

The Prison Fix: Race, Work, and Economic Development in Elmira, New York

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract  
The Prison Fix: Race, Work, and Economic Development in Elmira, New York

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Andrea R. Morrell

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Based on more than a year of ethnographic and archival research in Elmira, New York and, to a lesser extent, New York City, this dissertation analyzes the social, economic, and political processes through which Elmira, New York was transformed by the construction of the Southport Correctional Facility in 1988 as a project of economic development during a period of massive expansion of the New York State prison system. It focuses on the unfolding of the project of mass incarceration and its impact on the lives of Elmira's citizens and workers, as well as the men incarcerated in Elmira's prisons and their families. Through ethnographic work with prison guards, formerly incarcerated men and women and their families, and a broad cross section of Elmirans, I trace the tensions of constructing and maintaining two prisons that incarcerate nearly 2,500 men. I show how the project of prison expansion into Elmira was an attempt to "solve" the social, economic, and political crises of deindustrialization and economic restructuring with a prison "fix." By using the prison town as a unit of analysis, I argue in this dissertation that the prison is part of a regime that extends beyond the prison's walls. I demonstrate that despite increasingly intricate fences and barriers aimed at maintaining the separation between the incarcerated men and "free" Elmira, ideas, money, and relationships circulate between increasingly connected places. An ethnographic focus on the prison town, as opposed to the prison as a distinct institution or an arbiter of ghetto relationships, allowed me to

delineate the ways in which the prison leaks into the everyday life of the city of Elmira. Thus, the Elmira Correctional Facilities and the Southport Correctional Facilities are a part of a carceral state, equally political and economic, that makes use of Elmira as a place of confinement.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“They used to say Elmira was the glider capital of the world, now they say it’s the prison capital of the world.<sup>1</sup> We’ve got two prisons. Like I said, there’s 600 plus jobs at Elmira [Correctional Facility]. And when Southport came, that’s created another 400 jobs... That’s an awful lot of money... I know that the county legislatures, the Senate, the state senators, the state congressmen, they lobbied hard to get that here. Because this started to be a real depressed area. I mean every industry was moved out of here.”* Gordon, retired Correction Officer

In the fall of 1985, a few months after the *New York Times* asserted that “[p]erhaps no other small city in the Northeast provides a more vivid example of how American manufacturing has declined,” Elmira, New York was chosen as the site of another new state prison (Lueck, 1985:A1). A small city of just under 30,000 people in central New York State, Elmira was seen as a good candidate for one of the 29 new prisons proposed to be built in New York State under the leadership of Governor Mario Cuomo (Schlosser 1998: 57). The city was already home to the Elmira Correctional Facility, built in 1876, and was reeling from the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs. Some city leaders and residents were eager for the relatively high-paying jobs in the proposed prison. “Great! Call Elmira a prison town, call it anything you want,” an editorial in the local paper, the *Elmira Star-Gazette* encouraged, and keep up that “spirit of cooperation,” in order to secure a “fat new payroll” for the area (*Elmira Star-Gazette* 1985a). When the Southport Correctional Facility opened in 1988, the increased number of state jobs available for Elmirans at the prison fueled high hopes for a brighter economic picture for the

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<sup>1</sup> A glider is an engineless plane. Elmira has been touted as the “Soaring Capital of the World” because of the flight competitions held on the hills of Harris Hill Park in Elmira between 1930 and 1946.

area. More than twenty years later, what are the consequences of the city's attempt to replace manufacturing work with the expansion of prison work? Today, what does it mean for Elmira to be a two-prison town? Based on more than a year of ethnographic and archival research in Elmira and, to a lesser extent, New York City, this dissertation analyzes the social, economic, and political processes through which Elmira, New York was transformed by the construction of the Southport Correctional Facility in 1988 as a project of economic development during a period of massive expansion of the New York State prison system. It focuses on the unfolding of the project of mass incarceration and its impact on the lives of Elmira's citizens and workers, as well as the visitors to the men incarcerated in its two maximum security state prisons. Through ethnographic work with prison guards, formerly incarcerated men and women and their families, and a broad cross section of Elmirans, I trace the tensions of constructing and maintaining two prisons that incarcerate nearly 2,500 men. Following Gilmore (2007), I argue that the project of prison expansion into Elmira was an attempt to "solve" the social, economic, and political crises of deindustrialization and economic restructuring with a prison "fix."

There are now more than 2 million people incarcerated in the United States. Mirroring, and perhaps catalyzing, a national pattern of prison growth, the number of people incarcerated in New York State more than tripled between 1980 and 2000, increasing from 21,929 to 70,112 (Correctional Association 2003). In an era marked by rates of incarceration unparalleled in American history, an ethnographic analysis of a small city that welcomed a new prison in search of job creation is a critical standpoint from which we can understand mass incarceration and urban change in the United States in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In my analysis, these two phenomena

should not be analyzed separately: from the perspective of Elmira as a prison town, this dissertation seeks to tie the crisis of deindustrialization in upstate New York to the massive growth in prisons in the 1980s and 1990s. The City of Elmira is a poor place with 25 percent of the population living below the poverty line (U.S. Census 2010), a depressed housing market, and the state's highest rate of reports to child protective services, even before the 2008 economic crash (McKelvey 2004). Elmira's population is racially mixed-- out of 29,200 people, twelve percent are African American and five percent state that they are one or more races; these numbers have been relatively stable since the Great Migration (U.S. Census 2010; Sorin 1988).<sup>2</sup> I ask why, how, and in whose interests were prisons chosen as a vehicle for Elmira's economic development? The prison town, viewed as both a geographic location and an analytic tool to understand the web of relationships entangled in the political economy of prisons, is the site of my inquiry. The expansion of the use of prisons as tools of social control marks a significant set of historical shifts in American life--the globalization of labor markets, the neoliberal state's abandonment of the poor from the redistributive functions of governance, and a shifting set of racial inequalities based on these changes. I frame my ethnographic questions in this larger political economic context.

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<sup>2</sup> Population statistics are complicated by the fact that the census has counted prisoners in the locations where they are incarcerated as opposed to the prisoners' home area. While in my analysis I removed the prisoners from my count when possible, if prisoners are counted, as they are in the census, Elmira's population is 14.6 percent Black. Stated in a different way, roughly a quarter of all African Americans residing in Elmira are incarcerated at the Elmira Correctional Facility. (Southport Correctional Facility is located outside of the city limits of Elmira, so it is not included in the city's population statistics.)

At a time of great insecurity for many Americans beginning in the 1970s, the "War on Crime" became a catchall response to the perception and/or experience of chaos. While criminalization has long been a theme in the American treatment and management of poverty, Nixon's War on Crime fanned the flames of white working people's angst with a fiery populism. The late 1960s and early 1970s were deeply insecure times for many working-class Americans. The reconfiguration of industrial capitalism through what David Harvey has called "flexible accumulation" (1990) meant that many workers in heavy manufacturing were losing their jobs as factories moved to the American South or were reorganized to work on temporary production schedules. Through the War on Crime, the social upheavals of the 1960s were linked to the "problems" of poor urban Blacks. Christian Parenti writes, "Crime meant urban, urban meant Black, and the war on crime meant a bulwark built against the increasingly political and vocal racial 'other' by the predominantly white state" (1999:7). The project of mass incarceration, and more specifically the use of prisons as economic development projects for struggling towns and cities, coalesced at a time of great insecurity of the "fragile affluence" (Pappas 1989) gained by some working-class people—most often white working-class people.

As Jonathan Simon (2007) points out, while people across experiences of race, class, and gender are implicated in the pandemic fear of crime, the particularly racialized nature of the last four decades' expansion of the criminal justice system most radically redefines the life experiences of young men of color. In 2011, one in three African American men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine had spent time behind bars (Pew Research Center 2008). If this pattern of expansion continues, the statistics will prove even more ominous for younger African

American men: of Black males born in 2011, one in three will be incarcerated at some point in their lifetime (Harrison 2004: 10). The consequences of the War on Crime are quite clear: millions of young men, largely Black and Latino and from New York City, or increasingly, Rochester, Syracuse, and Buffalo, have been sent to prison in upstate counties for longer periods of time and for less serious crimes. For many New York City residents, then, their experience of “upstate” is defined by the prison. Prison disrupts the lives of millions of families, removing caretakers and wage earners during their incarceration upstate and hindering opportunities for survival upon their "reentry" into society. For example, anyone with a felony conviction is barred from entering public housing, receiving student loans, and working in many kinds of employment. It was in thinking through the roots and consequences of incarceration as a social program, designed to include some through the expansion of employment opportunities and exclude others through criminalization, that I embarked on my research in Elmira.

### **Elmira as a Prison Town**

Elmira has been a prison town for nearly as long as it has been a town. Elmira's prisons have run the historical gamut from an experiment in Progressive reformism in the late 19th century to the "no frills" solitary confinement of the recently constructed Southport Correctional Facility. The history of Elmira cannot be separated from the history of its prisons and, therefore, offers a unique perspective from which to understand the dynamic relationship between urban development and prison expansion. Beginning in 1833 with the completion of the Chemung Canal connecting much of the state to the Erie Canal and enduring through the growth of the

railroads, Elmira's proximity and supporting role to New York City was central to the city's development (Horigan 2002: 1). In 1861 during the Civil War, based on these strategic transportation facts and a thriving economy in agriculture and lumber, Elmira was first named a Union army military depot and became home to army generals and other military elites (Horigan 2002, 9). Union Soldiers, many of them young Irish American men from New York City, came first to Elmira in order to be deployed to battles dotting the American South. While there, many were arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct. On account of their presence Elmira was regarded by some as a "pretty rough place to live in" (Horigan 2002, 13, 14). These barracks were eventually abandoned for other sites; however, the depot was transformed into a prison camp in 1864 where 8,000 to 10,000 Confederate soldiers were held on the banks of the Chemung River. Elmira quickly gained notoriety as the site of a squalid Union prison camp and was deemed the "Death Camp of the North" (Horigan 2002, 27). Three thousand Confederate soldiers died along the shores of the Chemung River, festering in smallpox, flooding river water, and hunger. The racial fault lines of the period were employed as mechanisms of control and shame as a troop of 200 African American Union soldiers were given prison guard duty at the camp, causing unrest among the Confederate prisoners (Horigan 2002, 49). In this period, like the present day, the prison was source of fascination and the cause of fear for people living just beyond the prison gates. Elmirans in the nineteenth century feasted on their own reality television: one enterprising local built an observatory tower and charged visitors fifteen cents to have a look over the fence at the prisoners (Gray 2001: 23). Not surprisingly, both major historians of the camp relate the growth of Elmira as a city, both demographically and

economically, to the growth of the prison camp (See Horigan 2002 and Gray 2001).

