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“What are women’s prisons for?” Gendered states of incarceration and history as an agent for social change

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

As the exhibition \textit{States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Histories} travels the nation, visitors will explore the roots of mass incarceration in our communities. While mass incarceration has garnered increased media and scholarly attention in recent years, mainstream analyses overlook the role of gender, even as women are the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population in the United States. This article argues that women’s incarceration and the gendered aspects of the carceral state need to become more prominent in the national narrative, and that museums and public history institutions, in partnership with local communities, have the potential to lead this effort. Archival research and oral history interviews with community activists on the ground shed light on the gendered aspects of incarceration in the United States while, at the same time, amplifying the voices of community members and activists. Doing so provides a model for how museums and public history professionals can become active participants in promoting social change.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Carceral studies; gender; Massachusets; mass incarceration; oral history; public memory

Gendered states of incarceration

\textit{States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Histories} is a public memory project that focuses on the past, present, and future of incarceration in the United States. Organized by the Humanities Action Lab at The New School in New York City, and created by a community of over 500 people in 20 cities, the project consists of a national traveling exhibition and an accompanying multimedia digital platform that explore multifaceted histories of incarceration (States of Incarceration, 2016). In recent years, mass incarceration has gained increasing attention from activists, scholars, journalists, and politicians. Yet while media and scholarly attention overwhelmingly focus on the incarceration of men, women are the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population in the United States and now make up almost a third of incarcerated women in the world. The number of incarcerated women in the United States serving sentences of more than a year grew by 757\% between 1977 and 2004 – nearly twice the 388\% increase in the male prison population (Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2006).

In an interview for the \textit{States of Incarceration} digital platform, Out Now activist Stickii Quest makes a powerful comment: “All prison is, is gender. It’s so gendered and so rigid...”
that anyone who doesn’t fit … it’s dangerous …” They trail off for a moment. Quest’s comment, linked to the experience of LGBTQ individuals, makes a broader point about the intersectional oppressions of those most affected by incarceration. Women’s incarceration is simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed: poor women of color are significantly overrepresented in the prison population (Ritchie, 2012). The vast majority of incarcerated women are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes such as prostitution and minor drug or property offenses, often linked to mental health, substance abuse, and physical or sexual abuse (Kajstura & Immarigeon, 2015; Dichter & Osthoff, 2015; Mauer, Potler, & Wolf, 1999; Women in Prison Project, 2002). Women’s incarceration also presents specific challenges in terms of reproductive justice, with often devastating effects not only for incarcerated women, but for children, families, and communities.

Asserting that women’s incarceration – and its intersection with reproductive justice – needs to become a more prominent part of the national conversation on this issue, students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst engaged with the States of Incarceration project through the lens of localized histories of women’s incarceration and activism in Massachusetts. As public history students and activists, we approached our work under the premise of history as an agent for change, and the belief that historical inquiry can be an act of unsettling the present. Methodologically, we drew on extensive primary and secondary documentation in state and university libraries and archives, as well as conducting oral histories with individuals and community partners. This approach centered the lived experience of incarcerated women and their families and the ongoing work of activists and organizations for reproductive justice, prison reform, and abolition. Many of these community partners served as advisors to our team’s contribution to this multi-institutional national project as well as to a local bilingual (Spanish and English) exhibit specific to Western Massachusetts, which will accompany States of Incarceration when it is on display in the region.

The content and arguments presented here are derived from the collaborative efforts of University of Massachusetts Amherst students and faculty who contributed to States of Incarceration. Throughout this project, we examined gender as the historically contingent social construction of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men, and we examine the tensions that arise when individuals do not adhere to such norms (Scott, 1986). Archival research and oral history interviews illuminate the gendered aspects of the carceral state in an historical context while simultaneously amplifying the voices of community members and activists, providing a model for how museums and public history professionals can engage with incarceration in the past, present, and future by focusing on individual lived experiences in the midst of a vast, dehumanizing system (Figure 1).

