagine that this situation only contributed to the chaotic home life that Louis experienced, and

although his father was loving in his own “tough and strong” way, the lack of parental supervision was noticeable. Louis dropped out of school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, although he says he would show up to basketball games to play and also to practice with the team. He told me that it was no big deal to not sign into school in the morning but show up to games because he was so good at the game and rules were more relaxed at that time. In addition to basketball, up into his late teens Louis continued robbing places with his crew.

One of the guys he was running with was locked up at one point, and when he got out, he went and got Louis and told him he should come with him to buy a gun. Louis figured the gun was just “protection for the streets,” but it was more than that. In New Jersey, Louis and his friend went to a house, where his friend walks inside and kills a man. Louis describes this in gruesome detail, that he was outside talking with a woman when they heard shots, so they ran upstairs and walked in on his friend standing above the man he shot. The man shot the other man in the back of the head, a move that Louis said was “unnecessary, he didn’t have to do that, the guy was already dead.” Louis and his friend escape out the window and he decided to run with his friend. Louis looks back on this moment as a big mistake: “I shouldn’t have run with him.” Louis thinks that if he wouldn’t have run then he wouldn’t have looked as guilty as he did. Maybe if he would have stayed back, he could have maintained his innocence, but by running he became an accomplice. Louis and his friend run back to Pennsylvania.

At this point Louis doesn’t know why his friend decided to kill this man, but he would later find out that the man that was killed had attempted to rape, or did successfully rape, his friend in prison. This was an act of revenge, so that when both of them were out of prison he decided to kill the man. Louis doesn’t know why his friend didn’t speak up about this because it could have helped them when they were picked up, which they were relatively quickly after the



incident. Although it wouldn't abdicate him of murder, the story of the rape would at least make sense in a redemptive, eye for an eye sense. Louis was tried and turned down the deal, choosing instead to take the 10-25-year sentence that he was facing. Louis didn't know the story of the rape at this point, so all that he was maintaining was that he didn't kill the man, which the woman who was with them was saying he did. "I don't know why she was lying," but Louis maintains that there was a reason for the lie, perhaps a protection of the friend who committed the murder.

Louis makes bail and runs south to Florida. This was at the advice of his mother, and he says that he did not want to run, he wanted to stay "and turn [himself] in and clear [his record]." Nevertheless, he does run to Florida, and then subsequently to Georgia. He was on the run like this for 8 months. It should also be mentioned that at this point in his life Louis has a 4-year old daughter, he was 24, and he knew that after the "night [of the murder] his life would never be the same." After 8 months, he did return to Philadelphia and turn himself in.

The details at this point of the story are murky, but Louis does end up in prison, this time with a life sentence. He remembers receiving death threats from his co-defendant's family, although at this point his co-defendant was locked up in New Jersey. The first facility Louis went to was SCI Graterford, and he had a lot of friends in there from Philadelphia, especially "this old-head who pretty much controlled the place." "Not staying there long was a good thing," Louis says when talking about SCI Graterford, presumably because he had a lot of friends in there and if he wouldn't have been transferred to SCI Dallas he wouldn't have begun the *transformation* process because he would have been in the same element with the same people he was used to on the streets of Philadelphia.

Louis was transferred to Dallas, however, where he also had friends, but these friends were much more into “education and politics” than the guys at SCI Graterford. Louis did not talk much about his intake into prison, perhaps because he is so far away from that moment in time, but he clearly remembers “the turning point, the birth of my consciousness.” He was in “the hole” in Dallas, the restricted housing portion of the facility, and he roomed with a couple of “really enlightened guys,” one of those being Russel “Maroon” Shoatz, an ex-Black Panther. These guys, as Louis explains, were “in there [prison] for killing cops.” Shoatz was also a “soldier” in the Black Liberation Army. Louis was exposed to conversation about topics like community development, capitalism, social justice, and other complex philosophies and modes of thinking. This is something that the public isn’t aware of with restricted housing: it’s not necessarily isolation, it’s just a more restricted unit away from the general population. Inmates are able to talk to each other and, in this case, lecture younger guys about complex ideas by just having conversations.

When Louis did get out of this restricted housing unit, he began to read voraciously, but he “also found ways to share the knowledge I was gaining with others.” He says to me “what we all want is self-empowerment,” and he realized that “unless I educated myself, I would never get self-empowerment.” So, Louis began his process of self-*transformation* by “reading, studying, growing.” Louis probably would not have had this *transformation* if it weren’t for the old head’s influence over him, as he narrativizes it. This also points to the importance of the social component of restricted housing as educational spaces. Although the popular conception of restricted housing units is that they are solitary, they are in reality very social. Louis explains that while he was in restricted housing, he underwent an educational process that was led by senior inmates: “every day in the RHU (restricted housing unit) we would engage in serious

conversations about life in prison, politics, racism, sexism, and homophobia.” “These conversations set the tone for my *transformation* because everyone had a spot, no one could disrespect another person because they didn’t agree with their point of view.” Certainly, Louis is in the position of the old heads he met in the past now. He is part of an organization that mentors guys who were in his shoes 30 years ago. Earlier, in 1998, when Louis was transferred to SCI Huntingdon, he would “start conversations on the gate on a daily basis to stimulate our educational process, guys would want to enter the conversation and add their input.”

