# Standing at the Intersection of Identity and Convict Criminology: A Brief Exercise in Reflexivity

*J. Renee Trombley*

## INTRODUCTION: THE PROMISE OF CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY

The first Convict Criminology (CC) session took place in 1997 at the American Society of Criminology's (ASC) annual meeting. The session was organized by members with personal experiences with the correctional system as formerly incarcerated (FI), as well as their allies. There was consensus among the group that many of the teachers in corrections had little, if any, experience in jails or prisons and lacked knowledge of what really took place behind their walls. In 2001, Richards and Ross defined the purpose and practice of CC, suggesting that those with first-hand knowledge can provide an informed perspective on the functions and effects of prisons and jails. Merging insider knowledge, personal experience, and academic research related to criminal justice provides a paradigmatic approach that offers distinct and relevant perspectives (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003). In 2020, the Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) officially became part of the ASC. The original CC group was not particularly diverse, but over the last decade, the membership of CC has become more diverse in gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and FI background. The intersection of these identities among the members further increases the perspective and diversity of this group.

As a CC member and the first vice-chair of the DCC, supporting the mission and goals of the organization – including building diversity – are particularly important to me. Diverse experiences and voices support CC's mission to support justice-impacted scholars in providing rigorous research that examines all aspects of the criminal justice system, including policing, courts, and corrections, from those who have lived experiences within the field (Tietjen, 2019).

The DCC has explicitly addressed this issue, arguing that those in academia have largely ignored research from those who are formerly incarcerated or have had direct contact with the system. Acknowledging that the relevance of research conducted by incarcerated or FI individuals is often overlooked is significant to the DCC's (2021) purpose:

> …to provide an intellectual home for all scholars/scientists who are interested in the study of Convict Criminology. The members of the

> DCC are students, researchers, and faculty members from diverse backgrounds—both with and without criminal records—that mentor formerly-incarcerated students and junior faculty, conduct relevant research, and advocate for progressive justice reform for formerly incarcerated individuals and all of society.

Appreciating what it means for me to be here, as a professor and a scholar, is humbling. Understanding that I made it despite many obstacles, as a justice system-impacted youth who transitioned from foster care to the juvenile justice system and then to the adult system, yet somehow made a way into higher education, earned a PhD in juvenile justice, and developed a passion for academic life along the way. I credit this to my faith, and grace and mercy from my Creator. Finding CC, in many ways, saved me. I was not sure I would be able to do anything with a PhD, and I was not quite convinced that I would not just end up back in the hood, sitting on the front porch, selling dime bags of weed and talking about the injustice that I saw everywhere I looked. I credit mentorship by Stephen Richards, one of CC's founding members, with giving me the courage and confidence to believe that I could find my way in the academy.

There were many barriers that I had to overcome to reach this place, and so many things that could have stopped me along the way. Though I have found space in academia, I have also continued to struggle with aspects of my identity and the stigma I faced along the way. Being labelled as a "convict" is not seen as a good thing, whether in the academy or elsewhere. Stigma poses a significant barrier for CC scholars to overcome, and discussions regarding the stigma often faced by FI individuals in the academy are plentiful (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Frana et al., 2012; Ross & Richards 2003; Tietjen, 2013). Maruna (2001) argues that the idea that folx who have done "bad" things can overcome and become "good" people "seems to contradict a fundamental belief of contemporary society" (p. 5).

In 1997, when the first CC section was officially organized at the ASC annual meeting, I was twenty-five years old, a mother of three small children, and enrolling in college classes for the second time. When I finally made it to higher education, I felt as many of CC's original members did. I sat in criminal justice classes listening to professors describe a system that they seemed to know little about (Ross et al., 2016). However, it was not until

2002 when I started graduate school that I found out about CC. I had just read Austin and Irwin's (2002) *It's About Time: America's Imprisonment Binge* and was excited to talk about how much I enjoyed it. One of my professors told me about Irwin's role in starting the CC group at ASC and suggested I might find a place there. When I read Irwin's (1985) book on jails, his work spoke to me on a personal level. Despite our differences, his work was inspiring and filled my heart with hope.

