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ABOUT TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE JOURNAL

The ***Transformative Justice Journal (TJJ)***, founded in 2012, is an online, open-source, peer-reviewed scholar-activist, anti-authoritarian, subversive, and critical penal abolition journal dedicated to promoting transformative justice. TJJ is organized and edited by a radical critical grass-roots collective of activist-scholars, community organizers, and current and former prisoners from around the world. TJJ was influenced out of conversations at the International Conference on Penal Abolition ICOPA in 2010. As a scholar-activist journal, TJJ was developed out of scholarly and community dialogues around promoting a decolonizing and anarchist criminology social justice penal abolition community-based alternatives to both the retributive, punitive, and utilitarian justice models used by most colonial criminal justice systems, which victimize offenders and re-victimize survivors of offenses, while promoting profits over people and corporate interests over community interests. The current punitive criminal justice system takes control, responsibility, healing, and accountability away from victims and offenders and instead gives them a powerless and victimizing experience. Transformative justice, a decolonizing and anti-oppression approach, however, views conflict not from the lens of the criminal justice system, but from the community; as such, those involved in the conflict are seen as individuals rather than victims or offenders. Moreover, transformative justice works to dismantle oppression by systems of domination, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, elitism, statism, classism, transphobia, ecocide, speciesism, and ableism within all domestic, interpersonal, global, and community conflicts that foster theories such as, but not limited to eugenics, capitalism, and colonialism. In short, transformative justice is restorative justice plus social justice. Transformative justice expands the social justice model, which challenges and identifies injustices, in order to create organized processes of addressing and ending those injustices and providing space and place for marginalized voices. Transformative justice also builds off the principles of anarchism, decolonizing, prison abolition, healing justice, Quakerism, liberation, revolutionary social justice resistance movements, First Nations in Canada, and restorative justice in order to dismantle oppression, repression, suppression, and domination.

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The Transformative Justice Journal is located in the Department of Criminal Justice at Salt Lake Community College.

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2. The Transformative Justice Journal publishes rigorously peer-reviewed scholar-activist work of the highest quality.
3. The Transformative Justice Journal provides the utmost respect and care during the review process.
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5. The Transformative Justice Journal charges no fees for publication.
6. The Transformative Justice Journal supports and encourages submissions that are excluded from mainstream journals, such as, but not limited to use photographic, video, MP3, art, poems, raps, and new media work.
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Arting and Tojisha Kenkyu

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Keywords: A/R/Tography, Autism, Epistemology

Arting and Tojisha Kenkyu

Iris Arcus

Tojisha Kenkyu ("TK") began in Japan in 2001 as a non-coercive, peer-led therapy for individuals with serious psychiatric conditions to explore and articulate their lived experiences in their own words, rather than in diagnostic labels. It has since expanded into more generalized use in Japan, including as a method of scientific inquiry into autism (Kumagaya, 2009). Remarkably, TK has yet to be explored in creative realms, leading me to ask: can TK be a form of Arting? By Arting, I mean not only the immediate action of creating a work of art, but art as praxis integrated

into daily life. This essay presents how I have successfully used TK for creative practice and, more importantly, argues for TK's potential as a form of art therapy, especially for so-called "neurodivergence". TK is inherently aligned with the values and goals of social and transformative justice, and thus, TK art therapy can and should be studied as an option to incarceration for people with mental health challenges. To demonstrate, I will give a brief background on traditional TK, its resonance to social justice, and outline my experience Arting with TK, providing a case study of my work as further evidence.

Tojisha kenkyu, "self-study by those involved", emerged in Japan around 2001 at a residential mental health facility, Bethel House in Hokkaido. TK involves five interrelated steps: maintaining a reflective distance from one's challenges; verbalizing and sharing those struggles with peers; collaboratively identifying patterns and formulating hypotheses; developing personal coping methods; and testing and refining those strategies through daily life applications (Ikuyoshi, et al., 2017). This ongoing, iterative process values lived experience as epistemic authority and encourages participants to become experts on their own lives, supported by - not defined by - outside professionals. It is the re-centering of self to the epistemic authority, movement from medical model to social model, fostering of peer space as mutually restorative, and a powerful sense of agency in the process that aligns TK with transformative justice as I understand it. The move from the medical to the social model is specifically interesting since a recent scholarship on autism by Australian researcher Damian Milton proposes such a shift (Milton, 2018). Essentially, Milton argued that the problem was not that autistics were medically deficient to non-autistics, but simply that the two groups did not yet know how to communicate effectively between their two worlds.

In 2009, an autistic researcher at the University of Tokyo, Shin-ichiro Kumagaya, transferred TK to scientific inquiry by testing hypotheses drawn from his own TK therapy sessions (Kumagaya, 2001). This is how I first encountered TK in relation to autism. At first, my interest in TK was purely as a therapy for myself. As a newly diagnosed autistic, after spending my life living with an erroneous bipolar diagnosis, I was desperate to finally "solve" my problems. Most treatments enforced upon me for this incorrect bipolar disorder were enormously damaging to my body and soul, especially the medications. TK appealed to me in a moment when I wanted to repair this damage. In TK, I saw the ultimate goal of transformation, a goal I was seeking after the realization that the "problem" was not just me but also the systems and social stigmas I was forced to navigate without the "Handbook to Life". Since my corrected diagnosis, I have begun increasingly to choose Arting as an alternative to Lifting and a way to unmask. Another motivation is to contribute to positive social change by discussing difficult topics. Interrogating autism through TK and willingly exposing myself to public scrutiny through Arting was a logical conclusion for me. In Arting, I have found my life. Without a mask, I have found my face and all that it is or is not. TK allows me the mindfulness and radical acceptance I need to reposition myself for a "more comfortable life," as Kumagaya put it (2022).

To help the reader envision TK as praxis, I offer a case study of the genesis of my recent piece, "Magical Associations ," presented in Figure 1. My application of TK as praxis involved first a prolonged period of research on autism and journaling, with some basic photographic work to complement the entries. The journal investigated various "symptoms", such as overstimulation, sleep and awakening, memory, meltdowns, and eating.

