

Carceral Citizens Rising: Understanding Oppression Resistance Work through the Lens of Carceral Status

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ABSTRACT We have all committed crimes, but few get caught. The distinction between carceral and conventional citizens is largely an illusion but one that affords great privileges to some and grave consequences for others. Rooted in critical feminist theorizing, intersectionality, and abolitionist scholarship, we extend Miller and Stuart’s conceptualization of carceral and conventional citizenship by embedding them in a social identity and system of power we call “carceral status” that intersects other categories like race, class, and gender. We draw from interviews with 32 formerly incarcerated activists to illustrate how carceral citizens experience “five faces of oppression” that define an oppressed group. Not only do they make material changes in institutions through their work, but they also symbolically restore themselves and transform the meaning of the carceral citizen category, providing new dignifying meanings to this aspect of identity. Our project introduces carceral status as a useful analytic tool for research and practice.

All humans transgress the law (Baxter 2017; Woodall 2017, 2018; Coyle 2018), but those detected by the carceral state are marked and subjugated, whereas those who remain undetected are privileged to evade such categorization. Baxter’s (2017) pioneering work on “we are all criminals” demonstrates that every individual has violated at least one punishable law in their lifetime, yet only 25 percent become shackled by the criminal label. All other lawbreakers evade criminalization and preserve their privileges and freedoms, ignoring their infractions with ease (Gabor 1994; Coyle

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2014; Baxter 2017; Woodall 2017, 2018). The criminal label translates individuals into carceral citizens (Miller and Stuart 2017) available for legal and social exclusions (as well as perverse benefits), whereas conventional citizens retain full rights to membership despite their legal transgressions (Baxter 2017; Coyle 2018; Woodall 2018).

We argue that these two positions—one privileged and one oppressed—constitute a social category, or system of power, that we term “carceral status.” Understanding carceral status as a system of power within a hierarchical matrix of oppressions and privileges has been scantily theorized outside of its intricate connection with race (Alexander 2012; Miller and Stuart 2017). In this article, we articulate a language around carceral status as a system of power that intersects in complex ways with other categories. Elaborating this framework is an ongoing project in the “afterlife of mass incarceration” that we initiate using novel data from a study of formerly incarcerated activists (FIAs) in the United States. We hope that further research and theorizing takes up the carceral status concept as an analytic tool to better understand race, gender, and class experiences as they shape, and are shaped by, carceral status.

CARCERAL STATUS

Carceral status as an analytic tool is rooted in sociological understandings of how power relations construct differences, such as in class, race, gender, and sexuality. Social location refers to an individual or group’s place in a particular power system’s hierarchy (Collins 1986; Young 1990, 2019; Weber 1998). Because we are all criminals, different positions of carceral status are social constructs not necessarily representative of differences in behavior. Carceral status is a system of power that is a distinct socially constructed, structural category encompassing those who are selected to be criminally marked (oppressed) and those who remain unmarked (privileged). This broader specification of carceral status extends Miller and Stuart’s (2017) “carceral citizenship” and provides a theoretical framework for studying up (Nader 1972) by examining the privilege and power (Brekhus 1998) of the unmarked, such as critical freeness studies (Brittany Harder, pers. comm., 2018; Woodall 2018).

In this analysis, we use Miller and Stuart’s (2017) concept of carceral citizenship, Young’s (1990) five faces of oppression, and prior work on carceral-subject positionality (Woodall 2017, 2018) to frame carceral status

as a separate but interlocking system of power that crosscuts other social positions (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality). We first engage with theory and prior research to show how carceral status can be conceptualized as a socially constructed category (otherwise conceivable as a system of oppression) within which lie positions of privilege and oppression. In doing so, we apply Young's (1990) five faces of oppression to data from interviews with 32 FIAs to bring participants' voices to bear on the position of "carceral citizen," which lies within the carceral status system of power. We argue that carceral status is best understood as a contentious category that exists in its own right and that intersects with, and is shaped by, classed, raced, and gendered realities.

We then show how carceral citizen activists engage in emancipatory struggles, redefine themselves, and reshape the confines of criminal stereotypes that are attached to carceral citizenship, emerging in the social imaginary as a group with a "right to have rights" (Somers 2008). Driven by consciousness and bound in solidarity, respondents take hopeful action toward recognition of their "right to have rights" (Somers 2008; Currie 2012). We articulate formerly incarcerated activism as a counteroppressive project from which a rights-bearing group arises and consider how a carceral citizen collective identity forms in their mobilization and resistance work. Identities are transformed and cultural constructions are affected by movement work (Snow and McAdam 2000). Similarly, the movements of FIAs shape-shift personal and social sensibilities about criminality through collective carceral citizen resistance to the very social arrangements that generated them. Participants articulate how they challenge the five faces of oppression as a collective force for justice. Although carceral citizens endure oppression through exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, and violence, they simultaneously resist oppression as a rights-deserving category through insurgent acts of identity-claiming and in life-affirming movements for justice (Holston 2009; Glenn 2011). Their counteroppressive work transforms the meaning of the carceral citizen category for themselves as well as others.

THE LANGUAGE OF CARCERAL STATUS AS A SYSTEM OF POWER

In a formal sense, we consider carceral status to be a system of power or system of oppression as Patricia Hill Collins (1993) describes, including three dimensions of oppression: institutional, symbolic, and individual (Harding

1986). Like race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and ability, carceral status is a system of power with institutional, symbolic, and individual dimensions. Domination is structured through institutions, socially sanctioned ideologies, and the cumulative effect of oppression or privilege that each of us “carry around” individually (Collins 1993, 35). Therefore, the language we use may reflect one or more of the dimensions of systems of power that individuals experience as interwoven at any given moment.

The concept of carceral status can be described generally as a social status, social category, or characteristic of identity. Generally, the word “position” describes a standpoint within carceral status and “identity” may be used in a general sense to depict how people place themselves and/or others in a particular carceral status position. We can call carceral status an “identity category” like race, class, and gender. This is important because although people place others in categories within carceral status (e.g., marked or unmarked), those placements may not match the personal understanding of the individual being categorized; regardless, that social label affects their identity and experiences of the self.

Likewise, debates around what constitutes a “group” infect our conceptualization because whether people need to acknowledge themselves as a member of a group to be a group member is a matter of ongoing debate. Like Miller and Stuart (2017), we use that term on occasion in this article. We acknowledge that more research is needed to distinguish whether carceral and conventional citizens view themselves as a group or not and what the nature of the meaning of that group is through the lens of socially constructed ideologies. The term “category” is generally used to refer to the categories within systems of power, but not always; it may be used when talking about “categorization” in the construction of difference as a social process. In articulating carceral status, we make every effort to use consistent language and to clarify meaning as needed.

EXTENDING CARCERAL CITIZENSHIP

Although the conceptualization of carceral citizenship fits squarely in this discussion of social structural categories, we suggest an expansion of Miller and Stuart’s (2017) framework in five ways. First, in congruence with Underground Scholars (2019), we argue that the carceral citizen category should be defined as “anyone who has been in a carceral setting” to include more people who are affected by collisions with the state (e.g., to include

people who are subject to repeated stop-and-frisks or who have publicized mug shots). Second, because we are all criminals, we argue that it is important to understand the differentiation between carceral and conventional forms of citizenship as solely a social construct, rather than differences in behavior (Woodall 2017, 2018). Third, we embed conventional and carceral citizenship positionalities together in a social category, or system of power as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1986) articulates, that we call carceral status. We understand this system of power to have multiple dimensions: institutional, symbolic, and individual (Collins 1993). Fourth, we demonstrate how carceral citizens constitute an oppressed group within the system of power called carceral status. Finally, through their own voices, we restory carceral citizens not merely as dormant subjects of oppression but as people with dignity and agency who can, and do, through counter-oppression work, transform the meaning of the category and redefine themselves.

In this article, we conceptualize the first two extensions of Miller and Stuart by weaving together prior research, theorizing, and our participants' narratives. We articulate the last three extensions primarily through our participants' experiences. We show that participants demonstrate the claim that carceral status is a legitimate system of power within which carceral citizens are an oppressed group. We also show that they are agents finding and stepping into their power to change the dimensions of their oppression. We further argue that the privileged conventional citizen position ought to be incorporated in future studies to produce a full vision of the positions within carceral status.

CARCERAL STATUS AS AN AXIS OF OPPRESSION/PRIVILEGE

A type of second-class citizen status begins from the moment someone collides with the criminal justice system (Travis 2002; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014; US Commission on Civil Rights 2019). Such a status is marked by exclusions from the labor market (Pager 2007; Uggen et al. 2014; Couloute and Kopf 2018) and from public assistance (Wolkomir 2018) and by the imposition of monetary sanctions (Martin et al. 2018). There are considerable legal, cultural, and educational exclusions (Couloute and Kopf 2018), as well as political exclusions (Uggen and Manza 2002; Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004; Manza and Uggen 2006; Uggen, Manza, and Thompson 2006; Uggen et al. 2020) for people

with felony convictions. Such consequences result in sustained economic insecurity for people affected by the carceral system (Richards and Jones 2004; Harding et al. 2014), and this insecurity reverberates intergenerationally (Foster and Hagan 2007).

