

ANGELENOS INCARCERATED: THE LA COUNTY JAIL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

A thesis presented

By

Joanne DeCaro Aforalli

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Abstract

The LA County Jail Oral History Project aims to document the conditions, culture, and recent history of the LA County jail system through the oral histories of former and current inmates. The oral history project and its public website create an opportunity to grant an authoritative voice to the literally disenfranchised minority of the former and current local inmate population in Los Angeles County. Five initial oral histories have been gathered from those who were incarcerated in one of the LA County jails from the 1980's to present day. The project's [prototype website](http://angelenosincarcerated.org/) (<http://angelenosincarcerated.org/>) serves as a digital space to test the intersections of diverse media forms in the relation of these narratives. The site is composed of a project video, two exhibits with accompanying video and audio files, and an interactive mapping feature. The principal analytical components of the thesis are its customized TEI schema and five encoded oral histories. The primary inquiry driving the encoding process is the marking of recurrent trauma and identity formation as it is impacted and reformed by the experience of incarceration.

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Overview

The LA County Jail Oral History Project aims to document the conditions, culture, and recent history of the LA County jail system through the oral histories of former and current inmates. The oral history project and its public website create an opportunity to grant an authoritative voice to the literally disenfranchised minority of the former and current local inmate population in Los Angeles County. Five oral histories have been gathered from those who were incarcerated in one of the LA County jails from the 1980's to present day. The narratives begin in the 1980's in conjunction with the nation-wide surge of incarceration rates, partially based on tough new sentencing requirements, such as the Three-Strikes sentencing law. The project's long-term goal is to collect 80 to 100 oral histories to form a representative sample of former and current inmates, taking into account factors such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. An interactive website created for the public will house the collected oral histories with accompanying visual storytelling, and support inmate and researcher curated exhibits on topics related to the collective history and culture of participants. The underlying philosophical goals of the project are to provide an opportunity for inmates and former inmates to create authoritative narratives of their experiences in the LA County jail system in a manner that supports inmates regaining and reimagining ownership of their life stories surrounding incarceration, and to foster dialogue and understanding with the inmate community and the general public. The analytical core of the project is an exploration of recurrent trauma and identity formation as it is impacted and reformed by the experience of incarceration. In the project's next stage it plans to employ and collaborate with the former inmate community on every level of project development, from using former inmates as oral history recorders and encoders to collaborating with them on website exhibit creation.

The project's [prototype website](http://angelenosincarcerated.org/) (<http://angelenosincarcerated.org/>) serves as a digital space to test the intersections of diverse media forms in the relation of these narratives. The site is composed of curated video files, audio files, photographs, transcribed text, and interactive mapping features. The prototype is the first step towards a finalized site where some of the project's philosophical goals can be realized. In its finalized form, one of the central aims of the Angelenos Incarcerated website will be the creation of researcher and former-inmate curated exhibits on topics relevant to this geographic inmate and former inmate community (e.g. 1992 riots, East LA Cholo culture). The website currently houses two exhibits: one displaying an individual's narrative, and one displaying a thematic exhibit that includes contributions from all 5 preliminary participants. Also featured on the website is the project's introductory video. The video allows viewers to become familiarized with the topics and concerns of the project through a media that prioritizes the voices of participants; as well it does the work of immediately humanizing the project's stated philosophical goals. Once the website moves beyond the prototype stage, one of the main aspirations of the project is for the site to serve as a dynamic and engaging digital community space for the former inmate community, in which they would have partial ownership of its content, presentation, and long-term objectives.

Project Origins

“Deputies slam inmates’ heads into walls and windows. They push inmates to the ground and kick them with boot-clad feet. They shoot unresisting inmates with Tasers. They use other inmates to carry out gruesome attacks on their behalf: in one case, inmates sexually assaulted another inmate with a broomstick; in another instance inmates raped another inmate while holding his head in a flushing toilet. All of this occurred with the apparent cooperation of LASD employees. This year alone, inmates suffered a shocking litany of severe injuries at the hands of deputies, including a fractured jaw, a broken collarbone, eye wounds so severe that they required surgery, [...] One former inmate, who is now a drug treatment counselor, witnessed multiple deputies beat another inmate so severely that he “let out the most awful scream I have ever heard in my life,” the memory of which still causes the counselor to “shiver.”” - 2011 ACLU Report

The 2011 ACLU report prompted a formal FBI investigation, in which a former FBI Agent in charge of the Bureau’s Los Angeles Field Office stated, “Of all the jails I have had the occasion to visit, tour, or conduct investigations within, domestically and internationally, I have never experienced any facility exhibiting the volume and repetitive patterns of violence, misfeasance, and malfeasance impacting the Los Angeles County jail system” (Liebowitz, et al).

The LA County Jail Oral History Project hopes to create an opportunity for the academic community and the public to engage in a critical discussion on the conditions and culture of the Los Angeles County jail system. Moreover, this subset of stories can serve as an entry point into the larger discussion of the American prison system. When the prison industry has exploded to the state where one in every thirty-one Americans is under some form of correctional supervision, there is a compelling need for humanizing, self-authoritative representations of this disenfranchised subsector (Liebowitz, et al). Prison walls are built not only to keep inmates inside, but also the public out. The project aims to move beyond reports, news headlines, and shocking statistics in an effort to re-center the discussion and get closer to the core of these men and women’s experiences under incarceration. Pioneers in the field of prisoner literature, like H.

Bruce Franklin, have fought and won at the Supreme Court in defense of prisoners' rights to free expression and testimonial. As Franklin asserts, the acknowledgment and propagation of prisoners' stories is crucial to curtailing the malfeasance of the system: "The literature of the slaves told the inside stories of antebellum slavery and thus helped destroy it. So too, the literature of prisoners tells the inside stories of the American prison and thus threatens its dominion and expansion. The deepest insights into the American global prison, including its cultural and political logic, come from this literature it tries to repress" (241). The inmate and former inmate community is an invisible minority often misrepresented and marginalized; yet, its story is very much woven into the fabric of Los Angeles society. The goal of LA County Jail Oral History Project is to provide an opportunity for this disenfranchised minority to regain authority over their narrative and share a profound humanizing self-representation with the larger LA community and beyond.

Background Research

Prison.

In post-Revolutionary America the groundwork of the country's modern prison system was laid in the biblically inspired concept of resurrection from the "virtual destruction of the self" (Smith 28). The prison reform movement intended for the site of incarceration to stifle the body but "renovate the soul," and was viewed as a just and necessary precursor to the "convict's resurrection as a citizen and a member of the human community" (6, 28). The religious analogy of a monk, gaining wisdom and perspective in isolation, can best describe the lofty intentions of this early reform movement. However, as Caleb Smith is apt to point out in *The Prison and the American Imagination*, dehumanization "is no excess or exception; it is the very premise of the American prison" (Smith 29). Dehumanization remains the central tenet of the American system of incarceration, but for those even passingly familiar with the modern prison industrial complex, the idea of the current system as designed for the moral awakening and glorious "resurrection" of the inmate is beyond absurd.

