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Risky business, risk assessment, and other heteronormative misnomers in women's community corrections and reentry planning

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Abstract

This article uses ethnographic and interview data to explore how halfway house and community corrections staff in a women's halfway house in the northeastern region of the U.S. police women's sexuality and the ensuing complications of being queer and under supervision. In this setting, women are required to create a Reentry Home Plan that is approved by Community Corrections Officers, putting into tension some women's newly emerging queer identity and/or nonnormative relationship schema that they see as "healthier" and more stable than heterosexual relationships, with Probation or Parole Officers' heteronormative ideals that disapprove nontraditional home plans. This study shows how these women negotiate a marginalized sexual identity and resist biased forms of heteronormative surveillance that extend beyond the legislative parameters of community corrections supervision. It also illustrates the tensions between correctional staff, who view residents' nonnormative relationships as potential sources of risk, and the supervised women, as they develop community release plans.

Keywords

community corrections, gendered punishment, prisoner reentry, risk assessment, sexuality

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Critical feminist scholars have argued that the study of crime, victimization, and criminal justice response must acknowledge how these phenomena are situated in a complex social world systematically shaped by relations of sex and gender (Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988). According to some, a more thorough theorization of risk-based penalty, or punishment responses based on the criminogenic assessment of one's relational needs, is needed to account for intersectional relational and positionality dynamics, which include race, gender, and sexuality (Ocen, 2013; Potter, 2015).

Gendered risk, or risk assessment that is moderated by one's assigned gender classification and its presumed associated relational costs and benefits, has been explored in both sociolegal and punishment and society research, and includes studies on risky sexual behavior (Race, 2007); substance abuse treatment (McCorkel, 2013; McKim, 2017); marital and familial constructions (Haney, 2010, 2013; Hannah-Moffat, 2007); economic self-sufficiency (Bridges, 2017); and the conflation of inherent risk, irresponsibility, and ethnoracial marginalization (Bridges, 2011; Roberts, 2014). To date, however, the literature has yet to explicitly examine the relationship between macro neoliberal ideologies of personal responsibility and racialized and gendered punishment schema for nonnormative sexuality identity construction informed by those ideologies. Through the lens of "commercialized feminism," this article draws on data from an ethnographic study set in a community-based corrections facility to explore gendered punishment of queer or non-gender-conforming women, as they negotiate drafting acceptable postprison reintegration plans. More broadly, this article will explore how the politics of racialized, nonnormative sexual identity are constructed and managed by vulnerable actors.

I build on existing literature in three ways. First, I provide an empirically informed theorization of how contemporary community-based penal mechanisms further marginalize and deny women the space to affirm a nonnormative sexual or gender identity. Second, by relying on ethnographic data collected from a private halfway house for women, I offer an analysis of how these kinds of punishment sites are both informed and bolstered by neoliberal race and gender norms. Finally, I explore how halfway house residents subjected to these frameworks conceive of and respond to the expectations of house personnel and probation officers, including how they challenge the institutional mandates and expectations without disrupting the institutional personnel's apparent maintenance of order and control.

Commercialized feminism and the penal enterprise

Kelly et al. (1996: 80) call the blending of neoliberal ideas about the individual with contemporary feminist ideals "commercial feminism." Commercialized feminism insidiously communicates to marginalized women that achieving mainstream acceptability will follow individual change and self-regulation, and that the onus is on them to initiate that transformation. Goodkind (2009) notes that the

allegedly transformative rehabilitation messages packaged for women, which are supposed to make themselves happier and more confident, also serve to shape them into the kind of good citizens needed for the successful functioning of the neoliberal state—agents who uphold state-sponsored political values of self-reliance, efficiency, and social order.

Goodkind (2009: 401) also argues that neoliberal feminism has resulted in “a shift in the location of the problem to be addressed from outside of the self (e.g., patriarchal society) to within the self (e.g., low self-esteem).” Under this framework, it follows that if marginalized women would comport themselves in socially acceptable ways for which they could be proud, they would be motivated to improve their social and economic prospects, and seek material means and mechanisms through which they could achieve those goals, for example by marrying a breadwinning male suitor. Those successes will not be possible, however, if women are perceived as sexually divergent or sexually autonomous (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Bay-Cheng and Goodkind, 2016). Furthermore, the social costs stemming from one’s departure from mainstream prescriptions of women’s sexuality are reflected in diminished worth; poor cultural appraisals; and the assignment of blame, recklessness, and irresponsibility. Because this framework is widespread, it perpetuates social inequities between women who adhere to these expectations and those who do not.

