

Incarcerated Scholars, Qualitative Inquiry, and Subjugated Knowledge: The Value of Incarcerated and Post-Incarcerated Scholars in the Age of Mass Incarceration¹

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The intellectual work of incarcerated scholars is often discounted and devalued. There is insight, however, to be gained from looking at the world from our perspective; the perspective of the marginalized who are captive in a secretive and closed world. Much like the value of subaltern theory on narratives of European imperial conquest (e.g. Said, 1995), incarcerated scholars offer valuable and unique counter-discourses to the dominant crime-and-punishment narratives of mass incarceration. Yet opportunities for the (post)incarcerated to explore these counter-discourses are often blocked by private and public universities. Criminalization inhibits would-be scholars into the forays of academia, particularly at the graduate level. A research project conducted inside a maximum-security prison demonstrates how academia errs in this regard.

Over the past four years, incarcerated scholars engaged in the History Project at the Indiana Women’s Prison (IWP) in Indianapolis rewrote the history of that prison. The goal of the IWP History Project – in addition to writing prison history – is to improve us as scholars and problem-solvers by thinking critically about our environment and the origins of the institutions in which we currently experience imprisonment. We are challenging ourselves to be more – more than the objects of critique that non-incarcerated people see when they denounce “criminals” as disposable and unworthy, and more than our own inimical self-definitions and perceived inadequacies.

The IWP History Project is also about making a viable contribution to the body of scholarly knowledge about prison life. Our goal is to tell a more complete history of the prison we live in, while retaining the contradictions and complexities that animate prison life. What we have learned is that in the quest for homogeneity, the history of a place, a time, and a people can get flattened in the manufacturing of history, where the voice of the subaltern is lost. We want to find those voices because they belong to us. In many ways, they are our voices.

Created by Dr. Kelsey Kauffman, the IWP History Project grew out of the Incarcerated Scholars Program. Facilitated by retired and volunteer faculty, the program filled the gap when the Indiana legislature cancelled funding for all higher education in prisons in 2012. These amazing teachers

provided the raw materials (books, paper, pens, etc.) and, most importantly, created an atmosphere in which students – including Anastazia Schmid, Kim Baldwin, Leslie Hauk, Lori Record, Lori Fussner, and me, to name just a few – could traverse an intellectual landscape. In doing so, we shifted from being students to scholars. Critical to our project was our reading, assimilation, and synthesizing of primary and secondary source data. We obtained original materials for our research from the Indianapolis Public Library, the Indiana State Archives, and IWP itself, including detailed prisoner demographic data from nineteenth century prison registries, which we digitized for posterity. Once we had command of a topic, we could speak from a place of knowing. At that point, we became more than students.

The IWP History Project commenced in the summer of 2013 with a team composed of undergraduate and graduate students who collaborated to research the first decade of our prison's existence. Consider the challenges of the incarcerated historian. We do not have access to the Internet. Our library is miniscule and primarily stocked with romance novels. Interlibrary loans take months if the requests work at all. And, of course, we cannot search the archives or other repositories ourselves. These were some of the challenges we faced in researching the Quaker women of the prison reform movement who founded this institution. It was even harder to learn about the incarcerated women and girls left in their charge. To overcome these challenges, we filtered our research requests through others. As our research progressed and themes developed, following up on leads took weeks and sometimes months. Some students received more information than others, and sometimes the research materials provided were not particularly useful. As I discuss below, expediting our research required learning how to ask pointed questions and developing an understanding of the broader implications of a single topic. The delays and limited resources did not reduce the quality of our work or our enthusiasm for the research project.

For the most part, historians consider IWP to be the first women's prison in the United States and the Quaker women who founded it are constructed as heroes of the progressive era. After reviewing and discussing the existing historical and contemporary accounts (retrieved for us by non-incarcerated teachers, librarians and friends), we also initially believed we were writing a "feel-good" story about two Quaker women banding together with other Quakers and state officials to create a safe and rehabilitative environment for women in need. After all, Rhoda Coffin and Sarah Smith, the founders of

the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls which opened in 1873 and is now the Indiana Women's Prison, are credited with creating the first separate state prison for women in the United States. Devout Quakers and prison reformers, Smith and Coffin were at the forefront of a prison reform movement to save "fallen" women and "wayward" girls from the clutches of "designing" men – the prison warden and guards – at the co-ed Indiana State Prison-South, known as "Jeffersonville" (Freedman, 1981, p. 16; Banka, 1871, pp. 179-180; "The Prison at Jeffersonville", 1869). The terms "fallen" and "wayward" were used to describe women who had engaged in prostitution and/or had a criminal conviction (Freedman, 1981, p. 14). Such women were ascribed a tainted status and therefore had "fallen" from the ranks of true virtuous womanhood.

