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## CARCERAL EXTRACTIVISM, LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES, AND "ACTING RIGHT" IN THE U.S. SOUTH

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CARCERAL EXTRACTIVISM, LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES, AND “ACTING  
RIGHT” IN THE U.S. SOUTH

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Edward Lee Bullock  
Lexington, Kentucky  
Director: Dr. Erin Koch, Associate Professor of Anthropology  
Lexington, Kentucky  
2020

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### CARCERAL EXTRACTIVISM, LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES, AND “ACTING RIGHT” IN THE U.S. SOUTH

Mass incarceration and its effects are well documented and carceral privatization is hotly contested on moral and economic grounds. This dissertation examines the local effects of carceral privatization in the U.S. south in historical context. Tallulah is a small, rural predominately African American town in northeastern Louisiana that endures high rates of poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment. It also hosts four private prisons operated by LaSalle Corrections, LLC. Two primary and overlapping questions guide the research. 1) How has an history of carceral entrepreneurship and mass incarceration impacted the way persons and communities create livelihoods and imagine futures, and how have these strategies changed over time? 2) In what ways does for-profit incarceration in Tallulah sustain historically racialized social and economic patterns of low educational attainment, unemployment, crime, and poverty? Findings presented here draw on 13 months of ethnographic data collected from 2015–2019 where I conducted informal interviews with multi-generational participants and partial life histories with persons aged 19-92, participant observation in community spaces and public meetings, as well as guided tours in the community and surrounding area and local archival research.

The dissertation provides an overview of Louisiana’s carceral economy spanning chattel slavery, convict leasing, and sharecropping up to the more recent history of carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah recounted from local newspaper archives, publicly available documents, and resident’s experiences. I argue that incarceration and prisons be understood as an extractive industrial enterprise (carceral extractivism) within a longer trajectory of expropriative racial capitalism. Examining the local history and effects of carceral entrepreneurship as it materialized locally in Tallulah during the 1990’s in the building of a men’s detention facility and a youth prison, since converted to a women’s

transitional facility, illustrates how these processes involve private individual investors, the community, and state actors that national debates often leave unexamined.

I argue that carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah influences community livelihood strategies and well-being overtime through changing employment possibilities and wage migration but must be understood alongside and with other processes including periods of school integration, state policy towards social services, and the legacies of deep poverty, disenfranchisement, and criminalization in the south. Similarly, carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah exacerbates socioeconomic challenges in the community, materially in the form of financial resources diverted from the city to private companies and the Sheriff's office, but also in terms of imagined life outcomes and of living day to day in a "prison town" where the facilities predominate on the landscape.

In response to the challenges presented by mass incarceration in the community I examine the ways in which people make lives worth living alongside extractive carceral institutions through various forms of work, including scrapping metal, cottage food industries, and involvements with local churches. Through these livelihood creating activities, centered around an ethic of "acting right," non-carceral spaces of social reproduction are created, resisting, even as they are constrained by, carceral entrepreneurship in the community and broader region.

KEYWORDS: Louisiana, mass incarceration, privatization, livelihoods,  
extractive industry

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Edward Lee Bullock

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June 18, 2020

Date

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Now, because of the proliferation of prisons in the area people usually go to prison or you work in the prison, and consequently, we are all in prison here. If you understand what I mean. So, we have a low expectation of what we can be and what we can do because everybody we know is associated with prison. So, kids growing up - they are either going to be in prison or work in the prison or they are going to get out [of Tallulah]. That's it. – Franklin, Tallulah Resident.*

*Do your thesis or whatever you have to do. Write your story. Make sure you put it out there. When you get to the end of writing your things down, you write down there: Mississippi and Tallulah say, "Help. We say help. We need help." – Pastor, Red Port Resident*



**Figure 1: Map of Louisiana. Madison Parish and Tallulah in red outline. Source: United States Geological Survey.**

Located in Madison Parish in northeastern Louisiana, Tallulah was chosen for my project, in part, due to the prominence and concentration of the carceral facilities existing

there. The family owned and operated LaSalle Corrections, LLC, runs eleven carceral facilities across northern Louisiana (Chang 2012b).<sup>1</sup> Four of them are located in Tallulah. The facilities occupy two sites, a men’s detention center and a women’s transitional center. Highly visible on the landscape, these facilities have a combined capacity of 1,697 beds (LaSalle Corrections), roughly 25% of the city’s estimated population (USCB 2015). Moreover, regionally, Louisiana and its history of settler colonialism, chattel slavery, convict leasing, and plantation agriculture provides an example of the continuity of these histories in terms of labor and resource expropriation with prison building and mass incarceration in the present – what I have termed carceral extractivism. This research employs a multi-generational approach to understand how an extractive privatized carceral economy influences the ways people create livelihoods and imagine possible futures in the context of historically racialized labor exploitation and patterns of poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment. Moreover, this dissertation ethnographically examines what it means to “act right” alongside and in spite of these formations and constraints. How might the structures of “the past” provide context for what is happening in the present? What else might be possible and how? What are the consequences and constraints? How is all of this experienced by and in the community today, and over time?

**“This was Tallulah – they called it ‘Baby Vegas.’”**

Driving into Tallulah from the interstate exit, one finds a gaggle of truck stops and then motels surrounded by fast food restaurants and gas stations where a large

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<sup>1</sup> LaSalle also has locations in Georgia, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona (LaSalle Corrections. Locations.).

parking area serves as an overnight rest area for tractor-trailer drivers. Cross the bridge over the patina green Brushy Bayou and you come to a fork in the road. Head left and you pass a small community college, an overgrown graveyard, a complex of buildings housing the high school and middle school, and then cross beneath the overpass, a Men's Detention Center. Go right at the fork and you head into downtown Tallulah.

A digital message board framed in a wood *Welcome to Tallulah* sign flashes recurrent messages such as "Beauty is a Miracle" in a calligraphic, evangelical feeling font. American flags and tall shade trees line the street into Tallulah that runs alongside the bayou and effectively demarcate the black and white sides of town. Tallulah, despite recurrent reports from white folks of complete integration, remains intensely segregated. Midway between the welcome sign and the train tracks that mark the beginning of downtown proper, a window boarded former high-school building poses a strange mixture of a sturdy brick façade, a gapping roof, and an interior gutted for valuable metals diminished by weather and burning. As one resident quipped, "I bet there ain't an ounce of copper left in there." Cross the railroad tracks and Highway 80 (east and west) and Highway 65 (north and south) intersect amidst a mottle of small businesses, abandoned and disintegrating buildings, empty lots, and municipal buildings, including the Sheriff's office and the jail, which young people call the "four-four" because of its address.

This intersection is important. Before Interstate 20 which runs from western Texas to eastern South Carolina was completed in the mid-1970's these were major routes which made Tallulah a highly travelled and visited town. Tallulah itself was an important center for commerce and entertainment. Conversations and interviews with

residents are saturated with comments, sometimes nostalgic and at times fatalistic, concerning how Tallulah was once a bustling and at times famous town, known for shopping and for its place on the Chitlin Circuit, a “Blues Trail” of venues stretching across the eastern seaboard through the central United States and into the south (Lauterbach 2011). As one resident commented, “This was Tallulah – they called it Baby Vegas. Everybody came here.” Many residents remembered the many juke joints and clubs where blues musicians and entertainers would come and play during Jim Crow, noting lines of people down the streets when word got around that B.B. King, Muddy Waters, or others would stop to play (Orleck 2005:8). For example, one resident remembers as a young girl that Ike and Tina Turner would visit her house when touring. Others talk about coming off the plantations in the “boss man’s” trucks to come into town on the weekends, pointing to disused buildings and now empty lots to say this used to be Walter’s, the best grocery in the state, or this was the black movie theatre where my uncle took me to watch cowboy westerns.



*Figure 2: Empty lot where a music club and bar used to stand.*



***Figure 3: Abandoned gas station.***

Many people attribute the construction of I-20 as a primary reason for Tallulah's decline. Abandoned gas stations are ubiquitous and speak to the diversion of traffic flow that once went through downtown Tallulah. Other residents attribute Tallulah's "going down" as a result of out-migration or people growing old or dying. That business there, so and so got sick and they just closed it down, or they're in the nursing home now. Others note the decline in the public-school system, noting the forces of segregation and race. Others point specifically to the prisons and Tallulah's designation as a "prison town," or more diplomatically, a "corrections community." Head west on Highway 80 out of town, guard towers and high fencing strung with rows of concertina wire rise up along the roadside on property that used to be Chicago Mill and Lumber, a mill and box factory that opened in the 1920's. At its height, Chicago Mill employed more than 700

people. Mixed in with dormitories and administrative buildings behind the perimeter fencing are wooden structures, remnants marking where the Mill once stood. This is where the Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth was built by the Sheriff and a private prison company. It was closed down for constitutional rights abuses. Today, it houses the privately-operated Madison Parish Transitional Center for Women. A green and white highway sign marks the facility as Tallulah's "corporate limit."

### **Carceral Extractivism and Racial Capitalism**

Mass incarceration in the United States means there are more people imprisoned and under criminal justice control than at any other time in history – some 2.3 million people, predominately of color and increasingly women, whether they be held in prison, jail, juvenile facility, on probation or parole, or in Indian Country facilities or as detained "illegal" immigrants. In the course of one year in the United States, 10.6 million people churn through jails and 660,000 enter state and federal prisons (Sawyer and Wagner 2019). The issue of privatization, where private companies own and/or operate carceral facilities and administer facets of the criminal justice system such as bond administration, parole monitoring, feeding, and caring for the wards of the carceral state is a contentious issue. Incarceration is an enormous industry: Wagner and Rabuy (2017) at the Prison Policy Initiative estimate mass incarceration costs *at least* \$182 billion per year, up from just under \$7 billion in 1980 and \$40 billion in 1995 (Eisen 2018: 56).

Although the use of private prisons grew rapidly in the 1980s and '90s, privatization processes do not in and of themselves drive mass incarceration; this is also decidedly a choice that is made by the state to manage populations (Foucault 1978), generate wealth, and maintain political power in offices and institutions (Eisen 2018).



Incarceration involved companies profit from this choice. However, as this dissertation examines and the methods and perspective of anthropology are well equipped to illustrate, privatization is not only a feature of present day capitalism writ large; it is also a long developing and locally evolved process involving multiple actors and incurs social and economic costs in places, in towns such as Tallulah, La., where carceral entrepreneurship occurs.

In this dissertation I approach carceral privatization through the lenses of extraction and resources. Examining mass incarceration and privatization in this way resists persistent discourses and explanatory models regarding “cultures of poverty” and racialized “pathologies” (Greenbaum 2015), as well as constructions of deserving and undeserving poor (Susser 1996) that obscure the role of the state and local institutions in peoples’ lives (Polanco 2015). Incarceration and privatized incarceration in particular create an extractive “draining up” of human potential, labor, and socioeconomic resources to exploitative institutions and the state (Buck 2001).<sup>2</sup> As geographer and abolitionist Ruth Gilmore (2015) notes: “Today’s prisons are extractive.”

[Prisons] enable money to move because of the enforced inactivity of people locked in them. It means people extracted from communities and sent away, and people returned to communities but not entitled to be of them, enable the circulation of money in rapid cycles. What’s extracted from the extracted is the resource of life: time. If we use the politics of scale to think about this, understanding bodies as places, then criminalization, territorially because [its] jurisdictionally specific, transforms people [in]to tiny territories ripe for the extractive activity to unfold, extracting and extracting again and again, time from the territories of selves. The time extracted opens a hole in a life, furthering perhaps to our surprise, the annihilation of space by time. The stolen and corrupted social wage flies through the time hole to prison service employees’ paychecks, to vendors, to utility companies, to contractors, to debt service. [quoted in Schept and Mazurek 2017:182]

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<sup>2</sup> See also Sassen (2014; 2013) and Bauman (2004).

The inactivity that Gilmore references is materially different than what is described historically in Chapter 2 in terms of the forced labor in Louisiana's first penitentiary, the convict lease work camps and prison farms, or on the plantation. However, this forced inactivity in confinement – it is true that most people imprisoned are not made to (or allowed) to work – is not at odds with but is contiguous with the plantation model of forced labor. For example, a former corrections worker described to me that inmates “getting out for a little freedom” from Tallulah’s facilities on a work crew depended on the amount of *time* a person had on their sentence and their behavior – here, the ability to work is a reward and a “trusted” status. In any case, Gilmore’s point is not that the use of incarcerated labor today is insignificant or unproblematic: it is. As Pem Davidson Buck (2009) has argued, “Unfree labor, in varying forms and intensities, has been critical to the political economy of what is now the US for nearly all of the last 400 years”(4). Likely this will continue to be so as “work” is again taken up as rehabilitation, even as labor is still categorized as a punishment, at least in Louisiana, as recent legislation and investments in “alternative” corrections becomes more prevalent.

The larger point for Gilmore is that coerced labor is not *necessary* for the proliferation of prisons and mass incarceration today – it is choices about how to respond to crises of surpluses – of labor, land, infrastructure, and capital – in the wake of deindustrialization and increased outsourcing (Gilmore 2007; Harvey 2001; Wacquant 2010). In this sense, the value of an incarcerated person is not their ability to labor cheaply, although they do, for example being responsible for maintenance and service positions in facilities and in Prison Industries (LeBaron 2008). Overwhelmingly, though, prisons create a space where the inactivity of the incarcerated produces revenues from the

state in terms of per diems, but also in the syphoning off of funds from inmate labor (they do work) and their social and familial networks to be spent for their board and care, in commissaries, entertainments, and communications. Mass incarceration, though, is also about how persistent racialized cultural discourses (criminality), political maneuvering (power), and criminal law (disenfranchisement) and its prosecution (plea deals and sentencing) shape outcomes and determine what levels of expropriation and extraction of people are permitted as tolerable and felt to be “natural.”<sup>3</sup> Often prisons replace other industry.

For example, Schept and Mazurek (2017) note how in Appalachia there is a turning from extractive coal mining to prison building. They consider that “the substitution of coal for carceral infrastructure” might be conceived “as the temporally and materially overlapping layering of extractive economies” (182). While this continuum of extractive economies in Appalachia takes place on mine reclamation sites and the manufactured flatness of exploded mountain tops (Mitchelson 2011; Szuberla and Kirby 2006), it manifests in Tallulah in the substitution of agriculture and lumber milling for the jailing of children and then women (discussed in Chapter 3) on the site of a defunct lumber mill. Having depleted the profitability and existence of trees on the landscape, there is now the rooting up of people. Recognizing that “resource” is also a practice (Adams 2014; Richardson and Weszkalnys 2014) highlights the relationships and contradictions between community social reproduction and extractive carceral entrepreneurship (for example, as in the quote heading this introduction, that prisons simultaneously represent an employment opportunity and potential imprisonment).

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<sup>3</sup> See Alexander (2010); Beckett (2012); Pfaff (2017).

In the view of extraction and resources that guide the dissertation, I examine the legacy of slavery's capitalism (Beckert and Rockman 2016) to illustrate how racialized carceral capitalism (Wang 2018) dovetails with and differs from what historically came before it, dynamic incidents of what Cedric Robinson (1983) has termed "racial capitalism" as "an historical agency" (2) – coercive capital accumulation and uneven development based on racial difference (Bhattacharyya 2018; Fraser 2016; Marable 2015 [1983]; Melamed 2015). Contextualizing the history of carceral growth in Tallulah as contiguous with the legacies of chattel slavery, convict leasing, and sharecropping (Chapter 2) takes up the necessity of viewing history within the sets of cultural, political and economic processes that intersect (and disjoint) to produce communities in contexts of unequal power (Roseberry 1994:14). The multi-generational aspect of this ethnographic project requires returning to these histories as many of the research participants are the sons and daughters of, or were themselves, sharecroppers; their lives and communities directly influenced by the coercion of structures developed out of this history. The growth of carceral entrepreneurialism needs to be ethnographically and materially understood as an outcropping of these histories (Chapter 3 and 4). Indeed, Tallulah itself originated in 1857 as a railroad stop on a cotton plantation.

### **Preliminary Fieldwork: Research Questions and Methods**

I conducted 13 months of ethnographic research in Tallulah. The research questions and the methods used for data collection during August 2017 – August 2018 were informed by preliminary research conducted in 2015. All research conducted was with Institutional Review Board approval from the Office of Institutional Responsibility at the University of Kentucky. I identified myself as a PhD student and researcher in all

research settings and obtained consent from research participants. I obtained a waiver of documented consent to further protect anonymity, so consent was given verbally.

Considering that mass incarceration and prison privatization are contentious issues, and the possibility that corrections workers may have been required to sign non-disclosure agreements (this did turn out to be the case), it was my contention that having signed documents would be inappropriate and potentially create risks for participants.

Throughout the dissertation I have used pseudonyms for names of people and places to provide anonymity. I have also changed or altered people's occupations and other potentially identifying descriptors. However, I have largely retained the names of elected officials and people in historical contexts where this information is publicly available, for example in local and national reporting and court documents surrounding the period of prison building in the 1990's. I have chosen to retain the name Tallulah when referring to the fieldsite. On myriad occasions it was made clear that residents I spoke with wanted the "story of Tallulah" told. I have, though, changed the names of specific locations or altered them geographically where these changes promote anonymity.

For this project I employed participant observation, interviews, life history collection, and guided tours of Tallulah. Preliminary fieldwork in 2015 confirmed the appropriateness of methods and I retained them during extended primary field work (2017-2018) and a follow up return to Tallulah (June 2019). I also conducted archival research at the local newspaper to document the timeline and details of carceral industrialization in Tallulah which is presented in Chapter Three. During my first visit in 2015, I attended a Poverty Summit organized by local community groups which hosted elected officials and national and state legislators and featured breakout sessions to

discuss areas such as youth recreation, poverty, education, public safety, and possible actions that might be taken to obtain resources for community development in these areas. I also attended a School Board meeting and a Chamber of Commerce meeting. These meetings, discussed later (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), combined with interviews and informal conversations provided guidance in formulating the research goals.

### **Research Questions**

My research, then, is driven by two primary and overlapping questions:

- 1) How has an history of carceral entrepreneurship and mass incarceration impacted the way persons and communities create livelihoods and imagine futures, and how have these strategies changed over time?**
- 2) In what ways does for-profit incarceration in Tallulah sustain historically racialized social and economic patterns of low educational attainment, unemployment, crime, and poverty?**

To answer these questions the combination of methods used here intend to capture the experiences and the viewpoints of multiple generations of residents. The multi-generational approach to project design and data collection produces historically contextualized experiences and explanations about life in Tallulah and carceral expansion in the community that differ according to age and memory. They illuminate convergences and divergences of outlook that can be compared and offer analytical insights into changes in the community. For example, the experiences of a former sharecropper growing up in tenancy during the 1930's will have a different perspective than a young person having grown up in "the streets" of Tallulah throughout the 2000's. Likewise, the ways in which livelihoods are created and the imagining of possible futures, as well as the meanings attached to them, will change. However, racialized structural commonalities persist overtime as I illustrate in this dissertation, such as high poverty

rates and barriers to educational attainment, even as the edges and contours of these inequities shift.

### **Methods and Data Analysis**

I conducted participant observation in a number of locations to gather qualitative data by participating in and recording observations of social situations, routine activities, and events experienced by participants in daily life (Schensul et al. 1999:91; Spradley 2016). I regularly attended a number of administrative meetings including City Council, School Board, Chamber of Commerce, and Police Jury (similar to a county board of administrators). Attending these meetings provided insights into local political debates surrounding municipal finances, town infrastructure, and community members' expressions of displeasure concerning challenges they face in the community. Common topics of public comment were poor water quality, poor road conditions, flooding from clogged culverts, debris and litter in neighborhoods, illegal dumping, deterioration of abandoned houses, and upkeep of vacant lots.

I announced my presence at these meetings as a researcher and introduced myself to local elected officials. Attending these meetings was one way in which I generated contacts for interviews. My ongoing presence at these meetings allowed me to have references for conversations with residents who were politically active in the community. It was also through attendance at these meetings that I was able to reconnect with persons I met in my preliminary field visit in 2015. I attended public festivals and events, such as a Memorial Day Program (which I wrote about for the local newspaper) and a Martin Luther King Day Program which celebrated the significant history of Civil Rights activities in the town and broader region.

In addition to meetings and events, a large portion of my participant observation occurred during work activities – the enactment of my own livelihood strategies. I engaged in three primary types of work, often concurrently: scrapping metal, opening and managing a small business, and writing for the local newspaper, which was unpaid, but gave me access to people, space, and the newspaper archive. All gave me differing kinds of presence in the community and made me recognizable in the community in different ways. These presences both opened and foreclosed access to spaces, populations, and people over the course of my fieldwork. For example, there is a great deal of mistrust in the community and initially I was viewed with suspicion. This is also a function of the size of the town and the ways in which “everybody knows everybody,” but “tries to mind their own business.” It is also a matter of how community members “placed” me in relation to their community (Kingsolver 1992; 2011). For example, I learned anecdotally that speculation of who I “was” ranged from an undercover FBI agent, a criminal fugitive from Arkansas, and an investigative reporter.

Researchers and informants have multiple, intersecting identities, life histories, and statuses (Crenshaw 1990; Narayan 1993; Rosaldo 1989). Objectively and connotatively all three of these identities in some way relate to criminal justice, surveillance, and policing, and in different ways to presentations of my whiteness, gender, and education. In all cases there is a tension between the insider and outsider frames which these potential “placements” reflect, as well as differentials in power. My FBI persona was largely constructed around the fact that I was taking pictures while working at scrapping metal, which is often work performed in marginalized communities. I can imagine that I seemed out of place doing racialized work (although poor whites also



do this work in the community) especially as I was perceived to be surveilling a poorer community through photography. Likewise, the demographics of Arkansas (predominately white) and the Delta region are racially flipped, so again, I wonder if the presumption of class and race tied to fugitiveness was at play. Lastly, the investigative reporter identity fits squarely with others who have visited Tallulah as reporters and researchers, but also my multiple identities. The barriers posed by the investigative reporter identity was not helped by my association with the newspaper or the framing of my research dissertation by some community members as “writing a book on Tallulah,” which I often had to clarify in the context of doctoral research and ethnography. Over time with my continued presence in the community these perceptions largely abated. People still sometimes call or email to check in on me - and my findings - as I write the dissertation.

During fieldwork, I did not use “formal,” prepared scripted interview guides. Instead, my interviews were framed as informal conversations. I felt scripting interviews may lead to “guiding” informant’s answers. I was also concerned that their answers be as uncircumscribed as possible. Lastly, I was concerned that scripting questions risked “building in” my own presumptions from preliminary fieldwork. Interviews covered a broad range of topics related to community organization, local history, challenges faced in the community, and prisons and their privatization. As recurrent themes, explanations, and experiences appeared in interviews, I was able to ask new informants for their thoughts on those explanations or about comparative experiences. Interviewing in this way allowed for capturing and representing a “common-sense model” based on the words of informants themselves (Stack 1974:xii). Interviewing in this fashion also

allowed me to disseminate explanations and findings I was gathering to participants and to discuss them (Harrison 2010). Participants in my research were always curious what I was finding and often asked me about my own experiences and thoughts. Many were keen to correct my misinterpretations or refute and expand on answers and explanations about situations or events I had heard elsewhere.

I was able to recruit informants for interviews through chain referral or snowballing where informants refer or introduce possible participants to the researcher (Stack 1974). Several people in the community graciously suggested persons to contact or took time to introduce me to possible research participants. These residents were also instrumental in arranging interviews that likely would not have occurred by other means. As well, my multiple positions working in the community allowed me to generate interview opportunities through gradually becoming familiar with people in the community by being recognized in day to day life. While I spoke informally with multiple informants many times, I conducted over 50 recorded interviews with more than 40 individuals. People were overwhelmingly gracious in letting me record conversations, however, in some cases, for instance when visitors to a home where I was conducting a recorded conversation arrived, I turned off the recorder, or where I was asked not to record, I took handwritten notes.

Because the research sought to understand how livelihood strategies have changed overtime in relation to the carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah, I intentionally sought out a multi-generational sample of the population. Informants age ranges from 19-95. The majority of my recorded interviews were with persons who tended to be older. There are several reasons for this. Chain referrals from older residents tended to produce referrals to

peers. In many cases, and especially among residents with knowledge of civil rights history in the region, it was often lamented that the person who I “should have talked to” about experiencing a particular event or topic had passed away. The cohort of people I met in administrative positions, that are in elected positions, or are civically active in the community tend to be older. As well, my status as an educated white male, I believe, made securing interviews with persons in administrative positions, both black and white, who had acquired college degrees themselves, easier. Although, it is possible that these statuses also made some community members reticent to speak with me. As one person, having obtained a doctorate themselves, quipped to me, “They don’t like people with PhD’s around here.”

Some interviews that were scheduled did not occur. In one case, the person was not able to attend, and the interview could not be rescheduled. In other instances, phone numbers were not in operation. It is not uncommon for lower-income residents to purchase minutes rather than cell-phone plans which can make phone contact difficult if the minutes have run out. Where I was aware that a person used minutes rather than a plan, I endeavored to talk with them in person so my research would not cost them financially in replacing minutes used to speak with me. I did not want to diminish their ability to communicate in their daily lives with friends and family. In some cases, interviews and follow-up interviews were not conducted out of respect for health conditions. For example, several people were undergoing cancer treatments that would have made the interview process physically uncomfortable.

*Life history collection* from persons of multiple generations, racial backgrounds, and genders were chosen methodologically to document lived experience overtime (Shaw

1980), particularly in regard to socioeconomic change and various periods of extractive privatization, e.g., racial integration, the Civil Rights Movement, and the industrial shift to privatized incarceration, and the 1994-2004 period of youth incarceration. I was not particularly successful in collecting the number of life histories I had planned and my intention to create an oral history project in the community did not come to fruition. A large part of the reason for this was not gaining sustained access to elderly populations until late in my fieldwork. The histories I did collect described experiences of school segregation, plantation agricultural work, historical racial disparities in education, and the cultural and economic shifts that occurred during different phases of extractive industrial activity in Tallulah.

*Guided Tours* draw on social mapping techniques where residents identify social spaces that are important to them and describe the activities that occur in them (Shensul et al. 1999:128-132). I conducted approximately four guided tours with residents of different ages, race, and socioeconomic statuses to gain generational viewpoints on the city's institutions, services, and individual and collective livelihood strategies. Tours elicited information concerning how informants respond to, remember, and imagine Tallulah as a place (Navaro-Yashin 2012). They elucidate remembered landscapes and past events meaningful to the person and community that would otherwise remain invisible (Hochschild 2016). For example, on a walking tour an older resident explained that at one time the sidewalks were wood pallets and if a white person came along, *you'd have to step out into the mud and let them pass*. The guided tours were helpful in producing historical data on changes in community social, economic, and material composition over time, such as I described in the opening vignette. For example, I

learned about the music club that had once stood on the empty lot (Figure 2) during a walking tour.

For data analysis, I draw on a grounded theory approach to develop “theory” from the data – my field notes from participant observation, archival research, and crucially the spoken words, explanations, and representations provided by interlocutors in the fieldsite in conversation and interviews (Messerschmidt 1981). The data were analyzed by reiteratively reading and comparing interview transcriptions and fieldnotes of observations and work activities for recurrent themes and variables. While much of this was done manually, for example printing and annotating interview transcripts and in newspaper archival review, I did perform key word searches and coding queries using NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software to generate and analyze the ways in which themes arose in different contexts and from varying positionalities, for example the appearance of “youth” and “education” in interviews with teachers, elected officials, and community members, both in regards to the youth prison, but also in terms of challenges faced in the present.

Secondary analysis draws on publicly available documents, reports, data bases, and newspaper archives. Examples include federal government agency data, such as the Census Bureau’s Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), and state level data, such as that published by the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services and the Louisiana Department of Corrections and Safety. Readers should, though, keep in mind that data reporting at all scales (national, state, etc.) are often estimations, partial, or likely understated. For example, sociologist Becky Pettit (2012) has illustrated national household-based statistics such as those provided by the American

Community Survey and the United States Census are understated and incomplete. They do not accurately reflect the effects of mass incarceration and demographic data collection often does not consider those who are uncaptured in prison, jails, and other institutions. As well, lack of or faulty reporting by localities on data such as arrest and conviction numbers can affect accuracy of descriptive statistical information. As much as possible and where warranted I have attempted to augment data with relevant studies and qualitative observation.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Mass incarceration and its effects are well documented and carceral privatization is hotly contested on moral and economic grounds. This dissertation contributes to these discussions in the popular media and in anthropological studies of incarceration by documenting the local lived contexts and consequences of carceral privatization in the U.S. south. I argue mass incarceration and carceral entrepreneurship can be understood as an extractive industrial formation emergent from racial capitalist accumulation that relies on the congruence and cooperation of a range of individual, economic, and governmental actors that constrains, but does not negate, livelihood creation and alternative visions of community development.

The first chapters of the dissertation rely heavily on historical and archival research to develop a context for the historical formation of carceral extractivism and its relationship to racial capitalism. Chapter Two examines the history of extractive carceral entrepreneurship in Louisiana through chattel slavery, convict leasing, and sharecropping up through the end of World War II. I draw heavily on recent historical scholarship concerned with the connections of slavery's historical legacies and present day capitalism

and, ethnographically on the experiences of a former sharecropper I call Clarence, to examine the political economy of the area before the flurry of prison building in the 1990s. I draw on Nancy Fraser's (2016) notion of expropriation to understand the entanglement of capitalism with race oppression, which is clear in the case of carceral privatization in the past and in the recent present in the south.

Drawing heavily on archival research at the local newspaper, Chapter Three complicates popular accounts of mass incarceration and carceral privatization that is largely focused on federal and state actors by detailing historically the local manifestation of privatized mass incarceration in Tallulah. I recount how the prisons were actually built on repurposed farmland and on the site of an abandoned lumber mill and discuss some of the ways turning to carceral industrialization impacted the town.

Chapter Four recounts a Poverty Summit I attended in 2015 and presents large blocks of transcribed conversation from two Community Forums held in 2018 and 2019. The intention in this chapter is to foreground the voices of the participants to provide lived experiences that bring forward the history presented up until this point in the dissertation. Prefaced by the dialogue presented in Chapter Four, Chapter Five and Six turn to an ethnographic examination of work and social reproduction in the community. I consider the roles of agricultural restructuring and the Civil Rights Movements and a notion of "the economy" that rests on notions of creating livelihoods and lives worth living (Narotsky and Besnier 2014). Scrapping metal is discussed as a livelihood strategy and provides a case study in the way an ethic and practice of "acting right" influence work and social reproduction. I examine the role of punitive educational polices in their role in structuring life chances in the context of mass incarceration.

Building on the ethnographic material presented in Chapter Five, Chapter Six presents an account of running a small business in the field site and discusses the contradictions arising from mandatory work requirements and child support claims when claiming governmental assistance. Chapter Seven concludes the dissertation. I offer a brief overview of the main arguments and discuss the broader implications of carceral extractivism and possible policy recommendations.

### **A Note on Writing Strategies**

The data I collected, particularly the rich, historically situated, multi-generational stories and insights informants shared with me drive the organization of this dissertation, outlined above, and the choices made while writing it. Throughout the dissertation I have tried to foreground historical time periods and events that speak most saliently to the realities of people's daily lives as they have shifted overtime in relation to the long duration of racial capitalism's growth in this country, and in Louisiana specifically. In many cases, rather than parse and recontextualize informants' words in cut-out snippets curated around topical categories, I leave long passages of transcribed interviews intact as narration (Bell 2013). This practice serves to amplify the participants' words and to capture a sense of the entirety of what was said, leaving the narratives of their experiences and their own theorizing about those experiences in the foreground. Further, this choice deliberately creates a more accessible text where I have largely avoided jargon without compromising the deep theoretical work that people do in the conduct of their lives and concerning the issues this dissertation examines.

In other cases I have related continuous sections of discussions (ex: Chapter 4) that challenge the conception of an interview as a singular event between two parties and



to approach the discussion as an object of enquiry that takes on different meanings for different participants in different contexts (Briggs 2007: 566-567), both within the discussion event and across the dissertation. The dissertation and its ethnographic presentation, I feel, benefits from these choices by foregrounding the multi-generational nature of the data and understandings of the participants as they related their own stories, but also their collective visions of what the “story” of Tallulah is for them.

## CHAPTER 2: HISTORY OF EXTRACTIVE CARCERAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN LOUISIANA

### Introduction

This chapter provides context for considering the history of carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah discussed in the next chapter, but also carceral privatization writ large as a historical process and political economic project. It places present day mass incarceration and privatization in the U.S. south more broadly in the larger field of extractive industrialization and racial capitalism that emerges with settler colonialism, chattel slavery, and then convict leasing and sharecropping in Louisiana (Du Bois 1935; Cardon 2017; Carleton 1984) and the U.S. south (Blackmon 2009). Manning Marable (2015[1983]) discusses these developments in terms of what he notes as the *coercion* underpinning racial capitalism and the integral factors that sustain it: *fraud* and *force*. The fraud of the American Dream, of free markets, and equal opportunity, and the force of physical violence, the criminalization of black life, forced labor through imprisonment, and mass incarceration (94-100).

Noting the historical partnership of private individuals, commercial interests, and the state in the administration, or rather, the conscription of predominately African American populations to capital, this chapter seeks to trouble popular narratives whereby carceral privatization is considered relatively “new” and to argue that the logics and structures of the carceral state today, both in the sheer materiality of apprehended bodies and in its financing is contiguous with the “carceral landscape” of the plantation (Johnson 2013:209-243). In the sections that follow, racial capitalism provides the frame in which slavery, convict leasing, and tenant farming are discussed as iterations of carceral extractivism.

Examining the extractive quality of the relationships between capital, resources, and the “for-profitness” of incarceration I draw on Nancy Fraser’s (2016) notion of expropriation. Fraser expands on Karl Marx’s notion of labor exploitation in commodity production and argues that to understand the entanglement of capitalism with race oppression, one must also consider “expropriated” labor. Fraser describes expropriation, in the broad sense, as “accumulation by other means. Dispensing with the contractual relation through which capital purchases ‘labor power’ in exchange for wages, expropriation works by *confiscating* capacities and resources and *conscripting* them into capital’s circuits of self-expansion.” As she notes, “confiscation may be blatant and violent, as in New World slavery—or it may be veiled by a cloak of commerce, as in the predatory loans and debt foreclosures of the present era” (166).

This chapter traces the continuities between chattel slavery, the history of convict leasing to private interests and state building projects on levies and railroads, and pulls this history forward to contemporary carceral privatization to highlight the violent and blatant force of expropriating conscripted bodies that then do mix in the more “modern” financialized logics of per diems and bed space in carceral institutions today (Mitchellson 2014). Also implicated are both the economic potential of exploited and expropriated human and community resources to extract profit, but also the “hierarchical political relations and legal statuses, which distinguish rights bearing individuals and citizens from subject peoples, unfree chattel, and dependent members of families and subordinated groups” (Fraser 2016: 169). Persons with criminal justice contact often occupy the lower rungs of this hierarchy.

Slavery and prisons have historically been ways in which “rights bearing people

have been differentiated from subject peoples, and unfree chattel.” Hernandez, Muhammad, and Thompson (2015) note:

Prison and slavery defined the boundaries of citizenship and, in this sense, were two sides of the same coin. Through the antebellum period the color line largely governed the use of prisons, primarily for poor men of European ancestry. Enslaved black and Native American populations remained outside the prison gates, subject to brutal and capricious physical punishments long beyond the timeline of Michel Foucault’s accounting in *Discipline and Punish*. By the mid-nineteenth century the end of slavery collapsed the boundaries of citizenship and race. [21]

Slavery in the United States was only ever partially abolished and full citizenship never fully granted. As one Tallulah resident pointed out: *I'm talking about the 13th Amendment. They freed us from slavery, but they put that little caveat in there. If you're incarcerated, then you are free labor.* The provision for state sanctioned enslavement as a punishment for crime through the criminal justice system memorializes and extends the contours of the institution of slavery in practice, if not in form. The Thirteenth Amendment’s “slavery loophole created the legal preconditions for mass imprisonment of the formerly enslaved and of indigenous populations and non-European immigrants on an unprecedented scale” (Hernandez, Muhammad, and Thompson 2015:21)

Noting the relational aspects between slavery and prisons is to recognize the structural emanations that persevere in the figure of plantation prisons and the bodily, legal, and social deprivations of incarceration – the diminishment of full citizenship that comes with the racialized mark of criminal justice involvement more generally. It is no mistake, then, that a young black man would remark to me:

*...to have a felony charge – you pretty much don't have any rights as a human being. You're a slave at that point. You can't vote and you can really only get a minimum wage job or worse. What options do you really have available to you?*

What does one do when their very survival has been criminalized (Harrison 2007)?