As scholar and prison reform advocate Ruth Gilmore asserts, the main historic American justifications for incarceration as a form of punishment are: "retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, or incapacitation" (14). Numerous studies have shown the modern prison system fails both as a deterrent and as a form of rehabilitation; therefore, what we are left with is a system built on retribution and incapacitation, with incapacitation now serving as the dominant impetus (15). Incapacitation functions ideologically "as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited," which renowned prison advocate Angela Davis argues functions to relieve the public of "the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers" (16). Instead of facing the systemic

problems that afflict low-income communities, and especially low-income communities of color, the United States has turned to a warehousing model for “undesirables.” Within this warehousing system accounts of the traumas, tortures, and unrelenting process of “breaking” or dehumanizing its captives cannot but eventually fully shatter the myth of resurrection and rehabilitation. Yet, even if the myth of rehabilitation begins to carry less and less cultural weight, as a society we still are in the position of accepting incapacitation as a justifiable or functionally necessary form of punishment. On some level, the majority of society must think that prisoners deserve to be in these sites of incarceration. It is the hope of this project that the long-form oral history testimony of former inmates will contribute in a small but eventually meaningful way to the demystification of the horrors of the modern American prison system. As in many historic fights for justice, equality, and the recognition of atrocities, the first-hand accounts of the “other” can work to bridge the social and cultural gaps until the reader or viewer can see the “other” in him or herself.

Since this project centers on the geographic location of Southern California, it is pertinent to briefly discuss the role California has played in the modern expansion of the prison industrial complex. In fact, scholars are quick to reference California as the premier case study of the rapid expansion of the prison industry witnessed in the past three decades. Up until 1980, California was home to nine prisons, and it took 100 years to gradually build up to that number. Then in the 1980’s the number of Californian prisons doubled, and only continued to rise afterwards. In fact, the California state prisoner population grew almost 500 percent between 1982 and 2000, even though the crime rate in California “peaked in 1980 and declined, unevenly but decisively, thereafter” (Gilmore 7). The classic argument for the rapid expansion of prisons and the enactment of the Three-Strike laws that furnished them, was “crime went up and we cracked

down;” however, as Gilmore maintains the more truthful statement behind this policy was “crime went up; crime came down; we cracked down” (20). In this light, it is hard not to see the policies of prison expansion primarily underwritten in economic and political gains. The Department of Corrections is California’s largest state agency, employing a workforce of over 54,000 (Gilmore 10). Furthermore, the Department’s prisons are touted as job-creators and economic-stimulators, and “tough on crime” politicians are a staple of the modern political system.

Finally, to help create a better informed understanding of the Californian prison population, I would like to offer a few statistics. Perhaps, most glaringly pertinent to this project is the fact that the five-county Los Angeles region supplies 60 percent of state prisoners (Gilmore 75). The racial composition of the California prison population breaks down to Latinos in the majority with 35.2 percent; African-Americans at 30 percent; and white prisoners at 29.2 percent (Davis 13). On a final note, when considering the project’s analytical interests in how on-going trauma is reshaped by prison, it should be noted that a whopping 70 percent of Californian prisoners have spent time in the foster care system (van der Kolk 170).

Digital Humanities.

Within the field of digital humanities there is a present momentum to create a meaningful space for work that equably combines the practices and theories of digital humanities with the practices and theories of social activism. Leaders behind the #transformDH movement contend: “Questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability should be central to digital humanities and digital media studies” (Baily et al. 71). Furthermore, the movement strives for a version of digital humanities that centers on “the intersection of digital production and social transformation through research, pedagogy, and activism, and that will not be restricted to institutional academic spaces” (72). The movement pushes digital humanities scholars to apply their work outside the

confines of academia, to recognize and support seemingly non-traditional, “non-academic” projects, and to amplify and legitimized “voices of those whose perspectives have not traditionally found a place in academia” (76). Digital humanities has often been described as a big tent that supports an all-inclusive, interdisciplinary approach to scholarship, but as Fiona Barnett describes in “The Brave Side of Digital Humanities”: “There is a difference between ‘making room in our tent’ and meeting other folks where they are: different priorities and different focuses can lead to different types of projects”(69). The sentiment behind this and the #transformDH movement being that it is not enough to carve off some space for digital humanities scholars devoted to social equality (e.g. feminism, critical race, gender studies); instead, the digital humanities itself must transform to make these social justice ideologies a fulcrum to augment the work of the field as a whole.

The LA County Jail Oral History Project is grounded in the commitments and aspirations of the #transformDH movement. In its finalized state the project hopes to engage the digital humanities community in conversations about the intersections and melding of public humanities and digital humanities work. Public humanist Wendy Hsu contends that the academy often operates under “the assumption that scholarship is inherently a form of ‘public good,’” and this assumption “is not a productive place to start a conversation with those outside of the academy”(281). The project cannot by its creation alone serve the inmate community; it needs to work at every stage to ensure inclusivity and public service. Hsu’s call to build projects “*with* and not *for*” a community drives the philosophy of how this project engages with its subjects. The project views those who donate their oral history as co-creators of the project. At every step of the project’s development members of the inmate community will function as collaborators, with the plan that it will literally be as much their project as it is mine. Their desires, fears, and

rationales will be the guiding force of this project. Hsu notes, “public participation begins from a place of humility. Civic actions stem from dialogues across lines of power” (284). One of the foremost intellectual and moral mandates in this work is creating a space of “dialogues across lines of power,” while maintaining humility at the largeness of this task.

Social Justice.

The LA County Jail Oral History Project arose from the desire to use digital humanities methodology, tools, and platforms to create new narratives, dialogues, and community spaces around the subject of incarceration. The project believes in a social justice reasoning that first-person narratives have the potential for profound ameliorative change. African American studies and legal scholar Imani Perry asserts that narrative “literally shapes the way we are governed” and is “fundamental to the way we as humans structure our lives and operate within the world as individuals and members of communities”(44). Perry discusses how negative narratives around race are central to the dehumanization and discrimination of minorities, but she contends, “communities can choose to ‘shift narratives’” or “provide ‘counternarratives’” (61). The LA County Jail Oral History Project aspires to be a site of “counternarratives” where dialogues about prisoners can shift to a dialogue that includes prisoners. It can be a space for what bell hooks famously describes as “talking back,” where prisoner voices are presented as “equal to an authority figure” (6). hooks defines “talking back” as moving from “silence into speech” and from “object to subject—the liberated voice” (9). She champions that for “the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited” and their allies this liberated voice “makes new life and growth possible” (9). The LA County Jail Oral History Project is designed to challenge the presentation of its subjects and their narratives as objects of study.

The project cannot in any manner shy away from its advocacy and activist imperatives.

hooks refers to “true speaking” as not only a creative expression, but as an “act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act— as such, it represents a threat” (8). The testimonies of these participants are acts of “true speaking” that are certainly courageous, and can be viewed as a threat to the prison and law enforcement industry. It is important to consciously remember that the participants are taking real, tangible risks to tell their narratives—risks within their own community and potentially with law enforcement or the judicial system. Ruth Gilmore states that “in scholarly research, answers are only as good as the further questions they provoke, while for activists, answers are as good as the tactics they make possible” (27). This project must navigate the delicate balancing act between its scholarly and activist agendas, hoping to provoke questions as much as ameliorative “real world” impact in the lives of the participants, their communities, and the public’s understanding of the former two. The project uses the critical work of Perry and hooks as the bedrock of its moral imperative, and hopes to serve as a small but tangible realization of their advocacy.