For Smith and Coffin and the state of Indiana, the "debaucheries" perpetrated upon the women in Jeffersonville represented a blight upon womanhood that besmirched Indiana's good name. As a result, these women were seen as especially in need of reform (Freedman, 1981, p. 42; 60-62; Rafter, 1990, pp. 30-33; *Sixth Report of the Board of Managers of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, 1878). Coffin and Smith were at the forefront of several "reforming" institutions founded for women at the close of the Civil War.² The initial framework for the idea that deviant women were "out of place" in terms of social and cultural norms, and could only be helped, redeemed or "reformed" by incarceration was pervasive, popular, and widely accepted.

As we began to understand the gist of the existing scholarly work on Coffin, Smith and the Reformatory's creation, questions began to form in our minds. Our experiences as incarcerated scholars have left us with a profound contextual awareness of power imbalances. Our insight began to provoke subtle questions in our minds regarding prevailing and dominant historical narratives. A component of this included our personal knowledge and experiences of the destabilizing effects of unfettered power over incarcerated people. Also, while not much is written about the incarcerated women and girls in the Indiana Reformatory, the subjugated knowledge of the incarcerated women was a primary focus of our research; through it, we aimed to provide a counter-narrative. Where, we wondered, were the women's stories? Ultimately, our perspective as incarcerated women allowed us to ask questions that exposed the meta-narrative of the women's "benevolent" prison reform movement as incomplete and simplistic.

Our first challenge to the standard story of the prison's founding came early and unexpectedly. As I combed through the registry of the *Penal Records of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, I discovered an odd pattern. Not one woman convicted of a sex offence (including prostitution) was incarcerated at the Reformatory. Tracking the makeup of the women's prison population made us suspicious. How could the Reformatory not incarcerate the very women who Coffin and Smith claimed so desperately needed a separate facility? We pressed our outside researchers to look again. Eventually, we discovered that a Magdalene Laundry run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd had opened in Indianapolis a few months before IWP and housed women convicted of sex offences ("Sisters to Close Home for Girls", 1967). Reformatory staff and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Indianapolis had agreed that the Reformatory would get the murderers and thieves, while the Sisters got the prostitutes.

Magdalene Laundries, led by Catholic nuns, were workhouses where women were committed by family, priests, or the courts and had to perform the arduous physical labour of washing clothing. The work was punitive, but also metaphorical in that it was a means for women to turn from their "sins" and "wash" them away. Magdalene Laundries are commonly associated with Ireland, but as we discovered, they flourished in the United States as well. Magdalene Laundries – and not the Indiana Women's Prison – were the first prisons for women in the United States and by far the most important during the nineteenth century (Jones and Record, 2014). Indeed, by 1900, there were 39 of these private Catholic prisons for women in the United States and only three state prisons, including IWP (United States Bureau of the Census, 1904). Their existence flies in the face of the narrative of primacy that the Reformatory and its leaders claimed for themselves.

Another discovery came from a fellow scholar at IWP, Anastazia Schmid, who had herself received inadequate and indifferent mental health care by county jail staff. In her research on mental and physical health care provided to the women and girls at the Reformatory, Anastazia discovered that the man elected president of the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1876, the renowned Dr. Theophilus Parvin, was providing medical care to the women and girls at the prison during its first decade (*Second Report of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, 1874). Given how inadequate medical care is in prison today, it seemed exceptional for a person occupying a post as prestigious as President of the AMA to

have worked at a prison. Anastazia discovered that Dr. Parvin used his position at the prison to conduct experiments and surgeries on the women – often without their full knowledge or consent (“The Reformatory”, 1881; Schmid, 2016). Three years after he resigned from the Reformatory, Dr. Parvin published an explicitly illustrated obstetrics and gynecology text based on what he learned from operating on the women in the Reformatory (see Parvin, 1887). With nearly ten years of unfettered access to 125 women and girls a day, he used their bodies to further his field and career (Parvin, 1875).³ This information was present in the history, but hidden; it took our perspective as incarcerated women to reveal its problematic nature. This is the value of subjugated knowledge.

Yet another example of the value of subjugated knowledge concerns the finances of the institution. One of the goals of the Reformatory was to become self-sufficient. In addition to selling handwork (gardening and farming) and handicraft (cane chairs, socks, etc.), and operating a laundry, the facility practiced a form of labour exploitation with a euphemistic name:

The Board has adopted the Ticket of Leave system for the government of the Reformatory Department. When, in the opinion of the Superintendent, it becomes proper for a girl to be allowed an opportunity to again make her way in the world, the Board grants her a discharge conditional upon her good behavior. She, thus, remains a ward of the institution, without expense to it, and may be returned at any time upon her giving evidence of a want of reformation, or a lapse from good behavior, without a new commitment. (*Third Report of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, 1875, p. 13).