In 1876, a year after the end of the war and the closure of the camp, Elmira became the home of the country's first reformatory, heralding a new era in the nation's purpose and methods of incarceration. The Reformatory Movement was constructed as a reaction to the harsher treatments of the prisons of the colonial period and the Pennsylvania Penitentiary and the Auburn models, both to a certain extent based on penal slavery (McLennan 1999). As the fabled warden of the Elmira Reformatory, Zebulon Brockway emphasized a strict regimen of manual labor and "moral" training. According to one corrections text, "Elmira's premises— individual treatment, the indeterminate sentence, and parole—were universally embraced and would not be seriously questioned until the 1970s, when a new concern for individual liberties and due process would begin to chisel away at the rehabilitative ideal" (Benavides 2002, 614). Signaling the connection between the prison and the town, Zebulon Brockway, also served as the mayor of Elmira.

Despite local nostalgia (e.g. Barber 1957) that largely glosses over the brutal tactics of the reform movement, many advocates from across the state took note of Brockway's brutality and decried it as torture. Brockway relied on beatings to maintain control over the prisoners and kept a count of the number of lashes given to each prisoner (New York State Board of Charities 1894). In the 1940's, Elmira's prison was split into two sections: the reformatory, which housed men for longer sentences; and the reception center, where new prisoners first entered the state prison bureaucracy before they were sent to their longer term prison assignment. The Elmira Correctional Facility still houses the state's reception center for men who are being moved from

downstate to the Elmira “hub” of the New York State prison system.<sup>3</sup>

Elmira’s second prison, the Southport Correctional Facility, was built in 1988 at the height of the prison construction boom during the Cuomo governorship. Three years later, the prison at Southport was transformed into an entirely solitary confinement facility marking New York’s complete break with the liberal corrections ideal of rehabilitation. Today there are 2500 men incarcerated in Elmira’s two prisons, 800 of whom are held in entirely in solitary confinement at Southport Correctional Facility.

### **From Railroad Town to Prison Town**

After the opening of the Erie Canal in 1833 and shortly thereafter the Chemung Canal, Elmira was opened to a vast regional shipping network. The town began to grow from a small agricultural town to a burgeoning site of trade and industry. The growing concentration of wealth and growing population of laborers intensified with the arrival of the railroad in 1951 (Skandera-Trombley 1997: 67-69). Elmira was a stop on Erie, Lackawanna, Lehigh Valley, Delaware and Western Valley railroads, thus making it a place of strategic importance for numerous industries. American LaFrance fire engines and American Bridge works, two steel based industries that eventually left in the 1980s, came to Elmira during this period (Skandera-Trombley 1997: 67-69).

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<sup>3</sup> The Elmira hub includes eight state prisons, from Southport to the south, to Butler Correctional Facility in rural Red Creek, New York along Lake Ontario to the north, to Willard Drug Treatment, Five Points and Cayuga east and west in and around the Finger Lakes. In total in the Elmira hub, there are four maximum security prisons including the all SHU at Southport, two medium security prisons, the minimum security “shock” facility at Monterrey, and a drug treatment campus at Willard.

According to the U.S. Census 2010, fifty-three percent of Elmira residents identify as Catholic, and many residents claims three countries—Irish, Italian, and Polish—(and a smaller population of German Lutherans) as their place of ethnic origin. The heavily Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholic population in Elmira today recalls the migration of Irish and Italian immigrants to Elmira: the men to dig the canals and build and work in the railroads and the women to work as domestics. African Americans came to Elmira as early as 1800 both as freedmen and enslaved people, and in larger numbers after 1840. More African Americans migrated to the city during Reconstruction from the South, others from coming from bigger cities of Philadelphia and New York (Sorin 1988: 9). African Americans in Elmira were deeply involved in the history of the Underground Railroad as Elmira was considered a half-way point. The abolitionist history of Elmira is point of pride for many Elmirans. When I visited Elmira as a child, a house on route 352 linking West Elmira to a regional shopping mall in the village of Big Flats was always pointed out as having been part of the Underground Railroad.

From 1950 to 2000, the city of Elmira lost more than third of its population, shrinking from a city of 49,716 people to just barely 29,200 people, largely as a result of the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs (Shaw 2004) (I describe this process in depth in chapters 2 and 3).<sup>4</sup> As I describe throughout this dissertation, the reduction and geographic reorganization of manufacturing work changed Elmira as a place. Working-class neighborhoods have become poor neighborhoods, churches have lost members and been forced to consolidate with other churches, and, as in many poor places, young people with college degrees have left the area in search of work in bigger cities. Most importantly, this pattern of economic restructuring and the resulting

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<sup>4</sup> This includes the roughly 1800 men who are counted in the census who were/are incarcerated at the Elmira Correctional Facility.

impoverishment is not specific to Elmira, but rather reflective of national shifts in the political economy of cities. Cities close to Elmira like Binghamton, Rochester, New York, and Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, Pennsylvania, and bigger cities like Detroit (see Sugrue 2005) and Philadelphia (see Maskovsky 2006) mirror this pattern of economic restructuring and shifting racial geographies.

During my fieldwork, I heard a young white woman express her fear that Elmira was becoming a “Little Rochester”. While I gather this was a coded way for the speaker to allude to a racialized “inner city,” the statement carries a kernel of truth. Elmira, like Rochester, has lost a similar percentage of its population since the 1950s, including a recent five percent loss from 2000 to 2010.<sup>5</sup> Rochester’s industrial and manufacturing economies have taken a similar nosedive, largely based on the restructuring and downsizing of Eastman Kodak, the city’s largest employer until 2006. The company filed for bankruptcy in January of 2011 (Moore 2012). After this, not surprisingly, major research universities, such as the University of Rochester and RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology) and retail establishments were expected to carry the economic weight previously shouldered by the vanished heavy industries. The demographic character of the city is perhaps the source of anxiety for Elmira’s future becoming more like Rochester’s: 44 percent of the population of the city identifies as Black or African American and 47 percent identifies as white, and there are sizeable Puerto Rican (15 percent) and West Indian (2.4 percent) populations (U.S. Census, American Fact Finder, 2010).

In 2004, the New York State Comptroller’s Office put out a report ranking the cities of New York State based on their “socio-economic stress indicators.” Rankings were based on an

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<sup>5</sup> Elmira went from a population of 49,716 in 1950 to 29,200 today. Rochester went from 293,316 in 1970 to 210,565 today. Elmira data compiled from the Chemung County data book and the Census Bureau. Rochester data compiled from city-data.com and the census.

aggregate of percentages of residents living in poverty, female headed households, adults with no high school diploma, and vacant housing units. Elmira ranked the sixth most stressed-out city in New York, after Hudson, Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo, and Utica, with Binghamton trailing not far behind at number ten (Hevesi 2006). Unlike neighboring cities of Ithaca (30,013 people) and Binghamton, (47,393 people), Elmira does not have a major research university. This is particularly significant for two reasons. First, Governor Cuomo's new plan for New York State Economic Development created regional economic development models headed by the leaders of large regional universities. Second, following this pattern, the lack of a research university and therefore any related influx of new capital into an area means that Elmira may sink even lower on the map of stressed out cities.

In addition to overall losses of population to the metropolitan area of Elmira, the City of Elmira has lost population to surrounding towns and suburbs. In the past two generations, Elmira has been transformed from a county seat to a bankrupt city forced into shared services with the rest of Chemung County. Some of the movement from Elmira to surrounding towns reflects a national pattern of white flight and class migration of middle income people to outlying areas. The city of Elmira is much poorer than the Greater Elmira Metropolitan area of Chemung County where the median household income is 45,625, much closer to the national average. In the city of Elmira, 23.3 percent of families are living in poverty, 37.9 percent with kids under 18, and 47.8 percent when all of the children are under five years old. In the city of Elmira 3.9 percent of the population holds a bachelors degree and in the surrounding county it is nearly five times that number: 18.9 percent. Horseheads, a village to the north of the city of Elmira, has the "better high school", a 4.5 percent poverty rate, and is 95 percent white. As part of a state-wide pattern that Pendall (2003) has called "sprawl without growth," population and industry have

been not only moving outside of the city to Southern states or abroad but have also moved to (or were more likely to stay in) the surrounding towns. While the industry and some wealthier populations have moved outside of the city, the city of Elmira serves a center for social services from around the county. In addition to the courts, hospitals, and banks used by people across class lines, social services for the poor including unemployment offices, welfare offices, a regional inpatient mental health facility, food banks and soup kitchens remain in the city center.

The City of Elmira sits along the Chemung River in the Southern Tier of New York State. Elmira is roughly divided into four neighborhoods or sections and these boundaries and identifications shift and change. The Chemung River bifurcates the city from North to South. South of the River, Elmira's Southside bore much of the brunt of the loss of manufacturing work. As good paying manufacturing jobs left, the value of housing on the Southside and the city center of Elmira decreased, thus creating new housing opportunities for poor blacks and poor whites.<sup>6</sup> The Southside is now considered rougher than it was twenty years ago, and the housing stock has certainly declined. The east side of Elmira, marked as east of railroad tracks that run through the center of the city, underwent profound changes during urban renewal. Much of the neighborhood was bulldozed for the purpose of building a "parkway" through the center of town - a boulevard commonly known as the "road to nowhere." Since the 1970s, perhaps because of dislocations from urban renewal and/or due to somewhat of a relaxing of historical spatial segregation (different Elmirans suggested both), there has been some movement of Elmira's African American population out of the east side and into downtown Elmira and the Southside of Elmira. This process, on the heels of some displacement of "Slabtown" during urban renewal,

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<sup>6</sup> (As one measure of poverty, eighty one percent of food stamp recipients are white in Elmira and fourteen percent are Black, U.S. Census, American Fact Finder 2010).

somewhat shifted the racial geography, but not the racial makeup, of the city of Elmira.

