

Incomplete Sentences:  
Exploitation and Empowerment in American Incarceration Media

by

Rachel Paige Thompson

A.B. Social Anthropology joint Comparative Literature  
Harvard University, 2016

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES  
AT THE  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

JUNE 2019

© 2019 Rachel P. Thompson. All rights reserved.

The author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce  
and to distribute publicly paper and electronic  
copies of this thesis document in whole or in part  
in any medium now known or hereafter created.

Signature redacted

Signature of Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Department of Comparative Media Studies  
May 10, 2019

Signature redacted

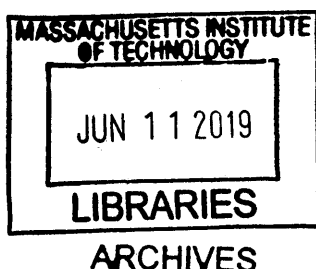
Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_

Lisa Parks  
Professor of Comparative Media Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Signature redacted

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_

Vivek Bald  
Professor of Comparative Media Studies  
Director of Graduate Studies





Incomplete Sentences:  
Exploitation and Empowerment in American Incarceration Media

by

Rachel Paige Thompson

Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies  
on May 10, 2019 in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in  
Comparative Media Studies

ABSTRACT

Nearly 7 million individuals are currently under correctional supervision in America, with around 2.3 million confined in county, state, federal, and private correctional facilities. For those who are not currently and likely never will be incarcerated — including the majority of lawmakers and policymakers and myself — popular media in part defines our understandings of the American corrections system, from policing to the courts to imprisonment.

In order to interrogate the ways in which such popular media can lift up or drown out the voices of those who are incarcerated, I critically analyze three case studies: a popular television show, an acclaimed podcast, and a recently released feature film with an accompanying documentary. Broadly, I argue that all texts constituting the incarceration media genre produce varying positionalities along an exploitation-empowerment spectrum, and by situating my chosen texts in dialogue with one another, I explore how these shifting relationships operate through popular mass media.

Thesis Supervisor: Lisa Parks

Title: Professor of Comparative Media Studies

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
LIST OF FIGURES	6
INTRODUCTION	7
Literature Review	9
Methodology	17
Chapter Overview	19
CHAPTER 1 - <i>BEYOND SCARED STRAIGHT</i> , BEYOND THE PALE: TELEVISED CHILD ENDANGERMENT AS ENTERTAINMENT	23
From Reality to Reality TV: The Background Behind <i>Beyond Scared Straight</i>	27
“No! It’s about you!”: Producing Neoliberal Citizens On-Screen	31
Beyond the Television Set	45
Conclusion	46
CHAPTER 2 - VOICES OF PRISON: SUBVERTING INCARCERATION MEDIA THROUGH AUDIO STORYTELLING	50
Politics of Production and the Audio Podcast Genre	56
Close-Listening <i>Ear Hustle</i>	61
Conclusion	70
CHAPTER 3 - THE MARGINALIZED IN THE MARGINALIA: INCARCERATED EXTRAS AND ACTORS IN PRISON FILMS	75
Prison Media Precursor	78
‘It’s my story, my story deserves to be known’: Reliable, Incarcerated Storytellers	87
Conclusion	92
CONCLUSION	94
BIBLIOGRAPHY	99

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been a thesis without the critical, generous, and thoughtful feedback provided by my advisor, Lisa Parks, and my reader, Helen Elaine Lee. Their insights and perspectives were invaluable in helping this project evolve from a set of ideas into a cohesive argument and compelling motivation for my continued research.

Many faculty members in Comparative Media Studies lent careful questions and guidance throughout my two years: Heather Hendershot, William Uricchio, Ed Schiappa, Nick Montfort, and Jing Wang. I also had the privilege of exploring the provocations in this thesis with scholars outside of CMS — I would like to thank Robert Sampson, Malick Ghachem, and Ronald Niezen for helping me think across disciplines.

I am ever-grateful to the members of my cohort — Matt Graydon, Rekha Malhotra, Josefina Buschmann, Libby Falck, James Bowie-Wilson, and Sultan Sharrief. We all flourished alongside one another under the artificial light of windowless classrooms. Thank you for your wisdom and encouragement.

For those who have spent hours enduring Boston's rush-hour traffic with me on our way to various prisons and jails, I never would have survived Storrow Drive without your company and your conversation. Thank you for making my experiences even more meaningful.

Thanks, *ad infinitum*, to my ever-supportive fiancé, Kenneth Nugent, for indulging my “I-write-best-at-3am” mentality and providing all puns and witty turns of phrase found hereafter. My brother, Eric, offered me his couch and his wine when my research took me to his side of the country. And, of course, thank you to my parents, Greg and Michele Thompson. All that I am, I owe to you.

Finally, I want to thank all of the currently- and formerly-incarcerated mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, students, teachers, abolitionists, and advocates who have opened up their lives to me. I hope to fight for a world in which this thesis never could have existed.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Illustration from "Don't Let Them Take Me Back!"	29
Figure 2. Advertisements for <i>Beyond Scared Straight</i>	35
Figure 3. Stills from <i>Beyond Scared Straight</i> used as promotional material	35
Figure 4. Still from Season 2, Episode 10	38
Figure 5. Still from Season 2, Episode 7	38
Figure 6. Still from Season 8, Episode 5	40
Figure 7. Still from Season 3, Episode 4	43
Figure 8. Still from <i>Riot</i>	80
Figure 9. Poster for <i>Riot</i>	82
Figure 10. Opening still from <i>Riot</i>	86
Figure 11. Closing credits for <i>O.G.</i>	86
Figure 12. Still from <i>It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It</i>	88

## INTRODUCTION

One of my earliest encounters with the American prison system was a sign on the side of the road: Do Not Pick Up Hitchhikers In This Area. It alluded to escapees from the Clements State Prison, I guessed, but I never saw anyone walking along that desolate Texas highway. I did see prisoners on television, though, when I tuned in to MSNBC's *Lockup* after school. As the opening to every episode put it, "We spent months inside. This is what we witnessed." Floating-head interviews with incarcerated men and women were framed by stylized barbed-wire, and everyone on-screen wore a variation of the iconic prison jumpsuit.

As a college student in New England, I had the opportunity to go inside and bear witness as an educator and an advocate. In some ways, my impressions of incarceration that had been informed by popular media held true — prisons and jails were stark and brutal places — but in many moments the individuals I worked with nonetheless brought resiliency and hope and humanity to their histories and their situations. The stories that I had encountered through venues like *Lockup* were stunted and incomplete — they were stories of crime and criminals, not people and their lives.

In what ways can popular media lift up or drown out the voices of millions of incarcerated Americans? This project focuses on a series of media texts — a television show, a podcast, and a film-documentary pair — in order to analyze their representations of incarceration as well as the ways in which their production contexts position incarcerated individuals in an ever-shifting negotiation between objects, subjects, and creators. I have chosen these texts because they each feature, in some way, the sights and sounds of authentic, active carceral spaces and the lives imprisoned within those spaces. At the same time, they each also inhabit the realms of mass media, with millions of eyes and ears tuning in and turning on.

Nearly 7 million individuals are currently under correctional supervision in America, with around 2.3 million confined in county, state, federal, and private correctional facilities.<sup>1</sup> This number places the United States as the country boasting the highest incarceration rate in the world. The vast majority of these millions are disproportionately African-American, disproportionately male, disproportionately young, and disproportionately from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

For those who are not currently and likely never will be incarcerated—including the majority of lawmakers and policymakers and myself—popular media in part defines our understandings of the American corrections system, from policing to the courts to imprisonment. In 2015 President Obama brought David Simon, the creator of the television series *The Wire*, to the White House to discuss criminal justice policy in America, and at every prison education or prison reform event I have attended, correctional officers and formerly incarcerated speakers have saved me the trouble of raising my hand during the Q&A; without fail, they mention the misleading and harmful portrayals of crime and prison, criminals and prisoners, depicted on television and in theaters.<sup>2</sup> Such visual media, newspaper articles, and literary works constitute the genre of prison media, also known as incarceration media. These terms refer to narrative-driven representations, whether fiction or nonfiction, made from within or about life inside facilities of punitive control in the United States, and my project interrogates the ethics and politics of producing and consuming such media in our current era of mass incarceration.

---

<sup>1</sup> Danielle Kaeble and Mary Cowhig, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2016,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, April 2018; Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, March 19, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> James Forman, Jr., *Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 230.



Within this context, incarceration media better captures the wide range of correctional supervision methods being used; prison media centers the prison, whereas incarceration media can encompass pre-trial detention, jail, probation, parole, and immigration detainment. Looking forward, as possibilities like e-carceration emerge, the concept of incarceration may outlive the physical structure of the prison in American correction contexts.<sup>3</sup> In many cases incarceration media texts toe the line between exploitation and representation, with legal policies failing to protect or specifically opposing the populations that survive behind bars. Creative labor is often unrecognized when performed by incarcerated individuals and communities — artists are not acknowledged or paid for their work — because of systemic economic disenfranchisement perpetrated by the nation’s corrections systems. I have chosen three case studies through which to explore the potentials of exploitation and empowerment that is possible through incarceration media: a popular television show built upon the abuse of children at the hands of inmates and guards, an acclaimed podcast sharing stories of life in prison, and a recently released feature film, accompanied by a documentary, set in an active prison and involving currently incarcerated men. These media texts share a sense of reality, being produced inside prisons and with the presence of people suffering imprisonment, but each one situates the people and the carceral institution differently. I am interested in incarcerated individuals as objects of media, creators of media, and critics of media, and how these positionalities operate across media texts of various forms.

## Literature Review

---

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Alexander, “The Newest Jim Crow,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2018.

This project relies upon several overarching theoretical frameworks — politics of representation and production, genre studies, media effects — but each media text I analyze also requires specific lenses for interpretation. Below I address the theoretical undercurrents that propel this thesis as a whole, and, in each chapter, I introduce auxiliary strands that help me better interrogate the different media forms.

The politics of representation raises questions about how narratives, stories, and images of incarceration are constructed and the rippling effects of these signifying practices. In his introduction to the aptly titled *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall describes our ongoing relationship to representations, explaining that “we struggle over them because they matter [...]. They define what is ‘normal’, who belongs — and therefore, who is excluded. They are deeply inscribed in relations of power.”<sup>4</sup> These already high stakes are raised even higher when turned upon the contemporary context of prison representation, where the definition of normal determines how many years a person must be confined and where and how.

Scholars from across disciplines — sociology, media studies, mass communications, cultural studies — have addressed the theoretical and practical concerns that accompany a media landscape rife with stories revolving around both real and fictional crime. Along the lines of mass communication studies, Denise L. Bissler and Joan L. Connors’s recent collection, *The Harms of Crime Media: Essays on the Perpetuation of Racism, Sexism and Class Stereotypes*, offers case studies mostly centered around the construction of the contemporary criminal in national and local news outlets. Authors Gary Potter and Victor Kappeler distill the problematic

---

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 10.

position of infotainment in relation to public policy, writing that “media representations vastly exaggerate the danger of crime and offer intensive policing and harsh punishment as the solution to the problem,” continuing on to argue that “the media both represent and reproduce the official version of social order.”<sup>5</sup> Depictions of crime determine the collective understanding of criminality, moving away from the individual and their situation and toward a more Foucauldian model of constructed social categories vulnerable to regimes of discipline and punishment. As Bissler and Conners’s overall collection shows, local news channels providing infotainment serve as particularly harmful culprits in representing crime and influencing policy. They argue that “how an individual news story is framed will focus on particular aspects of the crime, and reinforce themes about crime, which will also reinforce beliefs about crime in news audiences.”<sup>6</sup> This cherry-picking best serves the advertisers and the audiences of local news outlets while failing to offer a factually-based assessment of crime in society.

The effects of crime and incarceration news media have been examined outside of citizen consumers as well. In January of 2019, researchers found that elected judges who regularly watched conservative news stations imposed harsher criminal sentences.<sup>7</sup> The authors noted a correlation between the length of the sentences and the voting cycle — as an election drew closer, the judges upped the harshness of sentences. Along with this, the authors analyzed the ways in which the news stations portrayed the nature of crime and criminals. For example, on

---

<sup>5</sup> Gary W. Potter and Victor E. Kappeler, “Media, Crime and Hegemony,” in *The Harms of Crime Media: Essays on the Perpetuation of Racism, Sexism and Class Stereotypes*, ed. Denise L. Bissler and Joan L. Conners (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Denise L. Bissler and Joan L. Conners, “Preface,” in *The Harms of Crime Media: Essays on the Perpetuation of Racism, Sexism and Class Stereotypes*, ed. Denise L. Bissler and Joan L. Conners (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Elliott Ash and Michael Poyker, “Conservative News Media and Criminal Justice: Evidence from Exposure to Fox News Channel,” (March 2019).

Fox News, the word “crime” was most often used with racialized phrases like “black on white” and arguably demeaning designations like “perpetrator” or “perps” and “priors.”<sup>8</sup> This kind of politicized information causally impacts high-stakes decision-making for elected judges, such as the length of an individual’s incarceration, because of its effect on voter attitudes. Put differently, although the conservative news media may not sway a judge’s personal opinions on policy, the conservative news media does sway the voters. This more systemic approach to media effects, discussed at length by Aaron Doyle in his book *Arresting Images*, requires that researchers explore how media effect not only audiences or individuals but also social institutions more broadly.

Moving away from news media and into more entertainment-minded representations of crime and its consequences, Bill Yousman, author of *Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV: Representations of Incarceration*, devotes a chapter of his work, entitled “Watching a Nightmare,” to the hit HBO television drama series *Oz*. By critically analyzing and close-reading several episodes, Yousman develops a framework for interpreting the fictional show within and beyond its own logics. For example, Yousman asserts that *Oz* nuances its characters more effectively than other crime dramas, but the show nonetheless constructs false depictions of life in prison. Through a careful tracking of the instances and details of violence shown on *Oz*, Yousman found that these figures fail to match the actual statistics of prison violence published by the U.S. Department of Justice. Unsurprisingly, the drama features drastically inflated occurrences of violence, usually employed in the service of driving the narrative arcs. Beyond this structural function, Yousman argues that the violent “[...] spectacle however may also

---

<sup>8</sup> Ash and Poyker, “Conservative News Media and Criminal Justice: Evidence from Exposure to Fox News Channel,” 4-5.

perform another, latent function, that of reinforcing viewers' fear of inmates while simultaneously articulating those fears to stereotypical notions of race and class."<sup>9</sup> Once again, hyperbolized and exaggerated representations of incarceration impact real-life understandings of criminality and, by extension, potentially criminal policy.

On a fundamental level, prison walls in the United States are intended to function as a non-porous border keeping those held inside apart from the rest of society. Media discourses, then, represent one of few pathways for reaching in as well as reaching out. Although this project focuses on only a limited number of case studies, an array of incarceration media came before and will come after the television series, podcast, and films I discuss in the following chapters. Importantly, much of this incarceration media has been created and shared by those experiencing the injustices of the prison system, who bring with them a front-line authenticity that is essential to creating more nuanced representations of prisons and jails. My research is indebted to the African American Intellectual History Society's blog, *Black Perspectives*, which publishes the "Prison Abolition Syllabus." This resource includes a section on Voices from Inside with more than a dozen published entries authored over the past three decades. The Marshall Project, a nonprofit journalism organization focusing on issues of criminal justice, features a Life Inside series, described as "first-person essays from those who work or live in the criminal justice system."<sup>10</sup> The American Prison Writing Archive, founded by a Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at Hamilton College, now holds more than 1,600 essays penned by incarcerated

---

<sup>9</sup> Bill Youssman, *Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV: Representations of Incarceration* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 156.

<sup>10</sup> "Life Inside," The Marshall Project, accessed May 5, 2019, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/tag/life-inside>.

individuals, and I serve as a transcriber for the archive.<sup>11</sup> This year, the *Yale Law Journal* published a special collection entitled “Critical Voices on Criminal Justice: Essays from Directly Affected Authors.”<sup>12</sup> Reginald Dwayne Betts, celebrated author of *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, will be releasing a new poetry collection about his time incarcerated and the life that has followed, called *Felon*. These media artifacts have informed my own broader understandings of incarceration media as a genre not limited to the realms of popular culture.

Non-incarcerated artists and activists have also contributed a wealth of perspectives, humanity, and sensitivity to the corpus of incarceration media. *Aperture* magazine’s recent issue, “Prison Nation,” features photography from an array of artists that serves to humanize and sympathize as well as expose. This issue includes an interview with Nigel Poor, an artist essential to the discussion in the second chapter of this thesis, regarding her discovery of a trove of photographs depicting life in San Quentin State Prison during the 1970s and 1980s. On the other side of the country, the photographs captured by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick, a couple who spent decades witnessing the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, have been featured at venues ranging from the Venice Biennale to the Frist Art Museum in Nashville in the spring of 2018.<sup>13</sup> More than a decade ago, artists Sharon Daniel and Erik Loyer created Public Secrets, a project that allows women incarcerated in Central California to narrate their own stories and experiences through an interactive digital storytelling platform designed by

---

<sup>11</sup> “American Prison Writing Archive,” Digital Humanities Initiative, accessed May 5, 2019, <https://apw.dhinitiative.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Critical Voices on Criminal Justice: Essays from Directly Affected Authors,” *The Yale Law Journal*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.yalelawjournal.org/collection/critical-voices-on-criminal-justice>.

<sup>13</sup> “Slavery, the Prison Industrial Complex: Photographs by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick,” Frist Art Museum, February 2018, <https://fristartmuseum.org/calendar/detail/slavery-the-prison-industrial-complex>.

Daniel and Loyer to encourage viewers to engage in the act of uncovering the recordings.<sup>14</sup> On the literary side, Rachel Kushner's recent novel, *The Mars Room*, offers a meticulously researched window into the contemporary incarceration of women, especially mothers, who, as of last year, made up 80% of the female population held in American jails.<sup>15</sup> My own thesis reader, Helen Elaine Lee, is one of a number of exemplary contemporary artists contributing critically and thoughtfully to the corpus of incarceration media.<sup>16</sup>

This enumeration covers only a sliver of the vast body of work that falls into the category of incarceration media. I mention these authors and artists and activists and their dedicated labor and careful attention because, despite the impression the following pages might give, incarceration media is not relegated to the purview of large media conglomerations or traditional entertainment industries. For my purposes, I have chosen objects for analysis that meet this era of mass incarceration with the audiences of mass media — the scales are vast and aligned and I find that resonance to be meaningful. Despite the mind-boggling order of magnitude that American detainment has reached, though, imprisonment remains a deeply individual way of administering justice and, I believe, more so injustice. In future research, I plan to adjust my scale, focusing more on grassroots media expressions rather than popular media, in order to better attend to the granular ways in which incarceration media is created and produced and disseminated from the margins. In the meantime, this project will hopefully offer other scholars,

---

<sup>14</sup> “Public Secrets,” Electronic Literature Collection, [http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/daniel\\_public\\_secrets.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/daniel_public_secrets.html).

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Sawyer and Wanda Bertram, “Jail will separate 2.3 million mothers from their children this year,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, May 13, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Two of Helen Elaine Lee's forthcoming novels, *Pomegranate* and *The Unlocked Room*, center on stories of incarceration — both the hopeful escape from prison cells and the stories kept inside.

consumers, and citizens a model for thinking about incarceration media in terms the terms of power and voice and images and storytelling.