Girls chosen for “ticket of leave” were the most trusted and indoctrinated in the ideals of the “cult of domesticity” (discussed below). They would leave the Reformatory on an early form of probation, and be sent to labour in the homes of friends and associates of the Reformatory staff in this domestic service enterprise. Used to reduce the institution’s population – and, therefore, the cost of operation – this convict lease “ticket of leave” system represented a way for the prison officials to profit from incarcerated labour. While looking like a method to re/integrate women into the workforce, it operated as a method to keep young girls tethered to the prison as “a ward of the institution without expense to it” (ibid). This means that young girls

laboured in these homes for their keep (i.e. food, meager clothing and a bed), removing the cost of care from the prison. Yet as far as we can tell, the prison still charged the county-of-conviction for their incarceration.

When our research inquiries led to archival and unpublished sources, we discovered significant incidents of physical, sexual, and gendered violence. For example, an 1881 legislative investigation charged Sarah Smith and other employees with gross physical abuse, as well as general mistreatment of the women and girls. There were allegations that Smith and staff had beaten women and girls and “ducked” them in cold water (a nineteenth century version of waterboarding), hosed them down, denied them access to water closets, and knocked their heads against walls, often while stripped naked.⁴ The scholarly inattention to this investigation may have to do with the fact that none of the Reformatory staff received any sanctions and no arrests were made. Our positions as incarcerated scholars, however, pushed us to examine the power relationships at work that brought about Smith and Coffin’s exoneration. We discovered that both women were tremendous political operators. They were connected politically and personally to legislators and governors (Freedman, 1981, p. 62; Rafter, 1990, p. 31.). They and their husbands were integral to a network of Indiana powerbrokers that resulted in the foundation of no fewer than six state and community agencies: the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls, the Indiana House of Refuge, the Indianapolis Home for Friendless Women, the Richmond Home for Friendless Women, the Indianapolis Colored Asylum, and the Richmond Temperance Organization. Indeed, Coffin and Smith were deputized sheriffs and Smith was named “City Missionary” (Johnson, 1910, pp. 145-146). They were a part of the very fabric of the political infrastructure that governed the state of Indiana.

The nature of our research, coupled with our prison experience was integral to synthesizing the context of the 1881 investigation. We know of and/or have personally experienced corruption and sexual, gendered, and psychological violence in prison with no recourse or accountability for prison officials. By peeling back the layers of narrative sediment that have accumulated around these “benevolent” reformers, other understandings inevitably surfaced. How does an austere, nineteenth century Quaker woman rise to the heights of political influence and power? How did full control of a state institution accrue entirely to two women? Whom did they have to become? What were the stakes and what were they willing to do

to achieve their goals? Contemplating these qualitative questions led us to theorize about the nature of sexual and gendered violence in prison, and the utility of the “cult of domesticity” as a tool of racial and cultural violence.

The “cult of domesticity” is a term historians have used for the normative gender conventions prevailing among the nineteenth century elite and middle-class. Scholars have analyzed the ways in which this ideology of separate spheres, restricting women to domestic and helping roles, inflicted constricting expectations on women of all social positions, with the most brutal restrictions landing on working-class white women and women of colour of all social positions (Hall, 1983; McClinktock, 1995; Welter, 1966; Yee, 1992 [see especially chapter 2, “Black Women and the Cult of True Womanhood”]).

The cult of domesticity was a critical factor in the power relationships between benevolent reformers, such as Smith and Coffin, and the women in their charge. It set impossible expectations and then punished women who failed to live up to them, excusing and exacerbating the infliction of sexual and gendered violence upon incarcerated women and girls in the nineteenth century. Incarcerated white women and girls who had “fallen” due to conviction for a crime, whether committed or not, were banished from the ranks of Victorian white respectability, accused of contributing to the degeneration of the white race and affixed with a taint, the nineteenth century version of a stigma still visited upon the incarcerated (Smith, 2005).