The challenge of navigating hegemonic expectations of appropriate gender expression and sexuality performance are magnified in the penal field, where gender expressions are highly regulated. In addition, conformity is integral for survival for those with fewer demonstrable prosocial tethers to the status quo (Kunzel, 2008b). These mandates are particularly salient for women navigating this historical period marked by neoliberalism. While neoliberalism is commonly associated with macroeconomic and social policies that promote free market schemes and condemn intrusive social welfare programming, its precepts emerge in the psychological repertoires and growing endorsement of individualism and personal responsibility (Brown, 2006) that pervade contemporary institutional operations.

Thus, existing scholarship highlights how broader gender-based ideological imperatives mimic neoliberal market tenets, operating insidiously within carceral institutions, and largely ignoring the socioeconomic origins of the problems confronted by their clients. Carlen (1988), for example, suggests that for justice-involved women, conformity is motivated by the desire to achieve the “good life” as defined by the mainstream, through their paid labor in the public domain and an innately fulfilling devotion to a loving and heteronormative family—prosocial efforts that are often inaccessible to underclass women. Women navigating social capital limitations imposed by a criminal record must work that much harder to seek redemption and (re)acceptance into a community that requires propriety and self-sufficiency.

Along similar lines, Haney (2010) examines how two different community-based penal sites regulate women’s behavior by curbing their assumed overdependence

upon state aid, and demanding their public abandonment of needs discourses. McCorkel (2013) and McKim (2017) examine privatized drug treatment for criminal justice-involved women to uncover deeply racialized, gendered, and classed constructions of incorrigible criminality and addiction that recreate hierarchical gender subordination among the women subjected to treatment. This literature empirically demonstrates how these institutional sites both pathologize and individualize their charges' problems, while also demanding that these women create more marketable (e.g. White, heteronormative "good wife," "good mother," and "good citizen" personas) and self-sufficient versions of their formerly criminal selves.

In supervisory contexts, women's gender or sexuality expression that deviates from hegemonic mandates is especially fertile ground for inequities and harms (Kunzel, 2008a; Smith, 2006). For example, Sumner and Sexton's (2016) qualitative findings from four men's prisons demonstrate that institutional officials' continuous conflation of gender and sexuality ignores transgender women's unique vulnerability and undermines institutional interest in their safety and security. More broadly, criminal justice-involved individuals who struggle with adopting normative expectations of self-comportment must often surrender to those norms or conceal their true identities and desires in order to survive.

Persons subject to penal control are under immense pressure to *cover*, that is, to publicly downplay stigmatized attribute(s), to meet implicit or explicit mainstream expectations (Robinson, 2007; Yoshino, 2006). While the explicit criminalization of marginalized gender or sexuality expression is constitutionally prohibited in the USA, existing research demonstrates that state-funded penal institutions still participate in practices that, at best, *tolerate* queer and transgender individuals, and more often punitively discriminate against more marginal queer subjects (Mogul et al., 2011; Sumner and Sexton, 2015). Therefore, women under criminal justice supervision, particularly those whose identities do not neatly align with racialized, heteronormative, hegemonic expectations, might disproportionately confront a supervision experience marked by additional hostilities. In response, they may be forced to "cover" problematic aspects of their identity, resist the pull to accommodate mainstream norms, or even strategically maintain a posture of "surface compliance" (Werth, 2012: 9) by selectively adhering to the more rigid or observable institutional mandates to appear compliant, while inconspicuously ignoring or opposing others. Critical feminist research thus draws attention to how cultural endorsements of neoliberal rationality might lead institutions to treat women's failure to meet the implicit and explicit expectations of gender performance and sexual behavior as evidence of poorly prioritized self-interest, the inability to mobilize self-service or discipline, or the sign of risk and endangerment to come (Hannah-Moffat, 2000; Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat, 2009). In the forthcoming analysis, I draw on this conceptual framework to explore how women navigate supervision in light of institutional pressures and practices that enforce a heteronormative, raced, and classed ideology of what it means to succeed.