The social positionality of a carceral subject is generated within institutionalized forms of carceralism, meaning social control measures like legislation, surveillance practices, enforcement procedures, punitive sanctions, and other methods of governance that are associated with the carceral state (Monaghan 2013; Brown and Schept 2017). These historical, institutional, state, and cultural forces that arise out of, and catalyze, power imbalances have an impact on everyone, but they do so differentially depending on carceral status. Carceral privilege and oppression thus become unequally applied to individuals and groups in various ways.

The sifting and sorting of people into carceral-subject positions, either marked (oppressed) or unmarked (privileged), occurs as individuals move across the life course. The label of “deviant” can begin early in life (Becker 1963), particularly for Black and Latino males, for whom the status of criminality is intricately woven into the fabric of how race is perceived and treated (e.g., in early education; Rios 2007, 2011). Collisions with the law can also occur later in life, perhaps completing high school and even attending college only to become labeled (Goffman 1963). Thus, carceral citizens come to experience the reverberating effects of long-term “felonism” (Polk and Polk 2016), which denotes a cycle of discrimination on the basis of carceral status. Marked actors may come to be referred to as urban outcasts (Wacquant 2007, 2009), human waste (Simon 2007), the socially abandoned (Biehl 2005), or the socially dead (Cacho 2012). Such subjects lie beyond recognition and representation (Brown 2014). Whatever the individual particularities, social forces push and pull people into, out of, and across various carceral-subject positionalities over their life course.

These positionalities have been scantily theorized, although the borders of a carceral-subject position are becoming more theoretically contoured. Most notably, Miller and Stuart (2017) articulate how carceral expansion has produced a distinct form of political membership for people who have collided with the criminal justice system; they coined the term “carceral citizens” to describe how people who have been incarcerated experience a different status of citizenship with particular consequences and benefits. Miller and Stuart also mention, but do not fully elaborate, conventional citizenship as a position of privilege and in a system of power. This framework

provides a useful way of thinking about how having a criminal record (e.g., any type of run-ins with the law that leave a “mark”) makes carceral subjects legible, translates information about their essence, flattens them in ways that inscribe them as purely “criminal,” and renders their complexity invisible (Miller and Stuart 2017).

The label “conventional citizen” is a construct that Miller and Stuart (2017) used to compare against carceral citizenship, articulating how conventional citizens have access to particular life chances that are denied carceral citizens. We take this a step further to acknowledge that conventional citizens have also broken laws although they have not been caught and marked; therefore, the difference between carceral and conventional citizens is constructed (Woodall 2017, 2018). As a result, we argue that carceral citizenship is best viewed as one position within a broader hierarchy of carceral status, shaped by social structural forces that hold great benefits for some and grave consequences for others. Carceral status is thus part of the matrix of domination, with defined positionalities within the status and one of several intersecting oppressions. Miller and Stuart’s (2017) conventional citizen language is akin to the “free” or “unmarked” position that has been articulated in other work (Woodall 2017, 2018).

The seemingly endless consequences of carceral citizenship are categorizable in line with Iris Marion Young’s (1990) five faces of oppression framework, which we employ to elaborate carceral status as a hierarchy of privilege for the crime-committing conventional citizen and oppression for the crime-committing carceral citizen. The five faces include (1) exploitation, (2) marginalization, (3) powerlessness, (4) cultural imperialism (or “othering”), and (5) violence. These are the experiences of oppressed groups, including the collective carceral citizens. When one is arrested, detained, incarcerated, and marked with a criminal label, they are exploited (e.g., in the labor market; Rusche 1978), marginalized (e.g., via the denial of welfare benefits; Mauer and McCalmont 2014; Martin and Shannon 2020), rendered powerless (e.g., voter disenfranchisement; Manza and Uggen 2006; Murphy, Newmark, and Ardoin 2006; Shannon and Uggen 2012), culturally imperialized (e.g., criminal “othering”; Brown 2009; Garland 2012), and subject to ongoing violence by police, in their communities (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993; Carbado 2017), and by the prison itself (Irwin 2005; Presser 2013). Within carceral status, these oppressions are reserved for the carceral citizens who have been labeled as such. The same is not

true for the conventional citizens who, by the numbers, have likely committed a crime but have not been caught and labeled.

CARCERAL STATUS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

We further assert that carceral status must be understood as a system of oppression in line with Patricia Hill Collins’s (1986) framework, whereby one’s positionality is shaped by multiple, intersecting identities, as illustrated in figure 1. Black, Latinx, White, Asian, indigenous men, women, and trans people become uniquely ensnared in the web of incarceration, thus compounding oppression or catalyzing privilege. Analyzing experiences in this manner requires taking an intersectional approach, which is not the sum of added oppressions. Rather, it represents the acknowledgment and analysis of positionalities produced by systems of power that are interwoven, overlapping, and multiplicative (Collins 1986; Crenshaw 1990). Individuals are placed into particular carceral status positions as Miller and Stuart (2017) point out. Taking that logic a step further and conceptualizing the oppressed and privileged as positions within a carceral status category allows us to explicate how other categories shape the experiences of conventional and carceral citizenship, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability, and other statuses.

An individual’s experience of carceral status is constituted in accordance with their position in other hierarchies as well. The most notable example is race, which allows us to understand the carceral system as an

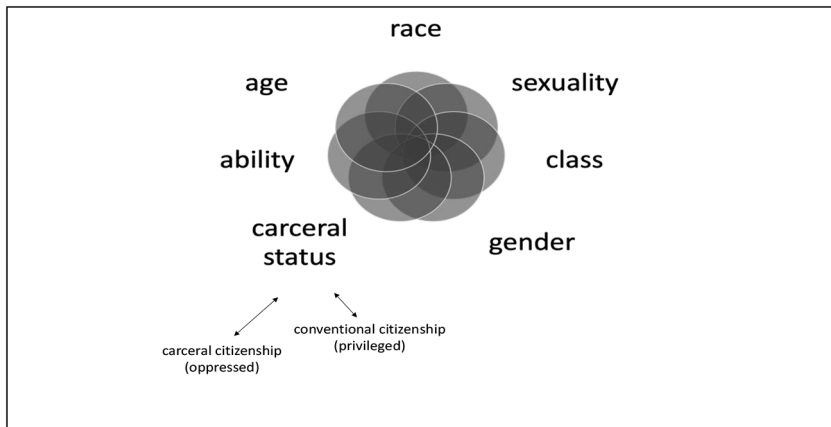


FIGURE 1. Carceral status as a category of intersecting identities

extension of slavery (Wacquant 2000; Alexander 2012) that serves as one critical means by which all people of color are oppressed. Blackness is often equated with criminality in the social imaginary (Western 2006; Wacquant 2007, 2009; Alexander 2012). Blackness amplifies the likelihood of becoming cast as a carceral citizen and affects how the label is experienced. This is how we can understand that what it means to be Black in society is understood as what it means to be deemed criminal. Vulnerabilities to arrest are intensified for Black families and communities (Western 2006; Berg, Lei, and Simons 2019), and carceral oppressions are interwoven with racial subjugations in specific ways and with specific consequences that reverberate across generations (Travis et al. 2014).

Conversely, being White decreases one's chance of being caught and labeled, as whiteness is not associated with criminality. Even once they are labeled, White people may more easily pass as conventional, even proceeding with criminal behavior and remaining undetected by the state, by institutions, or by other social actors (Pager 2007). Moreover, conventional citizens of any race are excused from checking the box on job or college applications even though they have likely committed a crime (Woodall 2017, 2018), resulting in privilege.

Carceral subjugation is likewise, yet uniquely, differentially experienced across gendered positionalities. For example, a woman's experience of a marked carceral status is different from a man's (McCorkel 2013). Moreover, being marked is experienced differently for women of color than it is for White women (Miller and Stuart 2017; Richie 2018). Thus, carceral status positionalities are shaped by other positions in matrices of domination (Collins 1986).

APPLYING CARCERAL STATUS

Adding carceral status to our repertoire has practical implications. For example, a plethora of antiracist workbooks have been released and greater attention to diversity and equity are rising in prevalence since the 2020 Black Lives Matter actions (Mayes, Tierney, and Keating 2020). Carceral status could be added to worksheets and workbooks that are being used as aids for assessing people's experiences. For example, in the popular *Racial Healing Handbook* by Anneliese Singh (2019), the positionality exercise does not include carceral status. Having this language and conceptualization added to practitioners' assessments is important for helping people.

A White, hetero, cisgender carceral citizen is not at all having the same experiences as a White, hetero, cisgender conventional citizen. Table 1 is a suggested revision for the Racial Healing program and a suggested edit for other workbooks of its kind.

In addition, although we cannot be sure that if hiring carceral citizens were to be considered a diversity and inclusion practice that more job opportunities for carceral citizens would result, we do know that the addition of such criteria on company review sites would help carceral citizens locate those welcoming companies. For example, the website Glassdoor collects data to produce their company review profiles. Current and former employees rate diversity and inclusion on only the classic axes of race, gender, sexuality, and age, not carceral status. Having a carceral status question could be helpful to people with convictions to know where to seek employment. Unfortunately, this category of oppression/privilege remains largely invisible, and carceral citizens are left with mostly informal means of finding friendly employers. Carceral status ought to be recognized as a basis of discrimination and as grounds for appreciating businesses that hire carceral citizens inclusively. Additional applications include incorporating carceral status into risk/needs assessments, case management planning, or in research models on inequality.