The women confined at the Indiana Reformatory in the 1870s and 1880s were mostly white, a designation that included English, French, Irish, Canadian, German, “American”, and “American Race Unknown”. According to the 1873-1884 registries of prisoners admitted to IWP, 71 percent of women fell into this category, while 29 percent were designated as “coloured” or “black”, a category that was also interestingly partitioned (Indiana Women’s Prison, Penal Record, 1873-1884). As the percent of Blacks in the Indiana population at the time was less 2 percent (Gibson and Jung, 2002), it was clear that then, as now, women of colour were vastly more likely to fall subject to criminalization, stigmatization and punishment (Haley, 2016; Manion, 2015). While women of colour faced more violence, sexual or otherwise, and their experiences were surely qualitatively different than those of white women, our research reveals that white women who fell into the stigmatized intersections of class and criminal status also experienced physical and sexual violence in many of the same ways as women of colour.

Outside of the few women and girls of colour in the Reformatory, the staff sought to manage the “white criminal class” and stave off what they saw as the degeneration of the race at their hands. Those who displayed behaviour considered rude or violent, and/or who engaged in masturbation, faced physical abuse and the criminalization of their sexuality. Their punishments were harsh. The women and girls who deviated from social norms and violated the moral imperatives of the “cult of domesticity” were subject to tremendous violence in the name of reformation.

Our ability as incarcerated scholars to ask critical questions and excavate subjugated knowledge is nurtured by the process of qualitative inquiry. We were not confined to the quantitative measure that criminologists have critiqued as profoundly limiting what is possible to know about crime and punishment (Fan, 2007; Muhammad, 2011; Young, 2011). As opposed to statistical measurement, qualitative inquiry focuses on lived experiences and the complexity of people’s lives. It cares about the ephemeral processes of human endeavours. This idiosyncratically-defined and applied method recognizes subjugated knowledge may be delicate, fragmented and require reconstruction using various sources. Qualitative inquiry requires a willingness to wrestle with the pieces and parcels of knowledge in order to complete a different historical picture of the dominant narratives.

Most important, qualitative inquiry as a method allows for the excavation of subjugated knowledge. Incarcerated scholars who intimately understand and experience marginalization, secrecy, and subjection are also better able to comprehend the systematic subjugation of others. Our experiences unearth human stories and the structures and formations at work that created their subjugated experiences. Qualitative inquiry supports intellectual inquiries such as genealogies and critical histories of the present (Foucault, 1979; Visker, 1995). Genealogy as practice, “is, then, a sort of attempt to de-subjugate historical knowledge, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse” (Foucault, 2003, p. 10). Genealogies can throw into question current institutionalized narratives such as the perspective that “nineteenth century Indiana women reformers were wholly selfless and benevolent”. With genealogy, we can expose the imperialist patriarchal underbelly of racial and cultural formations such as the “cult of domesticity”. Research then becomes a viable collection

of information that can reveal problematic institutionalized practices and ideologies that plague the carceral state today.

In resurrecting subjugated knowledge, you must first understand how any narrative is always incomplete. Michel Foucault (2003, pp. 6-12) suggested that subjugated knowledge is hidden *within* the dominant historical narratives and has to be de-subjugated, excavated, and justified, because they are disqualified. In our particular case, as incarcerated scholars in the IWP History Project, we were working with two levels of disqualification. One is the disqualification that comes with our incarcerated status as researchers and writers who are low on the scale of the academic hierarchy. The second is the disqualification of the opinions of our historical subjects, incarcerated people, whose low-ranking knowledge we excavated.

What is at stake in this double disqualification? Why does it survive even today, long after the “cult of domesticity” has altered its formal role? At stake is failing to recognize that knowledge continues to be subjugated in ongoing struggles over what knowledge is and which versions of whose stories will achieve the status of audible, believable, and dominant. At stake is the loss of our collective stories and experiences that cause us – as incarcerated scholars, but also you as reader – to examine our beliefs and ourselves. At stake is the loss of our common humanity, our interconnectedness with one another. At stake is the perpetuation of penal policies that assault the personhood of the incarcerated. People in prison are under constant surveillance, examined, abused and even experimented upon – the effects of which often last well past incarceration.

If historically, incarcerated subjects are not considered people in the same way as the non-incarcerated, then the impetus behind “crime-and-punishment” practices and procedures do not have to consider their voice, living conditions, states of mind or future, while keeping the body captive. What follows is the devaluation of all incarcerated persons through time. We witness this devaluation in the case of the dominant narrative of Indiana’s “benevolent” prison reformers in the nineteenth century and the women and girls in their charge, but thanks to qualitative inquiry we have been able to ask, how is it flawed? What and who is disqualified through this telling? Only through qualitative inquiry do we gain the ability to ask these questions and reap the benefits of such insights.