Specifically, I explore how women resist institutional forces to maintain their identities in this space. I operationalize the construct of *resistance* in light of Rubin's (2015, 2017) conceptualization. A substantial proportion of penological scholarship relies on the term, "resistance," to describe a range of identities that oppose hegemonic norms (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001), consciously political acts of rebellion (Morrill et al., 2003), and/or tacit opposition expressed through noncompliance and passive rebellion (Crewe, 2009). However, Rubin (2015, 2017) suggests that the "resistance" label implies intentional (in)action and disruption, so here I focus on the emergence of "friction" (Digeser, 1992: 995) or apolitical behaviors that automatically emerge in response to restrictive, oppressed, controlled environments.

Methodology

In April of 2008, I began volunteering on a weekly basis as a Reentry Coordinator at a private women's community corrections facility (hereafter, "halfway house"), located in a Northeast American urban setting. My work focused on helping to identify and coordinate the (re)integration needs of residents sentenced to mandated custody in this facility. The women were sentenced to serve terms here that ranged in length from 30 days to 12 months. I operated as an "embedded criminologist" (Petersilia, 2008) in this role, maintaining an insider/outsider status while engaging with the halfway house staff and residents. Staff and residents were aware that I was an academic with scholarly interests in women's reentry experiences. For the duration approximately 15 months, I was granted unrestricted access to the house's weekly mandated activities and day-to-day routines, including family reunification and life skill development workshops, group-based substance use disorder counseling sessions, and more informal activities of residents as they navigated probation officer expectations.

I worked with and alongside a full-time executive director, a part-time admissions director, three house monitors who rotated supervisory shift assignments, several contracted therapeutic specialists, and the approximately 40 women who resided at the house at any given time (resident counts fluctuated between 37 and 41 women during my research period). Though there was some residential flux during the 15 months that I worked at the halfway house, the cohort members whose stays overlapped for the greatest duration of time—approximately eight months—and with whom I spent the most time, represented diverse personal backgrounds. Five women identified as Latina, 12 as White, and 15 as Black. Their ages ranged from 27 to 61 years old. They were serving sentences for an array of offenses, the majority of which were low-level property crimes, and/or minor drug possession and trafficking offenses, although a few had been convicted for robbery. Others had relapsed and committed technical violations, so lived off and on at the halfway house for as long as two years. Notably, 32 of the women struggled with long-standing substance abuse habits. The vast majority of the women residing in the halfway house were either coming from an overcrowded

jail facility where they were assessed as low risk and eligible for community-based supervision, or they were finishing up the tail end of their state prison sentence under community supervision as one of their parole conditions. During the period that I volunteered at the house, only three women were mandated to reside at the halfway house due to committing a technical violation.

Residents and house personnel were not formally recruited to participate in a research study, so exchanges between residents, staff, and myself were unstructured and unrecorded. However, staff and residents permitted me to engage in on-site note-taking in recreational and workshop areas, and I curated extensive field notes after each site visit. For this analysis, I primarily utilize field notes and unstructured interview data collected during my time as a Reentry Coordinator at the halfway house, as well as analyses of key policy and programmatic texts used in the institution.

My handwritten notes were transcribed verbatim and systematically coded. All names of people, locations, and employers have been replaced with pseudonyms. The analytical process of coding involved a number of sequential stages that identified ideas and themes as opposed to counts of explicit words or phrases (Namey et al., 2008). The coding process began with a list of initial categories derived from the existing gendered punishment literature and included such key indicators as motherhood, employment, housing, sexuality, and trauma. For these data, however, the coding scheme was expanded to capture the women's experiences of identity transformation, their efforts to (re)claim their autonomy, and the mechanisms through which they abided by or challenged the heteronormative mandates of the community correctional supervision.

As my time was spent equally with the house personnel, contracted clinicians, and residents, this study equally privileges all of their voices. House personnel were all Black women, natives of the city in which the house was located, and between 40 and 55 years old. Two of the women on staff shared that they had been convicted of crimes earlier in their lives. Counselors and workshop facilitators represented a diverse array of racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender representations, ages, and educational backgrounds. Typically, the volunteers were students in their 20s or retired social workers in their 60s and generally lived closer to the facility, while the contracted, licensed clinicians were typically in their 40s and 50s and several commuted from further away. I did not directly meet with or observe probation officers' interactions with house staff or residents, so any insights gleaned about their behavior are filtered through the perspectives of the individuals that I could access. For the sake of parsimony, I will refer to the residents as *women* throughout the remainder of this article. However, the insights shared in the following pages are meant to include and shed light on the experiences of *women, womyn, womyn loving womyn, wimmin loving wimmin, bi-flexible, fluid, dykes, lesbian-identified bisexual, non-conforming* (for a contemporary discussion of terminology related to sexuality and gender, see Eliason, 2014; Lee et al., 2016), and a variety of other self-identified individuals charged with navigating the correctional context described above.