## **Slavery's Capitalism: Cotton, Plantations, and Trade in Slaves**

Although the history of prisons and slavery extend far earlier, I focus here on the period from 1830 -1860. These decades saw an intensification and expansion of slavery across the south. This period also illustrates the ways in which slavery's capitalism developed through a "blatant and violent" internal slave trade, the continued state sanctioned enslavement and forceable removal of indigenous peoples from their lands, and the political-entrepreneurial development of plantation lands through credit instruments backed by the mortgage of enslaved persons' bodies. Such violence mirrors and is perhaps constitutive of capitalism more broadly today (Desmond 2019). It is also around this time that settlement in Madison Parish intensified, prompted by movements of people leading up to and because of the global cotton market crash in 1837-1839.

For a century and a half, by 1830, what is now Louisiana had been under successive waves of colonization by the French, the Spanish and, with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States. Through displacement, enslavement, and genocide, the indigenous peoples of the Delta region – the Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Natchez, Tunica, Tensas, and other First Peoples – were being systematically removed. Settlement of inland Madison Parish was sparse up until the second half of the 1830's when businessmen from Mississippi and planters from the "upper south," amidst declining cotton prices and having farmed their lands into unproductivity, moving towards Texas in search of more fertile land, stumbled into the rich alluvial soils of the Delta. The Richmond Compiler, Madison Parish's first newspaper, noted in 1846, "The amount of immigration into the parish has been very great of late years. Steadily the timber goes down and prosperously the cotton and grain stalks rise up in its place"

(quoted in Moncrief 1937). Between 1840 and 1860, the population of Madison Parish would increase nearly three-fold from 5,142 persons to 14,133 (Moncrief 1937). Of that population of persons in 1860 in Madison Parish, 88.3% were enslaved (Menn 1999:3).

As historians Beckert and Rockman (2016) explain:

The ever-expanding demand for forced labor on this cotton frontier launched an internal slave trade that would ultimately relocate a million black men, women, and children from their birthplaces on the eastern seaboard to the new states of what was then considered the American southwest. Slave-trading firms in cities like Baltimore and Richmond used new technologies like steamboats to move captives to New Orleans, where slaves were repackaged as consumer goods and sold on terms of credit that linked aspiring planters to banks and bondholders thousands of miles away. The domestic slave trade witnessed some of the crassest entrepreneurship anywhere in the nineteenth century and helped transform slavery into something more than a labor system: a property regime in which wealth could be stored, transferred, leveraged, collateralized, and bequeathed through black men, women, and children held under legal title. [14]

According to historian Walter Johnson (2013), nearly a third of those million souls moved were brought by plantation relocations from eastern states, while the remaining two-thirds “were traded through a set of speculations that was quickly formalized into the ‘domestic slave trade.’ The ‘slave trade’,” as Johnson notes, was rooted in “the ventures of dozens of independent speculators who bought lots of ten or so slaves, generally on credit, in Upper-South states like Virginia and Maryland. They then walked them southward, after binding them wrist to wrist in a ‘coffle,’ to the emerging regions of the Lower South—first Georgia and later Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama—selling slaves as they went” (41). John B. Cade (1935) relates a story of witness told by G.L. Griffen, a former slave living not far from Tallulah in Ruston, La.

[Mrs. Bradford] was sold to a slave speculator. She was brought with a drove of slaves from Kentucky to Alabama. At night the men (speculators) rented a stable for them to stay just as we see horse stables of today with no protection at all. There were seventy-five in the drove. If one would get too hot and die on the way

or anything happened that would cause one to die, they would dig a hole and put him into it, put a little dirt over him and go on. [324]

From this initial band of traders there arose a complex of organized firms with offices and private jails with high walls that “could house as many as a hundred slaves at a time, large yards where the human property could be exercised, and showrooms where interested buyers could question and examine the people they hoped to purchase, at both ends of the trade” (41). These firms employed agents to scour estate sales and local jails to pick up slaves at a discount to resell at a profit.



**Figure 4: Wood engraving of slave coffle passing the United States Capitol ~1815.**  
**Source: Library of Congress.**

Enslaved people formed a key source of collateral for planters looking to procure loans to expand their operations and their wealth. Already by 1830, the enslaved population of just more than 2 million souls represented \$577 million dollars of wealth or

15% of all wealth in the United States. In 1860, the enslaved population had doubled to nearly 4 million and the amount of wealth increased to more than \$3 billion, roughly 20% of all U.S. wealth stored in the bodies of men, women, and children (Baptist 2014: 246). While the Bank of the United States, a private corporation, was already financing cotton expansion in the south through the sale of bonds in the U.S. and across Europe, in 1827, a Louisiana enslaver named J.B. Moussier was facing repayment of a \$21,000 high interest loan from a slave trading firm in Virginia. Moussier sought to devise a way to give himself and planters more control over their credit and capital. He worked with New Orleans “politician-entrepreneurs” to create the Consolidated Association of Planters of Louisiana (C.A.P.L), a bank chartered by the state in the same year (Baptist 2014: 245).

As Edward Baptist (2014) explains, C.A.P.L. issued bonds worth \$500 each, the average price of a young enslaved man at the time, that would repay 5% annual interest over the ten to fifteen years when the bond reached maturity. Louisiana backed the bonds (putting the state on the hook for any defaults) to reduce risk aversion and motivate investors in Europe. The C.A.P.L. model was replicated across the south in “Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and the territories of Arkansas, and Florida.” (Baptist 2014: 247). While slaves were still being collateralized and mortgaged to a lender, the banks in this case were securitizing the slave mortgages – “pooling the debt from many buyers so that it could be sold off in uniform chunks, reducing the risks inherent in lending to one person at a time” (247). Baptist explains:

The financial product that such banks [...] were selling to investors in London, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Paris, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York was remarkably similar to the securitized bonds, backed by mortgages on US homes, that attracted investors from around the globe to US financial markets from the 1980s until the economic collapse of 2008. Like the C.A.P.L. bonds, mortgage-backed securities shifted risk away from the immediate originators of loans onto



financial markets while promising to spread out and thus minimize the consequences of individual debtors' failures. Investors who purchased latter-day mortgage-backed securities planned to share in streams of income generated by homebuyers' mortgage payments. Likewise, the [state issued] faith bonds of the 1830s generated revenue for investors from enslavers' repayments of mortgages on enslaved people. This meant that investors around the world would share in revenues made by hands in the field. Thus, in effect, even as Britain was liberating the slaves of its empire, a British bank could now sell an investor a completely commodified slave: not a particular individual who could die or run away, but a bond that was the right to a one-slave-sized slice of a pie made from the income of thousands of slaves. [247-248]

Like the chopping, bundling, and sale of home mortgages in the early 2000's, the C.A.P.L. model was immensely successful – until it wasn't. The value of enslaved bodies tied to cotton markets ebbed and flowed with cotton prices and demand. Cotton prices climbed from .09 cents in 1832 to “an ecstasy-inducing .18 cents per pound” in 1835 (Baptist 2014:258). The rise in cotton prices combined with the confiscation and conscription of more indigenous lands through the Indian Removal Act of 1831 spurred a bubble inducing wave of speculation in land and slaves and a dramatic increase in forced migrations of enslaved persons into the south. By 1836, land sales had reached \$5 million dollars a month and a worried President Andrew Jackson who, distrustful of banks in any case, declared that federal lands must be paid for in hard specie (gold or silver, which is difficult to move in bulk) instead of paper notes (i.e., debt). At the same time, the Bank of England facing an economic recession began refusing credit to British cotton-merchants as textile factories were already glutted with cotton. Cotton fell to .06 cents a pound by 1837. The cotton market was crashing.

Large firms in Britain went bankrupt and closed; banks in New York shuttered their doors to avoid run-offs; and, overleveraged cotton merchants in New Orleans, some “allegedly owed \$500 for every \$1 that they held in cash or collectible debts,” dissolved

(Baptist 2014: 273). So, too, chartered banks in the southwest and elsewhere were grossly overleveraged, with debt interest obligations far exceeding reserves and clients' abilities to pay on the loans they had received. States infused money into banks to prop up planting operations, effectively bailing out some, for a time, but in ensuing years collection activities ramped up and thousands of enslaved persons were sold at deep discounts on initial investments to produce liquidity, breaking apart families and disarticulating social and blood bonds. Joshua Rothman (2016) writes of Mississippi:

Bearing the brunt of their owners' failures, thousands of slaves who had already lost families and communities through forced migration to the southwest disappeared back into the cash nexus as planters tried stanching losses by selling off their most valuable remaining assets, along with their land and their livestock.[137]

Others, he notes, simply left, abandoning their lands ahead of collectors that would inevitably come calling (137).

From the top down and on the ground, things could have been much worse. Bonnie Martin (2016) notes that while Baptist's account shows clearly the effect of the Cotton Panics of 1837 and 1839 on transatlantic and national financial markets, she argues that a more complete picture comes into view when local neighbor-to-neighbor transactions are considered. Reviewing more than 10,000 public records of loans where slaves were used as collateral in Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana counties, Martin found that local residents wove substantial nets of credit and capital production by loaning and lending to and from each other, alongside financial markets. Martin notes that although "the ratios of capital raised through merchants or lending institutions shifted by region," in the states she surveyed "neighbor-to-neighbor transactions continued to make up more than 80% of the capital generated in each state" (114). Local lending

between individuals, then, played a major role in the expansion of slavery and in the development of trade regimes and the United States economy as a whole. The financial market crash coupled with local lending, though, likely helped to consolidate the relative power of those in agriculture and manufacturing who did survive the crash.

Indeed, the industrializing segments of “the north” were at all points built upon slavery’s capitalism in “the south.” For example, in 1820, only a small fraction of the U.S. labor force worked in manufacturing, perhaps 75,000 people. By 1832, this number was 200,000, many in textile mills. The profit margins enabled by cotton picked by enslaved persons’ labor produced cost efficiencies in northern (and transatlantic) industries that allowed for expansion and specialization. As Baptist notes, “In fact, the same cotton that hands picked returned, spun and woven in the shape of the rough New England cloth that enslavers bought to cover the backs of African Americans” (2014: 319). Of course, plantation agriculture also required, “American-made shovels, plows, ropes, hats, shoes, and hoes. In fact, one estimate suggests that 30 percent of the ‘transportable’ goods made in the Northeast in the 1830s were sold to the West and South” (Baptist 2014:320).

Not limited to the plantation economy of south, the contributions of enslaved African Americans to the construction the entire U.S. economy cannot be understated. For example, Baptist provides a “back-of-the envelope” accounting of the importance of cotton to economic stability and growth in 1836. Although cotton made up only 5% of the \$1.5 billion in goods and services produced in the United States, he figures that once second and third-order effects, such as purchasing slaves, food, axes, clothing, and luxury goods bought by slave holding families, as well as wages spent by industrial workers in

the north, and the importation of goods on credit, Baptist estimates the forced labor of some “million-odd slaves – 6% of the total population” – on the cotton frontier directly and indirectly produced some \$600 million dollars, or nearly half of the U.S. economy (321).

The expropriation of the bodies and labor of 6% of the United States’ population would be made to found, through force, coercion, and bodily torture, its economy. However, consider this another way. One analysis of the 1860 Census surmised that 1% of slaveholders accounted for 20-30% of the total number of slaves (Blake 2001). This was true of Madison Parish as well. In 1860, the parish population stood at 1,640 whites, 16 “free colored” and 12,477 enslaved. Only 88 enslavers held 68% of Madison’s enslaved population, the rest spread across 241 smaller slave holders (Blake 2001).

W.E.B. Du Bois noted in 1935:

From all that has been written and said about the antebellum South, one almost loses sight of about 5,000,000 white people in 1860 who lived in the South and held no slaves. Even among the two million slave holders, an oligarchy of about 8,000 really ruled the South.” [22]

That a small number of powerful people with access to political influence and financial resources would own the majority of the wealth in people stored in their human property is unsurprising. Du Bois’ rulers of the south were themselves the bankers, lawmakers, judges, and governors. This story of political and financial connectedness resonates throughout this chapter in the instance of post-bellum convict leasing, but also in the next chapter which describes the carceral entrepreneurship that takes place in Tallulah and the development of the carceral state more generally.

Through the 1840’s those who survived the crash, men like Rice Ballard, a former slave trader, and Samuel Boyd, a lawyer and judge in Natchez, bought up land and people

and began projects in the interior west of the Mississippi through northeastern Louisiana and to the east of Vicksburg into Memphis; lands that were largely unexploited (Baptist 2014:360). It was in the context of this new expansion that settlement accelerated in Madison Parish, itself formed in 1838. The Madison Parish Police Jury, formed in the same year, had a road built from Richmond, the parish seat located just 2 miles from what would become Tallulah, to Milliken's Bend where there was a steamboat landing. This road and others allowed for the transportation of cotton and people (Buckner 5, 12A). Richmond was eventually burned and destroyed during the Civil War, and the original Milliken's Bend has since been swallowed by the shifting banks of the Mississippi. While commissioning roads improved land transportation, it was in 1852 that the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Texas Railroad Company (VST) began constructing a line west to Monroe from Vicksburg, and east from Shreveport to Monroe.

The line cut through the center of Madison Parish. Small stations were established at intervals, one of them being Tallulah Station in 1857. This new infrastructure "dramatically promoted new settlers and the opening of land in the Parish interior" (Buckner 12A-12B). The interior lands were also prized because of the lowered risk of devastation caused by flooding and the shifting course of the Mississippi River. The town of Tallulah grew out of and around this station that "was merely a train stop in the middle of a cotton field consisting of an office, a warehouse, a water tank, [and] simple loading and unloading facilities" (Buckner 14). What I believe to be that station, or at least part of it, is now a disused foundation, a pile of stones and railroad ties across the parking lot from an apartment building. At least one resident told me it used to serve as a slave auction; but, as she said, *No one talks about that*. Tallulah station was burned during the

Civil War as was much else in the Parish.

While blacks and whites worked in the building of infrastructure, railroads, like most everything else in the south, were largely built with the labor of enslaved persons. Theodore Kornweibel, Jr. (2007) notes that as of 1852 more than ten-thousand enslaved persons per year were working at building, maintaining, or operating railroads, jobs that



*Figure 5: Possible site of a former slave auction.*

newly emancipated blacks continued to do after the war. Railroad company annual reports show they both owned and leased slave labor, and antebellum papers show companies advertised to buy or hire out enslaved persons from enslavers. By 1860, “thirty-seven railroads used one hundred or more slaves, including twelve hundred laboring to build the Atlantic and Gulf in southern Georgia, five hundred building the Vicksburg, Shreveport and Texas, and four hundred or more slaves employed on seven

other lines.” All told, the number working on trackage was around 14,600 that year (Kornweibel, Jr. 2007: 295). During the war, the need for labor increased and some lines resorted to impressment, the forceful conscription of enslaved persons by the Confederate and Union Armies as railroads were transformed into military infrastructure (Kornweibel, Jr. 2007: 295). Detailed lists of the enslaved, their owners, county and states of origins were kept by rail companies.<sup>4</sup> Much of this trackage was destroyed during the war and was then rebuilt after, using former enslaved persons that were now incarcerated and leased to those that had formerly made use of their conscripted labor. So, too, were the incarcerated leased to build levees along the banks of the Mississippi – or rebuild the levee’s that General Grant had destroyed when he tried to shift the course of the Mississippi at Vicksburg to move further down river using dredges. Leasing, as the example of the railroads illustrates, was a common antebellum practice. After emancipation, though, “convict leasing” *was* the penal system, rather than the trade in enslaved persons and their labor, *per se*.

### **Convict Leasing: “One Dies, Get Another”**

Before the war, we owned the negroes[.] If a man had a good negro, he could afford to keep him... but these convicts, we don’t own ‘em. One dies, get another. [Slave leaser, quoted in Mancini 1996:2-3]

Louisiana opened its first state penitentiary, built by 100 incarcerated persons, in Baton Rouge in 1835, prior to which, state prisoners were held in the New Orleans jail. Three hundred incarcerated people were sent to the penitentiary to manufacture textiles and leather. Two thirds of them were white. The antebellum penitentiary was seen as a primarily white institution that could affect moral rehabilitation through work – what

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, the Tennessee Valley Authority (2020). Virtual Archive.

freedoms could be stolen from souls that were not really considered human, much less citizens? After just nine years, in 1844, the state decided administering the penitentiary was too costly and leased its incarcerated persons for five years to plantation owners James McHatton and William Pratt (Carelton 1984: 8-9). In that year, a news reporter noted the presence of 171 males and 6 females (Nobles 2000:5).

Connie Nobles (2000) notes the way an archeological survey and historical study of the penitentiary (March 1989-August 1991) condensed and represented its findings in a shorter pamphlet produced for a wider public audience. The report largely omits the details of the women and children in the penitentiary. However, Nobles (2000) notes the description of gendered work divisions: “All of the females were women of color [...] ‘occupied in washing and ironing for the convicts’” (6). The spaces where men and women were confined were kept separate, with the women’s section containing a “garden.” She argues that practitioners need to pay attention to “exclusions” and the intersections of gender, class, and race in the sites and histories they survey (2000).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, by 1848, a year before the end of the first lease, the penitentiary held “172 inmates, including thirteen enslaved women and their six children” (Derbes 2013: 280).

On December 11, 1848, “An Act Providing for the disposal of such slaves as are or may be born in the Penitentiary” was signed into Louisiana law. The legislation provided that any child born to an enslaved woman serving a life sentence shall become property of the state; and further, once the child reaches ten years old, the Sheriff of

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<sup>5</sup> See, Wurtzburg, S., and T. H. Hahn III 1992 *Hard Labor: A Cultural Resources Survey of the Old Louisiana State Penitentiary, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*. Coastal Environments, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and, Wurtzburg, S. and T.H. Hahn III 1992 *Hard Labor: History and Archaeology at the Old Louisiana State Penitentiary, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*. General Services Administration, Fort Worth, Texas.



Baton Rouge Parish should be notified so the children can be auctioned on the courthouse steps – an advertisement of the auction posted in the official newspaper and on the courthouse door for thirty days prior. “Pursuant to said advertisement,” the Act read, “sell the slave child for cash, and pay the proceeds of the said slave to the State Treasurer, to become a part of the free school fund of said State” (Derbes 2013: 280-281). Brett Josef Derbes (2013) writes:

From 1835 to 1862 at least sixty-one women were admitted to the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Of those women thirty-three were enslaved, five were free women of color, and twenty-three were white. Twenty-six enslaved women were serving life sentences, and at least ten gave birth while imprisoned, and their children were sold into slavery. [283]

For their initial lease, McHatton and Pratt paid nothing to the state for working its imprisoned persons. The state simply outsourced its penal operations to offload the expense. The two men made quite a profit, reducing their own costs by providing the bare minimum – of food, medical care, clothing – needed, most times, for subsistence. The same is largely true of today’s private prison operators. The state, though, seeing the profitability of the venture wanted its cut and a new 5-year lease was given to Charles McHatton, the brother of James McHatton who remained a co-lessee in the reorganized venture, McHatton, Ward, and Company. For this lease they were obligated to pay the state 25% of profits each year (Carleton 2019: 9-10). Besides profit sharing, some of the money made by the McHattons and Ward did return to state coffers.

On December 1, 1849, Charles McHatton purchased “13- year-old Celeste for \$470, and 10-year-old Frederick for \$226,” from unidentified mother(s); and, on June 5, 1852 he “purchased 10- year-old Alfred for \$580.” On December 3, 1853, James McHatton “purchased 10-year-old Joseph for \$800. Joseph’s mother Azaline was

sentenced to life imprisonment in St. Landry Parish for attempted poisoning and entered the penitentiary on 27 March 1839.” (Derbes 2013:283). “Attempting to poison” and “arson” were the leading crimes for enslaved women serving life at the penitentiary in this period, although as least one woman, Marceline, was given a life sentence for “assaulting a white.” Sentences were harsher for black women and white women tended to be released earlier. Marceline’s daughter was named Henrietta. She was sold to Samuel Isett, a man from Pennsylvania who was the clerk of the penitentiary from 1852 to 1859, on December 2, 1854 for \$600 (Derbes 2013: 283-284).

After the McHattons, prisoners were leased to J.M. Hark and W.S. Pike in 1857, but this time the state received half of the factory’s profits (Mancini 2011). Pike, for his part, “purchased 10-year-old Clara Williams for \$1,025 on 18 June 1859. Clara’s mother, Frances Williams, was born in Virginia, sentenced to life for arson in New Orleans Parish, and arrived at the penitentiary on 6 April 1846” (Derbes 2013: 285). The Civil War ended Hark and Pike’s lease and the penitentiary factory, burned by the Union, was a fire hollowed shell. Shortly after the end of the war, the state, anxious to rid itself of the responsibility and cost of its inmates and the penitentiary, leased them to John Hugher and Charles Jones. Hugher and Jones sued the prison’s Board of Control in a bid to attain full control over the prison population, which it won, and the state passed a law in 1870 giving the men unfettered reign of the facility and the state’s inmates. Immediately, the men sold their lease to a former major in the Confederate army, Samuel Lawrence James. Historian Matthew Mancini (2011) surmises Hugher and Jones were probably working at the behest of James all along.

James controlled the lease for the next three decades, from 1870-1901. Nathan

Cardon (2017) notes that Louisiana's convict population during this period grew dramatically. The racial demographics of the penitentiary immediately flipped in the postbellum period. In 1868 there were 203 black males, 85 white males, and 9 black females. By 1893, of the 1,090 convicts, 83 % were black males, and of the 40 women held in the penitentiary at Baton Rouge, 37 were black (Cardon 2017:421-423). By 1901, the majority black prison population of "1,142 prisoners lived and worked" at James' Angola Plantation home, with 242 serving life sentences. From 1866-1901, the postbellum incarcerated population increased more than 400% under Louisiana's convict lease system. It is common to consider today's period of mass incarceration as somehow unique. I suggest it is not. Instead, it is a contiguous phase in the historical growth of the carceral state. During the decade that followed, by 1910, the number of people incarcerated doubled and "black incarceration rates grew ten times as fast as the overall population." The incarceration rate of black males, [...] in black parishes like East Carroll and Madison," was 4% (Hermann 2015:347).

Leasing was made illegal with Louisiana's 1898 Constitution but continued until James' lease expired in 1901. After the lease expired, Louisiana, in effect, had to build its penal system from "the ground up" – purchasing land, materials, infrastructure, and hiring personnel. Louisiana's most recognized and enduring carceral institution, Louisiana State Penitentiary, often called "Angola" or "The Farm," was purchased from the James family heirs. James died, suddenly, on the property in 1894 from a massive aneurism (Carleton 88-92). Effectively, James had built a public-private prison at his plantation home. When the state purchased Angola, along with several other plantations, one ironically named Hope, James' son remained plantation manager and the executor of

James' estate took the role of chairman of the penitentiary board.

Indeed, in 1902, then Governor Heard would describe the vision for Louisiana's penal system as a "great industrial and business enterprise" (Carleton 1984: 94). One might consider Heard's expression as a conflation of distinct spheres, one public and one presumably "private:" State penology and its infrastructure on the one hand, and business, writ large, on the other. It is common today to discuss carceral privatization in the context of a "business of punishment." Considered on its face, though, these were never, at least in the south, in practice or thought, distinct fields of action. Rather, they occupy sections of the same racist "plumbing system" designed to extract and accumulate capital and control labor (Buck 2001:12). The plantation itself, and the larger south as a geography of containment (Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga 2015; Doughty 2018), as much as it was industrialized and patterned to create revenue from the business of slavery and cotton, was strategically structured as a kind of "land bondage" on a "carceral landscape" (Johnson 2013: 209-243). What else is a prison farm?

### **Privatization and Convict Leasing**

Interrogating the private-public structuring of convict leasing resists accounts of carceral privatization today as easily parsed in economic terms of cost efficiencies and moral debates about corporatized punishment (Armstrong 2003; Dolovich 2005; Sigler 2010). Tracing this history illustrates that incarceration in Louisiana and the south has always been deeply tied to private interests, extractive industries, and state building projects understood as extractive in terms of human and natural resources and capital accumulation. For example, drawing on the work of historians Mary Anne Curtin (2000) and Alex Lichtenstein (1996), scholar and abolitionist Angela Y. Davis (2003) argues,

“The persistence of the prison as the main form of punishment, with its racist and sexist dimensions, has created this historical continuity between the nineteenth and early-twentieth century convict leasing system and the privatized prison business today.” (37). She notes that while convict leasing was legally abolished, “its structures of exploitation have reemerged in the patterns of privatization, and more generally in the wide-ranging corporatization of punishment” (37). Consider Curtin writing about the use of convict labor in Alabama’s coal mines:

In the late nineteenth century coal companies wished to keep their skilled prison laborers for as long as they could, leading to denials of “short time.” Today, a slightly different economic incentive can lead to similar consequences. CCA [Corrections Corporation of America] is paid per prisoner.<sup>6</sup> If the supply dries up, or too many are released too early, their profits are affected... Longer prison terms means greater profits, but the larger point is that the profit motive promotes the expansion of imprisonment. [quoted in Davis 2003:37]

This was part of what happened with the lease(s) in Louisiana and continues today with lengthy mandatory sentencing. However, there is a crucial difference between the financial incentives that Curtin notes between leasing and the institution of slavery that came before it: the value in black bodies. Davis notes: “Slave owners may have been concerned for the survival of individual slaves, who, after all, represented investments. Convicts, on the other hand, were leased not as individuals, but as a group, and they could be literally worked to death without affecting the profitability of a convict crew” (2003:32). And they were. Under Samuel James’ lease in Louisiana, some 3,000 people died (Carleton 1994 [1971]: 46).

A story from The New York Times in 1886 graphically captures an example of the treatment leased laborers endured under the leasing system.

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<sup>6</sup> CCA is now CoreCivic.

In 1884 Theophile Chevalier was sentenced to five years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary for stealing five dollars. Soon after he arrived in Baton Rouge, Chevalier was transported to a railroad camp at Crew Lake and given the task of washing inmates' clothes. Because of the swamp-like conditions of the camp his shoes disintegrated, leaving him to labor without footwear. On an extremely frigid day he told the prison captain that he was too cold to wash; the captain responded by telling him he could continue washing or be whipped. Chevalier went back to work but soon collapsed. He was taken back to the camp where he waited two days to see a physician. During this period, one of Chevalier's feet "dropped off," while the other hung on by a tendon, the result of extreme frostbite. When the physician finally saw him, he was forced to cut off the remaining foot at the ankle joint with a penknife because he lacked the proper operating tools. Later, Chevalier was returned to the penitentiary from the work camp, where his legs were amputated. [Cardon 2017:417-418]

What happened to Chevalier afterwards is unknown, and this is perhaps as indicative of the sentiment, "one dies, get another," as the torture he experienced. While this brutality and those sentiments shock the conscience, it does illustrate a key difference between slavery and Jim Crow convict leasing – the heightened disregard for life in the later, the shift in the "value" of labor and the bodies that performed it. The deaths of persons like Chevalier allowed the state to not only deflect the costs of caring for inmate populations, but also to share in the profits generated by leasing enslaved and then incarcerated labor. This was particularly true after the end of the Civil War when a large influx of former slaves, having become freed citizens, were eligible to become state criminals, rather than property to be disciplined on the plantation or sold out of jails (Carleton 1994 [1971]: 13).

The failed promise of Reconstruction and the aggressive disenfranchisement of freed blacks through Black Codes, Jim Crow Laws, physical violence, and other political efforts by which power and wealth consolidated to whites created the conditions under which "convict labor" accrued substantial fortunes to a relatively small number of individuals and corporations. Moreover, leasing, like share cropping and debt peonage

which I discuss below, provided a means for rural farmers and industrialists, sanctioned by the state, and aided through the judiciary, to create a non-wage labor force.

Profiteering from state building and the accumulation of wealth by working the bodies of men, women, and children, both physically and financially, through the lease literally laid the foundation for Louisiana's penal system. However, it also served another purpose.

Noting the reliance of convict labor in building Georgia's railroads, Alex Lichtenstein argues that convict leasing and Jim Crow were central to the development of "a racial state" (Davis 2011:34):

New South Capitalists in Georgia and elsewhere were able to use the state to recruit and discipline a convict work force, and thus were able to develop their state's resources without creating a wage labor force and without undermining planter's control of black labor. In fact, quite the opposite: the penal system could be used as a powerful sanction against rural blacks who challenged the racial order upon which agricultural labor control relied. [quoted in Davis 2011:34]

### **Sharecropping and Chicago Mill and Lumber**

Alongside the penal system, planters' control of black (and poor white) labor on plantations relied on agricultural labor arrangements structured by tenancy. Tenancy traditionally can either be in paying cash rent or it can take the form of sharecropping, where a part of the crop yield is exchanged for access to land. As Erica de Jong (2002) points out, "common usage and the U.S. census after 1920 defined those workers who provided their own farm animals and equipment as tenants, distinguishing them from sharecroppers, who had only their labor to contribute" (24). In sharecropping the landowner (or the plantation manager) supplies a cabin and the land as well as the tools, seeds, mules, plows (or later tractors), and other materials to plant and raise the crop. The owner would then distribute one half of the crop ("working on halves") or some other fraction to the tenant (such as quarters or thirds). However, from the revenue of the

tenant's "share" would be deducted the costs of the materials (which were often bought or leased at high rates at a local supply store). Tenants who owned mules and implements did slightly better and received a larger share of the crop, but in reality, when their labor was highly supervised, they became "simply sharecroppers with mules" (de Jong 2002: 24).

From discussions and interviews in Tallulah, sharecroppers largely grew their own food and what other essentials they needed were bought on credit. At the end of the season the accounts were balanced and many times the tenant was left with little to nothing, sometimes because of bad crops or low prices, but more often due to dishonest and predacious credit terms and fraudulent accounting by landowners and merchants. With little or nothing to show for the year, many tenants became land locked into debt peonage as they relied on the "loans" supplied by landlords and storekeepers for living essentials. Postbellum plantation agriculture, although restructured, reproduced the plantation of the "old south" as confinement on a carceral landscape. As well, laws that favored planters such as making it illegal to leave a plantation if you had debt or to sell a crop to a buyer other than the landlord made it difficult to "get ahead."

Like the convict leasing system, the sharecropping system that grew up alongside it were in place before emancipation but took on new importance in the postbellum years as a powerful method for controlling racial hierarchies and labor. The purported full rights of citizenship and mobility granted by emancipation and enjoyed unevenly and fleetingly during Reconstruction were systematically – by legal disenfranchisement and political corruption – and also violently – by forced labor and terrorism – taken away (Du Bois 1935). While sharecropping forms a lower intensity reconfiguration (debt peonage),



sharecropping itself grew out of the (intensely circumscribed) resistance and general refusal of newly freedmen and women to return to the fields of their former enslavers without concessions, however slight these may have been in practice. The methods of coercing labor remained intact (lashing and driving) as did the racist views of southern whites which were mobilized to justify the brutal methods of controlling them and expropriating their wages. For example, Erica de Jong (2002) notes an article that appeared in the *Madison Journal* in 1928 asserting African Americans needed less clothing and food than white people. Its author claimed:

The negro... can weather the fiercest winter gale, clad only in a pair of cotton overalls and a blue jumper... He can live a week on three soda crackers, a box of sardines, and five cents worth of cheese... His surplus money he spends on entertainment... and it very often happens that when the birds begin to sing, Mr. Negro is seized with wanderlust, and suddenly disappears. [24]

In de Jong's estimation, the "prevailing view among white Louisianans" was that "black people would not work unless they were coerced, they could survive on less money than other people, and offering them higher wages only caused them to become shiftless and unreliable" (24). A former resident and Civil Rights activist in Tallulah, Moses Williams, who has since passed away, recalled in an interview with de Jong the beatings delivered to tenants on the plantation where he lived as a child. White folks who tried to intervene on behalf of violence against African Americans were often threatened with the same treatment (de Jong 2002:33-34).

Throughout this dissertation I argue that mass incarceration and privatization in the Delta cannot be understood without recognizing the role of extractive racial capitalism and the continuity between Louisiana's carceral past and present. While the previous sections of this chapter dealt with slavery and convict leasing, an examination of

livelihoods and work in Tallulah and the broader region need to be understood and contextualized in terms of postbellum plantation structures of share cropping and the locally important Chicago Mill and Lumber. In Madison Parish sharecropping was the primary way in which the labor of African American labor was reorganized. Further, operating concurrently alongside sharecropping was the lumber milling industry that thrived in the region up until as one resident who I call Clarence, an African American man in his mid-nineties, put it: “They ran out of timber.” I rely heavily in this section on conversations with Clarence and the contrasting experiences of a white man in his mid-eighties that I call Robert. Through their memories, as well as others who shared their experiences of “working in the fields” on the region’s plantations and their assessments of the economically and socially significant Chicago Mill and Lumber in Tallulah. I write about sharecropping and lumber milling together because in many ways the historical overlapping conjunction of extraction in the fields, the Mill, and the forest camps that fed its raw materials provide valuable insights into the constraints on social reproduction, such as current states of educational attainment and racialized occupational opportunities in the region (which I discuss more in Chapter 5). Further, this history provides a context for the overall political economy of Tallulah and its turn to extractive carceral entrepreneurship.

The coerciveness of sharecropping and lumber milling relied heavily on the ability of plantation elites and Jim Crow social ordering to dispossess African Americans of literacy and numeracy. For example, Clarence tells me:

*I didn't get a public education. We blacks didn't have no bus, no school; we went to school in the black church. We couldn't go no further than the fifth grade and once we got out of the fifth grade we had to transfer to Tallulah, but we didn't have no bus or nothing. My daddy had an old Model A Ford and he would drive*

*us. Sometimes he couldn't, but me and my sister would come to school. One teacher taught the first through the fifth grade in that one building. She taught those five grades. She was strict, but we loved her. She was mean and didn't take no mess. We didn't have free lunches and we didn't have busses. That's just what it was.*

*We walked to school and carried our lunch in a little bag or a little bucket... Ah, let's see... about three miles. A lot of kids didn't have nothing. My momma, she would always fix an extra biscuit or something to give the kid that didn't have nothing, because some of them didn't have anything. But the weather, the weather was so bad back then, we got two or three snows every year and we still had to go to school. My little brother - it'd be so cold he'd be crying. We got three months of school - December, January, and February - if the cotton was up. Sometimes we didn't get all the cotton picked before Christmas, so we picked it after Christmas. We'd go to the field before the sun came up, and work and then come in at 12 o'clock and eat and go right back till the sun go down.*

As with education, planting cycles and the plantation system structured much of black life in the region, as did lumber manufacturing. Clarence provides an example of the connectivity of lumbering and agriculture, but also of exploitative practices employed by plantation managers and bookkeepers in the share cropping system which exploited the undereducation of tenants that was perpetuated over generations.