This enumeration also introduces a binary that, at first glance, might seem to map directly onto the ways media production and consumption empower or exploit incarcerated populations. This binary is the incarcerated versus the non-incarcerated — creation by those who have experienced prison firsthand versus creation by those who have not. This categorical differentiation has something behind it — imprisonment is an experience, and those having a direct history with it bring a significant credibility in helping to convey it. When applied uncritically, though, the binary is a dangerously fraught way of understanding incarceration media. As I will show, *Beyond Scared Straight*, a reality television show that profiles inmate-run programs intended to deter youth from committing crimes, exploits almost every person involved. Incorporating real scenes of prison and real incarcerated people, then, fails to guarantee that a piece of prison media will not exploit its subjects. Realistic representations of life and lives inside are not sufficient to prevent the perpetuation of containment and control. As my analysis shows, in some instances a sense of realism may even serve to distract from the exploitative nature undergirding a media object. At the same time, a media creator's lack of prison experience, such as the director of the film *O.G.* discussed in chapter three, does not mean that the resulting media form is by default disempowering or inauthentic. For each work discussed in this project, creation and dissemination depends on a negotiation between those who suffer from imprisonment and those who do not.

Along with the media artifacts that comprise the incarceration media genre and the scholarly work analyzing them, critical understandings of policing and incarceration in the United States have been developed and are essential to any discussion of the criminal justice



system. This rigorous body of work has laid bare the ways in which the contemporary system of mass incarceration perpetuates systemic racism and classism in its control, containment, and surveillance of black and brown bodies. Put simply, a discussion of incarceration is necessarily a discussion of race and of class. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argues that mass incarceration serves as a continuation of the structural, legalized disenfranchisement that took the form of Jim Crow laws following the Reconstruction era. Today, she argues, communities of color are relegated to a perpetual undercaste through the denial of housing, employment, education, engagement in the democratic process — all accomplished by an unequal administering of policing and imprisoning. More recently, Elizabeth Hinton has suggested in *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* that the current era of incarceration is not a continuation of a racial caste system but rather a new phenomenon linked to expanding efforts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to control and contain African-Americans. Along with these academic texts, Ava DuVernay's documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* traces a line between slavery, chain gangs, and contemporary incarceration, taking its title from the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which abolished slavery except as punishment for a crime.

## **Methodology**

A critical, close-reading analysis of the media texts allows me to explore the ways in which the content represents its own conditions of creation. The specter of the prison and the prisoner is at the core of each media object I approach, and the narratives, images, sounds, and perspectives—the material conditions that makes up the varying pieces media — are essential to understanding how storytelling can lift up or drown out those that make the stories possible. I also treat each

piece as ideological in its own way — each discursively constructs the “criminal,” the “prisoner,” the “prison,” and these constructions support and oppose various ways of understanding criminal justice in the American context. I conduct this analysis through a close-reading of select episodes and scenes of the media texts, with an eye toward the ways creators and participants portray their projects to the public through interviews and commentaries.

For this project, I examine not only the content of the media but also their provenance, motivation, and reception. I explore the ways in which they came to be, the people and organizations who drove their creation, the networks that allow for their distribution, and the ripples that pulse out after the media objects are shared in the world — all of these are essential to understanding exploitation and empowerment beyond the text. Furthermore, the television series, podcast, and films I examine share not only the setting of prison but also an aura of implausibility — under current correctional circumstances, they probably never should have existed, so why do they? A recent release of photographs from a prison in Alabama powerfully answers this question. The pictures depict sickening acts of abuse and conditions of negligence, and they were smuggled out by an unnamed individual and provided to news outlets by the Southern Poverty Law Center for distribution. A note included on the thumb drive storing the photos included the sentiment: “I can’t help but wonder if the public knows just how bad these men are treated day after day and year after year.”<sup>17</sup> That kind of incarceration media, unfiltered and brutal and honest, exists in spite of the sanctioned production cultures that undergird the media at the heart of this project. In other words, my understanding of incarceration media must

---

<sup>17</sup> Shaila Dewan, “Inside America’s Black Box: A Rare Look at the Violence of Incarceration,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2019.

grapple with how my chosen texts function in dialogue with or in relation to other media as well as the realities of incarceration.

In the last chapter, I take a detour into an archive in order to contextualize a contemporary piece of incarceration media within a longer and potentially forgotten lineage. This look backward helps establish some of the questions that should be answered when evaluating prison media moving forward. It is also important to situate the content of this thesis with my own provenance and my own motivation. I have taught and tutored in correctional institutions across Massachusetts for around six years, and my experiences necessarily shape how I approach and interpret incarceration media. This project began because I heard the same refrain again and again: “You might have watched [insert popular television show or film here], but that is nothing like real prison.” In some form, this sentiment has been shared with me by currently incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, corrections officers, and prison reform and prison abolition advocates. These comments pushed me to question the reasons behind incarceration media texts’ lack of veracity — in what ways are the representations I encounter near to or far from true, lived experiences, and why? As I turned a critical eye toward the crime and incarceration media around me, I also began to consider the ways in which incarceration media texts came to be. It’s difficult enough gaining access to a correctional facility as a family member or a volunteer, so how did media producers manage to navigate this?

### **Chapter Overview**

I begin with *Beyond Scared Straight*, a reality television show produced by A&E between 2011 and 2015. As the title implies, *Beyond Scared Straight* builds upon an earlier piece of media, the award-winning documentary entitled *Scared Straight!* from the late 1970s. As I trace out in the chapter, the creation of the film *Scared Straight!* was directly inspired by a widely-read

magazine article, which had profiled an inmate-run deterrence program designed to steer children away from a life of crime. These back-and-forth movements — from on-the-ground programs to popular media, from popular media back to on-the-ground programs — capture the effects incarceration media can have on criminal justice institutions across space and through time. A close analysis of *Beyond Scared Straight* episodes also reveals the ideological underpinnings that guide the television show, such as the requirement for children to be self-disciplining and self-sufficient in the face of structural inequalities and reinforce negative notions about prisons and those working and living within them. In this way, *Beyond Scared Straight* profits a few and exploits many.

In my second chapter, I turn to a media object that I consider to be *Beyond Scared Straight*'s counter-discourse. *Ear Hustle*, an audio-only podcast produced by incarcerated men held in San Quentin State Prison and a Bay Area artist, offers powerful, humanizing accounts of life inside prison. The subversive power of the voice is amplified by the power of enunciation — listeners must engage with the podcast on its own terms, as the material presented upends the traditional balance between who listens and who speaks in the prison context. On a fundamental level, the sound design of every episode rejects and rewrites existing stereotypes perpetuated by the incarceration media genre. Finally, the conditions of the podcast's creation, especially in the contemporary context of the "golden age of podcasts," help to explain and situate its success. In these ways, then, *Ear Hustle* empowers the men who create it and the men who participate in it, but how far can empowerment carry individuals who are caught in a broken system?

Finally, I end the project by analyzing a recently released prison film, *O.G.*, which boasts the rare distinction of being filmed inside a functioning correctional institution with appearances by correctional staff and currently incarcerated individuals. Interestingly, although *O.G.* is one-

of-a-kind in the contemporary popular incarcerated media landscape, a historical detour reveals that the film is neither the first nor the only of its kind, and this looking backward introduces fundamental questions for evaluating and dismantling the power structures built into the popularization of prison media. In this chapter I also examine a side project that took place parallel to the filming of *O.G.*, a documentary entitled *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It*. This documentary is the outcome of a filmmaking workshop that co-occurred with the production of *O.G.*, and, in many ways, it more completely accomplishes the goals that Sackler set out with when she began producing *O.G.*

Together, these chapters expose the perpetual tension between exploitation and empowerment that underlies all incarceration media. Through form, content, and production, each of the media texts constructs positionalities for those involved — the incarcerated participants, the correctional staff, the publics outside. In various moments and through various relationships a text can shift between exploitation and empowerment, and I trace the operations behind these shifts and negotiations across the case studies.

The chapters also reveal the potentialities of incarceration media to have an impact on incarceration policy, making the production and representation of life inside a method that could be leveraged by activists and reformers. Unfortunately, the most sinister and exploitative media text analyzed in this project, *Beyond Scared Straight*, offers the most compelling example of a mass media object affecting criminal justice institutions and practices. In what ways could emerging works in the incarceration media category use the troubled history of *Beyond Scared Straight* to achieve opposite ends? For the creator of *Ear Hustle*, the labor invested in the media text did result in a policy shift — but only for him. How can producers and consumers of incarceration media navigate the exploitation-empowerment spectrum in the pursuit of systemic

change and reform? In the case of *O.G.*, economic and attribution considerations offer a channel for thinking more structurally about recognizing and honoring the creative labor that many incarcerated communities provide for prison media texts.

## CHAPTER 1

*BEYOND SCARED STRAIGHT, BEYOND THE PALE:*TELEVISED CHILD ENDANGERMENT AS ENTERTAINMENT<sup>18</sup>

A 12-year-old boy, outfitted in an oversized orange jumpsuit, stands weeping while incarcerated adults reach for him through the rusted metal bars of a jail cell. With his hands wrapped severely around the boy's shoulders, a corrections officer prevents any possibility for escape. Later, the boy will struggle to keep prison food, known as "the loaf," down, and a detained man will force the boy to comb his chest hair. After a day of verbal abuse and physical threats, the boy will tearfully renounce his ways and commit to making better decisions in the future.

Nearly every episode of *Beyond Scared Straight* (2011–2015), an A&E television series, adheres to this structure. Allegedly misbehaving and disobedient pre-teens and teens are subjected to the realities of life behind bars, which is intended to deter the children from further delinquent behavior. Corrections officers and incarcerated adults work together to break the children down until the youth promise to reform themselves. These types of deterrence tours are popular throughout the country at the county and the state level; the A&E series serves to document a day-in-the-life for these preexisting programs. Unfortunately, scared straight programs are costly and ineffective, but they continue to crop up in counties across the United States. I argue that this staying power stems, at least in part, from the popular media surrounding deterrence-based interventions. Beginning with *Scared Straight!* (1978), continuing with *Scared*

---

<sup>18</sup> Thank you to Professor Robert Sampson and my colleagues from Sociology 242, taught at Harvard University in the Spring of 2018, for helping me untangle the sociological studies informing much of this chapter. Thank you, also, to the organizers and participants of High/Low: Taste, Quality, and Resolution in Film and Media, a conference held at UC Berkeley in the Spring of 2019 where I presented an earlier version of this chapter.

*Straight! 10 Years Later* (1987) and *Scared Straight! 20 Years Later* (1999), and culminating with *Beyond Scared Straight*, perceptions of juvenile delinquency and deterrence have been shaped by these documentary portrayals.

This string of reality-based media is interwoven with policy formation and application regarding the proper treatment of so-called juvenile delinquents in the American incarceration system. A juvenile justice program featured on a televised documentary was replicated by counties across the nation, and then these on-the-ground programs were later broadcast on national television as a reality show. Policy experts and officials from the Department of Justice published statements criticizing juvenile awareness programs, but the reality show continued to air and, as I discuss at the end of this chapter, scared straight programs persist around the country today. These ideological and social impacts of *Scared Straight!* as a piece of incarceration media were underscored almost immediately following its broadcast. In a 1984 edited collection, *Justice and the Media*, Gray Cavender argues in his chapter “‘Scared Straight’: Ideology and the Media” that “‘Scared Straight’ is one of the more visible examples of state action resulting” from representations in media culture and the distribution of a media object.<sup>19</sup> In particular, Cavender analyzes the documentary through its ideological agenda — criminals and juveniles are presented through stereotypical lenses that conveniently distort and simplify conversations surrounding justice and punishment.

Along with these on-the-ground policy implications, the contemporary television show’s genre serves to expose the media object’s potential ideological effects. This argument builds off of Laurie Ouellette’s work on reality television and the promotion of a neoliberal citizen. As she

---

<sup>19</sup> Gray Cavender, “‘Scared Straight’: Ideology and the Media,” in *Justice and the Media: Issues and Research*, edited by Ray Surette (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1984), 249.



writes, “Reality programming is one site where neoliberal approaches to citizenship have in fact materialized on television.”<sup>20</sup> In particular, Ouellette’s discussion of *Judge Judy* resonates with my argument — both the courts and the incarceration system necessarily invoke conceptions of legal behavior in the context of a neoliberal ideology. As Ouellette explains, “The courtroom program [...] draws from the symbolic authority of the state to promote both the outsourcing of its governmental functions and the subjective requirements of the transition to a neoliberal society.”<sup>21</sup> *Judge Judy* and similar programs “construct templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility.”<sup>22</sup> In a system that places the burden on the individual, the intervention of the state represents a final opportunity to reform in a normative way. Importantly, *Beyond Scared Straight* offers an understanding of the state, embodied by uniformed correction officers, as sadistic — the children are told to change their ways or else have their liberty revoked by a system that sanctions violence and abuse. Put differently, the show serves as a warning against government intervention.

In a similar fashion, Aurora Wallace examines reality television and its ideological imperatives in her essay “Better Here than There: Prison Narratives in Reality Television.” Wallace analyzes *Locked Up Abroad*, an internationally-focused spinoff of MSNBC’s program *Lockup*, in order to understand how reality television “reaffirm[s] uncritical notions of rehabilitation and narratives of empowerment consistent with neoliberal thinking.”<sup>23</sup> *Locked Up*

---

<sup>20</sup> Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, eds., *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008), 231.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Aurora Wallace, “Better Here than There: Prison Narratives in Reality Television,” in *Punishment in Popular Culture*, eds. Charles J. Ogletree, Jr. and Austin Sarat (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 55.

*Abroad* places the American incarceration system in dialogue with other nation's systems, often revealing, by contrast, the humanity of the American model. Although pitched as reality television, *Locked Up Abroad* lacks many of the markers that characterize *Beyond Scared Straight* — the episodes were often filmed years after the incarceration occurred and, thus, scenes depicting the cruelty that took place in the prisons are filmed reenactments. Nonetheless, Wallace unearths what she describes as neoliberal orientations, which suggest to audiences that only through self-empowerment can rehabilitation be realized, even if you're locked up in a Venezuelan or Peruvian prison. The context surrounding the experience of incarceration is irrelevant — the individuals should maintain the ability to fix themselves for the better.

Along with Ouellette's and Wallace's work on reality television, I also draw upon the work of a scholar who has approached *Beyond Scared Straight* from a critical media perspective, focusing on issues of class and normative ideologies. In "Guilty Pleasures and Cultural Legitimation: Exploring High-Status Reality TV in the Postnetwork Era", Michael Wayne analyzes two A&E series, *Beyond Scared Straight* and *Intervention*, arguing that the legitimacy of these programs as less low-brow than their counterparts — *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Maury*, for example — comes from the philanthropic packaging. The "socially marginal" participants are terrorized into realizing the error of their ways, and the middle-class viewership witnesses the personal transformation of the children. My work brings in additional questions of gender and race when considering the promotion of hegemonic ideals of propriety and legality, as well as a discussion on the lived implications of the show. Again, this television program and actual state punishment policies are intertwined, and I contribute an extended consideration of the television show with my focus on media texts in the context of the criminal justice system,

situating *Beyond Scared Straight* in the broader media environment that allows for spectacle and surveillance beyond the television screen.

### **From Reality to Reality TV: The Background Behind *Beyond Scared Straight***

Before turning to the content of *Beyond Scared Straight*, the broader context of the juvenile awareness program model will offer valuable framing for understanding how incarceration media and punishment policy interact. Juvenile awareness programs bring children into adult correctional settings and use “in-your-face” intimidation tactics in an attempt to dissuade participants from continuing delinquent behavior. Also referred to as delinquent deterrence programs, jail tours, or early intervention programs, the earliest juvenile awareness programs began in the 1960’s across twenty different states and involving various methods. Colloquially, the first program known to rely on scared straight methods was established by a group of incarcerated men in San Quentin State Prison, called SQUIRES. Initially, SQUIRES employed a “moderately confrontive” technique whereby the incarcerated men engaged in conversations with the participating youth, taking on more of a mentoring role than the terrorizing role found on *Beyond Scared Straight*.<sup>24</sup> Over time and through rough trial and error, however, deterrence through fear was believed to be the most effective intervention method for justice-involved children. Similar trajectories have been sketched out for the Rahway Lifers group that would eventually be featured on *Scared Straight!* As James Finckenauer traces in his definitive study, *Scared Straight! and the Panacea Phenomenon*, as the program evolved, the incarcerated men

---

<sup>24</sup> R.V. Lewis, “Scared Straight—California Style: Evaluation of the San Quentin Squires Program,” *Criminal Justice & Behavior* 10, no. 2 (1983): 209-26.

running the Juvenile Intervention Program turned to techniques more akin to “shock therapy” than “counseling.”<sup>25</sup>

The in-facility juvenile awareness model rose to national attention when the so-called “Scared Straight” program run out of Rahway, New Jersey was filmed and broadcast first in Los Angeles in 1978 and then, after receiving overwhelming praise, nationwide in 1979.<sup>26</sup> *Scared Straight!*, which won that year’s Academy Award for best documentary, inspired jurisdictions across at least 38 states to implement similar programs, many of which have been in operation for decades. Arnold Shapiro, director and producer of the original *Scared Straight!* documentary, discovered the juvenile deterrence approach through “Don’t Let Them Take Me Back!,” an article authored by Roul Tunley and appearing in *Reader’s Digest* in 1978. The article offered a vivid portrayal of the Rahway program to a wide reading public, with hostile scenes like:

A black inmate, his arms like tree trunks, stepped to within several feet of the boys. They squirmed uneasily as he peered into each face without saying anything. Finally he spoke: “We’re gonna tell you turkeys what prison life is really like, not what you’ve seen in the movies or on TV. These men are gonna tell you things that are not easy to tell. If I find any of you smiling or not paying attention, I’ll break your goddam jaw.”<sup>27</sup>

This racially charged prose is also accompanied by racially charged illustrations, such as the one below, which further position the incarcerated individuals as aggressive, inhuman combatants. Along with the narrative recounting of the program, the article also alleges that of the more than 4,000 children who had participated, only around 6% returned to prison, foreshadowing the

---

<sup>25</sup> James O. Finckenauer, *Scared Straight and the Panacea Phenomenon* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 69.

<sup>26</sup> Finckenauer, *Scared Straight and the Panacea Phenomenon*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> Roul Tunley, “Don’t Let Them Take Me Back!,” *Reader’s Digest*, January 1978, 97.

questionable claims and statistics to be repeated in Shapiro's 1978 documentary and throughout a host of various media outlets.<sup>28</sup> Shapiro followed the original film with "check-ins" ten and then twenty years later, as well as a docu-drama that fictionalized the ideal scared straight scenario.

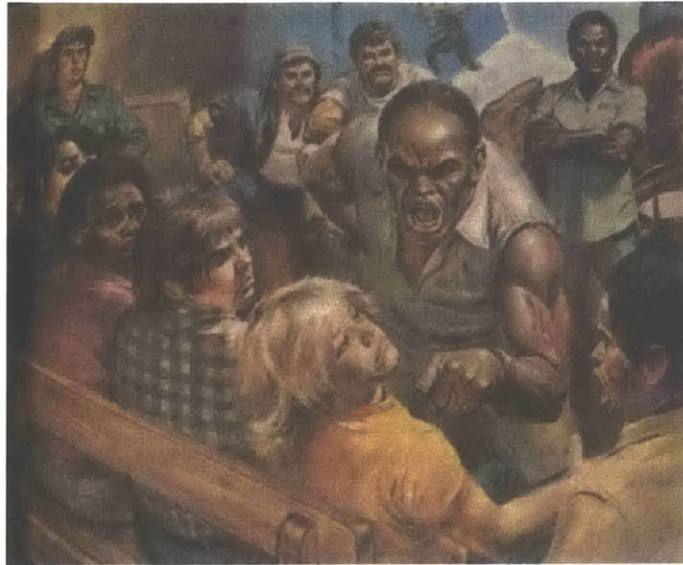


Figure 1. Illustration from "Don't Let Them Take Me Back!"

From the outset, sociologists have been assessing such programs to determine if they accomplished the goal of promoting desistance — the discontinuation of committing crime — for youth offenders. As early as the 1970's the programs were determined to have failing results, and these findings were further substantiated at a United States Congressional Oversight Hearing held in the months following the documentary's national broadcasting.<sup>29</sup> There, Congress also sketched out the power of the media text. As Ike Andrews, a Democratic Congressman from North Carolina, purported in the opening statement for the hearing, public reaction to the film and the film's claims led counties in dozens of states to rush to implement their own scared

<sup>28</sup> Finckenauer, *Scared Straight and the Panacea Phenomenon*, 96-100; Gray Cavender, "Scared Straight': Ideology and the Media," 257.