Insiders like Louis are the ones that new guys go to for guidance, and he shares his wisdom and hopefully gets the guy to want to undertake the process of *transformation*. This seems to be the model of the Lifeline Association’s mentoring agenda, but it’s not a long shot to think that this goes on in other prisons as well, in addition to other social institutions that are similar. There is an “old guard” of sorts that not only teaches the culture of the facility, but the proper way to orient oneself and learn about the world in meaningful, life changing ways. It’s not far off from the AA model, where young, unaware people come in and learn from those with a lot of experience and knowledge and are mentored. In this case alcoholism is not what is being treated, but something more historical, racial, and completely wrapped up in identity and the criminal justice system. The identity of the criminal begets the criminality, and what Louis wants is to end that cycle.

Louis explains a kind of community policing, where most of the possible violence that could happen is deescalated before it becomes a situation that the guards have to intervene in. There is a certain orientation that Louis has toward the staff of the prison. He sees them as the oppressor, and in most cases altogether unnecessary because the people who are inside that are decent intervene before a situation gets out of hand. It does the beg the question that if the

guards weren't there, would there be a similar level of community policing? Presumably the situation is stopped because once it escalates then everybody suffers because the block has to be locked down and then searched. Louis sees the psych staff as largely unnecessary as well because the lifer group that does mentoring only sees real change when there is someone talking to another person who has experienced what the individual suffering is going through. In Louis' words, Dare 2 Care<sup>6</sup> is a place where "we talk about character growth and what it means to be adapting to yourself emotionally." Louis' argument is that in order to get to the point that he's at one has to undergo a serious mental change and orientation towards learning and being introspective. He says that some guys are at that point and others really struggle with it, which makes sense because prison is not an environment where being emotionally open is comfortable.

At this point I ask the question that nags at the back of my mind and in some ways is the foundation of what I'm trying to get at. If these guys, the Lifeline Association, went through this process of *transformation* and became the really great individuals they are today inside prison, then isn't it logical to think that prison presents a place where positive things like this can happen, that it even facilitates it in some way? Louis looked at me and said, "Rich, that's exactly it." He thinks that his *transformation* certainly did come about because of him being inside and coming in contact with some intellectual types, and that he doesn't see himself undergoing the same process if he wasn't inside and was on the streets. In Louis' view prison is morally reprehensible, despite their being outcomes like these, although they are most probably in the minority. "Prison is not good, but we need institutions that would serve the population without incarceration."

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<sup>6</sup> Dare 2 Care is a program that Louis helped start which is a part of Lifeline's programming. It is a group where newer inmates are talked to by older inmates and are given space to discuss their lives and incarceration. A large part of this programming is built around helping men work through childhood traumas. It is voluntary and not mandated in any way, yet is very popular.

I asked Louis what these institutions would look like: “we need real schools, real education, and real opportunities.” I pushed a little more and Louis says what most social scientists propose, that these communities need to revamp how the police relate with the community, address the lack of steady employment, and have decent and affordable housing. But more than that Louis says the education system needs a pedagogical system that addresses the historic and cultural aspects of the population it serves. He says there is a need for this because “without a cultural awareness program and without historical and cultural enlightenment you can can’t have a sense of purpose.” This is the difference, for Louis, between rehabilitation and *transformation*.

Rehabilitation is a term that the inside men do not like because it connotes the institutional framework of prison, whereas *transformation* connotes the individual struggle with the self towards something that would be considered good in society at large. Louis thinks that the self is dynamic, that people can and do change. This is also not a completely selfless endeavor, because as Louis changed, his outlook to the rest of the prison changed: “it’s not just about me, there are people here that I love who I want to go home.” In addition, Louis is a member of the Lifeline Association, a group inside that generates profits from legal sales inside and then chooses a charity to donate the funds to. Most recently, the Kaupus Camp, facilitated by the Mother Maria Kaupus Center in Mount Carmel, received around \$4,000 from Lifeline, which goes a long way for that organization. But the orientation can be seen as a group manifestation of the individual *transformation* on display. These donations also serve a practical purpose, when “we have the sense of empowerment, we make a difference inside, proving people wrong [about prisoners].” The *transformation* works to eliminate the “criminal mentality,” getting inside guys away from the mindset of “getting over,” and moving towards

“figuring out how to appreciate themselves.” “We’re just asking for an opportunity, look at the *transformation*, we change.”

Louis presents a typology for *transformation* that is based heavily in social interaction with other inmates. Specifically, Louis finds salvation in educating himself and then sharing information with others. “Serious conversations” are the material that caused Louis to step back and reflect about himself, but also the larger structure of the prison and, further, of society. This naturally caused him to reflect on his childhood and adolescence, and he began to realize that his entire life has been deeply traumatic, and though he enjoyed robbing people and engaging in a criminal lifestyle, it’s not really who he is or wants to be. Louis’ lived experience is fundamental in informing his *moral career*, specifically that said career is one of trauma and that the prison itself did not cause Louis’s identity to change when he was incarcerated, as Goffman (1961) posited it would when he wrote of the “mortification of self” (14). Louis changed when he was in a setting that allowed him to be educated, and when he realized that he had moved from *criminal to student*.