*There are things that shouldn't have went on, but they did. Like they short your pay and you couldn't say nothing about it. They used to have what they called "working on the halves" - it was the worst - it wasn't right. He [the landowner] was supposed to furnish the seed, the mule, the plow and stuff and you worked the land and you got half the money, but you never did get half. They charged you for what you didn't even know nothing about. The farm I come up on down there, there was 60 families on that farm. The man that owned it lived in Kansas and he came down twice a year. He come down when they plant and when they get up, and that's the only time you'd see him. Share cropping – that's what they called it. But you never did come out right. You did all the work and you didn't get no money. The whole family would come out with a \$100, \$150, \$160 dollars after working the entire year.*

*I remember in 1939 we come out of Concordia Parish and my Dad said, "We going to make a clear crop this year and have some money in the winter." He worked a little sawmill cutting lumber - rough lumber - you had to pick it up - you didn't have no machines, the men had to pick it up. While my Dad worked lumber - my brother, he was a big boy then – and my two smaller brothers and my sister and my mom and me, we worked that crop all that year. We come out with a*

*hundred and some dollars. So, we went to the lady that kept the books and asked her to look at our account because something was wrong with the numbers. And she said, "... that nigger's calling me a liar." That was in 1939.*

*Daddy took that little bit of money - he had a sister up here and she knew this man that had made a hauling trailer in his yard and charged Dad \$25 dollars for two loads to move us from Concordia Parish to up here. That's how we got up here. There was a man out there, my auntie knew him, and we moved onto his place and we were supposed to work the new ground we cleared for three years going on four. But he took the cleared land after two years. We never got ahead a little bit till I went into the Army and got an allotment for my mom and them to help them out. That's how he got ahead. He had a good crop and went across the river and bought some land over there. He never did farm no more. He went to work at the factory making storage sheds. He worked there until he got disabled. It was pretty rough coming up.*

Clarence's remembered experience provides an example of how absentee landlords and dishonest bookkeepers expropriated and confiscated labor and earnings. The bookkeeper's slur in response to Clarence's father reveals the overt racism and presumption of superiority by whites, as well as the constrained agency of sharecroppers to right the wrongs they encountered. Despite and because of these factors, there was cooperation among the tenants on the plantation, as Clarence's mother making extra biscuits for neighbors' children illustrates. Noting there were 60 tenant families, some white, on the plantation, Clarence told me that if someone got sick, *everybody would throw in and help you work your crop out. That's the way they used to do. If you got real sick the people from the church would come sit with you and they helped you work the crop out. That's where they lived and they were very close about that, the blacks were.* This story also reveals that tenants, at least in the incidence of Clarence's family, did have the power, albeit constrained and ultimately unhinged from any ameliorating justice, to leave. Although, as Clarence points out, situations did not always improve. Like many African Americans, Clarence's service in the military formed a pathway to "getting

ahead” (which I discuss further in Chapter 5 in relation to civil rights and voting).

Working a small lumber mill to clear tree stands to open up planting land like Clarence’s father was doing was common. Along with cotton and sugar, lumber provided a third major industry at that time. There had been lumber mills operating in the parish since 1842 but these were mainly to satisfy local demand. By 1925 Madison Parish had seven sawmills in operation. In 1928, the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company bought the Krus Brothers Mill in Tallulah because of its formidable woodland holdings and its proximity to the Vicksburg, Shreveport, Texas railroad and the river. In its first year the Mill employed 250 men. Over time the mill expanded, adding a veneer plant and then a box factory. By the time Clarence and his family were moving out of Concordia Parish in 1939, Chicago Mill and Lumber was employing 700 people (not including the 300 in the forest camps felling trees), generating a payroll of a half a million dollars a year. It had its own permanent 35 miles of log road and portable rail spurs that could be projected into forest stands. Veneer from Tallulah was being sent to “furniture factories in Grand Rapids, Chicago, Dubuque, Los Angeles, Cape Town, South Africa, and to Monterey, Mexico.” Dry kilns for veneer production operated on the site 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. American Tobacco Company was the largest buyer of Tallulah’s plywood (glued together veneer sheets) for making cigar boxes; as well, stained plywood was shipped to San Juan, Puerto Rico for cigar boxes. Lumber shipped to nearly every part of the United States and was exported to England, Canada, and Mexico (Moncrief 1937).

Clarence, like many in Tallulah and those who moved from other parishes would at some point work at the Mill. It was a major draw for the area. Between 1930 and 1940, some two thousand people moved into Tallulah. Of them, 86 % were African American.

Over the duration of its operation, the Mill employed nearly 40% of the town's population and 70% of the company's workforce in Tallulah were African American (de Jong 2002; Madison Journal 1975; Reckdahl 2003). Clarence described what it was like to work in the Mill.

*When I worked in the Chicago Mill, we were paid three dollars and something an hour. All hard work. We didn't get no breaks; there wasn't no breaks. If me and you were working on a machine and one of us had to go to the restroom, I'd have to do your job and mine too until you got back. That's how that worked. There wasn't no such thing as a break.*

*Back then there used to be woods all over here. Around here where we are now out to Bear Lake there was 7 miles of timber and the Chicago Mill hauled it all out and cut it up. They used to have a railroad track built down through the woods and they had two steam engines that would go out at night and come back in the morning to load the train. Down at the mill they used to dynamite the logs to bust them up to get them under the saw. They didn't have band saws like the ones they got now. They drilled a hole in the log and blew it up. What a thing. They had one man that handled the dynamite. I had an uncle here - he was the first black man that graded lumber at Chicago Mill on the slip. They cut up all the timber and there wasn't any more to cut. A company came in from Arkansas and started farming, cutting corn and what not.*

The work and time discipline (Thompson 1967) in the Mill required cooperation, although coerced and sped-up by doubling individual worker's tasks during "breaks" in production could only have made this already dangerous work more so. Several people in Tallulah mentioned stories of dismemberment and broken bones. Like the intensification of workers' labor, the ability to pull logs with steam engines and to reduce the circumference of trees with explosives increased the extractive capacity of the Mill until it reached a point where the all "the timber was cut up" by the early 1980's. While the Mill was already reduced to a work force of 100 by 1975, one resident, an African American man in his 50's and business owner who I call David explained the cultural and economic importance of the Mill.

*You had the Chicago Mill over there where our parents and a lot of our [now]*

*elderly people worked before it went out of business. Chicago Mill was the cultural hub because they depended on that. They woke up by the whistle, went to lunch by the whistle, and went to bed by the whistle. Everything centered around Chicago Mill. Chicago Mill was the stable support for this area. A lot of people worked there. If they weren't doing farming, it was Chicago Mill. They moved by Chicago Mill's clock. It was not the best place to work, but it was a place they could depend on at that time. [...] They built a prison on one part of that, I forget what year that was - that prison over there - that's part of the old Chicago Mill.*

David clearly situates the field and the Mill as key sites guiding the social and economic rhythms of life in Tallulah while also referencing the prison built on the site that has become “part of the old Chicago Mill.” Indeed, many, particularly older residents, noted the historical significance of the Mill and directly indexed it to the prison, and vice versa, when referencing the move to incarceration and the facility that grew up on that land. For instance, a woman I call Barbara told me, *When I was a little girl my dad worked at the mill, the sawmill, but now, that's where the women's prison is.* Or conversely, a resident pointed to the facility out of his truck window while giving me a tour of Tallulah and said, *There, where the prison is... that used to be Chicago Mill.* Not only do the Mill and the prison cross-reference each other as past, present, and possible forms of work and industry, they also figure as possible community and worker self-identifications. With the shuttering of the Mill, Tallulah became a “corrections community,” as one resident put it. The Mill and the prison pose a stark contrast. For younger generations, if they know of the Mill it is through stories that bear little connection to their lived experience, or it is through working in the prison facility that refigured the carceral landscape. Also, aggregated with the Mill is agriculture when David notes, *If they weren't doing farming, it was Chicago Mill.* Likewise, Clarence remarks that the agricultural place holder for the prison that would be built after the Mill shut down was a corn farming operation.

## Racialized Outcomes

In the 1930's, spurred by the Great Depression and lack of land, a migration of “hill people” from the Red River area in north-western Louisiana and Arkansas, as well as Mississippi moved into Madison Parish. A white man in his mid-eighties I call Robert recalls his family's move to Madison and tenancy. His description of “renting farmland” and the trajectory of outcomes for him and his family contrast with what was possible for Clarence and his family, foregrounding the racialized and classed nature of mobility and opportunities for curating livelihoods during the inter-war period of the twentieth century.

*My people came over on the tail end of the Great Depression in 1932 from over in the Red River bottom in northwest Louisiana trying to get somewhere to make a living. I was born and raised here. Born on rented farmland out here on Ashley Plantation. When I was a kid, we had a whole lot of small farmers. Well like us – we might have rented a hundred acres when we were farming. Daddy would have maybe 30 or 40 acres of cotton and then put out hay for the livestock.*

*When I was fifteen years old, I was delivering papers and got to be friends with a boy, and his brother-in-law owned a crop-dusting service. He let me come to work for him – real long hours. I worked for him from 1950 to 1966 and he was good enough to teach me to fly as part of my income. After I graduated from high school, I went to college at Louisiana Tech and got my ground school and then a commercial license and went to work crop dusting. I did that from 1954-1989. It was a good stretch.*

*In 1943 my dad quit farming and went to pipelining - these big pipelines they lay underground to transport oil and gas. He worked all over Kentucky – my daddy worked there for several years – then on up into Massachusetts and in Texas.*

In contrast to Clarence, Robert was able to graduate high school, go to college, and quite literally rise above the fields as a crop duster spraying the rented lands his father left for the oil industry.<sup>7</sup> Robert's relationship to the plantation, his father's hired hands, and its

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<sup>7</sup> As with crop dusting, the growth of the oil industry, like the decline of sharecropping that I describe below expanded greatly in the south during World War II as demand increased and pipelines were laid, like the railroads, as military infrastructure. By the 1950's nearly a quarter of Louisiana's tax revenues came from energy producers (Stromberg 2014: 56).



educational structures were also quite different, shaped as they were by race. Robert describes his interpretation of the plantation planting and educational structures but also shares his memory of interacting with African American farm labor and the ways in which class effected education for poor whites.

*I never will forget – I was six or seven years old – my Daddy had a man working for him, and he was a good honest man, and Daddy let me ride on a cotton wagon with him. He'd make one trip a day to town on the cotton wagon to go to the gin. Daddy trusted him that much to let me ride with him. He had a wife and she was one of these "firebrands" and every chance she'd get she'd take me off to one side and tell me how bad the white folks were treating the black folks. I always have thought about that. Her name was Birdie. I'll never forget her.*

*When I was a kid, I was born in 1934, we had a black church just across the road from our house and they had their school in that church and all kids of all ages met in one school with one teacher. He was the most respected man in the country, and he had a car which was highly unusual. He never did get more than 10 miles an hour - the kids used to practice running alongside the car trying to keep up with him. We called him Mr. Benny and our parents made sure that we talked to Mr. Benny with respect and called him "Mister" Benny. He was a preacher and a teacher. This was going on when I can first remember, and I know it was commonplace in the 1940's. I moved back into town in 1943.*

*All the black kids were in the churches and white kids had regular schools. Even in those days the plantation schools were not open during crop times. They only went to school three or four months a year because they had to be in the field during the planting time, the preparation time, the hoeing, and then they got a little time off before they had to start picking. Then, in the winter – in the dead of winter – they'd go to school if they could get enough firewood for them old little heaters they had in the church. Even when I was in the first - second- third grade the country kids in my grades were not required to come to school in September. They could start school with no penalty in October when they got through picking cotton; that was the poor white kids, sharecroppers, and small farmers. There was a whole bunch of kids in school that was farm kids.*

Robert turned nine years old in 1943, the year his father left farming to bury oil pipeline in Kentucky. At that time, Clarence was working at the now abandoned Coca-Cola bottling factory packing bottles into cases of twenty-four. Clarence turned 18 years old that year and left the bottling plant and Tallulah. Clarence crisscrossed the country

several times travelling through Arkansas and Mississippi to California and from there to Washington, D.C. and then back again to Hawaii to military bases. By the time he completed basic and advanced training and gunny school he shipped to Okinawa where he served in the 2300<sup>th</sup> Quarter Master Trucking Company, an ordinance supply company that hauled food, ammunition, and supplies. Clarence tells me, *I was on Okinawa when they dropped the bomb. Sure was.* In 1946, Clarence came home and helped his family and himself “get ahead.” He provided an allotment for his family and used his G.I. benefits to attend trade school.

During the War years, the enlistment of African Americans combined with an ongoing migration of labor into military construction and manufacturing left plantation owners and Chicago Mill equally concerned by “labor shortages,” a racialized euphemism and strategy for creating pools of exploitable labor (Stuesse 2016). While Clarence was making his way through military training and Robert was making his way from the “country” to the town, the first 300 of 20,000 captured Prisoners of War (POWs) that would be sent to camps across Louisiana arrived at Camp Ruston, a prison camp about forty miles from Tallulah (Hoose 2014:129). Eventually reaching a capacity of 5,800 POWs as a result of the German Afrika Corp surrender in Tunisia, Ruston was the second largest internment camp in the state (Gelpi, Jr. 2009:346; Hoose 2014:129).

### **POWs, Woodpeckers, and Electric Chairs**

In September 1943, the War Department began allowing planters and companies to contract POWs’ labor in exchange for a small “salary,” \$.80 of daily wage in script, transportation, food, with the remainder of the wage being sent to the government (Shea and Pritchett 1982: 15). The Tallulah Fairground was wrapped in barbed-wire and 505

German prisoners from Ruston “promptly set up a kitchen, bakery and library.” Chicago Mill and Lumber sent trucks in the mornings and drove the POWs out to lumber camps to clear cut the remaining timber of what had been two-million vanishing acres contained in the “Singer Tract.” The Singer Sewing Machine Company had acquired the land for access to timber for making sewing machine casings but sold the rights to Chicago Mill.

There were efforts by elected officials and the Audubon Society (who were appalled at the use of POWs’ labor, and the environmental destruction) to turn the remaining tract into a refuge for a quickly disappearing Ivory-billed woodpecker. The Chicago Mill Chairman in Chicago, Il., reportedly cared little, saying, “ We are just money grubbers. We are not concerned, as are you folks, with ethical considerations.” Likewise, Singer was not making sewing machines, but “gunsights and triggers,” and were unconcerned with environmental considerations or the trees (Hoose 2014:131). From 1943 to 1946, the years that Clarence had spent in military training and stationed in Okinawa, the Mill and the planters profited from conscripted labor of war prisoners. Indeed, they profited in three ways: the nearly free German labor; the production of boxes for the War Department and for British tea; and the sale of cleared land to rural farmers. From time to time the sawmill blade in Tallulah would jam up on the Minié balls shot from rifles during the Civil War that had lodged in the trees (Cokinos 2009:105; Hoose 2014:130).

An African American man I call Phillip remembers the camp. I was sitting chatting with him after attending church one Sunday and he began to tell me of a traumatic childhood memory involving an electrocution in 1942. This memory entangled with his recollection of the “concentration camp.”

*There's one thing that I remember that I don't want to remember, but it sticks with me. When I was a kid, I don't remember how old I was – well there was a concentration camp here at the Fairgrounds - a POW camp - and they were Germans here and they stayed somewhere, I don't know where they lived at. They would go around the city and cut weeds on the sides of the ditches and the sides of the road. They would do it. Those people would do it. That was during the Second World War. When the War ended... they just disappeared. I don't know what happened. Maybe they were shot – I don't know. When the Second World War came on, and just being a little boy - I knew there was a war and that was it. I had my mother's family members were in the service, in the Army, and they would come and visit.*

*What I was saying... I remember as a little boy, and it's a sad thing to me, was, and I didn't really know better, but I wondered why they were executing a man downtown at the courthouse. His name was Willie Lockett. I remember just as good - he was supposed to have raped this woman - a white lady. Now, people say, hearsay, that he didn't. He was caught with her, and so, if she didn't say that he had raped her, they were going to get her. It was one of those things. As a kid you hear that talk you know. I remember the night that they executed him. It was one evening and all the lights was going like this.*

Phillip holds up his hands and opens and closes his fingers to his palms in pulsing, flickering motions:

*They'd go down and they'd jump back up. That was the night they electrocuted Willie Lockett. I never forgot that.<sup>8</sup>*

Phillip's memory of the internment camp raises what appears to be surprise at the municipal labor in which POWs engaged; maintaining the roadsides and ditches in a town that held them captive. This is work that is largely understood as racialized and performed by African Americans in Tallulah. Indeed, such work was commonly performed by interned prisoners as was work in lumber, agriculture, and mining (Shea and Pritchett 1982:17). As well, there's a ghostly quality to Phillip's memory of the men in as much as he could not say where they lived or stayed, despite knowing of the camp,

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<sup>8</sup> During this time, Louisiana stored its electric chair, "Gruesome Gertie," in the penitentiary at Angola. It was transported to Parish executions in a truck (Galvin 2015). Mississippi also had a traveling electric chair (Townsend 2016).

or where they went when they “just disappeared.” Too, there is an entangled “wondering about” the strangeness of a man being executed at the courthouse at all, much less the manner in which the execution reached out from the courthouse and materialized before him as flickering lights in surging electrical currents. Two horrible circumstances, a concentration camp and an execution reflected through the prism of childhood. Or, it may be that recollecting the internment camp provided an historical context for placing the execution on a timeline in a long past mottle of remembered events. Regardless, these experiences were clearly affecting and the drawing of them together conjoins the incarceration of German POWs and the execution of an African American man, effectively linking the internment camp at the fairgrounds, the courthouse, and “contract” POW laborers “on the sides of roads” as features on a remembered carceral landscape.

## **Conclusion**

After the Germans disappeared and those who survived the war returned to Tallulah, the lumber industry continued to expand as did other forms of manufacturing. The social and economic transformations spurred by the War increased African American opportunities for creating livelihoods off the plantations ultimately dismantling the sharecropping system and prompting a shift in agriculture towards mechanization and large landholding. Of course, the dissolution of sharecropping and tenancy did not occur all at once. Agricultural mechanization was already ongoing, but in Madison and the surrounding parishes these processes proceeded more slowly because of local constraints and often violent enforcement of social, political, and economic hierarchies that produced cheap racialized labor for a longer period of time. The military training, military benefits and assistance from the government, and the experience of race relations outside of

Madison, as well as their own treatment in the military as it desegregated helped form new possibilities for life chances and consciousness concerning disenfranchisement and control in the Jim Crow south (de Jong 2002; Lutz 2001; Rushing 2009). I return to the post-war years, agricultural restructuring, and Civil Rights activism to provide a context for a discussion of livelihoods and community development today in Tallulah in Chapter Five. The next chapter details the growth of carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah and describes the political economy of prison building through processes of privatization and extraction.

### CHAPTER 3: LOCALIZED CARCERAL EXPANSION IN TALLULAH



*Figure 6: Guard tower at the former youth prison and the remnants of an outbuilding from Chicago Mill and Lumber.*

The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us. We do not question whether it should exist. It has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison. [ Davis 2004:18-19; quoted in Polanco 2015:200]

#### **Introduction**

This chapter traces the turn to a carceral industrialization in Tallulah in the early 1990's and examines the local and statewide repercussions of this shift as well as the place specific social and economic consequences of carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah. Reconstructing how prisons came to be built and by whom and for what reasons in Tallulah provides context and a case study for the dissertation's claims regarding carceral extractivism and racial capitalism more broadly. In relationship to livelihoods, futures,

and the reproduction of economic barriers to well-being, retracing this period of prison building illustrates the ways in which the political economy of punishment writ large occurs in a locality and how this history still reverberates in Tallulah and Louisiana more broadly today.

The contents and research presented in this chapter is drawn largely from archival research at the local newspaper, national reporting, court documents, and occasionally, but less so, the memories of residents. As there is no digital archive of the newspaper that I am aware of, I worked with bound volumes of print copies. Some of them were quite old and in some cases pages were fragile. I took digital pictures of the volumes (roughly 13 years) to reduce wear from handling. The account of carceral entrepreneurship given in this chapter is partial and concentrates on the early period of carceral industrialization occurring in the 1990s. In some cases, years relevant to reconstructing the prison building timeline were missing (ex: several years in the 2000s).

This history and its material transformations inform the project's research questions concerning how for-profit incarceration shapes livelihoods, resource provision, and structures environments across areas of social and civic life. It illustrates the ways that political influence, cronyism, and carceral profiteering, very much like what occurred 100 years earlier with James and convict leasing, disenfranchise and under-develop communities and human capacities. Also like in the period of convict leasing, fear mongering was rampant, law and order politics were expedient, and the national and global economy was undergoing a massive restructuring.

While Chicago Mill and Lumber was laying off workers into the 1970's and early '80's, a broader process of deindustrialization was occurring nationwide as



manufacturing gave way to a more “flexible” financialized service-oriented economy (Harvey 1991). During this period, like the incarceration boom in the post-Civil War period that occurred alongside the shift from a slave based political-economy, Louisiana was again under financial and infrastructural stress from a surge in mass incarceration spurred in part by a policy shift from the War on Poverty to the War on Crime that occurred over the decades following the Second World War (Alexander 2010; Hinton 2016; Mohammed 2010).

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs (2018) describes how in 1975, then Magistrate and later Federal Court Judge Frank Polozola found in favor of “four Black prisoners at Angola, Arthur Mitchell Jr., Hayes Williams, Lee E. Stevenson, and Lazarus D. Joseph, who had filed a lawsuit against the Louisiana State Penitentiary at in 1971 for numerous constitutional issues including medical neglect, unsafe facilities, religious discrimination, racial segregation, and overcrowding” (Pelot-Hobbs 2018; see *Williams v. McKeithan* C.A 71-98 (M.D.La, 1975), US Magistrate Special Report). The court ordered sweeping changes to address the issues raised in the suit which included significantly reducing prisoner populations at the facility. Efforts to comply with the order pushed state inmates and newly convicted persons into already overcrowded local parish jails. While rural Sheriffs initially complained of the cost of housing state prisoners, by 1980 and into the 1990’s per diem increases incentivized carceral expansion, especially in rural areas.

Locally and at the state level, carceral administration in Louisiana and the south historically wavers between competing and essentially contradictory political and economic appetites to defray costs of penal operations while also seeking to capitalize on them, as was seen with the convict leasing system. The growth in Tallulah’s carceral

industry began in earnest in 1990 at the height of the War on Drugs, the “crack epidemic,” and a “tough on crime” political environment with the Madison Parish Detention Center for Men. The initial efforts of then Sheriff Mark Harmon to build the center failed because the parish could not meet the 30% cost contribution to state monies as multiple tax propositions failed on the ballot. The parish jail was at, and at times over, capacity and the Sheriff under threat of fines from the federal government. Unable to fund the construction of the center through tax revenues, Harmon matter-of-factly sought financing from private investors. Such a move was made possible because of the Louisiana Private Corrections Management Act of 1989 that legalized contracts with private prison operators, ending a nearly one hundred year moratoria on the practice.

**Madison Parish Detention Center for Men: “... a good moneymaker.”**

A private groundbreaking ceremony for the \$1.3 million, 13,500 sq. ft cinderblock building was held on October 23, 1990. The local newspaper reported Harmon said: “I went and borrowed money from private individuals. I plan to manage the facility until it is paid for” and then he would become owner and sell the building and property to Madison Parish. Distortedly, he claimed, “There is no tax money involved in this project” and that LeBlanc Group were the architects and engineers and Louisiana Corrections Services, Inc. (LCS) “are the professionals who do this for a living and are developing [the facility]. There a lot of other investors involved,” Harmon explained, “and I don’t know all their names.” Harmon did note that only one local individual was involved in the project but was left unnamed. LCS was founded the same year the detention center opened by Pat LeBlanc, a long time Louisiana businessman who was active in the Republican party in Louisiana, and his sons. Both the LeBlanc Group and

LCS were owned and operated by the LeBlanc family (Madison Journal, 10/31/90, 1-A). This rather small concentration of individuals involved in the project, which mirrors the financing of the youth prison described below highlights the ways carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah, and historically the broader state, relies largely on the political and financial capital of a relatively small group of people.

The plan as the sheriff described it was to have two jails, the existing one that houses parish prisoners and the new center to house state prisoners and people awaiting trial. Once the individual has been sentenced then the state starts paying for the incarceration. The per diem rate at that time was \$18.25 per day but the possibility of it raising to \$26 per day in the near future made the investment attractive. The current rate in 2018 is \$24.39 (Claitor and Leger 2018:3). Harmon planned to take first time offenders and not house “hardened criminals,” noting that, “I already take prisoners from other parishes. It’s a common practice. When my jail fills up, they take some of my prisoners.” Harmon’s plan to have two jails, one for state and one for parish inmates speaks directly to the problems faced by the state and parishes in regard to overcrowding and the disinterest, and in some cases the inability, of the state to mitigate it through other measures, such as modifications in policing and less punitive sentencing, even while under a nearly two decade old judicial order (Madison Journal, 10/31/90, 1-A).

One result of this situation of state reliance on local municipalities and sheriff’s departments is a consolidation of political power in the offices of the sheriff locally and the Louisiana Sheriff’s Association statewide (Pelot-Hobbs 2018). Another is the opening of opportunities for private operators to finance and manage carceral operations for the state and local governments, often under the rhetorical auspices of “community safety”

and as a growth industry for rural economies, both of which are undergirded and made sensible by long standing narratives of black criminality and dangerousness (Muhammad 2011). A third result is the continued entrenchment of a swapping system whereby prisoners from the state’s urban population centers, such as New Orleans and Shreveport are diverted to rural areas outside of social and economic networks of support in the communities from which they are removed.<sup>9</sup>

As Ruth Gilmore notes:

...in the case of communities where imprisoned people come from, we have the removal of people, the removal of earning power, the removal of household and community camaraderie” and in “the rural areas where prisons arose, we can chart related destabilizations, and rather than, as many imagine, rural prison towns acquiring resources displaced from urban neighborhoods. The fact is the two locations are joined in a constant churn of unacknowledged though shared precarious desperation (Petitjean 2018).

When the detention center was finally completed in February 1992, Mike LeBlanc of the LeBlanc Group thanked those in attendance at the ribbon cutting for the opportunity to build what he hoped would be “a boon for the economy.” Louisiana State Rep. Bryant Hammett said, “I think it will be a tremendous boost for Madison Parish,” while also suggesting that prison building might be “a good moneymaker” for the wider Delta region (Madison Journal, 2/5/92, 1-A).

Indeed, just over a year later, the Journal explained the detention center holds parish and state prisoners, but as noted by then District Attorney General Buddy Caldwell, “much of the money that goes to pay to house the inmates flows out of the

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<sup>9</sup> On the issue of prisoner transportation and swapping, see Chang (2012a) and Gottschalk (2016:37-39). As Nancy La Vigne (2014) notes, people are an average of 100 miles from home in state facilities and an average of 500 hundred miles from home in federal facilities. In Madison Parish, if you are from New Orleans then you are roughly 250 miles, four hours by car, from home. There is no bus service to Tallulah.

parish and into private hands.” Here is an example of how privatization undermines local community economic and social development. This outflow of funds will be seen, quite dramatically, in the discussion of the youth facility later in this chapter. The newspaper reported that “Caldwell suggested the parish could save money by building and running its own detention center. The move would also allow his office to keep more criminals off the streets. Taking many of the addicted criminals away from their drugs would give relief to a community increasingly under assault, [Caldwell] said.” The District Attorney’s suggestion to effect cost savings while expanding capacity further in the parish reproduces the logic of the state in attempting to build themselves out of crisis while advocating for more incarceration.<sup>10</sup> Seen here, too, is the reproduction of state logics of profiting from the business of “rehabilitation,” at the turn of the century ending of convict leasing, a recasting of historically persistent, paternalistic colonial narratives of civilizing savages and character deficiency that undergirded defenses of black enslavement (Baker 2010; Trouillot 2003).

Caldwell noted the parish criminal docket was overburdened by crack cases. He claimed crack is instantly addictive in “one dose,” and leveled comparisons to overflowing water drains backed up with trash, saying “The bottom line is that we still need another 50 to 60 capacity so that *the stomach can have a rest from the virus* [my italics]. [...] Some of these drug dealers will tell you, “ he continued, “they got off of drugs when they were put in jail” (Madison Journal 6/30/93, p. 1-A). While mixed metaphors to be sure, the rhetoric of waste and garbage out of place and viruses

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, then and current Attorney General William Barr’s 1992 paper, “The Case for More Incarceration.”

threatening the social bodily system's health do powerful imaginary work and reinforce racialized constructions of dangerousness and criminality (Douglas 1966; Edensor 2005). These constructions of drug users and dealers, while conflated to preserve a logic of criminalizing bad actors and victims in one breath, posit the inevitability of crack creating criminals in "one dose" while also framing incarceration *as* rehabilitation in terms of incapacitating a pathogenic criminality, but also as a therapeutic intervention for addiction, in both cases proposing incarceration as treatment. It is worth noting the multiple "therapeutic" interventions proposed here, both in terms of financial "dis-ease," criminalized waste, and in terms of a racialized diagnosis of a viral, highly contagious drug addiction for which incarceration is prescribed as a cure. This is not to say that drug use disorders and the drug economy were then or are now not problems; but, I argue these manifestations should be understood as "symptoms" of structural violence (Galtung 1964; Rlyo-Bauer and Farmer 2016:47-74), such as poverty, policing, and mass incarceration itself that act to produce and reproduce the conditions whereby illicit practices such as drug dealing as a livelihood strategy is necessary at all (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009).

Less than a month after the District Attorney's commentary, the Sheriff's department announced it was expanding the Detention Center, adding 130 beds to double its capacity, repeating again that the expansion "will give an economic boost to the area." Harmon went on to signal the addition in terms of community building, quipping that, "While other people are talking, we're providing jobs" (Madison Journal 6/21/93, p.1-A). Two months after the announcement, Police Jurors (a Police Jury is similar to a county board of commissioners in other states) complained about the high costs of housing

prisoners at center. The parish had only budgeted paying for 36 parish prisoners and not the 60 that they figured were being held at the time. Juror James Moore distrustfully wondered if the jail was actually full at all and if the parish was paying to house prisoners at the Detention Center while the jail had unused capacity. There was speculation if the new expansion of the facility (itself speculation) would cause fiscal problems later because housing inmates there is more expensive than at the jail. Jury President Thomas Joe Williams explained the expansion worried him. “They may be creating a need for bed space,“ he cautioned, “that we are unable to pay for.” It was noted that while \$24,000 had recently gone to the Detention Center, no money was being allocated in the community for youth programming. Williams suggested the money spent on corrections would be better spent by building baseball fields, parks, or other recreation areas. “We have a heck of a parish,” Williams lamented. “Everywhere teenagers congregate we run them off. The only place it is legal for them to congregate, it seems, is the jail or the detention center” (Madison Journal 8/18/93, p.1-A).

Williams’ criticism references several issues here concerning youth provisioning in the community. One the one hand, a years old city curfew ordinance banning “anyone under the age of 17” from city streets and public places “between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. Sunday -Thursday, and between midnight and 6 a.m. Friday and Saturday” (Graham 1990,1-A).<sup>11</sup> According to residents in Tallulah during my fieldwork the issue of under-provision for youth is still perceived as a serious problem and a contentious flash point in Tallulah. This problem was identified and discussed in depth at a Poverty

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<sup>11</sup> In Louisiana, up until 2016, youth 17 and older could be sentenced to serve time in adult facilities (Dunne 2016).

Summit (Chapter 4) held in the community during August 2015 and several community residents, mayoral candidates, and youth remarked on this issue during all stages of my fieldwork. Headlines locally and nationally warning about the dangerousness of idle youth were common during the period leading up to the boom in prison building, and still persists in the community.

In response to the police jury concerns regarding the rising costs of incarceration, the Sheriff again appealed to economic development in the community. “They need to go to some kind of *business* school,” he retorted [my italics]. Harmon contended the Jury President was misinformed, insisting that he had taken it upon himself to build the facility and bring jobs and security to the parish. Harmon said he charges the parish \$10 dollars a day to house the parish prisoners which would otherwise cost \$21 dollars a day, plus mileage for transportation. He threatened this policy, which was intended to take some burden of the parish, might be put under review. Harmon also noted the Sheriff’s Department helped the parish save money by having inmates cut the courthouse grass instead of paying someone \$100 dollars to do it, which was the practice (Madison Journal 8/25/93, 1-A, 4-A).<sup>12</sup> The \$1.5 million-dollar expansion funded by the LeBlanc family and Louisiana Corrections Services, Inc. opened in July 1994, adding an additional 140 beds. It was estimated that the expansion would circulate an additional \$60,000 a month through “the economy” and add 8-12 additional guard positions. The newspaper reported that nearly “\$100,000 has been raised through the first center which has afforded the sheriff’s office new equipment and salary increases as proceeds go to the Sheriff’s

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<sup>12</sup> Incarcerated persons in orange jumpsuits can still be seen on the courthouse lawn and parking lots picking up litter.



Department because the laws of conflicting interest do not allow Harmon, who is one of the owners, to keep any of the money brought in by the center” (Collins 1994). The accrual of proceeds to Sheriffs’ Departments and for raises to sheriff proprietors is one example of how privatization arrangements financially incentivize expanding political power, policing practices, and grow carceral operations locally.

Juror Williams’ complaints about under provisioning youth in the community turned out to be prescient.

### **Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth**

Since 1992 then Mayor Donald Walker had been in discussions with the state to secure a youth prison in Tallulah. In November 1994, five months after the detention center expansion opened, Louisiana’s largest secure juvenile facility, Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth (TCCY) began accepting “cadets.” James R. Brown, a local businessman and son of former Senator Charles Brown of Tallulah (Ritea 2001), formed a private company, Trans-American Development Association (TADA) to operate the “boot camp” style facility. Designed to be the nation’s largest, the intent was to hold a total of 700 juveniles once all construction phases had been completed (Ferstel 2001). In order to win a no bid contract from the state for the facility, Brown included politically connected friends in the company: George Fisher, then Governor Edwin Edwards’ former campaign manager and Verdi Adam, a former engineer at the highway department (Butterfield 1998). TADA secured \$122.5 million in state-insured bonds, not based on their ability to manage the facility but through their friendship with the Governor. Trans-American contracted with GRW Corporation, a juvenile justice facilitator based in Tennessee, to operate the facility. One month later the state would call

a state of emergency at the facility due to beatings, violence, and a riot in the cafeteria. GRW was released from its contract. This was the first of several state seizures of the facility.

From its inception the men planned to operate the facility with the lowest possible wages and the least amount of service provision (Butterfield 1998), a common strategy and consequence of for-profit incarceration. Over the life of the facility TADA's operational contract was amended several times, in each case to the company's financial betterment. For instance, when the facility opened the state agreed to pay the company "\$52.88 per inmate per day and then \$62.88" once the facility was complete at full capacity with 686 youth. However, in 1997, the contract was amended under Gov. Mike Foster's administration to ensure the company was paid if the state took over the facility. The amendment afforded paying the company \$16.62 per day for all of the 686 youth, regardless of how many were held there. The company refinanced its debt the same day. The day after, each owner was paid \$2 million of the \$7.6 million obtained through the refinance. In 1999 the state finally seized the facility for Constitutional rights abuses, the first private prison in the country to be sued and closed by the Department of Justice. The takeover triggered the amended agreement and in 2000 the per diem rate increased to \$17.10 for each of the 686 youth, although the capacity was reduced by a court order to 440 (Ritea 2001). According to a state legislative audit, between January 1995 and April 2001, the three men comprising Trans-American made \$8.7 million dollars in salaries and dividends. The lease payments were initially scheduled to continue until 2012 when the bonds would be repaid; the three men would still retain ownership of the facility (Bervera 2004).

After the state took over the facility its problems continued. The state passed legislation closing the facility in 2003 -2004. TADA was rolled into Verdi Adam's firm FBA, LLC, took that name and continued to collect over \$3.4 million a year (through 2012) for the original construction bonds as well as lease payments. The state declined to release themselves from the bonds at the risk of tanking the state's credit rating. Instead, the Department of Corrections took on \$30.5 million dollars in more debt from the State Bond Commission to "purchase" the facility in 2007 and re-figure it as Steve Hoyle Rehabilitation Center, the state's first adult jail dedicated to drug and alcohol abuse treatment. As well, parts of the facility were used to train corrections officers, providing additional training space other than that provided at Angola (Staff 2005). The Department of Corrections made a payment of ~\$3 million in 2019 and will make its last payment in 2020 (House 2019).

### **West Side High**

In order to have a youth prison at all there needed to be an onsite educational facility. The classroom instruction named West Side High School initially consisted of a principle and twelve teachers, as well as other aides and therapists. The school district was tasked with hiring the teachers and would be reimbursed roughly \$779,000 by the state (Madison Journal. September 7, 1994. P. 1-A). Then school board superintendent Joe Walk announced that instead of the normal public education pay cycle where teachers are paid for 180 days a year, the pay cycle at West Side would run for 249 days and then reset (Cummins, Scott. 1994. P. 1-A, 3-A). A longtime resident familiar with the facility noted that the longer pay cycle and higher salaries had the effect of siphoning teachers in the parish and the broader region out of the public-school system and into the youth

detention facility. They explained:

*In order to attract qualified teachers, they needed to pay them more than what they make in the public schools. So, guess what that did. All of a sudden, certified teachers in the surrounding areas started applying for jobs out there for the higher pay [than] they were making in the local public-school systems. Initially a lot of people didn't know that this was in fact another high school under the Madison Parish School Board. You can imagine, it just - boom - it drained the certified teachers out these school systems. They came to teach in the prison.*

While other residents, including former educators, expressed doubts that this had happened, it was reported in 2003 that 97% of the teachers in the prison's "alternative" school were certified compared to 68% in the wider parish (Reckdahl 2003). Although there were competing claims regarding teacher migration, it is clear that carceral entrepreneurship in the parish did in fact extract and divert resources, including children from their families and communities, tens of millions of dollars in state funds to the three owners of Trans-American, and teachers from the parish and surrounding community public school systems. As well, consider that the salaries earned by teachers and guards living in other communities migrated out as well. Nearly \$800,000 per year in state funds for the school left when the youth facility and West Side High closed.