<sup>29</sup> Finckenauer, *Scared Straight and the Panacea Phenomenon*; Lewis, "Scared Straight—California Style: Evaluation of the San Quentin Squires Program," 209-26.

straight programs.<sup>30</sup> The unbelievably high success rates for the Rahway Juvenile Awareness Program soared even higher for those children included in the film, suggesting that the scared straight approach was effective especially when documented and shared for public consumption.

Two decades later, in 1998, Sherman et al. reported to Congress that juvenile awareness programs fall under the “what does not work” column for deterring youth offenders. Less than five years later, in 2002, Petrosino et al. published the first systematic review of juvenile awareness programs, which was then updated a decade later when *Beyond Scared Straight* was on the air. Petrosino and colleagues conclude that “the prior evidence indicates that there is a greater probability than not that it will be harmful”.<sup>31</sup> When the first season was airing in year 2011, the Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs, Laurie Robinson, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Acting Administrator, Jeff Slowikowski, published an op-ed in the *Baltimore Sun* reiterating the negative impacts caused by scared straight intervention programs: “[The A&E Network] portrays such programs as effective in keeping youths from becoming lifelong criminals. Unfortunately, the research tells us otherwise: ‘scared straight’ is not only ineffective but is potentially harmful.” Their article also alludes to a persistent irony: many juvenile awareness programs potentially violate federal laws under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. This includes the sight and sound provision, which prohibits children from being in contact with adult inmates for fear that the children will be verbally threatened or otherwise abused. Thus, *Beyond Scared Straight* can be

---

<sup>30</sup> Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Education and Labor, *Oversight on Scared Straight*, First Session, June 4, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, Meghan Hollis-Peel, Julia Lavenberg, “Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review,” *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 5 (2013), 33.

considered televised illegal behavior — not on the part of the so-called juvenile delinquents but rather on the part of the show’s producers.

Despite all of this work, these programs not only persist but also serve as entertainment for millions of American viewers and, now that several of the seasons are offered on the streaming platform Hulu, countless viewers abroad can also access *Beyond Scared Straight*. Based on the 1979 documentary and its subsequent follow-ups, *Beyond Scared Straight*, profiles different juvenile awareness programs across the country. By following a handful of children as they experience the program, the TV series’ audience witnesses the alleged transformations sparked by verbal abuse, physical and sexual threats, forced eating, and other deterrence tactics. The children featured in each episode have been chosen by youth counselors, school resource officers, court officials, and family members to attend the programs, and many of them have had charges filed at the juvenile level. At the time of its final episode, the show had featured more than 500 children across 29 prisons and jails.

### **“No! It’s about you!”: Producing Neoliberal Citizens On-Screen<sup>32</sup>**

A close-reading of a selection of *Beyond Scared Straight* episodes reveals the kind of neoliberal citizen the show promotes and, on the other side of the coin, the kind of illicit behavior and identity the show demonizes. Beyond showcasing the negative of the ideal neoliberal citizen, the show also captures what happens when individuals fail to meet the neoliberal standard, when they fail to self-discipline, when they fail to fix their choices. Like *Judge Judy*, *Beyond Scared Straight* is touted as reality entertainment for its audiences, refashioning facets of the criminal justice system into consumable media. While *Judge Judy* impacted perceptions of civil

---

<sup>32</sup> *Beyond Scared Straight*, “Jessup,” dir. by Arnold Shapiro, January 20, 2011, A&E.

procedure and American courtrooms, *Beyond Scared Straight* turns the punishment of children and the exploitation of incarcerated individuals into a for-profit media venture. This close-reading focuses, then, not only on the construction of a neoliberal citizen atoning for mistakes by self-disciplining and changing ways to conform to the normative social order, but also on the creation of a popular media understanding of prisons and those held within.

The episodes also offer an audiovisual recording of the different treatments at different facilities as they unfold, which sociologists can turn to anecdotally to examine the methods popularized on screen. Keeping in mind the caveat of observer effects caused by television producers and cameras, the footage and transcripts produced through the series nonetheless offer a one-degree removed opportunity for studying deterrence mechanisms qualitatively. Video evidence of juvenile awareness programs could assist researchers in determining which tactics produce harmful results. Although researchers have concluded that deterrence programs are at best ineffective and at worst criminogenic, less consensus has been built around the mechanisms behind the negative effects of juvenile awareness programs. Petrosino et al. claim that some post-hoc theories have been suggested, but their evaluations were not structured to address “mediating variables or ‘causal models.’”<sup>33</sup> As for the studies included in Petrosino et al.’s meta-analysis, little space is given to explaining what actually occurs across various deterrence programs. A close-reading of the televised episodes can offer a window into the potential mechanisms behind scared straight programs’ failings, especially as *Beyond Scared Straight* episodes have become examples for replication in on-the-ground facilities.

---

<sup>33</sup> Petrosino, “Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review,” 32.



For example, theories regarding the harms of violence for children may help explain why deterrence programs fail and perpetuate harm. As Patrick Sharkey explains in his recent book *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, The Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence*, fear and violence occupy children's minds.<sup>34</sup> He argues that “a feeling of safety is a prerequisite for learning and engagement”, using neighborhood violence and students' test scores to illustrate the negative impact fear can have on standardized performance and retaining information.<sup>35</sup> Scared straight programs are intended to educate children about the drawbacks of criminal involvement by engendering fear, stress, and intimidation — the precise psychological factors Sharkey names as inhibitors for learning.

Finally, even if the show were entirely fictional and staged, on-the-ground correctional facilities would continue designing new deterrence programs based on the content of the televised spectacle because of the show's categorization as reality TV. The following content analysis provides an understanding of the issues and identities at stake within this neoliberal conception. By examining the interactions of various players — corrections officer, incarcerated individuals, participants, and family figures — I will establish the acceptable and unacceptable ways of being for so-called delinquent children in America. These conditions for being a proper citizen also extend to influence the audiences watching, most obviously parents who fail to discipline their children and children who fail to obey, as well as audiences that have a stake in or control of the system.

America's historic penal system operated on the basis of structural racism through strategies like chain gangs, and the contemporary mass incarceration system reproduces this

---

<sup>34</sup> Patrick Sharkey, *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Revival of City Life, and the Next War on Violence* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 87.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

oppression. Young men of color are disproportionately targeted at every step of the system, and, as the incarceration rate increases for women overall, black and Hispanic women have historically been the most adversely impacted.<sup>36</sup> In 2016, the incarceration for African American women was twice that of white women, and the rate for Hispanic women was 1.4 that of white women.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, *Beyond Scared Straight* fails to acknowledge, much less address, the impact of race on criminal justice. I argue that this omission stems directly from the neoliberal framework described above. Structural inequality, a system rigged along racial and class lines, cannot be squared with the neoliberal conception of self-sufficiency that the series promotes. Children are told that they find themselves in trouble because of their own choices, and any discussion of the racialized history and contemporary operation of the American criminal justice system would undermine this message.

Although the underlying logics of *Beyond Scared Straight* necessarily overlook issues of structural racism, the media text can nonetheless be analyzed along these lines. Before even encountering the text of the television episodes, audiences may be met with the show's advertising choices that discriminate according to race. Professionally produced promotional materials for the series feature innocent-looking white children, trapped behind rusty bars or dwarfed by an imposing cell block. Despite the ever-present tagline, "Real Life. Drama.," these children do not appear in the reality series itself, but rather serve to advertise the show to potential audiences, targeting white youth as neoliberal subjects.

---

<sup>36</sup> "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet," NAACP, 2019; Talitha L. LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> "Incarcerated Women and Girls, 1980-2016," *The Sentencing Project*, May 2018.



Figure 2. Advertisements for Beyond Scared Straight

On the other hand, the other category of advertisements — those that foreground images of actual scared straight participants from actual scared straight programs from actual aired episodes — features depictions of children and adults of color almost exclusively. These vérité images capture distress and anger and defiance, feeding directly into the perpetuation and reinforcement of racialized stereotypes that Bill Youman traced through the fictional HBO series, *Oz*.



Figure 3. Stills from Beyond Scared Straight used as promotional material

Turning to the content of the series itself, the reality television style necessarily reproduces the racial disparities that are historically embedded in the American criminal justice system; the series puts on display the persistent inequalities in incarceration merely by showing the racial demographics inside correctional institutions. Like the U.S. prison and jail population, the children featured on *Beyond Scared Straight* are also disproportionately children of color, and this finding is substantiated in the Petrosino et al. meta-review of juvenile awareness programs. In most of the studies included in the review, children categorized as white made up the minority of juvenile participants.<sup>38</sup> In other words, both televised non-televised scared straight programs disproportionately target non-white youth, perpetuating the existing racial injustices. This analysis of *Beyond Scared Straight* embodies an act of subversive reading, of criticizing the series for a significant absence at its core. *Beyond Scared Straight* attempts to address incarceration without attending to race, but, as the content of the series reiterates, race and incarceration are intimately intertwined in the contemporary American context.

Along with race, the Petrosino et al. study also broke out gender percentages for the nine studies included in the analysis, only one of which even alluded to women by reporting 80% male for the participant population.<sup>39</sup> For the television show, however, females account for nearly a third of the children shown. In fact, the series premiere, discussed below, followed five young girls taken to Valley State Prison for Women in California, and the only children throughout the series to be tagged with “promiscuity” as an alleged offense were female. This obsession with female teenage sexual activity slots into the self-sufficient ideal of the contemporary neoliberal framework. Instead of sexual education or a more systemic

---

<sup>38</sup> Petrosino, “Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review,” 40-43.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

intervention, young girls are publicly shamed for being impure, and, by extension, potentially straining the resources of the state. If these young girls continue down a dangerous path and are incarcerated, as the scared straight program implies, then their children may require government assistance or help from extended family.

In order to prevent this, the authority figures and the incarcerated individuals equate illegal behaviors — theft, drug use, underage drinking — with so-called promiscuity, shifting the burden of propriety onto the teenage girls. Of course, this potentially reverses the existing legal framework for sexual crimes. Being below the age of consent across their home states, the girls featured on the show in fact may be victims of statutory rape.<sup>40</sup> Within the delinquent framework, however, the pre-teen and teenage girls must be responsible for their own chastity in order to meet the neoliberal ideal. This also resonates with Ouellette's discussion on dependency in the context of *Judge Judy*.<sup>41</sup> Women who have children out of wedlock or rely on welfare lack moral worth, neoliberalism posits, and reality television stigmatizes such choices in a spectacle watched by millions of viewers. These girls are positioned as the precursor to the women who later appear on *Judge Judy*.

---

<sup>40</sup> In the final episode of the sixth season, Gabby, a fourteen-year-old, indicates that she lost her virginity at thirteen and that her oldest boyfriend was nineteen. The age of consent in Georgia is sixteen.

<sup>41</sup> Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 232.



Figure 4. Still from Season 2, Episode 10



Figure 5. Still from Season 2, Episode 7

When young girls make “wrong” choices or engage in “wrong” behaviors, this deviation from the accepted norms opens them up to unchecked sexual threats in the criminal justice context. As one incarcerated woman puts it, “If you wanna act like a slut I’ll make you my slut.” For the participants, any marker of the female gender within this context equates to becoming a sexual object that, according to the comments made during the episode, may make these “promiscuous teens” vulnerable to sexual assault within the prison system.

Once again, the question of observer effect impacts the claims that can be made about deterrence programs more broadly. The presence of the television camera may exacerbate the volatility of situations, or the producers may direct incarcerated individuals to manufacture aggressive behavior and children to exaggerate distress. As Aaron Doyle argues in *Arresting*

*Images: Crime and Policing in Front of the Television Camera*, the presence of television cameras may alter the everyday practices of criminal justice.<sup>42</sup> With this in mind, it is important to note that one case involving the sexual assault of a child while attending a jail tour was recently settled in Canada. As a child, the victim was ordered on the terms of his probation to attend a jail tour, where he was subsequently raped by multiple incarcerated men while the corrections officer watched.<sup>43</sup> This is not to imply that all juvenile awareness programs condone such abuse, but the persistent use of threats and intimidation create an unsafe atmosphere legitimized by the non-fictionality of the television series. As one woman threatens, “In a minute I’m gonna take you somewhere, and there ain’t gonna be no cameras and nobody else,” leaving audiences to imagine what happens when the jail tours operate without cameras in tow. The show suggests that youth, especially teenage girls, must de-sexualize themselves in order to fit within a normative social order.

The television series and the various informational websites describe the programs as “inmate-run,” and explanations of the negative effects often point to the inmates as aggressive or abusive.<sup>44</sup> While this may oftentimes be true, placing the blame entirely on the inmates is inaccurate and misleading in light of the situations portrayed on the series. The children’s experience begins not with the incarcerated individuals but with the corrections officers. Many episodes open with a traditional intake process — fingerprinting, photographing, and changing into prison jumpsuits — which initiates the recategorization from free citizen to numbered

---

<sup>42</sup> Aaron Doyle, *Arresting Images: Crime and Policing in Front of the Television Camera* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 141.

<sup>43</sup> Bethany Lindsay, “Man Raped by Inmates During ‘Scared Straight’ Prison Tour Awarded \$175k from B.C.,” *CBC*, December 5, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony Schembri, “Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours” (Florida: Department of Juvenile Justice, 2006).

inmate. Any flicker of perceived disrespect is met with fear-mongering and physical contact perpetrated by the guards, who often taunt and tease the children to the point of tears. One prime example of this practice can be found in the tenth episode of the third season which takes place at Richland County Jail, SC. Corrections officers force the group of young girls participating in the program to engage in physical training, including push-ups and sprints. As one young girl, Kandra, struggles with the exercises, two corrections officers begin barking opposing commands to her. One tells her to run one way while the other tells her to run the other, causing Kandra to frantically run back and forth a few steps at a time. With tears streaming down her face she manages to cough out an apology, which the guards meet by yelling that she should be sorry and that she should be telling her mother that she's sorry instead of them.



*Figure 6. Still from Season 8, Episode 5*

Along with actively engaging in threats or abuse, the corrections officers also use their absence as a weapon. In the thirteenth episode of the third season, a group of young boys are locked into two floors of cells in Floyd County Jail, GA. As the corrections officers evacuate the cell block, the incarcerated men who usually occupy the cells rush the young boys. The steel doors of the cells feature a rectangular cut-out, which allows some of the incarcerated men to reach in at arms-length in their attempts to grab the children while others bang their heads



repeatedly into the metal. Unexpectedly, the low buzz indicating the opening of cell doors sounds, and a few of the heavy doors slide open, allowing the incarcerated adults to swarm into the tiny spaces with the young boys — still no authority figures in sight. Gun shots ring out and smack the cinderblock wall as guards rush the block and bellow that the “degenerates” must line up against the wall and move away from the boys. The sergeants in the scene inform the participants that this part of the tour “wasn’t planned” and offers them a realistic view of life inside.

As representatives of the state incarceration system, the corrections officers come to stand for the kind of interventions that are sanctioned within a neoliberal framework. When children are not self-sufficient, self-disciplined, and making the right choices, then they are sent to suffer at the hands of governmental agents. The television show avoids discussing the many factors and structural conditions, such as class, gender, race, and ability, that could contribute to the behavior and treatment of the children. Sociologists have isolated variables like lack of balanced sustenance, undiagnosed mental health issues, and past traumas when studying juvenile misbehavior and punishment. The physical environment into which children are embedded — the water that children drink and the air that children breathe — can have lasting effects on development, cognition, and, sociologists argue, behavior.<sup>45</sup> These structural barriers are not the product of historical accidents; people of color have been systematically excluded from neighborhoods and communities throughout American history. As Richard Rothstein argues in *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, this exclusion was enacted from the highest levels of government on down to local levels, with

---

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Muller, Robert Sampson, and Alix Winter, “Environmental Inequality: The Social Causes and Consequences of Lead Exposure,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 2018 44:1, 263-282.

African-American families and individuals prevented from obtaining loans to buy houses, purchasing houses in white neighborhoods, and moving into public housing developments. After World War II, zoning restrictions relegated African-American families to industrial areas near factories, and the government consistently provided scant financial support for majority African-American neighborhoods and development. This long history of segregation has been linked to modern-day environmental inequality. There is also the unequal distribution of the “juvenile” or “criminal” label for American schoolchildren — children of color are far more likely to be disciplined in school than white children, and these disciplinary actions have long-term negative effects on student success.<sup>46</sup> Instead of attending to any of this complicated web of history and society and discrimination, the series focuses on the children as responsible decision-makers. Painful realities, like the pressure of living under a system of control that devalues entire categories of life, the pressure of living the continuation of generations of enslavement and segregation — are ignored by *Beyond Scared Straight*.

According to the logics of *Beyond Scared Straight*, the children must function as responsible citizens for the benefit of society as well as for their own lineage — they bear the onus of not only overcoming history but also ensuring a future without incarceration for their family. In the first season of the series, one mother collapses to her knees in the prison yard as tears fall down her daughter’s cheeks, and a father tells his son to fall in line because the guard is in charge, not him. As discussed, juvenile awareness programs operate on stigma, spectacle, and shame, and the televised iterations exacerbate these factors. In particular, parental or familial imprisonment features prominently in many of the interviews with the children, and a handful of

---

<sup>46</sup> Erica L. Green, “Government Watchdog Finds Racial Bias in School Discipline,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2018.

children encounter a relative during the course of the juvenile awareness program. Sociologists of crime have suggested a trans-generational nature to criminality in the United States, with the incarceration of a parent serving as a strong predictor for future incarceration for an individual.<sup>47</sup> Along these lines, *Beyond Scared Straight* extends the neoliberal framework beyond the confines of the individual as children become responsible for altering not only their trajectory but also their family's trajectory. Several episodes center around narrative arcs in which the children encounter close family members during the intervention. Oftentimes the adult relatives plead with the children to change their ways and avoid the same fate. As one man says, "You keep actin' up, this where the fuck you gonna be. Right here with all of us — your cousin, your father."<sup>48</sup>

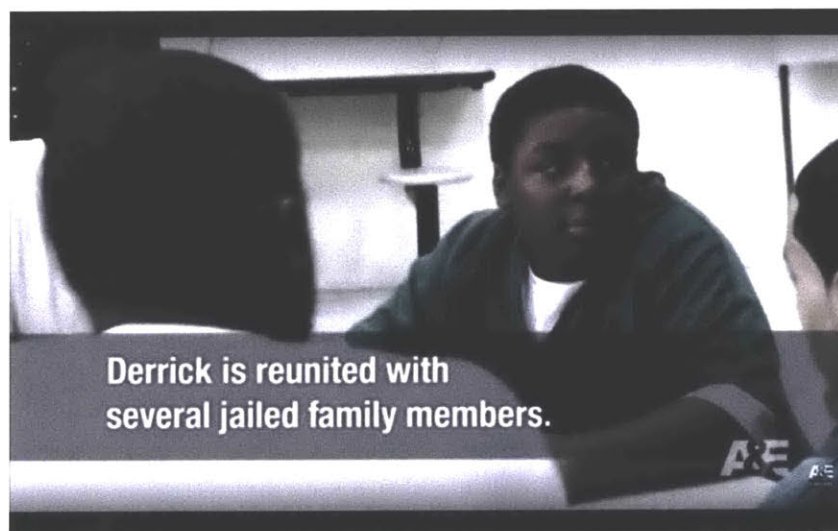


Figure 7. Still from Season 3, Episode 4

This dramatization of domestic conflict also appears in Ouellette's work on *Judge Judy* and reality television. As she argues, *Judge Judy* the television courtroom stands in for state-based mediation, and often the blame or burden for a mistake is placed on the individuals and

<sup>47</sup> Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman, *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> *Beyond Scared Straight*, "Hudson County, NJ," dir. Arnold Shapiro, October 11, 2012, A&E.

couched in the courtroom setting. If they had only made better choices or had more self-control, so the logic goes, they would not be in trouble. Such a logic ignores structural conditions that position people with limited choices or resources making transgressive behavior a cry for help, quest for survival, or coping mechanism. Similarly, in *Beyond Scared Straight* the onus of disrupting the incarceration cycle is placed on the children — teenage sons are tasked with atoning for the sins of their fathers. The context of the jail or the prison forecloses the sense of a family reunion, leaving parents and children unable to touch or embrace. Instead, the children are chastised in front of fellow scared straight participants, corrections officers, and millions of viewers at home. To put it in sociological terms, the criminal label is bestowed upon the children due not only to their inclusion in the program but also to their blood relation to incarcerated individuals.