### *James: Awakening to the Realities of Self*

James was born in Puerto Rico, lived there until he was about 14, then moved to Brooklyn in 1976. In Puerto Rico he lived out in the country, so there was little interaction to be had. But in Brooklyn, there were a ton of things to observe, and this excited him. I asked why they moved, and he told me, somewhat reluctantly, that there were better business opportunities. I asked what his parents did, and he told me, in a roundabout way, that they were drug dealers. I

clarified, “so they were drug dealers?” He repeated, “there were better financial opportunities in Brooklyn.”

For James’ parents, “money was love.” They were always buying him things. There were catalogs around the house and he could pick one up and circle things he wanted, and he would get them. However, he said that his parents were emotionally abusive and punished him for doing things that he perceived as being right, like making his bed. If he made his bed he would get hit, but if he got in a fight at school it would be glossed over. Because of this James never got the love and affection he needed from his parents; they would just buy him things. He also felt, from a very young age, that he was not good enough. This can be attributed to him being adopted, although he didn’t know why or how, and he never knew his real parents.

School did not hold James’ attention, he says “it was too easy.” When he was a teenager, because he “always had older friends,” he became involved with the Latin Kings in his neighborhood. James says he was drawn to the Latin Kings because they provided him with a sense of purpose and community: “I felt like I didn’t have anybody when I was a child, and the Kings made me feel like family, I wanted to be cared about.” James focused on the good that the Kings were doing in the neighborhood and liked the founding roots of the organization: “most of these organizations were started by civil rights activists and were meant to promote civil rights.” Some of the specific tenets of the Kings that James liked were that they “fought against oppression, teach and elevate themselves, and that Latino people are worthy of respect and are not third-rate citizens.”

When he joined the Kings, the president of the local chapter “took a liking to [him].” Because of this he didn’t have to go through getting “beat in,” the initiation ritual of the group where the individual is pushed through a line of other members and beaten. Members who were

beaten in would often be hurt badly, but at the end they would embrace with others, coming out on the other side of the beating as a member of the group. Regardless, the president of the chapter let James join the Kings without having to go through this ritual. When he was a “soldier,” James would often do dangerous and illegal things, but would also do things like “help the elderly with their groceries and paint houses.” If there was an altercation within the group, it was handled at “universals,” which are a kind of internal court where the organization takes care of their problems. James liked the structure and formality of the organization and saw their cause as just and worthwhile.

After a few years in the Kings, the mentor who looked after James and granted him entrance passed away. James was promptly promoted to the position of President of that chapter of the Kings. In his leadership role, James looked over 2,000 people and led with “diplomacy and honor, not violence.” If there were a disagreement, it was known that there was no shooting, and the matter was to be settled with fists; somebody wins the fight, someone loses, and that’s it. This is similar to how James remembers staff and inmates resolving differences in prison when he first came in: “we would fight guards mutually, they would fight us, we would settle it.”

Today, the staff of the prison, “they look at us as less than human.” James recounts a period of time a few months prior where he was dealing with a bout of depression. I asked him what he did to get help, and if he could ask the psychological staff of the prison for help. “You can’t go to psych, they’ll put you in a POC cell and dehumanize you.” James describes this as a special containment cell in Restricted Housing where the inmate is forced to wear a reflective jacket and is monitored around the clock. This protocol is similar to a mental ward’s suicide watch, where an individual who has indicated that they are struggling and may be a danger to themselves are confined and monitored. But, for James, this is not a helpful course of action. In



his view, this practice makes the person who is struggling feel worse. This reflects how members of Lifeline view the prescriptive treatment of the prison, mentioned in the language of rehabilitation; they are lacking and dehumanizing.

James makes a clear distinction between what he and the rest of Lifeline call *transformation* and the institutionalized system of rehabilitation. Whereas rehabilitation is prescriptive and entails a plan for how inmates are going to desist, the process of *transformation* is fundamentally different because it is generated within the self and it is not always externally driven. James is not concerned with seeing the parole board, he has a life sentence, but he is concerned with the nature of “healing and education.” At one point when James was in Restricted housing, or “solitary” as it is most well-known, he had a realization: “I had an awakening, I was sick and tired of being myself, like I was just a victim blaming others for my problems.” He was also tired of how others in the prison went about their lives within the facility: “it’s all about who can tell the greatest lie. It’s about outwitting, outlasting, and outplaying to get over on others.” James sees this kind of behavior as unbecoming of how he spends time in prison, and he sees his membership in Lifeline and the work he does mentoring younger inmates as conscious decisions that originated in feelings of “awakening.”

The *transformation* process, for James, is akin to freedom, and maintaining that freedom is vital. “You can bullshit rehabilitation, you can’t bullshit *transformation* because you’d be lying to yourself, and of the guys in here I’d say we [transformed] are around 10%.” *Transformation*, then, is rare and difficult to maintain because it is iterative and requires the rejection of the prescriptive rehabilitative narrative as well as the rejection of popular prison culture. Referring to the prison: “this is a place that coddles people with video games, and if they want to sleep all day, they can. This is not a good environment towards betterment.” This

statement seems at first contradictory, but it is not. James counts himself amongst the few that put the work in to reach a better place and escape the street culture of the institution, yet he needed to hit a kind of bottom in order to realize that the rehabilitative narrative of the institution was not working for him, nor could it because of the nature of his sentence. James started working personally on his *transformation*, but he also started to organize with other lifers.