During its operation, the youth prison would house more than 1000 predominately African American youth per year.<sup>13</sup> In 2000, over 80% of youth in secure facilities were African American. Nearly 70% of youth were detained for non-violent offenses (McGough and Cangelosi 2005:1142). A group of concerned citizens and parents of the incarcerated youth engaged the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana and the U.S.

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<sup>13</sup> Brian B. v. Stalder, CA No. 98-886-B-Mi (M.D. La. 1998) Amended Complaint (Class Action) p.12.

Department of Justice who both filed suit in 1998 (Reckdahl 1998).<sup>14</sup> Conditions at TCCY included the usual parade of neglect and cruelty found in popular media reports: improper sanitation, lack of medical care, excessive force and restraint, inadequate food, and sexual abuse.<sup>15</sup> For example, over seven days in “May of 1998, 70 of the 620 boys at Tallulah were sent to the infirmary after being involved in fights [and] one had been raped. Another youth begged not to be returned to a dormitory where he said a fellow prisoner had been sexually abusing him for weeks.” Additionally, “a former juvenile offender, a 16-year-old who served 18 months at Tallulah for stealing a bike, said youths often fought each other over food and clothes” (Friedmann 1999).

A former counselor, who I call Ally, recounted to me that while working at an alternative school in South Port, Louisiana many of her students in that community had served time at TCCY.

*A lot of the kids had actually, ironically, been in the Tallulah prison up here. I didn't even know what a “Tallulah” was. South Port Alternative School was the last stop for them. If they didn't go through that school, they wouldn't have any chance at an education. They ran them all the way from South Port to the Tallulah jail. Those kids had their horror stories about being there, and they used to tell them – “you're going to go back to Tallulah,” “I just came from Tallulah” – these young men, they were there until they were 22 and they went through a lot of different things. They talked about the rapes, about being raped in jail. They told me when you first get there it's a honeymoon period, then you're there about a week they'll break your jaw, then they'll rape you afterward. They broke your jaw so you couldn't scream. That's what they told me about. The officers knew, but it was like an initiation thing.*

*We actually had one guy – he had been cellmates with another student and when he came back to South Port – he used to beat this boy something awful. Beat him up all the time. I said, why do you pick with this boy, he hasn't done anything to you. “I just don't like him. I just don't like him,” he'd say. So, one day he hit him in the head with a fire extinguisher. And I mean, there was blood everywhere, and this boy went to the hospital. We thought he wasn't going to make it. But over*

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<sup>14</sup> See Swift (2013) and Dolan (2016). See also United States v. Louisiana, No. 98-947-B 1 (M.D. La. 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Pp. 16-33.

*the course of time, he came back, and he still has staples in his head. And then I said, well what was the problem? He said, what happened was the boy had been molested in jail. The boy that hit him with the fire extinguisher. He said, he was his cellmate. He saw it. He knew about it. And he told him, you better not tell anybody. He always thought that he was going to tell. So, if he could beat him into submission, to shut him up, he was ensured that he would never tell.*

*I firmly believe, I may be wrong, I believe if a person is a criminal, it started somewhere. It started somewhere. Unless you're a sociopath, it started somewhere. I look at these boys being all locked up, and all this here, and I say, you know something's wrong. Something's wrong. I've seen what can happen to these young people. I know there's a reason behind everything. Kids don't just do things for nothing. People think, "there's a bad kid." No such thing. Something has to happen in order for those kids to do what they do.*

Behavioral and psychological issues persisted well after release from the facility and return to their communities, illustrating “the churn of unacknowledged though shared precarious desperation” spanning these geographies and lives described by Gilmore. While these consequences would remain largely unseen by the majority of Tallulah residents, the collateral damages in Tallulah include the community identification with “Tallulah” and the association of its residents as a prison town and its impacts on education quality. Many residents presume matter-of-factly that a major barrier to community and business development, ironically given the stated reasons by local and state officials for building them in the first place, is the prisons. One person rhetorically but bluntly asked, “Why would you want to bring a business here?”

Tallulah was not the only privatized youth prison to be sued. The same organization, The Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana also filed a class action lawsuit in 1998 against Wackenhut Corrections Corporation (now GeoGroup), the company contracted to run the Jena Juvenile Justice Center in Jena, La.<sup>16</sup> The complaints here included, much like at Tallulah, lack of food, clothing, verbal and physical abuse by

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<sup>16</sup> See, A.A. v. Wackenhut (M.D. La.)

guards, and overuse of isolation. The facility was shuttered and settlement agreements from the Tallulah and Jena lawsuits spurred system wide change in the figuration of Louisiana's juvenile justice system. While the reformation of Louisiana's juvenile system is laudable, the fallout from these suits deserves more attention in terms of the privatization context in which they occurred and how the companies themselves and the facilities morphed.

Facing mounting scandals and evidence of abuses at Jena and elsewhere, Wackenhut, created a spin off company, rebranding as Global Expertise in Outsourcing Solutions (GeoGroup). Jena was sold to another spin-off company, Correctional Properties Trust (later CentraCorp) with which Geo would later merge. The Jena facility reformed as LaSalle Detention Center and began holding undocumented immigrants. In the interim Jena was used by the state to house prisoners evacuated during Hurricane Katrina. Eleven of the thirteen facilities acquired in the Centracorp transaction had already been under use by Geo through "lease-back" agreements. The value of lease-back arrangements is that they allow the seller to regain 100% of their capital from fixed assets (the building and its equipment) while still profiting from the use of these assets by leasing them to government entities. Louisiana Corrections Services (LCS), the LeBlanc family company that financed the Men's Detention Center in Tallulah would also later be acquired by GeoGroup in 2015.

The cronyism and corruption that occurred between the TADA owners, Governor Edwin Edwards, and the Department of Corrections at TCCY is well documented as is described above concerning the contractual features and political dealing that netted the men millions of dollars. Edwards was convicted in 2000 and served Federal prison time

for taking nearly \$3 million in bribes from applicants for casino licenses beginning in 1991 and through his last term in 1996. As well, although not convicted on this charge, Edwards was an unindicted co-conspirator for taking a nearly million-dollar bribe from Fred Hofheinz, a former Houston, Texas mayor, for the contract to build the youth prison at Jena (Butterfield 2000; Dannenberg 2001). Hofheinz was unable to raise the \$12 million dollars to build the facility and with the help of Edwards, sold the rights to Wackenhut.

Patrick Le Blanc, the founder of LCS Corrections died in a plane crash while running a campaign for public office. Michael LeBlanc, Sr. and Michael LeBlanc, Jr. and two business partners are currently awaiting sentencing in October 2020 for conspiracy, paying bribes and attempting to pay bribes between 2012 -2015 to Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) director Christopher B. Epps and Kemper County Sheriff James Moore. Moore worked with the FBI to build the case against the four men. The LeBlanc's were making payoffs to Epps in exchange for securing MDOC contracts for their Louisiana based Brothers Commissary and American Phone Systems businesses in Mississippi (Bohrer 2019).

For their part, a group of Tallulah residents lobbied the state for the facility's conversion into a community Learning Center, with the local Community College as its core. In 2004, Louisiana Legislature amended the statute that closed TCCY (renamed Swanson when the state took control). The statute originally read that the facility "must be" used as a correctional facility, but was amended to allow for the Learning Center if the facility were bought outright, or the state fully owned the facility, harking back to the issue of state indebtedness. Despite these efforts the prison reopened as Louisiana



Transitional Center for Women (LTCW) and was later, along with the men's facility, sold to LaSalle Corrections, LLC.

The McConnell family that runs and operates LaSalle began in the construction side of prisons during the 1990's and eventually shifted into operations, noting that their already successful nursing home company relied on, in principal, the same business model: put people in a room and keep them alive. By 2012, LaSalle played a role in incarcerating one out of seven prisoners in Louisiana (Chang 2012b). As of June 30, 2018, Louisiana has a state prison population of 33,186 and 47% of these circulate through local carceral facilities and jails and 8% are in transitional work centers. Roughly 67% of this population are black and 94.4% are male (LDPSC 2018). The parole and probation population in 2018 stood at 66,235 (O'Donoghue 2018.)

Privatization and the foregrounding of profit in carceral operations largely short circuits rehabilitation as a potential penal philosophy, gearing corrections to warehousing through cost saving measures and incentivizing increased sentences, as had occurred in convict leasing (Bauer 2018). However, as prison companies increasingly move into areas such as community care, transitional centers, and electronic monitoring, there may be a move to "rehabilitate," but it defers the costs of these "services" to its "clients" whereby real investment in preventative maintenance (such as anti-poverty investments and equitable educational funding) disappear into profit margins.

For example, the case study of TCCY demonstrates mass incarceration can perversely entangle educational systems into the same extractive infrastructure, quite literally collapsing the school-to-prison pipeline on the site of an old lumber mill. The legacy of this imbrication of education with incarceration manifests itself also in the more

recent decision to build a middle-high school complex next to the men's detention center, where school buses traveling to schools and repurposed school buses transporting inmates share the same roads, a feature of life that further normalizes carceral industrialization and puts a fine point on young people imagining carceral futures for themselves, whether as an employee or an inmate.

## **CHAPTER 4: CALL AND RESPONSE: POVERTY SUMMIT AND COMMUNITY FORUM**

As ethnographers, we are challenged to attend at once to the political, economic, and material transience of worlds and truths and to the journeys people take through milieus in transit while pursuing needs, desires, and curiosities or simply trying to find room to breathe beneath intolerable constraints. [Biehl 2013:574]

### **Introduction**

This Chapter begins with a description of a Poverty Summit that I attended in 2015 and then presents an edited version of two Community Forums totaling about four hours of recorded conversation arranged with local residents in 2018 and 2019, respectively. I juxtapose these events and the content of the conversations at each to draw parallels between the ways that discourses at the Poverty Summit and in the Community Forums align or disjoint, the ways that the larger frame of politics and socioeconomic challenges are perceived in a broad sense in the community and how they are experienced in the daily lives and memories of individuals, over time. Several topics dominated the Summit that reoccur in the Forum: community engagement and solidarity, development and availability of resources (or lack thereof), and the perception of a recursive feedback loop where education, crime (and policing), and poverty constitute primary coordinates shaping livelihood choices and futures.

The Forum conversation that follows the Summit description examines the lived experience of several developments guiding the dissertation up until this point – the experience of sharecropping and Jim Crow, criminal justice and mass-incarceration, youth imprisonment and policing; it also prefaces subjects further examined in the chapters that follow – family, faith, education, social services, and livelihoods. As discussed briefly in the introduction and examined more fully in the next chapter,

livelihoods here encompasses the common sense consideration of “the *means* by which people make a living,” but also, the more widely considered “*ways of living*” that are constrained and enabled in differing proportions by access to resources within “wider social contexts” (Staples 2007: 11-12, italics in original). As such, this chapter serves as a fulcrum point in the dissertation that foregrounds the “voices,” words, and analysis of the project’s interlocuters in response to its research questions concerning mass incarceration, prison privatization, and individual and community development in a place, Tallulah, in the U.S. South. Indeed, the choice to title this chapter “Call and Response” highlights that these community members were gracious to respond to the call put forth by this research, but it also references the tradition of “call and response” in African American culture – in antebellum work songs, blues music, and in the black church – as a strategy to engage common lived experience and solidarity. I have largely tried to retain the call and response structure that was a primary feature of the discussion.

### **Poverty Summit**



***Figure 7: Poverty montage used as cover of Poverty Summit program. Created by Sharon Rambo. Photo by Author.***

Roughly 30 people congregated in the gymnasium of the recently built middle-school high school complex. The itinerary distributed to those in attendance displayed a montage of photographs of abandoned and shuttered buildings and disused land taken in and around Tallulah. Reprinted on the inside next to the schedule of events was a reprint of an article that named Madison Parish as the poorest parish (county) in the state, with a poverty rate of 40.3% (59.2% for children) through 2009-2013. It also noted that less than 75 % of Parish residents had completed high school (see Frohlich 2015). This article, a concrete expression of a material existence was cited here, but also at other events I attended and in other conversations.

The first half of the Summit featured a succession of speeches by former and current local, state, and federal elected officials. Largely rhetorical, speakers overwhelmingly invoked well-worn themes regarding individual responsibility, “pulling up by the boot-straps,” community accountability, and sacrifice during “difficult fiscal times” – tropes that have traditionally worked to “blame the poor,” cast racialized workers and the poor as undeserving, and deflect from harmful governmental policies and business behavior dressed up with empowering names like “Safe Streets” and “Right to Work.” Group breakout sessions followed, and attendees split up to conduct SWOT analyses regarding areas of community concern.<sup>17</sup> The themes from the officials’ speeches bled into the group discussions in differing degrees and were apparent in phrases such as “social economics,” “self-care,” and appeals to “personal responsibility” and “community accountability.” The SWOT groups discussed six areas: Community

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<sup>17</sup> Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats analysis is a common strategic tool used in business and other organizations for project planning.

Safety, Economic Development, Education, Community Health, Housing, and Youth.

Informants frequently cited education and youth empowerment as the answer to Tallulah's high rates of crime, poverty, and widely imagined malaise of thinking about life chances and positive futures. Here and across my research, a defeatist and negative mind-set was the most cited area in need of change for the city "to get better." Given the fact that we were discussing a perceived poverty, crime, and education nexus in a public-school facility built next to a prison presented a certain unease and perverse irony. Groups at the Poverty Summit framed the issue of community in several related but at times opposed representations. Descriptions of community in Tallulah, and of youth in particular, vacillated between depictions of persons aimlessly "walking the street" and committing crimes, incapable of "self-care," and as disenfranchised from basic services such as after school programs, proper health care, and community programming. Accounts of youth both valorized their untapped potentials and capabilities ("the children are our future") and pathologized irresponsibility, aimlessness, and their presumed dangerousness.

Still in 2015 is found the worn narrative of youth criminality as well as the lack of programming and funds to "help youth" that Juror Williams had decried during the prison building spree twenty years prior (Chapter 3). Attendants advanced calls for educational interventions, increased community trust with law enforcement, and an ethos of "community self-care." In many ways the discourses from elected officials and community members themselves rehearsed talking points that put into tension the imaginary of the responsible and self-sufficient individual which pathologizes persons who, by the communities own accounting, are disenfranchised from the resources to meet

that ideal (Lyon-Callo 2008). The issue of resources echoed across all areas. In terms of human resources, common concerns raised included lack of trained professionals in teaching and law enforcement. However, many expressed an awareness that trained and skilled workers often out-migrate from Tallulah. Conversely, groups complained about income made in Tallulah and Madison Parish following workers who lived elsewhere, accruing benefits to other communities and tax bases. Lack of financial resources for funding educational, safety, social programs, and other services were ubiquitous across all areas. In this sense, the Summit's descriptions of the causes of poverty are its definition.

Goode and Maskovsky (2001) have argued, instead of "imagining the poor as invisible, passive, pathological, or in need of charity or moral reform to instead treat poverty as a political, economic, and ideological effect of capitalistic processes and state activity" (3). Abandonment was a key figure to express discontent with a lack of support from the state. One person lamented a persistent perception of the Delta region as a "Third World" country. Indeed, the visual rhetoric of the "poverty montage" created for the Summit program elicits such a representation. This imaginary starkly contrasts the nostalgia recounted at the Summit and incessantly across interviews and conversations for a foregone time when Tallulah was "the" destination for commerce, sociality, shopping, recreation, and entertainment. It also contradicts what many residents openly imagine for the future in terms of development and resources.

Residents posed several possible explanations for Tallulah's cultural and economic decline. The most prominent were those described in previous chapters, e.g., the completion of Interstate 20, which diverted traffic from once major arteries

intersecting in Tallulah and the loss of area industry typified by the closing of Chicago Mill and Lumber Company in the 1980's. Others described how political corruption in the form of cronyism, nepotism, and catering to the private interests of a few businessmen and the personal enrichment of office holders pervert and obstruct economic and business development in Tallulah. Political corruption formed a common theme in my interviews and included stories of vote buying, voter fraud, and the problem of voter disenfranchisement due to criminal convictions.

At no time during the Summit that I am aware of were the carceral facilities explicitly mentioned as a factor in the community. After the Summit I introduced myself to a (white) Congressman as a researcher and told him I was interested in the privatized prisons in the community. He gladly volunteered, "Oh yeah, I know them," meaning the owners of LaSalle. When I explained I was researching their impact on the community, he quickly withdrew, told me, "Good luck.," and hopped into his car. This exchange was unsurprising and, perhaps cynically, I expected it. Although the fact of the prisons was not mentioned at the Summit, the issues that swirled through the breakout groups and the Summit itself spoke to broader issues of concern (crime, education, poverty) to which prisons matter-of-factly left unnamed are indexed rather than publicly cited as a problem in and of themselves. For example, in the category of Community Safety "weaknesses" in the community included "Too many killings in the community, "drug infested neighborhoods," and an over-reliance on the Sheriff's Department in contrast to an under-resourced Police Department.

The crime, poverty, education nexus and the historical progression traced in the preceding chapters contextualizes how people's lives become structured by decisions and



processes in which they are either not motivated to participate – “What’d them lying asses have to say? Can’t trust none of them lying ass crooks” – or are disenfranchised from taking part in by legal (inability to vote) and socioeconomic restraints, such as work schedules or transportation. Similarly, the visibility of carceral institutions alongside other areas of life (e.g., schools and neighborhoods) is significant and how they help shape and possibly normalize interrelated and co-produced social and economic patterns of violence and poverty, even as these are experienced unevenly across categories of difference. This normalization extends to how notions and imaginaries of community are formed and to what degree residents, and in particular youth, are variably valorized as sources of hope and potential while also pathologized as irresponsible, itinerant, or dangerous. Lastly, the prevalence of carceral institutions in the social and economic fabric of Tallulah, or towns like it, are perceived to shape people’s conceptions of life chances and influence the attitudes and practices of other social institutions, such as school administrators, government officials, police, and commerce organizations.

During my extended fieldwork in 2018, three years after the Summit, the results of the SWOT analyses were published in a full-page ad in the local newspaper as an endorsement for a Mayoral candidate running against the incumbent. Publishing the results formed a rebuke of the administration’s perceived failure to work with community members in addressing the goals and solutions developed at the Summit. The afterlife of the Summit illustrates the persistence of the issues addressed there, but also the way in which the Summit as an event is still mobilized towards drawing attention to those issues, as a political, economic, and historical marker by which some community members gauge (a lack) of material progress, but also as further proof that elected officials in

Tallulah and the state more broadly, are “out for themselves” and can’t be trusted.

### **Community Forum**

Shannon Bell (2013), in her presentation of the stories of feminist environmental activists fighting the damaging effects of extractive industrialization and mountain top removal in Appalachia, foregrounds the voices of the women activists she interviews for the study, so they “speak for themselves” (5). Bell limits her own comments and analysis until the end of the book, after the women have had their say. Although I provide analysis throughout the discussions that follow, my intention has been to foreground the voices and experience of this project’s interlocuters. The Forum conversation presented here provides a grounded discourse concerning experiences and understandings of a multi-generational group of African American women and men spanning the mid twentieth century to the present.

By foregrounding their voices I hope to decenter my role as a researcher and draw attention to the “problem of voice (‘speaking for’ and ‘speaking to’)” and “place (speaking ‘from’ and speaking ‘of’)” that can occur in ethnographic presentations (Appadurai 1988:17), but also to reiterate that it is from the grounded information provided by research participants that analysis proceeds. Reproducing this conversation intends to amplify the understandings and voices of those who participated in this research, and ultimately whose experience this research sought to understand and present. The Forum participant discussions touch on issues that are salient to those raised at Summit, and at times more personal and less generalized, such as issues surrounding youth, parenting, educational resources, employment opportunities, policing, prisons, and regional considerations of race.

I arrived at the Forum location where Ally, an educational professional, offered to host a community gathering to discuss the topics I was researching in Tallulah and share a meal. After introductions and discussion of my research in an adjoining room, we moved into a larger area where we gathered around a large recreation table where we would later share a meal. While some of the discussants live in Tallulah, many live in nearby communities and / or commute to Tallulah for work. I tell the group that I am particularly interested in the issue of for-profit prisons and how they impact communities and this discussion flows into our recorded conversation.

*Me: ...when they built that youth prison out there in the 1990s, for instance... there were three men who were friends with the governor. They created a company and they made millions of dollars.*

*Sonny, a retired transportation worker in his seventies, echoes: Millions of dollars.*

*Me: Undeniably it brought jobs. I wonder, in the bigger picture, how was that working locally in terms of how resources reach – or don't reach – the community?*

*Ally picks upon the issue of jobs in the community: I know a lot of people... I was surprised. I mean the women... when people are looking for a second job here – the women you see with the prison uniforms on – they're working as guards at the prison. To me, I find prisons offensive. I know you need them, to do what they do. Still, I just find the prison offensive. It's right here in the middle of the town and you see a person one day and the next thing you know – they're locked up. They're in, then they're out, then they're in – going to jail is no big thing. It's the norm. (Several people shake their heads and voice agreement.) It's not like for-profit prisons just started. (Ally scans the faces at the table.) We all know that. You got to be real. It's been going on. Like in South Port – remember? Sometimes they were picking people up to put them in prison just to make money.*

*Sonny: That's right.*

*Ally: You know? This place is no different.*

*Sonny: It was for profit, and it's still for profit.*

*Ally: Yeah, but only for a few. They – this is my opinion – I think they fool the*

*community. Like I said, all these people wearing these uniforms – “Oh, I work at the prison.” Sure, it's giving you a livelihood, true, but you're not looking at the big picture. If you ask any two or three people here in Tallulah if they have somebody locked up down there at the prison – I mean at one point they were breaking out of prison and walking home. That's how calm they were. They're not looking at their options. I wouldn't want a second job at the prison. I mean, incarceration is not offensive to people anymore. You notice that?*

*Sonny: It's the norm.*

*Ally agrees: It's the norm.*

Foster, a younger African American man and veteran explicitly links the presence of for-profit prisons in Tallulah to racialized criminalization and demographics.

*Foster: I really feel like there's an abundance of for-profit jails because there's an abundance of African Americans in the community. A lot of the crimes that get committed are petty crimes, but it's all an opportunity to profit – it's really the only thing they have to keep the city going. Where else would you see a town this small with a municipal police department and a Sheriff's department? There's a county and a city, and it doesn't make any sense for a town this small. And, I mean there's one of the biggest prisons - there's actually two prisons here, there's the men's facility and the women's facility right there in the front, so... (Foster pauses for a moment.)*

*It might not make a difference where you put the prison because municipalities arrest people all the time and take them to different parishes to hold them - for example, Red Port. If you get arrested in Red Port and you're not a county prisoner, they will take you to Central and they will pay those people by the day to house those inmates. So, it all depends on where you are geographically - it depends on how much money you are going to get.*

Ally, Sonny, and Foster's comments highlight the way incarceration becomes imbricated in the community in multiple ways. On the one hand the prisons become a source of employment, strikingly in Ally's account as a second job to augment other work, which speaks to the problem of what a former Mayor described as the problem of not only unemployment but under-employment experienced in Tallulah and the region. On the other, Ally describes the ubiquity of having criminal justice contact in the community as well as the normalization of incarceration in people's lives. African Americans and

people of color are incarcerated at higher rates than whites, and the majority of adult private prisons are historically located in the South (Wood 2007). As well, Foster comments on the tactic of transporting arrestees to other locations to generate revenues. Seventy percent of people in jails have not been convicted of a crime (Wagner and Rabuy 2017). Like the rest of the group, Foster also links incarceration to profit seeking, but does so by remarking on Red Port, a larger and more urban city just across the river.

A grandmother in her 60's who I call Pastor, she like several of the group are clergy, builds on Foster's comments and remarks about her experiences of living in Red Port. While she does not explicitly bring up the for-profitness of prison she does link the presence of prisons in communities to the issue of safety and lack of employment opportunities in the region. She also notes the ways in which communities suffering deep poverty can become "like prisons already."

*Pastor: Like here, they are being incarcerated in Red Port. One of the main things is – well, we are talking about Red Port now – there's really nothing to keep them sustained. In larger cities, there are things for them to do. In Red Port, you're limited. If you don't get that education and ship out – it's like being in prison already. There're just not enough jobs to accommodate people, unless you go to work in the casinos. I'm just telling it like it is. Many young people, since I've moved back here, I've encouraged them to leave once they get their degree. Get that degree and leave! They're even building another jail. It's gotten so complacent that they're putting it in a neighborhood like it's an apartment complex. People are complaining against it, but what can they do? You know where Mary lives – they are building a jail along the strip out there where she is. Now, if they break out, there's everybody there...*

*Howard, Pastor's husband who is also clergy, completes her sentence: ...in the neighborhood.*

*Pastor turns to Howard: You remember the guy that broke out and did some killing and then they had to kill him? (Several people are familiar with this event and nod their heads.) The neighborhood isn't a safe haven for people when you put a jail there; that man got out there and he killed some people, breaking in houses. I didn't realize my door wasn't as secure as I thought it was, but I found that out when that man broke out of there. (Defensive laughter floats around the*

room). *I am serious. I said, “Dear Lord God, my door is not secured!” I lost a little sleep over that. You need... if you can do it, to put that jail way out, but then – like I said – there's a lot of loitering. There's just nothing to do. When jobs get scarce and if they are doing a little substance, don't have the money – what are they going to do? Break in. Somebody is getting killed. They're just not breaking in and getting stuff and coming back out – they're going to have to silence some people to get their stuff. That's what we deal with on that side of the river, as well as here.*

*Me: It's regional...*

*Pastor: Yes, it is. Right. It's a lack of opportunity.*

*Reverend, a woman in her forties who also lives in Red Port, agrees: That's right.*

*Ally: It's a lack of opportunity – like Pastor said. There're not many jobs, and for young people there's nothing to keep them interested, so they are just falling away, looking for an opportunity for something – something, whatever comes up. You have to have some positive things in the community for the kids to take part in for them to know there is something out there other than just nothing. The negative things are right there in your face for you to see. The dope man is right there saying, “You don't have to go without shoes little Billy. You can have some Jordans...” ... and all of this other stuff. Then you actually have the kids out here that are hungry. They have homes – like single parent homes – where there is not always enough money. If the parent is out there working and the child is home alone, who are the influences when the parent is not home? I don't care what you tell your child – “stay in the house” – kids are going to do what they're going to do because they always have a little friend somewhere saying, “Your momma's not home – come on outside.”*

Ally's comments regarding the challenges of caring for children while navigating the necessity of work and the challenges to securing livelihoods for themselves and their children provides an example of structural vulnerabilities that arise with poverty in terms of providing necessities of survival such as food. The issue of child hunger arose repeatedly in conversations in Tallulah. Several former and current educators remarked about the problem of children's hunger, especially on the weekends when they are not in school and during the summer. (I return to this issue in the next Chapter.) Ally continues to discuss the issue of youth in the community, turning to education.

*Ally: I think the kids are forgotten. As far as education goes too, I can speak to this because I see it. Some people are working a job in education just because they need a job. They don't even like children.*

*Pastor nods her head: That's right. Absolutely, absolutely.*

*Sonny's voice rings out: That's the truth!*

*Ally elaborates, incredulous: I heard a teacher say this: "I don't even like kids." What? I asked her, "How are you working as an education professional if you don't like children?" She said, "I want the check. I don't want the kids." If you don't even care about the profession you're in, if you're not even willing to give your heart to help this child that may have other obstacles – now, if they have a learning disability, that's one thing – but, if you're a child who is hungry at home or somebody's beating the heck out of you before you get to school, if you don't have any compassion in the classroom for the kid, are you just going to throw that child away? They say, "Put him in special ed. He can't read. He's kind of slow. He's a little off. Put him in special ed." Talk like that puts a bug in a parent's ear, and if that parent is one of those that has a substance use problem, or don't want to work – here comes the fat SSI check. You see what I'm saying? That's a whole other can of worms.*

Although Ally's comments regarding Supplemental Security Income garnered a few sideways glances, I understand her suggestion to index a few possible paradoxes that can arise because of the nature of work in the region and the structure of social service provision.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand Ally is referencing the lack of wage and benefit sufficient employment opportunities in the region that can result in job seeking that Ally suggests trivializes the moral and ethical attributes of being an educator, such as empathy, and reduces a presumably virtuous profession (as well as the children) to a "paycheck." In this regard the root problems of a child's "poor" performance which are likely social and economic become pathologized under a rubric of mental deficiency or character defects,

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<sup>18</sup> When SSI is used for adults who became disabled before the age of twenty-two the benefit is referred to as Supplemental Security Disability Income. See Social Security Administration's Benefits page. See also my discussion with a woman I call Lucinda in Chapter Six regarding governmental assistance.

such as laziness. Ally suggests that a teacher who only cares about the paycheck cannot be motivated to consider the contributing environmental factors and social contexts that can lead to under-performance in the classroom, such as hunger and abuse. On the other hand, she suggests a parent or caregiver (based on a dubious and likely unqualified prognosis by an unconcerned educator) may leverage a child's perceived learning challenges and /or actual developmental disabilities to produce income (in Ally's example to support drug use) rather than to take therapeutic steps to improve the child's learning. In both cases Ally appears to be condemning the structural nuances of educational employment and social service provisions that make these related scenarios possible.

Pastor elaborates on Ally's points regarding the education system, youth activities, and her own struggles with providing for her family's education needs.

*Pastor: School is out for the summer and there's not a lot of things for kids. People don't make an awful lot of money, you know, and during the summer they used to have programs for kids in Red Port where you pay just a little fee. This year they banned some of the programs and the ones that they do have is only playing, no curriculum. I told her, "No! There's got to be a curriculum." I don't want my grandchildren going somewhere playing all summer, because education is the key that will get you started. We talked about the teachers. If they're out, why not volunteer at least a month and teach a curriculum so the kids won't just have to be out here [on the streets]? Because if they out there and they see the influence that's out there, we're talking about the lock up.*

*A lot of these guys you see them out here on the street mingling and the kids are looking at that and if they're not being taught anything, what are they going to do? When they see that, that's what they are going to start doing. We got to learn to make a sacrifice. We really do. I am a grandparent – and I am an older grandparent – and I'm teaching right now, math, and I'm teaching reading. I've had to send my grandchildren to school. It's hard. The curriculums are harder, and I've had headaches, everything, staying up pretty much all night; but, it's worth it. I need somebody else to be... to feel the same thing. Let's save the children. You know how they say, "It takes a village to raise the children" – it still does. When everybody... you know what? Parents got younger.*

*Sonny: Yes. That's a problem.*



*Pastor: Our older people, if we messed up, the whole neighborhood of old folks would whip your behind. They help get you in line. That's where we let it go. My grandchildren, I'm teaching them the old way. We're going back to old school. It's going to start at home. I'm serious. We have to go back. We got to go back. We got to empty out some of these prisons somehow, find some kind of way, a program that... because everybody doesn't want to be there.*

*A lot of people... I met a young man recently. I was on a bus and I'm just talking to him. He seemed so nice and stuff, and he said, "Well, I'm going back to prison – to jail. I have some time." I said, "You're going back? You don't sound sad about it." He said, "I don't have to pay a light bill. I don't have to pay a gas bill." He couldn't afford to be out. That's sad. What about rehabilitation? Everybody don't want to be there. Some are just there to keep from facing up to responsibility. So, they need some stuff done in Mississippi and Louisiana. I am going to shut my mouth, but I can talk all night.*

Although rendered largely as a subtext in the Poverty Summit, Pastor directly references the need for educational programming as an intervention into potential carceral futures that come from being raised by “the streets.” Or as one young man told me, *Tallulah raised me, like*. Pastor also brings up the issue of parenting and the community when she comments that *parents got younger*. It may be tempting to ascribe Pastor’s views to religiosity, but I think this would be a mistake for a number of reasons.

Young people, some with children themselves, in Tallulah expressed concerns about growing up too fast and taking on traditionally “adult” roles and knowledge. They also remarked on the lack of available jobs and opportunities to be young, such as discontinued local sports leagues, which was a concern raised at the Poverty Summit. Youth recognize the importance of an education. Several that I spoke with told me of being “put out” (expelled) from school (and homes) and the struggles they face in attaining GEDs and diplomas. They also realize and actively imagine that they will end up in a carceral facility, if not in Tallulah then elsewhere, and actively try to earn money to extricate themselves from Tallulah on the weekends in an attempt to not get “caught

up.” (I discuss the work strategies of youth further in Chapter 5.) Youth in Tallulah also described that going to jail or not depends on “who you get” – the judge you pull when you go to court. Reverend shares her experience of juvenile courts in Red Port that puts a fine point on this reality.

*Reverend: This is what I found out dealing with the courts and sometimes just going and sitting in on the courts in Red Port. See, I didn't know all the crimes that happen in the area. I see armed robbery, stealing old persons' purses, knocking them down, stealing cars. Not only that. Shooting. Drugs. You name it. I'm not talking about grown adults. I'm talking about kids. Not only that, what really shocked me, prostitution in Red Port. I didn't know it! These are young children now, and they got a judge over there – he doesn't give them a chance. He doesn't give the parents a chance to stand up for them. He doesn't give the lawyers a chance to stand up for them. Kids in school that haven't graduated. Some was ninth grade, ninth graders and some maybe 10th, 11th. But they don't give them chance. This judge, when they come before him, know what he cries out?*

*Oakley! Oakley! You're going to Oakley! That's a juvenile facility. So, while the parents are sitting there crying and the parents are trying to say, “Wait a minute, let me say something. My child ain't did this, my child...” After they have gone to the school and the lawyer went to the school and the grades were fine, but this big case has already been built upon their child. I went in there with a young teenager, big case already been built upon her. She was accused of hitting her grandmother and hitting her auntie. Come to find out the auntie and the grandma had jumped on her. She didn't hit neither one of them. Still, she was getting ready to go to Oakley.*

*The lawyer said, “Wait a minute, let me say something. I'm the lawyer.” The judge said, “I don't want to hear nothing from you, and I don't want to hear nothing from the mother.” I sat there and I said, “Wait a minute. I know this child and I got to say something because he's going to send her.” So, I said, “Your Honor...” I stand up to the occasion, so I stood up. I had on my clergy uniform and all that. He didn't know who I was, but he knew that I had to be a minister or something. I said, “Can I say something?” He said, “Okay, I respect you as clergy. What you got to say?” I said, “This young lady here is doing very well in school. She's not disrespectful. She comes to church. Please give her a chance.” He said, “I feel like something's been told wrong up in here.” He calmed himself down and he said, “Okay, she doesn't have to go to Oakley. I feel like there's some abuse went on in this home. I tell you what, we're going to put her in with another family.”*

*He was fine to send her to Oakley. He just had already set in his mind, anybody that comes in today, they're going to Oakley. This is what I feel: there's some that haven't done nothing, but they're not given a chance. But for those that have done something, they get a chance. The system is backwards. It's not fair.*

*They say everybody's treated the same. No, that's not true. Everybody's not treated the same and everybody's not treated equal. If you treated everyone the same, then you wouldn't get up and judge me before I get a chance to say something, before you know the whole thing that I've done and read it and looked it over. You don't give me a chance, so then you put me in Oakley? Some of the kids are lost because they don't have nobody to stand up for them. They don't have nobody to say, "Wait a minute, Your Honor. This didn't happen. Let me say something." See, we have to, as adults, we have to be able to have some sense of... we've got to have something within us that lets us have love and compassion.*

*Pastor: Empathy.*

*Reverend: We've got to have that. We got to first see is this child really what they say this child is before we can accuse them. The worst thing you could do to a child is to send them to Oakley – that's what I heard. This is for "life." This wouldn't be just for no month. This child was going to go until she turned 18. I just heard it so much: "Oakley! Send this child to Oakley." Down there they are treated like they are in real prison.*

*Me: It's always concerned me why they call it... If you're 15 you get sent up until you're 18 or 21, depending... they call it life.*

*Reverend: Yeah. Life. They call it life because it stops everything that you have going on with your family; they stop all the interaction with other people; and, they put you in a place where you know nothing at all. Sometimes when you're secluded in a place where you know nothing at all, it causes your mind to do some things and you become something that they say you are because at that point you feel no one cares. Nobody loves me and the Devil tells you nobody loves you and nobody cares. Then you feel that you can't get in touch with your family when you want to. You can't call. You can't do nothing. You just have a room – one bed and a nightstand – and that's all you have.*

Reverend recounts her experience of court and what she sees as the indiscriminate sentencing of youth, particularly to what she refers as "juvenile life." Tough on crime initiatives and legislation in the 1990's multiplied punishable offenses and increased the penalties for youth in certain types of crime. For instance, in 1993 Louisiana mandated fixed sentencing for certain types of serious offenses, including murder, sexual assault, and armed robbery (McGough and Cangelosi 2005:1140-1141). Mississippi is also well known for the severity of its "habitual" offender laws and mandatory minimums (see

fwd.us 2019). Part of Reverend’s frustration is that it is the judge that determines if the child actually committed a crime (is “delinquent”) or not; in the case of this particular judge, he was simply doling out dispositions to enroll in Oakley.