Trauma.

The project’s understanding of trauma as something that can be marked and encoded, reframes the more general term of “trauma” to E. Ann Kaplan’s term of the “traumatic situation,” which tries to not exclusively focus on the interior of the individual but “at what surrounds that person’s suffering— his or her environment, specific institutions involved, the state of her community, its politics” (Kaplan 39). This project cannot claim the expertise and perspective of the medical and psychiatric community when discussing trauma, therefore it is more productive to ground trauma as situations and events discussed by participants, rather than an attempt to professionally scrutinize the participant’s internal state of mind. However, it is also

useful to heed Kaplan's warning that "narratives of trauma told by victims and survivors are not simply about facts. They are primarily about the impact of those facts on victims' lives and about the painful continuities created by violence in their lives" (42). When encoding and presenting trauma, the project attempts to strike a balance between the fact-based "this event happened" and the more analytical "how and why" of a person's ongoing relationship to their traumatic situations. While it is important to document and acknowledge that trauma has occurred, there must be an accompanying analysis of the relationships between multiple traumas and identity aspects.

The two trauma scholars and leading psychiatrists on which this project centers its theory of trauma and PTSD are Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk. Judith Herman's seminal work *Trauma and Recovery* is of particular relevance to this project since Herman proposes the new diagnosis of "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" that is specifically designed for populations that have experienced prolonged captivity. Herman discusses at length how and why "the current formulation of post-traumatic stress disorder fails to capture either the protean symptomatic manifestations of prolonged, repeated trauma or the profound deformations of personality that occur in captivity" (119). She emphasizes prisoners are often incapable of integrating the chronic trauma of captivity into their ongoing life narrative (89). For example, studies of prisoners of war report that upon returning home POWs often never told their spouse or children that they were even POWs; it was a part of their war identity and experience that could not be integrated. Herman argues that prolonged captivity produces profound alterations in the captive's identity: "All the psychological structures of the self—the image of the body, the internalized images of others, and the values and ideals that lend a person a sense of coherence and purpose—have been invaded and systematically broken down" (93). Due to this they "suffer

not only from a classic posttraumatic syndrome but also from profound alterations in their relations with God, with other people, and with themselves” (95). Furthermore, the longer the period of captivity is disavowed the more those memories remain alive as free form, un-integrated, highly intrusive “traumatic memory” (89). The analytical interests of the project’s digital encoding meet at this very point of trauma and identity formation and re-formation in the space of captivity. The experiences of prolonged captivity profoundly change both a person’s identity and their relationship to their pre-existing trauma. With this project’s efforts to track, observe, analyze, and present some of these changes, it hopes to contribute in a small manner to a greater public acknowledgement of what should be a diagnostically recognized condition of complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Bessel van der Kolk’s recent publication *The Body Keeps the Score*, adds to the work of Herman by incorporating current physiological and neurological studies of trauma, such as neuroimaging, as well as an evaluation of physiological treatments for PTSD, such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, yoga, and massage. Van der Kolk describes how when a person’s “fight/flight/freeze” response is prevented or thwarted, “the brain keeps secreting stress chemicals, and the brain’s electrical circuits continue to fire in vain” (54). He argues “being able to move and do something to protect oneself is a critical factor in determining whether or not a horrible experience will leave long-lasting scars” (55). Incarcerated persons are incapable of escaping the unrelenting violence and threat of violence in jails and prisons. They are in a constant state of hyper-stressed “fight,” as well as often “frozen” in the inability to flee or express other natural responses to life-threatening situations. Many times prisoners, due to various situations, are not capable or willing to “fight.” To not have any time or space of safety, of “letting down your guard” for months, years, or decades on end, not only

deeply effects a person's psychology but also causes permanent changes to their very physiology.

Although Herman published her foundational work in 1992, the diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder or complex-PTSD is still not included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). The inclusion of a diagnosis in the DSM is absolutely crucial for multiple reasons: 1) insurance companies require a DSM diagnosis for reimbursement; 2) research funding is often contingent on a DSM diagnosis; 3) academic programs are organized based on DSM categories. As van der Kolk states, "you cannot develop a treatment for a condition that does not exist," and currently there is no official recognition of a more complex form of PTSD that would be unquestionably beneficial to the inmate community (145). A veteran psychiatrist Jill Shannahan relates that psychiatrists are often in a position where it is prohibitive to even issue the standard diagnosis of PTSD with their patients because insurance companies will not cover the cost of treatment for this diagnosis. To change these predatory and/or negligent practices by insurance companies and the APA, social advocacy is absolutely necessary. This project recognizes that it is not the kind of study that finds its way into the hands of the drafters of the DSM or the insurance companies, but what it hopes to support is a greater public acknowledgement for the unique formation and reformation of trauma and its aftermath that occurs under prolonged captivity and incarceration.

Digital Humanities Methodology

Overview.

The primary analytical interest of the project's TEI encoding is the marking of representations of trauma and identity as individual occurrences and ongoing sub-narratives. Sub-narratives in this project are viewed as underlying sub-topics generated by the oral history that form their own narrative arc throughout the oral history; for example, a person's battle with drug addiction or their evolving view of their sexual identity. In addition to marking these representations of trauma and identity, I am marking the subject's affective relationship to these components, as well as their affective relationship to their incarceration in general. By encoding oral history specific sub-narratives (e.g. recurrent sexual violence, drug addiction, race relations) and marking the subject's evolving relationship to those narratives (e.g. denial, reinterpretation, discomfort) a picture of how and when occurrences of identity and trauma impact or shift parallel sub-narratives emerges. In developing customized TEI encoding practices, the project offers new methods for capturing and evaluating thematic (as well as abstract and subjective) threads within text, such as trauma and identity formation. The primary analytical goal with these encoding practices is evaluating how trauma is represented in a person's narrative inside and outside the prison walls, and how traumas are born or reshaped by a person's time under incarceration.

Schema Design.

The schema design for this project has undergone many iterations. The first iteration was created in Julia Flanders' *Shape of Data* course in Spring 2016. In this first stage of schema design, I created a pseudoschema and a project-specific XML schema. As this XML schema was designed from the ground-up for the needs of this project, without the constraints of established

XML languages (such as TEI), I was able to envision slightly new and alternative approaches to the purposes of markup for textual documents. Due to the lack of actual textuality and nuanced structure in an oral history recording, I chose to use markup to focus on the emotional and thematic content of the text. Although I was pleased with the outcome of this first encoding process, my next goal was to turn my nonce XML schema into a customized TEI schema, which has the potential to be used and more readily understood in the broader digital humanities community. To meet the needs of the larger, long-term goals of this project, other encoders would need to be hired and trained. From this perspective, it would be more beneficial to the students and ex-inmates to be trained in the recognized and transferable language of TEI, rather than a unique XML language.