What’s in a name? From “women’s reformatory” to “gender-responsive” “correctional center”

The title of our exhibition panel, “What Are Women’s Prisons For?” was a deliberate provocation, intended to alert viewers to the many interwoven agendas at play in the incarceration of women. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts offers an interesting case study, in that it houses both one of the oldest sites of women’s incarceration – Massachusetts Correctional Institution–Framingham (MCI–Framingham), originally founded as the Framingham Reformatory Prison for Women in 1877 – and one of the newest – the Western
Massachusetts Regional Women’s Correctional Center (WMRWCC) in Chicopee, which opened in 2007 and expanded in 2014 (http://hcsdma.org/wcc; Turner, 2012). As we began our research, we became intrigued by the multiple valences of the term “reform,” and the way it has been deployed (and repackaged) over the time spanning the founding of both “correctional” institutions. “Reform” interweaves the work of middle-class white reformers, who led early attempts to build separate prisons for women, with contemporary criminal justice reform, in which “gender responsivity” – the notion that women’s distinct needs require separate sites and practices of incarceration – is often a rhetorical veil for expanding the carceral state. Focusing on “reform” allowed us to explore a metanarrative of how the differential criminalization and punishment of women operates at various historical moments to “reform” women’s characters according to particular societal norms of gender and sexuality (Figure 2).

The nineteenth-century prison reform movement presents an interesting dynamic of women as both reformers and as the subject of that reforming zeal. Middle-class white women advocated separate institutions for women as environments more appropriate to their perceived needs and successful rehabilitation. Reformatory also opened up myriad professional opportunities for working and middle-class women, from kitchen staff to superintendents. Incarcerated women were assigned highly gendered activities, including: “domestic arts, fine needlework, and other domestic housekeeping skills … [that] reinforced the social, economic and psychological dependency that brought the majority of women there in the first place” (Hobson, 1990, p. 127). The Framingham
Reformatory Prison also had a nursery, where infants brought to or born at the institution remained until the age of two, with the fostering of “proper” maternal instincts seen as integral to the task of women’s successful reform (Freedman, 1996).

In comparison to MCI–Framingham today – an overcrowded, underserviced medium-security institution where women (disproportionately poor women of color) often struggle to maintain contact with their children and families – it is easy to look to the institution’s early reform-era incarnation as a more benign model of criminal justice. However, historical court and newspaper reports reveal that the rise of reformatories catalyzed the proliferation of misdemeanor offenses for which women could be incarcerated – most of them gendered offenses (perceived as against order or morality) for which men could not be charged (Northampton Jail Book of Records, 1811–1823). One municipal court report in the Boston Globe of March 16, 1878, for example, bemusedly reported the arrest of Susan W. Belton among a group of women sent to the reformatory for four months of rest “from their weary rounds of nightwalking.” However, the “offense” seems to lie more accurately in the traversal of sexual-sartorial mores: with her “solid, masculine looking” appearance and dress, Belton had passed as a naval seaman for two years prior. Between 1877 and 1912, 27% of the women incarcerated at Framingham were there for “crimes against chastity” like prostitution, fornication, and lewd, wanton, or lascivious behavior (Freedman, 1981, p. 186). It also was not unusual for a woman to be incarcerated for “stubbornness.” By criminalizing certain behaviors and promoting others

Figure 2. Framingham reformatory for women. Photograph courtesy of the Framingham Public Library, Framingham, MA, USA.
through domestic skills-based programming and a strong culture of surveillance, women’s prisons became powerful enforcers of white, middle-class norms of gender and sexuality.

Today, the rapid construction and expansion of women-specific jails and prisons continues to be seen as a “reform” measure, underpinned by three main issues: overcrowding in existing facilities, proximity to family and support, and the need to “serve the women’s population better,” according to former Hampden County Sheriff Michael Ashe, in reference to constructing a new facility in Chicopee, MA to relieve some of the pressure on MCI–Framingham (Statewide Harm Reduction Coalition [SHaRC], 2006). The WMRWCC in Chicopee opened in 2007, and was proclaimed a “gender-responsive” jail, seeking to “empower women to reclaim their liberty through informed and responsive choices” (WMRWCC website). However, community leaders and activists emphasize that the construction of new, gender-specific sites of incarceration will not “serve women better,” but only perpetuate, expand and uphold the criminalization of women, particularly those with intersecting identities. Moreover, they have made clear that programming, policy, and policing in WMRWCC has often been the very antithesis of “empowering” or “responsive” to women’s best interests, from shackling during childbirth to women being filmed during strip searches (Barry, 2015).