Oakley Youth Development Center (formerly Oakley Training School), Mississippi’s only such center, exists alongside other youth facilities such as secure detention in Henley-Young which is currently under a consent decree to correct constitutional rights abuses such as physical violence by staff and over-use of isolation (see Dreher and Miller 2016; J.H. v. Hinds County, Mississippi (3:11-cv-00327)). When Mississippi ended convict leasing in 1890 (although chain gangs endured in counties),<sup>19</sup> like Louisiana, it purchased several plantations to build its state administered penal system of which Oakley Farm was one, initially housing women and then later juveniles (Taylor and Fletcher 1989).

Tallulah does have a “youth detention center,” although it is billed as an “alternative school,” which consists of an educational building and dormitories. In this dissertation I call it Tallulah Fields. Several people at the Forum are familiar with Tallulah Fields, which is either called by its name or with equal frequency, the “boy’s home,” a description that Sonny finds substantively uncritical, as his comments below suggest.

*Sonny: Now, the place at one time was the boy’s home; it looked like a boy’s home, but now it’s changing. Those boys had all broken out of the buildings and then they would go through the neighborhood and steal out of cars and everything. Now they’re putting up walls all the way around Tallulah Fields. They got walls. Now the next thing is going to be big gates – you know what I’m saying? – to hold those kids in. It’s just the creation of a miniature prison. I don’t think it’s really going to help those young men that’s in there. I think it’s going to*

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<sup>19</sup> Although chain gangs were not discussed, see for example LeFlouria (2015) regarding women’s chain gang labor.

*hurt them more because they feel they are just at the beginning of a prison and one ain't no different than the other - like a corporation.*

*If we go further down the road, we got a prison that's closed in and got those big chains and everything else around it. It's not a good thing. But I do believe, if you do the crime you ought to pay the time. But for young people starting out, it's not a good thing. I think that we should... it all starts in the home. Like we always had said that the parents would be parents and get their kids grounded in the home it would be better than that kid winding up going over there in Tallulah Fields and being counted as a young criminal. It's not a good thing.*

Sonny's concern about the facility's structural and aesthetic transformation into "a miniature prison" assesses the ways in which incarceration shapes Tallulah's landscape and becomes a formative event in the life course of the youth that are housed there, creating the expectation of carceral futures outside of the home for youth.

Two young women who participated in the Forum that I call Clara and Sherryl both grew up in Tallulah, but like many, had to look elsewhere for job opportunities after college. Both women are familiar with Tallulah Fields and criminal and youth justice more broadly through their community and social service work in the region and in other states. Both women, in their early thirties, share Sonny's concerns about Tallulah Fields and the conditioning of young people to be in prison. They also connect the facilities to the larger carceral and economic geography of the state, racialized incarceration, and privatization. They share the group's overarching concerns with the intersections of system involvement, poverty, and parenting.

*Clara: Like I tell my child – if something happens, you are not guaranteed to come to the center in Tallulah - they might ship you down south somewhere. They are not going to put you near where I live; they are going to put you somewhere far away. I tell them what happens in those places so they can be scared to death because I've seen it, and I have heard it, and that's not where you want to be. You don't want to be about that life. These are children, but it's almost like a miniature jail where they are being prepared to go to real jail. The same stuff that goes on in a real prison but at a smaller scale, that's all it is. They are not behind bars and that is the only difference.*

*Look. Tallulah is just a small piece of the puzzle. This is happening everywhere. Tallulah is one of the poorest, though, poverty stricken, and with the prisons here you have a recipe for them ending up there because you're not giving them anything to do. No jobs. That means you have a lot of people - you got a majority of young single mothers trying to raise these children and half of them don't know what they are doing themselves, so they are going to turn to the streets. All the men are on the street corners...*

A chorus of voices in the room echoes Clara's words as she finishes her sentence:  
*...or in jail.*

*Clara: There is a child right now, his mom is right there in the women's prison over here and he's in Tallulah Fields over there and she's writing him from jail. They can't visit each other because they are both incarcerated. She was already here in the women's prison and then he got shipped here. Usually inmates cannot write to each other but because she's his mother they can communicate. The prison situation, though, that's not unique to us – it just so happens that Tallulah is a small town and you have a recipe for that, but private prisons is big business anywhere you go. The system is set up for us to end up there.*

Clara notes the transgenerational impact of incarceration in the case of the mother and son who simultaneously incarcerated in Tallulah are separated from each other and their home community. I was told situations also arise in cases where correction officers and incarcerated relatives may occupy the same facility and officers are reassigned to duties or spaces that keeps them out of contact. Both of these configurations draw attention to Clara's admonition that the penal system is designed *for us to end up there*. Sherryl, like Reverend earlier, comments on the legal system and its connection to racialized youth populations.

*Sherryl: The boys are court ordered to come there [Tallulah Fields] and a lot of times the white kids have better representation in the court system versus the black kids: not as many white kids are sent to a detention center because their families can afford lawyers and someone to speak on their behalf. When they do get to the facilities, though, there is favoritism – the white kids get treated a little better and they get to go on different outings that the black ones don't necessarily get to go on. They don't keep the children separated in the facility, but you see a lot of different treatment. In any case, a lot of those kids are away from their parents.*

Clara elaborates on Sheryll's comment of sending kids out of their home communities and describes the hardships that it can create for families when a family member is incarcerated out of family networks (see for example, Braman 2007; Comfort 2008).

*Clara: And that means to me, especially with the juveniles, if the parents want to visit, they have to drive four hours from South Port to come here for the weekend and visit. That's ridiculous for them to have to do that, but that's how they have it set up. The families are irate because they can't visit or they want to come and bring so many family members, but you are only allowed to have so many visitors and they have to be a certain age when they come. Mothers show up with babies, but you are not supposed to have the baby there and they have brought the children and of course they want to see their little brother, but they are not allowed to come in. [Pause]. It's a mess.*

Clara reflects for a moment on the lived experience of young persons and families who are separated and ties this practice to broader state and national policy.

*Clara: Here's the kicker. It's actually cheaper to put them in school than to lock them up. It costs more money to incarcerate them. But they prefer to do it that way. And they don't give you a college education in jail. And if they do, what are you going to do with it now that you're a felon?*

*Ally: They're grooming those kids to be future criminals; then, you're always going to have a prison full of free labor. They figure that they're giving their community a break by putting them in. They say, "We don't need to hear there's anything wrong with them. They're the dredges of the community and of society anyways – let's go ahead and get them off the street." They act like they're doing you a favor, fooling us into thinking everybody's bad. I can't tell you how tired I am of looking at the news and seeing everyone all clinked up. You see our people all clinked up, making it seem as though we're doing everything. I mean, somebody has got to be innocent somewhere. (Many laugh in agreement and recognition of racialized portrayals of people of color in media.)*

*We were talking the other day about "When They See Us," this new thing that's out on Netflix about the Central Park Five,<sup>20</sup> you know what I'm talking about? Those five little boys that were accused of attacking that jogger and they sent them to jail for all those years. They were little; they were like 14. They said we were just little kids; we didn't know what was going on. The lawyer for them was saying somebody should have known. They should have looked at it and they would have seen there was no evidence.*

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<sup>20</sup> DuVernay, Ava. 2019. When they see us. Netflix.

*Reverend (heated): They knew! They knew there was no evidence! A lot of people don't want to do their jobs and investigate. They take the lazy way out. If you look like you did it, you did it. That's it. That's what happened in that case.*

Ally indexes Clara's comments about the prioritization and diversion of state and federal funds from education to bankroll incarceration to the systemic consequences whereby young people, and particularly youth of color are "groomed" through disparities in policing, bias, and their racialized criminalization as always already criminals in media (Cacho 2007), such as in the wrongful conviction in 1990 of the Central Park Five. Ally links the cultural attitudes reflecting associations of people of color with crime to her own experiences and fears of her family being targeted by police violence.

*Ally: I have sons and grandsons. All they have to do to be a threat is to go outside the door, because they look like everybody else. If somebody said, "Oh, they did it," because you're already stereotyped, because "all these black boys..." you already did it. "Put your hands up." I don't even like my grandson to play with toy guns. There was a little boy that was in a vacant lot by himself playing with a toy gun and somebody calls and says, "There's a boy out here with a gun." So, the police go out there: "Hey you!" Of course, the boy's going to turn around and his hands are going to swing and when his hands swing – they shoot. You see what I'm saying?*

*You talk about mass incarceration, but it's the mindset that's putting all these people in here. Now don't get me wrong. There's a bunch of crazy people now. We know that about all the races. But because there's more of us that are seen in these rural communities that you talk about, when the police roll up – a lot of times police looks like us and a lot of times the police don't. A lot of times the judges look like us and a lot of times the judges don't. I'm going to tell you this – just as sick as I am of looking at it on TV – people are sick of criminals. They are. So now it's to the point they don't take the time to figure out if a lot of people are actually criminal.*

*If he looks like he did it – even if he didn't do it – he must have done something. They come and say, "Your child did this." You're going to say, "Oh, no, he didn't do it. He was at home with me." "Well, bring him on down to the station." Well come on now – I'm gonna bring you down here and we don't need no lawyer because you were at home with me and didn't do this thing. When you get down there you realize your word means nothing. Nothing!*

*Reverend: When you get down there with your child, your child is going to jail. Your child is going behind those bars.*



*Howard: That's injustice.*

*Reverend: That's injustice. Yes, it is.*

*Howard: How about, though, all of the teenagers that are murdering... I mean this is weekly, daily right? What causes them to do that... commit crimes like that? Is it the system's fault because they shot down an old woman, or a kid over in Jackson, Mississippi? I mean, you remember this white boy, he was 19 or 20 – they stole that young lady's car. She went in the store...*

*Reverend: Oh, yeah.*

*Pastor: ...and the baby in the back...*

*Howard: ...and they shot the little boy and killed him.*

*Pastor: Mm-hmm, that little child.*

*Sonny: Little child, in the car.*

*Howard: What creates a mind in a child to do something like that? What can we do as a whole community? I mean, I'm talking about the clergy. I'm talking about the police. I'm talking about the Mayor, their mothers, and... you know, all of us.*

Ally's concerns about black youth, particularly black boys, and the mutual distrust of both the community about and by the police over claims of culpability and innocence that can result in incarceration – or death – strike the group, as Howard exclaims, as injustice. However, Howard asks the counterpoint question about youth who do commit crimes. Howard's question, in his example about a young white man, does not attempt to recast the conversation in terms of race, but instead echoes Ally's contention that the capacity to commit crimes is in itself not racial (although rates of incarceration and arrest are). Instead, Howard's question, how does a child, or anyone for that matter, become of a mind to kill another human suggests a broader context for assessing individual acts of violence that are not necessarily attributable to the person themselves apart from contributing factors. Pastor suggests a possible answer is the discontinuities in

communities created by fear and the lack of trust that attends it, particularly in the constant barrage of violence that appears in media, as well as in daily life in Tallulah and Red Port, and the lives of many in marginalized communities.

*Pastor: ...you see one child that's killing and then when you see another child, you get a kind of fear. You get scared. You shoot before you even question that child, because fear has stepped in. That's what happened. We lost trust in one another as people, because everybody started having their own agenda. "This is my family, so I am going to stay right here." Someone else says, "I'm going to stay right here," and then another person – "I'm going to stay right here." What about the ones that are out here astray? They don't have anybody. That's what Luke's talking about in the Bible.*

*There's that family that's on drugs – you take that child, and you nurture that child because you have the love of God and the love of humanity in your heart. It may be a struggle but take a chance. We've got to take a chance again! Even on the kids that we call bad – sometimes we do – well, some of them are bad, I'm not telling no lie. There're some bad children. (Laughter in the room). My grandchildren get bad sometimes. Oh, Jesus. But you think I'm going to give up? No, I'm not. You've got to reach out and take the ones people don't love. Take the unlovable. Just take a chance. Bring them to you. You've got to love in spite of – unconditionally. Jesus died for us. He died for us. He took a chance. He didn't have to die, but he did. We've got to get that in us again.*

Howard continues to work through the question of “why?” He looks back to his own childhood and lands on the issues of family and faith.

*Howard: We, most of us in here, we grew up poor, real poor. We found the land; we picked cotton in the land. I mean, it was hard, right? There were ten of us. But one thing we did – Momma and them, they took us to church. We had belief in God. They talked to us about how if you do this, you're going to go to hell. Consequences. So, we were raised up with the fear of the Lord, and it was really, really hard living. We walked to school, about three miles or so, you know what I mean? But what helped us is the love of God and righteousness. We were hungry growing up. When I got grown and started traveling, sometimes I was hungry. I wasn't about to shoot nobody or kill anybody. We talked earlier about how the community's got to, you know, take the children into churches; but, then, they have got to take God into their own lives also and believe in the righteousness of Christ. But now, there is no ... there doesn't seem... to be any love, no foundation at home. No love. Its “dog eat dog” and “I don't care.” Well, we believe the Scripture. The word of God. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all his righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you.”*

*Ally: You answered your own question Howard. You asked what makes a person*

*kill and do what they do? You answered your own question. Because when you said, when we were coming up, we were poor. And you talked about the foundation you had that grounded you. There were consequences for your actions. You knew what was going to happen - and then we had a sense of love and respect for our parents. We didn't want to disappoint them.*

*Sonny: That's right. Love and respect.*

Howard and Ally both reflect on the importance for them of having a grounding in the home and God. Howard, who is in his seventies, reflects upon his own childhood spent sharecropping and parses what he sees as a key difference in the forms of poverty that he experienced and those that animate violence in today's communities, as well as their potential outcomes. While Ally points to the personal and moral obligations to do right by one's parents which she suggests needs to be part of a mandate to survive and do well, Howard stresses the love (and fear) of God and righteousness. Howard, as did many in the group, links a supportive and nurturing family and spiritual life with the ability to stay out of prisons and jails, but also with the ability to stay alive.

*Howard: But like you said, if you're brought up, and you're told there's consequences for your actions... Pop used to preach to us, sang and prayed, that stuff just got into us. When we left home to find work, we were 14, 15, in different places. One night, I had left Philadelphia and as far as I could get was South Carolina with my money. I had no more money; so, I had to start hitchhiking. I got into a little town... I forget what town... it was very small. It was cold and raining. And so, they had a new, just a little place that was a jail. I saw the deputy, and I said, "Sir, I'm trying to get home to Mississippi. I don't have no money. Could you let me sleep in the jail until the morning?" [Laughter] He said, "Okay," and let me sleep in the jail. I mean, I was tired. I guess it was about twelve or one o'clock, somebody started kicking my feet.*

*Pastor: In the morning?*

*Howard: In the morning. And I looked up, I said, "Oh..." Three people with hoods on their heads.*

*Pastor: Uh-oh.*

*Howard: And I saw, like, I guess it was the real Sheriff, with his badge. So, help*

*me God... You see, first of all, let me tell you - I have faith in God. I pray and pray. Now, they could have killed me and wouldn't nobody know anything about it. So, they were kicking my feet. "Boy! Wake up! Wake up! Boy!" I said, "You didn't have to kick my feet." That's what I said – being a smart mouth. They said, "Where are you going? Where you from? Are you involved with that old Civil Rights Martin Luther King?" (Howard pauses for effect.) "I don't know nothing about that, sir. Why, I don't even know who he is." (The room erupts with laughter. Howard smiles.)*

*Now, really, I love a good march. Anyway, he told me, "All right, when daylight comes, you get up and you get out of here. I don't want to see your blankety-blank in this town after 9:00 a.m. tomorrow morning."*

*I was already walking when the sun broke. I caught a ride into Georgia. But they didn't hurt me. And I said that smart mouth thing, "Why you kick me?" But, if I would've said, "Yeah, I know Martin. He's right you know..." (Laughter).*

*Pastor: Good Lord.*

*Howard: But I got to Georgia. I saw an old man driving a buggy and his name was Lawrence Goodman. I said, "Sir, I need something to eat. I'm trying to get home. I'm willing to rent out. You got any job for me to do?" He said - this was 1963 - he said, "Son, I don't have no money, but you come on and go home with us." His nieces lived with him, and the one, she was kind of crippled, and he said, "If I was you, I wouldn't go no further." I mean, those were really hard times - fighting and killing. So, we stayed around there in Georgia. His niece worked at the ... not the one that was crippled, the other one... worked at the school. He got me a job there, and he also got me a job loading peanuts from a freight car. I saved up. I stayed with him probably about three months saving up money to come home. But all my travels - you know the Klan's reputation...*

*Sonny: Yeah, know that's right.*

*Pastor: Mm-hmm.*

*Howard: You know it. But I had all this faith now already. Always had it. That's why I could travel and go places, and nothing could hurt me; but I tried to stay away from trouble. When I look back, I wasn't even afraid when they came in and kicked me, because I have faith. But... I was afraid enough to say I didn't know no Martin Luther King. But you know... some people suffered way more than we did. People got hung up in trees and beaten, chopped up, cut they private parts off, all that kind of stuff. It was bad back in the day. I was there in the forties and fifties... struggling in the sixties...*

*Ally: How afraid are you now...*

*Howard: Of what I do?*

*Ally: No. How afraid are you now in the community, with the condition that the community is in? I'm just being...*

*Howard: What it is, because I'm older, and you know, you're not as strong and stuff. These young boys – I don't go out too much at night. I don't ride around in Jackson. I don't have a weapon in my car or anything like that, but...*

*Reverend: Trust God.*

*Howard: Yes.*

Howard's brief recounting of his life history provides an accounting of an impoverished childhood sharecropping and the embodied dangers of being African American as he travelled the United States to find work in the 1960's. Howard cites his upbringing and his faith for his ability to quite literally stay alive in his encounter with the Klan in a South Carolina jail. However, Howard also vividly remarks on having to make judgments on how far his faith would shield him from harm when he denied knowing of Martin Luther King and by extension his own association with civil rights. Doing so was an attempt to try and "stay out of trouble." Even so, the human kindness he received in Georgia reads as representative of the positive force of community, even among strangers, that the Forum participants advocate for those in need in their present-day lives. A crucial feature identified by the group in making this kind of community possible is affective reciprocity – the empathic capacity to give and receive kindness. As many in the group argue below, developing this capacity can be gendered, directly related to life history and feelings of self-worth, and implicated in possible futures.

*Pastor: The Bible says, "Speak those things which are not as though they were." When we see somebody that's on a struggle, you start speaking positive into their life. There's a boy I know, he was just a mess. He didn't do drugs or anything like that, but his father had passed away without teaching him much, so I encouraged him to get a job and live right. He's doing really well. I told him, "I'm so proud of you. I'm just so proud." He looked at me like I had lost my mind. He said, "Something's wrong with you." That's what he told me. He never had anybody*

say, "I'm proud of you!" We've just got to encourage them.

*Ally: Yeah, you do, because the community - like he's talking about, mass incarceration - because like we started out saying over here at the table, it takes a village.*

*Pastor: That's it. These kids are just growing up, but they're not brought up.*

A woman in her thirties who I call Lilly has joined the Forum after getting home from her job where she is involved in social work. Lilly has been listening to the conversation and notes the contradiction she finds in often being told she is too visible in her own child's life, bringing her up, in contrast to the situation that Pastor described, where young people grow up without positive reinforcement.

*Lilly: But you hear about the opposite... you know, people say, they called me a "smother mother." They're convinced that at some point my daughter is going to lose her mind ... (Room busts out in laughter) ...they say you smother a child and you think they're so good and that child is going to be the one that goes bad. Then there's people that are like, even with little boys, "Let him grow up; let them be a man; let them be strong; don't smother him." And there are women who are raising sons. I mean, yeah, you need a daddy; but I mean, where's he at?*

*You have to show the child. A man has to be able to have feelings, affection and love and be able to express himself. You're not trying to teach them to be "soft," but you can only go so far if you don't have that in you. My daughter knows I love her; that's what's important to me. I don't care what you think. So many people buy into that. "Go. Go be a man. I'm not going to baby you. Don't come to me to figure it out." Then, one day they have children of their own and then what happens?*

*Ally: Well my sons, they'll call me, "Good morning, Mama.", I'd say, "Good morning, Baby." "I love you Ma, just calling to tell you I love you" "Well, I love you too." They don't care who's around. Sometimes I hear, "Who you talking to?" 'Oh, that's my Mom', and one would say, 'I haven't talked to my mom in three years'. How you ain't talk to your mom in three years?*

*Sonny: There's power in love.*

*Reverend: Okay. Let's go back to the children because when you all were talking, some things came to me. You know you have some men that tell women not to hold their sons. "Don't hold him. You're not supposed to hold him like he's a girl." No! You have to hold your sons. I'm serious, just like you hold the girls.*

*You're supposed to hold the boys and if they don't do it, these men grow up not to love their mothers like they should, not to love a woman like they should. They can be very abusive.*

*Lilly: They can't give you what they don't have.*

*Reverend : And, look. That is what causes them to go out and do these crimes. That's what causes them to do these crimes because down here, low, inside, they weren't taught that love, that nurture like a girl. The boy is not nurtured like that.*

*Howard: You can tell a boy that been loved by the fact that he doesn't try to beat up on a woman. Okay. Some people that hurt you, you know, but if you have love in your heart, if your mother have shown you love, and she did everything she could and there's no way you would hit a woman.*

*Lilly: But some of them do, some of the men do grow up very abusive. Yeah. I'm talking about teenagers that I've been dealing with and this young girl was pregnant by him and he was beating her while she was pregnant. You don't do that. Okay, when the baby came, the baby was dead. I'm saying this to say when you down here and you're reared up a certain way and you learn a certain thing, just like you see that fighting going on in your household - you think that's just the way it goes, because that's what you saw, that's what you learned. If you saw your parents arguing, you saw your parents fighting, you saw your parents cussing and all this going on and so you become that same thing. You think that's the way life is.*

To say what the group argues for above in terms of instilling in people senses of care and self-worth (“nurturing”) revolves around the gendered ways in which children are “brought up” (or not) and in particular the cultural values placed on masculinity and self-sufficiency is accurate, but, as several discussants noted, this needs to be understood in the broader context of transgenerational poverty in which it occurs. I argue this is true for the entirety of the Forum discussion presented in this chapter which highlight the lived experience of a poverty, crime, education nexus that emerged at the Poverty Summit. I argue that at its core, what the Summit suggests and what the Forum provides is a historically situated analysis of violence, vulnerability, and trauma that attends life histories in environments structured by a legacy of racism and the material hardships of

intense poverty (Western 2018).

I return to the subject of violence in the context of poverty in the next chapter, particularly as these disrupt social reproduction and livelihood creation, but in the discussion above, Howard's memories of encountering the Klan, Ally's assessment of black vulnerability to criminalization and police violence, and Reverend's documenting of discrimination in youth court provide just a few examples. These examples also illustrate, as do the multiple descriptions of youth being groomed for incarceration and residents seeking corrections jobs, the dense imbrication of the criminal justice system and all of its component parts in lives lived in resource scarce environments.

However, like in the Summit and in the Forum, people and communities find creative although constrained ways to claim resources and resist and navigate these structures. In some cases, these take the form of personal interventions into people's lives such as by providing encouragement or material support, and in others the sheltering of at-risk travelers or speaking on someone's behalf in a courtroom. I elaborate on strategies people use to make livings and create futures in the next Chapters Five and Six on livelihoods and social reproduction and expand on the conversations presented above to further elaborate on the factors that enable or militate against people's ability to do so, for instance uneven educational opportunities, demands on receiving state aid, lack of jobs, and carceral entrepreneurship. I close this Chapter with a prayer that concluded the Community Forum.

### **Closing Prayer**

*Reverend: Lord we just thank you that we had a mind to come together today. Lord, no matter what we do, we do it for your sake. Lord, thank you for the opportunity to get together to talk about the things that were going on, early on in life and in the lives of the prisoners. We pray for the prisoners. We pray for those*



*that are confined. We pray for those that feel like no one loved them and no one cared. We pray Lord God that those that are released Lord God, that they - that society won't continue to label them and not enable them to be able to make it out here in society.*

*Pastor: Yes, Lord.*

*Reverend: We glorify your name in all that we do. We magnify you for your works, knowing Lord God that if our upbringing is in you that we have a stable life and that we are able to live out what we were taught and told from the beginning. We pray we will not stray too far from that. God, I give you praise, honor, and glory. I thank God today for this place.*

*Sonny: Thank you, Lord.*

*Reverend: I ask that you continue to set your angels at camp here for a protection and a shield. I ask that you put in the mind of the teachers, Lord God, more for the education of your children. For Lord God, the children are our future. We ask Lord God that when they're grown, they will not deter – Oh Hallelujah – from what they have been taught. Guide those that are not exposed to what these are exposed to that you send your grace, and you send your mercy, so it is sufficient – Oh God – to see all of us through.*

*Sonny: Yes, Lord.*

*Reverend: I just want to say, “Thank you. Thank you, Lord.” I want you to continue to lead us. I want you to continue to guide us as we travel along the way. Lord God, I know this is not our home. We are just journeying through. But Lord God, in the mist of what we're in, we have to know that there is a conclusion and there's an answer to the whole matter. We ask that you help us in that conclusion.*

*Howard: Yes, Lord.*

*Reverend: In Jesus' name I pray... Amen. Amen. Amen.*

*Forum: Amen.*

*Pastor: Oh, that was good.*

*Ally: Come on y'all. Hug.*

## CHAPTER 5: LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES AND “ACTING RIGHT”

### Introduction

The multi-generational narratives provided at the Community Forum illustrate the many ways in which the historical continuity of periods carceral extractivism are experienced over time, persist in the present, and can be examined ethnographically. Many of their concerns about creating livelihoods and positive futures relate to the racialized effects of mass incarceration and reflections on what it means to have a life worth living in the context of poverty and lack of resources. James Staples (2007) points out that livelihoods has an every-day meaning and refers “to the means by which people make a living... search for income, whether in cash or kind, through which they can access resources to sustain themselves and their families” (11). Of course, this meaning has resonance for people in Tallulah. However, residents are also keenly aware of the social, political, economic, and importantly the historical contexts that determine or over-determine “*ways of living*” that provide a wider range of relevance for the term and the practices associated with them, for example felony convictions, segregation, property ownership, political corruption, gendered work, and structural poverty (Staples, ed. 2007:12, italics in the original).

Likewise, as the Forum discussions suggest, livelihood creation, that is, “making a living,” should be considered in the broader context of “well-being,” what Susana Narotsky and Niko Besnier (2014) describe as the formation of a “life worth living” (S5).

As the authors explain:

Making a living is about “making people” in their physical, social, spiritual, affective, and intellectual dimensions. It is about the forms of human interaction that make different kinds of resources available, although often unequally, through social relations of production, distribution, and consumption. It is also

about struggles and stabilization around the worth of people and how to make life worth living. It is this effort to make life that we term “the economy.” [S14]

In Narotsky and Besnier’s view, the economy, when viewed as a life making project is inherently centered around social reproduction, “that is, around the objective and subjective possibilities to project life into the future,” or what the authors call “hope” (2014:S5). From this vantage point, and understanding that futures are imagined generationally, the issues raised at the Summit and the content of the discussions at the Forum take on new importance and clarity in terms of their deep resonance with not only making a life worth living, but also the struggles faced “making people” in all of their dimensions with claims to hopeful futures (Hacking 1986). This chapter specifically, and this dissertation more broadly, draws on anthropologies of livelihoods, work, and extraction to examine how people do this because and in spite of material deprivations and carceral entrepreneurship in the region.

This chapter begins with a discussion of two important developments, agricultural reform and the Civil Rights movement, and their historical impacts on livelihood creation and community development. The abilities and opportunities for people to extricate themselves from predacious agricultural arrangements in particular and Jim Crow disenfranchisements in general in the Delta were substantially shaped by these developments that coalesced around the end of World War II. On the one hand agricultural mechanization and farm consolidation diminished the need for farm labor and tenancy, as such, largely disappeared. On the other, efforts to exercise voting rights and the end to Jim Crow disenfranchisements in social and economic mobility during the late forties and into the 1970’s increased African American political and economic participation.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss how livelihood creation and social reproduction are organized around an ethic of “doing right.” Doing right, on the one hand indexes a moral and ethical set of practices that inform ways of working and being in the community. I provide a case study of the work of scrapping metal and a localized ethic of “doing right” that functions to structure how work should be practiced and more broadly what it means to be a productive citizen in a moral economy structured by lack of resources and incarceration. Lastly, I engage with a conversation about educational structures and how these are influenced by punitive logics of mass incarceration. Throughout I try to synthesize the influence of carceral economy and community development in historical relation to livelihoods and futures.

### **Agricultural Restructuring and Civil Rights**

Of the over five million African Americans that left the South between 1940 and 1970 in the concluding decades of what is often called the Great Migration, many were from the Delta region (Orleck 2005:8). It should be noted that the population of Tallulah did increase during this period, reaching a peak of 11,381 in 1980, and the population has declined ever since to an estimated population of 6,768 in 2018.<sup>21</sup> While Tallulah’s population increased as folks moved (or were forced) off the plantations and into the city, the overall population of the parish declined due to emigration. Many emigrants left the region to procure better paying jobs in industrialized cities in the north, but overwhelmingly, from Tallulah, they traveled to Nevada to work on military construction

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<sup>21</sup> It is unclear how Louisiana’s practice of counting prisoners as residents for census purposes affects population counts in Tallulah and Madison Parish. For example, if the more than one thousand beds in carceral facilities are subtracted from census counts, the actual residential population may be much lower.

projects and in casinos and hotels in Las Vegas. Several residents told me of having family in Vegas, and other places like California and Texas. Several of the residents I spoke with described having left Tallulah themselves and then “being drawn back home” either to retire or to care for ailing elders and family.

Annelise Orleck’s (2005) oral history of women, former cotton-pickers and domestic workers predominately from Tallulah and Fordyce, Arkansas tells the story of emigrants to Vegas who, led by Ruby Duncan, a native of Tallulah, organized on Vegas’s Westside to obtain community building institutions such as libraries, senior citizen housing, and job training programs. Many of the women described what it was like to live in the Delta during that late 1940’s and into the 1960’s where they faced violence, assault, and oppression, on and off the plantation, from more powerful white men and anti-black groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Locally, several residents who had returned from abroad after World War II, their conditions improved by the benefits of The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known colloquially as the GI Bill, were able to buy property, attend trade schools, and open businesses in Tallulah (de Jong 2002:149-150). They, like the women that Orleck describes faced violence and resistance from whites and supremacist groups as they organized in Tallulah and the broader Delta for social and political rights, particularly the right to vote.

To provide one example, Zelma Wyche, a prominent Civil Rights figure and the first African American Sheriff in Tallulah described why he returned to Tallulah after the War.

*My primary reason for coming back to Madison Parish after World War II was to do something about the situation that we were in in Madison Parish as black people... We were really under a bondage .... [B]lack people were primarily slaves, I might say, because there was nothing constructive that black people*

*could do in Madison Parish that would help them. The only thing that the white man wanted out of us was work for nothing or a little pay. After that they were through with you. I knew I was going to stay in Madison Parish the rest of my days and that was why I thought it was necessary to band ourselves together to do something to help eradicate these conditions that we were in. [quoted in Kaplan and Stanzler 1971:731, n.25]*

Further informing Wyche's decision to return to Tallulah and to organize around improving opportunities for the black community was the injustice of being denied the vote during service. Wyche explained:

*[I]t was a time when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was running for reelection. All of us black soldiers stood there and felt like fools as we watched white soldiers going to cast their absentee ballots for Roosevelt. You know all of us liked Roosevelt and, man, I wanted to vote so bad that it just hurt. But they told me I couldn't vote because I wasn't a registered voter in my hometown. Now here I was an American soldier way over in Europe fighting for some white people's freedom and I couldn't even vote for the president of my own country. That hurt me bad. I said to myself right then that when I get back to Tallulah [and Madison Parish] I was gonna start laying the groundwork for black people to get the right to vote. [quoted in Sanders 1970:56,70]*

For Wyche and others, the conditions of bondage and disenfranchisement from voting presented clear obstacles for what they considered a "life worth living." Wyche and several other men began organizing the Madison Parish Voters League and first attempted to register to vote in 1947. Then Registrar of Voters, Mary K. Ward, informed the men that they would have to meet the "voucher" requirement and be identified by two registered voters (all of whom were white). No one would vouch for them. In 1951, Wyche and several other men again attempted to register. Wyche, Harrison Brown, and Ike Oliver who were barbers and Martin Williams who owned a dry-cleaning shop formed the committee and were more willing than most, being self-employed, to organize because of a lack of white leverage over their livelihoods. For example, Moses Williams who had moved to Tallulah in 1952 joined the League and was

fired from his job at a tire shop for his activism. He simply used scrap materials and started his own (de Jong 2002). Again, they were told they would need “vouchers.”

Once the voucher system was ended the state implemented citizenship and literacy tests, as well as other measures to disenfranchise black voters. As Kaplan and Stanzler (1971) point out, the Louisiana Constitution was amended in 1960 to bar illiterate persons from voting while those who were illiterate and already registered (all of them white) remained on the roles (744). This was quite effective given that, for instance, the median number of school years completed for non-white Louisianans was 6 years, a direct consequence of racialized educational arrangements surrounding plantation agriculture (1960 Census, P-20).

Even when blacks prepared and were successful on the exams which presumptively asked for interpreting some part of the state constitution, Martin Williams recalled the Registrar would then ask an unanswerable question, such as, “ How many bubbles are in a bar of soap?” (de Jong 2002: 161). Resistance at the Registrar’s Office was not arbitrary; instead, there was a regional agreement between Madison, East Carroll, and Tensas Parish officials, including then Madison Sheriff C.E. Hester, that no blacks would be registered to vote (de Jong 2002:162). Indeed, no blacks in Madison Parish were registered to vote after post-Reconstruction disenfranchisements until 1962 (Kaplan and Stanzler 1971: 732-733). In addition to the cotton parish pact, local whites threatened black community members with loss of jobs, those still laboring on the plantation and those in other positions (laborer, teaching, and service positions) as work opportunities diversified after the War. Physical violence was also widely employed to circumvent advocacy and mobilization for rights generally and more decidedly, for trying to vote.

Clarence, during his time as a sharecropper, for example, recalled how John Henry Scott, a pastor and activist in Lake Providence in East Carroll to the north of Tallulah had been shot at and local merchants refused to gin his cotton, a common tactic to disenfranchise and control tenant farmers. His church had also been burned to the ground (Scott and Brown 2003). Whites became anxious about increased voting registration for blacks in the parish, at the same time, the Voter League increased demands for integration and equal opportunities and access to resources. For example, 61 people were arrested for protesting to integrate the Post Inn Café in Tallulah. It took only ten hours for bail to be raised. On two separate occasions I received a printed-out document entitled “June 2, 1968: Negroes Placed in Jail Endearing to Integrate Post Inn Café” listing the names, race, sex, age, and occupation of the arrestees, as well as hand written notations of those who have since passed. Similarly, there was a mass boycott of white owned businesses in 1965 that closed 17 businesses as whites chose to shutter store fronts rather than hire black salesclerks. The local A&P grocery was picketed for 111 days before meeting the League’s demands (Fairclough 2008: 395-397; Sanders 1971: 58). Like Scott in East Carroll, several Tallulah residents suffered Klan and white supremacist arson during this time. Moses Williams’ tire shop was burned down and Rev. Willie Haynes’ church was razed. Several homes were burnt as well (Fairclough 2008:396)

As Wyche explained, despite violent horrors and turmoil, this was a period of culminating change and “things started to get better.” Wyche recalled Tallulah as a “*Bad town. A real bad town it was. [...] Man, these mean white folks wouldn’t think nothing ‘bout shooting down a black man right in the streets.*” Wyche attributed the turnaround in



Tallulah to the economic activism and boycotts in '65 “that came close to paralyzing” the town (Sanders 1971:58). Wyche went on to run for Chief of Police in 1967. He lost and then sued for a new election when it was discovered the voting machine levers for the Democratic ticket had been disconnected from his name on the ballot. He won the new election in 1969 (Fairclough 2008; Sanders 1971).