Before I began the process of creating a customized schema, I attempted to fit my XML design into the standard TEI All and TEI Speech schemas. On a basic level this process further familiarized me with the intricacies and sophisticated complexities of the TEI language. More importantly for this project, this process enabled me to parse which XML elements could be readily adapted to established TEI elements and attributes, and which would benefit from the customized creation of elements and attributes.

For the creation of a customized TEI schema it became necessary to move beyond an understanding of how specific TEI components function and are applied, to a broader understanding of how and why the TEI is designed and can be manipulated. For me, this meant acquiring an understanding of classes, modules, data types, and other structural functionalities of TEI, and then how to apply and adapt them. My first step was to evaluate which modules were useful to this project, and which elements from those modules could be added, eliminated, or possibly reassigned. The next step was the creation of my own elements and attributes. In this

process the first challenge was to make these elements and attributes structurally functional and properly apply within the envisioned design of the oral history encoded documents. The second challenge of new syntax creation was developing the appropriate new language for these elements and attributes. The next step in the larger process was to modify and constraint existing TEI elements in use by this project; for example, constraining the value list for @type on <div>. Once all the new and modified elements were in place, the next important procedure was providing glosses and descriptions for all the terminology used in these elements. For example, what differentiates <trauma> from <reTrauma> (recurrent trauma), or how exactly are the @ana attribute values of denial, reinterpretation, and transformation being defined for this project? Or more simply what distinguishes a sob from a moan, a giggle from a laugh on the @new attribute of <shift>? This led to a series of refinements for the customized elements, attributes, and their constrained list of values. Throughout this process I worked on encoding the texts with the schema, so I could further test and refine the customization to the evolving needs and desires of the project. My final step in the customization creation process was to eliminate the unnecessary TEI elements and attributes, constraining the schema more precisely to the analytical interests and practical desires of the project.

New Elements and Attributes.

Elements:

1. <trauma> - Site of a singular occurrence or situation that has the possibility to produce trauma in the subject. A singular traumatic event.
2. <reTrauma> - Ongoing or recurrent trauma specific to the subject's narrative. The trauma or the effects of the trauma should typically exist inside and outside sites of incarceration.
3. <identity> - Aspects of a subject's identity that can be tracked over the course of the

narrative. These aspects of identity should have significant emotional weight and affective display for the interviewee.

4. <demographic> - Used for tracking demographic changes in the subject's narrative.
5. <guards> - Used for tracking the actions, encounters, and narratives of guards in the subject's oral history.
6. <prison> - Used for tracking a subject's affective relationship to a specific prison or jail, and to prison and jail types.
7. <SHU> - Used for tracking a subject's detention in solitary confinement, which in the California prison system is referred to as the SHU, pronounced like "shoe."

Attributes:

1. @affect - A behavior that acts as a sign of emotion that can be registered visually and orally, such as facial expressions, vocal expression, or gestures, like mannerisms or body language.
2. @emoScale - The emotional scale, or affect scale, is designed to show the changes in a subject's affective display to the topic over the course of tracking recurrent trauma and identity. The "0" functions as the subject's baseline for "normal" or average affect display during the interview. From this baseline it can be determined if the subject is expressing emotion in the direction of positive or negative affect. Affect should be determined based off physical signs of emotion, such as facial expressions, vocal expression, or gestures like mannerisms or body language. The baseline and subsequent scale will function uniquely for each participant. For example, one person's display of negative affect might peak at loud sighs and groans, while another might peak at uncontrollable wailing and moaning; however, both of these peak signs of emotional affect would be counted as a “-

5” on the scale of that participant. This scale takes into consideration people’s diverse ranges of affective display.

3. @stateChange - For recording the new state or condition of the subject's demographic information.

The majority of the new elements also contain TEI standard attributes, such as @type and @ana, which contain constrained value lists. These value lists are comprised of a series of individual values, in which each value contains a detailed description. As well, each of the new attributes listed above contains a detailed constrained value list. Additionally, some of the new elements and attributes are supplied with instructional material for their application, this material is found within notes (<!-- -->) inside the schema. Please refer to the schema to see all descriptive and instructional material.

Encoding Process.

As previously described, the encoding process and the schema design process have occurred in tandem and with a lateral responsive framework. That is to say the schema and the encoding process have had a high degree of mutual influence on each other. Once the schema reached a near finalized state, the typical encoding process for the project is described below. It should be noted that the encoding process began with plain text transcripts of the oral history audio recordings.

1. Data cleaning and formatting: I worked with Northeastern University Library’s XML Applications Programmer Ashley Clark to develop an XSLT stylesheet that reformats the plain text transcriptions into a functional base level of XML rich data. This process automates the basic general formatting of the document which consists of <sp> (speaker) elements with the @who attribute and value of #spk1 or #spk2, and places the text inside

the <sp> elements in a <u> (utterance) element. The real complexity and strength of this stylesheet is its ability to distinguish and properly label the different speakers as #spk1, #spk2, or higher numerical figures. As well, Ms. Clark and I crafted regular expressions to modify other plain text styling in the transcripts, such as replacing any words in brackets with <vocal><desc>original text</desc></vocal>.

2. Basic elements and structure of complex elements: In my first sweep of the text I added basic standard TEI elements, such as <placeName> and <said>, as well as the more simplistic of my customized elements, such as <demographic> and <SHU>. In this stage I also added the basic structure of the more complex elements, such as <reTrauma> and <identity>, with their @xml:id, @next, and @prev attributes.
3. Intensive listening and complex element refinement: In this stage of encoding I worked extensively with the oral history's audio and video files to add the elements that rely on sound and action (shift, emph, vocal, kinesics, incident) and the attributes that also rely on a nuanced interpretation of the audio/video files (@affect, @emoScale, @ana).
4. Re-evaluation of complex elements and doc divisions: Happening at times concurrently and subsequently, the analysis of one section of text would influence other sections, especially with relative measurements, such as the emoScale. For example, a thorough analysis of a highly emotional section of the text might influence how I rated other affect displays in previous sections. As well, since the oral histories are not always recounted in a linear fashion, I found it more useful to add in the temporal <div> elements after a complex encoding relationship with the text had already been established.

Analytical Process.

To transform the analytical results of my encoding process into edited narrative material I looked to *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. I found the ethnographic “grounded theory” approach to qualitative data, which comprises of “deriving analytical categories directly from the data, not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses,” extremely appropriate for the goals of the LA County Jail Oral History Project (qtd. in Emerson et al. 172). In practice, applying this theory meant creating “analytic categories” for my oral history, such as “domestic_violence” for <reTrauma> or “racial” for <identity>, in a manner that privileges categories that reflect the significance of events and experiences to the subject, and not my preconceived notions of what is significant material from the oral history.

Practically, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* helped provide a framework of how people doing ethnographic research, like oral histories, convert their coding, or in my case encoding, into revised, public-facing analytical material. The first step suggested in the text is writing code memos, which are a series of free form analysis and insights gained during the encoding process. They are meant to be open and ranging in topic matter. From there, the next step was to pull out all the encoded data for a topic, such as all the <reTrauma> with @type=“domestic violence,” to then sort and reevaluate these encoded chunks as a group. At this point, I was able to look for deeper analytical insights, and see what does or does not fit into these theories. Finally, I turned my code memos into what the authors’ term “integrative memos,” which explicate links, bring in theory, and start to shape these memos for a readership by integrating contextualization and background information. The authors describe the work of an ethnographer as someone who is “simultaneously creating and solving a puzzle” (Emerson et al. 173). This is very fitting for my

oral history project, in which I am creating the oral history material, encoding, analyzing, and presenting it.