CARCERAL CITIZEN ACTIVISM AS AN IDENTITY-MAKING, NARRATIVE-CHANGING, ANTIOPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

Social groups are constituted of individuals who share a common history that social status produces.¹ People discover themselves through relational

1. Carceral status, as described here, is a system of power within which are embedded positions of oppression and privilege as described above. Whether the oppressed or privileged category within carceral status should be called a “group” or not is an area for further research and theorizing. Attempting to answer that question without a comparison group of non-activists to tell us about their perceived affiliation with carceral citizens might be considered speaking beyond our data. Based on the participants’ own reports, however, at some points in their life they felt like merely a “criminal,” a “menace,” or a “troublemaker.” One could argue this also constitutes a “group” identity, but one that has identified with the narrative of the state and internalized oppression. When those are the only available options, it is understandable why one might view oneself in that way. We assert that as carceral citizens find each other, particularly nonactivists who come into contact with FIAs doing countering oppression work, an alternative category, or group identity, becomes available to them. No longer must

TABLE 1. Singh’s (2019) “My Multiple Identities” Activity as an Example of the Applicability of Carceral Status in Practitioner Assessments

Social Identity/ System of Power	Privileged Position	Oppressed Position
Race	White	Person of color
Disability	Able-bodied	Physical, cognitive, or mental health disability
Gender	Men, cisgender	Women, trans, nonbinary, genderqueer
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	LGBQ+, polyamorous, asexual, aromantic
Religion	Christian	Muslim, Eastern, Pagan, Jewish, etc.
Social class	Middle upper class	Poor, working class
Age	Young adults, middle-aged adults	Children, adolescents, older adults
Carceral status*	Conventional citizen	Carceral citizen

* This is a suggested addition.

identities that arise in social processes (Young 1990; Somers 1994). Sometimes “a social group comes to exist only because one group excludes and labels a category of persons . . . those labeled come to understand themselves as group members on the basis of their shared oppressions” (Young 1990, 46). However, there is no reason to believe that identity stands a priori; just because individuals share something does not necessarily mean they will identify as a group (Somers 1994). Although people may experience the same political, legal, and social exclusions, they may not define those exclusions as rights denied to themselves or to the category as a whole. Social identities are historically, narratively, socially, and relationally formed by institutional and cultural practices (Somers and Gibson 1993). The important point is that the carceral subject becomes legible in the historical evolution of mass incarceration. The stories that are used to explain a carceral subject’s behavior or the justifications for impositions of penal

they understand themselves as associated with a group of “criminals,” but rather as a group of people harmed by the carceral system, who share common oppressions and even common solutions. Whether to think of carceral citizens as a category or a social group is debatable, and we hope that social psychologists take up the issue. Miller and Stuart (2017) articulate carceral citizens as a “subgroup” or even a “group” that is socialized to interact with public institutions in particular ways. The criminal record makes them legible as a “group.” The social psychological literature may be limited in its ability to fully articulate the process of carceral citizenship identity formation, and there is much more to know about how carceral citizens view themselves along their life trajectory. We are prioritizing the way the state categorizes people, the harm of internalizing that oppression, and the freedom of restorying oneself through resistance.

harm are all spun within a particular culture of punishment (Brown 2009; Garland 2012).

Identification is also shaped in resistance (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Out of antiprison and countercarceral mobilization, a rights-bearing carceral citizen may arise. As Miller and Stuart (2017, 543) note, “A theory of citizenship in the carceral age must allow for formerly incarcerated activists who push for and successfully advance meaningful change.” As we will elaborate, in carceral citizens’ efforts to win rights, they transform who they are, how they are treated, and how they are understood.

How collective identities are constructed is debatable (Snow and McAdam 2000), and there are many avenues for further research in this area. Although collective identity can involve preexisting categorization imposed by the state (Polletta and Jasper 2001), it may also require one to personally locate oneself within a particular narrative identity of a group (Somers 1994). Collective identification can also be problematic to assemble across boundaries of difference (Young 1990; Gardner and Richards 2017). Race, class, sexuality, and gender crosscut carceral status and can affect whether a criminalized person identifies as a carceral citizen, or stories themselves within the pathologizing narratives of the oppressor, perhaps instead understanding themselves as an “offender” or seeing themselves as an individual who simply behaved badly and deserves the harms they endure. Regardless of the carceral citizen’s perception of self, they are subject to the same oppressions and, whether they join in solidarity with others similarly oppressed or not, benefit from the same wins achieved by FIAs’ work. For example, there are numerous initiatives led by carceral citizen activists, such as “ban the box” on employment and education applications and reenfranchisement efforts occurring in many states (McLeod 2018). Their collective action shape-shifts the meaning of carceral citizenry.

As we will show, carceral citizens meet every criterion of an oppressed group but can also powerfully reshape the narratives that bind them. Symbolic understandings are created in struggles for institutional and political change (Giddens 1991). The carceral citizen is constituted in part by commonsense cruel logics of criminality, in part by tyrannical legal exclusions, but also in part by their restorying through media success stories, in their political wins, and in reframings of justice in terms of social problems and human conditions (ReFraming Justice, n.d.). The category is ever re-rendered as carceral citizens take the social stage as a rights-bearing group, shaping and shifting the public imaginary in their efforts of resistance.

Carceral citizen activists (also called “formerly incarcerated activists” in popular media and in our analysis below) challenge the state and build community. Their work is imbued with struggles for self-determination against oppressive policies and social arrangements. In their mobilizations to force the hands of states to loosen, or break, the shackles imposed on them, the articulation of themselves as a rights-bearing collective is communicated. Their initiatives represent a transformation in social renderings of carceral citizens from those deserving of their fate and dispossession toward an acknowledgment of them as a rights-deserving group vis-à-vis their right restorations.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CARCERAL SUBJECTS IN CLAIMS TO RIGHTS

In this article, we draw on the experience of carceral citizen activists to articulate how criminalized people constitute an oppressed class, how their activism actively challenges those oppressions, and what that means for broader carceral citizen liberation. FIA work coproduces, co-shapes, and co-organizes the self and society. Social systems are practices whereby a level of “systemness” is achieved in interaction (Giddens 1984, 27). Systems are thus social practices that have been reified to maintain organized collectives, which both constrain and facilitate action. Over time, the reification of these structures is loosened, giving hope that the carceral citizen’s activist work is accomplishing much more than what their policy or community changes are. From the perspective of Giddens and constitutive theory, FIAs are engaging in an active coproduction of, and reclamation of, the world circulating through them.

The knowledge that FIAs carry, which has arguably been displaced, is at least partially captured in our interview data, with an empirical eye toward how FIAs challenge dominant discourse and “totalizing identities” (Somers 1994) of broken individuals. Through civic engagement, the stereotypical limitation and denial of what is possible for them unravels and they take “alternative lines of flight” (Arrigo and Milovanovic 2008, 168). Formerly incarcerated people have the opportunity to become something more: an activist, a politician, or a neighbor. In this article, we draw on the experience of carceral citizen activists to explore how criminalized people constitute an oppressed class, how their activism actively challenges those oppressions, and what that means for broader carceral citizen liberation.

METHOD

The methodology of this project is rooted in feminist standpoint epistemology (Smith 1974), which advocates for confronting knowledge claims of oppressors, in this case the knowledge shaped by professionals, the state, and a masculine criminology (MacKinnon 1987; Hannah-Moffatt 2001; Arrigo and Milovanovic 2008; Presser 2013; Belknap 2014, 2015; Britton, Jacobsen, and Howard 2017). Living in the skin of someone continuously shaped by these broader social forces, the first author began her empirical inquiry from a unique vantage point, as a directly impacted scholar-activist.

The research project from which our data emerge employed feminist technicalities of method (Esterberg 2001), which include practices like ongoing reflexive adjustments during the course of research, enabling participants to express their own ideas, and attention to power in the coproduction of knowledge. The project further deployed a social harm perspective (Hillyard et al. 2004) that turns a critical lens to recognizing harm as occurring on a continuum to prevent distinguishing carceral citizens as distinct from victims. The imposition of harm can result in the enactment of harm that is cyclic, overlapping, manifold, and processual. Finally, the methodology rests on the notion that stories can serve as “evidence” (Maruna 2015).

Although there are FIAs adorning stages, featured in news stories, trending on social media feeds, and stepping into political spaces, very little scholarly attention has been paid to this population. Our findings are drawn from a larger project in which the first author sought to explore FIA’s personal stories, how they came into activism, how their activist work helped them reenter, how it affects their identity, and how their work strikes at the systemic roots of the problems of crime and punishment. Drawing on her unique positionality as a directly impacted scholar-activist, the first author recruited 32 carceral citizen activists for in-depth, semistructured interviews over 3 months of fieldwork in Atlanta, Philadelphia, and New York. Although the first author spent time in those cities, snowball sampling led to contacts in other states who were then interviewed by phone.