Urban development initiatives have breathed some life into the downtown but large sections of the heart of the urban center are lined with empty storefronts. At one point in the summer of 2007, there were a few restaurants, a bar, a rent-to-own furniture store, and three tattoo shops in a two block radius, but few other shops. A flood following Hurricane Agnes in 1972 devastated sections of the city north and south of the Chemung River including downtown. Following the flood, most of the downtown stores relocated out of Elmira to the newly built shopping center in the town of Big Flats. The area along the north side of the river has recently undergone a restoration with park benches, open green spaces, and a new fountain. On a particularly hot summer afternoon, from my perch on a treadmill at a new gym (where Fox News is always one of the chosen stations) across the street from the park, I watched a mother and her children splash around in the fountain to escape the heat. I recalled that the public pool on the Southside had been closed for a few years. Young white kids cruised by in souped up old cars with hip-hop blaring. Following a pattern of development favored by many American cities, a hockey stadium for a minor league team was built downtown in an attempt to draw more crowds into the city.

Both despite and because of the prison, life goes on in the city of Elmira. People go to work, go to the mall, and celebrate birthdays, holidays and parades. The prison is a backdrop, often willfully ignored, to a place many people love and call quite idyllic to raise a family. My informants tell me that it is a nice place to live--a safe place to raise children surrounded by beautiful natural scenery. Short drives, from the slow moving streets and half-occupied stores of downtown to the weathered, low slung houses of the residential, working-class areas of the Southside, give stunning views of the Chemung Valley and vast green hills in the distance.

While Elmira's residents find many uses for the city--a place to work, a place to live, a place to find cheap housing, a place to be near family, a place where they have perhaps always lived--the state's economic development program of use for Elmira was quite explicit and quite narrow: Elmira was a good place for prisons.

*Place image here*

Image 3: Photo by Dougtone, via Flickr. Intersection of Broadway and Lyon and Southport Streets, entering the southside of City of Elmira from the Village of Southport, 2003.

### **Foundation of Approach**

This dissertation seeks to understand the expansion of prisons in New York State in relationship to processes of urban change over the last half century through the lens of a prison town. Geographer Ruthie Gilmore theorizes that U.S. prison growth occurred at the crossroads of

two crises in the late 1960s: a social crisis, both fictive and real, of loitering youth and unwed mothers and of growing “disorder” created by burgeoning social movements; and an economic crisis of state surplus endemic to capitalism’s uneven development (2007). By “solving” capital’s desire for growth by pumping money into the prison system, Gilmore theorizes that the “expansion of prisons constitutes a geographical solution to socio-economic problems” (Gilmore 1999: 174). Asserting that the “new California prison system of the 1980s and 1990s was constructed deliberately ... of surpluses” and idleness in land, labor, and people, and state capacity, Gilmore writes that these were not inevitable but made possible by the conditions at hand (2007: 88). Adding to a theorization of mass incarceration as both productive and symptomatic of a racialized working class, historian Heather Ann Thompson links the criminalization of urban spaces in the post war period to the historical attempts at control of African American populations in the post-slavery American South (2010). Moreover, Thompson echoes a body of scholarship that asserts that the criminalization of urban space, particularly through the War on Drugs, was a state response to social movements for civil rights among African Americans in the 1960s (Thompson 2010: 706-707; see also Buck 1994; Mauer 1999; Tonry 1996; and Chapter 7). Through the historical political economy of a prison town, I argue that mass incarceration emerges both in and through the state response to deindustrialization and economic restructuring. Mass incarceration was made possible by the infrastructure and practices of heightened racializations of crime fighting and the criminalization of dissent in the urban experience (see Mullings 2003; Gilmore 2007).

This is a departure then, from theories proposed by Loïc Wacquant that paint the prison

as “meshed” with the “ghetto” (Wacquant 2001). Like Wacquant, I seek to understand the “material and symbolic dimensions of the contemporary restructuring of the economy of punishment” (Wacquant 2009:xvii), and I consider racism as a pivotal force in making and remaking the prison regime. However, when Wacquant argues that the “ghetto...operates as an *ethnoracial prison* [original italics]” that hinders the development and opportunities of African Americans, he inadvertently re-ghettoizes the population he seeks to free (Wacquant 2000:383). By focusing on a closed geographic area of high concentrations of poverty and incarceration, Wacquant reinforces the misleading notion that poor people do not circulate with wealthier people in work or leisure outside of their neighborhood, or in his words, their ghetto. In my ethnographic treatment of urban New York State, I problematize ghettoized notions of the urban and the rural, of Blackness and whiteness: my work includes ethnographic research in poor Black and Latino urban neighborhoods—Wacquant’s “ghettos”— and poor places, like Elmira, where poor African Americans and poor whites live outside of a ghetto in Wacquant’s sense, but at the same time, have their life experiences limited by on-going processes of dispossession and/or the axes of racism. Rather than an isolated experience of the population of African American urban poor in large cities, poverty and disenfranchisement, while experienced more acutely by African Americans, are at the core of the experience of working-class life in America. In opposition to Wacquant’s characterization of the prison as “a core political institution and not an economic one” (Wacquant 2010: 611), I put forth a Gramscian understanding of the relationship between capital and governance. That is, the prison is neither primarily economic nor primarily political; rather, it is an inseparable imbrication of the two. Thompson offers a

critique of Wacquant's characterization of mass incarceration as solely a political project by arguing that mass incarceration was a "historical phenomenon that—like deindustrialization and white flight—*itself* caused crisis and collapse in America's inner cities" (Thompson 2010: 716). Building on the work of scholars in the tradition of political economy, I situate this dissertation in a body of literature that understands the social control of poor and working people and their social movements as key components of owning class hegemony, a process both economic *and* political.

Historian Cronon has argued that it is difficult to "draw a boundary between the abstraction called city and the abstraction called country," and called for writing the two in a "unified narrative" (Cronon 1992: 19, xiv). Following Cronon and building on anthropological theories that seek to complexify the study of institutions, places, and people, I write Elmira within the web of urban social relationships that are produced, reproduced and, sometimes, disguised across the geographic space of New York State through the prison system. Thus, throughout this dissertation the prison town serves as an analytic tool to understand the geographically grounded processes of criminalization and the raced and classed locations of the actors across and within this space. Considering that prison expansion was put forth by the state quite explicitly as a jobs creation program, it is necessary to look at economic development in Elmira, the city, in the context of New York State. I demonstrate how the political economy of a global city is deeply tied to the political economy of a prison town in upstate New York. Furthermore, although there are increasingly intricate fences and barriers aimed at maintaining the separation between the incarcerated men and "free" Elmira, I find it useful to build on Ted

Conover's analysis of the prison as an "extension of a neighborhood" of the incarcerated men (Rose 2000). Through an analysis of the prison town, we see how the prison is not only an extension of the neighborhoods of the men incarcerated there, but at the same time, an extension of the city of Elmira and Correctional officers and their families. While much anthropological writing focuses on larger metropolitan cities in order to understand the expansion of the carceral state, I posit that an essential part of the story of twenty-first century urbanization lies in the narratives of marginal places like Elmira and their relationship to enclaves of concentrated capital.

### **Prison Towns as Abandoned Spaces**

In thinking through prison towns in California, Gilmore writes:

*"Forgotten places are not outside of history. Rather, they are places that have experienced the abandonment of contemporary capitalist and neoliberal state reorganization. Given the enormous disorder that 'organized abandonment' (Harvey 1989c:303 The Limits to Capital) both creates and exploits...In this chapter I will conceptualize the kinds of places where prisoners come from and where prisons are built as a single-though spatially discontinuous-abandoned region"* (Gilmore 2008: 31).

Of prison towns and the urban areas where many prisoners come from, she asks: "How are these places objectively similar?" Gilmore uses the phrase *desakota*, coined by Geographer Terry McGee (1991) for thinking through urban and rural places together as a single abandoned region. A word drawing from the economic geography of Indonesia, a *desakota* is used to describe a "town-country," a place "neither urban nor rural", but an "ambiguous place of settlement" (Gilmore 2008: 62). Gilmore repurposes the word to examine California, and specifically prison towns and poor urban areas where many prisoners come from. A *desakota* is a term that

“highlights the structural and lived relationship of marginal people to marginal lands in both urban and rural contexts” (Gilmore 2008: 38). Gilmore argues that in these abandoned regions the circulation of capital is at core of a place’s abandonment, whereas “the movement of resources—whether transfers of meager social wealth (welfare to domestic warfare) or migrations of persons (voluntary or not) intraregionally or across supraregional spaces to amass remittances that, once sent, counter the apparently unidirectional concentration of wealth” (Gilmore 2008: 43). That is, a *desakota* is a space purposefully and usefully marginalized, used as a place of inbetweenness for a capitalist class always in search of profit.

Following Gilmore, I examine Elmira as an abandoned space intricately tied to other abandoned spaces and marginalized people across New York State. The City of Elmira is also tied to a regional economy in the more rural areas of Chemung County and surrounding counties—smaller villages like Big Flats, Baldwin, and Horseheads. Abandoned spaces, imagined ambiguously and broadly, can help us think through the abandonment of the places that accompanied Elmira in successful applications to becoming enterprise zones in 1988: Auburn, NY; East Harlem, New York City, NY; Elmira, NY; Moriah, NY; Niagara Falls, NY; Oswego, NY; Plattsburgh, NY; Utica, NY; and Yonkers, NY (Barron 1988). In this dissertation, I describe how Elmira, as a useful, albeit secondary, place in the regional and global economy, negotiates the uses of Elmira as a prison town. I look at how Elmirans make sense of their abandoned place and how inequalities are recreated in this abandoned space.