Outcomes.

The primary analytical question that guided the encoding of these narratives is: how is recurrent trauma and identity reshaped by the experience of incarceration? Before diving into some of the results of the encoding process and its further analysis, here are some examples of what was being recorded in this process. In the five initial oral histories, the most common forms of identity that were tracked were: social identity, racial identity, and familial identity. The most common forms of recurrent trauma were: domestic violence and addiction. Other forms of recurrent trauma that appeared in these narratives included: neglect, medical trauma, physical violence, and community violence. The recorded values of singular trauma took on a far broader range than recurrent trauma, including traumas such as: deprivation, sexual violence, discrimination, grief, and death.

The encoding process is designed to facilitate the literal overlap and juxtaposition of recurrent trauma and identity in the text. Often passages are simultaneously encoded with recurrent trauma and aspects of identity—and sometimes multiple forms of each. As well, longer passages of recurrent trauma and identity often contain smaller instances of singular trauma. With this information, it can be studied if, for example, passages of domestic violence also often contain singular occurrences of deprivation or sexual violence. Or if in a person's social identity individual traumas, such as physical violence and death, occur more frequently before, during, or after incarceration. Still another way of utilizing the encoding could be to trace different @ana attribute values, such as “transformation” or “reinterpretation,” to track certain psychological moves that occur throughout all trauma and identity aspects of individual narratives and multiple

texts. In the spaces of overlap of recurrent trauma and identity a picture of how multiple sub-narratives are affected by the experience of incarceration and by each other begins to emerge. In the sections below I will touch on some of more compelling trauma and identity networks, theories, and links established through this process.

Pre-Incarceration.

Parental neglect. Domestic violence in the home. Feelings of racial and social isolation. Being surrounded by extreme forms of community violence. Being forced to participate in that community violence. These are some of the dominant forms of early trauma experienced by the participants. All of the participants joined a racial gang either inside or outside of prison. Both of the female participants joined a gang prior to incarceration, and the male participants joined racial prison gangs. While all the participants' gangs pledge allegiance to one race and commit racially fueled violent crimes, none of the participants expressed any sentiments of racial hatred. In fact, all of them discuss rejecting racism in their personal lives. So, what motivates a non-racist person to join a racist gang? An early feeling of isolation, both as an individual and as an ethnic minority in your neighborhood, seems to play a decisive role. Eddie and Jessica both described at length the sentiment of never "fitting in," which for both of them was associated with an early familial transient lifestyle. For Eddie this was compounded by being what he describes as "the big white kid" in neighborhoods of color. Luke echoes this feeling of racial isolation in his testimony. Another huge factor, not surprisingly, is instability, neglect, and violence in the home. Jessica joined the biker gang Hells Angels as a sixteen-year-old after a history of neglect and abandonment. A further factor is an early and relentless exposure to community violence, which in Los Angeles often appears in the form of gang violence. Luke witnessed a man beaten to death with another man's fists outside his home at the age of eleven.

Jackie was jumped into a gang at the age of thirteen, and by the time she legally became an adult she had been forced to participate in many acts of extreme violence herself. Jackie, Eddie, and Jessica were all incarcerated as minors; Jackie for long stretches of her youth. Their juvenile minds were partially formed under incarceration, in states of constant fear and degradation. While none of the male participants had a choice in joining a racial prison gang, both Eddie and Antonio found deep solace in their prison gangs and even climbed their internal ranks.¹ These gangs filled voids created by early trauma and identity crises. While this finding is certainly not groundbreaking in the area of gang research, it is an important foundation for how to read these narratives of gang members. As a society we often are presented with the narrative of gang members as soulless thugs, hardened killers, and extreme racists. Instead maybe we should view them, or at least some of them, primarily as heavily traumatized, socially isolated children. At minimum, this is how I aim to present these former gang members in this project.

All of the initial participants have another factor in common—meth addiction. For some, their experiences as an addict formed a nexus of trauma in the lives. For Antonio and Jackie, their addiction was an important factor in why they lost their children. All of the participants felt that addiction was at the heart of their struggles with incarceration; they were addicts before they were ever “criminals.” How and why someone becomes a drug addict is a complex study in itself, but it’s safe to say that childhood trauma factors into the equation. Eddie speaks of wanting to hangout with the “bad kids” to feel included, Jessica got hooked on speed by an abusive boyfriend after her mother abandoned her, and Antonio grew up in a household plagued with domestic violence in which his older brothers were also dealing drugs out of the house.

¹ In male penitentiaries in the Californian jail and prison system, all activity and housing assignments are officially

Early childhood trauma and/or feelings of social isolation are at the root of the two main sources of imprisonment for the participants: addiction and gang activity.

Under Incarceration.

All of the participants witnessed or experienced horrendous acts of violence under incarceration, from riots to “blanket parties,” rapes, and killings.² All of them experienced forms of physical and mental deprivation, such as food and water deprivation and solitary confinement. More so than the physical suffering they witnessed and experienced, what the participants discuss affecting them the most is the systemic process of dehumanization under incarceration, and its long-term psychological consequences. When Eddie experienced a medical emergency under incarceration he could have died from the deputies’ malfeasance; however, what upset him the most, what sticks with him to this day, is that the medical personal treated him with obvious disdain and contempt in the hospital. Eddie was in the most vulnerable state of his life, being seen by people he had considered up to that point as neutral and benevolent societal figures. To be treated as “non-human” or as Judith Butler terms an “ungrievable” person, deeply and permanently damaged Eddie’s social trust—his faith in society. People that were supposed to be the primary helpers of society—police and doctors—failed him immensely, giving him the impression that his life is not valued by his society. He was no longer a person worthy to be grieved over; he was shown his death quite literally wouldn’t have mattered as much as someone else’s or possibly at all in society’s eyes. Eddie is perhaps the clearest cut example of this state of “ungrievability,” but all the participants experienced it and were permanently altered by it. Judith Herman describes this societal betrayal in *Trauma and Recovery*: “The damage to the survivor’s faith and sense of community is particularly severe when the traumatic events themselves

² Blanket parties are when people confine a person with a blanket over them, and then beat them with locks. Another common version of this is the “lock in the sock” form of torture.

involve the betrayal of important relationships. The imagery of these events often crystallizes around a moment of betrayal” (55). In the collected narratives, these moments of betrayal—where a person’s faith in society is shattered—seep out of the recordings in the darkest notes of sorrow, anger, and disillusionment. Once this social trust is broken it is incredibly hard to repair. Often in the short-term this leads to an increase in personally destructive and socially destructive behaviors. In the long-term it changes the way the person perceives their self-worth and how they perceive the overall benevolence of society.