Figure 1: *Magical Associations (2025)*

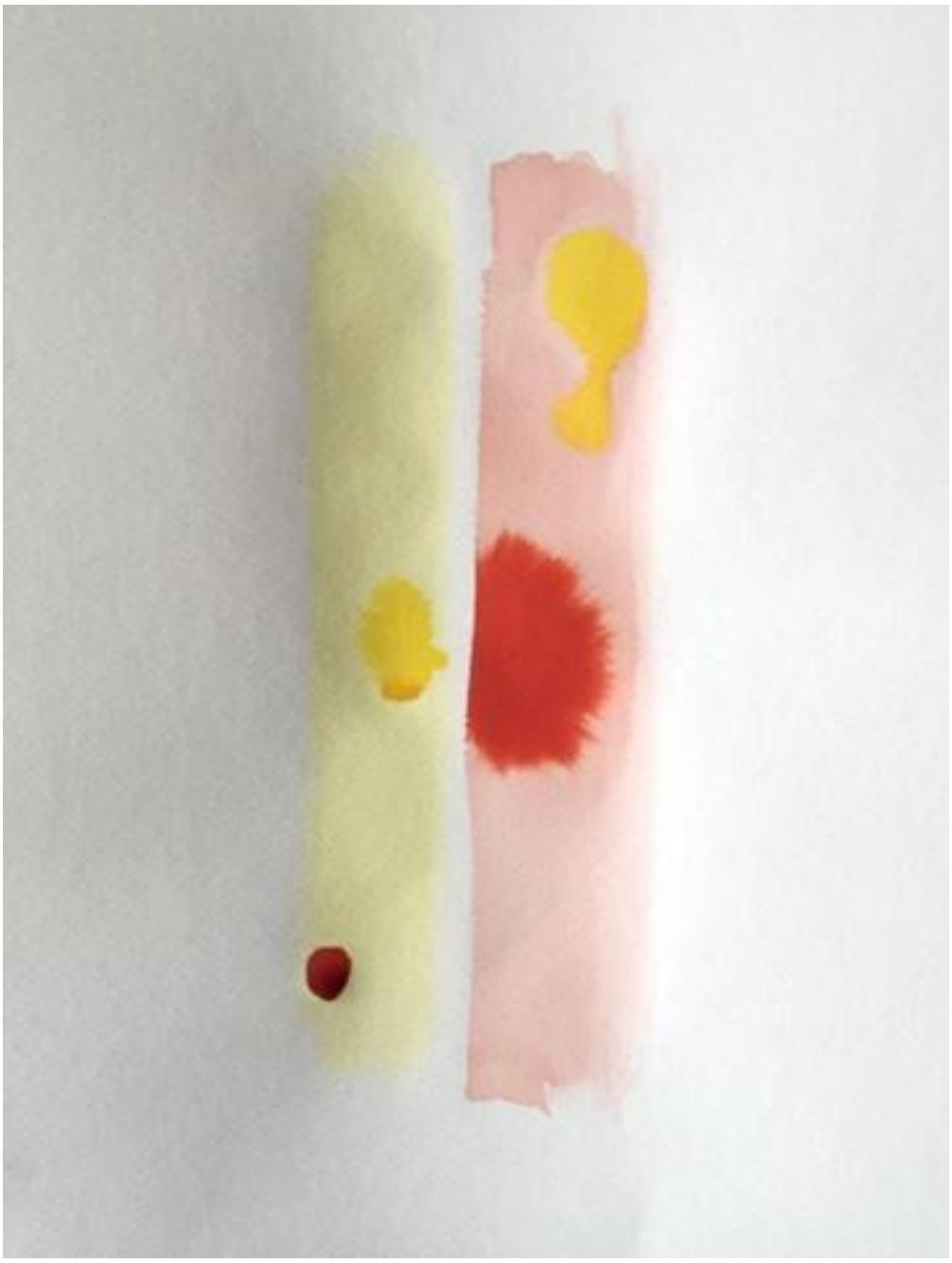
Note: Cyanotype on cotton rag, watercolor ink, Sharpie, gold leaf, scraps of maps, thrift store dress / frame.

In spring 2024, I moved into creation mode, choosing an entry I wrote on eating as a topic to explore visually for the next year. This entry is admittedly the easiest to begin with, as it describes my physical aversion to the color combination of primary red and yellow and how that caused me problems with eating as a child and resulting traumatic experiences. I began to challenge myself to only work with those colors, and this forced me to abandon photography in the interest of ink and paint, and to consider abstract forms of representation. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, my first attempt at intentional work with these colors was awkward and ugly, a simple practice in minimalism, laying the colors side by side, searching for something pleasant.

Figure 2: *Studies in UnAcceptable Colors, 1, (2024)*

Note: Watercolor ink on cotton rag

Figure 3: *Studies in UnAcceptable Colors, 7, (2024)*



Note: Watercolor ink on cotton rag

This process is a very conscious one, in which the challenge of enjoying these colors remains a priority. I permitted myself to include another color I like, blue, to soothe the process, and saw more success with a series of self-portraits. I also began to apply gold leaf, considering that it is a sort of yellow, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4: *Studies in UnAcceptable Colors, Self Portrait 27 (2024)*

Note: Pen and Ink, Sharpie, goldleaf on cotton rag.

Toward the end of this period, I also read art theory and philosophy, which prompted me to reconsider notions of inner space, "inheritance", memory, and the experience of vision. In Figure 5, I reference a philosophical question I had while reading Luhmann's essay (1990) with Milton's theory (2012) in mind: Does autism function like a sort of autopoietic system? Here, the reader can see how TK was beginning to integrate into the lifestyle of Arting.

Figure 5: *Studies in UnAcceptable Colors, Autopoiesis (2025)*

Note: Watercolor ink on Cotton rag.

By May of 2025, I was in a swirl of memory, aesthetic inquiry, and mitigating day-to-day life with more mindfulness. One day I awoke with a new image in mind and produced "Magical Associations" by July, drawing the title from an explication of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* that I had just read (Rampley, 1997).

One familiar with some of the struggles of autism can immediately see a few personal benefits to TK in Arting. First, it forced me to intellectualize my autism, increasing mindfulness, and articulating the causes and solutions to problematic behaviors. Another benefit was that certain visual exegeses prompted me to work outside the box artistically and find new forms and imagery or methods of working. This brought me to a completely original idea. Many autistics rely on routine and "sameness" for regulation, and mimic others to fit in. Looking back on my

photographic work, I saw that I had both been mimicking what was working for others (in my own way of course - mimicking does not mean copying, and one could argue that anyway, all art has an element of mimicry). I was essentially locked into a specific pattern of methodology to express myself. Applying TK as a methodology assisted me in breaking out of stagnation and finding my own unique visual exegesis on an autism associated eating disorder that many professionals are still attempting to understand, by allowing thought and emotion to lead rather than my photographic skills.

Often, I receive two responses to my description of TK as praxis: first, isn't this already what artists do? Second, isn't this just art therapy already? To both, I answer yes, but there are differences. First, it is totally likely, artists are already engaged in TK - perhaps unknowingly. But so far, I do not see this therapy, its methods and particular questions addressed publicly by artists, even in Japan. Even Kumagaya's recent description of TK states, "[TK] has also attracted interest from various academic fields beyond the boundaries of the humanities and sciences, including anthropology, sociology, philosophy, medicine and engineering." (2022) Notice art is not mentioned.

As far as art therapy, TK has not yet been formalized in the west as an accepted practice. TK stands in opposition to traditional art therapy, which is inherently carceral and chauvinist, so this will take some work. Art therapy relies on psychoanalysis and DSM language to investigate, analyze, and name conditions for the patient, as in classic therapy sessions. The general purpose of western therapy is to correct a person to suit society's view of "normal," even ABA has been criticized as such. Milton recognized in 2012, how even as autism became more widely accepted it was being co-opted by such a chauvinist medical model, writing:

> Although compared to many categorisations of disability, autism has attained a great deal more public attention and that one could say that the label has become a fetishised commodity and even a global industry (Mallet, 2011), yet it is an industry that silences the autistic voice from any participation, other than in the form of a tokenistic gesture. Therefore, far from owning the means of mental production about one's own culture, the 'autistic individual' becomes the 'product' of the industry, the 'thing' that is 'intervened' with…Autism is not just an 'invisible disability' to many in terms of a behavioural definition, the 'autistic voice' is made 'invisible' within the current culture of how knowledge is produced about 'autistic people' often excludes empowered 'autistic advocates' from such processes.