As a result, the participants’ locations are designated as being in one of four regions in the United States: Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, or Southwest. All four regions are represented, though not in equal numbers. The sample varies by race and gender and captures the experiences of people who have served anywhere from a few days to a few decades inside of a

carceral setting, have spent at least 1 year to life on paper, and have endured extended criminalization and violent collisions (both real and symbolic) with the carceral state. The particularities of their history represent an array of criminal charges and their involvement with activism that span from a year to decades of action. The first author made use of her own hard-won experience as a directly affected scholar-activist and was gifted the opportunity to immerse herself in these stories of tragedy and triumph from which we present the themes of this project.

The first author also sought to recruit a diverse sample, using convenience and snowball sampling to capture some variation in the intersecting positionalities of race, class, gender, and carceral status. To represent various raced and gendered experiences, the author asked how people identified and targeted sampling to ensure diversity. As shown in table 2, about half of the sample identified as men, and 22 out of 32 FIAs interviewed identified as either Black, Latinx, or other non-White race. Black men are overrepresented in US prisons and jails and make up more than half of the men in the sample (25 percent of the total sample). Women are incarcerated at much lower rates, but they make up 40 percent of this sample (half of whom are Black) to gain insights into their unique experiences.

In addition, the FIAs interviewed in this project have been involved in a wide variety of change work, as shown in figure 2. This variety of activism is important for the research in that it illustrates the wide-ranging sets of interests that formerly incarcerated people have in regard to system-level change. Their work takes on issues of exploitation, marginalization, disempowerment, othering, and violence asserted in Young's articulation of oppression. Although not representative of all formerly incarcerated people, activists were recruited for this study specifically because their insights into the social forces that shaped their experiences likely exceed those of other criminalized people with internalized oppressions.

Additional demographic information, criminal legal involvement, and activist work specifics are detailed in table 3.

TABLE 2. Carceral Citizen Sample by Race and Gender

	White	Black	Latinx	Genderqueer	Total
Men	5	8	2	1	16
Women	4	6	3	1	14
Genderqueer	1	1			2
Total	10	15	5	2	32

Criminal Law and Policy	Incarceration Conditions	Policing	Employment
Criminalization of Youth	Community Building and Safety	Housing	Education
Abolition and Anti-colonialism	Harm Reduction	Media and Campaigning	Political Disenfranchisement
Social Service Barriers	Healthcare and Treatment Access	Othering and Stigma	Institutionalized Racism and Sexism

FIGURE 2. Criminal legal system related activism of participants

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

The first author conducted qualitative interviews to gain a deep understanding about carceral citizen activism and its relationship to the reentry process. Qualitative methods lend themselves well to such exploratory endeavors. Moreover, acquiring new identities requires the agency of actors, and qualitative interviewing helped reveal their interpretations of their change process. In addition, given that little is known about the relationship between activism and desistance for any identity category, carceral citizen activists who are differentially situated (e.g., cis women, men, non-binary, and genderqueer people from a variety of racial categories, age, and experiences) were interviewed. We gained some sense of similarities in their stories and ideas about their potential differences. Allowing their stories to unfold in ways that are responsible and responsive gave participants opportunities to interpret their own story. Finally, qualitative methods allowed us to understand “how” activism works for formerly incarcerated people.

This project required continuous analysis and sensitization to memos during analysis made in the field. Notes and important quotes were collected and documented in a file that helped shape the major themes presented here. This way, the fieldwork continued seamlessly in conjunction with ongoing analysis. The first author spent several hours each night

TABLE 3. Participant Demographics

Person	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Age	Number of Years under Correctional Control	Number of Years since Last Arrest	Years Involved in Activism (#)	Some of Their Activist Work*
Lance	White	Man	Hetero	35-44	6-10	1-5	16	Abolition, ed, research, voices and art of incarcerated, rj, gj
Brooklyn Sloan	Black	Woman	Hetero	35-44	11-15	11-15	1	Abolition and gj, rj, reentry, policy, lobbying
Zoey	White	Man	Hetero	35-44	11-15	1-5	20	Housing, education, campaigns, lobbying, rj, gj
	Black	Woman	Hetero	45-54	1-5	1-5	2	Policy, voting, representation, ed, lobbying, reentry, leadership, rj, gj
Terrell	Black	Man	Hetero	65+	26-30	26-30	8	Compassionate release, ending solitary confinement, lobbying, rj
Gwen	Latina	Woman	Queer	35-44	11-15	16-20	13	Abolition, community building, transformative justice, leadership, rj, gj
Randall	Black	Man	Hetero	55-64	16-20	21-25	13	Voting rights, ed, policy, lobbying, rj
Gabriela	Hisp./White	Woman	Hetero	35-44	11-15	6-10	7	Reentry, ed, research, crimmigration, lobbying, rj, gj
Greg	White	Man	Hetero	35-44	1-5	6-10	14	Ed, research, housing, employment, treatment, youth justice, lobbying
Jessie	Black	Man	Hetero	35-44	11-15	16-20	18	Youth justice policy and care for insiders, lobbying, rj
Kelly	White	Woman	Bi	25-34	11-15	6-10	6	Abolition, policy, lobbying, campaigning, gj
Scarlett	White	Genderqueer	Pansexual	45-54	1-5	21-25	40	Sex worker rights, rj, gj, organizing, art, music, culture, leadership
Brandi	Black	Woman	Queer	45-54	16-20	21-25	20	Reentry, compassionate release, gj, rj
Shana	Black	Genderqueer	Queer	55-64	11-15	26-30	26	Voting rights, reentry, housing, lobbying, policy, rj, gj

Wanda	Black	Woman	Hetero	45-54	16-20	11-15	2	Mother's rights, pregnancy safety, gj, rj, lobbying, policy
Garrett	White	Man	Hetero	25-34	11-15	11-15	5	Sex offense policy, law, reentry, lobbying, leadership
Kalif	Black	Man	Hetero	45-54	31-35	31-35	21	Abolition, ed, juvenile lifers, lobbying, rj
Tyson	Black	Man	Hetero	45-54	26-30	26-30	7	Veterans, homeless, reentry, rj
Aven	Black	Man	Hetero	35-44	16-20	16-20	13	Know your rights, law, research, wrongful convictions, rj
Frida	Latina	Woman	Hetero	25-34	6-10	11-15	4	Ed, resources, reentry, immigration policy, lobbying, rj, gj
Pheobe	Black	Woman	Bi	45-54	36-40	36-40	20	Ending life without parole, restorative justice, rj
Lilly	White	Woman	Hetero	35-44	6-10	6-10	8	Food access, services, lobbying, gj, rj, leadership
Jack	White	Man	Hetero	35-44	6-10	11-15	20	Ed, employment, policy, rj, leadership
Samuel	Hisp./Black	Man	Hetero	45-54	16-20	26-30	22	Health, policy, lobbying, pub info, rj, leadership
Marcos	Latino	Man	Hetero	35-44	11-15	21-25	23	Ed, ending solitary confinement, reentry, rj, leadership
Deedra	Black	Woman	Hetero	35-44	11-15	6-10	3	Incarcerated mother's rights, gj, rj, restorative justice
Price	Black	Man	Hetero	45-54	31-35	31-35	33	Ed, leadership, ending life without parole, rj
Reginald	Black	Man	Hetero	45-54	31-35	31-35	25	Policy, lobbying, leadership, reentry, father's issues, juveniles, rj
Madelena	Latina	Woman	Hetero	35-44	1-5	6-10	4	Ed, campaigning, leadership, rj, gj
Vasco	Latino	Man	Hetero	35-44	21-25	21-25	4	Ed, culture, film, media, leadership, reentry, rj
Piper	White	Woman	Queer	25-34	11-15	11-15	3	Communication, media, campaigning, gj, rj
Taylor	White	Woman	Hetero	45-54	11-15	16-20	10	Abolition, ed, research, lobbying, reentry, gj, rj

* ed = education; rj = racial justice; gj = gendered justice.

organizing notes and pulling memorable quotes, immersed in the field and in the process of research, documenting what was shaping up to be common themes in line with expectations, surprises that were not accounted for in the proposal, and interesting categorizations that emerged. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participant or assigned.

RESULTS

Below we demonstrate that carceral status is a system of power (or system of oppression) with institutional, symbolic, and individual dimensions (Harding 1986; Collins 1993). First, we illustrate how carceral citizens constitute an oppressed group by applying Young's (2019) interpretation of her original five faces of oppression to findings from qualitative interviews with FIAs. Then, we illustrate how carceral citizen activists counter those oppressions through their work to make material changes in institutions as well as symbolically restorying themselves to transform the meaning of the carceral citizen category. Finally, we argue that this evidence supports the concept of carceral status as an axis of oppression, which simultaneously privileges conventional citizens in the social strata and intersects meaningfully with other systems of oppression.