Another seemingly universal feature of incarceration is the inmate’s uninterrupted, unrelenting state of fear and hyper-vigilance. This means never for a moment, not while you eat, sleep, go to the bathroom, never do you let your guard down. The concept of safety and security ceases to exist. There is nowhere to hide, to protect yourself, no way to stop some of the awful, unimaginable things that happen to you or that you witness happen to others. There is no reprieve. This experience alone is enough to alter a person. When you combine this with a similar pre-existing trauma, as in the case of Antonio, it appears as if the traumas from earlier abuse is amplified and reinforced to greatly shape one’s personality. Antonio was raised in a home with an alcoholic father who regularly abused his mother. In homes where domestic violence regularly occurs children are often left with no authority figure to turn to for help, and no means to protect themselves or stop the violence inflicted on others. Moreover, since the violence occurs in the home, these children are left with no place of safety.³ An abusive home environment cruelly mirrors a prison, and for those who were raised in abusive homes the prison cruelly replicates their juvenile environment. Antonio’s coping strategy in prison is reflective of a child raised with domestic violence: he “keeps his head down,” follows the rules without

³ Please refer to “Part Three: The Minds of Children” in *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk.

question, and internalizes the blame and guilt for exterior violence. A ceaseless state of violence and jeopardy from adolescence through adulthood has left Antonio feeling as if he is “always imprisoned,” and as if it is “all the same”—prison and the outside. He discusses how at home and at work he does what he is told, he follows the rules, and complies without question. While in some practical ways this attitude is useful, it has also made his primary existence one of subjection and compliance to the desires and demands of others. It has left him with a mentality that things don’t really change or get better; it’s just a different form of prison with different rules. Domestic violence and prison compiled on each other to utterly “break” him.

One of the women interviewed had the opposite experience surrounding incarceration and domestic violence. For her prison provided a form of refuge from a series of relationships with older men that were beset with domestic violence. Jessica experienced the recurrent traumas of neglect and abandonment as a child and adolescent. There are well-established connections between the childhood traumas of neglect and abuse and the adult traumas of domestic violence between partners and rape.⁴ As well, neglect was a compelling factor in Jessica seeking a new “family” in the form of a motorcycle gang. While Jessica had overwhelmingly negative experiences in local jail facilities, her longest stretches of incarceration at federal prison camps for women in Victorville and Phoenix inclined more towards positive experiences—“positive” only when considered in comparison to other prison experiences. Jessica still considers this stretch of time to be the worst in her life. In these facilities Jessica experienced sexual advances from guards, which initially frightened and confused her; however, she eventually began to use this misconduct to her advantage.⁵ This gross malfeasance notwithstanding, Jessica was able to form

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This statement is not intended to diminish the psychological harm of unwanted sexual advances, especially within the power dynamics of incarceration. In fact, I believe these advances connect to a whole series of trauma surrounding childhood vulnerability and sexuality in Jessica’s narrative. However, her overall experience under

strong networks or communities of women in the camps. Most significantly, in these facilities she was able to abandon her identity as a member of a white biker gang, and be separate from her abusive partner long enough to seriously consider and then request a divorce. A transformation in Jessica's recurrent patterns of neglect and social isolation—the building of a new community—had a profound affect on her self-image. Jessica built herself into a strong woman who no longer desired or needed the negative support systems of a gang and an abusive relationship.

Post-Incarceration.

Every participant discussed the pain and challenges they faced upon their final release as they reintegrated into society. Even those who could find work readily thanks to friends or familial connections, still describe the scars of permanent social stigmatization and ostracisation. The participants experience a form of “social death.” The term “social death” originates with Orlando Patterson's analysis of slavery, introduced in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Social death is comprised of three key components: systematic violence, generalized humiliation, and what Patterson refers to as “natal alienation.” Natal alienation is alienation from your children and ancestors: “alienated from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth” and “by extension, all such claims and obligations [to] remote ancestors and [to] descendants” (Patterson 5). In recent scholarship, Joshua Price makes a compelling argument for the modern connections between slavery and incarceration as “social death” in *Prison and Social Death*. Price argues, “To be sentenced to prison is to be sentenced to social death. Social death is a permanent condition. While many people integrate themselves back into the society after imprisonment, they often testify that they permanently bear a social mark, a stigma” (5). While

incarceration in federal facilities was mostly devoid of the recurrent traumas and negative identity aspects that had plagued her youth.

the permanent stigmatization of inmates is keenly felt by all the participants, I would first like to discuss how the concept of “natal alienation” most directly applies to two of the participants.

For Antonio and Jackie, by far the most painful, soul-crushing experience to occur as a result of incarceration was the loss of their children. Antonio was eventually able to regain custody of his children, but for Jackie the loss of her two children was permanent. Jackie describes how she interpreted the deciding factors behind her children’s permanent removal by the Department of Family Children Services:

When you have to go before the judge and the Department of Family Children Services courthouse, they look at your entire record from the time you were a child to the time that you're having your own child. And by the looks of it, being that I was incarcerated myself, at the age of 13, I was in the juvenile justice system, a ward of court at the age of 13[...] [my] placement at juvenile hall, camp, YA, prison. Their decision was that I was an unfit mother and not, not capable of caring for my two children.

Jackie views her past, her literal stack of records and files, as a token that turned her into an ungrievable person, a socially dead person. Once marked as such, her rehabilitation, her epic transformation from a gang member and drug addict to a drug counselor still couldn’t rescue her from social death. The permanent removal of her children, with no hope for the possibility of reconciliation is one of clearest forms of Patterson’s “natal alienation.” Her children have grown up never being allowed to consider their mother as their mother, and Jackie is permanently marked as “non-mother” mother. These twisted forms of motherhood in social death are living reincarnations of the system of slavery.

Incarceration and the social death that occupies and follows it profoundly altered the participants’ view of society and themselves. Most of the participants describe this alteration as “getting hard.” A person must obviously change their demeanor to survive prison, but the participants found that change to be irreversible, permanent. Luke describes that after

incarceration “you don't trust certain people or you look at everyone differently. Everyone becomes a potential threat.” Jessica relates, “I'm definitely more of a bitch and more like, I guess untrusting to people, you know. As opposed to before [...] everything was bubble gum and kisses and everything is great [...] now it's like, a harsher reality I guess. It's sad because I was a kid, you know.” A word that echoes in both these descriptions is “trust;” the basic foundations of societal trust have been broken. From the horrors of prison to the stigmatization of societal re-entry, the participants' new role as the “social dead” broke and reshaped core parts of their identity. Jessica describes how upon release she was repeatedly denied the most menial of jobs. Those experiences made her feel like she was “a piece of shit basically:” “They were judging me because of my record [...] it's very frustrating and discouraging, sad and depressing, you know. And if anything makes you wanna go back to your old ways.” In jail and prison the participants were subjected to “systematic violence” and “generalized humiliation,” and even those who were childless at the time suffered alienation from their loved ones, and then later an alienation from greater society. They, along with other targeted minorities, are the “social dead” of present society. And for those who also experience forms of intersectional social death, like the addition of transphobia, incarceration equates to layers and layers of removal and isolation from society—creating a psychological break, a distrust, that cuts to the core of identity.

Rhetorical Process

Listening.