Wyche implemented changes in the structure of the police force, himself having had been arrested several times for his activism. Indeed, he was on parole for “assaulting a white” when he was elected. For instance, Wyche formed biracial police patrols and ended the practice of whites arresting whites and blacks arresting blacks. Many of the older residents described this arrangement, often chuckling or shaking their heads as they recalled the officers. According to Wyche, two results from this shift were a greater respect for the police department and a decrease in arrests and arraignments for frivolous charges such as “back talk” (Sanders 1971:59-60). For instance, one resident had reported being arrested for speeding while sitting on his front porch. During his life Wyche was elected to several offices including Mayor of Tallulah in 1986; he was defeated by Donald Walker in the 1990 election, who then, along with the Sheriff ushered in the flurry of prison building described in Chapter 3.

I provide this brief overview of Civil Rights activism in Tallulah to highlight the ways in which residents sought to create the political and civic conditions for creating lives worth living, but also how these activities were resisted and met with violence and coercion. Over the 1950's and 1960's the dissolution of agricultural livelihoods and closure of Chicago Mill in the 1980's accelerated the influence of mass incarceration, carceral entrepreneurship, and disenfranchisement through the legal and penal systems

locally. Indeed, mass incarceration is seen by some as a backlash to the gains made during the Civil Rights era (Alexander 2012; Beckett 2002).

### **Work and “Acting Right”**

The rest of this Chapter considers the ways of living and livelihood making in Tallulah and the broader region today, while keeping in mind the historical struggles that grew off the plantations, through war and migration, travelled through Registrar’s Offices and the courts, and now materialize in new sites of life making with its own constraints and opportunities. While the overt violence of the Klan may have largely diminished, the structural violence and vulnerabilities such groups sought to protect still resonate with the effects of incarceration. The vestiges of segregation marked in the landscape by abandoned school buildings and closed businesses persist and imbalances in educational opportunities and the manufactured reliance on state support endure. I take up these issues throughout this Chapter in the context of “the economy” and creating lives worth living.

### **Scrapping Metal**

Driving into town on a brisk morning for fieldwork in early November I noticed a funnel of smoke billowing up from behind the disused football stadium of the old high school in a haze hanging on the horizon. It was not unusual to see smoke on the skyline in Tallulah. Unfortunately, house fires are common due to faulty wiring and subpar construction. As well, given the number of abandoned properties in the area it is not unusual that they be destroyed by the fire department. In general, the air in Tallulah is often singed with smokey char as people burn trash and brush to declutter flood prone yards and remove debris from the ubiquitous ditches and clogged culverts meant to divert



***Figure 8: Smoke from burning mobile classrooms behind Tallulah High School.***

rainwater from homes and buildings. Sometimes burn piles simply contain the more mundane paper goods and detritus produced by households in daily living as Tallulah does not have a recycling program. For example, my neighbors and I tossed our cardboard, paper, and even disused furniture on a pile in the common yard area at our apartment building to burn at night which was often a social occasion for us. As well, the city lacks trash trucks with hydraulic lifts, so if the garbage bins are too heavy, they may be left unemptied on the side of road. The lack of municipal recycling is of course one factor that makes scrapping viable.

Finding the blaze, I pulled up behind the fire truck. Nearly a decade ago behind the abandoned high school mobile trailers had been set up to aid in the transition from the closing of the high school while construction on the new complex beside the men's prison was completed. Dilapidated by weather and vandalism the mobile trailers had been

set ablaze so the iron frames and tin shells could be cut up and removed from the lot. I watched the structures burn as the fire department kept a close eye on the flames, wetting trees and nearby buildings to prevent the fire from escaping the lot and spreading to surrounding buildings and homes. Already Johnny had begun dragging still enflamed air-conditioning units out of the fire. This was one of the first job sites where I worked scrapping metal.



***Figure 9: Fire department burning the trailers.***

Scrapping metal is a common strategy employed by people in the community to generate or supplement incomes. Generally speaking, scrapping metal is a form of recycling; it is also a potentially socially and economically potent livelihood strategy and work practice in Tallulah, but also globally as it forms “one of the most important sources of employment in the world” (Alexander and Reno, eds. 2012:19). For example, Kathleen Millar (2008) discusses the informal work of recycling by Brazilian “catadores” (collectors) on a massive landfill in Rio De Janeiro and shows how social and economic relations emerge for workers, but also for the larger community surrounding the dump site. As Millar points out, recycling often occurs in marginalized communities.



***Figure 10: Scrap metal piled outside of a building across from one of Tallulah's oldest black owned businesses.***

She further notes how “picking,” the identification and gathering of materials for recycling, must be learned as a practical and embodied skill. In what follows I describe how the work of scrapping metal is practiced as well as the ways it engenders social reproduction around an ethic of “doing right” or “acting right.”

I began scrapping metal with Johnny early in my fieldwork. Johnny is a middle aged, African American man. He has a felony record and spent many years incarcerated in the federal system and then in the Men’s Detention facility which is just across the bayou from where he works and lives. Johnny is a self-employed business owner of which scrapping metal is a part. His wife works in a gendered position caring for the elderly in a nearby care center, but also runs a small business in town. Scrapping metal provides a great deal of flexibility in how and when he labors; but this agency is also

constrained in certain ways. Scrapping is contingent on external factors such as weather, bodily pain and fatigue, everyday emergencies, and the availability of “jobs” in the area. Even when jobs are abundant, there is sometimes an issue of whether there is enough time to complete them, and whether they are “worth it,” or not.

Depending on the size of the job, the amount of work he can complete may be contingent on the availability of workers other than himself. Although, Johnny is capable, and sometimes prefers to do what I viewed as an extraordinary (and at times unreasonable) amount of work on his own. Even so, the job removing the outbuildings from behind the school was a formidable one and – somewhat arbitrarily – was conceived to be time sensitive. The fire department came and burned the buildings down because the school board did not want to pay to have them removed knowing that they would then be taken off and disassembled for scrap metal somewhere else. Essentially that person would be getting paid twice, which would not have been “right.” So, there is a kind of moral economy structuring how this work was to take place and how the monetary benefits were to be distributed (Thompson 1971).

Removing the buildings entailed cutting up the trailer frames with an acetylene torch into manageable lengths and dragging off the huge sheets of aluminum roofing and folding them by hand and then literally jumping up and down on them to get them as flat as possible to maximize the volume that could be hauled. Beyond the frames and tin, scrapping also requires sifting through the burned-out materials and gathering up anything metal that can add weight to the load. Examples in this case include doors and door frames, vents, electrical outlets and fuse boxes, toilet paper hangers and door closers, exit signs, plumbing, and conduit.



*Figure 11: Razed trailer featuring a metal door and tin roof.*



*Figure 12: Cut up frames featuring jagged edges.*

Cutting, lifting, and sifting require learning how to comport your body in such a way as to avoid muscle injuries, lacerations on jagged metal, tetanus from nail punctures, and the ability to stay clear of other workers' bodies. For example, on one occasion I was standing behind Johnny and not paying attention. His arm swung upwards pulling a generator crank rope and his elbow smashed square on my nose and blood gushed out. He looked at me and said, "Don't do that." It is expected that a worker develops an awareness of what the other person is doing and assisting them, often to avoid injuries while also making work more efficient. Much of this knowledge is transmitted non-verbally and many of the movements learned and embodied by doing. The ability to work in this way constitutes part of "acting right." However, acting right in terms of physical work also means continuously moving and minimizing break times which informs a particular work ethic, or as Johnny would say, "working like I do."

Beyond the ability to navigate dangerous materials and lift and carry heavy weights while remaining uninjured, knowing what materials to pick and how to separate them is crucial. For example, valuable metals such as aluminum are separated out from the trailer scrap. Especially important is copper tubing from plumbing, heating and cooling units, as well as wire from electric work. Gathering copper at jobs like the school site requires knowing how and where to harvest the copper. For example, from electrical conduit. Once the end of the wires can be pinched in the conduit, the wire is pulled from the length of the conduit and the conduit itself is placed on the trailer as weight. Often the conduit is bent and has to be manually straightened either by hand or by foot using the ground or an object as a fulcrum (See Figure 13). At least once during the day at the school site a 5-gallon bucket is walked around the site to collect copper.



Copper fetches between \$2.50-\$5.50 a pound depending on the grade and commodity markets and is considerably more valuable than scrap iron which usually brings between \$.05-\$.07 cents per hundred pounds. Air and heating units are the best



***Figure 13: Pulling copper wire from electrical conduit.***

sources for copper tubing (and aluminum) that requires little preparation for recycling (See Figure 14). Copper retrieved from electrical work, cords, and from electrical boxes requires “cleaning.” Cleaning copper entails gathering wires and then burning off the wire casings (See Figure 16). An accelerant such as diesel fuel or motor oil is used. As well, any connectors or non-copper attachments need to be snipped from the wires (see Figure 15). Failure to clean the copper properly can result in reductions per pound at the recycling yard. Being docked for “dirty” copper has the potential to be costly, and it is generally accepted that scrap buyers will nearly always find a reason to claim

contamination in any batch of cleaned copper to avoid paying full price.

Copper can be stockpiled and treated as a savings account of sorts. If need be, the copper can be cashed in should a sum of money be needed quickly or cashing in copper



***Figure 14: Copper and aluminum from air conditioning and HVAC units.***



***Figure 15: Remnants of wire connectors and non-copper metal cleaned from wiring.***



***Figure 16: Copper wire being burned to remove casings.***

can be scheduled to align with a known obligation. Iron on the other hand can accumulate quickly. In a typical day, just gathering scrap around town or doing odd jobs (collecting “gifted” or found appliances such as washing machines, broken down lawnmowers, or occasionally old cars, as well as regular household junk), a scrapper can easily “make a load” and generate more income in a day than what a low wage job would pay in a week.<sup>22</sup> In general, though, taking a load across the river to the scrap yard really only makes sense if you can get about five or six thousand pounds on the trailer, especially if

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<sup>22</sup> Often times appliances and cars can be repaired and sold or kept and used rather than recycled as scrap. See, for example, Schiffer, Downing, and McCarthy (1981) concerning re-use.

there were additional workers to be paid.

Scrapping metal is a livelihood strategy in so far as it produces income to acquire necessities to live. More than this, scrapping is one way in which a life can be made. In the sense of “doing right,” scrapping also consists of a set of ethics and moral mandates – in so far as Johnny practices it – by which people are themselves made. In economic terms, this activity produces income for the person performing it. Scrapping also accrues other benefits and costs and is an important site for social reproduction, not only for Johnny and his family, but in the wider community where it occurs. For instance, money is produced by the collection and sale of the scrap, and this money is redistributed to his “partners” that work with him. The funds that are paid to workers often depends on the perceived quality and amount of work performed on a given day, the spot price of scrap offered at the scrap yard, or potentially debts that were owed and being worked off. Money paid to workers is used for food, cigarettes, to pay bills, court fees, for recreation, for pain relief, medicines, and for pocket money and then redistributed in the community through these purchases and payments.

Money is also distributed as “costs” required to perform this work. Costs included payments to hardware stores for blades for reciprocating saws (which often snap or wear down quickly depending on what was being cut), tools (such as tin snips which were desirable for harvesting and “cleaning” copper wire), and to agriculture outfitters for oxygen and acetylene tanks. Other places in the local constellation of actors (Latour 2005; Law 2009) that come together in various formations to make scrapping possible include local gas stations to fuel the truck and fill deflating tires, local auto-part stores as well as regionally based stores that have a larger inventory of parts. I made trips on

several occasions for replacement auto parts that could not be acquired locally. Scrapping metal also involves a broader contingent of residents and supports and is generative of and made possible by other livelihood making activities in the community.

For example, a local mechanic who has a “shop” in his front yard can make repairs on Johnny’s truck, although Johnny often makes repairs himself. Likewise, residents who have skills and specialized equipment such as welders are often called upon to make repairs or adjustments to equipment such as raising wheel well fenders or welding repurposed trailer axels. Other costs that accrue to the community include rental fees for extra hauling trailers, sometimes as many as three have been in use for a particular job whereby one can be left on sight for loading and one pulled to the scrap yard, creating an assembly line of sorts. The multiplication of trailers expedites the transportation of scrap across the river where it is sold at the scrap yard, but also the amount of money that can be collected in a day which impacts how and how quickly workers can get paid and costs recouped. This can be an important strategy, particularly if costs for gases for cutting torches are particularly high. At one job, a community member was paid for each run he made to the yard which resulted in two trucks making runs that day. This person also asks for help with “jobs” he is doing, so there is a reciprocity that occurs.

**Doing Right with Food: “D’you bring me a plate?”**

A portion of the money was also being spent regularly on lunch “plates” and drinks, usually Faygo sodas that could be had at a local store for 3 for \$1.00, which was a source of pride for Johnny as well as indicator that he himself is “doing right.” Johnny would say, “My workers eat when they work with me. I always feed my workers, don’t

I.” Initially, it was common to eat at a small local restaurant, until that closed due to what was spoken of as a situation where an unscrupulous landlord raised the rent (suspiciously after the restaurateur had upgrades done to the electric in the building they were renting to avoid using generators to run the electrical appliances). After this, much of the food was bought at a local food truck. In particular, salami sandwiches, which I was kiddingly known to be fond of. Several times I was told that Miss. Nanna at the food truck asked after the white boy who likes salami sandwiches. The time I bought two one day for lunch was a frequently told story. Besides the local food truck, food was bought at the hot food counter of a local grocery, occasionally ordered from the old truck stop (as opposed the newer Truck Stop which had a large buffet and a meeting room where many local meetings and events took place) or, although less frequently, at a popular gas station and grocery in Mississippi. Buying food there always had the character of a special occasion in the context of lunches. It was compulsory that everyone wash their hands before taking a place in line. At other times, tamales were ordered from local residents who



*Figure 17: Portion of homemade tamales delivered to a work site by a local resident.*

made them in their homes and would then deliver them to the work sites, selling them to order. Making and selling food to augment income is quite common in Tallulah.

A woman I call Gemma did this as well, but she also made “plates” for distribution at the church after service on fourth Sunday when she came into town from her second home in Florence where she teaches public school and is politically active in both communities.<sup>23</sup> It was common for large compartmented Styrofoam containers to be a staple in household kitchens. I was also given such a plate by Johnny at his house when he invited me over for BBQ in appreciation for my work and for “acting right.” Essential to living, food itself, and often the ability to access it, can be viewed as a prestige good, a form of social capital, and a flexible metaphor for sociality (Mintz and Du Bois 2002).

Consider a typical conversation invoking cooking and the gifting of food.

“Hey, now. What’d you cook today?”

“Nah, I’m not cooking today.”

“What? You up here talking to me and your chil’ren going hungry! Goddamn.”

“What? That’s all those kids do is eat.”

“I know your husband eats. You make him cook today?”

“That man can’t boil water. What’s he going to cook?” (Laughs).

(Laughs). “Not worth a damn or a nickel. I can cook now, can’t I cook? Why you not cooking today?”

“Too tired.”

“Too tired!” (Shakes head). “She says she’s too tired. What you got to do?”

“I’m going out West Port to the doctor. Been out to Red Port already for work and now I’m going over to West Port. I got no time to cook.”

(Shakes head.) “Well, bring me a plate tomorrow. I know you gonna cook tomorrow.”

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<sup>23</sup> Fourth Sunday in the black church, at least in the Missionary Baptist Church, is for communion. Some churches hold church only once or twice a month depending on a number of factors, such as if the pastor has other churches and travels. The convention of holding church some weeks and not others is historical and traces back to, as Clarence and Gemma explained to me, when only a handful of pastors travelled from plantation to plantation. Should there be a fifth Sunday in the month, a large group of churches will congregate at one church for a Sunday School Convention.

Questions like “What did you cook today?” or “You didn’t bring me a plate?” index the day to day grind of making do and meeting obligations. Cooking becomes a place holder for time and practice that registers the importance of surviving and can be a metaphor for a host of life events and challenges. However, asking to be brought a plate can be literal and so can asking about what someone cooked. For example, Johnny dislikes some foods that his wife enjoys so friends and family will make those dishes. Similarly, plates are made and taken to family and neighbors who are incapacitated or struggling to make ends meet. While cooking and food can be deployed figuratively, more practically, the making of and distribution of food can also be a form of moral giving. For example, it appeared that many folks relied, in part, on receiving plates from social networks. At churches, in particular, folks would often take several at a time to distribute to others. Food for church services was purposefully prepared in amounts to facilitate this distribution.

The imbrication of the church and social reproduction, even in its intersections with scrapping metal cannot be understated. Johnny gives a percentage of his earnings each week as tithes to his wife’s church. He himself does not go to church but persistently claimed that his “blessings” and success were due to his practice of tithing and his faith in God. “I have what I have because of what I give to God. You better take care of Jesus. You give to Jesus and he gives it back to you.” On many of the occasions I attended church I tithed money I made scrapping metal.<sup>24</sup>

For example, Gemma and I took money and communion, which is fourth Sunday,

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<sup>24</sup> Tithing in black churches takes place in two rounds. One pass is for upkeep of the church, and a second pass is made to accumulate funds for the sick, homebound, or those otherwise in need.



a little self-contained package that looks like a coffee creamer with grape juice and a wafer wrapped in the lid to a woman from her congregation who was homebound and undergoing cancer treatments. Her home – like many others – was poorly constructed, without insulation, bad wiring, and the walls were not sheet rocked but were pressboard. This is very common construction in her neighborhood and was stated as a primary reason for the number of homes that burn down in that community, as I mentioned above. It is also seen as a moral failing of predatory landlords that refuse to maintain their properties and take advantage of their tenants' precarity. For example, one conversation about a black property owner revealed that they made tens of thousands of dollars a month through dubious renting practices.

Like the monies generated by churches, portions of scrapping revenue are also distributed to people in the community – some given away as help each week to friends or as gifts. Monies also circulate as loans to help pay rent, buy medicines, pay other debts, or as stop gaps between paychecks, disability, or other forms of regular income. For example, municipal workers receive bi-weekly checks and for those receiving social assistance or disability funds receive money once a month.

Johnny's labor scrapping metal and the monetary benefits it provides more than what is narrowly referred to in the economic sense as "a living." To be sure, Johnny understands scrapping as a business, but scrapping metal is also contingent on social relations between members of the community and incurs all sorts of non-economic exchanges that occur outside of labor exchange and materialize a broader sense of "the economy" (Gibson-Graham 2006). For example, at one job site, several young men that work for the city helped to clear brush from a lot where we were working. The presence

of the young men became an opportunity for Johnny and a local pastor to share their own experiences with “the streets” and criminal justice system as warnings and encouragements to “do right” by themselves, their families, and communities. Trust in God. Stay off the streets. Stay in school. Work hard.

While an ethic of “doing right” or “acting right” covers the physical force of work and comportment while laboring, it also extends to the conduct of living in a broader individual and community sense. Even still, “acting right” becomes indexed to the real potential of criminal justice system contact and time spent incarcerated. In this sense, scrapping metal is a practice of resistance and placemaking that seeks to exclude possible carceral futures, even as it is in some respects structured by them (Bourdieu 1990). On multiple occasions I heard Johnny give similar talks to young men who are by virtue of where they live, what they look like, and simply “walking outside,” as Ally put it at the Forum, become vulnerable to entanglements with the police and /or potentially violent “trouble” more generally (Quesada, et al. 2011). Scrapping metal, then, occurs in a larger universe of “making lives worth living” that far exceeds narrow visions of “making money.”

### **Acting Right at School and Doing Right by Youth**

While Johnny espouses an ethic of acting and doing right that is embodied in work practices and enjoined in the community through resource redistribution and encouraging youth to stay out of trouble, there is also a sense of acting right that filters through administrative bodies structuring policy making and imaginaries about youth in education systems that impact livelihoods and possible futures. As the Summit and the Forum illustrated, education is widely considered a cause and cure for poverty and

constrained life chances, as when Pastor encourage youth to get that degree and get out of Red Port. The remainder of this chapter examines the challenges that educators and students face within an educational system that is deeply imbricated with punitive discipline, surveillance, and mass incarceration more broadly. First, I provide an analysis of a School Board meeting I attended in 2015 and then discuss the work of teaching in local schools in a high poverty district with a former educator that I call Grace. While the School Board meeting illustrates how administrators imagine what it means for youth to “act right” in school, the reciprocal question, what does it mean to “do right” by the children is raised in the interview and secondary data analysis around issues of poverty, discipline, and violence.

### **School Board Meeting**

On the opposite side of the high school from where the modular classrooms were burned, scrapped, and recycled, a detached building, once a cafeteria I believe, serves as the Madison Parish School Board meeting room. Opening the heavy dented gray metal door, a large padlock hanging unlatched, has the feeling of breaking and entering. Two nameplates and microphones mark the seats of the school board members who are absent. A silent prayer and the pledge of allegiance follow a call to order; a roll call opens the meeting. The board votes to proceed with a program to ensure free need-based meals to all children, and also to split K-2 and 3-6 into separate elementary schools and establish grades 7-8 at the middle school and 9-12 at the high school. This framework for grouping students was couched as primarily financial and educational, to save money and to better track progress of students in regard to state testing. Madison Parish consistently fares poorly on state measurements of learning success criteria, as does Louisiana nationally.

However, there were also sexualized and gendered concerns about “mingling diverse age groups” in the same buildings. The board voted to delay the opening of schools by two weeks to facilitate the change and allow time for notification of parents and to schedule bus routes. This was a major structural change, but I want to focus here on a conversation that echoes the crime, education, poverty theme that was so prevalent at the Poverty Summit discussed in the last chapter: approval of the Student Governance Policy.

The long and protracted debate I witnessed regarding student conduct policies, and in particular the suggestion of a “zero tolerance” policy for violence mandating immediate arrest for fighting refocuses the crime, education, poverty nexus in a new context. The debate on policy revisions for student conduct initially explored setting new parameters for infractions such as truancy, cheating, failure to bring ID badges and whether or not to charge students for replacements, and the dress code, in particular standards for “appropriateness” regarding hair braids and head coverings.

A white middle-aged woman on the board ruminantly questioned at length whether “frizzy” hair escaping “unkept,” loosely plaited braids was “acceptable” in young girls and what length was seemly for boys. She seemed somewhat anxious if braided hair for boys could even be deemed acceptable.<sup>25</sup> This discussion was eventually shut down after some time by another board member who, exasperated, forcefully wondered that even if you could decide what might actually constitute a standard of “visual appropriateness” for hair braids, how could that possibly even be translated into

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<sup>25</sup> For a study examining surveillance, school policy, and discipline in schools specifically for Black girls through a critical race lens, see Wun (2016).



***Figure 18: Sign posted in the window of a local business warning customers to pull up their pants before entering the store.***

language, much less a policy? Board discussion framed largely racialized, classed, and gendered issues of presence, integrity, identification, bodily comportment, and self-presentation in terms of surveillance and enforcement, of acceptable behavior by staff and parents, self-regulation by students, and consequences for lack of self-determination (see Figure 18). Disciplinary measures were couched as maintaining discipline, accountability, responsibility, and “standards” and centered on punitive detention, suspension, and expulsion. However, just as the Summit revealed contradictory impulses to applaud and revile youth and the parenting skills (or perceived lack thereof) of caretakers, a similar refusal to totalize the goodness or badness of students was apparent here as well.

“Problem” students with behavioral issues can be transferred from the regular classroom and enter in-school suspension facility at the Madison Parish Alternative Center (MPAC) for a specified time or until they meet certain requirements and “reenter” the “normal” classroom (MPSD 2019). The alternative school is housed in a section



***Figure 19: Exterior of Madison Parish Alternative Center (MPAC) with a Sheriff's cruiser parked out front.***

of a former middle school. A board member suggested supplanting alternative school with “Saturday school” as a potential “behavioral intervention.” Funding and staffing issues were raised as concerns about adding another program to the school district, but ultimately expectations that students (and by extension irresponsible parents) would simply not attend on a weekend day and the issue was tabled. Considerations of who is behaviorally capable, that is rational, moral, and freely choosing to be well behaved and therefore deserving to be educated, and who would choose not to, either by choice or lack of parental intervention provided the dichotomy for the debate.<sup>26</sup> An ethos of punishment as control and correction, although structurally implicit in segregation to an alternative unit, was most strongly felt in a move to institute a “zero tolerance” policy mandating

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<sup>26</sup> See Susser (1996) on constructions of the deserving and undeserving poor.

automatic arrest for violence, i.e. fighting (see Mallett 2016).

The boards' proposed move to a "zero tolerance" policy and a criminal justice response to behavior brings into relief a possibility that crime, education, and poverty coalesce in the context of administrative governance through entanglements with law enforcement and criminal justice such that "the capacity of mass incarceration to structure individual and community dispositions" makes thinking a zero-tolerance policy appear natural (Schept 2013:71). Reiterating the "enforcement and consequences" themes above, the fighting policy centered on students "learning that there are consequences for actions," stopping "bad behavior" on "the first offense," and "accountability." The specter of the "gang member" and "gang fights" also arose, although an informant and parent herself later laughed at this. "There are no gangs here," she said. "They're just bored kids who live on different streets." Only one community member in attendance rose to speak, urging caution citing that an arrest and involvement in the criminal justice system incurs "long-term consequences" for future life chances.

The uneasy feeling produced by the proximity of for-profit carceral institutions to the schools I experienced at the Poverty Summit returned. The board decided to leave the wording as "may" be arrested, rather than "will." Despite the ambivalence of this decision, the ability to think a "zero tolerance" policy suggests the crime, poverty, education narrative is punctuated by the heavily carceral environment in Tallulah, inflecting and possibly structuring, even if unconsciously, how bodies and behaviors are constructed in moral and civic imaginaries and how administrative bodies make or fail to make certain decisions. The importance of this is to note how the material, environmental prevalence of carceral institutions might translate as a normalized carceral ethic working

to structure other areas of life that conform to broader logics of punishment and imaginaries of threatening youth.<sup>27</sup>

### **Punishment and Poverty in Schools**

Educators I spoke with provided diverse accountings of punishment (or the lack thereof) in schools in Madison Parish. For example, one teacher who left the school system to teach in Mississippi (a better ranked district and better salary) complained of the coddling that students received even as they flagrantly disrespected teachers.<sup>28</sup> In this case the inability of teachers to discipline students was largely related to administrative fears of lawsuits. Nevertheless, there is a general, albeit gendered and racialized, conception of youth in classrooms as always already in need of discipline and correction, as the comments regarding youth in the School Board meeting illustrate. In contrast to these narratives, another teacher, a younger white woman who I call Grace, described the punitive nature of discipline in the public-school system and expressed the need to understand student behavior in the larger social and economic contexts in which they live.

*Grace: A lot of our kids – I used to know the abuse numbers, I think they are dated at this point – I'd say at least 1 in 4 of kids, if not 1 in 2 of our kids is facing some kind of abuse at home. I mean, corporal punishment is still allowed in our schools and used readily. I had no idea when I was first hired, and I walked down the hallway on my first day and I realized I was the only teacher that didn't have a ruler, or a paddle, and I've seen it. I had a student blow up... they were playing around in the hallway and one kid smacked the other kids hat off his head and stomped on it – that kid just lost it, flipped out. He shoved me into a wall, beat this child up, you know screaming and cussing... I...I...was asked as the teacher to*

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<sup>27</sup> See Vélez Young-Alfaro (2017) on the punishment and constructions of youth as threats in youth prison schools, where terms such as “thug” and “gangbanger” are commonly used to describe and reference youth.

<sup>28</sup> It is common for teachers living in Tallulah to work in other districts. As well, many residents, provided they have the resources, will send their kids to schools in other districts or to charter schools.



*stand there and watch him get paddled. It was my worst day of teaching ever. It was awful. Corporal punishment happens a lot.*

Grace estimates that between 25% and 50% of her students experience some kind of abuse at home and perceives frequent use of corporal punishment. Louisiana is one of nineteen states that allows corporal punishment and one of ten states that make up 75% of incidents of corporal punishment (Whitaker and Losen 2019). Louisiana does not permit striking children with disabilities or Attention Deficit /Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in public elementary and secondary schools (Global Initiative 2019:12). However, as Grace describes below, it is unclear how many children with disabilities go undiagnosed. Grace also notes how a prioritization on security in the schools over guidance counseling and non-punitive understanding increases teacher labor, complicates teachers' roles in schools, and can result in poor, even tragic outcomes for students.

*Grace: The resource officer is non-negotiable. We have a resource officer, but we don't have a social worker and we are a high poverty community. I taught middle school and by the time I got through all the counseling and the social and emotional help my students needed then I was expected to teach, bring them up 2 or 3 reading levels per grade, and ...it's interesting how things are structured, and it's a little bit of the chicken and the egg given the current reality at our schools. We need a resource officer. We have fights that break out. We have sometimes scary situations that happen. I would say they happen far less frequently than anyone perceives them to actually happen. I don't know the specifics of our school to prison pipeline, but I would say if you can research about it, it's important.*

*We have a lot of... I can tell you some of my kids are juniors and seniors that I knew back then, because they had shit going on at home and they were behind in school or they had some social emotional need like severe ADHD or bi-polar disorder, something that was undiagnosed, we were not giving them the resources that they needed. I tried everything I could to keep them in class, but a lot of times they had to be removed.*

*I've seen those same students play out - they're not in school anymore. They're at the alternative school; they're at Tallulah Fields; or, ... they're... [claps loudly] ... Billy Johnson shot and killed his cousin last year... [claps loudly] ... Gerry Wilson shot one kid and got himself shot and killed... [folds her hands in her lap] ... I heard the sirens go off the other day. [...]*

*So, it's predominately boys. My black boys are "scary" and this and that, and we're very quick to...we're not enabled, or empowered to ...we just don't have*

*the structures in place to give them what they need; so, they fall through the cracks and I think a lot of the times we really push them there... We live in a community where prison is part of the norm, even if we don't explicitly talk about it.*

Grace relates that while the presence of a school resource officer (SRO) is “non-negotiable,” the absence of a social worker creates an enormous amount of care work for her over and above “teaching,” which becomes indexed to raising test scores on state exams. As well the perception of her young boys as “scary” references long standing racialized characterizations that prioritizes security measures above social and economic needs. Indeed, Louisiana falls well below recommended levels in its ratios of social workers, psychologists, and nurses to students. For example, the School Social Work Association recommends a ratio of social workers to students of 250:1. The average in Louisiana schools is 1,979:1, while the average is 2,106:1 nationally (Whitaker and Losen 2019:12-13).<sup>29</sup>

Grace also explains how the mismatch in SRO’s to social workers results in a structural deficiency whereby students are more likely to be removed from classrooms and / or placed in alternative school and juvenile corrections settings, or worse as her list of former students lost to violence illustrates. Whitaker and Losen (2019) note that 49% of Louisiana schools report having police, 34% percent report having police but no nurse, counselor, psychologist, or social worker (nationally 43% and 31% respectively) (19). Although Grace recognizes the need to sometimes resort to removing kids from classrooms, students of color and students with disabilities are more likely than their counterparts to lose days of instruction due to suspension.

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<sup>29</sup> Whitaker et al. (2019) based ratios on reporting from United States Department of Education, 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).

Losen and Whitaker's (2018) analysis of 2105-2016 CRDC data found that out-of-school suspensions nationally accounted for 11,360,004 days, amounting to 66 million hours of lost instruction and 63,000 school years of lost learning (4). A longitudinal study found that 12 years after a first suspension (ages 25-32) people were more likely to not have graduated and to have been arrested or on parole (Rosenbaum 2018). The extraction of youth bodies from school and time from classrooms can contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Basford, Borer, and Lewis 2014), fitting into the larger structure of carceral extractivism and resource dispossession considered in this dissertation. As the caution against mandatory arrest urged by the resident at the School Board meeting warned, criminal justice contact can have deleterious effects for later life outcomes.

Grace notes normalization of incarceration in the children's lives and the social and economic factors that compound this reality.

*LB: Is there a sense that kids expect to be in one of these buildings at some point?*

*Grace: Oh yeah. They get told it a lot. I've heard adults speaking to kids in a way... I think they're trying to help and scare them straight. "You're going to end up in jail. You're going to end up like your daddy. You're going to end up like your cousin." I really truly think that adult thinks they're helping break the cycle... but they're reinforcing their norm and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And then, it's not just that in isolation, but when you couple it with... we are a high poverty district where our average student is having a tough time at home, even on a good day.*

*A lot of our kids don't know where they are going to sleep at night, or they think they are sleeping one place and they got to move in the middle of the night. A lot of people are staying with relatives and hopping from house to house every night. No one is truly homeless in town, homeless in the sense that people are sleeping in the street and sleeping under bridges; we call it transitional homelessness. A lot of our kids don't get fed on the weekends. This is why I love our health and nutrition person; she is busting her ass to make sure kids get lunches during the summer. She's driving around in her own car delivering food to kids. We have really great people.*

Broadly speaking what Grace describes as a lived context for young people is poverty and the chaotic living conditions it creates when people experience abuse and neglect,

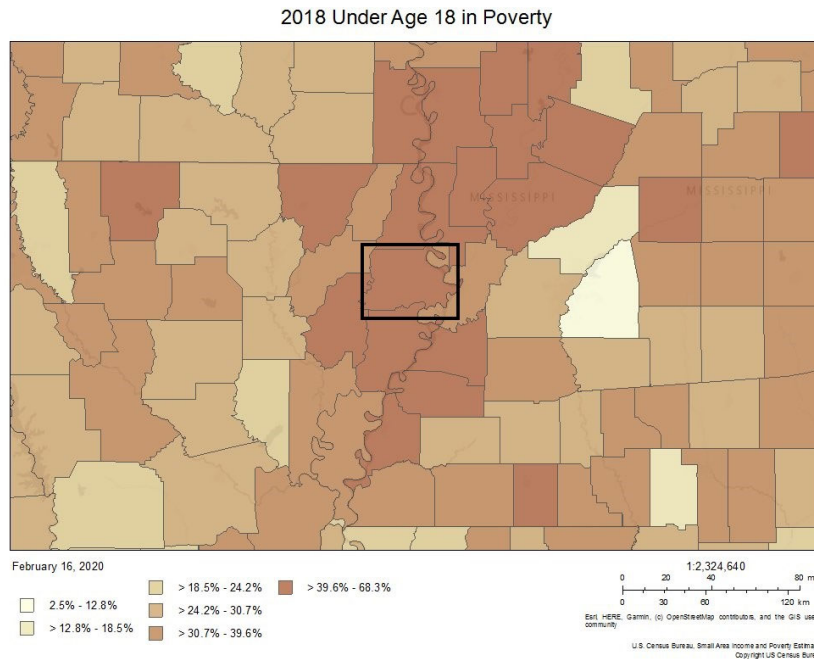
lack secure and predictable housing, and lack economic resources to access necessities such as food (Western 2018). As the visualizations below illustrate, childhood poverty and poverty more generally in Madison Parish is much higher than state and national figures. These issues echo those that were discussed at length in the Community Forum.