TK solves Milton's problem first by re-centering a person to be their own meaning-maker. With the study in colors, for example, it was my choice to identify this as a "problem" and attempt a sort of aesthetic exposure therapy as a hypothesized solution for my aversion. It was my purposeful awareness and introspection that allowed me to adapt my studies in color with compassion. It will be my choice to decide if this is working for me and to ask why or why not? Secondly, TK equalizes the power dynamic between "patient" and "therapist" who is to act as a guide and asking peers with similar experiences to support each other in compassion and understanding. Here is where Arting comes in, to express what might otherwise be imperceivable or seemingly impossible to verbalize, to open a window into lived experiences. My color experiments, for example, have triggered explanations of the ASD eating disorder.

The question remains what a group effort would look like. TK traditionally relies on peer support as individuals with similar conditions of being talked to each other to find words for their experiences. It asks for a respectful and honest community effort. These groups often meet regularly and know each other, so that they can respond to each other, even challenging each other to dig deeper, clarify or change perspectives. It has been my intention all these years in practicing alone to one day form a group experiment with other neurodivergent artists and see the group effort in action, see what kinds of art we create together, what kind of critiques we can offer, what riddles we can solve. Considering that art has already been proven to "have a positive outcome on the incarcerated, their families, the prison environment, and society", it is logical that TK art therapy has potential for the same (Brewster, 2014).

This essay thus serves as a manifesto and inspirational call to Arting for my fellow so-called "divergents", diffabled, and incarcerated humans seeking solutions. In this moment of renewed oppression under an uber-capitalist techno-bro state, we must not cower but arise and speak for ourselves, wresting the production of narrative back, united in resistance to further diminishment. My own small practice of TK Arting has proven it is possible to use TK as an *inlet,* Arting as an *outlet*, and on a larger scale, the two together as a powerful means to break free from the prisons of stigma and "intervention" built for us by a society that increasingly sees us as a medical and existential threat. TK Arting offers creatives a generative framework outside these oppressive paradigms through which individuals can reclaim authorship of their narratives, positioning creative praxis as both epistemology and emancipatory methodology.

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Harmonious Paradoxes: Formerly Incarcerated Activists' Self and Social Change as Transformative Justice

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Biography: Dr. Denise Woodall is a critical sociologist, faculty member, and recovery advocate whose work examines inequalities and the social construction of difference in the criminalization of populations. Drawing from lived experience and academic inquiry, her research engages system-blame approaches and challenges the evidence used to justify harm against the working class and the multiply oppressed. She reimagines treatment through evidence, ethics, dignity, and self-determination, advancing a human rights–centered vision of collective liberation.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Formerly Incarcerated Activists, Carceral Status, Peer Support Self and Social Change

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Harmonious Paradoxes: Formerly Incarcerated Activists' Self and Social Change in Transformative Justice

Denise Ruth Woodall

> Up to our knees in tears and blood of people who lived here/ and ran this town before it was a town / now it's an abomination / yesterday's plantation, today's prison / it's all in your head, because it's in the air. (Sole, 2024, *All in My Head*)

Introduction

Formerly incarcerated activists navigate the intertwined, and at times paradoxical, work of transforming both themselves and the social conditions that shaped their lives. Their activism is more than resistance; it is a means of reshaping identity, reclaiming agency, and making visible their collective right to have rights (Woodall & Shannon 2022). In challenging deprivation, subjugation, and political estrangement, they engage in personal processes of healing and self-determination. This paper examines these "harmonious paradoxes," drawing on the narratives of formerly incarcerated activists (FIA's) to explore how individual and social change are enacted as inseparable practices within transformative justice.

Based on interviews with 32 FIA's, the article shows how individualized self-change work—such as peer mentoring or healing practices—is both distinct from and deeply interwoven with broader social-change activism. Transformative justice emphasizes healing and accountability while also transforming the conditions—oppression, violence, and state control—that enable harm in the first place (Nocella 2019; Mingus 2022; Generation Five 2017). Yet existing research has seldom illustrated how abolitionist commitments coexist with personal accountability and the transformation of harmful systems. Where language falls short, activists use powerful metaphors to describe how personal-reform and social-change work intertwine in harmonious paradoxes: micro-level change (via peer mentoring and self-care) occurs alongside, above, below, within, through, in contradiction to, and in harmony with macro-level social-change work.

Social Drivers of Harm

Harms people commit are embedded in historical and political structures that produce the conditions for violence. Settler colonial governance relies on carcerality as a state logic that Others individuals, normalizing legalized abuse and sovereign control over Indigenous peoples and immigrants (Coyle & Schept 2017; Kashyap 2020). Within these regimes of dispossession, people live under constant displacement, surveillance, and deprivation—conditions that can erupt into interpersonal harm as accumulated injury. Prison expansion, fueled by profit-driven motives and racial capitalism (Gilmore 2007), widens the carceral net while failing to address the structural wounds that drive harm. It operates alongside community disinvestment, housing segregation, redlining, and the enduring legacies of Jim Crow (Alexander 2010)—architectures of exclusion that create economic desperation and social alienation. Capitalist exploitation appears in carceral capitalism (Wang 2018), where poverty from systemic extraction drives survival-based harms. These injuries intersect with oppression, marginalization, and systemic violence (Woodall & Shannon 2022). Imperialism and gendered oppression shape what is labeled criminal and obscure the structural production of harms such as sexual and domestic violence (Richie 2018). Gendered symbolic violence (Anderson 2008) limits recognition of harm, distorts accountability, and fosters cycles where the silenced or misunderstood perpetuate harm. Intersecting oppressions Potter (2015) are lived realities that fracture bodies, relationships, and correlate with harmful behaviors.

Even progressive reform narratives can reproduce carceral logics, punishing symptoms while leaving root causes intact (Schept 2015).

Structural inequalities rooted in race, gender, and class shape exposure to harm and the likelihood of criminalization. Poverty, systemic racism, under-resourced education systems, and limited economic opportunities form interconnected drivers of behaviors punished by the criminal legal system (Travis, Western & Redburn 2014; Western 2006, 2015; Carbado 2017; Edwards, Lee, & Esposito 2019). For women of color, these dynamics are compounded by the scarcity and inadequacy of resources in contexts of violence and racism, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and criminalization (Richie 2018). Gendered pressures and expectations—whether through economic marginalization, ideals of femininity, or working-class masculine norms—further contribute to engagement in criminalized activities (Piquero & Sealock 2004; Anderson 2008). Family violence remains a pervasive antecedent to women's law-contact (Salisbury & Voorhis 2009).

Broader systemic forces also play a role: the profit motives of mass incarceration direct resources toward punitive control rather than community stability, producing further social dislocation (Gottschalk 2016; Kilgore 2012). Racialized criminalization of cultural identity, as seen in the surveillance and suspicion toward Latine communities, intensifies marginalization (Rios 2007, 2011). In many disadvantaged neighborhoods, normalized participation in informal economies and the routine experience of incarceration reinforce these patterns, creating self-reproducing cycles of criminalization.

Given the overwhelming evidence that such social conditions shape interpersonal harm. Even within the structural oppressions that shape daily life, personal responsibility can be part of dismantling the very systems that produce harm—cultivating the skills and relationships needed to challenge oppression while working to transform its root causes. Transformative justice is not a tidy balance between the self and the social; it is a weaving of contradictions, a negotiation never finally resolved, a constant crossing between inner reckoning and outward resistance, the art of waging peace in a world that profits from war, and the discipline of seeing with the same eyes the wounds within and the structures without, refusing to look away from either.