I argue that James, and other members of Lifeline, have engaged in and mastered identity management that transcends the context of the prison. Meanwell observes in her study of homelessness that “the institutional context of the homeless shelter provided residents with boundaries with which to define the present” (2013:444). This is also applicable to the prison, as the prison provides those incarcerated with identifiers for their reality, reinforced through rehabilitative language and the insistence that they must see the self as criminal. When James says that *transformation* is about “maintaining freedom,” he means freedom of the self and the ability to construct one’s own identity irrespective of the coercive forces around them.

### *Henry: Transformation as the Killing of the Old Self*

Henry is a black man, bald, around 5’10”, with full sleeve tattoos and a radiant smile. We started out by talking about the difference between rehabilitation and *transformation*. Henry tells me that rehabilitation means that you are a drug addict, whereas *transformation* means that you “kill the old self.” Henry says rehabilitation is not an efficient way of changing someone because it doesn’t acknowledge what they already know and allow them to recognize themselves as valuable. For example, Henry tells me that a drug dealer may feel guilty or remorseful in the lens of rehabilitation because he sold a product that could take lives and is illegal. On the other

hand, the individual gains an understanding of supply and demand, understanding of markets, and soft skills.

Henry uses his elevation of skills to spin *transformation* as a practical path of change because it utilizes what the person already has as opposed to programming them with something else. For Henry, it's a matter of misplaced energy and potential. If this person were to employ the skills, they developed in the drug trade into something that was "positive," then they could surely be successful. Henry tells me this because he gets guys that come to him all the time and say stuff like "I'm worthless, I'm a fuck up, nothing I do is good," and Henry will respond by saying things like hey, even though you sold drugs, you developed a lot of good skills. In contrast, Louis would think the exact opposite. He has a very rigid idea of a "plan" of how *transformation* works, although each case is subjective; there are certain modes of thinking that inform the *transformation* process and Louis could be seen as more conservative or strict, and Henry as more open and inclusive.

Henry was born in Harrisburg, PA, in the south side projects, which were notoriously rough. His father worked as a "pimp enforcer," which means that he was a bodyguard for a local high-ranking pimp, and he would keep the girls in line. His mother was a prostitute and he was born in what was basically a brothel. Henry tells me this was a "hyper-sexual" environment, and it was not uncommon when he was young to see men and women naked and having sex everywhere in the house. It didn't bother him, he said, it was just what happened. At this point, Henry talks about being raped when he was young. He says that a lot of guys inside were raped or sexually assaulted when they were younger, but they never talk about it and then it kills them. He said that he had not really had to accept what happened, but rather realize that what happened to him growing up, and the whole situation he was in, was not what was normal. As he says,

“out in the world, others weren’t going through what I was going through, they just weren’t.”

Henry tells me that he was “sold” to a family for the summer in the Poconos. His mother told him that he was going away to be with a nice family who will take care of him. His mother, having run out of options to take care Henry and at her wits end, think that sending him to a better off family for the summer is a good option because they will feed him, clothe him, and house him, although they will also rape him. Henry was around 7 years old at the time and remembers all of it. He says that the family was actually very nice and did take care of him but made him perform sexual acts on them.

“Poverty breeds these things” Henry tells me as he explains living in “abandoned houses,” that being abandoned houses where he and his mother would scrape by. His mother, at this time, was a drug addict and it was normal for him to see her nodding off from using. In addition, his father routinely beat him. Henry quit school in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, after being kicked out for a fight. At this point, Henry decided to try his hand at selling drugs; he calls it the “red rock trade.” Unlike some of the other people I interviewed, Henry says he and his friends thought that gangs were “cowardly... [there was] no gangs in Harrisburg, we were individuals.” At this point in his life, Henry says that he learned that he “wasn’t any good at selling drugs” but had a knack for “robbing people.”

At age 16, Henry was tried for his first assault charge. After that, he “stopped caring about everything, I was on a suicide by cop mission.” This means that he would purposely be overly aggressive and intense in the streets, hoping to get into an altercation with the police so that he would be killed. Henry was the guy that gangs called when they needed muscle or a wildcard, someone who would show up with a gun and “act reckless.” Henry got involved with a lot of things while maintaining this attitude including “smuggling illegals over the border in

Texas, selling drugs [and] smuggling AK-47s into New York through Niagara.” I asked Henry about the draw of these activities and he told me that “it was exciting” and that people “respected and feared him.” This gave him a sense of purpose and power, identity management through violent means.

Henry was charged with his first homicide when he was 19. He was on the run from the police, and through accomplice liability he was eventually caught. Although he did not commit the crime that he was charged with in this specific case, he lied and took the deal because he thought he would get out; “I had to admit culpability, even though I didn’t do it.” And, reflecting back, Henry says that he takes the “other stuff” that he did, the violence and pain he inflicted on others, even though it is not pertinent to the case he is in prison for, and supplements those acts in place of the homicide that he did not commit but for which he is nevertheless serving a life sentence. As Henry told me multiple times throughout the interview, “truth and honesty have been the foundation of these redemptive, living things.”