I had spent a lot of time in jails. I learned a great deal from the way different jails operated and the folx who ended up there. At one point, I was in and out of a city jail so frequently that when I arrived the guards would often laugh and referring to the women's cellblock in the back of the jail, would tell me to show the other women who had been arrested the way to my house, simply because I had been there so often. Some swear that prison life is harder than being in jail. I disagree with this statement based on my own experiences. Jails are very chaotic and depressing, with more restrictions and less access to services. I believe that most people who have experienced both, if given a choice, would rather go to prison than a city or county jail, and a federal prison would be even better. I am not alone in these conclusions (Irwin, 1985; Tietjen, 2013).

I was excited when I was able to read research that reflected this reality, and I cannot explain how earth-shattering it was for me to find research, books, and articles by Convict Criminologists. Writing and conducting research was something I had dreamed about, and the thought that I could use my own experiences to inform my research and help others in the process warmed my heart in a special fuzzy kind of way. Finding Convict Criminologists, reading their research, presenting alongside the group at conferences, and having the mentorship and support of the group encouraged me and gave me hope to believe in possibilities for myself.

Convict Criminology helped me find space to be me and it gave me courage to believe that one day I could make a difference in the way we understand justice. Coming from where I had come from, I was used to surviving in the streets and personally dealing with the justice system, but I had little knowledge of higher education and what it would take to survive in this space. It can be tough and for some it may seem impossible. I was struggling as a single mother, carrying the label of ex-offender and system-involved youth, and I was just trying to find a place in academia

where I might fit. I realized that my struggles with identity influenced my own perspective and academic research. Individual and social identity is influential in so many ways. I have found it interesting that, even as a group, CC has also struggled with identity issues. Identity and the language we use to describe it can be powerful. Even within CC, issues of identity are debated and represent different perspectives on labels and personal and social identification, as well as discussions of the implications for those who involve themselves with the group. I recently found out, while talking with the daughter of one of the movement's founders, that this conversation has been going on for the last twenty-five years.

Overall, I am left thinking about how diverse and different our members are, each of us in our own right. As a group, I see persistent determination to take things to a new level, as we bring with us different experiences, yet offer inclusion for all those who come to the table. As a group, we are always striving to build a bigger table for more folx to be able to sit. We have travelled different pathways to CC while carrying different layers of stigma attached to our own personal and social identities.

In her paper "Experience as Evidence", Joan Scott (1991) points out that for historical perspectives seeing is the origin of knowing and becomes evidence for the fact of difference. Central to the proposition of this current work is precisely the differences among our group. We are not all the same. Scott (1991, p. 778) notes:

> …but the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause.

This paper argues that the idea of intersectionality can help us center these discussions to facilitate critical examination of the criminal justice system. Utilizing a framework of intersectionality, this paper extends the discussion on personal and social identity, and its implications for the group of Convict Criminology. Engaging the reader in an exploration of a personal narrative provides the foundation for this paper, which weaves traditional research with reflections on my own personal experiences.

## STANDING AT THE INTERSECTION

Criminal justice research is often rooted in discussions of differences across race, class, and gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality after finding applications of a single-axis framework for understanding race and gender discrimination contributed to increases in the marginalization of Black women. A single-axis framework, she argued, negated the importance of experiences – not just being Black and not just being a woman, but in being Black *and* being a woman. Examining the implications for intersectional research suggests that moving away from an additive approach can overcome research limitations that exist through dichotomous and either/or classifications (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 1993; Hancock, 2007). This is particularly useful when examining issues of identity and access to higher education, including potential barriers and obstacles. As it is anti-essentialist, intersectionality recognizes that there is no one definition of what it means to be a woman or a man, to be Black or white, rich or poor, young or old. Within each of us, these identities represent variations that fall along various continuums (Witt, 1995).

Race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, ability, class, gender, sexuality, carceral status, and age all significantly, and differentially, impact social identification (Miller & Corbone-Lopez, 2015; Woodall, 2019). How individuals experience themselves and are responded to by others based on their categories of identity have both specific and cumulative effects. These characteristics all intertwine into narratives that impact people in different ways and across different experiences. Some people are impacted more by certain identities at different points in their life, while others experience stigmatized and marginalized identities quite differently at different times (Carbado, 2013; Wesely & Miller, 2018). It is imperative that the practical implications of policies and practices that either prevent or promote systematic harm be examined from an intersectional perspective to specify cumulative consequences and effects, within higher education generally and CC specifically.