The familial relationality of incarceration has been discussed at length by crime sociologists, with one famous study concluding that a parent's incarceration is one of the best predictors for the child's future criminal activity, especially in the case of fathers and sons.<sup>49</sup> Current scholars, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates in his piece "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," have framed the conversation through a distinctly racial lens.<sup>50</sup> When a system so clearly builds off the foundations of institutionalized racism, then the impacts spread out seismically from individuals to families to neighborhoods to generations. *Beyond Scared Straight* relies on this sense of inevitability for black and brown children — children of color very well

---

<sup>49</sup> Michael Roettger and Raymond Swisher, "Associations of Fathers' History of Incarceration with Sons' Delinquency and Arrest among Black, White, and Hispanic Males in the United States" *Criminology* 49, 4 (2011). 1109-1147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2011.00253.x>

<sup>50</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," *The Atlantic*, October 2015.

may encounter family, friends, and neighbors during the program, and these encounters serve as reminders that state control is always immanent.

### **Beyond the Television Set**

The television series can be understood as an exemplification of the neoliberal positioning of the subject, promoting practices of self-disciplining and control. This extends past the half-hour episodes and the prison and jails and seeps into the everyday — individuals should surveil themselves in order to meet the standard of useful, productive citizens. Because of cross-platform capabilities, this logic of control can carry beyond the confines of a reality television episode and television cameras. Self-surveillance turns on itself, returning to the insidious practice of punishment as spectacle. The official A&E YouTube channel provides updates on children featured in the show, as well as flashbacks to the “most explosive scenes” and emotionally-charged, decontextualized snippets of past episodes. These videos oftentimes rack up hundreds of thousands of views. For the recycled content, the math works out in an interesting way. Recently, A&E has been releasing flashbacks from the third season of the series, which aired during 2012 and 2013, making yesterday’s featured children today’s college-applying, job-seeking young adults. A cable television program aired half a decade ago becomes a transmittable URL.

Outside of the official content promoted by A&E, other trans-media options allow for the unending surveillance of these children’s choices and missteps. Each episode highlights only four to five individual children out of a group of up to a dozen youth, and, in true reality television style, each child receives his or her own floating-head interview, including the

accurate spelling of first names, ages at the time of the filming, and a list of offenses.<sup>51</sup> Many of these interviews are complemented by an interview with the child's relatives, usually mother and/or father with accompanying first names. These pieces of an identity — first name, location, estimated birth year, relatives' names, offenses — come together to make the individuals featured on the series searchable. A Google query is all too easy, and, because their faces figure so prominently in the show, not only their names and ages but also their appearances can be cross-referenced to ensure accuracy. Many jurisdictions also put arrest records and intake photographs online, allowing a curious viewer to at least conduct a surface pass of the participants' available offending history.

Through my research I have been able to identify about a quarter of the children whose information was featured, most of whom had documented arrests on file in the years following their appearance on *Beyond Scared Straight*. The extortionist practice of online mugshots and background reports contributes to a broader surveillance ecosystem that operates parallel to the state. Given this ability to scrub private sites for offending histories, the task of control and discipline diffuses into the wider citizenry — the evidence of an individual's delinquency is forever saved to be accessed by any other individual or any web-scraping algorithm.

## **Conclusion**

Arnold Shapiro takes credit for changing thousands of children's lives. As he puts it, "The only accurate studies that are actually being done on 21st-century [intervention] programs are mine — are my shows. There's no person in the United States but me who has witnessed these programs

---

<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, the original *Scared Straight!* documentary referred to the children and incarcerated men only by numbers. First names were added during the production of *Scared Straight! 20 Years Later*.

all over the place”<sup>52</sup> As extensive research has borne out, Shapiro did potentially alter the lives of thousands of at-risk youth — for the worse. In a roundabout way, though, the uninhibited documentation and dissemination of these programs is invaluable. People often refuse to believe the extent of abuse that is permitted in the American incarceration system, and, hopefully, this footage will one day serve as incriminating evidence for the realities of the nation’s treatment of justice-involved children. In some cases, problematic or troubling representations serve to expose conditions that need to be addressed.

This chapter began with an overview of the theoretical frameworks undergirding my argument, as well as a discussion of Michael Wayne’s class-focused analysis of the series. In particular, I relied upon Laurie Ouellette’s reading of *Judge Judy* as a reality program that supplants the role of the state in modeling the behaviors and non-behaviors of the ideal neoliberal citizen. Aurora Wallace’s focus on *Locked Up Abroad* allowed me to more precisely apply these frameworks to the incarceration setting. I then turned to the history of juvenile awareness programs and their relationship with media texts, focusing especially on the dialectical nature between incarceration media and public policy for this case study. While *Judge Judy* stands in for the state, both *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* promote state-sanctioned and state-operated programs. Importantly, these programs are cost-effective — the teenagers simply require transportation, the corrections officers are on duty anyway, and the incarcerated adults represent a paradoxically-unlimited labor resource — and they also shift the burden of change onto the children. The programs also illustrate through intimidation, threats, and abuse why the participants should avoid state involvement at all costs.

---

<sup>52</sup> Andy Dehnart, “Beyond Scared Straight’s Real-Life Controversy,” *The Daily Beast*, February 23, 2011.

These claims were substantiated through a close-reading of salient episodes and encounters featured on the television series. In particular, I addressed three previously unexplored issues: gender and sexuality, abusive authority, and familial ties. As I argued, these areas reveal the kind of ideal citizen the show promotes. Girls should be pure because promiscuity is equal with theft, everyone should fall into line because the guards have ultimate power, and children are responsible for breaking the family's cycle of incarceration. Finally, I examined the implications of the reality television program outside of the confines of TV. When other platforms and content are considered, *Beyond Scared Straight* extends beyond the televised, momentary surveillance of teenagers. Recycled scenes appear *ad infinitum* on YouTube, and exploitative mugshot websites allow anyone to track down any child who was forced to appear on the show. Incarceration media, then, may continue to operate as a set of expressions and representations as well as a surveillance mechanism. *Beyond Scared Straight* is at once a piece of entertainment and a ledger of so-called juvenile delinquents.

Just as A&E recycles content — a flashback from the sixth season was shared on YouTube just a few hours this writing — correctional institutions continue to recycle the model of juvenile awareness programs. One of the facilities featured twice on *Beyond Scared Straight*, Chester County Jail in South Carolina, continues to operate its juvenile deterrence program, referred to as Project S.T.O.R.M (Showing Teens Our Real Mission). In February of 2019, two news outlets, the local *Rock Hill Herald* and the *Charlotte Observer*, took observations and documentation from Project S.T.O.R.M to a group of six child psychology experts for analysis. Five of these experts, including Desmond Runyan of the University of Colorado, Ross W.



Greene of Harvard University, and Kenneth Dodge of Duke University, characterized the tactics employed in Project S.T.O.R.M as child abuse.<sup>53</sup>

Another juvenile deterrence program featured on *Beyond Scared Straight*, this time Mecklenburg County jail in North Carolina, also continues to operate. In March of 2019, after Project S.T.O.R.M came under scrutiny, a reporter from the *Observer* attended a “kinder, gentler” session at Mecklenburg.<sup>54</sup> A description of the Mecklenburg program echoes the original intent of juvenile awareness programs decades ago. The incarcerated adults serve as mentors or counselors, sharing their stories not to intimidate but to educate. Corrections officers exhibit patience with the children attending the program — they go so far as to comfort distraught children, according to the article. Halfway across the country, in Bexar County, Texas, a new deterrence program opened in May of 2018, welcoming “good or bad kids” to “see what it’s really like to be jailed.”<sup>55</sup> Parents need only call the Sheriff’s Department to get more information. Also in Texas, Williamson County Sheriff’s Department launched a jail tour program in June of 2017, describing it as “[...] a Williamson County version of the television show *Beyond Scared Straight*.”<sup>56</sup> The only communities empowered by the media object, then, seem to be those that plan to exploit the incarcerated individuals and the children who will be caught up in the programs.

---

<sup>53</sup> Alexander Ames and Tracy Kimball, “‘Scared Straight’ creator takes on critics, contending success stories abound,” *The Charlotte Observer*, February 26, 2019; Tracy Kimball and Alexander Ames. “Sheriff says ‘Scared Straight’ program helps troubled kids. Experts say it’s child abuse,” *The Charlotte Observer*, March 2, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Ames, “In Charlotte, troubled teens go to jail for ‘kinder, gentler’ wake-up call,” *The Charlotte Observer*, March 20, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> “Scared Straight: Young people experience what it's like to be a Bexar County inmate,” *News for San Antonio*, May 9, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Tony Cantu, “Williamson County Launches Jail Tour Program As Crime Deterrent For Juveniles,” *Patch*, June 12, 2017.

## CHAPTER 2

## VOICES OF PRISON:

SUBVERTING INCARCERATION MEDIA THROUGH AUDIO STORYTELLING<sup>57</sup>

*Ear Hustle*, launched in May 2017, “brings you the stories of life inside prison, shared and produced by those living it.” Hosted by two men incarcerated in San Quentin State Prison, Earlonne Woods and Antwan Williams, along with visual artist Nigel Poor, the podcast completed its first ten-episode season in November 2017. As the hosts mention in each episode, *Ear Hustle* receives support from Radiotopia, a podcast network run by the Public Radio Exchange (PRX) which considers itself an “independent record label” of podcasting.<sup>58</sup> This chapter brings together three areas of inquiry, namely the politics of representation, medium theory and textuality, and production studies, in order to situate *Ear Hustle* within a field of incarceration media while also doing justice to the show’s richness and depth. I argue that *Ear Hustle* subverts the wide-ranging, misrepresentative, and often sensationalistic incarceration media genre by providing intimate oral storytelling from inmates themselves.

Much critical work has been done on the creation and dissemination of crime media, including research on representations of incarceration in both US and UK popular culture. For the purposes of this project, I build off the work of Bill Yousman and Denise Bissler and Joan Connors, discussed in the literature review in the introduction. These authors conduct critical

---

<sup>57</sup> Thank you to Professor Lisa Parks and the members of CMS.796 for helping me explore the ideas in this chapter before I realized it even was a chapter. I am also grateful for the feedback I received at the New England Graduate Media Symposium, where I presented an early draft of this chapter in the spring of 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Riismandel, “Podcast Survivor: PRX’s Radiotopia — an ‘indie label’ for podcasting,” *Radio Survivor*, February 13, 2014.

analyses of media texts in the context of criminal justice policies and rhetoric in the United States, providing a framework for discussing the media treatment of incarcerated individuals and populations across fiction, nonfiction, television, and film. Their research endeavors, however, focus on the specific issues associated with visual representations, oftentimes pointing back to the “terror” or “violence” of images.<sup>59</sup> Because *Ear Hustle* denies the primacy of the visual and instead operates within the domain of aurality/vocality, I ground my close-reading, or, rather, close-listening of the podcast in sound studies, medium theory, and linguistic anthropology while sustaining my critical interrogation of the incarceration media genre.

In other words, the content of *Ear Hustle* sits within the lineage of crime and prison media, but its form as an audio podcast requires different and varied methods of analysis. Jonathan Sterne’s work on sound studies offers terms and methodologies for interrogating the texture and effects of aurality and vocality, and I pair this domain with concepts borrowed from linguistic anthropology; I interpret *Ear Hustle* as both an object of sound media and an object comprised of dialogue, conversation, and speech. For these latter categories, I focus on the work of Michael Silverstein on indexicality, Michael Adams on slang, and, finally, Mikhail Bakhtin on heteroglossia, which together allow me to critically analyze the meaning-making strategies employed by the podcast’s hosts and guests.

*Ear Hustle*’s form, however, is not its only differentiating aspect—the conditions of its creation also call for careful examination. While Yousman and other scholars felt compelled to interview formerly incarcerated individuals in order to contrast media representations of

---

<sup>59</sup> Brian Jarvis, “The Violence of Images: Inside the Prison TV Drama *Oz*,” in *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture* (Cullompton, UK; Portland: Willan Publishing, 2006), 154; Yousman, *Prime Time Prisons*, 141.

incarceration with direct experiences of it, *Ear Hustle* comes to its audiences from inmates themselves. Along the same lines, the screenwriters and directors of crime media shows like *The Night Of* and *Oz* have worked in and researched the prison system, but they have not been the people denied freedom and held behind bars. These creative professionals bring years of experience and talent and connections to the table, but the perspective of people who have directly been impacted the criminal justice system is essential to creating a fuller understanding of imprisonment and punishment in the United States.

This brings us to the third domain of inquiry, production studies, or, as I refer to it, the politics of production. This term foregrounds the role that power plays in producing a media text that, in this case, has reached millions of people.<sup>60</sup> Just as there is a politics to representations, there is a politics to production — who is allowed the platform to speak and who receives credit? Who benefits from the popularity of an incarceration media text and in what ways? By holding up the production of *Ear Hustle* to other examples of incarceration media, the disparity between surviving imprisonment and profiting from its dramatization becomes clear. Nonetheless, in the case of *Ear Hustle* a unique constellation of conditions has allowed for this particular show to emerge, placing it not only along the crime media spectrum, but also within the rising genre of story-driven audio podcasts. In closing this section, I turn to Kate Lacey’s work on ethical listening to nuance the interplay between the power of speaking and the power of hearing.

*Ear Hustle*’s content and narratives place it squarely in line with the ongoing production of the broader genre of crime media and, more specifically, that of incarceration media. The episodes’ stories center around the performance and experience of punishment in the American criminal justice system, but their form bypasses a central tenet of popular incarceration media:

---

<sup>60</sup> Jamilah King, “Behind the Scenes of ‘Ear Hustle,’” *Mother Jones*, April 2018.

the seemingly unmediated image. Because the physical nature of American prisons stems from their underlying disciplinary logics, such images are often doomed to recreate these same logics. As Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, the organization of the prison — cellular, organic, genetic — is derived from a constructed understanding of the ideal social order and the criminal’s place in that order. As he writes, “[...] the prison must be an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus: it must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind.”<sup>61</sup> This order, aimed at correcting those who are imprisoned, manifests in the physical structure of contemporary correctional facilities, with people held in cells upon cells upon cells and cloaked in generic jumpsuits. Thus, whenever documentaries or dramas use prison as a site, the rigid logic of undifferentiated sameness guides the visual aesthetics — we do not see friends, fathers, brothers, or sons but rather a mass of men all shrouded in orange or gray or blue and behind all the same bars. Even when individual inmates are interviewed on camera, the visual logic often renders them interchangeable. Along with these visual effects created by physical prison structures, infotainment and prison dramas also rely on the visual to convey visceral senses of terror, violence, and criminality.

On the other hand, *Ear Hustle* employs audio-only storytelling which pushes at least their own iteration of incarceration media toward intimacy, nuance, and individuality. Here, individuality operates differently than the self-sufficient, neoliberal model espoused by *Beyond Scared Straight*. For the men involved in *Ear Hustle*, the podcast offers a way to cultivate their personhood, their individuality that is often erased by systems of punishment. The podcasting

---

<sup>61</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 234.

medium productively delimits *Ear Hustle*'s form — no visuals, no interviews outside the facility — requiring deep attentiveness toward the speaking subjects and the acoustic soundscapes.

Listeners meet the men where they are, hearing their words as someone speaking to them, rather than seeing them as criminals in a monotony of jumpsuits. By prizing the embodied voice and person-to-person conversations, *Ear Hustle* reaffirms the subjecthood of its hosts and its guests — they tell the stories they choose in the ways they choose, or so listeners are told. Each episode closes with a short approval from Lieutenant Sam Robinson, San Quentin's public information officer, and the question of censorship has been asked by listeners more than once.<sup>62</sup> They address it halfway through the first season:

Sam Robinson [00:22:57.20]: When I say that I'm approving the story, it isn't about censoring. I think in our conversations and our engagement on this project, I think you are [laughs] maybe, to the listener, maybe, more credible than I am in that, it's not about censorship. It's a collaboration. It's making sure from the public safety side that there are things that don't exit this prison that would harm people here within our facility, other facilities in the state of California, or even people outside the walls. And so, what we're looking at from my office is no one is going to be adversely affected by it. Um, in terms of what your story is, uh, uh, in terms of the interactions and the engagement and the artwork in the podcast, that's all you.

Earlone [00:23:44.01]: Okay. So, for the people that think that we only can say so much, long as it's not violating the public safety, we good.

---

<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, Lt. Sam Robinson appears in the fifth episode of the first season of *Beyond Scared Straight*.

Sam Robinson [00:23:53.03]: Well, tell me this, has there been anything that you've wanted to say that I have rebuffed you on?

Earlonne [00:24:01.06]: No. Not yet.

Sam Robinson [00:24:03.20]: Not yet. [laughs]

Implicit in this exchange is the possibility of a chilling effect. Lt. Robinson may have never rebuffed Earlonne because Earlonne never brought forward a story idea which would be predictably rejected, and audiences would likely never know of this lack. Although *Ear Hustle* does empower incarcerated men to tell their stories, the surveillance logics of the American prison system ensure that this sharing is never direct — some form of supervision always mediates the communication.

In addition, this turn toward the aural, though a subversion of many visual-centric, entrenched incarceration media clichés, nonetheless operates in a potentially fraught ethical environment. In losing the image there is the danger of perpetuating the historical erasure of black and brown bodies. I have explored what might be gained from turning exclusively to the aural, but what might be lost when the image is disappeared? More fundamentally, can the visual ever be completely effaced? The repeated and reductive visual tropes accompanying prison media could, in fact, flourish when the listeners have only audio to drive their imaginations. In some ways, the close-listening to follow could reveal my own positioning to the incarceration media I consume. My experiences inside jails and prisons may offer me a fuller, but still impossibly incomplete, visual vocabulary in regard to imprisonment. The audio-only form may read as empowering to me because I have interactions and memories to fill in the visual gaps, while many other listeners may not.

At the same time, my limited access to correctional facilities does not mean that *Ear Hustle* is in any way redundant for me. Indeed, much of my time in prisons and jails is dedicated to GED test preparation, reading and writing skills, and coding, not the stuff of deep interpersonal sharing featured in the podcast. Furthermore, many county jails and state prisons strictly prohibit teachers and volunteers from engaging in any topic of conversation that could be deemed overly personal, while *Ear Hustle* prizes such types of discussions. Every prison volunteer handbook I have received contains some version of “The Sting: Anatomy of a Set-Up,” a step-by-step guide for “preventing manipulation” first described by Bud Allen and Diana Bosta in *Games Criminals Play: How You Can Profit by Knowing Them*. One way to assess whether a prisoner is setting you up, the guide explains, is to ask yourself if the individual tries to “engage you in conversations about your likes, dislikes, or other personal matters” and if you are “overly friendly or overly familiar” or “too sympathetic.”<sup>63</sup> The men on *Ear Hustle* convene over difficult and intimate topics like race, religion, and parenthood, but such conversations are usually considered off-limits to many non-incarcerated individuals who do manage to gain access to a correctional facility.