Transformative Intervention: Consciousness, Solidarity, and Hope Building

Elliot Currie, in his keynote address at the 2012 Critical Criminology and Justice Studies Conference, asserts three mechanisms that he believes have profound effects on successful re-entry in a model of "transformative intervention": 1) an increase in consciousness of how systemic deprivations lead to the criminal experience; 2) a sense of solidarity with the community rather than with an individual; and 3) hopeful action to change social conditions perceived as destructive. Transformative interventions seek to shift the reforming offender's gaze from internal to external conditions, to make meaningful connections with others who have shared experiences, and to then take meaningful action to change social conditions. He argues that the fostering of those behaviors provides better chances for long-term desistance via a transformative model of justice involving simultaneous self- and socially focused change. However, in many ways, Currie's model runs counter to conventional re-entry programs, which send messages to criminalized people to look inward, to fix oneself, and to adapt to harmful social realities (Currie 2012; 2013; Maruna 2004).

Conformist Intervention: Rendering Unconsciousness, Submissiveness, and Lowered Aspirations

Conformist, re-entry programming—dominant in social work, criminal justice practice, and criminological research—requires criminalized people to accept full responsibility for their behavior, regardless of social circumstances. They are urged to ignore life-shaping structural forces, look inward, and accept diminished opportunities (Currie 2012:19). This model claims personal responsibility leads to positive outcomes (Carlen 2013; Currie 2013; Maruna 2004). Those facing structural barriers must contort themselves to fit an unjust system to be deemed successful (McNeill 2014); rights to social restoration hinge on overcoming these odds (Maruna 2017).

Risk assessment tools often label critiques of law or justice as criminal or risky (Hannah-Moffat 2018). Widely used instruments (Robina Institute 2016) like the Criminal Sentiments Scale–modified (CSS-m) equate criticism of "law," "police," and "courts" with recidivism risk, requiring agreement that "laws deserve our respect," "courts are fair," and "police are honest." The Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (PICTS) instructs subjects to reject "blaming" poverty, government, or other external factors, and to abandon "superoptimism" to show change (Walters 2016). Such tools demand self-pathologizing and denial of structural harm, reinforcing surveillance, punishment, and coercive therapy.

Prison-based and transitional treatment models also reify individual pathology, justifying punitive responses and enforcing submission through cognitive restructuring and decision-making alteration (Lebel et al. 2008). These approaches extend psychological oppression (Foucault 1991; McCorkel 2013; Hannah-Moffat 2004; Whetstone and Gowan 2017; Schept 2015) and frame any reference to social context as "cognitive distortion" (Fox 1999; Maruna 2004). Despite research linking crime to structural causes, programming remains pathology-focused (Bazemore and Boba 2007), failing to contextualize offending and showing limited effectiveness (Currie 2012; 2013; Maruna 2015; Fox 2015, 2016).

Table 1. Comparison Conformist and Transformative Intervention

Transformative Intervention Dimension	Conformist Logic	Transformative Logic
Consciousness	Unconsciousness	Consciousness
Solidarity	Individual work - inward	Collective work - outward
Hope	Low expectations	Collective aspiration

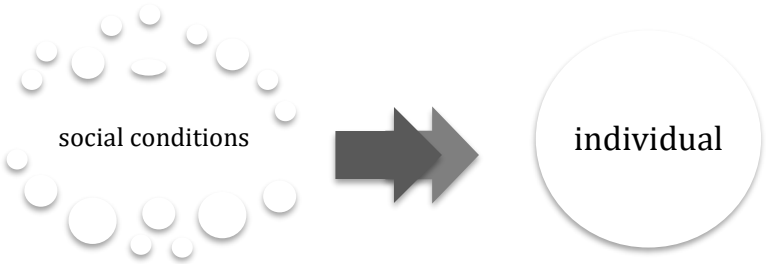
Recent programs acknowledge structural barriers but reframe them as actuarial "needs" rather than systemic problems, avoiding structural change. Issues like housing, education, and health become recast as criminogenic risks to be managed (Hannah-Moffat 2015; 2018; Ward and Maruna 2007; Maurutto and Hannah-Moffat 2006). This risk logic embeds structural deprivation into the deficits of carceral subjects, reinforcing responsibilization and diverting attention from socio-cultural causes (Hannah-Moffat 2001; Arrigo 2004). In turn, these "deficits" justify

expanded surveillance and governance, extending carceral control through new forms of subjugation (Maurutto and Hannah-Moffat 2006; Hannah-Moffatt 2016; Arrigo 2013).

Conformist versus Transformative Intervention Logics

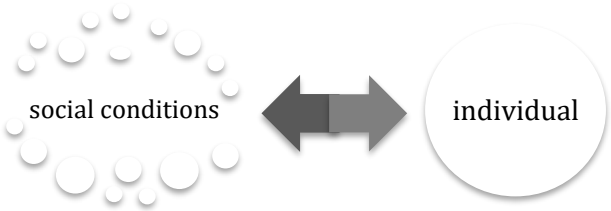
Conformist and Transformational interventions are comparable across Currie's three dimensions of change. See Table 1 Conformist logic asks subjects to ignore to remain unconscious to social conditions, to look inward, and to lower their expectations for life. While transformative intervention logic asks participants to see and understand harmful social conditions in solidarity with others similarly impacted, with aspirations of collective liberation. These are two very different paths for criminalized people to achieve well-being. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the envisioned relationship between social conditions and self within each intervention model.

Figure 1: Conformist Intervention



Conformist intervention occurs in a manner that requires an individual to change regardless of social conditions. As described, individuals are often the subject of social forces and are required to contort and adjust to them, rather than work to change them.

Figure 2: Transformative Intervention



Transformative intervention is accomplished in a manner that engages individuals in social change and/or helps individuals change for the broader goals of social transformation. The individual can be changed through concerted efforts to modify or revolutionize social conditions. The crux of this project has been to illustrate that social change work can be an integral part of personal and individual level change that is often ignored in conventional programming.

Methods

This study draws on interviews with 32 formerly incarcerated activists (FIAs) conducted over the summer of 2019 across the United States. Rooted in feminist standpoint epistemology (Smith 1974), the work is informed by a deep insider–outsider position—sharing lived experience with participants while also occupying the role of researcher. Standpoint shapes what one can see, but knowledge is always partial (Collins 1986; Haraway 1988). Guided by the belief in "stories as evidence" (Maruna 2015) and a social harm perspective, the analysis moves beyond individual acts labeled as crime to trace the harm continuum—structural, interpersonal, and symbolic injuries that span the life course (Hillyard et al. 2004).

Kristen Esterberg's (2001) feminist research strategies informed the design, centering participants as producers of knowledge and viewing each account as a co-produced narrative. Fieldwork spanned roughly three months—two months in Atlanta, one week in New York, and three weeks in Philadelphia—supplemented by phone interviews with out-of-state contacts. Interviews were audio-recorded, de-identified, transcribed on a rolling basis, and analyzed alongside continuous field memos, maintaining reflexive attention to how the harm continuum and the matrix of domination shaped both participants' accounts and scholar interpretations.