Thus, in my ethnographic work I asked: what were the conditions in New York State that made Elmira ripe for prisons as a means of economic development *and* how were/are these conditions constructed on a day-to-day basis? My research troubles a key fault line in New York State politics: the upstate/downstate divide. This line is often portrayed as a conflict between a

white rural provincialism and the "tougher"— even dangerous— "othered" city dwellers. In my research I found that while there are certainly many qualitatively different experiences of living in a large city versus a small city, common notions of rurality and urbanity are challenged by a deeper knowledge of New York City and Elmira—from the white working-class neighborhoods of Sheepshead Bay and Staten Island to historically African American Eastside of Elmira. Furthermore, across New York State, cities large and small suffered from economic divestment and the restructuring of manufacturing. The neighborhoods of the outer boroughs of New York City, where working-class New Yorkers generally reside, have had to undertake the same limited plans for economic development as other struggling areas.

The upstate/downstate divide is often expressed in racial terms as a clash between white and Black. A divide both racial and geographic, this historical fault line of race and class is used to the advantage of the Department of Correctional Services. Furthermore we see that these racial categories, as categories of workers, lie in centuries of American inequalities. Thompson locates these divisions in the process of creating white privilege and white supremacy. She argues that this process of labor segmentation rests on criminalization of African Americans and Latinos:

*“One of the most important privileges that working-class whites gained as a result of being courted by, and included in, the New Deal liberal state... was a new claim on citizenship that finally rid them of many negative assumptions about their class position and thus tended to inoculate them from association with criminality. African Americans, who had been shut out of the New Deal’s largesse, however, were afforded neither equal citizenship nor the privilege of presumed honesty that came with it. In stark contrast to white working-class Americans, who increasingly claimed the mantle of crime victim over the course of the twentieth century, poor blacks were increasingly blamed for any crime problem America had” (Thompson 707).<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson is summarizing and adding to Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, Cambridge, Mass. 2010.

The results of this classed racialization are experienced quite profoundly in upstate prisons and in poor neighborhoods of color across New York State, continually recreating what it means to be a prisoner and what it means to be a guard. Recent research by the Justice Mapping Project at Columbia University produced images to demonstrate this phenomenon through the use of maps. Researchers coined the term “Million Dollar Blocks” to indicate blocks in New York City whose residents’ incarceration would total a million dollars over the course of their sentence. Through the use of maps, the project helped to portray how this process was spatially concentrated in poor African American and Latino neighborhoods; in Brooklyn, New York City alone, there were thirty- five Million Dollar Blocks in 2003 (Gonnerman 2004).

While the example of Elmira certainly captures the national imagination of the racial character of prisons—white guards and Black inmates— the pattern is somewhat of an outlier in American prisons. In Lorna Rhodes’ research in Washington State prisons, rural prisons incarcerate largely white inmates and are staffed by white guards (2001). In California prisons, a multiracial incarcerated population is staffed by largely by Chicano guards. In New York City's Department of Correctional Services, primarily African American guards police primarily African American inmates. I present this data not to say that New York State prisons do not have a racialized character but rather to demonstrate how the fault lines of race shift and change across time and geography.

Elmira and its residents were recruited to do the work of the carceral state, partially lured by the notion that prisons were a recession-proof industry. Prisons as a project of economic development have failed to alleviate the poverty of white workers in that prisons did not and could not replace manufacturing as a centerpiece of the economy. Poor Elmirans are not only still left out of the economy, but subject to the heightened level of criminalization of the carceral

state. Importantly, in the Elmira area in 2008, there were two “million dollar zip codes”.<sup>8</sup> Gonnerman and the Justice Mapping Project’s work significantly highlights the relationships between urban and rural New York through the prisons. However, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision announced in November of 2011 that the majority of inmates in the New York State prison no longer came from New York City.<sup>9</sup> That is, the “sending communities” that bring large numbers of young men are more spread across the state (Karlin 2011). Prisons obscure the commonalities of the economic realities of working-class life across race, class, and geography.

### **Ethnographic methods**

Given that a new prison was introduced into Elmira for the purposes of economic development might reflect and produce new relationships between race, class, and community, I explored patterns of inequality in Elmira and how these might be related to the prisons or prison expansion. Furthermore, in order to understand the historical conditions that set the foundation for the siting of the prison, I undertook a project of archival research. To that end, I lived in

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<sup>8</sup> Compiled from the Justice Atlas of Sentencing and Corrections, justiceatlas.org, 3/13/12. Zip codes 14901 and 14904, downtown Elmira and the Southside of Elmira, have some of the highest rates of prison admission per capital in the state: 7.43 and 5.72 respectively. In contrast, the rate per 1000 adults in my zip code in Brooklyn, one of the most racially and ethnically diverse zip codes in the country, which includes parts of Flatbush and Kensington, is 0.63. Other statistics show that neighborhoods with higher density of African American residents have higher levels of police surveillance, measured by the rates of people on parole in a single zip code. Those numbers are double in Bedford-Stuyvesant (12 per 1000), Brooklyn than they are in downtown Elmira (6 per 1000).

<sup>9</sup> In 2011, Cuomo merged the Department of Correctional Services with the office of parole to create the Department of Corrections and Community Supervisions, or DOCCS.

Elmira, New York from March 2007 to August 2007 and January 2008 until June 2008, also returning to Elmira for four (total) week-long trips in the fall of 2007 and spring of 2009. I lived in my parents' home on Elmira's Westside, a middle income residential neighborhood where I had also lived during high school from 1989-1993. The Westside of Elmira is a separately incorporated town in Chemung County (the Town of Elmira, as opposed to the City of Elmira), with separate services, i.e. fire house, police force, and (lack of) civic garbage pickup. Following local narration, I consider the town of Elmira to be part of the political and economic entity of Elmira. Finally, I conducted informal research with a non-profit support group for families of incarcerated men in New York, New York from January to March, 2009, attending a weekly meeting. I visited Elmira to conduct exploratory research in the summer of 2006, including informal discussions with Correction Officers and their families and a review of relevant local archives. From this visit and from previous contacts, when I moved to Elmira in March of 2007 I began to focus my data collection on three “places of contact” between the prison and the town: public discourse about and response to crime and criminality in Elmira, prison work, and the "roadside hospitality" center at the Elmira Correctional Facility. I identified and interviewed forty-one key informants who are actors in these arenas. I completed numerous hours of observation at public forums such as city council and citizens groups meetings. In addition, I followed the work of a small non-profit group that runs the hospitality center at the Elmira Correctional Facility. Finally, I examined newspaper archives and historical documents from Elmira City government, the New York State Department of Correctional Services and others that allow me to put the current situation in broader historical context.

Each person in this document is identified with a pseudonym. Public officials for

example, the District Attorney or an elected politician, are referred to using their real names. In some case, informants are amalgamation of one or more persons. All direct quotations from recorded interviews with informants are held in quotes. Quotes from my fieldnotes that were not recorded are marked with single quotation marks.

My initial interest in the broader social and cultural implications of prison expansion began while working as a welfare rights organizer in Kensington, North Philadelphia, one of the poorest districts in the state of Pennsylvania. Many of the members of the community organization had been in prison or had family who were incarcerated in rural areas of Pennsylvania. Experiencing the great burdens of prison on the lives of poor Philadelphians led me to question my hometown and my family's connections to this industry, and challenged me to explore the relationships between prison towns and other poor and working-class communities across the state. While living in New York City, I often noted a portrayal of a monolithic "rural" upstate, full of white working-class men eager for prison work. I set out on my research project with the following set of questions seeking to document the daily life of a prison town and to trouble simple notions of a race/class divide in the making of the prison industry: 1) How, why, and to what extent have Elmira residents become politically engaged in opposition to or support for prison expansion and with alternative economic development plans?; 2) How do residents view the advantages and disadvantages of prisons for the town?; 3) Why and how do Elmira residents choose or avoid prison work?

I spent a significant part of my childhood in Elmira, New York, as a young child visiting grandparents, aunts and uncles. My family returned to Elmira in 1989, where I lived until leaving for college in 1993. Prison work has been a major part of my hometown's economy and my

family's sustenance for generations. After returning from World War II, both of my grandfathers took jobs in corrections. My mother's father, a skilled sheet metal worker and gardener, took a job as a guard and moved his family to "the country"--Greenhaven prison—in search of steadier work. He eventually returned to school and became an instructor teaching sheet metal to prisoners. My dad was born in Catskill, New York, where his father worked at Coxsackie Correctional Facility until he gained enough seniority and he and his family returned home to Elmira. At the end of his career, my grandfather's brother served as the deputy warden at the Auburn Correctional Facility until his retirement shortly after the Attica Rebellion. What I know of my grandfathers' working lives I overheard at family gatherings; one became too ill to speak and another died before I was thirteen and I never discussed their work with either of them. The family memories of prison work and prisons are fleeting: my mother remembers childhood days spent sledding down the Hill in front of Elmira Correctional Facility and her father crossing the picket line in the Correction Officers' strike of 1972. I remember school functions at the Reformatory Clubhouse—a social space for CO's and their families—and a tense day at school when a few of my classmates' fathers were inside Southport Correctional Facility during the uprising in 1991. In my recollection of family conversations, prison work is regarded as “tough work” that was done for the purposes of steady income, but work that eventually compromised my grandfathers' health. Knowledge of Elmira life, particularly white "ethnic" working-class and middle income life, however, is as familiar as the air I breathe, made evident in the nasal lilt of my own "upstate" accent that returns summarily when I set foot in Chemung County.

Despite being a “native” anthropologist in some respects it is preferable, as Narayan asserts, to redraw a messy boundary between “insider” and “outsider” and, “view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities

and power relations” (Narayan 1993: 671). In this vein, I may have been marked as an outsider in Elmira in a few aspects: my advanced education, my years in the larger cities of Philadelphia and New York, and my choice, ultimately, to leave Elmira and not to return to live there.

Entering the masculine world of Correction Officers and prison workers, and to a lesser extent local politics, as a young-ish, visibly pregnant white woman, may have marked me as outsider.

These attributes were also perhaps a foundation for access. A number of my informants were older white men, and they often agreed to be interviewed by saying they wanted to "help me with school" or identifying with their own adult children who were also in school. Although I had made acquaintance with only two of my informants before my research began, many people knew my parents, aunts and uncles, or relatives in my grandparents' generation. I was routinely asked, “which Morrells are you related to?”—a question that requires three generations of genealogy to answer sufficiently. Finally, while my interest in the topic was spurred by my family's history and ties to the prison, none of this data comes from my family or their immediate experiences. However, my family's history in the city, my years of Catholic schooling, and my grandparents' work in the prisons laid a foundation for ethnographic work on a potentially difficult topic.