THE FIVE FACES OF CARCERAL CITIZEN OPPRESSION

Exploitation

Exploitation is a form of oppression that occurs through the transfer of the results of one's labor to the benefit of another (Young 2019). These are relations that are reproduced and continuously extended to augment power. Angela Davis (2011) argues that mass incarceration (i.e., the prison industrial complex) touches directly on the prison's fundamental role in the exploitation of prison labor for profit. The warehousing of people in prisons creates jobs, and the low wages paid to prison labor or to formerly incarcerated people following incarceration benefit capitalists and undermine labor union wins (Kilgore 2012). Thus, the incarcerated are superexploited (Chang and Thompkins 2002). The average daily wage of an incarcerated worker for nonindustry prison jobs is 86 cents, down from 93 cents in 2001 (Sawyer 2017). So, when thinking about exploitation, one cannot ignore the state-sanctioned slave wages of prison labor, the chain gang, or the convict lease system (Lichtenstein 1996; Childs 2015). Neither should we turn a

blind eye to the ways that unemployed people constitute “an unending supply of raw material for the prison industrial complex” (Davis 2000, 68). The surplus population becomes used for profit through the business of incarceration (Gilmore 2007). Scholars have made the clear linkages from today’s manifestation of the exploitation of the incarcerated back to chattel slavery and the plantation economy (Smith and Hattery 2008; Alexander 2012).

Study participants confirmed that the legibility of their carceral status led to exploitation in the labor force in ways that align with that prior research. Reginald, Deedra, Brooklyn, and Vasco express how the labor power of criminally labeled people is expended to benefit and reproduce relations of domination. Reginald, a Black FIA, explained how he has “seen employers take advantage of, manipulate, and exploit people because they know they’re under supervision.” As Reginald elaborated, this means that conditions of probation require that people under supervision hold a job. Under this external pressure of the criminal legal system’s boot on their necks, participants are unlikely to leave a job despite labor violations or subpar wages. As Deedra, a Black woman activist, explained, employers are privy to the captive employment conditions of their formerly incarcerated workers. Based on her firsthand experience, Deedra notes, “They know I’ll have a hard time finding another job, but it wasn’t hardly worth doing it for the little bit of money that they were paying me.” Likewise, Brooklyn, a Black woman activist, explains, “I was working 93 hours a week at a poultry plant. My labor was being exploited because I was formerly incarcerated. They knew there was nothing better that I could do.” Brooklyn explains how employers request long hours out of formerly incarcerated employees who they know will struggle to change jobs.

It is reasonable to view all labor as exploitative, but carceral citizens are particularly vulnerable. Vasco, a Latino activist, describes a slightly different form of exploitation in which carceral citizens are exploited for symbolic reasons. Instead of focusing on long hours or underpayment, Vasco describes an added dimension to exploitation when formerly incarcerated people are paraded out to an audience. As Vasco argues, “We get utilized as pawns or something for people’s entertainment in cop shows, or jail break or whatever . . . they don’t care that we are opening up our deep emotional scars about being beaten up, molested, or whatever trauma that you have—we should be represented with dignity.” Participants thus confirmed the exploitation of carceral citizens that previous research has documented.

Marginalization

Marginalization is a form of oppression whereby a whole category of people is expelled from participation in social life and becomes subject to severe material deprivation through various redistributive policies and blocked opportunities (Young 2019). Power over people's lives is exercised by subjecting them to a set of harsh rules that differ from the rules for everyone else, thus creating issues of distributive justice. Formal laws and policies bar formerly incarcerated people in hundreds of ways (National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, n.d.; US Commission on Civil Rights 2019). Just a few of the exclusions documented in the literature involve exclusions from employment, housing, medical care, transportation, education, licensure, and other public benefits. Carceral citizens, then, are denied basic rights to societal inclusion (Miller and Stuart 2017).

Participant narratives describe this experience of marginalization through various forms of exclusion postincarceration. Brandi described her experience, "My record stopped me from a lot of—I couldn't even get a place to stay, you know, and there's housing everywhere, but I couldn't get one because of my record." Reginald, working in activism and mentoring for many years, explains the marginalization that reentering people experience: "You're coming home, starting your life over from scratch with no resources. If you have housing, it's living with a family friend or loved one; you don't have the resources to be independent. So, I'm depending on someone to get me a bus pass, or a suit, or a fresh white shirt for an interview, and it puts you in a vulnerable position, because you're dependent on a society that doesn't want you."

Garrett believes these barriers are designed for people to fail: "We [the formerly incarcerated] are in a hostile society that does not want us. You know, like we [reformers] talk about reintegration, because a lot of our current policies are not really reintegration; they're anti-reintegration policies."

Frida described the denial of needed resources, particularly medical care, that happens even while still inside the walls, "Medi-Cal got taken away from everybody who was incarcerated, so then none of us had medical care. We should be provided for with medical care, but these women were getting ripped off their medications, and this is viewed as acceptable."

These participants' responses touch on some of the ways that carceral status can be conceived as a social category against which discrimination is legitimized and even encouraged for those in the oppressed position.

Powerlessness

Another hallmark of oppressed groups is being rendered powerless in the institutionalized processes of determining policies or rules that govern one's life (Young 2019). Of course, oppressed groups are rarely completely powerless, just as privileged groups are rarely entirely powerful. Young describes powerlessness as having limited power through institutionalized means. Often, directly affected people are barred from meaningful civic participation. For example, in the United States, the right to vote is a fundamental right that particular groups of carceral citizens are excluded from, particularly those with felony convictions. Research documents the disenfranchisement policies that have an impact on carceral citizens' power as a group at the ballot box (Manza and Uggen 2006; Uggen et al. 2020) and in other areas of civic life (Uggen and Manza 2003; Bazemore and Stinchcomb 2004; Uggen et al. 2004). Terrell described powerlessness by remarking, "We're not able to vote or, or even voice our opinions like we want to."

Randall, who works specifically on issues of felon disenfranchisement, explains how such policies disperse policy making and resources away from carceral citizens, reducing the power of carceral citizens not just symbolically but also materially:

You've got thousands of people that are incarcerated that are not voting. Public policies are then being put in place to further exclude people after they get out. But they are disenfranchised, either by law or because they're not used to having a voice, or the process to reenfranchise is convoluted. There may be financial decisions to be voted on, and those financial dollars in those local and municipal elections, those elections determine whose streets get paved, who—who gets better protection of their neighborhood, who gets the better deal from local government. And criminal justice system-impacted people are being excluded from having a say in those things.

Piper describes the injustice of being required to pay into the social system but not legally being allowed to have a say in it as a carceral citizen: "There was an election going on that I couldn't vote in, and I was very angry about that. Having to listen to people talk about the election and, you know, it was hard to not be allowed to participate in society in that very limited way. So, I'm, like, paying taxes, but not able to vote."

Terrell, Randall, and Piper focus on disenfranchisement as a deeply rooted form of oppression, and one particular way that carceral citizens are rendered powerless. What it means to be rights-bearing citizen in a democratic society is having the right, no matter how limited, to have a say in the policies or conditions that affect one's life. Formerly incarcerated people endure this form of powerless rendering to varying degrees by state across the United States.

Cultural Imperialism ("Othering")

When the dominant meanings of a society render the perspectives of a group invisible, this is considered othering (Young 2019). That is, the dominant group comes to define the othered group in terms of harmful stereotypes or classify them as deviant, or the othered group is in some way positioned or plagued by any array of dominant meanings that deny their perspective. Subjects become narratively flattened (Miller and Stuart 2017), which means they are reduced to being understood in terms of only a few criminal characteristics (Presser 2013), whereby their potentiality is limited and denied (Arrigo and Milovanovic 2008). The label is an expression of power to define the subject in deeply derogatory ways (Goffman 1968).

Participant comments illuminate how cultural imperialism shapes their experiences. Brooklyn explains this degradation, "I already see the scorn, I see the disdain when I walk into a room and folks know I've been to prison, I'm a criminal." This judgment can feel inescapable. Jessie says, "I'm painted into a corner, I can only be now what I've been labeled." Gwen reflects the durability of this status, "My record is continuously used against me, and, like, in 10 more years, I'm still going to be a convicted felon. Like, that's a fixed situation. I can't change it." Shana signals the inaccuracy of the construction of difference and its related harmful assumptions between the criminalized class and everyone else. "You're a criminal, you're this, you're that; I'm like, am I really? Because the only difference I'd say that's between me and some other folks is they just never got caught." Piper adds, "I had to realize, like, no, I'm not a bad person; I was a sick person. And to begin to heal from that and to see myself as more than what I did. That makes me think about, like, how our worldview is so vastly different than people who have not experienced being incarcerated . . . we have this perspective that is designed to be ignored."

Brooklyn, Jessie, Shana, Gwen, and Piper all speak to various ways that labeled people are othered, whereby they are marked out by stereotypes and their self-expression is overrun by dominant meanings.

Violence

Young (2019) defines oppressed groups as those whose members must fear random unprovoked attacks, damage, humiliation, and whose safety is continuously in jeopardy. In the case of criminalized people, violence not only is state sanctioned but also takes place at the hands of the state itself, by the very hands charged with protecting them. In this way, criminalized groups are deprived of liberties and safety. Scholars explain how people are criminalized and policed in violent ways with particular concentrations of police violence in Black and Brown neighborhoods (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993; Carbado 2017), noting also the brutal torture of incarceration practices like solitary confinement (Richards 2015), and the threats of violence reverberate post-incarceration as criminal records provide just cause for police to stop, frisk, harass, or violently intercede in formerly incarcerated people's daily activities.