During protests against the construction of WMRWCC in 2006, SHaRC activists emphasized the need to “deconstruct” the ideology of women’s prisons, and “reconstruct” viable community alternatives. In particular, they argued that women’s prisons are not for women: rather, women are best served by restorative justice alternatives within communities and by more equitable access to affordable housing, food, job opportunities, childcare, quality education, and healthcare in the first place. Women’s prisons represent an expansion of the carceral state that reinforces and upholds the mass criminalization of individuals who face intersecting oppressions based on race, gender, and class, and who do not conform to societal norms of gender and sexuality (Figure 3).

**Learning from lived experience**

Early on, we learned that expertise lies in lived experience: incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, their families, and those fighting in and for communities affected by incarceration are those best placed to ask the best questions, to mine the details, to track the way policy and politics play out in real lives. These individuals, whose lives are directly impacted on a daily basis by the carceral state, are the voices society should look to in order to engage and interrogate historical and contemporary narratives of incarceration. A powerful example is the work of Michelle Jones, an incarcerated teaching assistant in the Martin College history program at the Indiana Women’s Prison, who – in collaboration with other incarcerated students – has been researching and writing a book on the early history of their prison. Their pointed questions, posed in and through extensive archival data, overturn the traditional “feel-good story about two Quaker women banding together with … the state to create a safe and rehabilitative environment for ‘fallen’ women.” (Jones, 2015) At the beginning of our project, we asked local organizations and individual activists what issues they most wanted the public to hear about, and what they expect museums and the academy to contribute to ongoing activist work.

Recognizing the expertise of lived experience fundamentally overthrows the presumed authority of the curator-scholar, and requires an active “presencing” of other voices. The
panel we contributed to the exhibition features brief text and images illustrating the gendered history of incarceration in Massachusetts. Limited space on the panel and a relatively brief exhibition schedule acted as a promissory note for further elaboration. However, in our digital platform – accessible online, and beyond the exhibition’s timeline or spatial constraints – interviews with individuals who have been directly impacted by incarceration shape a fuller, intersectional framework. The five-panel local component to the exhibition highlights individual activists or organizations in Massachusetts who have worked to shed light on women’s experiences of incarceration, to support families and communities affected by its consequences, and to oppose the carceral state more broadly.

Given that we thought any discussion of gender and incarceration needed to be based in experiences both personal and historical, we conducted oral history interviews with local

Figure 3. Outside facing panel of “What are women’s prisons for?” at the States of Incarceration exhibit launch and national conference in April 2016. Photograph © Chelsea Miller.
activists and community members. Interviewees included formerly incarcerated individuals, their allies, and activists involved with associated social justice movements like reproductive justice. We hoped to uncover not just a personal history of the impacts of incarceration, but a community-oriented story as well. Our interviews included questions asking how each of these individuals became involved in activism work, how history informs their activism, and what they hope to see in their communities. We shared draft interview questions with interviewees prior to the interview, and interviewees could add, edit, or eliminate questions as they desired. Interviewees shaped their own narrative, reviewed edited footage, and received copies for their own use, thus deeply informing the process and content shared with viewers, in turn expanding the material’s reach and utility beyond the exhibition.

A model for museums, historic sites, and public history projects

In undertaking this project, we learned that in order for a social justice-oriented initiative to have a meaningful effect, the project needs long-term institutional support, sustained scholarship, and community involvement. Without such infrastructure, a project such as this runs the risk of being seen as a single, isolated event, only relevant for the duration of an exhibit or an academic course. In part, this is a funding issue: *States of Incarceration* was generously supported by grants awarded to the Humanities Action Lab by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Whiting Foundation, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Partnerships with local organizations can ease the financial burden on an individual institution seeking to develop a public memory project focusing on social justice. Collaboration among organizations also creates broader audiences for public events and the possibility for continued dialogue. Relevant public and educational events are necessary to draw in visitors, to facilitate community conversations around exhibits, and to open up the conversation to topics not necessarily explicit in the exhibit itself (Figures 4 and 5).