My work in the archives of the Chemung Valley Historical Society and the Steele Memorial Library (Elmira's largest public library) allowed me to establish the historical trajectory of Elmira's political and economic change. In the 1970s and early 80s, Elmira's largely steel-based industries moved south or were dramatically restructured to use fewer workers or to operate on temporary production schedules. Elmira had a relatively varied industrial base of steel industries; however, the town's one clear difference from other rust belt towns struggling to reinsert themselves into a post-industrial economy was the presence of a maximum-security state

prison. Elmira experienced a serious economic downturn in the early 1980s. During my loosely structured interviews with Correction Officers, I determined that it was during this period that many of my informants took the civil service exam to become corrections officers. Considering that Elmira has been a prison town since the Civil War, my investigations demonstrated how ideas about criminality have changed over time. For example, the Elmira Correctional Facility, formerly the Elmira Reformatory, and Southport Correctional Facility, have always held a high concentration of inmates from New York City. However, the racialized characterization and pathologizing of these inmates has changed: in the 1950s, special logs were kept of the crimes and sentences of Italian and Italian-American inmates in order to study an ethnic group the state deemed "deviant" during that period. The data I collected from my archival sites demonstrated that the prisons were a site of protest during three particular points in recent history: first, the Attica Rebellion of 1971; second, the strike of prison workers in 1979; and third, the riots at the Southport Correctional Facility in 1991. Here, I paint a deep portrait of these two of these three points in history from Elmira's perspective in order to show how the prisons have been a polarizing force in the creation of institutions of (in)justice over the past forty years.

Participant observation at local forums regarding public safety and news and social life more generally were key to my analysis of Elmira as a prison town. During my fieldwork, I documented a local panic about race and crime in that many people make a connection between the rise in crime in Elmira and the two state prisons. When I spoke in Elmira about my research, noting that my topic was roughly about the relationship between the prison and the town, many people replied, "Oh, well, they're [the prisons] good for the jobs and bad because their families [the families of prisoners] move here." Others asked inquisitively about my analysis of the prison-- is it good, or is it bad? In my research and in my writing, I have paid particular attention

to the attitudes of prison guards regarding race and crime and how those attitudes are and are not reflected among townspeople of different groupings. Through participant observation with a community group that runs the visitors' center at the Elmira Correctional Facility, I observed a group of people making a different set of connections with prisoners' families. The group is made up of a liberal-minded, multi-racial group of local church and synagogue members and often struggles to explain itself to prospective volunteers. Members often consider themselves a "buffer" in difficult interactions between prison guards and families of incarcerated men. As the first stop of the journey on an overnight bus ride from New York City and the long walk up the steps to the prison, volunteers explain the rules of the institution, serve snacks, and drive disabled visitors to the top of the hill. Volunteers play a complicated role as both partial extensions of the authority of the prison and advocates for prisoners' families, all while helping to facilitate the social reproduction of important family relationships across a great distance.

In forty one open-ended interviews with a cross-section of Elmirans, I elicited information on the following topics: accepting or avoiding prison work, the well-being (including economic and safety concerns) and future of Elmira, the effects of prison work on social or domestic life, and the effects more prison jobs might have on community and class relations. In interviews with prison workers and their families and local civil servants, I explored social attitudes and narratives about the advantages and difficulties of prison work as a solution to unemployment. Twelve of my interviews were with prison workers, the largest number of whom were Correction Officers (eight), but also included counselors (two) and chaplains (two). Five informants were formally incarcerated men (two) or wives (two) or sisters (one) of men currently incarcerated. I conducted ten interviews with individuals involved in local politics and business, including a District Attorney, a public defender, a city planner, union, civil rights, and

church leaders and activists (twelve), and local business owners (two). The additional interviews were with citizens who volunteered at the prison, lived near the prison, or whose children were interested in working at the prison (ten).

Ethnographic work in and around prisons requires a particularly delicate balance (see Waldrum 1998; Wacquant 2001). In my own work, I chose not to do ethnographic work inside the prison because of the bureaucratic requirements of the Department of Correctional Services (DOCS). For example, after an approval process in the state capital, DOCS would have had access to my field notes and would have had the opportunity to vet my work before it was published. For this reason and others, my field of study remained the city of Elmira and its various and varying relationships to the prison.

## **Chapter Breakdowns**

In Chapter 2, I review the literature that provides the theoretical foundation of my ethnographic research. Drawing on archival materials and ethnographic interviews, Chapter 3 traces the process through which Elmira was chosen as the site for a new state prison in 1985. Following Harvey's analysis of the new age of entrepreneurialism in urban governance, I situate this process in the context of the restructuring of the global economy and Elmira's loss of manufacturing. Chapter 4, based on my ethnographic interviews with Corrections Officers and their families and my fieldwork experience, analyzes the consequences of prison work. I describe how and why people became Correction Officers and how they, their families, and their fellow citizens see the consequences of prison work on their lives and their city. Chapter 5 focuses on a discourse I heard throughout my fieldwork in Elmira—the idea that families of inmates and former inmates were moving to Elmira and causing a rise in crime and swelling welfare rolls. I

situate this discourse within a dialectic between social ideas about crime and urban landscapes in order to demonstrate how the prison emerges as a site of racialization in a prison town. In Chapter 6, I introduce the prison town as both an analytical category and a geographic location. Highlighting Gilmore's notion of the prison town as an abandoned space across geographies I answer the question: how does the prison town work as a site of circulation and a site of social reproduction for the men incarcerated its prisons and the prison guards? Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with volunteers at the Elmira Correctional Facility's visitor center, I look at the day-to-day practices of social reproduction involved in visiting Elmira's two prisons as conduits of exchange in the carceral state. In Chapter 7, using archival and ethnographic data, I draw on two points of conflict in recent history, the Attica Rebellion of 1971 and the Southport uprising of 1991 thus demonstrating the porousness of the social, political, and economic boundaries of the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities and the City of Elmira.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review: Anthropology and Mass Incarceration**

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that an ethnographic portrait of the making and remaking of prison town broadens our understanding of the political economy of prisons and the relationship of U.S. prison expansion to urban inequality in the twenty-first century. Specifically, I posit that during a moment of political economic crisis, prisons were construed and constructed as an economic development project that would and could replace manufacturing jobs with work in the prisons. My ethnographic work in Elmira highlights the way that the prison and the town circulate through one another—workers, prisoners and prison visitors, salaries, state contracts and the caretaking dollars of prisoners’ families, public utilities, food, and medicine, and discourse about work, the nature of crime and criminality and the architecture of race and racism—in order to push an expansive definition of the carceral state to include the prison town.

Building on broadly theorized notions of the “Prison Industrial Complex,” notably the past decade’s work of prison abolition activists, I use the ethnographic tools of anthropology to show how racism, class, and gender inequality are produced and reproduced in and through everyday lived experience of prison maintenance. Thus, by placing the expansion and maintenance of incarceration in the context of a “local” political economy in New York State undergoing a “global” pattern of economic restructuring, my dissertation bridges theories that seek to understand both neoliberal forms of punishment and the dynamic and unequal social and economic processes of urban life (Harvey 1989a, 1989b, Low 2003, Maskovsky 2006). There is a very small but growing anthropological literature explicitly about prisons or prisoners. I highlight the existing literature and add it to four overlapping bodies of research to set the

intellectual foundation for this dissertation. First, I analyze a body of scholarly activist literature about the prison industrial complex and its critics together with a number of anthropological texts that touch on mass incarceration and the experience of incarceration. Then, I describe how my data intersects with literature on two of anthropology's oldest subjects—the anthropology of crime and criminalization and the anthropology of race and racism—and treats the larger racialized criminalization of poor and working-class life. I include a section about whiteness, in which I focus on how racial hierarchies are made in and through work and labor segmentation more generally. In order to set the context of a small city introducing a new prison for the purposes of economic development, I examine how anthropologists have theorized urban inequality and urban development since the Urban Crisis of the 1970s.

In addition to the work of Gilmore (2007), the precedent for research on prison towns lies almost exclusively with a body of activist literature that aims to point out the flawed economics inherent to prison construction as economic development. This literature serves the specific purpose of showing how prisons work in primarily rural economies by showing how prisons are a fiscal drain on municipal budgets in order to discourage small towns and cities from using prisons as economic development. The foundational work in this field was a comic book created by Kevin Pyle and Craig Gilmore through the Real Cost of Prisons Project entitled *Prison Town* (Pyle and Gilmore 2005) and a film entitled “Yes in my Backyard” by filmmaker Tracy Huling (1999). Pyle and Gilmore's work highlighted the social costs of prisons as economic development for rural areas that have "fallen on hard times" highlighting the environmental concerns and additional costs for law enforcement, social services, and health care

both for prisoners and prison workers as a general pattern across the United States. In New York, Huling's film, *Yes in My Backyard*, provides the foundational ethnographic work on a prisons as economic development for a rural area through a close examination of Coxsackie prison in rural Hudson River area of upstate New York. Her work documents the tremendous political pressure to build prisons in struggling areas in the late 1980s and early 1990s including the notion that the young people no longer have to leave the area now they can work in the jail as a CO, as a counselor, or in an administrative capacity (Huling 1999, 2002). In addition, Huling focuses on the violence of prison work, including the “markedly higher” reports of domestic violence in the area and talking with a guard who during his career as a CO work received fifty-seven stitches and a fractured skull as a result of an altercation with a prisoner. .

Sociologists have shown that as a project of economic development, prisons fail to produce a growth in private employment. In quantitative studies of prison towns across the United States, Hooks and coauthors demonstrate that the 508 prisons built in the U.S. counties between 1969 and 1994 failed to produce a growth in employment in rural counties (Hooks et al 2004; Hooks et al 2010). Moreover, the authors note: “[f]or both total earnings and income per capita, those rural counties *without a prison* grew at a faster pace. It is notable that employment grew more slowly in counties in which a new prison was built” (Hooks et al 2004: 48). My dissertation adds an ethnographic lens to the process of prison expansion in one specific location, including in-depth interviews with workers and their families who rely on prison work for sustenance and a more complete understanding of the stratification within the prison town.