Findings and discussion

Heteronormative house mandates

Research suggests that a sound, achievable, and sustainable gender-responsive reentry plan is positively associated with desistance and harm reduction outcomes for women under correctional supervision (Hall et al., 2013). However, in this setting women residents were provided a very limited variety and supply of instrumental support such as cash allowance and job-seeking guidance. Nonetheless, upon intake, women reported that they were repeatedly told to “hit the ground running” and to “make this stay count.” This ethos was enforced through the ever-present threat of reincarceration, and the women were often reminded by staff and probation officers of their precarious status.

A list of infractions and their corresponding sanctions were detailed in the 26-page House Manual, which was distributed to every resident upon arriving at the facility. House rules included maintaining order and neatness of self and space, abstinence from alcohol and illicit substances, maintaining employment (or persistent and focused job-seeking efforts, at a minimum), observing curfew expectations, acquiring permission to leave the facility, and participating in drug treatment programming (if court mandated).

Regardless of how one came to the halfway house, all stays were short term. Therefore, constructing a corrections officer-approved home plan was a critical deliverable required of halfway house residents. The official explanation for why the planning protocol existed as it did was articulated in the house manual:

This operating procedure provides for the planning and provision of transitional and re-entry services for offenders housed in {Private Community Corrections Company} facilities. These services provide a system for offenders to sensibly and successfully transition into their communities upon release from incarceration and for improving opportunities for treatment, employment, and housing while on community supervision.¹

Many residents believed that the “sensibly” drafted protocol’s true aim, however, was to further punish women for failing to live up to the heteronormative norms embedded in the community corrections ideology. The “home plan,” or physical address at which the women would reside upon release from the halfway house, included options to either enroll in residential programs or proof of the ability to reside in private residences (demonstrated by a signed lease or letter of support from whomever had promised to house the resident). Lila, a heterosexual Black woman shared her home plan draft with me and sarcastically described it as her “Leave it to Beaver Manifesto.” In spite of her wish to rent a room on her own rather than return to her mother’s abusive home, she believed that a plan that included living with her stably employed mother would raise fewer questions and

concerns with her probation officer. “Rather than try to start something on my own,” she shared,

he [her probation officer] would rather I sit up in that house with someone who he thinks will keep an eye on me. God forbid I do my own thing. She’ll [Lila’s mother] play match-maker and everybody will be happy.

Lila described her mother as very active in her local church and determined to find a suitable, respectable husband with whom her daughter could “plant roots before it was too late.” Lila, however, was reluctant to return to her mother’s home where she had suffered numerous abuses as a child. She told me that her probation officer was aware of that violent history, but still believed that a home plan that included a vigilant mother who would help to get her “settled” would lead to a better outcome than any reintegration effort that Lila could launch on her own.

While Lila described ongoing frustration with house counselors and her probation officer encouraging her to “suck it up” and live with her mother, she ranked her reentry planning troubles as less daunting than the stresses and challenges juggled by queer women in the house. Referring to queer women who had to draft home plans that did not involve same-sex partnerships, she offered that her struggles were easier by comparison:

At least I don’t have to answer questions about what kind of man I’m going home to. Now these chicks? Please. They got a whole nother set of issues, and a whole bunch of convincing to do around here. Wouldn’t wish it on anybody.

Heteronormative reentry goals and behavioral expectations

A great deal of hesitation and dread existed for women who suspected that their ideal reentry plans were not aligned with the institutional mandates enforced by the house staff and probation officers. In particular, queer women described their frustrations with their probation officers’ reluctance to recognize the significance of the romantic relationships they had cultivated with other women. Kayla described what she felt was a cumulative series of oppressive measures. She detailed the various restrictions imposed upon residents, ranging from strict mealtime windows and mandated group counseling sessions, to the regulation of acceptable suitors. Engaging in sexual conduct in the house was strictly forbidden, which she characterized as a “daily injustice.” After detailing many of the quotidian restrictions listed in the house manual, she casually offered, “yea, it’s just another thing to add today’s list of unfair garbage and nonsense” in regard to the rules concerning sexual conduct.