After being processed through Camp Hill, which he describes as being “hyper violent, [and where] rapes and stabbings were the norm,” he was sent to Greene County. At that time, SCI Greene functioned as the restricted housing unit for the whole state. “Dudes went there [Greene] to be alone, and I spent 10 years there.” Within this supermax facility there is also a special management unit, which is another level of supervision and surveillance. They call this “the hole.” Henry spent his first 6 years at Greene “in and out” of the special management unit for using or distributing drugs, doing tattoos, putting together makeshift grills and ovens to cook food, and “growing tomatoes in the window.” The final time Henry was put in special management, it was for a 6-year sentence, although he only spent 3 years there; this was for assaulting a staff member. “This was real isolation, you would be by yourself, complete

isolation, for days, sometimes I would even go days without eating.” Henry recounts taking the salt packets that came with his meals, when he would get them, and throwing them at a small receptacle where he was being held. After a while, it became full, and this is how he would know how many days had passed.

“This was when the *transformation* started,” Henry told me. At this time, he did not know that he had a child, who was born 7 days before his original sentencing. “I didn’t even know this woman was pregnant.” Henry’s daughter sent him a letter when he was in solitary; she was 8 years old by this point, and Henry didn’t even know that she existed. Henry was used to hearing other people in Greene talk about their families: “they would read letter out loud to their neighbors, people talked all the time about their families and their kids.” “I realized, in that moment, that I was fucking up,” he recalls thinking “I don’t know nothing about life, she don’t deserve anything like this, and she’s asking me why I’m not in her life in this letter.” The pain was unbearable, and Henry started reading in an effort to “understand how people say things, I was trying to figure out how to tell her that I’m sorry.”

The unit that he was on was the “all-star block, multiple big civil rights people were locked up there like Russel Shoatz, Arthur Johnson, and Gino Spruill.” Whereas the rest of the unit would be busy talking about their anger and how they needed to be violent, to “kill guards, these guys were talking about serious issues like race, economics, and history.” They taught Henry how to “fight mentally as opposed to physically; they taught me how to play chess and also how to strategize.” In this “search for community within the prison,” Henry went to the library and digested all the “good information” that he could. “*Transformation* is about stepping beyond rehabilitation, we have to learn to become deeply thoughtful.” In regard to his daughter,

Henry did reply to her, and he essentially told her that he was going to change his behavior and that “anything I give you is real, because that’s all I can give you.”

This process of *transformation* is by no means easy, as Henry relates: “a transformed person is surrounded by hardness all the time because the world doesn’t change along with them.” Henry says that he had and has “the struggling life, leading to struggling in prison, leading to the struggle of actually changing.” Being a transformed person in prison is not easy in and of itself, as it makes one a social outcast. As Henry relates, most people in the prison are only interested in talking about what they did in the past, back in the streets, or what they plan on doing when they get out. This is a key part of *transformation*, that it is deviant from the normative paradigm of behavior within prison. Henry is rooted firmly in the present, because that’s the upmost he can do in the shadow of a life sentence. “My mother has been doing time with me for 23 years, she’s been here all along with me, and we’ve been through a long, hot fire.” For Henry, the present is about building avenues whereby he can have positive influence on the outside world, and also advocate formally and informally for lifer’s rights to opportunities within the prison system.

### *Rico: Divine Pinnacles*

Rico is a 29-year-old man who identifies as Puerto Rican. He is average height, lean and fit, and speaks with a soft voice. He was born in Philadelphia in a “together home,” although that did not last as long as he would have hoped. When he was an infant he moved to Allentown, a smaller city in the south of Pennsylvania, with his parents. He recounts having a good relationship with his father although he was “very strict” and would “beat him.” Eventually, his

parents split up after a maelstrom of pain and drama and eventually were divorced. His mother worked long hours to afford their cost of living, and he would spend a lot of time at his babysitter's house. Another child who was often there would "bully" him and also, eventually, "sexually abuse and assault" him. Rico sees this as stunting his emotional growth, as well as significantly impacting his sexual self-perception. This has caused Rico to feel a great deal of shame about "being in his own body," which he sees as being operational in his conduct later in his life.

After the divorce, Rico, his sisters, and his mother "moved to one of the most drug-infested areas in Allentown." His mother could not pay rent in a better neighborhood, and the "house became a hub for people living in the streets." Rico's family was "super poor," and that "extreme poverty is what led [him] to start dealing drugs" when he was 12. His sisters would frequently have parties in their house, and he recounts seeing an "environment where people were fighting all the time, and I kind of wanted to mirror that." "I would just bump into guns, you know?" Despite there being a lot of activity in and around his house, Rico felt alone, and he felt that his sisters and his mother also felt alone: "we were like an island to ourselves." Around the same time Rico started dealing drugs, his mother started using drugs, and Rico distinctly remembers "struggling with not receiving affection from [her]" Rico's father would stop by occasionally but would promptly leave.

After moving to South Allentown at 13, Rico and his family were evicted and found themselves homeless. Rico, his 2 sisters, and his mother moved in with "a Mexican family with 1 room." Rico didn't like this living situation, so he decided to move back to downtown Allentown and live with one of his friends. Rico tells me that the situation living with the Mexican family was too crowded and intense. His sister, who was only a few years older than he



was, “was pregnant and gave birth to [his niece]” in the house. Even though he moved away, he felt responsible for his niece: “This little girl’s father wasn’t around, so I felt like I was the only male figure in her life.” Rico relates that he was far from stable at this point in his early adolescence, however, saying “I really didn’t know I was angry when I was a kid, but I was angry, I felt like I always needed to defend myself and I was fighting all the time.” Even at school Rico “would just square up with everybody; it’s not that I wasn’t smart, I just couldn’t behave.”