### **Politics of Production and the Audio Podcast Genre**

While *Ear Hustle*’s content places it within the crime media genre, its production and its audio form also align it with the emerging genre of story-driven, high-quality podcasts. With support from Radiotopia, network built on a partnership between the Public Radio Exchange and podcaster Roman Mars, *Ear Hustle* exists in a unique network of cultural production, alongside projects like *99% Invisible*, *Love + Radio*, and *The Allusionist*. By employing a production

---

<sup>63</sup> *DAI Volunteer, Pastoral Visitor, Program Guest & Intern Orientation Manual*, Wisconsin Department of Corrections, November 2018, 27.



studies approach to *Ear Hustle*, I can better explore how it came to be and where it stands in relation to the ever-growing podcasting industry.

*Ear Hustle* won Radiotopia's first Podquest competition, an open call for story-driven ideas launched in the spring of 2016. Out of nearly 2,000 entries submitted in just under a month, *Ear Hustle* moved through the semi-final and final rounds of the competition, eventually winning the support of Radiotopia for their first ten-episode season along with \$10,000. The language used to describe Podquest offers an insight into the context through which *Ear Hustle* emerged: "The project sought diverse talent, new voices and sustainable ideas that clearly align with Radiotopia's mission: to support motivated, independent producers and original shows that champion creativity, narrative richness, and high production values."<sup>64</sup> Earlonne, Antwan, and Nigel check nearly every element off of that list. Radiotopia's commitment to more diverse, ethical, interesting production opened up the ideal space for a media project like *Ear Hustle*.

In a profit- and viewer-driven media landscape, both nonfictional and fictional representations of incarceration must draw audiences and advertisers in order to survive, and this necessity in part drives the development of individual show's content. For *Oz*, Yousman argues that HBO offered viewers an experience distinct from regular cable television — HBO dramas could depict unreserved violence and adult content. This advantage on HBO's part manifests as hyperviolence in *Oz*, pushing forward the narrative of every episode and even the show's opening sequence.<sup>65</sup> *Ear Hustle*'s inclusion in Radiotopia relieves the creators of finding specific advertisers willing to support this specific media object. Radiotopia, with support from the Public Radio Exchange, has already groomed a large base of advertisers through its nineteen

---

<sup>64</sup> "Podquest," Radiotopia, <https://www.radiotopia.fm/podquest/>.

<sup>65</sup> Yousman, *Prime Time Prisons*, 168.

varied podcasts, and thus all Radiotopia shows benefit from this structure regardless of their specific content or audience demographics. This business model allows riskier concepts, such as stories about prison by prisoners, to achieve high production values and reach wide, engaged audiences.

Outside of the mass media structures, production studies can also consider the prison as a unique site of knowledge creation. In this case, the specific conditions of San Quentin have made a project like *Ear Hustle* possible. As Earlonne explains in the penultimate episode, “Gold Coats and OGs,” “guys spend years trying to get to San Quentin because of the programming,” and he personally spent around six years attempting to get transferred.<sup>66</sup> This points to an important nuance that should emerge in incarceration media: not all correctional facilities in the United States are equal. In her book *Reading with Patrick: A Teacher, a Student, and a Life-Changing Friendship*, Michelle Kuo describes the deplorable conditions of a rural jail in the Arkansas Delta where the shared cells were never cleaned and the inmates had no access to outside content such as books or newspapers. Other facilities, like the infamous Rikers Island jail, can barely provide basic living conditions for those they incarcerate while, across the country in Texas, prison officials may be required to report summer temperatures in their facilities after incarcerated men allegedly died from hyperthermia.<sup>67</sup> This raises the question, could projects like *Ear Hustle* survive in other American correctional facilities? Could *Ear Hustle* bring stories from different prisons and jails from across the country, creating a tapestry of narratives that more fully represents the reality of mass incarceration? The unlikely nature of the podcast’s production

---

<sup>66</sup> Nigel Poor and Earlonne Woods, “Gold Coats and OGs,” *Ear Hustle* (Radiotopia, October 11, 2017), 00:02:20.15.

<sup>67</sup> Jolie McCullough, “Texas may soon have to report the temperatures inside its uncooled prisons,” *Texas Tribune*, March 6, 2019.

comes to the fore in the third season, with the kickoff episode “Birdbaths and a Lockbox.” By this episode, the *Ear Hustle* team had produced more than a dozen hours’ worth of audio content, the show’s listeners had mailed in countless letters, referred to as kites, and many of the nation’s incarcerated communities were in the midst of a strike. Earlonne and Nigel start the episode with a discussion about how unusual San Quentin is:

Earlonne: [00:03:01] Most prisons aren’t like this. Most prisons simply don’t give you the opportunities that we got here.

Nigel: [00:03:06] Yeah, it’s not like they’re making it possible to produce podcasts at most other prisons.

It is potentially dangerous for publics and people listening to *Ear Hustle* to believe that all prisons conform to the model they’ve learned about through the show. As the episode continues, though, audiences are reminded that even San Quentin, with all of its opportunities, can smother the spirit. All of the categories discussed in the close-listening section above still apply, although the show’s producers arguably bring more nuance and flexibility to their work in these later episodes after becoming more established. For example, some of those iconic aural cues that Antwan Williams, the sound designer, carefully avoided in early episodes appear now. The sound of a prison door slamming shut can be heard nearly half a dozen times during the thirty-eight minutes, reminding listeners again and again that the prison has been on lockdown. Every incarcerated man in San Quentin has spent days, weeks, maybe months — there is no time limit on a lockdown, which adds to the cruelty — deprived of the already limited privileges they can usually turn to.

The production landscape surrounding *Ear Hustle* also feeds into what Kate Lacey describes as the turn toward an “ethics of reception” for media consumption and distribution.<sup>68</sup> Drawing from theories on constructing and sustaining mediated publics, Lacey argues for the development and nurturing of ethical listening in our visually saturated media age. In the golden age of broadcast public radio, ethical listening operated as a fundamental meaning-making modality for both audiences and content creators. Public radio producers attempted to develop morally sound programming, with listeners learning to tune in to the right programs and listen to them in the right ways. Lacey asserts that these concerns are lost in contemporary media studies, but the rise of podcasting, especially in the case of Radiotopia, actively works against the modern neglect of ethical reception. For example, Roman Mars’s recent podcast, *What Trump Can Teach Us About Con Law*, situates America’s erratic political situation within the legal bounds of the US Constitution. In other words, it attempts to explore the history and details of constitutional law through the tumultuous lens of current events, providing brief lessons in American civics and government.

Lacey’s discussion of listening publics turns to the inalienable rights that come with being a part of a speaking and listening society. She writes, “Listening is [...] an act, an act of choice, an act in relation to others, and an act that produces speech in the sense of inviting the other to speak.”<sup>69</sup> The right to free expression goes hand in hand with the right to listen, which reveals a final irony of *Ear Hustle*: its subjects may never be its audience. Nigel Poor has been fighting to have the podcast played in just California state prisons, let alone all of the other state

---

<sup>68</sup> Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics of Audiences in the Media Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 182.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

facilities, federal facilities, and jails across the country.<sup>70</sup> *Ear Hustle* represents a singular moment when a constellation of factors came together to make media production in prison and about prison not only possible but popular, but, this unique creation nonetheless remains inaccessible to incarcerated populations.<sup>71</sup> In other words, the criminal punishment system limits the individual's right to speak, right to silence, and, finally, right to listen.

### **Close-Listening *Ear Hustle***

Because *Ear Hustle* sketches out this new terrain of audio-based incarceration media, a multidisciplinary methodological framework must be developed to properly interrogate and analyze the content. To accomplish this, I first focus on the meaning-making strategies employed by the hosts when in dialogue with one another and with their guests, as well as the linguistic practices they use to align or deviate from social categories. Moving away from language, I also apply a sound or acoustic studies approach to the audio texture and textuality of the episodes, with the goal of further refining critical vocabularies for the close-listening of audio media. In particular, I focus on the presence and absence of specific sound elements from the show's soundscapes, and, finally, turn to theories of power and agency endemic to the embodied human voice. I use these various lenses to interpret and understand two different *Ear Hustle* episodes, "Looking Out" and "The SHU."

In order to analyze the conversations and dialogues of *Ear Hustle*, we must first explore the domains of indexicality, slang, and stance. Michael Silverstein, a linguistic anthropologist

---

<sup>70</sup> Sarah Rhea Werner, "The Woman Who Podcasts From A Men's Prison," *Forbes*, December 5, 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahrheawerner/2016/12/05/the-woman-who-podcasts-from-a-mens-prison/2/#3b553d69211b>.

<sup>71</sup> Sarah Larson, "My Best Podcasts of 2017," *The New Yorker*, December 14, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2017-in-review/my-best-podcasts-of-2017>.

based out of the University of Chicago, defines indexicality as “the property of a sign vehicle signaling contextual ‘existence’ of an entity.”<sup>72</sup> This entity can be mapped systematically on to speaking patterns and rules of languages, such as the tu/vous deferential distinction in French. A speaker’s choice to use either tu or vous in addressing another person indexes the positioning of both the speaker and the listener in relation to one another. Mary Bucholtz explains, however, that higher-order indexicality moves beyond easily definable social categories: “The social meaning of linguistic forms is most fundamentally a matter not of social categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, or region but rather of subtler and more fleeting interactional moves through which speakers take stances, create alignments, and construct personas.”<sup>73</sup> These discussions on stance and higher-order indexicality lead to questions of linguistic and semiotic categorization—how can shared linguistic systems be organized and applied? In his work *Slang: The People’s Poetry*, Michael Adams draws out this connection with indexicality, arguing that “slang gains its semiotic value only within the sociocultural context in which it is used. Indexicality is therefore a fundamental concept in understanding how slang and other semiotic resources come to be associated with social categories.”<sup>74</sup> Put differently, indexicality allows for contextually-bound meaning in speech, and the patterns of these meanings help to define groups or subcategories within culture.

Keeping the framework of higher-order indexicality and slang in mind, let us turn to the conversations that comprise the podcast. “Looking Out,” the third episode of the first season,

---

<sup>72</sup> Michael Silverstein, “Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description,” in *Meaning in Anthropology*, ed., by Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980), 11-55.

<sup>73</sup> Mary Bucholtz, “From Stance to Style,” in *Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, ed. Alexandra Jaffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 147.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

centers around stories of men in San Quentin finding opportunities to nurture and care for other living things, driven in particular by the unique situation of a man called Rauch. From the beginning of the episode, co-hosts Earlonne and Nigel establish their rapport, with Nigel describing her experience of walking through the prison yard with its “really strangely friendly atmosphere” against the backdrop of indistinct, conversational voices.<sup>75</sup> In moments like these, Nigel, the white, female, Bay Area artist, functions as the “average listener.”<sup>76</sup> She prompts Earlonne to contextualize and explain throughout each episode, and she also expresses the shock and distress that most of the general audience probably feels when confronted with the realities of life in prison. For example, when Earlonne shares that some men feel safer in San Quentin than they do in society, Nigel offers a momentary “hmm” and moves on with the story — how could prison be safer than society? her silence asks. These linguistic moves define Nigel’s positionality in relation to her co-host and the other speakers; she functions as the outsider who will help the men successfully communicate their experiences to their listeners. She mediates the men’s discourse by prompting questions or clarifications and providing context when the audience may need it, but much of the time she acts more as a conversant. She, Earlonne, and their guests share a space of active, participatory storytelling.

Nigel’s central role in negotiating the discourse does not, however, negate the men’s power to define their world in their language. When turning to the prison yard in order to hear other men’s stories, Nigel and Earlonne act out their relational stances in a brief moment:

Nigel [00:16:56.05]: All right. Getting back to Rauch's story. He has such a powerful urge to take care of critters, to nurture really, and we all have that urge one way or

---

<sup>75</sup> Nigel Poor and Earlonne Woods, “Looking Out,” *Ear Hustle* (Radiotopia, 2017), 00:03:05.00.

<sup>76</sup> Edison Research, “The Podcast Consumer 2017,” April 18, 2017.

another, whether it's having kids or taking care of pets, maybe it's even working with young people, and we wanted to find out what other guys inside do to nurture.

Earlone [00:17:16.10]: Except most guys aren't going to call it nurturing. They're gonna say "looking out". We went around with our microphone for some yard talk on the subject.<sup>77</sup>

Earlone catches Nigel's linguistic lapse — she employs a term that most men at San Quentin would not, and in turn Earlone provides the more apt phrase. This exchange occurs between the two of them in the confines of the audio recording space, before they transition to the prison yard, suggesting that this dedicated recording site serves as a place for generative play between interlocutors and within discourse. Importantly, the phrases that Earlone introduces and defines in the media lab become the titles of many *Ear Hustle* episodes and, stepping back, even the podcast itself: "ear hustling" means eavesdropping, as he explains in the first episode. This ensures that audiences have the opportunity to consider the podcast and its content literally on its own terms, embedding the San Quentin articulation of prison slang into the broader discourses surrounding the show.

This borrowing among and across speech registers, enacted between Earlone and Nigel every episode, has been described as a condition tied up in modernity and the agency of language. Russian literary theorist M.M. Bakhtin located discourse as the defining element of the novel genre as opposed to the epic, with discourse's power coming from heteroglossia, or the inclusion of a variety of speech into a single speaker's articulated language. He argues that fictional narrators produce conflict between different kinds of speech — that of authority,

---

<sup>77</sup> Nigel Poor and Earlone Woods, "Looking Out," *Ear Hustle* (Radiotopia, 2017), 00:16:56.05-00:17:16.10.



characters, omniscience, and all other potential registers — in order to inflect a hybrid, refracted language, the language of modernity. As he writes:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing [...], language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.<sup>78</sup>

Individual power and ownership are derived from filling, adapting, appropriating the speech and language that always exists as half of someone else's. Earlonne and Nigel continually act out their own modes of heteroglossia when they draw upon one another's types of speech, but the podcast also reveals how prison can strip individuals of this agency, of the ability to call upon varieties of speech and activate language:

Armando [00:13:31.21]: Being in the SHU for so long, it will affect you in many ways. You know, a lot of times in the SHU, we talk about the SHU syndrome. You know, from not being able to finish a sentence to forgettin' what you're talking about during a sentence. Sometimes, you can't even carry a full conversation with somebody.

This clip comes from the fourth episode, "The SHU," which centers around the experiences of four men at the Security Housing Unit at Pelican Bay State Prison. Armando and the other men subjected to extended periods of isolation repeatedly return to this idea of losing the ability to engage in both private and public communication. They can no longer maintain a dialogue with other speakers, nor capture their own ongoing internal monologues. Language, for them, no

---

<sup>78</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293.

longer lies on the borderline between oneself and others, but rather out of reach, between the abyss and others.

In his work *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, Brandon LaBelle understands this silencing capability of incarceration and confinement as a kind of torture specific to the punishing, disciplining, controlling regime of the prison system. He calls upon the historic example of Auburn prison in New York to illustrate the insidiousness of forced silence: “Auburn instituted its ‘silent system’ in 1821 whereby silence was to be maintained at all times: there was to be absolutely no talking among prisoners. [...] Silence in this regard functioned as an absolute form of surveillance, control, and isolation.”<sup>79</sup> By erasing the noises and sounds that accompany human existence, from breathing to moving to speaking, the policy attempts to erase the subjecthood of individuals and replace it with the objecthood of the criminal. In solitary confinement, Armando experienced the ramifications of such erasure, and this explains why the sounds of *Ear Hustle* are significant not only as expressions but also as documentation of life. The men included in the episodes can hear their own voices within the context of San Quentin’s sonic environment.

Alongside the particularities of discourse and dialogue in the show, the quality and texture of the recording also determine how audiences come to understand and interpret these men’s lives in prison. The audio for the episodes is recorded in just two locations: the media lab and the prison yard. In the media lab, Earlonne and Nigel speak to each other and guests with stabilized microphones and on-hand audio editing software, but when out in the yard they use portable audio recorders and microphones. After recording they can add effects and audio layers,

---

<sup>79</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 68-69.

but the restrictions and tone that come with creating in prison nonetheless manifest in the aural, diegetic experience of the podcast situated in its creation. For example, every episode begins with some iteration of the same exchange: is the media lab quiet enough for Earlonne and Nigel to begin recording? This perpetual, inescapable cacophony stands in contrast to LaBelle's more iconic, silent prison, but nonetheless draws upon his concept of the "right to silence and the right to speech."<sup>80</sup> In this case, Earlonne and Nigel can never depend on their right to silence, but Earlonne does locate his right to speech in hosting *Ear Hustle*.

In sharing Rauch's story in "Looking Out," Antwan Williams, the sound designer, employs a variety of audio effects to create a soundscape that non-diegetically points outside of the present temporality and, importantly, beyond the prison spatiality. When Rauch describes his mother's multiple attempts to drown him as a child, the audio track features the sounds of slowly dripping water matching the cadence of his speech. Then, when he first encounters the animal kingdom, the chatter of seagulls comes up in the background along with the soothing voice of a female character from his backstory. This audio evokes the subjectivity of Rauch and his intimate, personal narrative, neither of which are contained or occurring within the prison. The sound evokes a time in his life before prison, opening up a space beyond the walls to give an incarcerated man's subjectivity more complexity and a broader temporal dimension. Rauch is a prisoner and also a person. In other words, "Looking Out" and other episodes capture the sound of imagination and memory and interiority, moving away from language alone to create a fuller sense of story.

With this in mind, the marked absences in terms of soundscapes call for special attention. As discussed above, *Ear Hustle* emerges within a lineage of crime and incarceration media,

---

<sup>80</sup> LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, 72.

which brings along already-established sets of markers and indicators to guide audiences in understanding the narratives. The stereotypical prison sounds — clanging bars and clanking chains — do not appear in the podcast, nor does the stifling silence of confinement. By deviating from these formal expectations, the show asks audiences to reconsider their imaginary understanding of life in prison. In particular, such sound elements could have been used in “The SHU” to create a sense of solitary, mind-numbing isolation. Instead, the episode offers a short scream and the brief ticking of a second hand, both pointing to the interiority of the men at Pelican Bay:

Armando [00:10:40.04]: I have daughters who have literally had to see growing up behind a window. You know, they're in your thirties now but, you know, I have grandkids also who I've never got to hug or anything. [clock ticking]

[...]

Nigel [00:16:30.03]: I mean, I think that's the thing about this story. You can't possibly know what it's like if you haven't had this experience.

Earlone [00:16:35.00]: Exactly. [muted scream]<sup>81</sup>

These sounds bring listeners into the minds of the individuals experiencing isolation, but they emphatically do not leave listeners feeling as if they themselves experienced solitary confinement. Just as Nigel mentions, the physical reality of solitary confinement — and its commensurate deprivations — can only be wholly understood through the experience of it. The podcast, though, tries to help listeners appreciate the unimaginable. Furthermore, this marked lack of aural stereotypes points to a broader characterization of the soundscapes crafted and

---

<sup>81</sup> Nigel Poor and Earlonne Woods, “The SHU,” *Ear Hustle* (Radiotopia, July 26, 2017), 00:10:40.00-00:16:35.00.

offered by sound designer Antwan Williams for the show, that of a life occurring within but nonetheless greater than the bounds of incarceration. Many of the episodes do revolve around stories that fundamentally arise out of the prison context, but the use of audio effects and sounds reminds listeners that the individuals telling these stories exceed the categories of the prisoner and the criminal. In this way, the producers deny not only the primacy of the image, but also the command of captivity.

Lastly, specific theories of the voice operate distinctly from these studies of noise and sound and speech, allowing for a philosophical turn in the interpretation of contemporary audio storytelling. In her essay “Multiple Voices,” Adriana Cavarero posits a “vocal phenomenology of uniqueness, [...] an ontology that concerns the incarnate singularity of every existence insofar as she or he manifests her- or himself vocally.”<sup>82</sup> Here we abandon semiotics and the registers of language in order to move toward Mladen Dolar’s notion of voice as sustaining “an intimate link with the very notion of the subject.”<sup>83</sup> Locating this embodiment of subjecthood in the voice rather than strictly in discourse or image explains why *Ear Hustle* can powerfully destabilize stereotypes perpetuated by crime media.<sup>84</sup> Popular crime media uses incarcerated individuals as objects, oftentimes seen but not heard, and, if heard, heard through layers of mediation. On the other hand, all of the voices that comprise *Ear Hustle*, whether speaking or singing or voicing or floating, come directly from the true imprisoned bodies. Just as incarceration media depends on visual modalities to enact violence against the incarcerated individual, it also relies on the

---

<sup>82</sup> Adriana Cavarero, “Multiple Voices,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 525.