Table 2: Sample by Race and Gender

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

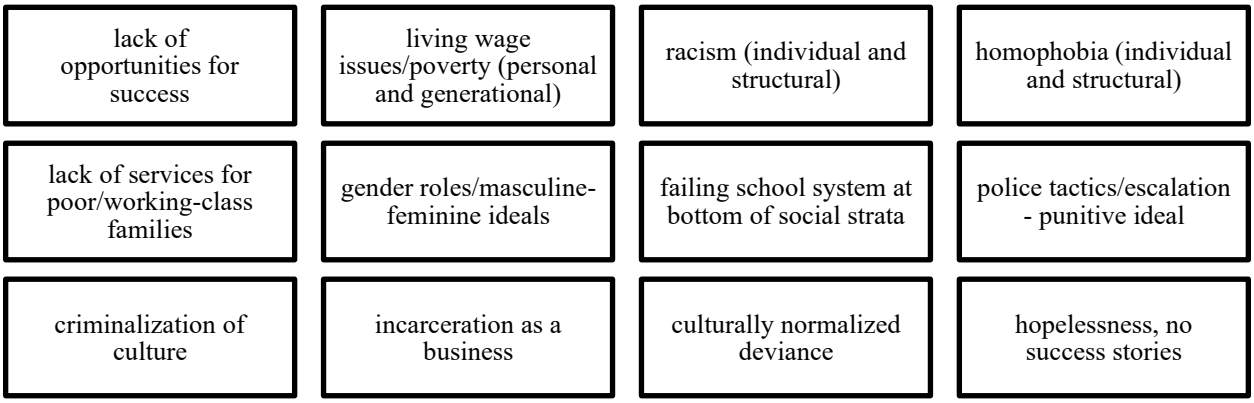
Among this project's many aims, a central focus was to understand the relationship between self-change and social change—how one transforms oneself while helping others to change, all while working to transform the very structures that cause harm. In the spirit of transformative justice, this meant exploring change as both an inward reckoning and an outward act of resistance, each incomplete without the other. Yet as we moved through this work, language often faltered; the distinction between personal transformation and social transformation blurred in the telling. To draw it out more clearly, I asked participants directly to describe the difference. What followed was less a simple answer than a shared labor of thought—we wrestled and wrangled with the question together. Almost instinctively, nearly every participant turned to metaphor, reaching for imagery that could hold the complexity words alone could not. Each offered their own rendering of the relationship, and each metaphor was a small work of art—distinct yet bound to the others, together creating a gallery of visions for conceptualizing reconciling the self and social change work of transformative justice.

Findings: **Social factors that drive and shape criminal justice involvement**

Participants were asked if they would link social factors to their own personal offending behaviors. Every participant answered "yes" to the question "Do you believe that there are issues within society that contributed to your crimes?" With this foundation, they were asked to elaborate

on their understanding of self-change in the context of social injustices. Figure 3 depicts the themes that emerged from their explanations of those social contributors.

Figure 3: Social Contributors to Participants' Offending



Participants' narratives revealed how race, gender, and class shaped their paths into the criminal justice system. Many described growing up in poverty, experiencing harmful policing, attending failing schools, and facing limited opportunities. Women of color spoke of navigating violent communities with scarce, inadequate resources; white women reflected on pressures tied to feminine ideals, survival strategies, and family violence. Men, too, discussed how economic barriers and cultural expectations of masculinity fueled their involvement in violence, property crime, or drug activity. Across identities, participants linked their offending to the environments they inhabited and the structural inequities they endured.

They also spoke about how entire communities become criminalized, whether through profit-driven mass incarceration, cultural stereotyping, or the normalization of illegal economies. Latinx participants described how language, skin color, and cultural expression were treated as signs of criminality. Others noted how incarceration was a routine life event in their neighborhoods, and how success in the underground economy often served as a local model. For many, crime was what "everyone around them engaged in," making it difficult to separate personal decisions from the social worlds that shaped them.

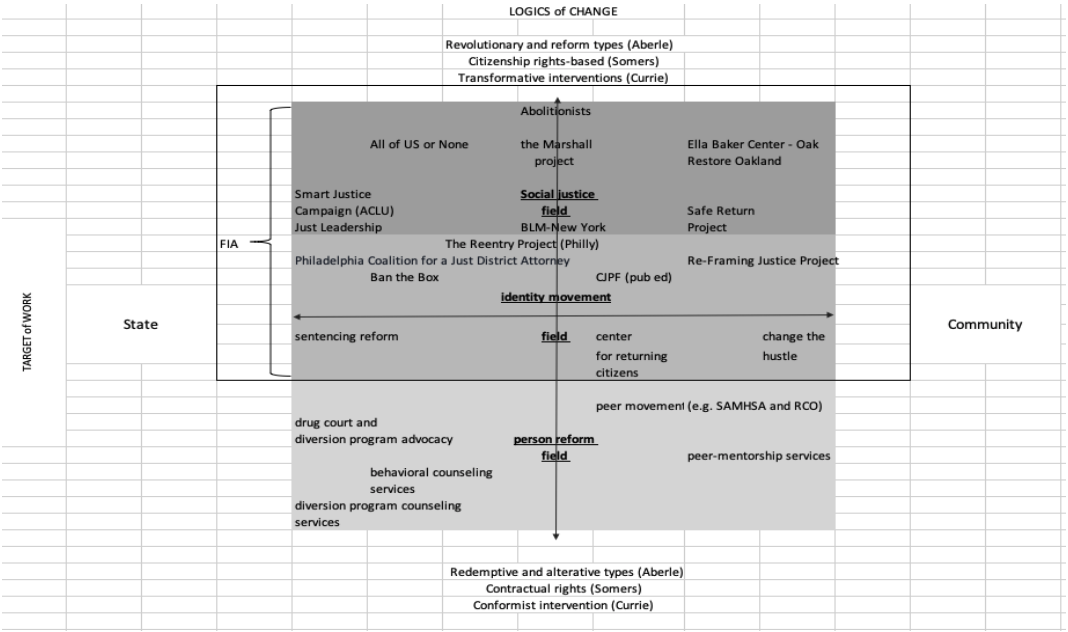
Given these structural drivers, participants questioned the effectiveness of purely individual-focused change efforts. While they valued peer mentoring and one-on-one support, they stressed that such work alone cannot dismantle the broader systems fueling harm. In their view, self-change and social change are distinct yet deeply connected—both necessary for justice to be realized. As illustrated in Table 4, participants often saw these two forms of work weaving together in practice, each reinforcing the other in their efforts to transform both their own lives and the conditions affecting their communities.

Changing the self and the social – differentiating types of work

Scholars have indicated that community integration, political integration, and "making good" are related to successful re-entry, although few scholars have specified the differences between those types of work (Lebel, Richie, & Maruna 2015; Fox 2015; 2016; Marlow, et al 2015; 2007, 2009; Maruna 2004; Bazemore & Stinchcomb 2004). We cannot assume that all practices

of "giving back" or community activism are the same. Figure 4 depicts activist work in which formerly incarcerated people engage in and how it is differentiated according to their locus of change (whether change must occur within a person or outside) and the targets of change (within the community or toward the state). [contact the author for more explanation about the typology].