The first time that Rico was ever incarcerated was around this time, which he thinks was when he was around 13. He was “locked up in juvenile for having a knife, but I got out quick and went back to selling.” When he was selling Rico “made money, could eat, and buy clothes.” At 14, Rico decided to take it further by starting to “rob big drug dealers.” Again, he was locked up in the same juvenile facility for stealing a car, and then the next year for shooting a pellet gun at people. These were pretty small lengths of time, but the last offense landed him 6-12 months. When he got out, he was 15 and “his mother was still not around, I had no idea where she was.” “I started selling drugs super hard, except now there are higher stakes and there are guns involved; I knew it wasn’t going to last forever and something bad had to happen.” The final time Rico was inside of the juvenile facility was for 12-16 months during this time. However, when he got out, something was different: “When I come home this time, my mother was waiting there for me.” They talked, got mostly on the same page, and Rico stopped selling drugs when he was 17.

Even though he stopped selling, he was “still in the same environment.” When he was 18, he committed a homicide. “I was on the run for a week, and I remember looking in the mirror and feeling completely numb.” “The thing is, every time I committed a crime, I

confessed to it, and if someone confesses that might be a cry for help.” Even when he was on trial for the homicide, Rico kept looking for people to talk to: “even my lawyer, I would just talk to him, I just needed to talk to someone.” For Rico, it was and wasn’t too late. It was too late in the sense that he was sentenced to a 20-40-year bid, but it wasn’t too late in the sense that he came to view the time as a portion of his life where he could develop. Rico decided he wanted to help others after he realized that, after some time, “I just got to the place where I realized that we’ve been wounded in a way where we can’t just be fixed physically.” Rico found that talking to people like Henry, whose story is above, helps him a lot. He learned that he needed to let himself “hurt... because I didn’t hurt before.” That is, Rico engaged in a kind of identity management where he projected an image of toughness and stoicism, but not letting himself be able to feel led him to lead with anger, eventually leading to a homicide.

As Rico reflects, he asks rhetorically, “how can I face this and allow it to produce a substantial change in my life?” “You know, everyone says I’m a crazy gangster dude and blah, blah, blah, but really I’m just a hurt person who needed people.” This is not to say that Rico blames the people around him for not taking care of him. Rather, in a very real sense, Rico makes a clear distinction between his past self and his current self. Certainly, the past self operates in his life in that he still feels wounds from the trauma of his childhood and adolescence, but he functions day to day knowing that the past did indeed happen, and yet it has no bearing on his current situation. The temporality of his time in prison has severed him from the being of his time on the outside. But Rico is not bleak, he seems to have come to a kind of terms with his arduous past through his family, helping others, and a conception of god. “I just really want to be honest and help others, you see, now I have a relationship with a god, I can feel love, concern, all kinds of things.” “Call it divine pinnacles, how can I not want to change?”

## CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

The motivation for this project was to understand how long-termers in prison understand and narrativize their time within the carceral system. When asked to reconstruct their past and situate themselves in their current context, my respondents clearly articulated a process of identity *transformation* that is temporal in nature – prior to their incarceration, they had a certain set of values that were attuned to their material surroundings. Some said they identified with the “street” or “the game,” while others had no real adhesion to their physical situations because the nature of those situations were so precarious. As such, some felt that they had no clear sense of identity formation, leading to an anomic state wherein committing acts of violence in efforts to “survive” were seen as commonplace and normative. Regardless, once they were incarcerated, the institution of the prison set to work on what Goffman calls the “mortification of self,” wherein institutional processes act to strip the individual of their sense of self, reinforcing that they are criminals and in many ways not citizens with rights (1961:14). Being cavity searched for the first time, and having questions like “where do you want your body to be sent” asked of them made it clear to my respondents that they were now in a different context of reality.

Respondents also espoused a creative and resourceful search for meaning within the institutional context of prison, a process centered around what Giordano et al. called “hooks for change:” those items in the inmate’s environment that they could latch onto and begin to craft new conceptions of their selves (e.g. Louis learning to be a student while in restricted housing) (2002:990). This is a subjective and relative process with many expressions, however, all of the men I spoke with speak of a time, often in confinement after committing an infraction or after

receiving bad news from the outside, where they were *shaken and forced to reckon with the weight of what they had done*. Giordano et al. (2002) would refer to this final shift away from criminal behavior as “the capstone,” but this term and classification assume that the actor “no longer sees these same [deviant] behaviors as positive, viable, or even personally relevant” (1002). This framework for understanding the process of *transformation* is helpful, but only to the point that it implies that the process is temporal in nature and that each actor is interested in a “positive” movement in character development. In addition, the men I spoke with who have life sentences also had to contend with the existentially pertinent question of what they were going to do with the rest of their lives considering they are ostensibly going to be contained for its remainder.