Moreover, intersectionality extends the conversation to conceptualizations about how these characteristics impact people individually and collectively, both within groups and between groups. This lends significantly to answering questions about the impact of multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Potter (2013) brought these discussions to the study of criminology, highlighting the significance of intersectional research.

Utilizing critical race theory and Black feminist thought, Potter argues that current explorations in the discipline that ignore intersectional theory can only provide limited utility for accurate research and effective policy (Potter, 2015). Warren-Gordon (2020) extended this conversation in her presidential address at the Midwestern Criminal Justice Association by urging us to consider the vitality of utilizing intersectional research in criminal justice and criminology to provide more opportunities for the inclusion of voices from marginalized populations. Over the past several years, scholars have used intersection to examine race, gender, and class issues in criminal justice and criminology, as well as rural criminology, juvenile justice, critical criminology theory, feminist drug research, and the potential impact for research in higher education, just to name a few (Carrington et al., 2014; Miller & Corbone-Lopez, 2015; Moore et al., 2018; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Paik, 2016; Veenstra, 2012).

While each of these identities are important, by themselves they can only provide an incomplete picture. It is through an intersectional lens that we begin to see the totality of individual identities, marginalized or not, and the resulting implications of a person's social location (Barak et al., 2018). In studying criminology, those who insist on dismissing the personal narratives of those with lived experiences and who choose to stay distant and detached in places of "neutrality", only further exacerbate the problem. Kathryn Henne and Emily Troshynski (2013) note that "the neutrality of criminological truth claims operates as another formation of violence that obscures marginalized and subaltern subjects. Its violence is cyclical and continually engrained through its disengaged disposition" (p. 466). The value of personal narratives, explored through an intersectional lens, bears witness to the experiences of those who represent multiple marginalized identities and their struggle to survive in academic settings, while supporting the validity of the impact of their experiences on the research they conduct.

## METHOD

Offering personal narratives in the path to reflexivity is a common strategy in CC's approach to examining the influence of carceral experiences in guiding and analyzing criminal justice and criminology research. As Williams and colleagues (2014) note, "CC draws on real-life experiences of ex-cons working as professors, this form of critical criminology directly

addresses othering and dehumanization that appears to be rampant, yet often unseen by those studying the U.S. criminal justice system" (p. 392). When examining research in general, we find that this is often a critically missing element from the field.

Autoethnography, involving both collaborative and reflexive research, can give voice to the researcher's lived experiences, the impact they have on research, and how these experiences shape the researcher's analysis (Reed-Danahay, 2017). Since it is focused specifically on identity, using an intersectional lens as part of this autoethnographic narrative on identity makes sense. As Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022, p. 4) note:

> …a singular analytical focus on one identity ignored and erased the multiple identities and lived realities of women of color and others who were impacted in multifarious ways by systematic inequality and thus were more vulnerable to structural violence. Intersectionality concerns itself with the multiple ways in which one's identity makes one simultaneously invisible and hypervisible.

I started by examining the intersection of my social and personal identities. I knew that based on race, gender, and class, my social identity impacted my experiences in meaningful ways, both inside and outside of academia. While my personal identity had been shaped by my social identity, my view from the intersection of these identities made me realize how influential this was in my experiences with both the justice system and higher education. While this exercise in reflexivity may have sought answers for myself, I also believe this analysis demonstrates the importance of intersectionality to support folx coming into the academy from marginalized populations, to bear witness to the barriers they face and to give hope to others as they gather strength to tell their own stories. I know from experience that this is no easy task.

As researchers, it is important to realize how our own personal and social identities affect the ways we engage in academia, the questions we ask, and the ones we do not (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Potter, 2015). I share my own story to illustrate how race, class, gender, education, and carceral status shaped my lived experience, including my access to and encounters with higher education. Using an intersectional perspective allows for an examination of the impact of different aspects of identity and experiences with marginalization that create barriers to higher education, while allowing

for opportunities to extend conversations on overcoming barriers and providing space for our field to become more diverse.

**Race, Gender, Class, Education and the Juvenile Justice System – The Impact of Intersection**

For me, some aspects of identity are inextricably tied to the way I have been perceived by others in a variety of contexts. Being young, white, and female ensured that I would be targeted in the streets, yet coming from poorer neighborhoods gave me an advantage in navigating my way around them. The first time I got locked up, kids that knew me from the neighborhood were there and they vouched for me. This helped ease my transition into the system. Yet, as a teenager and young adult, I found that the injustice of the system at times could be buffered by my complexion, my age, and my femininity.