***Small Area Income and Poverty Estimate (SAIPE)  
All Ages in Poverty  
2018 - Selected State - Selected County***

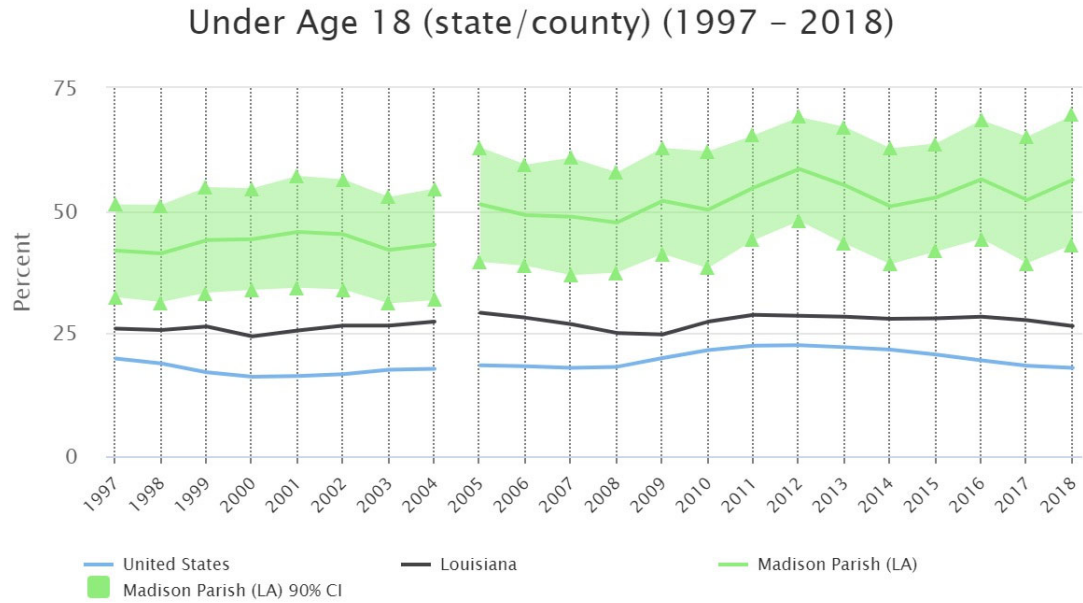
Year	ID	Name	Poverty Universe	Number in Poverty	90% Confidence Interval	Percent in Poverty	90% Confidence Interval
2018	00000	United States	319,184,033	41,852,315	41,619,366 to 42,085,264	13.1	13.0 to 13.2
2018	22000	Louisiana	4,529,047	848,005	830,136 to 865,874	18.7	18.3 to 19.1
2018	22065	Madison Parish (LA)	9,594	4,000	3,209 to 4,791	41.7	33.5 to 49.9

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program.

**Figure 20:** SAIPE generated table comparing poverty rates (all ages) across geographic scales.



**Figure 21:** SAIPE generated poverty map (under 18) showing the immediate Delta Region. Madison Parish outlined in black by author.



**Figure 22: SAIPE generated poverty graph (under 18) comparing geographic scales.**

Despite and because of the structural challenges that youths face, Grace applauds the efforts of those in the community who take it upon themselves to actively intervene in these circumstances, like the woman who delivers food during the summers. Alongside the problems associated with funding SRO’s above social workers, Grace did recount a teaching memory where the schools D.A.R.E. officer creatively argued for the importance of staying out of trouble and off drugs.<sup>30</sup>

**What You Can’t Get in Jail**

*Grace: I’ll never forget – our D.A.R.E. officer at the time would always try this scared straight tactic with the kids. Fifth grade is an interesting age in Tallulah - a lot of our kids when they hit 5th grade are 10, 11, 12, that’s when their respective communities are starting to tell them you need to start acting grown, but you’re not grown, yet. So, there’s a lot of confusion around what does it mean to be a 10, 11, 12-year-old for a lot of my students.*

<sup>30</sup> The Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E) program was started in 1983 in an effort to educate young people regarding the dangers of drug abuse and to introduce a “friendly” police presence in classrooms. Most studies have found D.A.R.E. to be ineffective. See for example, West and O’Neal (2004).

So, he'd say, "Do you all know where the jail is?" And the kids would say, "Yeah! It's right next to Popeyes." And, you know, they're talking about that and he's asking them if they're scared about going to jail. And they're like, "I ain't scared. I'm a man..." or, "I've been in the jail before. I'm not scared of it." And you know what got them - they're still 11 years old at heart - he goes, "You know what you smell all day in jail?" And they all yell, "Popeyes!" So, he goes, "You know what you never gonna get in jail? – Popeyes!" Then the kids are like, "No-o-o-o-o! That's not fair! I don't want to go to jail!" [Laughter].



**Figure 23: Popeyes restaurant and Madison Parish Jail which are directly across from the Madison Parish Courthouse (not pictured).**

*Grace: That was one of my favorite moments in teaching, and it was such an interesting moment because they are sitting there and jail, prison, either they know someone whose there, they walk by it every day, they live across the street from one, or that's what puts food on their table and keeps their school uniforms on them the correct size, is the prisons; and, for the majority of the class it's just such a regular thing. You hear the kids talk about it. It's normed in their life.*

*So, I would say it's an implicit part of the community. No one explicitly talks about it, only a few people who just say, "We got too many prisons in this town." The kids, though, are aware. For some of our smaller communities in Tallulah, I wouldn't say for every child it's normed, but I would say for a clear majority of them it's a norm.*

Grace's comments on carceral nominalization of prisons in her students' lives range from actual involvement with the facilities to economic dependence on the

facilities for creating livelihoods, illustrates another way, beyond SROs and zero-tolerance, that the school system becomes imbricated in the local carceral political-economy. The way in which the D.A.R.E. officer transforms Popeye's chicken into a tactic to caution the children invites returning to the issue of food and feeding that was prevalent in the School Board meeting in the need to expand lunch program coverage, in Grace's commentary of food insecurity and memory of the D.A.R.E. officer's comments, and in the broader community.

In July of 1994 the announcement of the Popeye's restaurant (shown in Figure 23) opening in Tallulah shared the front page of the Madison Journal with a story touting the jobs that would be created by the youth prison about to be constructed. Even though coincidental, there is something uniquely ironic about the juxtaposition of the stories in the newspaper and the D.A.R.E. officer's gambit to leverage Popeye's chicken, which *is* quite fragrant, to encourage good behavior, resist drug use, and stay out of jail. Indeed, the denial of food, such as in lack of nutritious meals in privatized carceral cafeterias to cut costs (\$1.25 per person was estimated in Tallulah facilities),<sup>31</sup> can be used, as Meghan Carney (2013) points out in her study of feeding practices in immigrant detention centers, as a form of "affective discipline." While the D.A.R.E. officer's gambit is hypothetical, it weaponizes food, not to harm bodily but to deter, with an appeal to potential loss of affective enjoyment for children who "Love" that chicken from Popeyes.

Carney develops the concept of "affective discipline," a term "referring to an

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<sup>31</sup> Anecdotally I was told that LaSalle cuts costs by using the cheapest products that it can purchase for maintaining incarcerated people in their facilities in Tallulah and this differs materially from practices when the facilities were under administration of the Sheriff's Department.

economy of surveillance [...] that targets the body as its primary site of intervention” (35). Through secondary research and ethnographic work with immigrant women in southern California, she describes how food and eating practices imbricate with “illegal” and undocumented statuses as economically and socially devalued both inside the detention center – “packets of crackers, or serving uncooked, frozen, or otherwise inedible food such as dry beans, cat food, or moldy or insect-filled food” – and in the broader community outside of it – skipping meals and turning to low priced fast-food, for instance (37, 39). She notes that feeding practices in state administered prisons, where prisoners fare better “overall as rights-holders by default of their U.S. citizenship” (38). This gives credence to what Carney notices as the “violent transformation [of food] into a weapon of political-economic power.” However, she also importantly notes, especially in the case of her primary informant, a woman she calls Pilar, who had sold food out of her home to factory workers in Guatemala before immigrating and being detained, how the preparation and eating of food post-detention can constitute a form of resistance that is therapeutic and empowering (43-44).

The D.A.R.E. officer leveraged this sort of “affective discipline” by asserting the loss of a widely enjoyed food, while also noting in jail the smell of that same food is constantly circulating but unattainable. In a similar way that Carney notes how feeding practices relates devalued status for migrants, the D.A.R.E. officer plays on this devaluation of people (and food) in jail and prison. However, as Carney notes, and as the discussion about Johnny’s supplying food for workers and Johnny’s own bragging about his cooking abilities demonstrate, the making and eating of food can be resistive and empowering. This is true in communities but also inside of carceral facilities as well. For



example, on one occasion Johnny recognized a community member that he had done “time” with and commented on how much this person enjoyed the food Johnny cooked inside and on his broader reputation as a cook while incarcerated.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the figurative ability for food and the material practice of cooking in conversations in the community illustrates the therapeutic and empowering dimensions food takes in conditions of hardship. Grace too mentions the practice of cooking and feeding that members of the educational community undertake to improve food-based outcomes for children during the summer. Although, it is common for residents that work with children, in tutoring and after-school contexts, to also send plates home with children.

Beyond the role of food to index and make outcomes for life, Grace notes the problem of insecure housing (transitional homelessness) and abuse that children experience literally and figuratively. These factors all compound in the children’s direct and / or indirect involvements with incarceration and policing and their normalization in everyday life in the community. For example, as Ally had alluded to in the Forum, Grace notes the ubiquity of abuse in children’s homes and the continuum of potential corporeal punishment they then face at school. At the same time, little consideration was given to broader social and familial contexts that spill over and challenge students in educational environments, much as Reverend had discussed regarding sentencing in the Red Port youth court setting. As the School Board meeting illustrated, children’s behaviors are largely considered “choices” and punishments as “consequences” of those choices. In this

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<sup>32</sup> Cooking in jails and prisons can be empowering, afford status, and serve to resist the bodily confinement and lack of power in carceral settings. See, for example, Cate (2008) and Ugelvik (2011). Cooking after prison can also be cathartic, as well as entrepreneurial; see, for instance, Joe Guerrero’s “After Prison Show” website and YouTube channel which has over one million subscribers.

way, the punitive nature of the school discipline largely mirrors the structure of the criminal justice system in as much as both work on binaries (guilty and innocent, good and bad, offenders and victims) centered around the presumed choices of racialized individuals without consideration of biography and social and economic context, which the absence of social work professionals, in Grace's estimation, exacerbates. While the experiences of Grace's students with poverty are not unique, it is instructive that the obstacles they face largely mirror the obstacles faced by the formerly incarcerated as they attempt to reintegrate after release: housing, income, and health (Western and Watkins 2018).

For example, Bruce Western (2018) conducted a longitudinal study of over one hundred men and women (n =122) released from the Massachusetts prison system and documented their first year after release.<sup>33</sup> Housing, income, and health were major racialized barriers to successful reentry. As Grace's comments and the stories told by the participants in the Forum and throughout this dissertation show, violence is experienced over lifetimes in environments of deep poverty. Western (2018; 2015) argues that is difficult, then, contrary to clear cut binaries of offenders and victims, to discount the ways in which individuals become situated as victims, witnesses, and offenders at different periods in their lives. For instance, of the 122 participants in Western's study, 32.7% experienced domestic violence while growing up, 42.1% witnessed someone get killed, 46.8 % were hit by parents, 91.7% got in fights, and 85.2 % got in trouble with the police during childhood. In terms of educational outcomes, 80.6% were suspended or expelled from school and 59.8% had dropped out high school (2015:10).

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<sup>33</sup> For an ethnographic study of incarceration and reentry for juveniles, see Fader (2013).

Various forms of violence occur in homes, neighborhoods, schools, and invariably after incarceration in a facility. Western argues that mass incarceration hardens “the connections between racial inequality, harsh poverty, and violence.” Structurally, “High rates of incarceration have deepened racial exclusion and undermined economic opportunity” (Western 2018:177-178). I relate Western’s findings adjacent to the commentary provided by Grace and in the context of the multi-generational stories related by the Forum participants to provide a continuum that can be useful for examining qualitatively and descriptively the myriad ways in which mass incarceration patterns institutions, livelihoods, and futures. Alongside education, an area that is deeply entwined with well-being and outcomes is social “safety net” provision.

The next chapter begins with a discussion with a former social worker I call Lucinda. Our discussion examines how people struggle to make claims for governmental assistance and the collateral consequences of the current “welfare” system requirements surrounding work and child support enforcement. Later in the Chapter I discuss the experience of opening and running a small business in Tallulah, an undertaking that is very much contingent on community economics and the strategies people curate to secure livelihoods and positive futures. Indeed, taking the job to open the business was a livelihood strategy I employed alongside scrapping metal that also formed a key source of participant observation and trust building in the community. As I describe there, it was also the way in which I was introduced to the lived aspects of poverty and other barriers to social reproduction in the region.

## CHAPTER 6: LIVELIHOODS AND INCOME

### Introduction

Like discourses of accountability and choice (choosing to mis-behave) that reinforce binaries of good and bad students in classrooms and spur punitive and bodily punishments for “problem students” in education systems, the devolution and privatization of social programs over the past several decades has resulted in the transformation of a focus on assistance to one of self-sufficiency (Morgen 2001). Self-sufficiency in this regard, and in terms of governmental policy, is largely indexed to a pathologized notion of dependency (as a drain on public resources) and fraud (“welfare queens”) while presumably reforming the poor through work (Davis 2004; Dickinson 2016; Morgen 2001). As Sandra Morgen (2001) points out, the Family Support Act of 1988 refocused the mission of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) away from income support to “help poor mothers care for their families to one focused on reform of poor mothers, mandating employment or basic education and job training for recipients of welfare” (747). Further, in 1996 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) “replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a program of temporary assistance with lifetime limits on receipt of cash assistance [60 months], a ‘work-first’ emphasis, and authority for program policy further devolved to states” (Morgen 2001:747).

Given the poverty and un(der)employment in Tallulah and the broader region (Louisiana is itself the second poorest state in the nation after Mississippi), the ability to access governmental aid is itself an important strategy for curating livelihoods and improving life chances. However, welfare reforms have largely increased work instability

and underemployment to the benefit of exploitative labor practices (Piven 1998). An African American woman I call Lucinda explained to me some of the challenges and contradictions of social service provision in Louisiana from her time as a social worker. In addition to the work requirements noted above, Louisiana mandates people with children file child support enforcement (CSE) claims against absent parents and further to waive rights to that child support in exchange for benefits. Both in terms of work requirements and child support “capture,” the social and economic context of poverty and entanglement with criminal justice systems can pose problems.

### **“Workfare” and Child Support**

*Me: You said community service or work experience 20 hours a week for benefits. Are they being paid for that?*

*Lucinda: No. They're doing that to maintain their benefit. So, it's \$188 a month. They have to do 20 hours per week if the child is under 6, or if the child is older, 30 hours per week. When it was localized, they used to go around to the community and try to get placement partners. The Council on Aging – they had people over there that would help with the feeding program, at the library, in the schools in the cafeteria.<sup>34</sup> The Louisiana Works Office, or LWC, took that component of the program over several years ago. When it was local, the challenge was that they could only get so many partners and they're the ones who help you find jobs.*

*So, the LWC took it over and they compiled all the work experience and contracts - now, when they call you in for your assessment or to do your Family Success Agreement - you can communicate to them that you're interested in school. I'm interested in X, Y, Z. I understand I have to do X number of hours, of something, but I really want a job. You go in there like that. People get placed and in 2 months if they show themselves able to work, they get hired. The whole goal in sending this person is that they want to work – go over there like you want to work and get that job. And so, it about 20 hours per week of some activity.*

*Me: Well, if you're doing 80 hours a month for \$188, that's what... \$2 something an hour?*

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<sup>34</sup> The Council on Aging provides meals and recreation for seniors.

*Lucinda: Right, right. Look. The ones who are in school - they have to submit their schedules, even the ones in high school. Some in high school are on welfare and have children. Their schooling will suffice for the work requirement. It's not uncommon for young women – and teenage mothers – to have multiple children. But, even when you are out of high school and you enroll in the community or technical college programs, it can be worth it because your receiving childcare, travel stipend, books, supplies... So, if you work the system, it can be done.*

*So, just think, you're doing the classes, but you have four children. So that's what, \$1600 dollars in childcare. And, I think the stipend for transportation is \$100 a month. That's what they give on that card you get. If you're taking the classes, they buy your scrubs, that's a whole other set of money - books, uniforms, but you have to be in good standing with the program. For example, locally anyway, cases are processed at the state level, the program used to have them up at the nursing home or send them through the CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) program. I was so glad when they added phlebotomy because not everyone is cut out for a CNA. They would go to the CNA class because that was all that was offered. Maybe you don't have that bedside manner or the disposition to be a CNA. So, some of them were successful. Some weren't. And, then they added the phlebotomy and they just like bloomed, you know. Now they offer, I think it's a patient care tech – so you go for this 18-month program and you're getting all three things.*

*I mean the ones who want it, they want it, but some just don't do right by it. You here the bad stuff. It is limited in what you get as far as the grant, but on the flip side if you have the day care and the little stipend - especially if you have a lot of children – it's just worth it to go through the programs for however many months if they are going to take care of all of that, and get something under your belt to maintain your household. Right? You have to do all of it though. Remain compliant. You can't just half work the program and then think you're going to get all of it, because that's just not going to work. It just depends on the area and the mindset of the people, I guess.*

In explaining the work requirements for benefits, Lucinda is primarily discussing Family Independence Temporary Assistance (FITAP) which is a program, amongst others, providing cash assistance falling under the larger umbrella of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Either together or alone FITAP and Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) both mandate employment, school, or active search for employment. When conjoined, for example, families receiving cash assistance who do not meet the work mandate may lose SNAP benefits as

well.<sup>35</sup> As Lucinda describes, when possible, enrolling in school to satisfy benefit program work requirements provides the best opportunity to actually benefit and “do right” by the cash-assistance programs as they currently exist to obtain the greatest amount of auxiliary supports, e.g., child-care, supplies, travel stipends. However, Lucinda also recognizes that “depending on the area” where a beneficiary resides can determine the ease or difficulty of taking advantage of those supports. For example, travel allowances don’t mean much in areas deplete of public transportation or other factors, insufficient social networks, other part time employment, and the like that constrain one’s ability “to work the system.”

What is clear from Lucinda’s description of work requirements is the shift from “welfare” to “workfare,” where assistance is formulated as a work subsidy. This too as Lucinda points out in regard to finding local partners (this is not just an issue in Tallulah but in other areas with lack of employment) can complicate where and what jobs are available. For instance, many of the jobs available in and around Tallulah remain limited to service employment in fast food restaurants or as retail employees, primarily cashiers. However, as Lucinda mentions, expanded opportunities for certifications at the community college locally, as well as similar programs in other areas and regions of the state can provide training for better paying employment. Still, it can be difficult to maintain a household on a CNA salary or other lower level medical certification. Many residents described this difficulty. Often, such credentials become subject to third-party contracting firms that provide home care or similar services at low wages. The structural

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<sup>35</sup> See Louisiana Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) State Plan and specific program descriptions available at the Department of Child and Family website.

dynamic at work, especially locally, still leaves benefit recipients' mandated labor accruing to the handful of persons who own (and are the employers) or lease land to businesses where labor accrues to the benefit of a few. For example, if you receive employment at the boy's home or the nursing home, you are working for one person. Alternatively, if you receive a job cashiering at the McDonald's or at the local pharmacy, you work for another.

Although important, despite the local configuration of business ownership, labor and wages are still being expropriated by the state to subsidize what is nominally considered assistance, although focusing not on the ability to have a life worth living, but to meet moralized financial obligations; or, put another way, to survive. Beyond work requirements, beneficiaries of cash and food assistance are required to file claims for child support enforcement (CSE) and assign rights to the state in order to receive benefits. Lucinda explained to me how CSE claims work in the context of seeking aid. The mandate to enforce child support is not limited to absent parents but can extend to entire family units.

*Lucinda: So, it is mandatory and can get complicated. Say, I'm an aunt or uncle seeking aid for children I have of a relative, or if I'm a parent, you have to pursue child support against all absent parents. Even if I have a child - if I have a sixteen-year-old daughter that can't get anything on her own, I would have to apply for welfare; so, I would have to file child support against her daddy, which is my husband – estranged or otherwise. If the boy she is pregnant from is a minor, I would have to file against his parents, his mom and dad. So, she's probably in school, so that 20 hours per week requirement would fall on her; if she was not in school, that would fall on me and she would have to do that 30 hour per week requirement. In any case, you have to pursue against each absent parent.*

*In cases where clients have children – say, 5 children with 5 fathers, potentially different fathers – paperwork would be filed on all of them and they get sent over to child support and they set testing to establish paternity. Doesn't matter. You have to do it. However, in some cases... for example, there are people*



*that say, “I’m in a domestic situation,” and they have a right to claim good cause, meaning they have a good reason for not wanting to pursue. There are cases where a woman, say, has three children and claims she doesn’t know who the father is for any of them. This is because they don’t want to file child support against the dad, so they say, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.” Or, they say they were raped every time. They still have to fill out the paperwork on the parent. The claim cannot be processed without it. Once they are found eligible and the claim is certified then they assign you a child support worker. They sit down with you and discuss your situation in detail, and they determine an exemption for good cause.*

As the table below (Figure 24) shows, the state collects an average of roughly \$528,000 dollars a month in child support from Tallulah residents and collects nearly \$5 million every six months. To put this in perspective, revenues collected by the City of Tallulah for the full year 2018 amounted to \$3.3 million (City of Tallulah 2018). Moreover, in Tallulah, parents, or as Lucinda explains, relatives, or the parents of minor children parents, are in debt \$33.5 million to the state. Over the same six-month period

<b>Child Support Enforcement (July 2019 - Jan 2020) - Tallulah, LA</b>					
Month	Current Support Collections	Current Support Due	Arrears Collections	Cumulative Arrears Due	Total Collections
Jul-19	\$ 529,919	\$ 1,003,314	\$ 177,493	\$ 33,137,178	\$ 707,413
Aug-19	\$ 534,231	\$ 1,001,112	\$ 163,815	\$ 33,052,928	\$ 698,046
Sep-19	\$ 527,282	\$ 1,005,372	\$ 237,384	\$ 33,223,921	\$ 764,666
Oct-19	\$ 536,449	\$ 1,010,421	\$ 167,030	\$ 33,404,763	\$ 703,479
Nov-19	\$ 514,506	\$ 1,010,695	\$ 118,835	\$ 33,751,948	\$ 633,341
Dec-19	\$ 537,932	\$ 1,009,172	\$ 165,163	\$ 33,972,397	\$ 703,094
Jan-20	\$ 514,320	\$ 1,009,492	\$ 129,501	\$ 33,998,757	\$ 643,821
<b>Totals</b>	<b>\$ 3,694,639</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>\$ 1,159,221</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>\$4,853,860</b>
<b>Avg</b>	<b>\$ 527,806</b>	<b>\$ 1,007,083</b>	<b>\$ 165,603</b>	<b>\$ 33,505,985</b>	<b>\$ 693,409</b>

**Figure 24: Table Showing CSE totals and averages in Tallulah, LA. Created by Author. Source: LDCFS 2020.**

statewide, Louisiana collected nearly \$243 million dollars in child support enforcement and people owed roughly \$2 billion in arrears payments in any given month (LDCFS 2020). The mandatory waiver of child support for benefits can create problems for people

who do not necessarily want to force a CSE claim, either out of fear of reprisal or other concerns, but nevertheless are in a socioeconomic position where they require assistance. For example, Lucinda recounted a case involving a man with multiple children who, although adverse to filing for enforcement, had no choice.

*Lucinda: He has his three children and his wife is on drugs, and he's...a working man. He says, "I work. I take care of my family." It's just gotten to a point where he needs some extra help. He didn't want to do it, but the wife got picked up and she got some time. So, he's just trying to get any help he can and she's in jail for at least a year or so. He's a man with three kids and he's hoping to enroll her in some kind of treatment program. He says, "She's a good mom, she's just got started on drugs." I just remember talking to him because he kept apologizing for wanting to apply for help. The ones who have never had assistance before they are just like, "I'm so sorry." I'm like no. This is what this is here for. There's a need and I can understand that.*

*I know after Katrina, we were sitting at the Salvation Army, and I got so full. It's just so hard when you're used to working and maintaining, and he felt so bad because, he's a husband and a father and he has these children and he's trying to maintain some kind of normalcy and the mom is - he's trying to shield the children from that kind of stuff, and now she's gone away. And, he said, "You know, we have to be here for her when she gets back." It just happens. It is men and women, but there are a lot that are in jail. There are so many of them whose absent parents are in jail. I'd say between fifty and seventy percent. They will serve them in jail, go there and do the testing. Even if they are in jail they will. So, what will happen is, by the time they get out, I guess they have a whole other problem – owing child support.*

Lucinda is clearly empathetic to the situation in which the father found himself. She highlights the opposing considerations he must make concerning caring for his children and his desire to help his wife who he believes is a good mom but has a drug use problem. In the scenario presented, mandatory CSE places the need to acquire assistance to care for himself and his children at loggerheads with the rehabilitative desire to help his wife who is now punitively incarcerated. Quite perversely, the mother will likely accrue debt for child support arrears (as well as any debt accrued from being in jail and any collateral consequences incurred by the conviction) which she will then bring back to

an already financially precarious family and a husband that would rather rehabilitate her than have a wife in jail and children with an incarcerated parent. The situation of the family that Lucinda describes illustrates the complexity that can be present in the lives of people seeking assistance and raises important questions regarding the collateral costs of a blanket mandate to file CSE orders. Further, the use of the criminal justice system to punish drug use problems, rather than provide non-punitive rehabilitative alternatives, is clearly counterproductive. Lastly, as the man's felt need to apologize illustrates, seeking assistance becomes a stigmatizing event whereby the assistance seeker identifies and is constructed as less than (Dickinson 2016; Mullings 2005). For example, Lucinda notes her own experience with assistance seeking after Katrina and how it made her feel "full," because she was used to "working and maintaining."

In addition to the case she related, Lucinda notes the number of assistance seekers who have an absent parent, predominately men, that are incarcerated. A 2018 report by Human Impact Partners and Operation Restoration (2018)<sup>36</sup> estimated there are 800,000 parents incarcerated across the U.S. and that 1 in 12 children in Louisiana have experienced separation from a parent due to incarceration (i). Eighty percent of incarcerated women are parents and were the primary caretakers before incarceration, having an average of 2.4 dependent children. Fathers in prison reported having 2.1 children each (HIP 2018:3). Louisiana has the 7<sup>th</sup> highest incarceration rate for women in the world: 198 per 100,000. For the majority of women who become incarcerated (51%), grandmothers often care for the children; whereas, when men are incarcerated, mothers are primary caretakers 90% of the time (HIP 2018: 5-6).

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<sup>36</sup> Hereafter referenced as (HIP 2018).

Daniel Hatcher (2013) has shown that is often poverty and not unwillingness to support children that creates problems for poor fathers. Like the rhetorical construction of the welfare queen, the racialized image of the “deadbeat dad” is pervasive. However, as Hatcher (2016) has also shown, government agencies and especially the private companies they work with to extract funds and revenues from the poor do quite well and profit from what he describes as the poverty industry. Companies like Maximus, Inc. contract with local, state, and federal government (internationally as well) to administer Medicaid programs, social safety net programs like SNAP and child support testing and administration that produce billions in annual revenue (see Hatcher 2016 and McMillan 2019). However, alongside the difficulties created by work requirements and CSE mandates, Lucinda also notes who can and cannot receive certain categories of benefits.

### **Collateral Consequences**

*Me: Say you're getting benefits and your spouse or someone that you're living with goes to jail or gets a felony, can that influence the other person's ability to receive benefits?*

*Lucinda: No. Up until about three months ago if you went to jail with a drug felony and you get out - let's say I have a drug felony, I got out, I apply for food stamps - I'm ineligible for a year. That was up until 3 months ago. And the way that was handled was if I went back home, I'm ineligible, but my household isn't. So that means that if I have four children, they can receive benefits, but I would be excluded as having a drug felony. After my year from release, then I'll be added. So that was the way it was, but now they don't penalize you anymore. That just changed recently. So now, you can just get your assistance. Now, for food stamps, like I said earlier, if we live together, I can have my own case and you can have your own case. If we share a child in common, we have to be together. If we live together, you have a child and I have a child, but they weren't biologically shared by us, we could have our own cases. We are only linked if there is a child in common. My problem with it is in cases for the elderly. If a couple is married and they both receive Social Security, they are not eligible for food stamps because they are married and receive Social Security.*

*Me: You can't receive food stamps and Social Security?*

*Lucinda: Right. That's how it is. They can't get food stamps. Now, suppose you have a disabled adult that receives SSI; they can only get \$40 dollars per month in food stamps. It's because of the type of income. You can have a twenty-something year old person who is not working and whose making it by the Grace of the Lord with 7 children and they're getting \$1100 a month. All you have to do is register for work and you're eligible. If you have a child under 6, you don't even have to register for work, and you can get food stamps. That's my issue. Senior citizens who are receiving Social Security, even with all their mortgages, utilities, the most they're going to get, even if they get a deduction for the medicines they have to buy - is \$16 or \$20. I think all children should eat. All senior citizens should eat. And disabled people that can't fend for themselves, they should be able to eat. Everybody who is able-bodied and they're just out here - there needs to be some kind of requirement, but after an adjustment is made, so if it's just me and I'm not working but I'm looking for work, I can get 192 dollars a month. That's the minimum for one person for food stamps. I think even with the seniors they should get at least \$192 if you're giving that to an able-bodied twenty-something that's looking for work. As far as the convictions, or if they go to jail or whatever, it doesn't come into play with food stamps. Now, if they are required to register for work and they don't, they can get sanctioned - they are given like 30-45 days to register for work -you have to register. If you don't then you get sanctioned.*

*Me: Are there problems with people applying for these things and they have a conviction, and this is precluding from working?*

*Lucinda: They will, yes. For example, if you were in jail and then you get out and if they're in a half-way house that's giving them breakfast, lunch and dinner, they're not eligible. They're getting their needs met as far as food. If they're not providing that then they can apply for SNAP, but if they're placed somewhere where they get that than they're not eligible. They will still have to register for work. Sometimes it works out. Like if you go to a commercial driving school and get that credential, they will pay for that. There're different things out there but it's just getting them to go, to believe, to work the process. They just have to get to that step.*

Rather than break this transcribed interview passage into topical sections centered on the assistance provision for elderly and disabled and the formerly incarcerated with felonies, I have left it intact. My initial question to Lucinda regarding barriers to receiving assistance for persons with a felony elicited a response explaining recent state policy changes, but it also prompted her to explain her misgivings about the denial of

benefits to the elderly and disabled persons who receive Social Security based income. Importantly, these forms of difference, being categorized as elderly or disabled, often intersect and people can be doubly punished for their age and disability in ways that Lucinda deems inequitable. The formally incarcerated also have multiple and intersecting identities (race, age, educational attainment, disability, and so on) that can aggregate disenfranchisements and increase barriers to making lives and incomes (Crenshaw 1990; Collins 2002; Mullings 2005).

Federal law permanently bars financial assistance to persons with a conviction of a drug crime unless states decide to waive or modify that restriction (USCCR 2019:25), which Lucinda notes Louisiana has recently done in regard to SNAP. Although, as Lucinda notes, this is constrained by situations such as reentry placements that provide food, and the work requirement still stands (as would CSE). Denying social assistance to persons with criminal convictions is just one of many collateral consequences that can challenge successful reentry and livelihood curation. The United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019) notes of collateral consequences (CCs):

More than 620,000 people are released from federal and state prisons each year and return to their communities. This substantial number is nearly equivalent to the population of Boston annually. While these and other individuals have already served their prison or jail sentences, are currently serving probation or parole, or have completely exited criminal supervision, they still face numerous collateral consequences of their conviction or criminal history upon reentering society. According to the National Institute of Justice, more than 44,000 collateral consequences exist nationwide. These include civil law sanctions, restrictions, or disqualifications that attach to a person because of the person's criminal history and can affect the person's ability to function and participate in society. For example, individuals with criminal histories can face barriers to voting, serving on a jury, holding public office, securing employment, obtaining housing, receiving public assistance, owning a firearm, getting a driver's license, qualifying for financial aid and college admission, qualifying for military service, and

deportation (for noncitizens). [1-2, citations omitted]<sup>37</sup>

Collateral punishments, then, disenfranchise persons from many of the resources required to make livings, futures, and participate fully as citizens (or to become one). This is particularly the case in regard to employment and the work requirement for assistance.

Of the 44,000 federal and state CCs, roughly 70% relate to employment and this does not include local ordinances or public and private employer-imposed restrictions (USCCR 2019: 35). Persons with convictions already face racialized demographic challenges and employer-based discrimination when searching for employment. For example, persons with convictions may have low-educational attainment (41.3% of the incarcerated population does not have a high-school diploma and only 13% have a post-secondary education). Likewise, persons with convictions are 50 percent less likely to receive call-backs on job applications: 60% of black applicants do not receive call-backs or offers compared to 30% of whites (USCCR 2019: 35-36). Taken together, demographic barriers (e.g., educational attainment, as well as drug use problems, lowered incomes, insecure housing), racial, and other difference-based discrimination quickly aggregate against those who are criminal justice involved. The story Lucinda related about the father's dilemma in seeking assistance, filing a CSE against his wife, and the challenges she and her family will face takes on new contours when CCs are considered. While livelihood making and life outcomes are considered generationally (Narotsky and Besier 2014:S5), they must also be considered across "time" incarcerated and after sentences are completed.

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<sup>37</sup> For an online searchable database of collateral consequences by state and category, see The Council of State Governments' National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction.

While work requirements, mandatory CSE claims, and intersecting forms of difference-based oppression can all contribute to barriers to effectively “work” the system, collateral consequences from convictions exacerbate these already punitive requirements, effectively punishing the poor. Social workers are also often overburdened with cases which creates stress and time burdens, or as Lucinda put, *It’s like you’re a rat on the wheel. It just never stops*. Like Grace in her added care work for students, Lucinda told me that her job also spills into her life in other ways. She related an incident where her young child asked her one morning quite out of the blue what child support is. Lucinda realized that even in her sleep, she continued to work. Also, like Grace, Lucinda recognizes that the way social assistance is structured without regard to socioeconomic contexts can make it difficult to get ahead. Grace’s observations concerning punitive discipline in schools and Lucinda’s explanations of workfare provide context for understanding what I observed while running a small business in the fieldsite as it relates to livelihood creation and the local economy.

### **Surplus Stuff: Financial and Economic Ecology of Furniture**

Not long after starting to scrap, I was given the opportunity to open a small satellite business selling used furniture. Opening the business that in this dissertation I call Surplus Stuff in the field site provided both a crucial space to conduct participation observation but also to gain a different kind of presence and visibility in the community. Because of its location I was positioned on a well-traveled road through town which made me visible not only as a person working in the community but also as a physical presence that was recognized by my constantly being present on the street outside the store. The winter during my fieldwork was especially cold with below freezing



temperatures. One day, for instance, I opened the store to find little piles of snow in the corners where the roof was open. I chuckled and then went to polish a coffee table and the once aerosolized polish oozed out of the can into a gelatinous puddle. Not having heat or air conditioning in the building – the building itself was old and full of openings to the environment – made standing in the sun during cold snaps warmer than being in the store.



***Figure 25: Abandoned storefronts downtown.***

Beyond the visible signs of abandoned businesses and buildings in disrepair on the landscape (see Figure 25 above), working in the store became a powerful learning experience regarding lived experience of socioeconomic issues in the community. Running a small retail establishment selling homewares and used appliances enabled observations regarding how money flows into the community through government assistance checks, regular and irregular employment, and particularly the importance of tax refunds in the local economy. Spending at the store followed the rhythms of these

money flows in an area where disposable income is largely lacking. However, it was also in the store that issues surrounding class became obvious, both along racial lines and intra-racially as well (Adams and Gorton 2004; Goode 2001; Thomas-Houston 2005), not only in terms of what was able to be bought but also in terms of conversations regarding the divisions of neighborhoods and the qualities that were prescribed to them. For example, large farmers and buyers from hunting camps were largely non-plussed by price and of course local residents had access to differing resources.

Even still, Surplus Stuff provided a source of goods for the low-income and those on assistance that could otherwise be obtained from rent-to-own stores and through local payday lending operations. Both charge usurious interest rates. It was common for these items to be rented and financed in such a way that they would generate interest debt to be paid down and then repossessed, only to be reused in transactions that reproduced this process with a new person (Williams 2001). For example, a former Mayor of Tallulah explained the predatory nature of some businesses and related these practices to demographics, wage and tax revenue out-migration, and lack of property ownership.