## **Prisons, Mass Incarceration, and Prison Industrial Complex**

In my work, I have theorized an expanded carceral state that includes the prison town as a key part of its architecture. This work stands on the shoulders of scholars of the political economy of prisons. In the late 1980s, recalling Eisenhower’s warning of the mounting menace of a “military industrial complex,” scholars and activists began to point to a “prison industrial complex.” Trying to make sense of a massive expansion of the U.S. prison system, scholar activists described this “prison industrial complex” or “PIC” as an overlap of government and capital, a system of profit for some and death for others (M. Davis 1995, A. Davis 1998, Schlosser 1998, Evans and Goldberg 1998).<sup>10</sup> In his 1995 article, “A Prison Industrial Complex: Hell Factories in the Field,” Mike Davis outlined the prison population explosion in California, highlighting a relationship between the state’s falling higher education budget, and the escalating corrections budget, and the proliferation of desperate towns fighting for more prisons and more prison jobs. Further work by scholar activist Angela Davis described the growth of prisons and the criminal justice system as a process of criminalization that sought to disguise the inherent racial and economic inequalities of American poverty and unemployment (Davis 2001). She added that this “practice of disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities has literally become big business” (Davis 1998:11). Eric

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<sup>10</sup> As Mullings (2003) notes in her article on the Prison Industrial Complex, the term was first alluded to by Paulette Thomas in the *Wall Street Journal* 1994. “[T]he defense establishment are cashing in too, sensing a logical new line of business to help them offset military cutbacks.” Paulette Thomas, “Making Crime Pay: The Cold War of the ’90s,” *Wall Street Journal*, 12 May 1994, A1.

Schlosser, best known for his recent work on the fast food industry, wrote one of the most commonly cited works on the topic. In this work, “The Prison-Industrial Complex” in the *Atlantic Monthly*, he described the PIC as a “set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need.” (Schlosser 1998:54 ). Schlosser theorized that “a confluence of special interests”— the fear mongering crime talk of politicians, the job seeking rural poor and working class, and companies seeking to make money in corrections— was pushing the construction of prisons (1998: 54). Scholar activist Julia Sudbury pushes the PIC into global perspective, cataloguing the emergence of a racialized “global carceral state” and increasing focus on women’s growing association with the criminal justice system (2005). The most expansive, and therefore useful, definition of the Prison Industrial Complex has been put forth by the activist organization Critical Resistance, who write: “Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to what are, in actuality, economic, social, and political ‘problems’” (Critical Resistance 2011). Thus, scholars of the Prison Industrial Complex focus on a broad field of public and private mechanisms of capital and governance in order to capture the political economic process of creating and maintaining carceral “solutions” to the problems of social inequality. Here, I argue that an examination of the connections pushed by Angela Davis, Mike Davis, Leith Mullings, Eric Schlosser, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and others is the key to thinking about mass incarceration as a critical social problem in the twenty-first century. Thus, the PIC, as a living theory, provides an important analytical tool to examine the relationship between the rise of Black militarism and

Rockefeller's crush of the Attica Rebellion and the subsequent passage of the Rockefeller Drug Laws; between prison bonds and struggling rural economies; and between rising unemployment in communities of color and new modes of social control.

In this dissertation, I add to the path-breaking work of critical legal scholars who created the foundational body of work regarding the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration. These scholar activists are actively engaged in work to dismantle the laws created during the crime panics of the past three decades and their work has received somewhat more attention from the mainstream press than academic work on the subject. This body of research provides the pivotal antidote to mainstream criminal justice scholars whose work is primarily geared at training police and corrections recruits. Mark Mauer has critiqued high rates of incarceration for their lack of impact on actual crime rates (1999), analyzed the negative implications of felony disenfranchisement for democracy in communities of color (1998), and catalogued the racial disparities in arrest and incarceration rates when compared with drug use (2007). Legal scholar Michael Tonry documents how, on account of the War on Drugs, expanded incarceration and criminalization of African Americans did not "just happen," but rather were the "foreseeable effects of deliberate policies" (Tonry 1996: 5). Arguing that U.S. law has built a "new political and social order structured around the problem of violent crime" (Simon 2007: 3), Berkeley law professor Jonathan Simon describes how that "fear of crime" has resulted in a qualitative shift away from democracy in American life, a move toward a penal state. Most recently, legal scholar Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), has challenged mass incarceration, calling it "a stunningly

comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control” (Alexander 2010: 4) for its role in recreating a “racial caste system” parallel to the historic Jim Crow laws. Importantly, some citizens have taken Alexander’s call to arms seriously and have created a “Campaign to End the New Jim Crow” among formerly incarcerated people and their allies in New York City. Taken together, these scholars show how the intensification of legal consequences for the illicit drug trade has created a complex web of criminality and disenfranchisement for people of color, particularly young men but increasingly young women (Sudbury 2005).

For many criminal justice scholars, an upswing in criminal behavior (often specifically citing crack cocaine) led to a rise in arrests and incarceration; mass incarceration is theorized as an end result, rather than within a process of social change. While some criminal justice education literature is critical of mass incarceration (see for example Clear 2007), there remains a vital need to respond to this body of literature with clear, consistent, and critical scholarship. My ethnographic work illuminates this popular literature by offering a complex ethnographic understanding and adds the perspective of the prison town itself, often painted as monolithic white place puppeted by rightwing politicians.

Sociologist Loïc Wacquant has sought to discredit the term prison industrial complex, arguing that the theorization of the PIC, “confuses the reengineering of the state in its dealings with the poor in the post-industrial era with a profit-seeking endeavor” (Wacquant 2010: 606). Furthermore, Wacquant asserts that “the prison is a core political institution and not an economic one” (2010: 611). However, in attempting to upend the notion of a prison industrial complex, or more broadly, the notion that there is a profit motive in prison construction and maintenance, he

disassembles his own argument. Through an argument that the prison is a primarily political engine to deal with a “class” problem: “the poor,” he obfuscates the poor as an economic or class group thus overlooking the important ways that the political and the economic fit together. Wacquant wrongly unbinds two interlocking points of theory; that is, the “art of statecraft,” as he calls statemaking, is necessarily an economic *and* a political function. In the capitalist city, hegemony of the state over the lives of poor and working people requires both political and economic domination. Poor people are further kept out of the economic and political systems by the legal ramifications of their imprisonment. In this dialectical understanding of the relationship between capital and governance, the prison is neither primarily economic nor primarily political; rather, it is an inseparable imbrication of the two. Indeed, the “profit” produced by the prison lies not only in the construction of the prisons by a prison industry, or in the workers’ salaries, but also in the control that the carceral state maintains over working-class and poor people, themselves the sources of ruling class profits. Furthermore, the Prison Industrial Complex is an analysis “in process” that remains an important theoretical architecture for many activist groups working to restructure our nation’s system of punishment. It is a concept that is continually renewed and reworked through campaigns to close prisons, reform the Rockefeller Drug Laws, and end the death penalty; thus, I continue to find relevance and usefulness in the term prison industrial complex to describe the American criminal justice system.

### **Anthropology and Criminalization**

The discussion of crime and criminality in anthropology is as old as the discipline itself.

From Durkheim's theorizations of group cohesion and deviance (Durkheim 2003) and Engel's ethnographic portrayal of working-class English urbanism (Engels 1999 (1845)), anthropology's treatment of crime and criminalization rests on historical theories that have sought to understand criminality and punishment as both an individual and social phenomenon. Based loosely in these two traditions, Jane and Peter Schneider mark two distinct genealogies of scholarship in anthropology--the study of crime and the study of criminalization, respectively (Schneider and Schneider 2007). The study of criminalization, they write, is the study of "the processes by which states, media, and fearful citizens define particular groups and practices as 'criminal,' evoking a threatening criminal imaginary" (2007: 352). The study of crime, on the other hand, includes a broader set of questions about, "illegal predation—banditry, rustling, theft, racketeering, and trafficking—whose specific trajectories are entangled with the destabilizing effects of state-legitimated political economies" (2007: 352). For the purposes of my analysis, I focus here on how anthropology has theorized criminalization, a set of questions that overlaps with, and provides the important foundation for, an anthropology of prisons.

Despite the very small amount of work in anthropology on the topic of prisons (see Rhodes 2001, Wacquant 2002) a few anthropologists have begun to carve out an anthropology of mass incarceration in the past decade. Based on ethnographic work among formerly incarcerated men, medical anthropologist Tony Whitehead describes a "prison-to-community cultural continuum" (2009: 20). He notes that it is:

...prompted by a large and growing number of incarcerated persons in communities with histories of high incarceration rates, persons with high rates of repeated re-incarcerations, the blurring of differences between community and prison behaviors and attitudes, and a 'normalizing' of the prison experience within the worldviews of community members (2009: 20).

Whitehead's ongoing applied medical anthropological work with men and women in Maryland is buttressed by his work on the anthropology of prisons for poor and working-class people of

color.

Analyzing historical patterns of social control aimed at poor and working-class populations, anthropologist Pem Buck situates the growth of mass incarceration and mandatory work programs for prisoners within a historical pattern by the ruling class to frame physical labor by prisoners with a moralizing of the poor and the belief that it is “good for the soul” (Buck 1994). In ethnographic work on Harlem, New York City, anthropologist Leith Mullings describes the growth of the prison industrial complex as a state “solution” to the growing redundancy of Black labor as a consequence of globalization (2003). Mullings further shows how the availability of crack cocaine in Harlem and other poor neighborhoods was met by a police response that targeted poor residents rather than large scale suppliers. This state response of criminalizing the poor further limited the repertoire of responses available to Harlem residents in their fight against an unjust distribution of resources (Mullings 2003). These anthropological analyses of prisons provide the foundation for building an anthropology of mass incarceration that seeks to understand prisons within the processes of capitalist accumulation and racialization of poor and working people.