At other times, it was a completely different experience. I was still young when I began to believe that the criminal justice system was the biggest set-up of all. From my vantage point, the streets merely fueled an economy that was built on poverty and a carceral system of injustice, taking human bodies and pushing them into jails and prisons like coal being shoveled into a blazing inferno. Except these bodies represented human lives – the lived experiences of men, women, and children who found themselves on the wrong side of the law.

**Racial Identity and Culture**

One of the first things that stood out to me when I came to Convict Criminology was its lack of racial diversity. When studying the criminal justice system, issues of racial disparities always show up. The overrepresentation of Black folx in the system is evident; in 2014, there were 6.8 million people overall in the correctional population, and over one-third of those individuals identified as African American or Black (NAACP, 2021a). In addition, a recent paper examining disparities in higher education finds that differences in access, completion, and future earnings persist for African Americans and Latinos (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). I was not blind to the fact that throughout my college career, young Black men, in particular, were absent from my classes.

I have been analyzing racial issues as far back as I can remember. I grew up in a diverse home, surrounded by people from different ethnicities and different cultures. Issues of race have always dominated American society,

and growing up in different interracial and diverse households gave me a first-hand view of hate and prejudice. By the time I started kindergarten, I began to realize that some people could not or would not like you solely based on the color of your skin. Racial issues were never a secret with my family and I remember the tough lessons I learned about how some people would treat me different simply because of who my mother loved.

Over the years, my racial identity has been continually questioned, my whiteness continually challenged. Grier and colleagues (2014) suggest that individuals who present as racially ambiguous do not afford others the opportunity to easily categorize them, leading to additional discriminatory practices. I have had boyfriends who did not know I was white until a conversation about race came up. For years my own children did not believe that I was "really" white, until they met my biological father. I have been cussed out when telling some folx that I was white and have had people argue with me about my own ethnicity. Since joining the academic environment, this has not gotten any easier for me. I have been told I was "nothing but a convict", an anomaly that people cannot figure out. I have been asked if I am a "wigger"[1] and I have heard that I "might be just a little too ghetto".

Recently, I have been told that I need to address my whiteness and the privilege that comes with it. Based on my lived experiences, this is not always easy. Yet, I understand the impetus for those who suggest it. As Potter (2015) points out, criminologists should examine how being white influences their experiences compared with those of other races. I have always analyzed, for my own understanding, differences in how people are treated in different places, based on identity. This is another reason that intersectionality makes so much sense to me, because in analyzing these experiences and watching others has allowed me to see that no one has the upper hand all of the time, but based on race, class, gender, age and sexuality, as well as other personal characteristics, some people do better in certain situations than others.

After all of these years, it has gotten harder for me to describe my own racial identity and to discuss the implications and experiences of being me, both positive and negative. I usually do not self-describe on questionnaires. For instance, I usually mark "other". In all honesty, I have never felt that I belonged to any racial group, feeling more like I was caught somewhere in the middle. Maybe my experience with identity and race are somewhat unique. Race defines so much of what we see happening in this world, and the

criminal and juvenile justice systems are no exception. I have experienced the consequences of race on both sides of the coin, both positive and negative, and while racial issues surely impacted my life growing up, within the intersection of gender, age, and race, I found both burden and blessing.

**Becoming a Woman**

More women are locked up today than ever before. Recent reports show that women's incarceration rates in the US have continued to increase and have now reached a rate eight times higher than it was in 1980, an increase of over 700% (Kajstura & Immarigeon, 2018). Data from 2019 indicates that there were nearly a quarter of a million girls and women incarcerated in US jails and prisons (Kajstura, 2019). Research shows that nearly one in eight individuals released from prison and one in six jail releases in the US each year are women. This data reflects the fact that almost two million women are released annually from jails and prisons, and yet the availability of resources and programs focused on reentry for women is largely inadequate (Sawyer, 2019). Research on gendered pathways to crime consistently finds that women in prison have often been subjected to high levels of interpersonal violence in multiple forms, including physical, sexual, and mental abuse, in both childhood and adulthood (Fuentas, 2013). Reported abuse is a significant predictor for high levels of trauma among incarcerated girls and women (Mollard & Hudson, 2016). Women in jails are more likely to present with significant levels of anxiety, personality disorders, serious mental illness, and PTSD (Dehart et al., 2009; Drapalski et al., 2009; Green et al., 2016).