Giordano et al. (2002) outline ideal typical schema whereby those deemed criminal revert and change the organization of the self, and while the “hooks for change” provide a symbolic representation for those things in the individuals environment which may pull them in a certain direction, they fail to account for how these environmental aspects relate to those with life sentences. Again, where this research adds texture to the academic conversation around prison is that my sample is comprised mostly of men with life sentences. Indeed, while the theoretical perspectives on desistance that Giordano et al (2002) develop are pertinent, the gravity of the life sentence upends and defies theoretical understanding. The life sentence is the absurd wrench thrown into the gears of logical conception if one does not subscribe to functionalist criminal sentencing reasoning.

Meanwell’s (2013) work with homeless shelter residents is useful for the purposes of this thesis insofar as she creates a framework for conceptualizing the life-narrative construction of a vulnerable population. Like Meanwell’s respondents, my respondents speak of a time before

they were incarcerated where they held certain tendencies and worldviews, and as they moved into the structure of the criminal justice system and eventually into prison, that ordering of the self, or to use Goffman's language, a fundamental rearrangement of the furniture of self (1959:22). Further, my respondents also employed a "temporal partition [which was] drawn between two morally-charged selves [and which allows] for profanation of the *past* self, without polluting the sacred present self" (Meanwell 2013: 442, emphasis in original). The past self, before interacting with the criminal justice system, was talked about as being "wild" or "out of control" or "in the streets," all qualities that the men I spoke with see as incompatible and distant in the present reality of their "calm," "reflective," and "intelligent and curious" current selves.

It is crucial to understand here that the two identifying words "criminal" and "citizen" are absolutely brimming with symbolic and practical meaning for my respondents. By practical I mean that these meaning can be operationalized in a variety of internal and external ways. Within the prison, the men I spoke with related examples of how they are "different" from the rest of the population. One respondent, named Chris, recounted a time when he was outside on the block watching television,

"I was watching CNN and one guy comes up and says "what the hell are you doing?" So, I tell him I'm watching the Democratic candidates for President talk about their health care plans because I have to stay informed so I know what's going to happen to my mother, you know? He told me "man, you've changed," but I don't care what he thinks because this is what's important, I gotta stay up to date on this stuff."

With this, Chris succinctly details some crucial things about the consequences of shedding the skin of "criminality." Within the culture of the prison population, it is seen as deviant to be

concerned about outside issues, but for Chris and the others in my sample, being plugged in to what is happening in American civic life is affirming to them that they are indeed members of the collective and they are rational agents who can make use of this knowledge.

James, whom I detail above, told me at one point that “people like us [transformed] make up, I would say, about 10% of the prison population. It’s not like everyone in here is like us, some people really are crazy.” It is clear after talking to my respondents that *transformation* is by no means common, and is an ongoing process of knowledge and development. It is not that one becomes “transformed,” but that one works day in and day out in conditions of constant pressure to maintain the values and orientations of a “transforming” person. This not unlike the “one day at a time” philosophy of 12-step programs, the difference being that the inside men are constantly interacting with environmental factors that may cause them to “relapse” because they have no choice but to live within the context of the prison.

So, it is not necessarily that the prison is beneficial because it evokes an individual who is in prison for a long period of time to undergo this process of *transformation*. Certainly, the individuals whom I interviewed for this study present dramatic changes in orientation and worldview, as exhibited by their narratives. However, as they relate, this is not because of the prison system’s rehabilitative programming; indeed, many of them see the rehabilitative programming of the prison as deeply ineffective because it allows for people to present themselves as “changed” when they really haven’t undergone what my respondents would classify as a true orientation shift. Henry, whom I write about above, resents that the prison programming is not as effective as it could be,

“You know, it’s really hurtful when the same guys I see come in, all badass and talking game, spend a couple months, maybe a couple years in here, they do all the required

stuff, they see the parole board and they get out, and then their right back in here next week. Literally, I have seen guys released and come back within weeks. Meanwhile, I'm in here trying to warn these guys and work with them, tell them they gotta change themselves if they want to stay out of prison. Like what is the cause of the hurt?"

Henry isn't saying that he deserves to be let out instead of these other men. Rather, he is deeply hurt when he sees men he knows have "potential to grow" come back into prison.

Louis had similar things to say, although he approaches imprisonment from a more ideological angle than Henry does. When I asked Louis the question "so if all these positive things are happening inside prisons and charitable groups can exist, doesn't that make the lend itself to the argument that the prison is positive?" he responds:

"Well that's just the problem, Rich. We have people in tough communities who grow up in terrible conditions and when they act out of fear of survival, we lock them in cages. What is the point of that? Where is the justice? Yes, the person who committed a crime is away from society, but that's not giving back to the community that the crime took from, you know what I'm saying? We need models of justice that have the capacity to take people away from society when it needs to, but which can also help the victims and the victim's families with some form of resolution that isn't based on revenge, because that hurts them over time as well. What good is it doing keeping people in prison for the rest of their lives when they could actually physically be giving back to the communities they hurt? Who does that *really* end up hurting?"

*The Historicity of Rehabilitation: Have We Defeated Our Own Purpose?*

The modern prison is a historical entity that has changed over time in various ways, yet the guiding paradigm of the institution has always been penance. The function of the modern prison at the outset was based on the idea that a prisoner must be reformed and therefore the facility should be thought of as a “complete reformatory... [which] lays down a recoding of existence very different from the mere juridical deprivation of liberty” (Foucault 1995:236). The detainment of rights and physical isolation away from society are not enough in and of themselves. Rather, isolation was synonymous with reflection: “Thrown into solitude, the convict reflects... [and is] alone with the presence of his crime... [and it is] in isolation that remorse will come to assail him” (Foucault 1995:237). This model of the prison still operates today, as demonstrated by the use of restricted housing and solitary confinement.