Often working in an applied anthropology framework, previous anthropological discussions of prisons have described how prisoners negotiate and resist an institution where they have little authority over their lives (Waldram 1998). Building on the work of Foucault, anthropologist Charles Bright examines the historical formulation of a Michigan prison not as a "monolithic mass of the 'big house'" but as a contested space (1996). In *The Powers that Punish*, an analysis of the internal practices of a single prison, Bright argues that the "key nexus" within

the prison is a tension between the "resources, practices, and values drawn from the street in a struggle with those of the "inner world of the prison" (Bright 1996: 9-10). Allen Feldman's ethnographic work in Northern Ireland examined the relationships between prison guards and Catholic political prisoners fighting for a united Ireland (1991). Lorna Rhodes' important 2004 anthropological enquiry into super-maximum security prisons, a relatively new classification of incarceration in which people are in solitary confinement for twenty-three hours a day, uses Foucauldian theories of power to explore new methods of punishment and social control within the criminal justice system. While not working in the tradition of political economy, the ethnographic work of Lorna Rhodes represents one of the discipline's only monographs on the subject of U.S. prisons in the era of mass incarceration. The most significant contribution in Rhodes' work is her illumination of the conditions of solitary confinement in the contemporary U.S. prison – a regime, in her words, of "total control" (Rhodes 2004: 162). Importantly, the Special Housing Unit prison at Pelican Bay in California has been the site of recent hunger strikes as prisoners fight against the conditions of their imprisonment. The changing nature of the prisons, both their expanding size and the nature of punishment itself, must be recentered in anthropological enquiry.

### **The Criminalization of Poverty**

Poor Elmirans, and poor people of color particularly, are often assumed to be "not from there" but belonging, rather, to the prison. This has consequences in how people are policed in the city. Thus, a key contribution to an anthropological study of the prison comes from critiques

of the “culture of poverty” by urban anthropologists. In described the poor through the lens of a racialized reproduction of class experience, urban anthropology creates the foundation for an anthropology of prisons. A key aspect of the anthropological critique of the culture of poverty lies in examining the criminalization of poverty and documenting the growing effects of involvement in the criminal justice system in poor urban communities of color in the United States, including racial discrimination and strains on kinship ties (Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Mullings 2003; Sharff 1997; Susser 1996). Anthropological studies of the criminalization of poverty note that the lives of the poor are subject to increased policing and surveillance, including through the surveillance of public space used for basic human social reproduction (M. Davis 1990). My dissertation builds on these theories by showing how a prison works as kind of urban policy for the working classes -- of economic development but more so of containment and control.

Ethnographies of urban spaces outside of the United States point to similar patterns of expanded carceral systems and diminishing welfare states, often described under the rubric of neoliberalism. Teresa Caldeira’s *City of Walls* suggests an increasingly complex set of carceral boundaries between the worlds of the wealthy and the poor in Brazil, and, at the same time, the deeply intertwined social and working lives of these two populations (2001). In Medellín, Colombia, Mary Roldán describes how work in cocaine distribution and “support”—work that ultimately made workers vulnerable to the state’s military police—provides some mechanism for the redistribution of wealth in the postindustrial backdrop of the city (Roldán 2003).

Anthropologist Don Robotham describes how the high violent crime rate, and the abandonment

of the poor “downtown” by “uptown” politicians and capitalists rests on the historical creation of colonial ghettos and the concentration of urban poverty in Kingston, Jamaica (Robotham 2003). “Zero tolerance” policing in the U.S. (Smith 2001) brought about a heightened surveillance and criminalization of poor neighborhoods, particularly poor Black and Latino neighborhoods, by cracking down on the small quality of life crimes (Vitale 2008; Smith 2001). This “zero tolerance” policing is not a singularly American phenomenon: law and order policing has been directly exported from the U.S, as Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City’s governments hire the chief of police and mayor, respectively, in order to replicate the viciously “anti-crime” efforts of New York City in their own cities (Auyero 2000).

### **Anthropology and Urban Development**

In order to understand the context in which Elmira sought prisons as a project of economic development, I build on anthropologies and geographies of urbanization and urban development. Ushered in by the onset of what David Harvey calls “flexible accumulation” or the regime of capital accumulation marked by a “startling flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption,” and “at the same time, entrained rapid shifts in the patterning of uneven development, both between sectors and geographical regions -- a process aided by the rapid evolution of entirely new financial systems and markets,” the organization of cities shifted under the feet of workers across the globe (Harvey 1990: 252). Cities that grew around the availability of manufacturing work struggled to reorganize their cities and towns in the wake of the loss of these same jobs. Elmira, New York

was no exception. In order for cities and their residents to continue to be of use in a capitalist society, many places have had to become, or at least market themselves as, different kinds of places. In this increasingly competitive, globalized world, Harvey writes, “urban governments had to be much more innovative and entrepreneurial, willing to explore all kinds of avenues through which to alleviate their distressed condition and thereby secure a better future for their populations” (Harvey 1989a). Harvey posits that this entrepreneurialism is by no means a totally complete or successful process, but that after the decrease of federal funds to cities in 1972, there were very few options for cities. Of the few choices that remain, including tourism, specialization in media or technology with local governments providing infrastructural supports for businesses, and international competition for production, there is a high level of competition among places to attract capital (Harvey 1989a). None of the choices, he adds, include ameliorating the living conditions of workers by creating housing or schools.

In the metropolitan urban realm, anthropologists and other social scientists have described the confluence of cultural and capital movements in the emergence of “revanchism” (Smith 1996)— social and political economic processes through which the wealthy classes reclaim urban space—such as gentrification (M. Davis 1990; Smith and Williams 1986; Williams 1988; Zukin 1982; 1991) and the reorientation of public space for tourists (Eisinger 1988; Rutheiser 1996). During the most tumultuous period of job-loss and change in the industrial and manufacturing industries in the 1980s, the rubric of deindustrialization shed light onto how small cities were suffering from the massive reorganization of capitalist accumulation. While anthropologists have contributed to theorizations of life in the small city, the study of the small

city leaves a vast amount of research to be done. Anthropologists have shown in Butte, Montana (Finn 1998), Pittsfield, Massachusetts (Nash 1989), and Barberton, Ohio (Pappas 1989) that rapid economic shifts due to economic restructuring and the resultant loss of manufacturing or mining work resulted in harsh conditions for workers. The main focus of these studies was the experiences of the workers rather than the processes through which the city proposed and enacted projects of economic development.

The process of reimagining and recreating urban places has been studied in large urban areas like New York (Dávila 2004; Brash 2011) and Atlanta (Rutheiser 1996), but to a lesser extent in smaller cities like Elmira or Canton, Ohio. How has the adoption of this entrepreneurialism been different for small cities? After decades of focus on the 1970s urban crisis in metropolitan areas, there is a small but growing attention in the social sciences to how small cities experience economic restructuring and rebuild their economies in its aftermath. Despite the hegemonic American nostalgia that small cities and towns are homogenous and parochial, more urbanists have begun to theorize the small city as increasingly polarized and variegated (but see Warner 1941 for notable example of early literature on inequality in the small city). Urban scholars tend to focus on metropolitan urban areas arguing that the “intensification” of the processes of linkage in the global city creates a denser and therefore more recognizably urban confluence of capital (see Low 2001:2). However, urban scholars Bell and Jayne argue that small cities are not just “bit part players” but are intrinsically linked to other places and an essential part of regional and international landscapes (Bell and Jayne 2009: 689). Many small cities in the rust belt— as many local elites have discovered—have been important sites of

manufacturing in the global economy. Scholars have shown how small cities in the U.S. and across the globe show are growing in size and that small cities have widely divergent experiences in “successfully” competing for position in a global arena (Mapes 2009; Bell and Jayne 2009). That is, there are some small cities, notably college towns, wealthy suburbs of major cities, or vacation areas that function as wealthier enclaves surrounded and “serviced” by residents of poorer cities and towns. Importantly, though, like neighborhoods of larger cities, the small city is as much a site of stratification as the big city, and is perhaps becoming more so.

While larger cities, or global cities, are the more dense sites of stratification, residents of rust belt cities that have lost their place in a radically restructuring global economy face the possibility of becoming left out of processes of economic distribution altogether. While recognizing the commonalities of stratification in small and large cities, some scholars suggest that life in small cities comprises a qualitatively different urban experience from the metropolitan experience. Connelly writes that small cities share some threads of commonality across culture, nation-state, space and place— including fewer resources to weather economic change, the greater accessibility of elected officials, and stronger social ties (Connolly 2011). The complex interplay of these characteristics: of a less dense geography; more plentiful and therefore generally “cheaper” land; geographic and historical relationships to neighboring metropolitan urban areas; and variation in the nature of social stratification; shape the choices for economic development in small cities.

It is within this context that small cities and towns attempt to rebuild their economies through the use of prisons as a form of economic development. From the classic rust belt towns

of Youngstown, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan, to private prisons in Arizona and Mississippi, prisons have become an increasingly popular choice for small cities that see the possibility of corrections as a “recession proof” industry (Steinmetz 2010). In one recent example, when the news reached Hardin, Montana in 2009 that a newly built but unused state prison was being considered as the new home for a military prison following the closing of the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base prison, the economic development director of the town expressed hope that the prison might bring some life back into his city, located in the poorest county in Montana (Meserve 2009).

A study of the prison town necessarily sits at the crossroads of literature on urban development and a body of anthropological literature that has examined how communities oppose and accommodate changes to political economic landscapes to demonstrate how relationships of power, dominance and resistance are produced and reproduced in everyday life (Carbonella 1998; Gregory 1998; Mullings 2003; Nash 1989; Pappas 1989; Susser 1982; Weinbaum 2004; Williams 1988). Community studies, once considered the hallmark of anthropology, have described the processes of creating and maintaining social cohesion (Arensberg 1942; Gluckman 1958; Viditch and Bensman 1958). Since the 1960s, anthropologists have contributed to a more complex notion of “community,” toward an understanding of community as a locus of political struggle and global interconnection through the study of community politics (Appadurai 1991; Goode and Schneider 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1995; Nash 1979; 1989; Williams 2002; Wolf 1959; 1982). Many studies of community politics have illuminated the ways in which racial identity undergirds or complicates collective struggles to challenge urban policies (Aparicio 2006; Gregory 1998; Hartigan 1999; Maskovsky

2006; Mullings 2004), poor people's struggles for housing, health care, and against welfare reform (Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Lyon-Callo 2004; Susser 1982), and the challenges of labor organizing in the wake of industrial restructuring (Carbonella 1998; Cowie 1999; Weinbaum 2004). In this dissertation, I interrogate these themes in order to highlight fractures and formations in notions of community and belonging in the context of new political economic factors related to prison growth in a small town.