*Mayor: You only have seven thousand eight hundred forty-three people in the city of Tallulah. Roughly 3,000 plus are children. Then you probably have maybe 1,500 or more elderly. So, you're working class is very limited and majority of them are traveling where - to Red Port. So, when they get their checks for working over in Red Port, what are they going to do? I'm going to pick up this because there's a Walmart here; I'm going to pick up all the groceries and everything that we need - we're going to do that there. You pick it up there and then bring it here. So, who loses out? Here. Because that money, the state money stays across the river. So, what about people that live across the river and they work here? That's the same scenario. They take their money with them. So, the taxes stay over there; their services stay over there; and, their money stays over there. The only thing they may bring back here - rental problems.*

*I would say anywhere between maybe 70% -80% of the people are renters here; there's little ownership. How are you going to be able to pay a mortgage if you're underemployed, working a job 28 hours a week without benefits? So,*

*when you're under-employed, you look to this predatory lending and line setting, because they can't borrow any money. You get preyed on. You can't go buy a brand-new car. You got to go one of these – just like taking payday loans, getting a car is the same way. You get your income tax; you buy a car; and, you pay \$3000 for what they paid \$500 for. Then it takes you 24 months to pay for it. Most of the time, if your underemployed and renting, they are going to repossess it eight months after you get it anyway. So, they'll turn around and sell your car to your neighbor. It's tough.*

Mayor traces out a financial and economic ecology where by demographics limit what he refers to as Tallulah's working class that is hampered by underemployment and lack of property ownership, but whereby the city itself loses revenues because of work and shopping patterns that moves money and spending out of the local economy. Exacerbating these issues are predatory lending and leasing practices that can leave people with lowered credit, lack of transportation, and debt.

Mayor makes a good point. During tax season cars sell briskly out of car lots and store front parking lots in and around Tallulah. However, even so, many who live in the community and shopped at the store survive on fixed budgets (for example the elderly), and insufficient incomes (the underemployed). Given this was the case, the store did well at tax time and residents took advantage of no interest lay-away plans, making payments over the course of several pay periods. Indeed, there was a small number of places to buy the goods the store provided at reasonable prices, especially for the majority of people who did not have transportation to towns and cities that were 20 miles or more away.

A major question posed by this project is how people create livelihoods in an area marked by carceral entrepreneurship and persistent historically racialized socioeconomic barriers to being well. Running a business in town provided a way to understand how people create work opportunities, but also opportunities to create them. The very demographic and economic challenges that Mayor described created the conditions by

which I was able to provide work opportunities in the community. Several examples illustrate this.

### **“What you got for me today?” Gigs, Hustles, and Futures**

The elderly (as well as many others), for instance, often lack transportation and / or rely on others for rides to shop and complete errands.<sup>38</sup> Many times, this need is filled by a family member or neighbor, but times arise when deliveries, especially of larger items were needed. Over several months a list of possible delivery persons with trucks and (sometimes) trailers who we could call to arrange deliveries was developed. Several of the drivers fit in calls from the store into their schedule of other “gigs” they would be doing at any given time, or alternatively, stop into the store on occasion to see if any were available, or just to chat. It was not unusual to see those same drivers arrive to pick up furniture as a favor for a family member or neighbor. Often folks who were needing deliveries knew or were related to the drivers which helped keep delivery fees low.

As well, folks, generally young people, would come and ask for a few hours of work, moving merchandise or sweeping up. “Hustles,” day to day work, such as sweeping the store, raking leaves, or washing cars, generated income for a variety of outcomes. These included buying food and other immediate needs. Tellingly, though, two young people I met worked hustles to save money to leave town on the weekends to “stay off the streets” and not get in “trouble.” Trouble could include being shot or ending up in jail. Hustles provided a way for them, and the young friends they would sometimes bring

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<sup>38</sup> In several instances during fieldwork I was told in conversation, or it was mentioned in interviews (usually in regard to food shopping or rides to the regional airport) how ride giving was itself a common way to earn extra income. At least one-person I met worked as a self-employed “taxi” service entrepreneur. Additionally, the sharing of motorized mobility scooters is common.

with them, but also residents across age groups, to productively create opportunities to make money and navigate an environment where employment opportunities are scarce (Thieme 2018).

I refer back to the problems Grace mentioned regarding kids being out of classrooms, research that relates educational outcomes such as expulsions to carceral futures, and Western's findings regarding poverty and violence. The young men (who I call Quinton and Billy) I met at the store looking for hustles to stay out of trouble had been "put out" – expelled from school – and were looking for ways to attain diplomas and GEDs, although this can be cost prohibitive. In both cases they were also looking for resources to contribute to the care of young children and relatives. Both were also navigating degrees of housing insecurity and each of them had experienced various forms of violence, as well as loss of friends and family (many due to violence and illness) throughout their lives. I am not attempting to pose these young men as representative of an emblematic type, but instead to illustrate that the social and economic contexts these men share, although positioned differently, are both quotidian and banal. Take an example from my fieldnotes:

Quinton came by the store one day looking for some work because he needed to get parts for his car after a fender bender. He was taking it in stride – an everyday emergency he was committed to resolving. He needs his car so he can pick up and transport family members and so he and Billy can leave town for the weekend. It was not unusual for Quinton and Billy to come together to the store to ask for work to make money. They were very conscientious and had a fantastic work ethic and were very eager to be productive and have their time occupied. As both continually expressed to me, *there's nothing to do here – no jobs*. Quinton was very soft spoken, while Billy was very energetic and forward speaking. Talking to Billy you could feel that he was struggling to speak his experiences in a generalized way, even as he spoke very quickly and urgently, that might have been less painful or hurtful. Billy was also the first to jump in when a question was asked. I wondered if he wanted attention, but I suspect he simply wanted recognition for his local knowledge and for an indication that his life and his

experiences were meaningful to other people. For example, Billy spoke openly and candidly about losing his brothers to gun violence. Quinton was more reserved about his personal life but spoke clearly about his desire to be a good father for his newborn child.

Both Quinton and Billy exhibited what Johnny would consider “doing right” in their approach to work. One day at the store while chatting after lunch I bought for us at Popeyes, both expressed to me that they were trying to steer clear of carceral entanglements. Quinton expressed to me that he thinks about ending up in jail a lot but says that is why he has tried to “slow down,” a phrase with similar meanings described by Jaime J. Fader (2013) in her study of youth reentry in Philadelphia as “falling back.” Falling back denotes both staying out of trouble and criminal entanglements but also how youth can fall back into harmful activities in communities (Fader 2013:14).

*Billy: Yeah, you know if you gonna do this, they be like, boy you going to Four-Four or you going to "the Parish." People be like, I got to go court this day, this day, and boy you are going... they going to send you. Who's your judge? You know. It's just a lot. I really pictured myself there for a long time. That ain't me man – I don't want to be there. That's why I just slowed down. I have dreams.*

*Quinton: I just hang around older people... and you go out of town or something like that. Me and Billy (Quinton is a couple years Billy's senior), we basically hang together a lot.*

*Billy: Every time I'm with him, I don't get in no trouble.*

*Quinton: I got a little daughter and I don't want to try and get in no kind of trouble that will keep me away from seeing her growing up.*

Billy's comments echo those of Grace and others concerning the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of youth being primed “to end up” in a facility. However, Quinton does try to mentor Billy. When I returned to Tallulah for follow-up fieldwork in 2019, I reconnected with Quinton. He was holding down a job as a welder, which has he has a passion and a particular talent for, and his daughter was doing well. However, because of being “put out” of school, Quinton's levels of literacy and numeracy are low. This means his

chances for mobility and possible livelihood futures are constrained. Sadly, during my visit I learned that Billy had been incarcerated at the Men's Detention Center after all. Quinton told me that he had fallen back with the wrong crowd, but he was hopeful of getting him out.

### **The Sociality of Furniture**

Surplus Stuff eventually, especially after hiring a local resident to help with the store, became a site where folks in the community came to peruse the wares being sold, but also to gather, talk, discuss goings on in the community, and events in their personal and work lives. This was also the case at the shop that Johnny's wife runs. In many ways, I tried to model the practices and atmosphere of what she and Johnny have created. For example, it was not uncommon for Johnny and his wife to gift shoes or other items to children in the community. Likewise, I would try to give discounts or a free item, like a picture or a lamp with purchases. Giving meaningful discounts on items is difficult because the aggregate sales tax (10.5%) is so high. Even more so than Surplus Stuff, their store provided a place for purchasing needed items at affordable prices. As well, Johnny's scrapping business produced odds and ends that could then be redistributed through the store, ex: extension cords, propane tanks, pipe fittings, and the like. I bought the Christmas lights I used to decorate the store front from Johnny.

These stores were also spaces where people in the community would come and "hold church," discussing the role of God in their lives and the grace of God more generally. Talk of God and "leaving it to God," (problems people or the larger community were facing) is ubiquitous. Often these conversations revolve around instances of perceived political corruption, contentions about character or moral failings

of perceived bad actors in the community, overcoming illnesses or ongoing battles with cancer, as well as their recoveries – high blood pressure, lupus, diabetes, aneurysms, and developmental disabilities (although the latter were not explicitly discussed as such) were common. The city's water troubles, due to aged infrastructure and environmental racism was also a common topic of discussion as were the perceived links between bad water and illness.

When I began fieldwork, I learned to keep up to date with city boil orders and rolling water shutdowns as the city sought to repair frozen pipes and mitigate against a water system long overdue for replacement or major repair. There are ongoing efforts to rectify the water problems in Tallulah, but infrastructure deterioration is common in the region (see for example, Hersher 2016). I bought bottled water, as did many others in the community. Anecdotally, I was told that some residents refused to bathe in city water, reported experiences of hair loss, and folks adding bleach to water when washing dishes. For example, at the Community Forum, Clara explained the correlation between cancer and water quality, specifically linking water issues with elderly populations. During periodic water boil orders, it is common for folks in the community to make water deliveries to the elderly and homebound.

*Clara: It's the water. They have tests now that link it back to the water. You bathe in it - and for some reason – people are still drinking it. The older people don't buy water like that and they can't get anywhere - so they are still drinking the water out of the faucet. If you are living in a poor community you don't have the money to buy a filter for the showers, or the kitchen sink. Even if you boil the water there are still things in the water that make you sick. They run all kinds of tests... I have an uncle that just died of cancer a few years ago. Women having breast cancer, all of that is becoming more regular than it used to be - and they are linking it back to the water. It's a big problem.*

It is true. Like everywhere, people in Tallulah die, of illness, accidents, and by violence. Surplus Stuff was on a main thoroughfare in town. Over time, I noticed



processions of cars that passed with some regularity on Saturdays. Funeral processions. I did not keep a precise count, but my perception, and that of others I spoke with, was three and sometimes up to five per week. Somewhat perversely, when the funeral home was too small, or other venues too expensive, it was not uncommon for funerals to be held for a fee at the local elementary school across the street from where I lived. I had always been curious about the full parking lot I observed on some Saturdays while driving to the furniture store, to meet Johnny to scrap, or to help in his wife's store.

### **Notes on Other Livelihood Strategies: Furs, Pecans, and Migrant Workers**

In this chapter I have traced some of the ways in which local livelihoods and incomes entangle with larger structural systems such as workfare and collateral consequences of criminal system involvement. I have also tried to illustrate how money flows in the community constrain and make possible social and work arrangements that influence strategies to curate livelihood practices. In many cases these strategies are linked to potentials and fears of incarceration and in other cases wanting to care for children and family members or simply the desire to not die. This chapter has also built on the previous one in its many attentions to aspects of what it means to do right by oneself and others and how these ethics become twisted and constrained in certain ways by shifting policies (e.g. workfare and child support) presumptively put in place to assist people but instead extract from and punish the poor even as they attempt to do right by those same systems.

While several ways of livelihood making have been considered here, farming, scrapping, hustles, the furniture store, teaching, and social work, many more have been left unexamined. Before concluding, I want to briefly examine some of these. For

example, two other common types of supplemental labor in the community include fur trapping and pecan picking.



***Figure 26: Pelts curing in a tree.***

On one occasion I was driving home from the store and noticed a tree full of pelts and a table where racoons were being processed for sale at a fur auction (see Figure: 26).



***Figure 27: Man gathering pecans.***

Seasonally, gathering pecans is ubiquitous (see Figure: 27). Often, I was asked permission to gather pecans out of my yard and stories of pecan gathering were turned into work parables. For instance, I was told a story about a young boy who asked his father for money. The father took the boy outside, pointed to the pecan tree, and said, “There’s your money.”

I provide three other livelihood examples that were not discussed – running a motel, contract labor, and migrant work – to illustrate the interconnectedness of Tallulah with other regions of the country and the world. The first is an excerpt from my fieldnotes and describes the interconnectedness of providing lodging and contract work. The second is a brief overview of immigrant labor in the region.

#### Grotto Motel

Moving into the field was difficult. In Tallulah there are no apartment listings, per se. It took about 2 weeks to figure out who rents properties – which are controlled by about 6-8 people (this number was actually higher but the majority of properties are controlled by a small number of people who also own other businesses, e.g., grocery stores, fast food restaurants, and laundromats and have professional careers in the community as well), as near as I could tell at the time. I contacted the number on a sign outside of a small apartment complex who referred me to someone else, who referred me to someone else, etc. In the meantime, I stayed at the Grotto.

The Grotto sits alongside a disused gas station about a mile from downtown. The gas station has been repurposed by the community for various purposes. For example, people who work in the grocery and dollar stores (these have since gone out of business) next to the property use it a place to wait for rides from work. Others pull over to park under the station canopy hovering over the pumps to chat and talk. An old signage frame sits on the ground in front of the station and is filled with old 40-ounce beer bottles and liquor pints indicating it is a place where people sit and drink. The motel itself is a barebones establishment. The room has cable, a microwave, and a mini-fridge, Wi-Fi. However, there is no ice machine. People go to the convenience store next to the property to get ice and occasionally Mr. P comes through with a bag to offer ice to people. The TV’s are old tube models and not flat screens. One of the operators offered to sell me one of out of a stack of TVs for \$5 dollars because it did not have a remote. It is unclear to me if the family that operates the motel actually owns it, given that negotiations for a lowered weekly / monthly rate had to be channeled through a

“manager” that was off site. In any case, a woman, her husband, and his brother run the motel from day to day as a family unit – cleaning rooms, maintaining, and repairing air-conditioning units, etc. This is something that Mr. P indicated often with great pride. “My wife cleans all the rooms. All the rooms, every day.” Indeed, everyday Mrs. P comes out with an old hotel servicing cart to service the rooms. Before this, though, Mr. P comes through with a 50-gallon garbage can and a shopping cart filled with towels to collect garbage and distribute towels. The garbage collected gets dumped into a dumpster that sits off to the side of the parking lot. Mr. P’s family is vegetarian and grow a lot of the food they eat behind the main office of the hotel where they live. They grow Indian cucumbers on trellised vines and eggplant alongside the motel as landscaping plants. Ms. P asked me if I liked Indian food and I said I love it. Ms. P didn’t seem to believe me, acting surprised that I did. On two occasions she made me vegetable biryani and raita, which was delicious.

The motel appears to have recurring types of clientele tied to local industry. Several of the persons staying there worked in geo-mapping for the oil industry. Of the people I met, several were from Texas –Houston area, 2 were Mexican American, 3 were indigenous Maya from Guatemala (a father and 2 sons), and 1 was from Cuba, living in Texas. They worked through a third-party contractor and often worked 2- 3 weeks at a time without a break, often staying in motels in states across the country. Because there were no kitchen spaces in the rooms, it was common to see people go to the grocery store next to the property to buy meats and produce and then cook them in electric skillets outside the rooms (Figure 28.)

The man in the room beside me was in construction and from Texas – he stayed there with his wife. He relayed to me that it was a good idea when going into Mexico to visit family members to drive an old vehicle, so the cartels would not kill him and take the new vehicle. Accordingly, he would drive a new vehicle when traveling in the U.S. but an older vehicle when visiting family in Mexico as a survival strategy. One of the motel dwellers, an older, quiet man (who I did not speak with) would often leave a can of Vienna sausages out for a small dog who lived in the apartment building between the motel and the stores. The little dog was seen night and day wandering between the stores and the motel, often lounging in the parking lots.

The use of contract and immigrant labor in agriculture is also common in the larger Delta region, particularly in the harvesting of sweet potatoes. For instance, one large farm in north eastern Louisiana recruits and transports some 300 workers from Monterey, Mexico for planting and harvesting. The company houses the workers in a former nursing home in Tallulah. They are transported each day to the fields some



*Figure 28: Outside cooking stations at the Grotto.*

30 miles away on the same fleet of yellow school buses that brought them to work from Mexico (Manger ND). As geographer William Manger (ND) describes, “It is very apparent when workers are in town. Because they do not have automobiles, they can be seen walking to and from the former nursing home and local stores where they purchase their necessities.” During my fieldwork, local business operators spoke fondly of the migrant workers, noting that they spend their wages in town and support their businesses. Johnny for instance very much liked the “amigos and amigas” who shopped at his wife’s store. It is also common to see white South-African seasonal workers shopping in town. I priced furniture at Surplus Stuff for the farmers who were looking to outfit their apartments.

## **Conclusion**

I have focused here on daily life and livelihoods as they relate to carceral extractivism in the region and community. What I have not registered here due to length are the efforts ongoing in the community to diversify economically through tourism, leveraging of historical assets such as plantation houses, the rich historical legacies of the Civil War, and importantly the rich history of Civil Rights organizing in the parish which I touched on briefly in Chapter Five. Similarly, the stories of individuals and organizations in the community that work, often with their own resources to provide after school tutoring, community libraries, and wellness opportunities have been left untold. I look forward to telling these stories in other venues.

While the dissertation did not permit space to register all of the ways of making livelihoods in Tallulah and how these are implicated in the global flow of goods and people, I mentioned some of them here briefly to contextualize another important issue I was not able to take up here and that demands further research. Mass incarceration in the United States cannot be properly understood without an attention to mass detention and deportation (see for example DeGenova and Peutz, eds. 2010; Golash-Boza 2016). This is particularly true in the privatization context, as most detention facilities are privately operated, owned, leased.

Indeed, LaSalle, the operators of the facilities in Tallulah have quietly opened or converted existing facilities to house undocumented immigrants in Louisiana (Lanard 2019). As Executive Director of ACLU Louisiana Alanah Odoms Hebert points out, “The number of ICE detention facilities in Louisiana has grown from 2 in 2018 to 11 as of July

2019.” Carceral extractivism extends beyond the racialized incarceration of citizens in institutions that are often uncritically indexed to prisons and jails.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION**

### **Carceral Extractivism and Key Findings**

This dissertation has examined the historical trajectory of mass incarceration in Tallulah and demonstrated the ways in which what I have called carceral extractivism and its ties to racial capitalism have impacted community livelihoods and development overtime. Historically, prison and punishment have been conceived as a corrective sanction communicating a collective social conscience (Durkheim 2013[1893]). However, this view fails to account for carceral facilities themselves (Garland 1991) as sites of disciplinary control beyond preserving moral boundaries (Foucault 1978). More recently, mass incarceration is described as a state apparatus for managing poor populations in response to state welfare devolution (Bonds 2009; Wacquant 2010:198-200), as a subgovernment constituted by legislative, corporate, and professional bodies with entrenched political, economic, and financial interests (Welch and Turner 2007-2008:59), and, particularly in the U.S., as a perpetuation of a racial caste system (Alexander 2010). Central to this view is the historical criminalization and dispossession of persons of color (Bonds 2013; Beckett1997; Muhammad 2010) through racialized legal and political initiatives, e.g., mandatory sentencing and disenfranchisement from voting, employment, education, and food and housing assistance (Harrison 2007; Hatcher 2013), and violence. As this dissertation demonstrates, all of these descriptions are salient and overlapping. Examining the influence of privatized extractive carceral entrepreneurship on individual and community life in Tallulah, as well as its role in reproducing socioeconomic problems, this dissertation provides a needed historically situated, localized regional study of carceral experience to understand how pervasive



incarceration and criminalization become structuring forces in persons' lives as they pursue livelihoods alongside and through the criminal justice system (Braman 2004; Comfort 2009; Cunha 2014; Price 2015; Rios 2011). Noting the extractive nature of incarceration reframes realities of mass incarceration and carceral industrialization in Louisiana and the U.S. away from thinking separately the economic and the political, commodification and legislated criminality, to a historically situated, resource-oriented understanding of populations (Schept 2014). Historically, as the discussions of convict leasing in Chapter 2 and carceral development in the fieldsite in Chapter 3 illustrate, Louisiana demonstrates an appetite for expropriation, the extraction of human lives, economic, and political resources and potentialities for capital accumulation over and above community development in a real sense.

Despite providing employment opportunities to the community and surrounding region, the project found that carceral entrepreneurship in Tallulah influences community livelihood strategies and well-being overtime through shifting employment possibilities, the punitive shaping of educational spaces and policies, and wage migration that should be understood alongside and with other processes including periods of school integration, state policy towards social services, financial resource distribution, and legacies of black disenfranchisement and criminalization in the south. Given that most of the inmate population in Tallulah is “swapped and transported” from elsewhere, it also taxes social networks and resources in sending communities.

The project also found that neither mass incarceration nor prison privatization were inevitable, even if they appear to be intensely durable. Members of the community construct and curate livelihoods through various forms of formal and informal work (such

as scrapping metal, cottage industries, gathering pecans, day work, and acts of charity) and community networks and institutions such as the church despite and alongside of the presence of prisons in their communities and the socioeconomic problems they face. Community members and administrative officials also marshal cultural resources such as a plantation house to develop heritage-based tourism in Tallulah and leverage their own rural, marginalized status to make claims on funds for medical facilities and infrastructure improvements.

These findings are important for the anthropological study of mass incarceration and privatization. The completed project adds a much needed local and regional study to fill a gap in existing literature that is generalizable and applicable to other areas where similar conditions persist. The project's ethnographic approach to community and regional level analysis responds to criticism that popular discourses of individual responsibility in criminal justice debates leave the state largely invisible in discussions of mass incarceration and carceral privatization. Further, this project can complement and inform research across multiple disciplines, including human geography, criminology, sociology, and public policy where the impacts of mass incarceration and privatization are examined.

Lastly, given the historical contextualization of this project in racialized legacies of disenfranchisement and criminalization, the project can refocus public and governmental imaginaries toward a historical view of the impacts of mass incarceration and community underdevelopment overtime that can guide forward looking policies and practices to improve quality of life and life outcomes in disadvantaged regions and communities.

Communities adopt prisons for intertwined and often simultaneously existing reasons, e.g., loss of local industry (Huling 2002; Mitchelson 2011), alleviation of unemployment and poverty (Stern 2006; Williams 2011), and prison overcrowding (Gilmore 2007:89-92). All of these circumstances appear in the history and trajectory of carceral expansion in Tallulah. At all levels of government incarceration and prison building were touted in terms of economic development and job production, but also profit making for a few. The dwindling of agricultural jobs and the closure of Chicago Mill depleted jobs in the community and drastically reduced the ability of a local workforce, while skilled at the jobs that had vanished, largely unprepared for other kinds of work. A common reality expressed to me in interviews and conversations was the outmigration of residents who were able to secure an education. Residents also stressed previous periods of outmigration to places such as Nevada to secure higher paying jobs in the construction of the Hoover Dam and in the casino and hotel boom in Las Vegas. Several residents remarked upon their own memories of segregation, black subordination, racialized and gendered labor categories (farm work, domestic worker), and educational opportunities structured by plantation farming schedules that contributed to the underdevelopment in the community.

Indeed, there seems to be a line to draw from agriculture to incarceration in Tallulah as well as the structuring of education into the rhythms of plantation agriculture and then into carceral facilities as was the case with the youth prison (TCCY). While carceral expansion suggests incarceration and detention form an internalized and habitual answer to address social and economic problems (Schept 2013), prison building often has none of the intended economic gains for the communities it purports to help (Hooks et al.

2004; Morrell 2012). Instead, the history of carceral privatization in Tallulah illustrates shifting state services and resources to corporate and public-private partnerships can increase or sustain socioeconomic inequalities in the communities where resources and capital are siphoned off by such entities and the people that administer them (Adams 2014; Fine and Ruglis 2009).

As the quotes at the beginning of this dissertation indicate, carceral industrialization's collateral effects are felt in the community as barriers to living well, a normalization of incarceration as a possible future, and as an internalization of living in a prison economy. Informal conversations with job placement officials spoke to the difficulties in finding employable persons for available jobs based on lack of skills and undereducation, as well as felony convictions and failed drug tests. At the same time education professionals spoke of the unwillingness of facility management to provide vocational training due to the costs. This is directly related to privatization as it was usual when the facilities were under state management, inmates in the facilities were given instruction in trades such as welding and carpentry, as well as computer classes. Additionally, as conversations with Grace illustrated, the punitiveness associated with mass incarceration filters through administrative policy and influences educational provision in ways that produce undereducation and potentially death by violence.

Current regulations related to punitive work requirements and state appropriation of child support benefits for absent parents (many of whom are incarcerated) also cause problems for those who seek claims on food stamps and monetary assistance. Youth I spoke with in the community, several of who were working on their GED or having dropped out of school and pursued technical training commented on their sense that they

might end up incarcerated. This is what happened to Billy. As Franklin, noted in the epigraph quote, *we have a low expectation of what we can be and what we can do because everybody we know is associated with prison*. Indeed “low expectations,” “hopelessness,” or the common shorthand “mindset” were ubiquitous descriptors of community sentiment. As I was getting ready to leave Tallulah to return to Kentucky, Johnny shook his head and remarked, “Make sure you tell them, Lee. This is a sad place. A sad, sad place.”

### **Commodity Thesis and Economic Anthropology**

In this dissertation I have resisted what I call the commodity thesis. There is a rich body of literature on the commodification of things, of people, and the ways in which under market capitalism we find a fervent bent to commodify everything in sight.<sup>39</sup> As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002) suggests, commodification is a problematic concept, particularly in regard to humans and bodies (2). Reframing the question of mass incarceration towards extractive carceral industrialization intends to shift from an analytic of human commodification to an historically contextualized and ethnographically grounded conception of resources and extraction to understand the relationship between Tallulah’s jails, the broader community, and the state. The commodity thesis risks naturalizing an economic category and fails to account for how lives and communities are refigured historically as extractable human resources through racialized economic and political maneuvering.

Popular conceptualizations of prisoner commodification in the privatization

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<sup>39</sup> See for example Appadurai, ed. (1988); Cohen (2004); Pande (2014); Scheper-Hughes (2002); Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant, eds. (2002); Shiva (2002); and Vogt (2013).

context risk leaving lived experience unreferenced. Indeed, several residents in Tallulah described the inmates at Tallulah’s facilities in economic terms. One resident flatly stated: *The [inmates] are commodities.* Another said:

*It’s privatized. It’s all about money. It’s all about money. I’m sure they got people out there that deserve to be incarcerated but I’m sure they got some out there that don’t need to be, but the length of their incarceration, who are the real beneficiaries of that? I think the ultimate answer is to provide financial gain for a few.*

Residents also maintain that prison building in Tallulah is “political,” indexing the control and power that institutions such as the Sheriff’s Department and the state more broadly wield in decision making in Tallulah, particularly in regard to resource provision and distribution. It is widely recognized, as an elected state representative expressed at a Port Commission Meeting, state resources flow to urban areas in the south, while people from the same population centers flow north to rural areas to be jailed. The majority of those incarcerated in Tallulah and Madison Parish’s privatized facilities are from somewhere else – human resources extracted from other communities to generate per diems for prison operators. This is not to say that members of the community do not circulate through these facilities, as well as the Parish Jail, as illustrated in this dissertation, they do. As the discussion of child support enforcement and collateral consequences in Chapter 6 shows, the challenges of making a life worth living are exacerbated by having a conviction. People become refigured as new sites targeted by state policy for further extractivism.

### **Broader Implications and Recommendations**

This dissertation has focused somewhat narrowly on the Tallulah and the Delta region. It has found that carceral entrepreneurship is contiguous with racialized histories

of labor exploitation and exploitation that share contours with mass incarceration today. Prison building and mass incarceration do reproduce socioeconomic problems in the context of poverty and violence that constrain the ability to create livelihoods and imagine positive futures. However, as the study of Johnny's scrapping suggests, these constraints are malleable to some extent and non-carceral social reproduction is possible and actively created.

No one can change the past. This is an unfortunate cliché tossed around to absolve that past, but also to diminish marks of complicity with its emanations in the present. This is perhaps a pedagogical problem. I recently taught a course largely based on issues of mass incarceration (my dissertation has benefited from this) and immigration policy and detention. I found, for example, that many students were not aware of the convict lease system that operated in the United States. The history we are writing now, though, can be influenced by law, policy, and more critical approaches that move from the administration of punishment (criminal justice) and extractivism through social and economic policies geared towards social justice (Western and Watkins 2018). There are several recommendations to be made based on the ethnographic data produced in this dissertation.

Criminal justice policy and sentencing reform is necessary. While both nationally with the First Step Act and in Louisiana with its recently passed criminal justice reform package are important, they do not go far enough. Part of the issue is that even these modest efforts do little to contextualize mass incarceration as structural violence producing vulnerability and suffering in historically disenfranchised and under resourced populations. Nor does it consider the ways in which punitive incarceration imbricates in

other areas of people's lives, materially and discursively. The examination of social assistance provision in the form of work requirements and captured child support illustrate this. As well, the recounting of the School Board meeting, the qualitative and secondary data analysis regarding punitive discipline demonstrated how punitive logics and racialized discourses of criminality can influence local level policy making and practices. Grace made this point clear in her experience of teaching in the community where Resource Officers are valued over and above social workers and other personal. Policy making must consider more broadly the social and economic contexts in its administrative decision making.

It is doubtful that much meaningful reform can occur in the immediate future given the current "law and order" political and devolutionist policy climate of the present moment. Despite what policy reform there has been, many of the reforms and policy directives made before 2016 have been rolled back. For example, the Department of Justice directive to cease using private prisons has been dissolved. The current Attorney General has historically been a proponent of expanding rather than halting mass incarceration. New rules governing SNAP benefit work requirements have been made more punitive and decreased availability to states. Likewise, education is more geared to privatization and charter schools than in the recent past. Lastly, recent tax reforms at the Federal level have done little to decrease income inequality and diminish poverty levels. Instead, as Mayor noted in regard to Tallulah, predatory financing and underemployment continue to be, in Nancy Fraser's words, exploitative and expropriative.

This dissertation has argued that carceral extractivism exists in the context of racial capitalism and historically this has been and remains the case. Historically, carceral



entrepreneurship and privatization (across life making spaces) has been coercive and drains resources from individuals and communities to the benefit of a relatively small number of people. Although unprecedented in terms of expansion, mass incarceration is not particularly “new,” nor is privatization. There is historical continuity when contextualized in the long history of extractive expropriation of labor and resources in this country and in the south. Hopefully, this dissertation can add an ethnographic study of these processes in a rural town in the U.S. south to extend conversations concerning how these larger processes might be reimagined. How can criminal justice move towards social justice? How can capitalism writ large be refigured in ways that are more humane or practiced differently, particularly in regard to political, economic, and social ends that diminish rather than exacerbate the problems that are indexed as poverty?

These are not new questions. They are historically persistent. The goal of this research has never been to offer a blueprint for building a more humane, empathetic, and equitable capitalism. However, the ethnographic project presented here has contributed to anthropology and carceral studies, more broadly, a historically considered and localized study of how these processes create barriers to livelihoods, positive futures, and community development. It has also described strategies that people, and communities develop and practice to effect, in whatever small measures, these processes and create the conditions for making a life worth living.

### **A Note on Police Violence and COVID-19**

During the time in which I was finishing revisions of this dissertation more black people and persons of color died at the hands and knees of law enforcement. The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis from a knee placed on his neck by police officer Dereck

Chauvin sparked outrage and global protests. So, too, the killing of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky has spurred wide-spread calls for police reform and accountability. These are just the most recent names of people killed by police. These deaths, maddeningly, were predictable. During the same number of months, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified. So, too, the COVID-19 pandemic was predictable. The response to both is deeply flawed. The framing of COVID and the response to calls for police reform have been uneven and the increasingly militarized response to protests has been dangerous. Many of the people who are protesting know the cost of COVID as well as the possibility of dying by police violence.

Prisons and jails are well known to be incubators for disease (Drucker 2013 and 2012), both while “inside” and then when formerly incarcerated persons are released into communities. For example, in Riker’s Island in New York from March 20, 2002 when the first COVID case was diagnosed, within two weeks more than 200 cases were reported in the facility. Similar conditions were reported at Cook County Jail in Chicago, with more than 350 inmates and staff were infected by early April. This too was predictable. During the 1918 Spanish influenza outbreak, it was estimated that half of San Quentin’s 1,900 inmates were infected during the first wave of the epidemic (Hawks, et al. 2020). According to data collected by the Marshall Project, between March 26, 2020 and June 2, 2020 there have been at least 40,656 COVID infections reported and nearly 500 deaths amongst prisoners in the U.S. Amongst staff, 8,471 cases and 34 deaths have been reported in the same period (Marshall Project 2020). Undoubtedly, these are undercounts.

Throughout this dissertation the data has illuminated on periods of carceral growth, over-crowding in carceral facilities, medical neglect, and a general and historically sustained attitude of disdain towards caring for the incarcerated and the communities from which they are harvested. COVID by no means has created the systemic problems observed in the criminal justice system, health system, or in the provisioning of social assistance; rather, like in the general global populations of marginalized persons, it has shown a bright light on historically persistent social inequities and economic imbalances in capitalism more broadly (DeWitte 2020). Likewise, in several instances of this dissertation, in the period of Civil Rights, in discussions at the Community Forums regarding policing, and in the discussion of School Resource officers, police violence against people of color is not new. It is, in fact, deeply engrained in the very historical growth of police departments in their early functions of plantation surveillance, recapturing the escaped enslaved, and later in the quelling of civil rights unrest and waging the War on Drugs in poor communities.

Police violence and COVID are public health issues; both are rooted in the history that this dissertation has traced. They are not anomalies. They are symptomatic of political, cultural, and economic inequities and injustices necessary for the structure of racial capitalism and the development of carceral extractivism that has been the focus of this dissertation. In creating systems and spaces for the curation of lives worth living in an economy that values the making of people in all their dimensions, including their right to live, there is much to do in remaking our world.

I close this dissertation with a last prayer from the Community Forum.

## CHAPTER 8: EPILOGUE (CLOSING PRAYER)

*Howard: Let us bow our heads and pray. Eternal God and Heavenly Father from whom all blessings flow, we just want to thank you Father. We ask that you bless everyone that's here in this circle today. Bless every home that is represented here. Father we ask you to bless our community. We ask Blessed God that the violence will cease and Dear God that your love will flow in the hearts of men and women everywhere. God, we love you and we thank you. Thank you, Lord. Thank you for your Grace and thank you for your Mercy. We thank you for the opportunity to be here today and we ask you to continue to Bless this community and all the Children, dear God. Please sir, look and have Mercy. Father we thank you. We Bless you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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## **VITA**

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#### **EDUCATION**

2017: Master of Arts, Anthropology, University of Kentucky.

2014: Master of Arts, English, University of Kentucky.

2013: Graduate Certificate in Social Theory, Committee on Social Theory, University of Kentucky.

2010: Bachelor of Science, Business Management and Finance, Double Major in English (BA), CUNY- Brooklyn College.

#### **HONORS**

2020: University of Kentucky Outstanding Teaching Award, University of Kentucky.

2020: Certificate for Outstanding Teaching, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Kentucky.

2019: PhD Student Travel Award. Department of Anthropology. University of Kentucky.

2019 William Y. Adams Award for Excellence in Teaching by a Graduate Student, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky.

2019 (Fall): College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Competitive Fellowship, University of Kentucky.

2018-2019: Inclusive Pedagogies Graduate Learning Community, University of Kentucky.

2012: William J. Sowder Award for Best Graduate Student Critical Essay, Department of English, University of Kentucky.

#### **GRANTS**

2018: National Science Foundation, Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant, *Community Development, Livelihood Strategies, and Carceral Privatization in the U.S. South*, (Award # BCS-1756928), \$20,183.

2015: Susan Abbott-Jamieson Pre-Dissertation Research Grant, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky, \$700.

#### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

2020-2015 : Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky.

2014-2015: Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies, University of Kentucky.

2011-2014: Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Division of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Media, Department of English, University of Kentucky.

2011- 2012: Writing Center Consultant, University of Kentucky.