And, since the women were meant to be “working on themselves,” it was understood that engaging in sexual behavior of any kind was a distraction that would lead the women astray and back into their previously reckless trappings. It was

common knowledge that women had sex off-site, but residents I interviewed believed that house staff “looked the other way” if residents had engaged in sexual behavior with male partners with whom they had preexisting relationships—husbands and partners from the preincarceration pasts, for example. Kayla revealed that women who had sex with other women, in the house or outside of it, did so at tremendous risk of being “snitched on,” “narced on,” or betrayed by other residents looking to earn “brownie points” with staff. A common concern was that newer, less socialized residents might trade another resident’s secrets for good favor with house staff.

This prohibition seemed tied to the facility’s commitment to heteronormative practice, since it was common knowledge among staff that women who were granted day passes often had sex with male partners who lived in the community. One house monitor shared the lack of concern about women having sex with men off-site when she told me: “As long we don’t hear about them trickin’ out there, we don’t mind.” In other words, women learned that as long as they were not engaging in sex work, sex with men outside of the house was not as forbidden as the House Manual would lead readers to believe.

Queer women living in the house, on the other hand, were not afforded the same freedoms. Kayla shared that the “no-sex” rule had disparate implications for women with differing expressions of sexuality. Heterosexual women who sought day passes to visit family and male romantic partners were usually granted them. Explicitly or ostensibly queer women at the house were not permitted to spend time “on the outside” with female associates with whom a potential sexual encounter was assumed. One queer woman, Jodi, told me that her probation officer knew that the woman she wanted to visit was her partner, and she was subsequently not allowed to see her. The probation officer told her that visits needed to be restricted to family, and that “it wasn’t a good time for her to hang with friends.” She shared her disappointment with me that her probation officer apparently did not see the value in her reconnecting with her partner of several years. Watching her heterosexual counterparts confront fewer visitation restrictions left her feeling shattered and cheated.

Queer residents were further vexed by their probation officers’ and halfway house supervisors’ refusal to approve home plans that included same-sex female partnerships. Claire, who knew better than to disclose that she planned to live with the female partner that she had grown quite close to while incarcerated, was devastated when a fellow resident revealed their relationship to a halfway house staff member. Claire later shared with me that she cycled into a depressive episode that lasted for weeks, after hearing the house monitor declare, “the time for y’all to be touchin’, ticklin’, and gigglin’ is over. Now is when you get serious about who you want to be.” Not only was the monitor implying that queer women’s sexual activity is trivial, but she warned that the conduct was prohibited and that residents needed to abandon that identity and conduct in order to do the “work” of rehabilitation and ready themselves for “sustainable” and “successful” reintegration trajectories.

Nurturing presumably frivolous same-sex partnerships, staff seemed to believe, would only interfere with that charge.

Strategies of opposition and the rejection of heteronormative commercial feminism

Despite the challenges imposed by the context in which the residents were to work on (re)building themselves, many women found ways to assert themselves and realize their desires. Of the 40 women who I spent several months with while working at the house, there were three with whom I spent at least three hours on a weekly basis. Through an in-depth analysis of my exchanges with Jane, Sandy, and Luz, I explore strategies by which halfway house residents challenged the mandates of gendered, racialized, and sexuality surveillance practices, which denied them the space to draft probation-approved reintegration plans that aligned with their own goals and desires.

Jane. I met Jane approximately 10 months into her stay at the house. She identified as a White woman, was 41 years old, and was serving a three-year parole sentence in the community. She infrequently spoke of her estranged adolescent son and was committed to a steadily deepening romantic partnership that she had forged with another woman while incarcerated. When opportunities to speak in private emerged, we talked about experiences that she didn't feel comfortable sharing within earshot of the residential staff. I asked about the nature of her evolving relationship with her partner and she offered, "this is my first good thing in a long, long while." Jane shared that the onset of her offending and substance abuse coincided with the onset of her sexual activity. She did not speak of any previous romantic partners, however, and her decision not to characterize previous sexual partners as romantic was deliberate:

If we're being honest, I've never had a boyfriend. I mean there were a couple of guys that I hooked up with, who I had friends with, who I even lived with. When I think back on it though, they were all pieces of shit. I mean *dogs*. And it's not that I wasn't with them of my own prerogative. I just realize now that until now, I never really had a real boyfriend, like a real somebody who loved me. Not until now. And, they're everything. Way more than everything or anything I could've expected.