Figure 4: The Typology of Formerly Incarcerated Change Work



Activists in the sample confirmed the sensibility of the typology, noting clear differences between the type of work directed at external factors and work directed at individuals. What was not expected was the depth of the self-change work *integration* (both for themselves and their peer mentees) with the social-change work experienced by the participants. These themes are called "harmonious paradoxes" because of the inherent contradictions in their loci of change. One could question, after all, "Why change oneself when the world is so unfair? Isn't it the world that needs changing?" The difficulty is in reconciling that both need attention.

Peer Support and Individual-Level Change Work

Participants described peer support as a form of work directed at individuals rather than systems, even though its focus was not always on changing the individual's behavior. Peer mentoring could mean guiding someone through personal change, but it could also involve navigating systems, mapping resources, or offering legal expertise. This work took place across both formal contexts (paid or unpaid roles with defined duties) and informal contexts (unstructured, relational, and often arising from activist networks or personal connections). The table below outlines the four primary forms of peer mentoring described by participants, showing how each can occur formally or informally.

Table 3: Varieties of Peer Mentoring

Type	Formal	Informal
Helping Someone Get to Where I'm At	Can combine behavior change, resource mapping, and/or legal guidance in a structured setting	Can combine behavior change, resource mapping, and/or legal guidance in an unstructured setting
Behavior Change	Treatment or behavior modification models in a structured setting	Treatment or behavior modification in a non-structured setting
Resource Mapping	Helping people connect with resources in a structured setting	Helping people connect with resources in a non-structured setting
Legal Guidance	State- or organizationally-authorized legal assistance	Non-state/non-organizationally-authorized legal assistance

Types of Individual-Level Peer Mentoring

Helping someone "get to where I'm at" often meant sharing personal experience as a source of inspiration or guidance. Lilly explained: *"I pull people in to talk to people about my experience and give advice for how they may be able to accomplish their own goals."* Deedra emphasized modeling success: *"Being able to be that example, that 'if I can do it anyone can do it.' I'm not special. To be that example is important for the other person and for us to realize our own journey and growth."* Behavior-change mentoring focused on modifying personal habits or choices, such as Jack's work "sponsoring through [a] 12-step [program]" or Price's employment "doing work in high schools to encourage change in their [students'] behavior." Resource mapping connected people to material supports. Zoey described her formal role: *"I help them get connected to resources, especially in my work with the organization I'm with."* Brandi shared how she did this informally: *"I can help them get in touch with people who can work with them to access things they need given their criminal record."* Legal guidance drew on lived or professional expertise, such as Terrell's shift from "jailhouse lawyer" to paralegal, and Aven's informal help "getting people out of their legal binds" and "help[ing] people learn the law."

Peer mentoring, whether through modeling, behavior change, resource mapping, or legal guidance, remains individual-level change work because outcomes hinge on the actions of the individual being supported. While it may overlap with systemic navigation or activism, its primary orientation is toward the personal trajectory of the mentee, not toward structural transformation. Participants' personal journey and self-change work, as well as peer mentoring work, are both regarded as individual-level changemaking. Social-change work, on the other hand, refers to the work the participants are doing to transform systems of power. These are inextricably interwoven, distinct yet mutually constitutive.

HARMONIOUS PARADOXES

Participants referred to powerful and inextricable relationships between internal locus of change (via self-change and/or peer-change work) and external locus of change (social-change

work). That is, they acknowledged different, but interlocking, individual-rooted solutions (whether in oneself or in another) and societal-rooted solutions. Notably participants in my sample approach individual level change, and social change, from a transformative interventionist perspective, in that their work is carried out with broader visions of justice. Their individual change-work is non-conformist and connects meaningfully to Currie's dimensions of consciousness building, solidarity, and hope. Below are the participants' descriptions of the assemblages of peer work and activism, self-change work and activism, or the alliance of all these elements in their lives. The themes, categories, and codes are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Transformative Intervention Harmonious Paradox Comparison of Individual-level-Change and Social-Change

Dimension of work		**Individual-Change**	**Social-Change**
Tactics	Style of labor	*Heart-work*	*Head-work*
	Communication	*Listening*	*Talking*
	Characteristics engaged	*Patience*	*Power*
	Combativeness-level employed	*Gloves-off*	*Gloves-on*
	Code adherence	*Personal*	*Professional*
	Education	*Unlearning*	*Learning*
Theory of change	Direction of change envisioned	*Building up*	*Trickling down*
	Priority for change	*Personal healing for activism*	*Activism for personal healing*
Experience	Waiting period	*Instant results*	*Delayed results*
	The view	*Mirror inward*	*Panoramic view outward*
	Time travel	*Past*	*Future*
	Emotions	*Subtle rush*	*Intense rush*
	Battleground	*Unique terrain (e.g. reveal cards)*	*Unique terrain (e.g. withhold cards)*
	Lighting	*Light from within*	*Light upon*
	Recovery focus	*Recovering relationships with self and others*	*Recovering relationships with the world*
	Functions of collaboration	*Co-healing*	*Co-learning*

Harmonious Paradoxes as Transformative Justice: Tactics

Participants described their one-on-one peer work and broader activism as "harmoniously paradoxical." Each calls for distinct tactics, ways of thinking, and emotional investments—yet they remain interdependent. This interplay between the personal and the political is central to transformative justice, where self-change and social change are inseparable in repairing harm and building collective liberation. To honor participants' authorship, quotations are retained verbatim. Analytic intervention occurs solely at the categorical tier, which contextualizes—but does not paraphrase—statements within the mutually constitutive domains of self- and social-change in transformative justice.

In harmoniously paradoxical ways, individual-change work and social-change activism call for different kinds of labor, emotional investments, and approaches. One-on-one peer work is often rooted in *heart-work*—listening, empathizing, and offering personal connection—while activism leans toward *head-work*—strategizing, speaking out, and engaging systems of power. These domains also differ in communication styles (listening vs. talking), in the degree of combativeness needed (gloves off vs. gloves on), in the characteristics they call forward (patience vs. power), in the codes they require (personal vs. professional), and in their educational approach (unlearning vs. learning).

Style of Labor – Heart-Work / Head-Work

Sloan:

> How do we win victories for everyone in the community, rather than just one person? That one-on-one mentorship is so important, but it doesn't create systemic change. Would there be a way to do that peer-to-peer mentorship while also having a component which pushes people to work on social issues? There's not a successful model that I'm aware of, but it's a shame people have to choose between the two. The most successful campaigns focus on narratives; we need the head to follow the heart. So, personal work is rooted in the heart, but for policy and macro work we need the mind to make connections to the broader issues.

Communication – Listening / Talking

Zoey:

> Personal reform work is more in the receiving, and the community-level work is the giving. I get clear on what individuals' needs are through working with them one-on-one. Then, I'm able to convey that to whoever I'm reporting it back to. Say I'm meeting with legislatures—I'm using that voice that people gave me in the one-on-ones to now present that to the people that are making these changes with the law and other social justice issues. One side is listening, and the other side is talking.

Combativeness – Gloves Off / Gloves On

Deedra:

When I'm out fighting for rights for women, I'm like superwoman. I'm powerful. She gets things done, and she fights for people. That's how I am. I play hardball! I have to put my cape on. When I'm one-on-one, I'm just me. I have to take my gloves off, and I'm giving it to the person. I'm giving them who I was and letting them know they can make the same changes I do. So, when I'm encouraging people [peers] to make a change, it's different than when I'm talking to senators and I gotta bring Wonder Woman out. It's not their community that's being affected. It's mine. But when I talk to people in my community, they're my people, and I let them know that I understand them.