To refine the practical methods of the project's oral history interviews I referred to Robert Weiss's *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. This text was essential in shaping my interview questions and interview guide, as well as providing a base philosophy to ethical qualitative interviewing. An vital part of this ethics requires establishing the interviewing relationship. Weiss provides these key moral imperatives:

The interviewer will respect the respondent's integrity. This means that the interviewer will not question the respondent's appraisals, choices, motives, right to observations, or personal worth. The interviewer will not ask questions out of idle curiosity. The interviewer will ensure, both during the interview and afterward, that the respondent will not be damaged or disadvantaged because of the respondent's participation in the interview. (Weiss 65)

When working with the inmate community the mandate that the participant “will not be damaged or disadvantaged” by participating in the interview becomes of the highest priority, because it is an ever-present potential threat and concern to the project and its participants. As of now pseudonyms and a redaction process are being utilized to mitigate the risk. In the future, when the use of real names will be considered, there will be the need for a more elaborate, participant-controlled redaction process.

Beyond the participant's safety, establishing a relationship of mutual expertise with the participant is crucial. They should feel comfortable and confident in my expertise as an interviewer and listener, and they should also feel *they* are the expert in their experiences under incarceration. This involves a steady refrain from overtaking an interview with my own body of knowledge about incarceration. But this does not mean that I should be or pretend to be a neophyte on the subject. Weiss maintains that the interviewer should demonstrate “that I want to

learn and that I'm worth teaching. That I know something, but not everything. So they can inform me, and I'll understand" (Weiss 39). This approach still centers the topical expertise on the participant, but it positions the interviewer as a learner worthy of further insight and discourse.

To further build an ethical modal for "listening" in this project I turned to Krista Ratcliffe's theories on rhetorical listening and trauma scholar E. Ann Kaplan's theory of "bearing witness." Ratcliffe's formative work on rhetorical listening provides a framework for consciously listening with respect, tolerance, and acknowledging one's own biases. Ratcliffe advocates for listening "with intent" to "understand not just the claims, not just the cultural logics within which the claims function, but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well" (205). She calls this process "*understanding as standing under*" the discourse of others (205, emphasis in original). This process of "standing under" means letting the participant's discourse "wash over, through, and around us" while "consciously acknowledging all our particular and fluid standpoints" (205). In the interview process I found myself at times struggling to apply Ratcliffe's theory, and in those times I found it the most essential. An example of this was when a participant discussed his own use of domestic violence against his wife. In that moment, I needed to continue to respectfully and actively absorb his discourse, but at the same time recognize my own "particular and fluid standpoints." I needed to let his story "wash around me," be willing to have it change or affect me, but also recognize and validate my own strong standpoints and emotions on this subject. I always knew that violence against women would be a point of difficulty for me in this project. I am therefore grateful for the imagery and theory Ratcliffe provides of allowing another's discourse to "wash over" you.

The second frame of reference that I applied in the activity of listening was E. Ann Kaplan's commitment to "bear witness" to trauma survivors. Kaplan argues that bearing witness

is to not only provide “a witness where no one was there to witness before, but more than that, one feels responsible for injustice in general. Witnessing involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common” (122). Kaplan commands the listener to “tak[e] on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone” (123). Often stories of trauma are ones not previously told, and ones that carry a heavy psychological burden for the subject. While the project maintains that it is not in the position to “heal” the effects of that burden, as the interviewer, I needed to be prepared to have that burden partially transferred onto me. Telling and listening to horror, to traumatic situations, is a shared burden that the interviewer and interviewee must commit to. It is then the moral obligation of the listener to attempt, even in the smallest measures, to try to change “the kind of world” where this injustice regularly occurs. To take these kinds of extremely traumatic stories from others without an activist vision or plan of action—action no matter how small—is ethically irresponsible. The project, while a small action, is utilizing these stories for a larger purpose and not for the indulgence of the listener.

Telling.

In another section of her research, E. Ann Kaplan asserts that telling stories about trauma “achieve[s] a certain ‘working through’ for the victim” (37). Kaplan and I share the disciplinary background of English; within this field it is natural to place emphasis on the possible healing and ameliorative effects of storytelling—to view “telling” as an act of “healing.” Even outside of the field of English, the long popularity of the “talking cure” in the field of psychology and its frequent references in popular culture has primed people to view storytelling as perhaps the ultimate form of mental and emotional healing. A patient sitting or laying on a long couch telling their story is still the most common imagery associated with the mental health profession.

However, recent advances in psychiatry have thrown into deep debate the primacy and singularity of “talk,” as stated by Dr. van der Kolk:

We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but usually it is not enough. The act of telling the story doesn’t necessarily alter the automatic physical and hormonal responses of bodies that remain hypervigilant, prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time. For real change to take place, *the body* needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present. (21, emphasis mine)

Van der Kolk further relates that when 9/11 survivors were asked what had been most helpful in overcoming the effects of their experience, the survivors credited “acupuncture, massage, yoga, and EMDR, in that order” (233). The project is not trying to discount the possible beneficial effects of storytelling to mental health and trauma recovery, but it must candidly recognize that participant “healing” cannot be a realistic or presumed goal of this endeavor.

In the process of assembling this project, I have found that most early listeners or viewers of this project assumed that some form of “healing” was a goal or benefit of the project’s mission of storytelling. For a multitude of reasons this cannot be the case. Firstly, for actual trauma “healing” and recovery to occur participants should absolutely seek psychiatric care, and possibly consider some of commonly available and relatively inexpensive activities that van der Kolk discovered aided 9/11 survivors so well. PTSD is a physical and mental condition for which the full gravitas of its long-term, highly-damaging effects is seriously acknowledged by this project, and from that understanding it must be made explicit that the project cannot be considered a “step” to recovery. Secondly, “healing” is never and can never be the primary objective of oral history projects; testimonies are not therapy sessions even if they might on the surface appear to resemble one. What the oral history and the community-based goals of this project can possibly assist in is in the de-stigmatization of inmate narrative and inmate personal

history. Personally, as the listener, the oral historian, I hope the method in which I received their narratives helped imbue the narratives with value and dignity, and provided the subject with assurance and a small sense of newly shared understanding and sympathetic community. If the project's process of telling and listening proves to provide a small amount of "healing" in the process of trauma recovery it will humbly be grateful for providing that opportunity, but will by no means expect or attempt to offer it.

Instead of "healing" what the project is principally in the position to provide for participants in the act of telling is the ability to create an authoritative narrative of their experiences under incarceration. In the process of collecting oral histories, almost all of the participants expressed that their experiences under incarceration is a narrative they rarely or never discuss in the normal course of their lives; most have kept it completely locked away from their loved ones and friends. The project hopes that participants can use the form and opportunity of the oral history interview to gather the often fragmented pieces of traumatic narratives to reassemble them in a space of agency, respect, and trust. Editor of *Doing Time: 25 Years Of Prison Writing* Bell Gale Chevigny describes the experience and benefits of inmate storytelling as: "To be able to say what you mean, to put to words what you perceive as truth, to impose form on the formless—this is a way to reconstruct a life, to restore one's sense of meaning, of responsibility to oneself and to others" (xvii). The authoritative narrative of the oral history functions as a separate, distinct experience, a telling in isolation of ordinary discourse; but, it is the hope of this project that this supportive, sheltered telling could open the doors to the participant retelling and integrating this narrative into their larger life narrative. Whether that is a healing experience or not, the act of creating a self-authored authoritative narrative should hopefully be at its core an animating and empowering experience.