The injustice we notice in the historical record also extends to the formal space of the university. Just as the “fallen” women and “wayward” girls

had to contend with a power structure that inscribed “criminal” inescapably upon them, the incarcerated and post-incarcerated scholar today has to contend with university exclusion and disqualification. It is easy to devalue the scholarly work of incarcerated men and women simply because they are incarcerated. It is easy to discount our epistemological standpoint and to fail to see it as valuable assets. Public and private institutions often deny post-incarcerated people’s access because their policies are shaped by the prevailing winds of tough-on-crime attitudes. Academia is often complicit in racial criminalization and carceral gatekeeping of all types.

Exclusionary practices destroy our opportunities. Why do I say that? Studies have shown that approximately half of the newly-released are re-incarcerated (recidivate) within three years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014) and that education more effectively prevents this than any other practice (Westervelt, 2015). Yet, universities can and do engage in exclusionary practices. A prominent public university in Indiana, for example, first required a potential graduate student to be out for one year and off of parole before even applying. The university then required him to have his application vetted by an “Exceptional Application Committee”, which included undergraduates as members. The committee decided that they would not allow the university to *consider* his application. So this inadvertently forced a post-incarcerated applicant to wait a full year before applying for admission and then denied him even the process of application. In instances such as this, the newly released are locked out of opportunities at the most critical time in the re-entry process. The public university adds, then, to the collateral consequences of incarceration. Ironically, these are the same institutions willing to educate people while they are in prison, sometimes benefiting from federal and/or state monies to do so.

One theoretical justification of these practices could be the need for campus safety. Yet is there any evidence to suggest that post-incarcerated individuals pose a risk or threaten campus safety and security? The university’s exclusionary practice invents and articulates a “truth” that enables administrators to disqualify post-incarcerated people from campus life. Those who would silence incarcerated and post-incarcerated scholars, who unearth subjugated knowledge or use their own subjection to reinterpret the present, may be perceived as threatening to those who use knowledge (history) to control the dominant narratives. For is it not academia, ensconced safely within the hallowed university, that contributes to the production of dominant narratives?

There are scholars subject to mass incarceration who are available to interpret the lived experience of incarceration and synthesize its individual impact and societal consequences to academia and the world. Our expertise can contribute to the academy in history, cultural anthropology, psychology, art, literature, and so much more.

The question is not whether universities should pursue and actively include the (post)incarcerated in their schools or what role probation and parole should play. Rather, we should ask instead, what barriers and structures allow universities to block the (post)incarcerated from degree opportunities, and how can we remove those barriers to allow universities to pursue and actively, even affirmatively, include such scholars?

Critical qualitative inquiry of subjugated knowledge can transform the university and the historians that write it. It opens a door. It can also inform understandings of history and the lens through which we translate and understand race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender. To exclude our rich perspectives severely limits knowledge and critique.

What we have found at the Indiana Women's Prison is that we can develop would-be graduate students. We have demonstrated our ability to speak and write in academia, and present our findings at national conferences and even present public policy alternatives to lawmakers. We have demonstrated our ability to make real change and we are not anomalies. Universities need to demystify their exclusivity, especially for graduate education, regardless of political trends. There is a hypocrisy of spirit in the liberal democratic academy wherein university elites protect themselves and schools from the tainted "criminal". A preferential admission option for post-incarcerated scholars would more aptly coincide with universities' commitments to provide students with a liberal education.

Critical qualitative inquiry challenges historians to search behind, underneath and within the ready archive for subjugated knowledge, and to be willing to de-subjugate and embrace the re-interpretation or transformation of the historical record. Hidden within the archive are a multitude of subjugated knowledges that could well benefit from the excavation and re-interpretation from the incarcerated and post-incarcerated scholars' perspective. Prison history is world history and in the age of mass incarceration, deserves a thorough examination by scholars whose research can be informed by their own qualitative experience.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Special thanks to Dr. Micol Seigel. Her instruction and honest critique throughout the writing of this paper were central to the development of ideas discussed here.
- ² Indianapolis Home for Friendless Women (1867); Richmond Home for Friendless Women (1868); Home of the Good Shepherd (1873) and the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls (1873).
- ³ For example, we were able to identify three women who Parvin discusses in an 1875 medical journal article who were incarcerated in the Reformatory and had been treated (experimented on) by Parvin (1875).
- ⁴ For contemporary accounts, see “The Reformatory”, *The Indianapolis Journal* – January 25, 1881; “Another Andersonville: Investigation of the Indiana Female Reformatory”, *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* – January 28, 1881; “The Ducking Tub”, *The People* – January 29, 1881; “Christian Punishment”, *The People* – February 5, 1881; “The Reformatory: An Investigation of Charges of Cruelty Commences by the Legislative Committee”, *The Indianapolis Journal* – January 25, 1881.

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