Brooklyn:

As an activist, I'm a straight beast. Because I feel like you can't be delicate with these people who have taken your power. So, I feel like when I'm in those spaces, I'm taking power. But when I'm with my peers, I'm on a compassionate front. I'm sympathizing, I'm empathizing, because it is me—because I'm in need of some of those services as well. So, like, I have a compassionate hat on, versus a lack of compassion with the folks who are taking away our breadcrumbs. So, like, one-on-one, I'm making sure my sister or my brother's needs are met for the moment, that the hunger pangs go away, that we can help find jobs… But when I'm in the trenches, I'm in a different way. When I'm stepping in front of the City Council, I'm putting on war paint, because… it's a war."

Characteristics – Patience / Power

Frida:

When I am helping another person one-on-one, I learn patience, because I am working with people that are on all different levels. And then, with activism, I learn power.

Code Adherence – Personal / Professional

Marcos:

Like, I could be talking to a formerly incarcerated person and joking about something other people may not even get, because they don't know. It's an inside joke. Now, I can code-switch to work in activism. I've learned to be professional and engage in academic vernacular. Then, I can turn around and describe what I'm doing with peers to them in a way they can understand.

Education – Unlearning / Learning

Sloan:

> A crisis of moral priority is in your bones: racism, homophobia, xenophobia, classism. It's part of our collective consciousness, part of our culture. So, in some ways, I think that the personal recovery stuff is more focused on unlearning things as opposed to getting new information. It's about growth through subtraction, as opposed to learning some new thing… My activist work is growth through the addition of understanding new concepts, and personal growth is letting go of a bad idea.

Theory of Change

Participants described two main logics for how change happens and how priorities are set. Individual-change efforts can "build up," helping people heal and gain the confidence, skills, and awareness to engage in activism. Social-change work can "trickle down," creating policy shifts and structural changes that then transform individual lives and expand the capacity for collective action. While the directions may differ, both logics are interconnected; self-change fuels social change, and social change creates conditions for self-change. The choice of where to focus—personal healing for activism or activism for personal healing—often depends on perspective and context.

Direction of Change – Building Up / Trickling Down

Zoey:

> In our own personal journey, one-on-one personal time with people we're helping can be used to connect them with others who are doing this [activist] work. We lift each other up. Then, from that perspective, we can see how the system is developed and what needs to happen in terms of next steps. Then we encourage each other to take those next steps. We don't do this to just blame the system, but to have directly impacted people educate those who can effect change."

Aven:

> Learning one's rights and the constitution is critical. People need to know freedom of speech, freedom to a jury trial, equal protection, due process, right to public assembly, rights to grievance… Helping people understand their rights is a way that they learn how to be strong advocates for themselves, and, as we start to assert our rights, we will see things change.

Gwen:

> The work that I do is building and pouring into the leadership capacity of directly impacting people by resourcing folks with the tools they need to step powerfully into advocacy work or activism… inspiring people to think about themselves outside the frame of how the punishment system views us and treats us… to become critically conscious.

Terrell:

> Working on system-level change… leads to more people coming out, being decarcerated, [and] that leads more people to needing help one-on-one.

Priority for Change – Personal Healing for Activism / Activism for Personal Healing

Scarlett:

> The moment that I speak up for things, I recover. It starts with service. Then comes self-healing by inventory-ing myself. I can get out into activism, but then have to get back to self-healing, because I'm likely to get angry about the system. I have to then step out and get right with myself again so that I can get back… I was getting sober on revolution.

Taylor:

> I have to care for myself, so that I'm not carrying a mess into the world.

Experiences

Although interwoven, the experience of doing peer-mentoring and activism feels different to participants. They differ in their timelines (instant vs. delayed results), in perspective (mirror inward vs. panoramic outward), in terrain (revealing vs. withholding cards), in how they move through time (recalling the past vs. envisioning the future), in the emotional rush each produces (subtle vs. intense), and in how light is cast (from within vs. upon). They also differ in what is recovered—relationships with self and others vs. relationships with the world—and in their functions of collaboration (co-healing vs. co-learning). For many, these dimensions combine into a recipe for well-being, with each "ingredient" necessary to sustain personal and collective transformation.

Waiting Period – Instant Results / Delayed Results

Greg:

> With one-on-one work, you can see the results of the impact more quickly or more directly. With massive policy changes and activism, the process is slow and grinding and never-ending. It can be frustrating… but when you do achieve some successes, you feel powerful and you feel like you really did something. It's a feeling of major accomplishment… It's more powerful knowing that you helped society. They're both good feelings, but one-on-one [effort] is more direct, and you see results more quickly, and the macro is slow.

Lilly:

> Those are different forms of work, but they can also be together… Activism is like a long-term game, and sometimes you are in it for years working on a campaign or a bill or whatever the thing that you're trying to change is. Sometimes you win… and sometimes you have to keep fighting until you do win. Peer mentoring is the value of connecting with human beings immediately.

The View – Mirror Inward / Panoramic View Outward

Terrell:

> Working with one individual is like a mirror. This person here is myself… a lot of conversation involves me listening to them, and, in listening to them, it has a mirror effect, because, at one time or another, I have been through that. So, then, working on the system-level stuff… I have to have a panoramic view. I have to see and understand how things operate on a bigger scale.

The Terrain – Unique Terrain (Reveal Cards) / Unique Terrain (Withhold Cards)

Jesse:

> Nothing is what it appears to be… You got to understand the terrain. I utilize all the principles of the Art of War. You got to know the ground and the variables, know who you're talking to and what motivates them. With peer mentoring, it depends on where they're at in their will to change… It's understanding your terrain, and, since your terrain can take on different aspects, you can't fight these battles the same way… If I'm in the political terrain, there's laws that go with that. There's things that you should do and should not do. You should not reveal all your cards. If you're working with someone individually, you have a different terrain, but it's the same war.

Time Travel – Past / Future

Tyson:

> The work with returning citizens I do is like a time machine. It's like I can speak to myself. I'm saying to myself what I needed to hear back then. The work is different when I work with a legislator and political individuals. I'm educating them of what they really don't know… I can help them know how to make situations better in the future.

Emotions – Subtle Rush / Intense Rush

Kelly:

> When we get big wins through our activist work, the feeling is better than any high you'll ever get off any drug. It's like a rush that goes all the way through my body. It's so empowering to know that we are actually moving and changing the system. I get a similar rush, like when one of my women I'm working with gets a job… Helping one person change their life is a huge win. It's kind of like that feeling when I'm moving legislation. But changing the system of feelings, and the rush, is a little more intense, because I know I just helped so many more people than I'll ever meet.

Lighting – Light from Within / Light Upon

Taylor:

> I'm trying to turn that light to shine onto, and show, the problems in society. So that those can be changed and yield some joy and freedom for myself and others. My mentor-self is trying to help that one person shine from the inside, so their light beams out.