Jane's refusal to legitimate her previous heterosexual relationships exemplifies the friction she felt when faced with heteronormative characterizations of meaningful partnerships. While she had spent years with some of those men, shared households, and even co-parented with two of them, Jane refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of those relationships. She characterized them as unhealthy, unproductive, and inconsistent with what a true relationship should look like. Similar to the rewriting and reframing of past narratives seen in other reentry samples (Maruna, 2001), Jane did not want to give those relationships any authority.

As they were incomplete and deficient, they were not legitimate. Her plans now, as she described them, were much more grounded in a healthy, prosocial reality that she imagined would last. She went on to add, "I don't care what any of them have to say. *This is real* [referring to her current same-sex relationship]."

Even if only in private with me, Jane challenged what she believed were house staff's prejudicial assumptions that queer relationships were frivolous, and this seemed particularly important to her. While her attention wandered during other exchanges, Jane was focused and emphatic when speaking about her partner. The pitch and volume of her speech dropped, but her words were punctuated by a deep and penetrating smile. "Do you know what it is to be *with* somebody who is never ashamed of you?" she asked. "Like, being protected, respected, and even admired? Do you know what it is to *be* somebody who you're not ashamed of? I'm telling you, it's wild!" Jane talked at length about how she anticipated the partnership growing into a lasting attachment and the idea of enjoying the comforts of reciprocated support was a reality that she had never dared to imagine.

Jane knew better than to share these aspirations with her fellow housemates, house staff, or probation officer, however. Instead, she simply did the public work of talking about irresponsibly designed past relationships during group counseling sessions, even if in private Jane discounted the significance of those prior relationships relative to the same-sex partnership that she had most recently cultivated. When describing the public performance of lamenting over poor choices with rotten men from her past, she shared that the public capitulation was a necessary part of the rehabilitation process in the house. The expectation that women had to reveal some broken element of themselves, particularly if tied to some poorly constructed relational dynamic, was an implicit norm in the house, she believed. While she could not produce an updated narrative featuring a partner from the opposite sex, she believed that it was important to convince house staff that her criminal past was attributed at least in part, to reckless choices in her past heterosexual relationships. The more she led others to believe that she was weak or irresponsible, the more she felt that they would "ease up" on her. "Give 'em a kernel and they're good for a while" she advised. While unhealthy past relationships were not celebrated by house staff, Jane believed that they were an assumed feature of the residents' histories. So, perpetuating those institutional beliefs, Jane said, made navigating surveillance that much easier.

Sandy. Sandy was a 36-year-old working class Italian-American who prided herself on having never relied on "some punk-ass dude." She resented the suitable housing criteria imposed by her probation officer that favored what can be characterized as a forced, incompatible heteronormative home plan. Specifically, her daughter's father was willing to welcome her back to the three-bedroom home that he owned, but she had no desire to rejoin them if it meant subjecting herself to his dishonesty and violent behavior. While she preferred to construct a home plan that did not include this romantic partnership, Sandy suspected that her probation officer might ignore the danger that she faced in that reentry setting, preferring

to see her in what he thought would be a more financially stable household. Externalizing her situation, Sandy described her dilemma in the third person:

I would say that they just don't understand what they're doing, asking people to go back to mothafuckas who could care less. But, they know. They definitely know because they got all the history and whatnot at intake. They know he wouldn't spit on her if there was a fire, but they stay claiming that jokers like him are better than nothing. No ma'am, try again. They're doing it on purpose because if she don't make it, they were right all along. They over there like, 'let that bitch burn' and when she comes back they'll tell her she should've tried harder to blow out the flames.