Consistent with prior research, the FIAs interviewed discussed experiences with state-sanctioned violence. Jessie described his personal experience with police violence, "I was a victim of police brutality around the age of 11. I was beat [*sic*] and punched in the stomach." Criminalization begins prior to one's processing and arrest; it is a way that police and the carceral state translate behavior. Kelly describes the ongoing and daily threat of police violence that criminalized people endure, "People get, you know, just shot by the police. That's true. That's really something that we have to be continuously cautious of because we know that police kill us." Kelly's words emulate how people engaged in crime are not always captured and booked in accordance with procedure but end up in deadly encounters with carceral state actors when their behaviors are translated as dangerous, or worse, their lives are viewed as expendable.

Samuel exemplifies how the broader legal system is structured to defend and justify such state acts of violence. He says, "There are laws that, that protect people in positions of power when they murder us. Like, you know, how many police officers use an illegal chokehold and kill us and then they're not prosecuted!" Police violence decimates Black and Brown communities, families, and futures. Police do so under the guise of people engaging in behaviors that justified such use of force. Yet Taylor describes her personal experience with police violence even as a White woman: "I

was beaten by a police officer when I was arrested as a teenager, the cop said I wasn't cooperating, but these encounters can be frightening. I'm White and a girl, and we think it doesn't happen to us at all, but it does. I had broken bones from this. I know it's much more rare and it's a different experience for White people, but it happens, I was just a kid and the officer got away with it, I was told it was my own fault."

Jessie, Kelly, Samuel, and Taylor all touched on the physical violence that is a lived reality for criminalized people, and a threat from which others are shielded. People whose behaviors are translated by state actors as acceptable, de-escalatable, or even completely undetected are not subject to these violent encounters. Being Black is interwoven with perceived criminality; hence, the violence that Black people endure is ever present and, with compounding perceptions of danger and criminality inscribed into Black bodies, is much more likely to be deadly (Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 2019). The conditions of any arrest, however, are violent by nature: getting stopped and frisked, having one's body groped, being handcuffed, stripped, contained, chained, isolated, held in a cage, and then warehoused. Criminalized relationships with police are imbued with fear, threats, and terror. A criminal record is often used to justify police violence after the encounter, especially when the person is Black (Hirschfield and Simon 2010). Police violence is often carried out against people who were already victims of social and interpersonal harms (Hillyard et al. 2004; Potter 2013; Western 2015). The dominant narrative is that perpetrators of violence and victims of violence are separate, but they are often embodied in the same person; indeed, there is significant victim-offender overlap (Jennings et al. 2010; Berg et al. 2012; Western 2015).

INTERSECTIONALITY AND OPPRESSION

All of these carceral citizen-based oppressions are experienced in a web of interlocking systems of oppression based on race, class, and gender that make experiences different. Applying Young's (2019) five criteria to the situation of groups makes it possible to think about and compare oppressions without reductive claims that one is more fundamental than the other. Particular forms of oppression appear differently for distinctive groups. We can compare the combinations of oppressions that groups experience and the intensity of those oppressions. Young asserts that "we can plausibly claim that one group is more oppressed than another without reducing all oppressions to a single scale" (1990, 61).

Kimberle Crenshaw's (1990) term "intersectionality" and Young's framework lend themselves to conceptualizing criminalized people's experience. Young (1990) argues that different groups endure different combinations of intensity of the five forms of oppression, thus intersectionality and Young's concepts provide a scaffolding with which to make empirical claims about compounding and intersectional oppressions. Furthermore, Young asserts that it would be false to represent one oppressed group as experiencing oppression the same way as another. These experiences of group-based oppression will vary across other systems of oppression (e.g., race, gender, class, or sexuality). Therefore, resisting oppression as a criminalized class requires ongoing negotiation between group solidarity and the simultaneous acknowledgment of group differences across these various axes.

Take the oppression of violence, for example. Communities of color are entrenched in police violence, but White people also experience violence and excessive use of force at the hands of police. The nature of this violence, however, varies both in likelihood and intensity across race. Some White people experience the cringe and the fear of blue lights approaching them. However, the police enact a particular systematized brutality against the Black community that is not characteristic of the police relationship with White racial groups. Criminality is the excuse that gets absorbed into popular sentiment to justify the deadly use of force against communities of color, while overlooking the police's ability to often de-escalate criminal encounters when White defendants are involved.

As we have shown, carceral status is a system of oppression whereby carceral citizens endure exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, and violence at the hands of the carceral state that conventional citizens have had the good fortune to evade. Yet carceral citizens are not agentless victims of these harms; rather, carceral citizens can and do resist and remake their identities. As we detail below, in insurgent acts of dignity and rights-claiming movements for justice, they restore themselves as a rights-deserving social category.

CARCERAL CITIZEN ACTIVISM AS RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION AND REVOLUTIONARY MEANING CHANGE

One way that identities are constructed is through legacies of dissent and the countering of oppression for positive change. Participants in this study

reconfigured the meaning attached to the carceral citizen category in their struggle against oppression by engaging in activist work. In their claims to rights, carceral citizenship becomes redefined. A once pathologized and oppressed person rises in the social imaginary as a powerful agent of positive change. Although carceral citizens experience three dimensions of oppression (institutional, symbolic, and individual), FIAs challenge them all through their work. They make material changes in institutions as well as change in the symbolic meanings of being carceral citizens, to themselves and to others.

Activists in this study articulated the importance of their work educating agents of social institutions about the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and how it produces the kinds of social disadvantage that make police encounters more likely. This type of critical education can reshape the way that the criminalized are perceived, and even de-vilify them. Greg says,

So activism has given me the knowledge and the skill set with which to more effectively and efficiently, you know, have a powerful part in changing society and changing dysfunctional systems, these oppressive systems, you know. . . . So that in and of itself has been powerful, you know, and then also it's given me knowledge of what the real problems are out there impacting the world, and our place in it. I work with an organization that coordinates forums and events to join citizens working for the common good. We come to understand the ways that people are oppressed, or damaged, or harmed by structural forces and how those interconnect. I then take that knowledge and teach students, law enforcement, correctional institutions, nonprofits, rehabilitations that people are being harmed in these various ways and say—here's what the real experiences of people impacted by incarceration are. I mean what the fuck are we doing, if we're not taking real social action?

Greg links the struggles of the formerly incarcerated to broader issues of justice in educational practice to reconfigure the way criminalized people are understood, not as isolated actors, but rather people ensnared in webs of oppression.

IDENTITY MAKING THROUGH LEGACIES OF DISSENT

It is important to note that activism for formerly incarcerated people has also been criminalized, just as political dissent more broadly can be criminalized.

Participants made this connection of being dangerous in “another way.” FIAs in our sample consistently refer to their change work as a means of challenging power. They use the language “we,” “us,” “them,” and “the system” to indicate distinctions between themselves as a group whose power has been compromised and others who “need education” about how the system is failing. “Power” and “systems” are referred to as entities that need to be “challenged,” “negotiated with,” “pressured,” or “forced” to act. The nature of some participants’ work involved more community and formerly incarcerated mobilization than direct interactions with the state. These participants seek to “build community” and “create safety” for themselves when the system has failed to do so. Participants in our sample continuously and paradoxically claimed their oppressed and resistant identities as steeped in historically similar insurgent politics of oppressed groups along many conceivable styles of oppression (see figure 2). They envisioned themselves as part of a community of resistance to systemic carceral oppression.

For example, Jack reminds us that “our nation was founded by law-breakers, ne’er-do-wells, and just outright criminals. It’s unfair to wave that flag to ask us [the formerly incarcerated] if we respect the law. Are the wealthy who have power, like Elon Musk or Bill Gates, being asked if they respect the law?” Sloan explains that fights for justice may require methods that defy the law, which has immense historical significance regarding shifts in power: “Now, I’m dangerous in a different way, arguably—in a more dangerous way to the system. When I take a trip to jail now [for activism], it’s viewed by many as a righteous, you know, a decision, that it’s connected to a legacy that we stand in the shadow of. So, I’m a lot more dangerous to the system as a community organizer, as opposed to a small-time criminal selling marijuana.”

Aven spoke to this historical threat via his insurgent education and rights-training in his community: “Police might look at me like I’m talking about them, prosecutors might get antsy, people in power might see me as secretly plotting misconduct or misdeeds against them. The reward is making the world a better place, the reward is preventing someone else from receiving the same sentence I received, educating that little boy, those who would have grown up to be incarcerated, is [*sic*] instead, growing up to be a lawyer or a judge. . . . I’m expanding the future, and people in power don’t like that.”

Like Sloan, Aven is now dangerous in another way. People in power are not fearful because of the danger he poses in a criminal sense, but

the danger he poses as an active change maker informing Black communities of their rights to stand up to the state. Both Aven and Sloan's work challenge power in the shadow of a legacy of state suppression of dissent. Sloan referred to King's words, "Power is never voluntarily given by the oppressor: it must be demanded by the oppressed" (King 1963). In the state's efforts to prevent this, activism is often criminalized. The forging of new social orders, however, has historically been the product of law-breaking forms of resistance.