Recovery Focus – Recovering Relationships with Self and Others / Recovering Relationships with the World

Scarlett:

> Women in conventional programming are asked to admit powerlessness, but I use a feminist interpretation when I work with other women. My approach incorporates systems of power. The people I work with can find they have the power in themselves… The primary purpose is to help myself, to help others, and the primary purpose is to help the situation, but it's a process whereby I go back and forth… To me what personal recovery means is the recovery of relationships: first the relationship with self, then with others I can help, and then the relationship with the world. So, when asked if I would be satisfied without doing activism—oh no, activism is necessary for personal recovery, so is personal recovery necessary for activism.

Functions of Collaboration – Co-Healing / Co-Learning

Gwen:

> I created what I wish existed for me. The questions that led to my awakening, I then asked other people going through the system. So, we are involved in a kind of co-learning and co-healing as we continue to refine our responses and think critically about the activist-work we engage in.

Getting Fed –

Brooklyn:

> I think in order to be successful, I think we have to be able to come from different angles. I don't think that we would experience enough success just one-on-one, because one-on-one, you're fixing the right-now need. But then what about tomorrow? And what about the day after? So, you have to change, you have to do direct services, you have to do policy, and you have to mobilize, you have to do demonstrations. It's kind of like… gumbo. Like, one-on-one would be like the shrimp, right? Like, policies would be like the roux. So, they're all needed… gumbo.

The quotes above illustrate the categories and domains of harmonious paradoxes. Participants described the interconnected, yet paradoxical, nature of working one-on-one

to help others and engaging in activism. This relationship between individual change work and activism is "harmoniously paradoxical" in that each requires different—but related—tactics. As Jessie put it, *"In order for anything to grow you have to have contradictions; this [self-change] may contradict that [social change], but that contradiction facilitates growth. Contradictions are a good thing."* Gwen echoed this sentiment, noting, *"Everything we touch, we change, and everything that we change, changes us."*

Carceral Citizens' Civic Satisfaction and Sustaining the Work

Although formerly incarcerated activists distinguish their activism from peer- and personal-change work, few would be satisfied doing only one or the other. Even those who imagined stepping away from activism said they would not want to do one-on-one work without the larger purpose of changing social conditions. As Zoey reflected, policy engagement *"opened my eyes to a different world… I don't think that I could go back to only doing peer mentoring."* Greg similarly noted that without activism, he would feel *"sad"* knowing structural barriers would still diminish opportunities for others. For many, mentoring is inseparable from a mission for justice.

Participants also acknowledged the personal toll of activism. While it can be deeply healing, it can also trigger trauma or risk burnout. Lilly urged caution for newly released people *"so they're not compromising themselves for the whole,"* and Samuel spoke candidly about the strain activism had placed on his personal life, prompting him to return to therapy. Both underscored that self-care is essential—not as a retreat from struggle, but as part of sustaining it.

Conclusion

Formerly incarcerated activist success stories are marked with distinct yet conjoined projects of self- and social change. When directly impacted people enact social change efforts in the spirit of justice, they are changed; in their own transformation, they shape what is possible for criminalized people in the social imaginary and their own lived realities. They provide vital support for one another and also commence, shoulder to shoulder, in active revolt and solidarity against limitations, controls, inequalities, and injustices. The consciousness of and resistance to harmful social conditions reside in them simultaneously with the cultivation of personal accountability and healing. In so many ways, they animate Elliot Currie's vision of themselves and others vis-à-vis their work that casts them beyond limiting cultural understandings of what is possible for criminalized people.

Formerly incarcerated activists contradict the conventional logics of how [mis]recognized offenders change their lives. For them, prosociality takes on an insurgent meaning. Their subjugated knowledge indicates to us a different way of conceptualizing the meaning of social reintegration, which, for them, is to transform the structures that deliver and perpetuate harm.

Conformist logics wither in the shadow of activists enacting change and discovering healthy and hopeful trajectories of personal well-being in the movement of barriers and meaningful social policy that eats away at unjust social conditions. This process loops back to provide social reliefs for others and themselves. In the process of mobilizing publicly, they change the narratives

of what is possible for directly impacted people and unleash their potentiality. The personal, including one-on-one interaction, is a meaningful intervention practice, but so is the insurgent work toward abolition of material deprivation, social subjugation, and political estrangement that has defined their lives. Indeed, individuals ought not self-contort to accommodate social conditions, nor social conditions contort to fit them. Instead, the impacted ought to reflexively, powerfully, and self-determinately step into creation of *the change they wish to see*.

In thinking about systemic social reforms and their impact on criminalized people's lives, the paradox of coming to peace with untenable social conditions for one's survival while simultaneously fighting for penal reform and abolition is a question needing ongoing exploration. We may be wondering how a small group of transformed individuals could succeed in transforming the harms of carceral regimes. And how can a carceral regime be transformed by those who justify its very existence? Many paradigms for understanding the shaping of and the being shaped by social arrangements enacted and experienced by the criminalized can be found in sociological understandings of the self and society. By exploring the linkage of private troubles with public issues as a central logic of helping people move beyond their immediate problems and to challenge social arrangements, directly impacted activists embody this tenant of transformative justice: "the inner and the outer are the same….the transformation of ourselves and the world becomes our constant practice" (Quinney and Wildeman 1991 as cited in Wozniak, Brasswell, Vogel 2008: 117).

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Love Thy Self

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Biography: Mx. Mizrahi is a NYC-based teaching artist, and mobilizer of social justice causes for over 15 years. Their creative enterprise "Mx.Enigma" has produced international award winning films, exhibitions, plays and has provided DEI creative solutions as a consulting business to NGOs, city/state agencies, at-risk youth and more like Footsteps, Reelworks, DYCD, Educational Alliance. Their main passion is to curate anthologies with their resilient clients to promote restorative justice and build a network of survivors through art therapy. In 2016, they were a Out in Tech Mentee of it's pilot class, where they worked with their mentor at Facebook's Education department to produce DEI & Cultural events on trans inclusion and awareness at their NYC HQ. In 2018, Je'Jae became the 1st nonbinary community board member elected by Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and 📺 anchor on a American network at MNN TV where their talk show "Queer Justice" highlighted experts, and advancement around qtpoc & immigrant causes. They're the founder of five mutual aids supporting working class QTPOC Artists made during the pandemic like "Trans Writers Collective" and "Queer Media Network" with over 3,000 members and NGO/State sponsorship to alleviate financial barriers and placement creatives to shine. Mx. Mizrahi had artist residencies with Poetics, Brandeis Collegiate Institute, Makerspace, NewHouse at Snug Harbor, Abrons Arts Center, People's Forum, Judson Memorial Church, and they have only yet begun!

Keywords: Artivism, Poetry, Intersectional Queer Studies,

Love Thy Self

Mx. Daniels

Stop being your own oppressor.
Protect yourself by any means.
The world can be cruel, but you don't have to, to you.
I wish you were able to feel free & safe to express yourself.
Your body needs healing, serenity & respect.
When I say 'Radical' you say 'Love', 'Radical', 'Love'!
It's not your fault you were confused, lost, and shamed. You didn't ask for it.
You are a human being that deserves to feel good, certain, secure and loved.
One doesn't need answers, justice, and success to deserve to heal and be at peace.
You can't spend your days, self-shaming, overthinking, driving yourself insane.
Love your imperfections.
Love thyself even in the unknown.
Love thy self even without answers.
Love thyself even in transition.
Love thyself to live, breathe, and grow.