<sup>83</sup> Mladen Dolar, “The Linguistics of the Voice,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012) 546.

<sup>84</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 114.

suppression of captive voices. Voices beget subjecthood, and subjecthood begets empathy — the antithesis of the criminal punishment system.

## Conclusion

Returning to the politics of representation and the genre of incarceration media, what are the political, material stakes of incarcerated individuals' production of a widely distributed podcast that circulates their voices and experiences within and beyond prison.

With a population of over 2.3 million incarcerated individuals, the United States boasts the highest prison population rate in the world.<sup>85</sup> These millions have been the objects and, in some rare cases, the subjects of a widespread and well-known genre across news and entertainment media. The representations put forth by crime and incarceration media then go on to determine how the criminal is understood in contemporary American culture, and, by extension, what should be done about the perpetrators. Through *Ear Hustle*, at least a handful of these men subvert who talks and who listens. As this chapter has argued, this subversion directly challenges the established genre of crime media and, more specifically, incarceration media, and, through this challenging, the mens' labor, voices, and histories challenge listeners to reconsider the categories of prison and prisoners. This reconsideration could offer a foundation for thinking differently about how the American justice and punishment systems should operate in contemporary society. Through an audio-only storytelling method, the creators of *Ear Hustle* open up a space for incarcerated individuals to participate in the activities that make us human —

---

<sup>85</sup> Peter Wagner and Wendy Sawyer, "States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2018," *Prison Policy Initiative*, June 2018.

they tell their own stories in their own words and in their own voices. The men are empowered in the most basic sense of the word.

I began my analysis by situating *Ear Hustle* within the broader genre of crime and incarceration media, specifically looking toward the domains of local news and television dramas as models for understanding how incarcerated individuals and communities are positioned to reading, listening, and watching publics. The news and teledrama forms rely on the visceral image in constructing violent, terror-ridden representations of the criminal and criminality, which in turn impact the public's perception of proper punishment and safe policing. *Ear Hustle* sidesteps the image, instead relying on noise, sound, and voice to construct narratives both about incarceration and outside of it.

I then situated *Ear Hustle* within the booming audio podcast genre and within a larger discussion of the politics of production. I turned to the specific conditions surrounding the show's creation and support, using a production studies approach to better understand how *Ear Hustle* emerged within the current landscape of story-driven, narrative-rich podcasts. With this established podcast ecosystem in mind, I question if *Ear Hustle* is specific to San Quentin or if the project could migrate to other correctional facilities. Is this a new production model for compelling incarceration media? This section ends with a final provocation: do today's podcasts, *Ear Hustle* included, bring with them the return of ethical listening that contemporary media studies allegedly lost?

Having detailed the significance of the audio-only nature of the show and the politics of production that underlie its creation, I transitioned to a close-listening analysis of two episodes, "Looking Out" and "The SHU." This analysis begins with broad theories regarding linguistic positioning which I apply to the rich discourses occurring between Nigel and Earlonne, as well

as to the loss of language through forced isolation and silence. This then feeds into the discussion of more auditory aspects of the show, with a focus on both the absence and presence of sound elements. In the context of crime and incarceration media, what stereotypical sounds does Antwan Williams, the podcast's sound designer, choose to ignore or incorporate? How do these sound elements construct narratives and subjectivities for the listeners? On the topic of subjectivity, I move into a more philosophical treatment of the voice as the locus of human uniqueness and subjecthood. *Ear Hustle* offers listeners the sounds of life both in and out of prison and the voices of inmates talking about life in and out of prison; audiences get to hear what the men's subjectivity sounds like and the differences among the men with their divergent perspectives; followers hear the slang and the lexicon of San Quentin that develops dialogically in every episode. For incarceration media, these auditory additions expand the possibilities for mediated storytelling — the aural markers of life in prison are indeed slamming cell doors and echo of solitude, but they are also every unique sonic form recorded and shared via *Ear Hustle*.

Unlike *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight*, *Ear Hustle* offers nuanced, human representations of incarcerated individuals. Earlonne and his fellow men imprisoned in San Quentin share rich narratives that grate against all of the incarceration media clichés — no reductive depictions of violence, no simple redemption, no cautionary tales. Just as bad crime media became bad crime policy, perhaps now good crime media will become good crime policy. While *Beyond Scared Straight* relies on domination, intimidation, and abuse as a strategy, *Ear Hustle* draws upon creative expression, self-reflection, and dialogue. To some degree, *Ear Hustle* transforms the prison into a space of relative “free speech,” whereas *Beyond Scared Straight* advances a logic of immanent incarceration outside of the prison environment.



In November of 2018, good media did become good policy, if only for a moment and if only for one person. California Governor Jerry Brown commuted Earlonne Woods's 31-years-to-life prison sentence. Governor Brown cited *Ear Hustle* as an example of the transformation Woods had undergone during his more than two decades in prison, and the administrators in the Governor's office shared with Woods that they listened to episodes from the podcast whenever they had the opportunity.<sup>86</sup> Here, an almost direct line can be traced from the media text to the creator's liberation. I cannot speak to the broader effects of the podcast, but for at least one human soul it helped open up the path out of prison. Because of his role on *Ear Hustle*, Earlonne has some kind of support system outside of prison. Nigel accompanied him out of San Quentin and drove him to a diner for his first non-prison meal, all recorded with the associated audio featured in the final episode of the third season. Radiotopia, the podcasting production company that made *Ear Hustle* possible, offered Earlonne a full-time job upon his release.

Unfortunately, the exception proves the rule. The vast majority of those who are released from jail or prison in the United States face daunting barriers to reentry and may lack the formal and informal support systems that could provide assistance. Many of these barriers are based in formalized restrictions imposed by the federal and local governments. The National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction (NICCC) catalogs and researches the difficulties individuals face when leaving correctional institutions, and the NICCC's current database covers more than 40,000 laws and statutes that could impact "employment, business and occupational licensing, housing, voting, education, and other rights, benefits, and opportunities."<sup>87</sup> For

---

<sup>86</sup> David Beard, "Earlonne Woods Made an Amazing Podcast—and It Won Him His Freedom," *Mother Jones*, January 9, 2019.

<sup>87</sup> "About," National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://niccc.csgjusticecenter.org/about/>.

example, one study found that in New York City “more than 30 percent of single adults who enter homeless shelters are individuals recently released from city and state correctional institutions” due in part to the restrictions surrounding ex-offenders residing in public housing and receiving housing subsidies.<sup>88</sup> Another report suggests that “formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27 percent — higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression.”<sup>89</sup> Good incarceration media led to a good policy decision in a single, individual instance, but broader empowerment will only come with more systemic change.

---

<sup>88</sup> Katherine Cortes and Shawn Rogers, *Reentry Housing Options: The Policymakers' Guide* (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, “Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, July 2018.

CHAPTER 3  
 THE MARGINALIZED IN THE MARGINALIA:  
 INCARCERATED EXTRAS AND ACTORS IN PRISON FILMS

In April of 2018, director Madeleine Sackler premiered her new film, *O.G.*, at the Tribeca Film Festival. The film was lauded for its unique setting — a functioning maximum-security state penitentiary located just outside of Indianapolis — and its unique cast — many of whom were incarcerated in the facility during filming and will be incarcerated for decades to come. HBO acquired distribution rights for *O.G.* in October of 2018, and the film began streaming in February of 2019. Sackler describes it as a low-budget independent piece, produced by her own production company, Great Curve Films, as well as Brookstreet Pictures. I argue that *O.G.*'s conditions of creation and content, when contextualized in a longer history of incarceration media, provide an example of relative empowerment for the direct participants and also open up channels for raising up the voices of indirect participants.

While *O.G.* is a unique prison film in the contemporary media landscape, it is not, as *The New Yorker* suggests, without precedent as the first full-length film to take place in the authentic setting of an active facility with real-life prisoners. An archival detour regarding Don Siegel's mid-century prison film, *Riot in Cell Block 11*, will situate *O.G.* within a longer prison media lineage that reveals the ways in which exploitation and empowerment can change and shift, particularly when inmates become extras and actors and critics. Along with *O.G.*'s precursor, I also analyze *O.G.*'s so-called companion film, a documentary entitled *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It*, which structures its own unique positionalities for the creators, producers, and participants.

Unlike *Beyond Scared Straight* and *Ear Hustle*, *O.G.* operates as one media text with one narrative arc, attempting to convey general truths about incarceration through the story of one

man. The film's plot centers around Louis Menkins, a man who has been incarcerated for more than two decades of his adult life, during the final weeks leading up to his release. Menkins, played by Jeffrey Wright, moves through his everyday routines in prison on screen, with the additional struggle of locating support systems that could help him prepare for life outside the maximum-security facility. This series of frustrations and disappointments offers an unveiled criticism of the institutional resources, or lack thereof, for those who are incarcerated, foregrounding the barriers to reentry that most individuals being released from prison and jail face. In a meeting with his parole officer, for example, Menkins asks about finding employment after his release, and, pointedly eyeing his watch and shuffling papers, the parole officer offers a string of words that amount to little: "Um, I mean, there's nothing formal that we're set up to do [...]." <sup>90</sup> This comment echoes the neoliberal ideology undergirding *Beyond Scared Straight*. Menkins should not expect his parole officer, an agent of the state, to assist him inside or outside of prison. Rather, Menkins is responsible for his own success, even though the resources most individuals use for job-searching — computers, telephones, the liberty to move freely through space — are withheld from incarcerated people. Menkins manages to acquire a newspaper with a classifieds section, but this very act could be used to discipline him and jeopardize his near-freedom. Menkins's struggle is the foil to Earlonne Woods's climactic release.

Following this exchange with the parole officer, Menkins's social worker places him in a restorative justice workshop instead of his preferred choice. This irreversible but seemingly small instance of something happening to Menkins later leads to one of the most emotional scenes of the film: the sister of the man Menkins murdered sits face-to-face with him at a table, eventually admitting through tears of anguish and grief that she believes Menkins should never

---

<sup>90</sup> Madeleine Sackler, *O.G.* (2018; New York City, NY: Great Curve Films, 2018), 38:08-38:15.

be released. Calmly, Menkins agrees with her, and only after returning to his cell do his frustration and fear and sorrow visibly overwhelm him. These moments reveal to audiences something about the prison system and its shortcomings, but they also serve to make Menkins too complex to fit neatly into a stereotype. He has perpetrated violence — this is not a film about a wrongful conviction — but the film does not present him as violent. While many well-known objects of fictional incarceration media reduce prisoners to cautionary examples of delinquency and depravity, *O.G.* attempts to present Menkins as a prisoner and a person. He committed a crime but that is not where his own life begins or ends.

As Menkins wades through this institutional uncertainty, the film's other main character, Beecher, makes his arrival at the penitentiary. Beecher, often referred to simply as Beech, is played by Theothus Carter, an Indianapolis native who is currently serving sixty-five years at Pendleton for armed burglary and attempted murder. Carter was chosen for the role through an open audition process at Pendleton, and Boyd Holbrook, from the television show *Narcos*, coached him and others on acting basics before the five-week shoot began. In interviews, Carter has suggested that acting comes naturally to him and many of the other incarcerated individuals he knows. As he puts it, "We really been acting our whole life. We act every time we go in a courtroom to try to get out of this shit we put ourselves in."<sup>91</sup> This role, then, empowers him to put those impulses to a creative use. After being attacked on the yard by Beech, Menkins mentors the younger man, advising him to avoid the attractive fraternity the gangs peddle and instead worry for his own survival. To this end, Menkins suggests to his work supervisor that Beecher be considered to fill an open spot in the auto body shop. Menkins's impending release hangs over his decisions and actions and alliances — his near-freedom functions as the light at

---

<sup>91</sup> Nick Paumgarten, "A Prison Film Made in Prison," *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2018.

the end of the tunnel that is almost always already fading. If Beecher abuses his new opportunity in the auto body shop, then Menkins's release could be threatened.

In the final scenes, the machinations and politics are laid bare. Beecher was moved to the auto body shop not because of Menkins's suggestion, but rather because one of the prison's gang leaders struck a deal with the administrator who runs the shop. The administrator's wife is terminally ill, which serves as justification for his participation in a scheme to smuggle weapons into the facility and, presumably, receive a cut. As the reality of the situation unfolds, Menkins must decide whether to smuggle the gun himself to insulate Beecher from discipline, do nothing and protect his impending liberty, or foil the plans altogether.

### **Prison Media Precursor<sup>92</sup>**

What if I told you that one of the earliest and most accurate, critical depictions of the American prison system came into being because one man shot another man in the genitals? I almost laughed aloud from disbelief when I realized this, hovering over loose sheets of legal pad paper in a dimly lit and stereotypically silent archive reading room. This handful of sheets came from a folder labeled neatly in pencil: *RIOT IN CELL BLOCK 11* — DS (1954). My interest in the 1979 film *Escape from Alcatraz* had brought me to the Don Siegel Collection at Boston University's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, but throughout Siegel's notes I caught an oft-repeated phrase, "the best prison film ever made," — penned into the margins or marked out

---

<sup>92</sup> Thanks to Heather Hendershot and my peers from CMS.791 for their thoughts and contributions when developing this work. Parts of this section were workshopped as an archival research assignment for that course.

with a single, steady line — never in reference to *Escape from Alcatraz* but always pointing to a film from the fifties called *Riot in Cell Block 11*.<sup>93</sup>

Produced by Walter Wanger, the man who shot the other man in the genitals, *Riot in Cell Block 11* from 1954 defied the guiding Hollywood conventions of the time: as Siegel scribbled in the early draft notes for his autobiography, the good guys lost and the picture had no women. Instead, *Riot* disrupted notions of the good guys and the bad guys and, importantly, had a socially conscious purpose. Wanger, Siegel, and, by the end of filming, the cast and the crew professed a collective ethics: the prison system needed reforming, and they were working to bring this cause to the American consciousness.

Set in the context of real mid-century prison riots breaking out across the nation, the film follows a group of inmates incarcerated in California's Folsom State Prison as they stage a riot that they hope will force the hand of the administration and the government in meeting their demands for work opportunities, freedom from abuse, and livable conditions. Wanger dedicated himself to producing the film because of his own experience in the American incarceration system. He served time in the minimum-security Castaic Honor Farm located just north of Los Angeles on simple assault charges (a notable reduction from the original attempted murder charges that came with shooting his wife's alleged lover), where, according to Siegel, he experienced the "inequities of prison life, the unfairness, the cruelties."<sup>94</sup> Wanger became a self-described prison reformer, attempting to use Hollywood to raise awareness and complicate popular depictions of so-called convicts and criminals.

---

<sup>93</sup> Don Siegel, notes on *Escape from Alcatraz* for *A Siegel Film*, Box 46, Folder 51 (Don Siegel Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA).

<sup>94</sup> Don Siegel, notes on *Riot in Cell Block 11* for *A Siegel Film*. Box 46, Folder 54 (Don Siegel Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA).

In 1953, after Siegel agreed to direct the picture, he and Wanger toured three state correctional facilities across California, stopping first at Alcatraz to speak with the warden over a meal served by murderers, moving next to San Quentin with its overcrowded cells and decrepit mental ward, and finally ending their journey at Folsom. There, to the men's delight, an entire two-tier cell block lay empty for the foreseeable future. It was ideal for shooting a documentary-style prison film. For each cell, the block boasted heavy steel doors perforated with holes barely large enough to stick a finger through and a rectangular slit to frame the furtive and crazed glances of restless inmates. Siegel uses wide, low shots throughout the film to emphasize the vast and crushing immenseness of the space, engulfing all bodies within the long white corridor marked by the imposing repetition of black door after black door.



*Figure 8. Still from Riot*

Beyond the confines of this cell block, the crew also filmed in the hollow prison yard and the caged-off mess hall, reiterating the impersonal and overpowering nature of incarcerated spaces.



Wanger's relationship and connections within the California Department of Corrections made this all possible, including casting Leo Gordon for the role of the homicidal "Crazy" Mike Carnie, in spite of the actor's legitimate arrest record. Gordon had previously served five years in San Quentin on charges of armed robbery, and Wanger had to convince the notoriously difficult Warden Heinz to allow Gordon to act in the film, so long as Gordon arrived every day through a separate entrance and submitted himself to a thorough search more typical of the traditional prison intake process.

Just one or two unassuming lines in Siegel's notes, one questioning whether the guards at San Quentin would have been able to "protect us during the riot," another mentioning how difficult it became to tell the "hired prisoners from the real prisoners," hinted to me that I was missing something obvious.<sup>95</sup> I knew that *Riot* was filmed at an operating prison in the wake of actual prison riots, but, I began to wonder, was it filmed with the involvement of actual inmates? The sixth chapter of Stuart Kaminsky's 1974 biography, *Don Siegel: Director*, provocatively titled "700 Prisoners and a Handful of Actors," helped to address this question. A draft of Kaminsky's book lives in the Don Siegel Collection, offering a rich supplemental history of the creation and production of "the best prison film ever made." I corroborated many of Kaminsky's details and anecdotes with Siegel's own handwritten notes regarding *Riot*, but other claims of Kaminsky's, such as the assertion that Don Siegel was viewed as such an expert in penology that Harvard Law School asked him to teach a class on the subject, I have not yet been able to cross-reference. Regardless, this chapter underscores the logical conclusions I had side-stepped when thinking about the film — of course Siegel and Wanger did not hire, coordinate, and pay hundreds of extras to invade an open and operating and overcrowded prison, especially with a

---

<sup>95</sup> Siegel, notes on *Riot in Cell Block 11* for *A Siegel Film*.

shooting schedule of just sixteen days. Even Neville Brand, the leading actor with whom Kaminsky spoke at length for the chapter, noted that “no one made any real money” from the film with its \$300,000 budget. How could they have afforded hundreds of Hollywood extras when they barely paid the leading men?

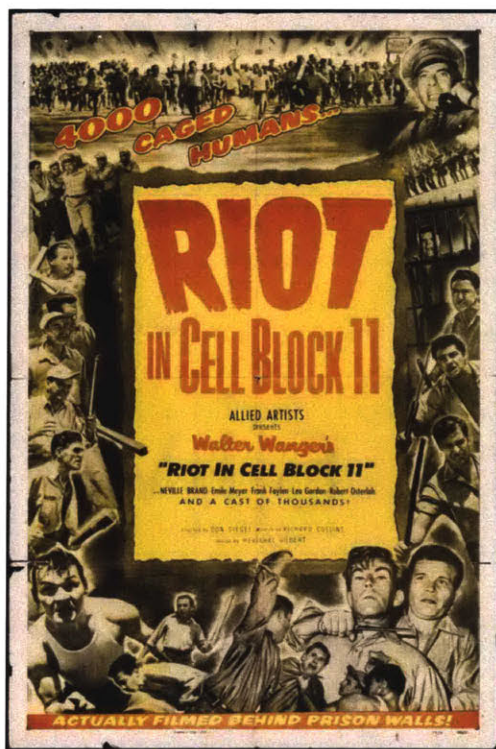


Figure 9. Poster for Riot

To my dismay, the collection’s coverage of *Riot in Cell Block 11* ends there, with a handful of sheets torn from a legal pad, a photocopied early script with a smattering of notes, and a draft of a biography written by someone else decades after the film’s production. What of those inmates who, however briefly, became extras and actors? The archive maintains all of the tedious casting sheets and productions notes for film after film and pilot after pilot, but, at least for now, lacks such materials for *Riot in Cell Block 11*. I could tell you how much money Clint Eastwood made each day while they shot *Escape from Alcatraz*, or, turning to the not-famous people, I can tell you the rate for “1 Negro Man” who worked as an extra on “The Self-Improvement of

Salvadore Ross,” a 1964 episode of *The Twilight Zone* directed by Siegel. For the potentially hundreds of incarcerated men who electrified the wild and swelling fervor of the titular riot, the men who lent legitimacy to Siegel’s “semi-documentary,” I have found no evidence that they were credited, paid, acknowledged, or noticed.<sup>96</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, their likenesses seem to have been exploited in the name of empowering prison reform movements.