Below, we outline the ways that carceral citizen activists resist the five faces of oppression. We report these results to illustrate how carceral citizens are not simply a helpless group but can also constitute a powerful collective force, employing agency in solidarity-based challenges to the institutional and social harms inflicted upon them. By engaging in this work, they redefine themselves and the category.

Counterexploitation

A resurgence of slavery in the prison industrial complex (Davis 2011) and the subsequent relegation of ex-incarcerated individuals to menial labor are lived realities, as described above by participants. Jack's work focuses on building gainful opportunities for the incarcerated within the growing tech industry. To do this, he works hard to ensure that incarcerated people have opportunities to learn new technology hands-on; he petitions and raises funds to provide the programming for people on the inside. In general, he fights against the low-wage menial labor trap that so many formerly incarcerated people find themselves relegated to after release. Jack envisions his work as countering exploitation of directly impacted people: "We are working with the Department of Corrections to do twenty-first-century work. We don't want people to be paid low wages for doing unskilled labor. That is generally how people are exploited. Directly impacted people are learning to code, to build programs—preparing them for high-paid jobs postincarceration."

Similarly, Shana's activism is centered on counterexploitation, working as a labor organizer fighting for directly impacted rights to living wages and employment protections. "We formed an organization 20 years ago, we organize around fairness in the workplace, fair treatment, and fair wages for people who've been incarcerated."

Both Jack and Shana's work affirm carceral citizenship as an oppressed social category in their active resistance to exploitation. Activists working

to give system-impacted people access to opportunities, career training, fair wages, and fair treatment situate themselves squarely against power augmented by exploitative conditions that the formerly incarcerated become subjected to. In this way, these activists are engaged in a site of struggle, making themselves legible as citizens with rights to fair pay and fair treatment.

Counter marginalization

Marginalization is hallmarked by material deprivation, which carceral citizens experience via resource barriers in nearly every facet of life. As a result, FIAs' work frequently consists of struggles for the restoration of rights in a wide variety of arenas (see figure 2). Fighting for formerly incarcerated people's right to housing, access to education, food, legal representation, mental health services, and jobs are all areas of insurgent contestation where the formerly incarcerated become key players in acts of collective and mobilized resistance to their own marginalization.

For simplicity, we focus here on the case of food access to exemplify the ways activism is an antioppressive practice against marginalization. Formerly incarcerated people may be barred from accessing food via welfare or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (Wolkomir 2018). As they are denied access to jobs that pay a living wage, or denied jobs at all, finding food can be a daily struggle. Carceral citizen activists' work may focus on the policies of the state, collection and distribution of goods, or radical farming initiatives to make communities self-sufficient. We further point out the intense experience of such vulnerability for Brown immigrant families and how fighting became a crucial part of life.

States establish a variety of ways to ban and provide food for people who have convictions. Across the United States, people may experience bans on a complicated host of welfare benefits. One component of President Bill Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 barred people with drug convictions from receiving benefits from SNAP. States were given the option to opt out, but some states retained the lifetime ban (Wolkomir 2018).

Lilly is working to end lifetime bans on food stamp accessibility for people with drug convictions in her state:

You know, [the ban] caught a lot of [drug] convicted folks. And interestingly enough, there was a Republican that wanted to reinforce this kind

of lifetime consequence. She'd say, if you're caught with a drug charge, you're banned for life. But we fought this and the law has changed and people are getting food stamps again. When we passed it here, we were one of eight states that had not made food stamps available for drug convictions. People have been working on this, you know, since 1996, when Clinton passed that fucking thing. People have been working to undo that harm and those exclusions for 20-some-odd years.

Lilly signaled that the work she engages in restores rights to the marginalized, giving them the basic human necessity of food that was, for decades, denied carceral citizens.

Activists may help one another meet their immediate needs in the face of oppressive state policies that deny them access to resources necessary for survival. FIAs build a collective identity and build collective movements in this way. Lance described his work on the ground and in the trenches, which on the surface looks like charity, but underneath that veneer lies an insurgent, solidarity-building effort. Lance explains his work in the following way:

There's a difference between solidarity and charity. Charity is top-down, but solidarity is being where people at. One of the organizations I help with is a collective commune. We have a food shelf, anyone can come in there at any time. It's a way for people who've been incarcerated, who may be banned in one way or another, to access food to get it. This is run by us, for us. We don't require licenses and we don't ask people to identify themselves. People come in there at any time, but, like, this is about solidarity. It's not, like, dominating them. Like, you know, if I give food to the poor, they'll call me a saint, but if I ask why they're poor, they'll call me a communist. . . . Nonprofits, they stifle social movements; [but] this community service *is* activism. . . . We try and involve them in ways that give people a sense of self-worth. So, we're developing this communal model of getting our needs met.

In this passage, Lance speaks about his attempts to unlock people's dependency upon the state, which is a hallmark of marginalization. Under such dependency, one's livelihood is based on being subject to arbitrary and invasive authority of social services who enforce rules to which the marginal must comply (Young 1990). Lance's work and his community are providing

for the immediate needs of people in support of carceral subjects' "right to claim to know what is good for them" (Young 2019, 508). A community model such as the one described by Lance allows formerly incarcerated people basic rights to privacy, respect, and choice, all of which are generally denied to carceral citizens and granted to nonmarked citizens.

Another example of countermarginalization activism, as conceptualized in this singular material deprivation of food, is radical farming. Although seemingly focused solely on food, the repercussions of this practice are liberatory across an array of oppressions. Food growing is understood as an act of survival and is a root of community safety and sovereignty from state oppression. To help us think about meeting the resources needs of directly impacted people as an antimarginalization practice, Gwen describes radical farming in her highly surveilled town in the rural Southwest: "For a lot of people, there is a reticence to engage the state, like it's a protective thing. In radical community making, and through the radical farming organizations, we want people to be involved in organizations that are thinking critically about these systems that produce and perpetuate harm—then you're adding, like, another warrior to the work." In this way, people affected by the state or under threat of capture or violence by the state, through transformative means, restore food to their communities with a deeper vision of distributive justice that is not attached to or dependent upon the state. Activist work in the public sphere serves to contest illusionary divisions between the marked and everyone else.

In the above ways, some carceral citizens resist marginalization and survive by fighting to provide life-sustaining nutrition to directly impacted people. Activist work in this vein of transformative justice is conducted with the intention of bringing carceral citizens together to generate their own self-sustenance. Unlike "carceral devolution" as described by Reuben Miller (2014), which describes a pathologizing of the carceral citizen and localization of their reentry resources, Gwen and Lance's work represents carceral citizens stepping into their power and taking back their autonomy from the state or the charity and services of others. It is fair to say that both Gwen and Lance would agree with much of Miller's assertions that indeed the strategies of "rehabilitation," the hybridization of criminal justice and welfare institutions, the expansion of community corrections, the therapeutic logics, and targeting of dishonored groups have had devastating impacts on the lives and sense of selves of carceral citizens. Gwen and Lance like to think of their work as a shifting away from dependence and pathologization,

and toward a take-back of personal power through solidarity and coordinated work in this case of distributive food justice. The success of their programs is less of a concern than their guiding logic. Their food programs are underpinned by the idea that formerly incarcerated people can step into their own power and sever dependence on others (e.g., the state, community organizations, or religious entities) that aim to “fix” them. The efforts Gwen and Lance describe are a countermarginalization effort in opposition to the dependence-driven programming associated with carceral devolution.

Counterpowerlessness

The fundamental right to citizenship includes the opportunity to vote. In the reclamation of those rights, a legible group of carceral citizens emerges. Although voting rights are far from all that is needed to create a rights-bearing or fully recognized citizen, it is one part of what it means to have some power. Randall works to reenfranchise and register convicted people: “It’s that one-vote power. Even though it’s only one vote, it is one vote. And as you count up all those folks, you know that adds up tremendously. I’m working to get people who are being granted these rights to vote back out to participate. We are only drops in a bucket; over time, we can fill the bucket.”

In this passage, Randall describes his work to reenfranchise and empower those who have recently gained back their voting rights. Although having the right to vote and exercising it can be arguably a limited form of political power (Owens and Walker 2018), it is a right of citizenship that has been denied people, and it is a part of a bigger civic engagement picture. Carceral citizens are rendered powerless when their rights to political participation are blocked through legitimized voting process, yet collective mobilization challenging state-sanctioned disenfranchisement empowers people. Powerlessness is rarely total; we conceptualize Young’s powerlessness as reduced power.

Reginald explains how engaging in policy and advocacy work empowers him and other carceral citizens, politically: “Like, you’re pushing for system change and creating that change, and holding the politicians accountable, [and] it can give you a sense of power you didn’t have before. If we can live that, then we are an example of what Gandhi refers to as ‘being the change you want to see in the world.’ We can hold our elected leaders accountable and [our] leaders accountable, [and] then that’s the exact thing we want to see in the world. More men and women coming out of incarceration

exemplifying that, the more change we're creating." Reginald argues that policy work on the part of formerly incarcerated people is a path to empowerment. Terrell described this "inclusion in the political process" as empowerment as well.