For me, my experience of gender is entwined with becoming a mother. I was in love with my daughter before she was even born, but I almost lost the opportunity to parent her. I had gotten in some trouble years before and, after going through pre-sentencing, I was told that I was going to be sentenced to prison. After breaking my ankle while out on bond and having surgery twice, my mother came to visit me. While I was still heavily medicated, she decided to take me back home. I left town before my court hearing, which meant that soon I had a warrant listed in the national database.

When I finally got caught and went to jail, I was almost three months pregnant. Everyone, including my lawyers, told me that I should plan on having someone come get my baby when she was born and that, if I did not, my baby would be placed into the child protective system (CPS). I knew

this to be true from seeing the experience of other girls – jails separate 2.3 million mothers from their children each year (Sawyer & Bertram, 2013). I could not imagine the pain that this would cause me.

I ended up staying in jail for a large part of my pregnancy, and I was worried. I had heard horrific stories of the risks involved with being pregnant while locked up such as mothers left to suffer in cells during labor while waiting on transport to the hospital. I was not allowed to leave my cell during my pregnancy. I was denied both extra food and any exercise. I spent over six months sleeping on a thin mat on the floor. Unfortunately, studies continue to show that prisons and jails neglect the needs of pregnant women in their facilities (Daniel, 2019).

I prayed the whole time I was in there, locked up and pregnant, and stretched my faith like never before as I hoped for transformation in my life. By grace and mercy, I was released in time to prepare to have my baby girl. This changed me into a better person and, although I would still struggle in the process, this experience put me on a path to personal redemption. So, my identity as a woman, particularly becoming a new mother, motivated me to seek help through my faith. By then, I desperately wanted to change my life and be a better person for my baby. The study of love has been limited in the field of criminal justice. Rusu (2017) argued that there has been a "cold indifference" to the study of love in the inclusion of social research. I am convinced this is a mistake. I argue that love changes people. Perhaps this stems from my experiences as a woman and as a mother, but I do not believe my thoughts are unique. We know that relationships and the emotional ties of love can have a significant impact on our lives, and a primary source of this love we often find embedded within our familial relationships. Those who felt family was lacking to fulfill these needs in childhood often look forward to having children and starting their own family.

**Juvenile Justice and System-Involved Youth**

Even as incarceration rates slow in the US, mass incarceration practices have ensured the highest incarceration rates of any country. Comparative data shows that the US has nearly six times as many adolescents and young adults incarcerated in secure facilities as Australia, Canada, the UK, Germany, and Finland combined (Sickmund et al., 2017). On an average day in the US, almost 50,000 youth are confined in juvenile justice facilities, while another 7,500 youth are sitting in adult jails and prisons (Sawyer, 2019). African

American and Latino youth are disproportionally overrepresented in the juvenile justice system (Hockenberry et al., 2016).

It is well established that system-involved youth, both male and female, present with higher levels of trauma, neglect, and abuse compared to their peers (Siegel & Welsh, 2018). The juvenile justice system further exacerbates harm among youth through various practices and policies meant to punish and control them instead of offering healing and transformation. The physical, mental, and emotional trauma experienced by those in the system becomes evident if you pay attention. They say you do not need any studies to see these facts, because if you look closely, it is there…in their faces…you can see it in their eyes (Leyva and Bickel, 2010).

The experiences of system-involved youth significantly decrease the likelihood that they will transition into higher education, while also increasing the likelihood that they will transition into prison and jails. Nearly 70% of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons do not have a high school diploma. Research continually finds that one of the biggest impediments to higher education is prior experiences with incarceration (Suitts et al., 2014). Juveniles and young adults who have spent significant time during adolescence engaged with the system are most likely to suffer consequential trauma, and these youth become the least likely to effectively overcome the obstacles as they move through life (Youth.gov, n.d.). In addition, while protective factors can mitigate negative experiences in the system (e.g. positive relationships with parents, prosocial role models, stable housing, and access to quality education and employment opportunities), system-involved youth are less likely to have this support (Dannerbeck & Yan, 2011).