In the narrative of the film, the question of working and earning while incarcerated surfaces with force as the leader of the riot, Dunn (played by Neville Brand, the fourth-most decorated American soldier at the time of casting), presents the inmates’ demands to the warden, state negotiator, and, importantly, the press. He begins by stating their desire for a work program that would keep them from “just sitting around waiting for their time to run out.” One newsman barks, “You’re asking for work?,” with an inquisitive lilt punctuating his disbelief.<sup>97</sup> The “block 11” men need to earn money, support families, learn a trade, and stay occupied, just like the prison guards they are holding hostage. Labor and occupations surround the prisoners, made possible in part because of their incarceration: the compassionate warden who runs the facility, the politician who takes a hard line on crime, the newspaper reporters who write sensational headlines. Every individual in the film personifies their work and their role, but the role of the prisoner is inherently impersonal and individually meaningless. They must be a prisoner *and* something, as Earlonne was empowered to be a prisoner and also a podcast producer.

Today, individuals serving time in a California State Prison may earn as little as \$0.08/hour or as much as \$1.00/hour, with daily earnings capped at around \$3.00 regardless of

---

<sup>96</sup> Siegel, notes on *Riot in Cell Block 11* for *A Siegel Film*.

<sup>97</sup> *Riot in Cell Block 11*, directed by Don Siegel (Allied Artists Picture Corporation, 1954), 00:32:40-00:33:05.

pay rate.<sup>98</sup> Many prison occupations tend to the maintenance of the facilities, ranging from janitorial to kitchen duties, but, for a small number of contemporary correctional facilities, possible occupations may include media production or computer coding. In particular, San Quentin State Prison has become known for its media lab, out of which the Peabody Award-nominated podcast *Ear Hustle* emerged and eventually outgrew. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, *Ear Hustle* shares stories of life in prison told by those experiencing it. On the Frequently Asked Questions page of the *Ear Hustle* website they refer to the show as a “labor of love” — the rallying cry usually heard from overworked volunteers. The main producers, Earlonne Woods and Antwan Williams, invest their labor and their time, just like Roman Mars of *99% Invisible*, just like Sarah Koenig of *Serial*, just like every host of every popular podcast, but the current economic structures and correctional policies prevent them from capitalizing on their work like their non-incarcerated podcasting peers.<sup>99</sup>

What if I told you that one of the earliest and most accurate, critical depictions of the American prison system overlooked the fundamental paradox that allowed for its creation? *Riot in Cell Block 11* worked to reveal the legitimate issues plaguing correctional institutions, and, in the same breath, its success depended on the exploitation of the men it aimed to serve. During the film’s dénouement, Dunn learns of his distressing fate. Despite their hard-won agreement with the warden and the governor, he will stand trial for inciting a riot and kidnapping guards, potentially tacking thirty more years onto his already lengthy sentence. But, the warden assures him, “the public has learned more about the inside of a prison in the last few weeks than they did in all my fifteen years of making speeches. Why do you think that is?” Dunn, coming to accept

---

<sup>98</sup> 15 CCR § 3041.2, § 8006

<sup>99</sup> Now that Earlonne Woods has been released from San Quentin, he is employed by PRX as a full-time producer.

or at least comprehend his sacrifice, responds, “Because we got in the papers...” (01:18:20 - 01:18:37). The press and the media represent the lingering bright spot as Dunn’s fight fades into obscurity behind a heavy cell door. I wonder if any of the actual Folsom prisoners, with their likenesses preserved on a reel of film, caught this same glimmer of hope, believing that this fleeting moment in a spotlight might change something, anything.

At the end of my first visit to the Don Siegel Collection I assured the archivist that I would not need to return. They could lock the archival boxes away in the vault until another curious researcher came looking. I was wrong. Less than a week later I came with the unanswered questions that had been gnawing away at me — Did I not look hard enough? What had I missed? — and once again donned a pair of cotton gloves before diving into the musty papers. Exhausting my search, and probably the patience of the Center’s staff, I begrudgingly returned the documents to their numbered boxes, like prisoners to cells, where they cannot work or be made productive unless the archivists and explorers of the experiences of others work with them.

In this way, *O.G.* was neither the first film set in an active prison, nor was it the first film to feature currently incarcerated individuals as actors and formerly incarcerated individuals as guides. But *O.G.* is the first popular media project to address many of my questions left unanswered by *Riot*. Like California, the Indiana Department of Correction sets the wages for the individuals incarcerated in state facilities, and a person of the highest employment grade can earn \$0.25 an hour, \$1.625 a day, and \$35.75 a month. For *O.G.*, though, the economic side is different than that of *Beyond Scared Straight*, *Ear Hustle*, and *Riot in Cell Block 11*. As Nick Paumgarten explains in the *New Yorker*, correction officers who participated in the filming and the twenty-eight incarcerated men who had speaking parts each earned \$335 per day, which is

the Screen Actors Guild minimum. For the incarcerated men, 10% of this was put into a victims' fund and another 40% was taken by the facility for room and board.<sup>100</sup> The incarcerated extras who did not have speaking parts were not paid but instead promised meals, but, unlike *Riot*, every name does appear in the film's credits.

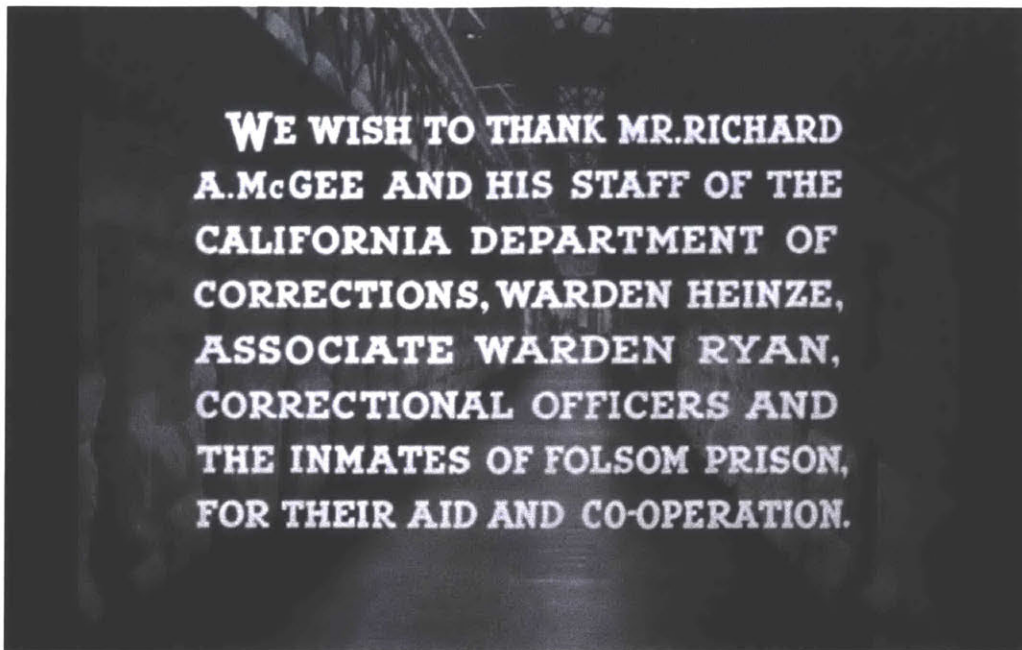


Figure 10. Opening still from *Riot*



Figure 11. Closing credits for *O.G.*

<sup>100</sup> Paumgarten, Nick. "A Prison Film Made in Prison." *The New Yorker*.

These facts are far from ideal, but they do indicate a movement toward more intentional involvement of incarcerated individuals in the making of incarceration media that relies on their likeness but is nonetheless scripted. The men and their experiences were partially the subjects of the film, but many of those men also had an opportunity to offer critiques and feedback, bringing the film closer to their intimate and authentic understandings of life in prison. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Jeffrey Wright notes that the film crew had “[...] 100 expert consultants on set at any given moment.”<sup>101</sup> Madeleine Sackler describes the experience similarly: “we all worked together to shape the story, the dialogue, the characters, the performances.”<sup>102</sup> Even more so than *O.G., It’s a Hard Truth, Ain’t It*, a documentary complement to the film, embodies the ways in which the voices of the imprisoned can be raised up and not drown out in the process.

### **‘It’s my story, my story deserves to be known’: Reliable, Incarcerated Storytellers<sup>103</sup>**

While Siegel referred to *Riot in Cell Block 11* as a semi-documentary, Sackler’s overall project draws a bolder line between the fiction, *O.G.*, and the nonfiction, *It’s a Hard Truth, Ain’t It*, the narrative film’s documentary counterpart. *It’s a Hard Truth* is the product of a filmmaking workshop offered at Pendleton, which trained the men in creative storytelling, formal filmmaking techniques, and film criticism. *It’s a Hard Truth* is a meta-piece — the overarching narrative arc follows the workshop participants’ struggle in making and sharing an honest story together, with that story woven throughout and between these process-driven glimpses.

---

<sup>101</sup> Jamil Smith, “Inside Man: ‘O.G.’ Star Jeffrey Wright on Life Behind Bars,” *Rolling Stone*, February 22, 2019.

<sup>102</sup> “Interview With Director Madeleine Sackler.” *HBO*.

<sup>103</sup> Madeleine Sackler, *It’s a Hard Truth, Ain’t It*, 1:01:36-1:01:39.

Like *Ear Hustle*, *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It* departs from the live-action form that makes up most of the popular prison media genre, such as *Beyond Scared Straight* discussed in the first chapter. Any scenes set outside of the correctional facility are animated, usually with the men's voices offering narration to explain the stories as they unfold. Depictions of abuse, violence, and harm — including that experienced by the incarcerated men as well as that perpetrated by them — are relegated to the animated world. To some degree, this formal decision can be explained by the physical inability to document the undocumentable.<sup>104</sup> Video evidence from these particular moments from these particular men's childhood doesn't exist, and so they must be represented through something other than direct documentary footage. There are other options besides animation, though, such as live-action recreation with hired actors, which is a common trope for works belonging to the closely-affiliated crime media genre.<sup>105</sup> The animation, then, is a conscious choice on the part of the documentary's creators, and it interacts meaningfully with the terror of the image concept introduced in the previous chapters.



Figure 12. Still from *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It*

<sup>104</sup> Sybil DelGaudio, "If Truth Be Told, Can 'Toons Tell It? Documentary and Animation," *Film History* 9, no. 2 (1997): 189-99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815174>.

<sup>105</sup> See *Forensic Files*, *America's Most Wanted*, *The First 48* for true crime and investigative examples. See *I Am Elizabeth Smart* for fictional dramatizations of actual crimes. See *The Thin Blue Line* and Errol Morris's other films for creative documentary examples.



Indeed, the men operate with a keen understanding of how visual representations can enact violence against their stories and their individuality. Early on in the documentary, the men engage in a group discussion regarding how they would like to address the reductive question that audiences probably immediately wonder — what are they in for? What are their crimes? In grappling with this, they choose to bury the lede, beginning the film with their childhoods and their everyday interactions, thereby delaying the hard truth of their crimes and their lives. As one participant explains,

I was thinking about this, like, we recognize that, you know what I'm saying, at the end of the day, you know, society sees us as, you know, prisoners. But I was thinking you could come in with your browns off. And as you talk and you start to put your browns on, they could begin to see, like, no, I'm actually in prison.<sup>106</sup>

Another participant interjects to add, “And you can show the crime that got you here.” As their voices describe these scenes, the visuals of the film shift from their group discussion to animations depicting their ideas. The adult men, animated, change out of civilian clothes and into prison jumpsuits. They hold up boards displaying their names and their ages and their crimes — all murder— as if they're having a mug shot taken. Then, the men's bodies shrink until they return to being the children whose stories opened the documentary, children reminiscent of those featured on *Beyond Scared Straight*, except through this incarceration media text the individuals are prompted to reflect on their paths rather than chastised for them.

Along with this meaningful movement between the forms of live-action and animation, the content of the men's documentary, mostly introduced through their discussions surrounding the making of their film, brings nuance to bear on topics of justice and imprisonment. While

---

<sup>106</sup> *It's a Hard Truth*, 00:19:40 – 00:20:07.

*Beyond Scared Straight* placed the burden of reformation squarely on the children's shoulders, *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It* struggles with the fraught relationship between individuals, their communities, and society — precisely because the creators of it engage in a fundamental struggle with that relationship through their confinement. These everyday interactions experienced between the men and captured by the men also cut directly into questions of politics of representation and production in the context of incarceration media. They negotiate how to tell their stories, how to show their stories, how to implicate the public, how not to implicate the public, how to respect their victims, how to explain without excusing — questions that individuals ask when they are empowered to share their truth, even when that's a hard truth.

In discussing the motivation behind their film, the men often refer to a hope that teenagers like them will learn something from their stories, echoing in many ways the mission of *Beyond Scared Straight* while nonetheless rejecting scared straight intimidation methods. Madeleine Sackler offers another potential audience — the segment that may have no firsthand experience with crime, prison, and, specifically, murder. As she phrases it, “I think it might be worth considering that, actually, a lot of people who might be watching this could come from communities where they don't know anybody who's ever killed anyone.”<sup>107</sup> One participant, Dennis, responds to this suggestion with incredulity, asking Sackler “In America today? [...] You think you can go back to your yearbooks, from elementary on, and not find somebody in there that's in prison for murder or who's been murdered?”<sup>108</sup> Sackler says yes, although from their expressions it seems impossible for the workshop participants to believe, there are communities in America that are insulated from that kind of violence and crime. Sackler here

---

<sup>107</sup> *It's a Hard Truth*, 1:00:26 – 1:00:37.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:00:37 – 1:00:48.

seems to be interjecting in order to speak directly to the Tribeca Film Festival participants and HBO subscriber base, who may share little demographic overlap with the incarcerated men, their families and friends, and the families of their victims. More personally, Sackler is sharing with the men about her own background and lived experiences.<sup>109</sup>

In another moment, when the filming of an interview pauses because another incarcerated man at Pendleton is being moved into a nearby dry cell, one participant, Franklin, inquires as to the cost of the camera that is filming the interview:

If you don't mind my asking, how much is that equipment, just that unit right there?

Probably, 25?

25 racks?! Man, I didn't think it was that expensive.

Well that's new.

25 grand ... (whistles)<sup>110</sup>

Here, again, the politics underlying the very existence of this project rise to the surface. The men are telling their stories to one another and through one another, but this is all being captured with equipment that neither they nor the facility they are imprisoned within could afford. After filming, the footage will be edited off-site and the animation will be drawn by someone outside.

---

<sup>109</sup> The Sackler family has been the focus of much national attention regarding the opioid crisis that has devastated communities across the United States. As mentioned above, Madeleine Sackler has avoided answering questions regarding, many would argue, her family's involvement in perpetuating the drug addiction that many incarcerated individuals, like those featured in *It's a Hard Truth*, suffer. Put differently, it's interesting to note here the ways in which accountability and culpability are framed in the current criminal justice system. These men acknowledge the personal responsibility they hold in taking other human lives, but any acknowledgment on Sackler's part that she many indeed know individuals who have caused others lethal harm is lacking. This is not to say that she must bear the burden of her forebears' sins, which in some ways would replicate the neoliberal framework I criticize in chapter one. Instead, this is to say that a narrow definition of harm is allowed in the system and in this piece of media.

<sup>110</sup> *It's a Hard Truth*, 00:27:55 – 00:28:14.

This exchange also reveals friction between what the documentary implies and what any viewer who has visited or been held in an operating correctional facility may realize — someone is supervising the men at all times. That someone, though out of the camera's view, is ever-present. For the most part, the documentary presents the workshop participants as autonomous creators, but cracks such as these reveal some of the limits of empowerment in the punishment system.

### **Conclusion**

Unlike Earlonne Woods, Theothus Carter and the creators of *It's a Hard Truth* remain incarcerated. In the months following *O.G.*'s filming, Carter was placed in solitary confinement, and, by the time the film premiered in April of 2018, Carter had been in “the hole” since August of 2017 and his communication with family and friends had been restricted since November.<sup>111</sup> Carter states unequivocally that these punishments are due to his participation in the film. Empowerment, then, is not a permanent state. Voices can be raised up in one moment only to be silenced the next, and, in Carter's case, that silencing may have happened precisely because of his empowerment to participate in the production of an award-winning film.

As I showed through an archival detour to *Riot in Cell Block 11*, though, more fundamental questions are being asked to fend of the exploitation of communities and individuals who participate in the creation of incarceration media. Are they being paid? If so, how much? If not, then are they receiving other kinds of compensation, like good time? Do they have a say in their own representation? If so, who listens? Is their involvement formally recognized in credits and citations? That being said, the *O.G.* model is far from perfect. The

---

<sup>111</sup> Nick Paumgarten, “The Première of ‘O.G.,’ the Film Made Inside an Indiana Prison,” *The New Yorker*, April 24, 2018.

production team took the first step by asking and answering many of these questions, and hopefully in the future population incarceration media can go beyond this to ensure that people are raised up.

This chapter also explored how a more traditional media object — *O.G.* — allowed for the creation of, I argue, a more empowering opportunity for incarcerated individuals to share their stories. *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It* did not feature special effects or a famous actor. It did not attract audiences at well-known film festivals. It was not the media object Madeleine Sackler set out to make when she went to Pendleton. Instead, *It's a Hard Truth* was pitched as the companion to *O.G.*, and it unfolded without a script but nonetheless with the benefit of new, professional equipment the production team had brought to Pendleton. Although *It's a Hard Truth* depended on *O.G.*, its creation and its content exceed the more traditional, more conventional film.

## CONCLUSION

No single media object is wholly exploitative or wholly empowering. In most cases and to varying degrees, the effects of a media object can be unraveled and traced through the world. With this research, I have explored the ways in which different moments — production, content, and dissemination — and different forms — television, podcast, and film — all offer opportunities for media-making and media-consumption to uplift or suppress. Each media text negotiates an omnipresent tension between exploitation and empowerment, positioning prisoners, producers, corrections officers, and audiences along a spectrum.

After grounding this project in theories and methods, I began with an interrogation of *Beyond Scared Straight*, from its embedded history in a decades-old juvenile justice approach to its exploitative practices that continues to this day. Once *Beyond Scared Straight* had been situated in a more long-standing dialogue between policy and media, I focused on the intersection of reality television with juvenile justice in order to understand how punishment operates as entertainment. This this kind of reality TV entertainment also brings with it a neoliberal orientation, which can be close-read through the content of the episodes.

I began my analysis by addressing a glaring omission from the *Beyond Scared Straight* text: race. Because of its neoliberal slant, I argue, the television show avoids discussion of the racist history and contemporary operation of the American criminal justice system. This kind of sociohistorical contextualization cannot coexist with the self-sufficient, self-reliant ideals of neoliberalism. In order to better address this, I turn to advertisements and materials surrounding the media object to read it against itself. This brings me to the content of the episodes, which I choose to analyze through three lenses: gender, authority, and family. These categories help me explore the construction of criminal, officer, and juvenile within *Beyond Scared Straight*'s own

neoliberal ideological framework, and in turn to expose the ways in which those belonging to these categories are exploited at the hands of a television network.