Randall, Reginald, and Terrell describe a counterpowerless imperative for formerly incarcerated people to reclaim their influence and rights to self-determination. Carceral citizens' activist work in that vein makes them comprehensible as an oppressed group denied rights, rights that are given to others who have also broken the law but by virtue of escaping detection have had the luxury to retain this liberty (Brown 2014; Woodall 2018).

Counterimperialism

Carceral citizen activists work to challenge the dominant meanings that have rendered their points of view invisible. The meaning of criminalized people's existence has been interpreted by dominant cultural products (Brown 2009). News stories, primetime television, websites, film, and musical depictions of "offenders" and "criminals" define the oppressed group as a whole. Frida asserted her work in countering such narratives, saying, "We're not only changing laws and policy, we're changing perceptions." Gwen explains how formerly incarcerated activists come to restorey themselves and rethink systems:

We're taught to think that what happens to people harmed by the system is right, and that it's fair. Then we come into our movements and we have these commonsense notions challenged, like we never even thought about it before. Should the police even exist? So, now I'm asking different questions, and our movement is interrogating whether the system should even exist in the first place . . . so those communities that are criminalized, that are surveilled, people who are supervised, folks who are convicted, incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and also people who have survived harm can be understood. Because we are actually not talking about two different populations there, though I would say the state frames it as such—the vast majority of people who move through the system have also survived harm themselves.

Often, without noticing, "dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity" (Young 1990, 511). Their claims to truth and universality can be internalized, creating double consciousness whereby

the oppressed refuse to claim the devalued, stereotyped visions of themselves. There is a contention, then, that the culturally different group (e.g., the criminalized) is marked as different.

Oppressed groups find ways to express their experiences—experiences that previously had been interpreted for them by the dominant group. As Greg indicated, “We are trying to give voice to the voiceless.” Also, Piper described that the objective of her film screening and discussion events is to reveal people’s genuine stories about the realities of prisons. She says, “Prisons are designed to be like out of sight and out of mind. I like putting it out there, so people have to think about these things, to think about the people. It could be our neighbor, the guy mowing our lawn, or even our problem.” Gwen, Piper, Greg, and Frida described how their work deals squarely with the issue of misrepresentation, a hallmark of subjugation. Their activism centers on storytelling whereby the harmful narratives of the dominant that reduce and deny formerly incarcerated lived experiences can be brought to light and even challenge the category of criminal.

Counterviolence

Carceral citizen activists challenge the myriad ways that the state abuses them, as well as the ways that they are socially positioned to be the victims of violence. Wanda’s work to end the shackling of pregnant women; Kalif, Price, Reginald, Frida, and Terrell’s work to end life without parole sentences; Lance’s work on demilitarizing the police; and Shana’s work on accountability for police brutality all aim to challenge the brutality of the state and the social arrangements that make carceral citizens vulnerable to violence. Many of the participants, over the course of their activist careers, have worked on the human rights violations that people have experienced inside carceral settings, as well as on those violations experienced after release.

For example, Randall’s activism centers on abolishing the psychological torture of long-term solitary confinement. He is sure to acknowledge that “harm occurs from violence at the hands of the people who have offended.” However, and importantly, he reminds us that, “The victims and offender epithets have given the inaccurate impression that they are two separate groups.” He challenges the social perception of this difference in his work. He is sure to publicize that offenders are also victims. This, he argues, “should matter in our decisions to determine what punishments are appropriate for victims; these punishments are arguably much harsher when we

are blind to the victim within the offender, the person upon whom we unleash state-sanctioned violence.”

Kalif, Price, and Frida are involved in spaces of community healing directed at highlighting how community, individually enacted forms of violence, and state-sanctioned forms of violence are all inextricably linked. As Kalif put it,

As a freedom fighter, I have to talk about what influenced me to commit the crime [homicide]. Violence is real. I have to acknowledge that, it's important. Crack had seeped into my community, it changed everything, it made young people like myself—14, 15 years old—think we had an express lane to the American Dream. I was a young unfortunate growing up in an inner city. You know the story. Cocaine offered us a promise, education became fruitless, I began to be seen like other young people who commit violence, sell drugs, so on and so forth. So, I do engage in analysis about what factors contributed to my acts. It's not just about me, though. It's about thinking about why there's so much violence in our society as a whole. Because it's all connected.

System-impacted people are often also victims, as Kalif emphasized that “hurt people, hurt people.” Kelly, who was a victim of prolonged child abuse, domestic violence, and untreated trauma, like most system-impacted people (Wolff, Shi, and Siegel 2009) talked about the “punishment of trauma.” She spoke about the connection between her childhood victimization, her subsequent criminalization by the state, and her work on changing those practices of harm:

It's the punishment of trauma. We're so broken at that moment in life, and just, you know, we had no sense that we could impact or change the system on a macro level, right? And so, I do my activism so the people that aren't ready to share their voice yet or aren't ready to share their narrative yet, they have somebody that is fighting for them. We can eventually end this cycle of violence, this cycle of abuse and incarceration; you know, sexual assault, that we experience at home, then by police and guards, all these different harms we experience, and now we try and change them through activism.

Kelly's words illustrate how victimization in childhood is interwoven with the experiences of incarcerated people at the hands of state actors.

Formerly incarcerated activism in this vein is directed at deconstructing the victim-offender difference that is a figment of the social imaginary and changing the very real harmful practices that affected their own lives. Thus, in their work, activists—like Kalif, Frida, Price, Kelly, Randall, and Gwen—arise in the social imaginary as a rights-bearing group, illuminating a variety of forms of violence that they, and other system-impacted people, continue to endure. Thus, carceral citizens, although oppressed, resist and are transforming the pathologizing narratives that have driven their socially relegated status.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have extended Miller and Stuart's (2017) concepts of carceral citizenship and conventional citizenship to argue that these categories are best viewed as social constructs embedded in an axis of oppression/privilege we call carceral status. We assert that this is a key analytic tool for thinking about and understanding the way collisions with the carceral state intersect with race, class, and gender to produce inequality. In doing so, we acknowledge that nearly everyone has committed crimes, thus the boundary conditions between a conventional citizen and a carceral citizen are purely state imposed. Where a carceral citizen is exploited, marginalized, disempowered, othered, or violated on the basis of their criminal past, a conventional citizen is not—even if they have broken laws. Carceral status is thus a socially constructed category that needs specification. Furthermore, we have argued that carceral status ought to be set as distinct from, yet overlapping with, race, class, gender, sexuality, and other systems of power in considerations of inequality. Our data support the language of Miller and Stuart (2017), but we add this carceral status conceptual category within which carceral and conventional citizens are embedded. This category, we argue, is useful for conceptualizing as separate from, but intertwined with, race, class, gender, and sexuality in social service or criminal legal evaluations, in considerations for employment discrimination, or in research.

Further, our data reveal much about what it means to be a carceral citizen, both as an oppressed group as well as in their capacity to mobilize for institutional, symbolic, and personal wins, much like other oppressed groups. Activists, like those interviewed in our study, are a part of challenging the commonsense notion that those who are labeled deserve their lot. Although they have experienced marginalization, exploitation, othering,

disempowerment, and violence, they can also erupt in civic opposition to the tyranny of the criminal legal state and fight against injustice. In doing so publicly, they bring attention to their struggle and redefine what it means to be a carceral citizen.

We have demonstrated the myriad of ways that carceral citizen activists achieve recognition as an oppressed group with a right to have rights. The criminal label indeed translates the subject as a carceral citizen as Miller and Stuart (2017) describe, but trauma and violence that carceral citizens and their communities endure at the hands of the criminal legal system, the emotional and physical wounds of the state, also translates the citizen. We acknowledge that the criminal record legally bars people from full citizenship. But as our interviews with 32 FIAs attest, they can also emerge as an agentic collective in their solidarity with one another to counter their oppression, and this has considerable impacts on the meaning of the categories, and thus for individuals and institutions.

Future comparisons of the carceral status categories intersected with race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, religious affiliation, and immigration status are needed. Although this study had an overrepresentation of people (especially women) of color, larger samples of carceral citizens, activists, and nonactivists would likely reveal previously invisible oppressions and privileges. Also, elaboration on positions within the carceral citizen category is needed, as people with more socially shamed offenses or who spent decades in isolation will be particularly aggrieved over those who may have more palatable offenses or experienced community corrections.

Although we have elaborated how carceral citizens occupy the oppressed position of the carceral status category, the conventional citizen, like most positions of privilege, remains invisibilized. We hope that the theoretical frame we have presented here will inspire future research that studies “up,” examining how conventional citizens are privileged simultaneous to the oppression of carceral citizens (Woodall 2017, 2018). Studies that examine the privileges conventional citizens garner as a result of “getting away with it” are also needed. We have reported here how oppression operates for carceral citizens as a subjugated group, but few study the privileged position. This dynamic was true for studies of race, which until recently largely focused on Black or Brown people, with scant attention to White people or whiteness. Such “up” studies are needed to make visible the privilege of those who have not been “caught” (Woodall 2018). By first distinguishing the oppressed position within the framework of carceral

status, as we have in this analysis, we now have the language and framework to expand studies and interpretations of social reality in ways that acknowledge and reflect the privileges of those who do not have a criminal history. Perhaps, as Sloan would say, it is time for the field of criminology to be “dangerous in a different way.”

NOTE

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