Sandy expressed extreme cynicism not only about "lousy" male partners' capacity and willingness to meaningfully support women upon release from the halfway house, but also the absence of institutional commitment to the residents' successful reentry. She believed that correctional staff ignored the residents' needs and were more invested in assigning personal responsibility to the residents' failures, and the promise of a heteronormative home plan, however unhealthy. Sandy described how her probation officer routinely discussed ways that she could reconcile with her daughter's father rather than investing that time designing a reentry plan that did not include him. The probation officer refused to acknowledge all the ways that her ex was problematic and no longer fit into her life, and instead emphasized the work she needed to do to get herself back into his household. Sandy was repeatedly told to work on her anger and present herself as deserving of another chance. Ignoring that her ex was abusive and dangerous, her probation officer asked her to think about what she could do differently to decrease the likelihood that he would reject her. She was repeatedly urged to consider the ways in which she could "patch things up" and limit her outbursts, so as not to upset her ex and disrupt the family's cohesion.

This line of advisement appears to exemplify a neoliberal commitment to commercial feminism. Sandy was pressured to change who she was and what she wanted in order to fit into a nuclear household that was more economically stable than what her probation officer thought she could create on her own. Sandy shared that her "know nothing PO [probation officer]" placed the onus on her, to "try to make it work" with her daughter's husband, to accept responsibility for her cleaved familial arrangement, and to develop ways to present "the best version" of herself to her ex, in order to decrease the likelihood that he would resume his abusive behavior. The implicit message was that if she had followed the probation officer's advice, the "good life" (Carlen, 1988) would be within reach. However, Sandy was not only unwilling to build that world, but the friction that surfaced when faced with the misaligned prospect, signaled to her that there might not actually be anything "good" worth going after.

Luz. When I first introduced myself to Luz, she warned that she had nothing to offer a researcher like me since she had yet to "figure out the magic formula."

She later told me that because of addiction and incarceration stints, her parental rights were revoked by the state, and that her mother was only willing to raise one of her children. This was the only one of her children with whom she had some measure of regular contact over the years. After several months of our building a rapport, she one day shared that the child for whom her mother had provided a guardianship was facing her own lengthy prison sentence and was leaving behind a young son of her own.

Once she shared this news with me, we never had a conversation where she did not restate her desire to return home and steer a successful reentry trajectory, so that she could take care of her grandson, as she wished she had done with her own daughter who was facing her own prison sentence. Luz's probation officer, however, told her that her motivation to get clean was problematic even though he was pleased with her desire to "get back to the business of living like the rest of us." When we could speak privately, Luz told me about her frustration with her probation officer, who warned her against nurturing ambitions to take care of her young grandson. He reminded Luz that she was still young enough "to get back in the game," identify a prosocial suitor with whom she could partner in the long term, "start fresh with a new family," and enjoy the comforts of what he presumed would amount to a steady and sufficient household income. Aligned with the institutional values of commercial feminism, this exchange exemplified not only that heteronormativity was demanded of these women, but that supervisory actors endorsed a very narrow conception of it that, first and foremost, hinged upon finding a breadwinning male partner.

As we spoke, I observed the accelerating pace with which she spoke and the tightening grip she maintained on my hand. It became clear to me that Luz was physically agitated by what she portrayed as the anachronistic, paternalistic, and White supremacist recommendations her probation officer had made. As a Black Dominican woman who was raised in a larger kinship network, she did not see occupying a primary caregiver grandmother role as the problematic construction implied by her probation officer. She suspected that his reluctance to see her take on this role had less to do with a fear of potentially criminogenic risk factors associated with parenting, since he had already encouraged her to "get back in the game" and have children with a new male partner. Instead, Luz was frustrated by her probation officer's dismissal of a familial construction that diverged from White middle-class beliefs about the dangers of single motherhood. She and I discussed the implications of his suggestions in light of research on grandparents as caregivers. We agreed that the probation officer's advice contradicted what is known about the prosocial characteristics of primary caregiving for grandchildren (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2005; Kerrison and Bachman, 2016) and that the practice was relatively common in communities of Color (Calzada et al., 2013). After several weeks of private reflection, Luz told me that she intended to reject the probation officer's recommendations, and decided to craft her own long-term home plan, unbeknownst to her probation officer, that would enable her to one day serve as her grandson's primary caregiver.