Lastly, I look at the ways in which the television show has seeped into a broader surveillance ecosystem through channels like YouTube and exploitative mugshot websites. Public shaming and punishment were made spectacle through the television show, and now the spectacle has become a participatory opportunity for audiences. An alarming number of the children featured on *Beyond Scared Straight* can be tracked through social media and arrest records, meaning a mistake from their childhood and their public embarrassment can follow them into any room. Many of the children featured on the show are now college-age and working-age — will this piece of incarceration media drown out their futures?

For my second chapter, I shift to a more empowering example of incarceration media, *Ear Hustle*, the audio-only podcast produced from inside San Quentin State Prison. I argue that the podcast upends many of the pitfalls entrenched in the prison media genre through not only its medium but also its fierce dedication to sharing stories that exceed ideological categories. Along with the incarceration media genre, *Ear Hustle* also exists within the audio podcast genre, which in many ways allowed for its production and its widespread popularity. By winning a podcasting competition, the show was assured advertisers, guidance, equipment, and a preexisting body of listeners.

I analyze the content of the show through a close-listening of multiple episodes, two from the first season and one from the third. In my analysis, I pay careful attention to the soundscapes developed by sound designer Antwan Williams, as well as the dialogue between co-hosts Nigel Poor and Earlonne Woods. In different moments the expected aural conventions — snapping handcuffs and clanging bars — are defied, subverting what audiences hear when they imagine

life inside of prison. At the same time, the very terminology of the incarcerated men is baked into the podcast. Listeners must discuss *Ear Hustle* on its own terms, beginning with the title of the podcast. On a fundamental level, *Ear Hustle* manifests subjecthood through the empowerment of literally lifting up one's voice, and listening publics reaffirm this by serving as engaged audiences. Earlonne Woods has been released from San Quentin and now works as a full-time producer for the Public Radio Exchange, the organization that has supported *Ear Hustle* from the outset, but it cannot be overlooked that the other men audiences met through the podcast remain behind bars and the thousands of citizens released from jails and prison concurrently with Earlonne will face structural barriers throughout their lives, including access to employment, housing, education, and democratic participation. Is empowering one individual enough?

Finally, I close the project by turning to a complex web of exploitation and empowerment through three incarceration media objects that span decades. Two feature films, *O.G.* (2018) and *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), claim authenticity and honesty through the physical setting of an active prison and the involvement of incarcerated actors and extras. But to what extent and in what ways are the imprisoned men raised up? How do the films portray empowerment not only through content but also through the conditions of their creation? Here I focus on attribution and compensation as two essential avenues that, if not attended to, almost guarantee that incarcerated individuals will be exploited.

Of course, money and credits also do not guarantee transformative or enduring empowerment. For that, I turn to *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It*, a companion documentary that was created during a filmmaking workshop that was taught in tandem with the production of *O.G.* Like *Ear Hustle*, *It's a Hard Truth* engages in a generative, creative kind of form not found in



most incarceration media. The incarcerated workshop participants choose to have their childhoods and their backgrounds and their crimes make up the bulk of the documentary, and these scenes are animated instead of reenacted or not visually represented at all. Between these animated scenes, the documentary shows the men in dialogue with one another, negotiating the ways in which they want to be seen and received.

Unlike the extras in *O.G.*, the men in *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It* did not receive compensation — the documentary was not under the purview of the Screen Actors Guild, so there was no minimum pay required by a union. Despite this, I argue that, ideologically and personally, *It's a Hard Truth* more effectively communicates the struggles that individuals and communities experience through the criminal justice system. It placed the participants at the center, making them all at once subjects, creators, and critics whose only goal was to share their truth.

Together, these media objects expand and alter the category of incarceration media in formal and practical ways. *Beyond Scared Straight*, though problematic and abusive, does exemplify the power of an incarceration media text to alter institutions and policy. Hundreds, if not thousands, of children's lives were changed because a handful of popular, mass media texts emerged within a specific context and under a specific politics of production. What could an incarceration media project that is predicated on empowerment and equality and justice learn from *Beyond Scared Straight's* exploitative success? As scared straight programs continue to crop up around the country, *Ear Hustle* introduces new forms and production models for incarceration media. The podcast dislodges entrenched aural imaginaries and opens up new platforms for those impacted by incarceration to embody their subjecthood through sound and dialogue. The perpetual tensions between exploitation and empowerment persist, as they always

will for incarceration media, but the creators and producers and participants attempt to engage with these nuances rather than obfuscate them. The final trio of texts, three full-length films, lay bare the economic and attribution arguments that the longer lineage of incarceration media has sidestepped. For *Riot in Cell Block 11*, its conceptualization as a prison reform film was a contradiction in terms — it aimed to help change the conditions of incarceration while nonetheless exploiting the labor and identities of hundreds of men. Half a century later, with Madeleine Sackler's *O.G.*, the incarcerated extras and actors are receiving credit and compensation, but what kind of empowerment does that bring and how can incarceration media more broadly adapt? *It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It*, the companion documentary to *O.G.*, further complicates the exploitation-empowerment spectrum because those tensions are, in many ways, the very subject of the film. Incarcerated amateur filmmakers struggle to create a story out of each other's narratives, always with some audience in mind. Incarceration media, then, centers not only on the politics of representation and production, but also on the politics of consumption.

I hope that now, as my own readers go out and encounter or even produce incarceration media, they consider who's making it, who's starring in it, who's getting paid, who's accessing it, and, broadly, who is benefiting.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Michael. *Slang: The People's Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012.
- . "The Newest Jim Crow." *The New York Times*. November 8, 2018.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/08/opinion/sunday/criminal-justice-reforms-race-technology.html>.
- Ames, Alexander. "In Charlotte, troubled teens go to jail for 'kinder, gentler' wake-up call." *The Charlotte Observer*, March 20, 2019.  
<https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article227670529.html>
- Ames, Alexander, and Tracy Kimball. "'Scared Straight' creator takes on critics, contending success stories abound." *The Charlotte Observer*, February 26, 2019.  
<https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article226328860.html>
- Aos, Steve, Roxanne Lieb, Jim Mayfield, Marna Miller, and Annie Pennucci. *Benefits and costs of Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Youth*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2004.
- Ash, Elliott and Michael Poyker. "Conservative News Media and Criminal Justice: Evidence from Exposure to Fox News Channel." March 2019.  
[http://elliottash.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/AP\\_Fox\\_with\\_stars.pdf](http://elliottash.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/AP_Fox_with_stars.pdf)
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.
- Beard, David. "Earlone Woods Made an Amazing Podcast—and It Won Him His Freedom." *Mother Jones*, January 9, 2019.  
<https://www.motherjones.com/media/2019/01/recharge-36-earlone-woods-ear-hustle-freedom/>
- Bersani, Bianca, and Elaine Doherty. "Desistance from Offending in the Twenty-First Century." *Annual Review of Criminology* 1, no. 1 (2018): 311-34.
- Bissler, Denise L., and Joan L. Conners, eds. *The Harms of Crime Media: Essays on the Perpetuation of Racism, Sexism and Class Stereotypes*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.
- Bucholtz, Mary. "From Stance to Style." In *Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, edited by Alexandra Jaffe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

California Code of Regulations. Title 15: Crime Prevention and Corrections § 3041.2, § 8006.  
[https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Regulations/Adult\\_Operations/docs/Title15-2016.pdf](https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Regulations/Adult_Operations/docs/Title15-2016.pdf)

Cantu, Tony. “Williamson County Launches Jail Tour Program As Crime Deterrent For Juveniles.” *Patch*, June 12, 2017.  
<https://patch.com/texas/round-rock/williamson-county-launches-jail-tour-program-designed-crime-deterrent-juveniles>

Carson, E. Ann. “Prisoners in 2016.” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, January 2018.

Cavender, Gray. “‘Scared Straight’: Ideology and the Media.” In *Justice and the Media: Issues and Research*, edited by Ray Surette, 246-59. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1984.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” *The Atlantic*, October 2015.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/>

Cortes, Katherine, and Shawn Rogers. *Reentry Housing Options: The Policymakers’ Guide*. New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2010.

Couloute, Lucius, and Daniel Kopf. “Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, July 2018.

“Criminal Justice Fact Sheet.” *NAACP*. 2019. <http://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>.

*DAI Volunteer, Pastoral Visitor, Program Guest & Intern Orientation Manual*, Wisconsin Department of Corrections, November 2018.

Dehnart, Andy. “Beyond Scared Straight’s Real-Life Controversy.” *The Daily Beast*, February 23, 2011.  
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/beyond-scared-strights-real-life-controversy>.

DelGaudio, Sybil. “If Truth Be Told, Can ‘Toons Tell It? Documentary and Animation.” *Film History* 9, no. 2 (1997): 189-99.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815174>.

Dewan, Shaila. “Inside America’s Black Box: A Rare Look at the Violence of Incarceration,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2019.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/us/inside-americas-black-box.html?module=inline>

Digital Humanities Initiative. “American Prison Writing Archive.” Accessed May 5, 2019.  
<https://apw.dhinitiative.org/>.

- Doyle, Aaron. *Arresting Images: Crime and Policing in Front of the Television Camera*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.
- Dunbar-Hester, Christina. *Low Power to the People: Pirates, Protest, and Politics in FM Radio Activism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014.
- DuVernay, Ava and Jason Moran. *13th*. USA, 2016.
- Edison Research. "The Podcast Consumer 2017." *Edison Research*. April 18, 2017. <http://www.edisonresearch.com/the-podcast-consumer-2017/>.
- Electronic Literature Collection. "Public Secrets." [http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/daniel\\_public\\_secrets.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/daniel_public_secrets.html).
- "FAQ." *Ear Hustle*, Radiotopia, [www.earhustlesq.com/faq/](http://www.earhustlesq.com/faq/).
- Feinstein, Sheryl. "Another Look at Scared Straight." *The Journal of Correctional Education* 56, no. 1 (2005): 40-44.
- Finckenauer, James O. *Scared Straight and the Panacea Phenomenon*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982.
- Fishman, Mark, and Gray Cavender. *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998.
- Forman, James, Jr. *Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Frist Art Museum. "Slavery, the Prison Industrial Complex: Photographs by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick." February 2018, <https://fristartmuseum.org/calendar/detail/slavery-the-prison-industrial-complex>.
- Green, Erica L. "Government Watchdog Finds Racial Bias in School Discipline." *The New York Times*. April 4, 2018.
- Hall, Stuart, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publications, 1997.
- Hinton, Elizabeth. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Hirschi, Travis, and Michael Gottfredson. "Age and the Explanation of Crime." *American Journal of Sociology* 89, no. 3 (November 1983 1983): 552-84.

hooks, bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

“Incarcerated Women and Girls, 1980-2016.” *The Sentencing Project*. May 2018.  
<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

“Interview With Director Madeleine Sackler.” *HBO*.  
<https://www.hbo.com/movies/og/madeleine-sackler-director-interview>

*It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It*. Directed by Madeleine Sackler, Dennis Brown, Marshaun Bugg, Al'Jonon Coleman, James Collins, Franklin Cox, Brandon Crider, Clifford Elswick, Quentis Hardiman, Joseph Henderson, Charles Lawrence, Sr., Herb Robertson, Rushawn Tanksley, and Mark Thacker. Great Curve Films and Brookstreet Pictures, 2018.

Jaffe, Alexandra M., ed. *Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Johnstone, Barbara, and Scott F. Kiesling. "Indexicality and Experience: Exploring the meanings of /aw/-monophthongization in Pittsburgh." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12, no. 1 (2008): 5-33.

Kaeble, Danielle, and Mary Cowhig. “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2016.” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*. April 26, 2018.  
<https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6226>

Kaminsky, Stuart. Draft of *Don Siegel: Director*. Box 41, Folder 1. Don Siegel Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Kimball, Tracy, and Alexander Ames. “Sheriff says ‘Scared Straight’ program helps troubled kids. Experts say it’s child abuse.” *The Charlotte Observer*, March 2, 2019.  
<https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article226325665.html>

King, Jamilah. “Behind the Scenes of ‘Ear Hustle.’” *Mother Jones*. April 2018.

LaBelle, Brandon. *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Lacey, Kate. *Listening Publics: The Politics of Audiences in the Media Age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013.

Larson, Sarah. “My Best Podcasts of 2017.” *The New Yorker*. December 14, 2017.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2017-in-review/my-best-podcasts-of-2017>.

Laub, John H., and Robert J. Sampson. *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

- . “Turning Points in the Life Course: Why Change Matters to the Study of Crime.” *Criminology* 31, no. 3 (1993): 301-25.
- . “Understanding Desistance from Crime.” *Crime and Justice* 28 (2001): 1-69.
- Lewis, R.V. “Scared Straight—California Style: Evaluation of the San Quentin Squires Program.” *Criminal Justice & Behavior* 10, no. 2 (1983): 209-26.
- LeFlouria, Talitha L. *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- Lindsay, Bethany. “Man Raped by Inmates During ‘Scared Straight’ Prison Tour Awarded \$175k from B.C.” *CBC*. December 5, 2018.  
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/prison-assault-award-1.4934363>.
- Lipsey, Mark. “Juvenile Delinquency Treatment: A Meta-Analytic Inquiry.” In *Meta-Analysis for Explanation*, 83-127. New York: Russell Sage, 1992.
- . “The Primary Factors That Characterize Effective Interventions with Juvenile Offenders: A Meta-Analytic Overview.” *Victims & Offenders* 4, no. 2 (2009): 124-47.
- Maahs, Jeff, and Travis C. Pratt. “‘I Hate These Little Turds!’: Science, Entertainment, and the Enduring Popularity of Scared Straight Programs.” *Deviant Behavior* 38, no. 1 (2016): 47-60.
- The Marshall Project. “Life Inside.” Accessed May 5, 2019.  
<https://www.themarshallproject.org/tag/life-inside>.
- Mason, Paul, ed. *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture*. Cullompton, UK; Portland: Willan Publishing, 2006.
- Murray, Susan, and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2008.
- McCracken, Ellen, ed. *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age*. New York and London: Routledge, 2017.
- McCullough, Jolie. “Texas may soon have to report the temperatures inside its uncooled prisons.” *Texas Tribune*, March 6, 2019.  
<https://www.texastribune.org/2019/03/06/texas-prison-heat-legislature-reporting/>
- Muller, Christopher, Robert Sampson, and Alix Winter. “Environmental Inequality: The Social Causes and Consequences of Lead Exposure.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 2018 44:1, 263-282.

National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction. "About." Accessed May 9, 2019. <https://niccc.csgjusticecenter.org/about/>.

Nguyen, Holly, and Thomas Loughran. "On the Measurement and Identification of Turning Points in Criminology." *Annual Review of Criminology* 1, 1 (2018): 335-58.

Nyre, Lars. *Sound Media: From Live Journalism to Music Recording*. London: Routledge, 2008.

Ortner, Sherry B. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Paumgarten, Nick, "A Prison Film Made in Prison." *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/a-prison-film-made-in-prison>

—. "The Première of 'O.G.,' the Film Made Inside an Indiana Prison." *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-premiere-of-og-the-film-made-inside-an-indiana-prison>

Petrosino, Anthony, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, Meghan Hollis-Peel, and Julia Lavenberg. "Scared Straight" and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency. *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 5 (2013). DOI: 10.4073/csr.2013.5

"Podquest." Radiotopia. <https://www.radiotopia.fm/podquest/>.

Poor, Nigel and Earlonne Woods. "Looking Out." *Ear Hustle*. Podcast audio, July 12, 2017.

—. "The SHU." *Ear Hustle*. Podcast audio, July 26, 2017.

—. "Catch a Kite." *Ear Hustle*. Podcast audio, August 9, 2017.

—. "Gold Coats and OGs." *Ear Hustle*. Podcast audio, October 11, 2017.

—. "Birdbaths and a Lockbox." *Ear Hustle*. Podcast audio, September 12, 2018.

Riisman, Paul. "PRX's Radiotopia - an 'indie label' for podcasting." *Radio Survivor*. February 13, 2014. <http://www.radiosurvivor.com/2014/02/13/podcast-survivor-prxs-radiotopia-an-indie-label-for-podcasting/>

Roettger, Michael, and Raymond Swisher. "Associations of Fathers' History of Incarceration with Sons' Delinquency and Arrest among Black, White, and Hispanic Males in the United States." *Criminology* 49, 4 (2011). 1109-1147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2011.00253.x>



- Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018.
- Sackler, Madeleine. *O.G.* 2018; New York City, NY: Great Curve Films, 2018.
- Sawyer, Wendy, and Peter Wagner. "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019." *Prison Policy Initiative*. March 19, 2019.
- Sawyer, Wendy, and Wanda Bertram. "Jail will separate 2.3 million mothers from their children this year," *Prison Policy Initiative*, May 13, 2018.  
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2018/05/13/mothers-day-2018/>
- "Scared Straight: Young people experience what it's like to be a Bexar County inmate." *News for San Antonio*, May 9, 2018.  
<https://news4sanantonio.com/news/videos/scared-straight-young-people-experience-what-its-like-to-be-a-bexar-county-inmate>
- Schembri, Anthony. "Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours." Florida: Department of Juvenile Justice, 2006.
- Shapiro, Arnold. *Beyond Scared Straight*. New York: A&E Television Network, 2011-2015.
- . *Scared Straight!*. 52 mins. Los Angeles: Golden West Television Productions, 1978.
- . *Scared Straight! 10 Years Later*. 1987.
- . *Scared Straight! 20 Years Later*. 96 Minutes: United Paramount Network, 1999.
- Sharkey, Patrick T. *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Revival of City Life, and the Next War on Violence*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Siegel, Don. Call sheets and blocking for *The Twilight Zone* episodes. Box 10, Folder 32. Don Siegel Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.
- . Draft notes on *Escape from Alcatraz* for *A Siegel Film*. Box 46, Folder 51. Don Siegel Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.
- . Draft notes on *Riot in Cell Block 11* for *A Siegel Film*. Box 46, Folder 54. Don Siegel Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.
- . Manuscript for *Riot in Cell Block 11*. Box 10, Folder 46. Don Siegel Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Siegel, Don. *Riot in Cell Block 11*. Allied Artists Picture Corporation, 1954.

Silverstein, Michael. "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description." In *Meaning in Anthropology*, edited by Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, 11-55. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980.

Smith, Jamil. "Inside Man: 'O.G.' Star Jeffrey Wright on Life Behind Bars." *Rolling Stone*, February 22, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/jeffrey-wright-og-interview-796395/>

Solon, Olivia. "Haunted by a Mugshot: How Predatory Websites Exploit the Shame of Arrest." (2018). Published electronically June 12, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jun/12/mugshot-exploitation-websites-arrests-shame>.

Sterne, Jonathan. *The Sound Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014.

Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Education and Labor. *Oversight on Scared Straight*, First Session, June 4, 1979.

Tunley, Roul. "Don't Let Them Take Me Back!" *Reader's Digest*, January 1978, 96-100.

Wagner, Peter, and Wendy Sawyer. "States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2018." *Prison Policy Initiative*, June 2018.

Wakefield, Sara, and Christopher Wildeman. *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Wallace, Aurora. "Better Here than There: Prison Narratives in Reality Television." In *Punishment in Popular Culture*, edited by Charles J. Ogletree, Jr. and Austin Sarat, 55-78. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Wayne, Michael L. "Guilty Pleasures and Cultural Legitimation: Exploring High-Status Reality TV in the Postnetwork Era." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 5 (October 2015 2015): 990-1009.

Werner, Sarah Rhea. "The Woman Who Podcasts From A Men's Prison." *Forbes*. December 5, 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahrheawerner/2016/12/05/the-woman-who-podcasts-from-a-mens-prison/2/#3b553d69211b>.

Wilson, David, and Sean O'Sullivan. *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama*. Winchester, U.K.: Waterside Press, 2004.

*The Yale Law Journal*. "Critical Voices on Criminal Justice: Essays from Directly Affected Authors." February 25, 2019, <https://www.yalelawjournal.org/collection/critical-voices-on-criminal-justice>.

Yousman, Bill. *Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV: Representations of Incarceration*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009.