Students and faculty in the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst wanted to sustain the conversations that *States of Incarceration* initiated. In an effort to do so, a planning committee composed of community leaders, activists, and department faculty, staff, and students selected “The US in the Age of Mass Incarceration” as the thematic focus of the biannual Feinberg Family Distinguished Lecture Series for 2016–2017. The series includes more than a dozen panels, performances and gallery exhibitions (recognizing the role of the arts in catalyzing nuanced, affective personal encounters with complex issues), know-your-rights workshops, and lectures by the nation’s leading scholars, artists, and activists. The events explore a wide range of topics, from police brutality and immigration detention, to the consequences of incarceration for women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals. All events are free and open to the public and offer child-friendly activities to enable parents to participate; many include free transportation from urban hubs to their small-town venue, or are co-hosted by organizations in nearby Holyoke, Northampton, and Springfield, MA. The events presented by the Feinberg Series are intended to inspire questions, foster dialogue, and support ongoing activist work about mass incarceration.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst and affiliated colleges in Western Massachusetts developed relevant carceral studies courses for teachers and undergraduate students in dialogue with the Feinberg Series, including course offerings like: Warfare in the
American Homeland, Mass Incarceration in the US, Grassroots Community Organizing, and Social Justice Humanities. For elementary and secondary school teachers, the program offers a professional development series led by award-winning social justice educator Dr. Antonio Nieves Martinez, titled “Teaching in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” The series, offered with the Collaborative for Educational Services, supports educators across content areas in exploring the far-reaching consequences of the carceral state in their classrooms. Curriculum development and teacher training opportunities greatly expand the educational reach of the original project by allowing students and participants to take the conversation beyond *States of Incarceration* and the Feinberg Series into their home communities and classrooms.

Moreover, education and curatorial staff from the Museums10 consortium, a local collaborative of museums of art, literature, history, and the natural world in Western Massachusetts, will meet at the Hampshire College Art Gallery for their regular professional development session in February 2017. The gallery is a satellite Feinberg Series site hosting a contemporary art exhibition called *Made in America: Unfree Labor in the Age of Mass Incarceration* that features artists and activists inside and outside prison whose
work confronts the intersection of incarceration and economic/intellectual labor. This professional development session offers a chance to discuss the challenges, strategies, and opportunities associated with exhibitions that directly engage urgent social issues, with direct reference to *States of Incarceration*. In turn, participants can bring the lessons outlined above back to their respective institutions.

**Conclusion**

During her interview for the *States of Incarceration* digital platform, Olga Pedraza of Voices from Inside shared, “We [incarcerated women] have felt silenced and like we didn’t matter … My name is not 109213. My name is Olga Pedraza.” Throughout this process, one of the most powerful lessons we learned was that a social justice-oriented project could do more harm than good if we do not prioritize the voices of individuals and communities directly impacted by the issue in question. Archival research provided a foundational understanding of the history of incarceration in Massachusetts, while interviews with local activists and formerly incarcerated individuals illustrated the contemporary effects of this historical legacy. These interviews expose the gendered nature of incarceration by foregrounding lived experiences within systemic oppressions that many historical narratives do not acknowledge.

If history is to be a catalyst for social change in the present, then museums and public history professionals must engage with individuals like Olga Pedraza and others directly impacted by mass incarceration. Their voices, as well as those of activist, advocacy, and policy organizations focusing on contemporary criminal justice, must be prioritized and amplified. Presumptions about the authority of the curator-scholar must be eliminated in favor of a more collaborative, community-oriented approach. In doing so, we more
powerfully reveal the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender within the carceral state, and begin to work toward a more just, compassionate, and informed society.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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