Experiencing incarceration often holds individuals back from educational opportunities, making it almost impossible for those folx to obtain the credentials they need to successfully integrate into society once they are released from prison (Couloute, 2018). When I got out of juvenile detention at fifteen years old, I tried going back to high school. Not only did I not fit in, but I was told because of my lack of proper education while in juvenile facilities, I did not have the necessary credits and would not be able to graduate until I was at least 21-years-old. After I turned 16, I was encouraged to take the GED and I thought that was a good idea. I tried to go to a community college, but I had spent years entangled in the juvenile justice system and I was still living the street life. From the time I was 13-years-old into my early twenties, I dealt with many different challenges.

I had become a mother, and yet I still struggled to break free of the system and the street life that I knew while working on getting my life straight. That is what I was doing when I enrolled in college courses the second time. I had already been doing work in the community and had even helped with the development of a transitional living house for women with children. Yet, I knew that I needed additional education. One day I found my way to the community college that was across the street from where I was working at the time. Maruna (2001) points out that individuals who have been incarcerated, and who have acknowledged creating harm through a deviant lifestyle, often feel the need to "make good", that is to use those experiences to share a transformed life with others, helping them avoid the same pitfalls. In the streets I often thought about how one day, when I got free from that life, I would use my experiences to make a difference in my community.

For many people – both men and women, youth and adults alike – coming out of the system and seeking changes in their life, faith helps them find a path to freedom and transformation (Irwin, 1985; Leyva & Bickel, 2010). Sometimes that may be all they have left. I know that was true for me, and at the end of the day I found out how much I needed that faith for my own journey. Without faith, I am sure I would not be here today.

**Education and Opportunity – Class**

Class, race, gender, and age differentially shape these struggles for youth already involved in the system. The accumulation of disadvantage can often be overwhelming. Every struggle increases the necessity of focusing on survival. Surviving homes, surviving the streets, and surviving the system, young people are just trying to make it another day, alive and free. Many juveniles going through the system, especially girls, are often guilty of having committed survival crimes (Sickmund et al., 2008). In the juvenile justice system, it is easy to see that most kids come from poorer neighborhoods and households, an exception being more serious criminal cases. Growing up, my family was poor and that was an identity I carried. I knew this affected how some people saw us, but I also knew I wanted something different, something more. I was sure education could help.

Yet, I was not so sure about my chances of success anywhere, much less in educational settings. Higher education can often seem like a luxury, an elusive dream. One study found that the probability of formerly incarcerated kids even applying to college was significantly lower compared to their

peers (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). Education can be key in helping folx desist from a criminal lifestyle and overcome obstacles on a trajectory toward a healthy and productive life, and research has shown the value of education and its correlation with positive life outcomes, including employment and relationship opportunities. We also know that not everyone has the same access to education and growing up in poverty decreases the quality of one's education, especially for marginalized populations. The majority of the correctional population in the United States has not completed high school or obtained a GED, with incarcerated women slightly less likely to have these certifications, and minorities less likely to have graduated from high school or with their GED compared with whites (Harlow, 2003).

## DISCUSSION

Growing up, I felt stigma attached to my identity at every turn. Whether it was race and culture, gender, class, or my experiences in foster care and the justice system, I continually felt the shame, stigma, and repercussions of a multiply marginalized identity. While I wanted to be able to talk about those experiences and to be free of the shame that stigmatized identities bring, I found that it was not that easy. My life had been significantly different from the lives of the people I sat next to in my classes.

I wanted to be honest and open about how my experiences influenced my perspective, but in academic settings – first as a student and then as a professor – I was often told that I should not share my experiences. Yet, I always believed that it was necessary to talk about my reality to help others who were on the path. Sometimes, though, it was easier to hide, to avoid the judgements that you know will quickly come once you come out as a Convict Criminologist. There is often not a lot of support for Convict Criminologists in the academy, and members of our group are not always welcomed into spaces dominated by traditional criminologists (DCC, 2021; Richards & Ross, 2013; Tietjen, 2013). It is no surprise that many members, while supporting and encouraging those who have "come out", choose to remain anonymous and to hide their real identities to avoid the very real personal and professional repercussions that almost certainly will come (Richards & Ross, 2001). These repercussions can impede everything from educational and research opportunities, inclusion on grant work and service projects, and prospective job opportunities and avenues for advancement.