The concept of rehabilitation is also synonymous with penance. The language of rehabilitation is still used today, and the model of penance has remained largely unchanged. Rehabilitation, as the goal of the prison system, connotes the institutional process of changing an individual into a social and non-deviant being, and the method for achieving that end is the use of solitude to force the individual into a state of penance. Foucault further explains this methodology as follows,

“In absolute isolation... the rehabilitation of the criminal is expected not of the application of a common law, but of the relation of the individual to his own conscience and to what may enlighten him from within. Alone in his cell, the convict is handed over to himself; in the silence of his passions and of the world that surrounds him, he descends



into his conscience, he questions and feels awakening within him the moral feeling never entirely perishes in the heart of man” (1995:238).

This method, originally conceived for a penitentiary built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Quakers, located in Philadelphia and named Eastern State, is still operational today (Thibaut 1982).

However, the method has been scaled up to meet the demand of a large number of criminals. In addition, the system has been integrated into state governments via independent departments of corrections, operating independently from the Federal department of corrections. The bureaucratization of the prison system has succeeded in cloaking itself in an “iron cage of rationalism” (Weber 1930:124).

Nevertheless, this model of the prison holds true today and even has, in the case of the men in my study, positive outcomes. This is not to say that I think prison is positive; rather, the reality of the situation is far more nuanced. The tension between the structure of the prison and the individual is *necessary* for the phenomenon of *transformation* to occur. The majority of men in my study have life sentences and have spent considerable time in isolated or restricted housing units. I present typologies in my case studies as to how different individuals understand and explain *transformation*, but all of these typologies are essentially comprised of periods of isolation and reflection that were brought about solely because of the structure of the prison. I argue that what my respondents call *transformation* is rehabilitation without incentive, meaning that the draw of rehabilitative programming is that if one finishes all of the prescribed programming then they look good before the parole board and are theoretically released. However, the men I spoke with will most probably never see a parole board, so the motivation must come from another source, a source which is ultimately generated by the individual within the lived experience of the prison.

If the goal of the prison system is to truly rehabilitate individuals whom are deemed deviant, then in many ways the model has been successful to a point. Among my sample, the prison has forced them to realize what they have done and come to terms with it, the express purpose and philosophy of the penitentiary. However, the accomplishment of this goal is far outweighing the cost. Currently, 2.3 million individuals are incarcerated in the United States, and we have the largest incarcerated population in the world (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). As of 2016, 161,957 individuals were serving life sentences (Nellis 2017:5). If we take James' estimate that 10% of the prison population is undergoing the process of transformation, then we are left with a "transformed population" of 230,000. Conservatively, this number accounts for the whole of the prison population with life sentences with an excess of 68,043 individuals. Is this level of incarceration worth the human and economic toll? As is stands, among 401,288 prisoners released in 2005, 44% were arrested during the first year after release, and 24% were arrested by the 9<sup>th</sup> year after release (National Institute of Justice 2008). The absurdity of the situation is clear: those who are *transformed* are individuals who have a slight chance of being released from prison, yet those who are released from prison return at alarmingly high rates. If the purpose of the prison is to rehabilitate, then it appears to be largely unsuccessful at accomplishing this goal. Although I detail positive outcomes within prison, they are among a small, relatively homogenous group, and their success is overshadowed by the larger backdrop of mass incarceration.

*Directions for Further Research*

The charitable organization that I drew my sample from is an organization of inmates in a Pennsylvania prison that were given the ability to organize and advocate for opportunities that they would not regularly receive. As a result, the organization has raised and donated upwards of \$30,000 to local charitable and nonprofit organizations, specifically ones that deal heavily with at-risk youth and childhood trauma. The charitable portion of the organization is positive for obvious reasons: there is funding for often very underfunded initiatives in the area. But more deeply, the reasoning behind the donation of resources points to a deeply held belief that the men are indeed responsible for their actions and as a result wish to pay a physical and symbolic restitution. Although individuals may have held these beliefs, the organization has crystallized the intention and the symbolism of the action. Further research should be done on the prevalence and nature of charitable organization within prison.

Further research working in a longitudinal way could also further our understanding of how *transformation* works and changes over time. It would also aid in adding to our understanding of how those with life sentences take their constructed pasts with them through different physical and temporal spaces. It is also imperative to have data regarding how the concept of *transformation* functions, if at all, within the setting of a women's prison. Nevertheless, the foundation of *transformation* serves as a fruitful path for investigating conceptions of self within the context of prison, as well as the intricacies of the identity of those with life sentences.

*Limitations of Study*

Although I successfully interviewed 22 men with life sentences, the sample is by no means representative of the broader prison population, nor does it account for women with life sentences. The sampling method was also conducted in a manner where respondents were relatively homogenous as far as orientation to the concept of “transformation,” which was purposeful but does not provide insight as to how the idea is operationalized on a macro scale. This is not a longitudinal study; I received a snap shot of how my respondents narrativized their life histories in a specific place and time, and it does not account for how these conceptions may change manifest differently over time and in different spaces.

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