While she could never share her long-term plans with him, Luz made a conscious decision to dismiss the norms that her probation officer attempted to enforce. Despite the criticisms she faced for envisioning a familial constellation that diverged from the White middle-class nuclear familial template, Luz described an intense resolve and commitment to creating the grandmother role she had imagined. In order to placate her probation officer's concerns about her pursuing a familial arrangement that he deemed imprudent and risky, Luz began attending parenting and household budgeting classes that were hosted by the halfway house staff. She led the institutional staff to believe that her participation in weekly Life Skills workshops was motivated by an innocuous desire to simply learn more about participation in prosocial institutions. The truth, however, was that she intended to extract useful lessons from the halfway house programming to develop her capacity to be a responsible grandparent.

Conclusion

The penal logic animating daily practice and informing institutional values in this setting mimics broader ideological biases that disadvantage women. First, women under criminal justice supervision in this site were subjected to probation officers' risk assessment rubric that held out the superiority of a heteronormative home plan based on prevailing mainstream aspirations for female success. These norms and values then structure the house residents' behaviors and presentations of self. Second, while the human capital needed to skillfully and convincingly portray oneself as adept in commercial femininity may not ever be available to the residents, or even in line with their desires, they believed that staff and probation officers expected them to aspire to it. In fact, residents believed that espousing the institutional ideal of being a heterosexual, married, mother (as a superficial gesture of surface compliance, or not) was a critical prerequisite for earning a more favorable assessment of their reentry prospects. Third, for the women confronting a totalizing institution like the one that exists in this halfway house, the institutional mandates appear to spark an array of resistance strategies. While many women in this setting challenged the assumed value of achieving commercial feminism in a number of different ways, I did not encounter a single resident who failed to encounter some "friction" and discomfort with what they believed was the logic behind what they were routinely asked to do, and who they were expected to become. Every resident I spoke with expressed some discomfort with the institutional expectations imposed upon them—to leave the house, stay clean from drug use, find a breadwinning male suitor, and serve as an impeccable mother and community role model.

These findings contribute to the scholarship on racialized and gendered punishment in several respects. For example, as research suggests that interventions that increase the salience and relevance of positive future identities will increase motivation to pursue them (Oyserman et al., 2015), these findings highlight the harms that come when intersectionally vulnerable and marginalized individuals in these

spaces do not feel affirmed in the belief that all elements of their desired future identities will be embraced and celebrated. The findings also contribute to the growing body of literature that asserts that adopting gender-neutral (where all clients are treated equally, which in practice will always unfold in ways that favor the male majority) or gender-responsive (tailored for women, but generally in ways that reinforce larger structural biases disproportionately confronted by women) governance agendas are still insufficient for allowing sustainable, positive outcomes for women under criminal justice supervision (Hannah-Moffat, 2001, 2005; King, 2013).

Finally, by examining how women prisoner reentry home plans are constructed, and whether those plans are designed to satisfy larger sociocultural ideologies, this research interrogates a critical liminal space in state punishment, where the lived experience has potentially monumental consequences. The home plans provide the blueprint upon which these women's futures are presumably hinged. In the immediate months that follow prison release, women navigating reentry supervision will be judged based on the extent to which they comply with that probation officer-approved plan. However, insofar as women's home plans are designed with their relational obligations in mind, they also serve as a long-term plan for shoring up the prosocial prospects of themselves, their children, and their communities. At face value, this is not this worst idea or intention. However, these findings problematize the extent to which these women are governed by White, middle-class, heteronormative norms of domesticity, which is advanced as the primary mechanism through which they can lock in those long-term prosocial goals. Not only is this problematic, but policy makers have yet to critically interrogate the belief that White, heteronormative identities are even inherently empowering for marginalized women (Hannah-Moffat, 2000, 2010; Richie, 2015; Whalley and Hackett, 2017).

While not every woman observed and interviewed in this study identified as queer and/or non-White, centering the experiences of those intersectionally marginalized women is useful for punishment scholarship invested in advancing evidence-based social justice platforms. By lifting up the urgency of queer necropolitics research, and resisting the tendency to cast the experiences of queer women of Color as fringe, we can produce scholarship that is more nuanced, informed, and expansive, as well as mobilize stronger, more productive social justice proposals. A commitment to developing rehabilitation and reintegration programming that better speaks to a more inclusive set of individual needs will empower otherwise marginalized individuals to realize future, prosocial identities that are authentic and embraced.

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Note

1. Excerpt taken from the halfway house manual's Operating Procedure bulletin, published in 2008.

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