Retelling

Reading.

As a literary scholar a preliminary question that needed to be asked is how am I approaching the reading of these narratives and how am I presenting these narratives for others to read? When conceptualizing the inmate community there is often a normalized desire to be consciously or unconsciously critical, suspicious, or “paranoid” in the act of reading and listening to their stories. Somewhere in the back of the audience’s conscious or subconscious and even the inmate’s subconscious, is the voice that says: “They must have done something to deserve this.” The very names inmate, criminal, ex-con, felon cannot help but supply this subconscious critical lens, a lens that coaxes us to routinely question the subject’s veracity and motives. Every aspect of this project’s collection, research, presentation, and design strives to encourage what Eve Sedgwick coined as “reparative reading,” which she describes as “additive and accretive” with the desire to “assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have [its own] resources” to present a new vision (149). The project supports the inmate narratives by adding context, analysis, and multi-modal presentations to counter further potential dehumanization for the participant in a manner that is “additive and accretive,” a manner that retains and honors the original object, the oral history, as the “truest” and most significant element of this project.

Another method to frame this edict to respect the innate truth and wholeness of the inmate’s story is an embrace of surface reading. In *Surface Reading* literary scholars Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus offer surface reading “as an affective and ethical stance” that involves “accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects” (10). They refer to Anne Cheng’s argument to replace “suspicion and critical mastery” with “a constellation

of multiple surfaces understood as concealing nothing” (Best and Marcus 9). Cheng asserts that by juxtaposing multiple representations of the surface, the scholar comes to “inhabit and is inhabited by what she studies” (9). In my own approach to reading these narratives I attempt to maintain a sustained level of acceptance and trust with the text and its narrator. I do practice a form of psychological analysis in the trauma encoding of the text. However, this is done with the goal to practice this kind of analysis in an “additive” manner that supports and illuminates the pre-existing narratives of the texts, instead of mining these texts for obscured meanings or mastering them into submission. In the creation of what I have termed the “sub-narratives” of trauma and identity, it is my desire to display for myself and the reader the “constellation” of these complex sub-narratives—how they interact, overlap, contradict, and support each other. It is a practice of taking what is already there and remixing, relabeling, and “juxtaposing” to generate new meaning and analysis, in a manner that still leaves intact and honors the original narratives.

Presenting.

In the presentation of the narratives of former inmates to the public, the project has two social justice based agendas. The first is held in the belief that stories—especially in-depth, raw, earnest stories—are one of the best methods to humanize both a social issue and an “undesirable” or “ungrievable” individual. Literary scholar Saidiya Hartman most eloquently expresses this as “a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction” (7). One of the original impetuses for the project was the shocking lack of inmate voice and narrative in the media’s presentation of the FBI investigation into the abuses in the LA County jail system. Instead, there was a sterile discussion about the facts and figures of violence and general malfeasance. There needs to be stories, voices, faces, and images to “counter the violence of

abstraction” in the media. More than just bringing these stories to the attention of the public, it is the hope of this project that these narratives can do some of the work of establishing these individuals, and inmates as a group, as “grievable” persons. Judith Butler states, “only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters” (14). To be counted as “grievable” is to be seen as truly human, a peer, a fellow citizen. Butler argues that without grievability “there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life” (15). Inmates and former inmates very often find themselves stuck in the space of the “ungrievable,” the social dead. It is important for the public to view the often permanent loss of this population from society, in the physical and theoretical sense, as something worthy of their grief, of their concern, and of their social and political energy and actions. It is the hope of the project that it can contribute or even spearhead part of this movement towards inmates as “grievable” beings.

The second presentational objective takes root in the belief that activism and ideological resistance can be practically beneficial mental tools for those under oppression. In the next phase of this project, the integration of the inmate community into the collection, encoding, and presentation of the oral histories is an essential step in the project’s development. Former inmates will record other inmate narratives, reshape the vocabulary of the encoding process, and create website exhibits on topics that speak to their individual and community-based experiences. In facilitating these acts of community building and activism, the project hopes to support for the inmate collaborators what bell hooks describes as “the strength and power that emerges from sustained resistance,” which “can protect us from dehumanization and despair” (8). For members of the inmate community, this project desires to be one of those sites of “sustained resistance,” a resistance built on the work of creating counter-narratives of

humanization.

Community.

One of the largest and most ambitious goals of the next phase of project development is community creation and community integration. The project will attempt to build local community interest and participation through a series of community discussions, talks, and events. It is important to the project to build connections and lasting relationships with diverse communities in Los Angeles. The project plans to spend substantial time in communities significantly affected by high incarceration rates, but it will also prioritize connecting with communities that are less directly affected, with the hope to foster new networks of dialogue. The project believes that small events spread out over region and time can eventually build momentum towards both interest in the project, and more importantly in the issues and discussions it raises.

The first step in building a sense of inmate community would be the hiring and collaboration with formally incarcerated individuals. The inmate hires and collaborators would be able to build their own sense of a micro-community within the project. Then in the oral history collection process, they would have the opportunity to interact with incarcerated individuals who are from diverse neighborhoods, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and those who have different gender representations and sexual orientations. The project plans to engage the greater inmate community by hosting events in partnership with non-profit organizations, such as: the ACLU, the Aleph Institute, the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, the California Prison Focus, and the Prisoner Reentry Network. Furthermore, the project will offer and encourage all of the oral history participants to attend, speak at, and socialize at the diverse array of planned community events.

The benefits of creating and reshaping a sense of community can be broad and profound. The project does not wish for the experience of the participants to end with recording of their oral history. Of course, participants will have the option for it to end there, but one of the goals of this project is to give participants a tangible sense of how their story is being presented and to whom. Scholar bell hooks discusses the importance of knowing your audience. She states “to know who listens, we must be in dialogue. We must be speaking with and not just speaking to” (16). The project aims to give participants a sense of dialogue that expands beyond the one-on-one of the interview, a sense of dialogue that establishes new community ties. hooks claims that this form of new dialogue and activism can provide a vital measure of support for others living in silence. She contends, “when we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence” (18). Creating new branches of dialogue can both be a form of activism and a form of community restoration. For those who have been isolated by the space of incarceration and the long reach of the stigma that follows, community dialogue can be a space for what psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk describes as “restoring well-being:” “Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being; language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding a common sense of meaning” (38). Judith Herman seconds the substantial impact of restoring the breach between traumatized people and community. She maintains that this restoration depends on two factors: “first, upon public acknowledgment of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action” (70). This project will build upon this research by first creating community events that are spaces of judgment-free acknowledgement of the traumas that surround and occur during incarceration, and by establishing the events as spaces of community action and sustained resistance. In practice, this

means providing ways for the inmates and the public who have been galvanized by the oral history narratives to become active in criminal justice reform.

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