Individuals coming out of the system deal with different multiply marginalized identities, and battle various struggles and situations while working to overcome traumatized and disrupted backgrounds. This often makes it so much harder to even make it to academic spaces in the first place (Custer et al., 2020), especially in graduate education. Because of these obstacles, it is imperative that mainstream criminologists who do have a voice in the academy use it to advocate not just for students, but for their fellow colleagues who are looking for the safety and security they need to “come out” and be honest about their own experiences with the justice system (Ross et al., 2011). As long as people like me are encouraged to keep our pasts hidden, as long as we are forced to conceal our personal identities to avoid negative consequences for our academic career, the less likely we will succeed in the attempt to bring more diverse voices to the table. Intersectional approaches to reflexivity in research can only broaden an understanding of the lived experiences of justice-impacted scholars.

Members of CC have spent considerable time and energy reaching out to those who have expressed interest in the group, and have provided a space and place for people like me and folx who have come out of the system, as juveniles and adults, from jails and prisons, presenting with diverse racial identities, gender identities, those who identify as LBGTQ, as well as those who do not wish to identify at all. This group continues to provide space for all of our allies who have loved ones, family and friends directly impacted by the justice system, and without them we would not be complete (Ross et al., 2016).

## CONCLUSION

I realized at the intersection of personal and social identity that the stigma of being justice-involved was my greatest challenge and becoming an academic was my greatest achievement (aside from being a parent). While many colleges and universities continue to suffer from an overall lack of diversity, few criminal justice faculty members and/or administrators are willing to engage in the serious business of advocating for those from marginalized populations, especially when it comes to recruiting and supporting those who are formerly incarcerated or system-involved. Examining autoethnographic studies focused on reflexivity from an intersectional perspective can help address the impact on those experiencing multiply marginalized identities,

while identifying pathways to overcoming barriers in higher education for FI and justice-impacted students.

I will admit that when I first got to graduate school and to Convict Criminology, I was scared to come out. It was an experience at the 2013 ASC conference that fundamentally changed the conversation for me. Victor Rios, a well-known scholar who writes about his gang experience as a juvenile, was at the conference. His work is inspiring for me, particularly his book *Punished*: *Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (Rios, 2011). When he caught my attention and walked over to where I was standing with a friend, I was eager to speak with him. Yet he had come to me with a question, and I was not sure I had an answer. He leaned over to tell me that he had noticed my jailhouse tattoo. Recognizing that I was with the Convict Criminology group, he had brought a young female student over with him and explained that she had been asking where the women in the group were.

As this young lady looked to me for answers, I realized two things. One, that the tattoo I got when I was 13-years-old might always be a giveaway about my past to those who knew about such things. While studies show that jail and prison tattoos can signal an experience that is laden with stigma, the renaissance in tattoo art has somewhat diminished the risk and the taboo of having ink, but a jailhouse tattoo is always recognizable by those with insider knowledge (Earle, 2018). Second, and more importantly, this was a defining moment for me. Over the years, I have realized how important it is for people to have space to talk about who they are, to express the truth about their unique identities and experiences, and the influence it has on their teaching and research, and to be able to do so without the fear of stigma and repercussions in the workplace. For me, I have found that as much as I might try, I could never really hide who I was and that, in reality, I should never even want to. Those experiences ensured that I would be able to encourage others, whether they were headed to higher education or involved in other pursuits, engaging their energy towards building a positive and successful life. That is all I ever really wanted. This is my way of making good.

## ENDNOTES

[1] This term appends the "w" in "white" to a derogatory term for Black people.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dr. J. Renee Trombley* is an Assistant Professor in Criminal Justice and Criminology at Metropolitan State University – Denver, where she also serves as a Faculty Fellow and is currently developing the Justice Impacted Scholars Alliance. Dr. Trombley is dedicated to building opportunities in higher education for justice impacted folx, both in the community and in prisons and jails. Her research interests include restorative justice, peacemaking criminology, convict criminology, violence and victimization among youth, and juvenile justice and delinquency, as well as the use of qualitative methods in academic research. Dr. Trombley has spent time writing, publishing, and presenting on issues related to trauma among youth, juvenile justice and schools, restorative justice and reentry, restorative justice in higher education, and convict criminology and identity.