### **Anthropology of Race and Labor**

An important body of work in anthropology has described how the boundaries of “race” are historically contingent while describing social structures that make and remake hierarchies based on racial categories. The study of race cannot be separated from social class, but rather, as Verena Stolcke writes, racism is a method of “naturalizing the socioeconomic inferiority of the underprivileged” (Stolcke 1995: 5). Faye Harrison cautions us that even though race is not biological reality, that “should not preclude our giving sufficient analytical attention to the ideological and material forces that categorically mark and stigmatize certain peoples...while treating the privileges of others as normative” (Harrison 2009: 613). In this dissertation, I draw from and add to the key anthropological insight that race is not biologically real, but is made and remade through racism, in this case in the prison and in the urban experience of the prison town. In this dissertation, I follow the insights of anthropologists who focus on how racial categories work as a set of relations that are inextricably tied to class. For many of my informants who worked as prison guards, the experience of whiteness is marked by privileges—quite literally

profiting from their work as prison guards—and limitations as working-class persons. Thus, my study will build on the work of anthropologists who have described whiteness as a set of privileges. In addition, this dissertation builds on anthropological notions of race and ethnicity that show them to be not fixed categories. Poor whites from the area also end up in the state's prisons, their experiences achingly similar to the thousands of poor Black and Latino New Yorkers who travel across the state to visit their incarcerated family members. Thus, I situate this dissertation within urban anthropological critiques of Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty" and its recent historical manifestations as the "underclass" a la William Julius Wilson (1987) or the "hyperghetto" a la Wacquant (2001).

For the remainder of this section, I focus on two literatures that engage the questions inherent to this project. First, the literature on what has been called the "underclass" and second, literature on whiteness and poor and working-class whites, two populations whose lives are intricately connected in Elmira, albeit on opposite sides of a prison gate.

In William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*, he created the notion —proven to be a powerful explication in popular media -- that an "underclass" population had become a serious problem in American "ghettos" (1987). Notably, Wilson defines the underclass population equally through the economics and behaviors of joblessness, but he describes an increase in pathologies—sexual activity, family dysfunction, and crime among them—as a causal factor for the growing rates of poverty among African Americans (Wilson 1987). A focus on poverty as a Black problem helped to misconstrue the multiracial and geographically varied demographics of American poverty, and to code criminality as a Black issue in the public

consciousness (Goode and Maskovsky 2001 : 12). Goode and Maskovsky recount how in popular literature and in the political scene, support for American welfare reform in the late 1990s was built on a coupling of racism and sexism: “Obsessive references to the fecund welfare queens and, later, to the specter of dangerous Black men shaped the political culture of the Reagan era and beyond” (Goode and Maskovsky 2001: 7).<sup>11</sup>

Anthropologists and other social scientists have made significant contributions to the study of whiteness. Karen Brodtkin study of the “whitening” of Jews reflects the way in which access to material and educational resources and a widening conception of “whiteness” in the first half of the twentieth century made space for Jews and southern and eastern European immigrants in the racial category “white” (1999: 88). Brodtkin notes how the period after World War II became an “historic moment for real class mobility” on account of GI Bill measures granting college tuition assistance and help buying homes. She says, “it was a time when the old white and newly white masses became middle class” (1999: 88). Yet not all Americans had equal access to this “stepping-stone”: African-Americans were systematically excluded from state structures in which “middle-class” identity was formulated, facing discrimination in the housing market and college admissions (Brodtkin 1999: 95). Racial categories were at the same time fluid enough to bend to accommodate the Jews, and rigid enough to ensure the impoverishment of yet another generation of African-Americans. Brodtkin uses the term middleness to described the Jewish experience of and relationship to white racial formation in the U.S.—what she calls “doublevisions, an experience of marginality vis a vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis a vis blackness” (Brodtkin 2000: 2). I find Brodtkin’s definition of

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<sup>11</sup> Anthropological critiques of Wilson’s theories dovetail with my previous section here about anthropological responses to crime and the “culture of poverty”.

“middleness” useful to describe the raced and classes experiences of working-class whites more generally and in the prison in particular—that is, shifting and changing relationship to privilege and power. Historically, working-class whites have had a limited relationship to power as a part of their class experience, but an expanded relationship to power defined in opposition to poor and working-class African Americans has defined the class experience of working-class whites in Post-World War II America (Brodkin 2000; Winant 2002).

But the question, which has perplexed many radical historians, remains: why have working-class white people continuously chosen the privileges of whiteness? Through an examination of the language of labor categories, Roediger argues that during the period of slavery, Europeans used the term “wage slaves” to differentiate themselves from enslaved Blacks (Roediger 1999:27). Blackness, then, became associated with “servility” and whiteness with “freedom,” and white workers persistently chose to use this distinction to their advantage (Roediger 1999:21- 25). White “wage slaves” were only renting out their labor and therefore the possibilities for leaving their chains of bondage were within a (perhaps imagined) realm of possibility; dreams which constituted a significant part of the “wages of whiteness.” Pem Buck’s powerful book *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power, and Privilege in Kentucky* (2001) records the powerful ways that elites deliberately worked to codify white privilege in labor segmentation despite interracial organizing for racial and economic justice.

As scholars rush to declare a colorblind era, my work contributes to a body of anthropological work that demonstrates the centrality of an analysis of racial inequality in the contemporary United States. Harrison argues that under the banner of colorblindness in the American South, “white privilege has been undergoing a reorganization to accommodate

antiracist reforms as well as the changes brought about from recent inflows of immigrants” (2009: 13). Brown et al (2003) underscore the varying ways that racial discriminations—most virulently in the criminal justice system—have morphed from arguments based on the criminality of a Black people based on biological difference to “colorblind” arguments about the pathologies of Black culture and Black families. We are reminded by Gibson that race has discursive power without being reinforced in day-to-day interactions: in her article on Shellcracker Haven, Florida, Gibson shows that despite the lack of any significant African American population in this poor white area, the apparitions of historical Black populations haunt white racial identity (1996).

In this dissertation, through a focus on stratification within and through the prison town, I contribute to a body of literature that views poor and working people beyond the limited and limiting framework of an isolated ghetto. Many working-class whites have experienced economic decline in the era of economic restructuring, and historical racisms have become emboldened as a scapegoat for white economic decline (Berlet and Lyons 2000). Eve Weinbaum’s ethnography of workers’ struggles at ACME boot factory in Tennessee asserts that this struggle is a perfect example of where racialization could have happened but didn’t because of a union campaign against blaming Puerto Rican workers for the factory’s move (Weinbaum 2004). Race here is not solely the experience of African Americans, but guided by the notion that whites also “have race.”

### **Chapter 3: Constructing Southport: Small City Urban Development and the Prison “Solution”**

When I first started my research in Elmira in 2006, I went into the Steele Memorial Library, the main public library in downtown Elmira, and looked in the card catalogue under “prisons.” It indexed many articles about the two state prisons in Chemung County but the first card also said “*see also economic development.*” I wondered: was it that clear cut for Elmira that the prisons were an economic development project? Who were the architects of this plan for economic development? What were the debates surrounding the construction of the prison? And, finally, what exactly has the expansion of prisons as a plan for economic development meant for Elmira and the larger New York State?

I situate my ethnographic questions in the context of the massive transformations in urban governance that emerged in the late 1970s, often described as the rise of neoliberalism. Following Harvey’s (1989a) idea that this period marked a shift in the organization and function of cities, whereas the formerly managerial mode of urban governance was replaced by a necessarily more entrepreneurial function in an increasingly competitive, globalized world, I look at how dominant actors in Elmira’s political economy become intertwined with the political economic project of prison construction in Albany. Finally, I introduce Logan and Molotch’s concepts of the city as a “growth machine” (1987) as a conceptual framework to guide my analysis of Elmira as a commodified place during this transformation. Throughout the chapter, I focus on the crucial role of the state in determining the paths and modes of economic development in the state of New York and how these processes unfold in the ethnographic example of Elmira. I show the ways that relationships between state and private business became

deeply entangled—indeed, inseparable— in an effort to solve the crisis of unemployment and economic loss in Elmira.

The idea of a growth coalition, or a group of elites and their allies in government, media, and sometimes the arts, highlights the assemblage of players on the local and state levels and those who are allied with them in the planning for economic development in Elmira. This group of elites converges in what Logan and Molotch call a “growth coalition” that drives urban planning in order to extract money from the area’s land and labor, or create “growth” (1987). Business leaders’ personal economic interests and their participation in local politics become intertwined for the purposes of the expansion of personal wealth. In *Urban Fortunes*, the authors present the idea that “the desire for growth creates consensus among a wide range of elite groups, no matter how split they might be on other issues (Logan and Molotch 1987: 51). Thus, I examine the Elmira growth machine not as a separate political economic engine with equal power and authority but as a collective of individuals and businesses and a conglomeration of capital and personal interests that overlap with the interests of the Albany growth machine in the construction of prisons. The hallmark of this idea is that a governing group is not a staid and solid formation but a group organized around the common goals of profitability. The apparent solidity is created through the constant process of seeking out of growth and maintaining hegemony. Following Logan and Molotch’s analysis of how local media communicate the elite’s framing of “growth” as a question of “jobs” while conveniently leaving out the idea that this also creates wealth for local business members, I examine the role of the popular media, *the Elmira Star-Gazette*, and to a lesser extent television, in the consolidation of public opinion and public will to envision alternate methods of economic development. I outline the individual and collective players that comprise the Elmira growth machine in the period 1981 to 1988, when

construction on the Southport Correctional Facility was completed and the prison accepted the first prisoners into its cells.

Two essential themes emerge in this chapter. First, through the lens of Elmira as a part of the New York State region, we see prisons in relationship to the larger urban crisis. Second, I look at how white working-class men—who comprise ninety-seven percent of the security employees at both facilities—do and do not function as allies of the growth coalition. I will look at the New York State as a region first. Throughout this dissertation, I look at Elmira as a distinct municipal entity, as a part of the “Elmira area.” Elmira, the city, is necessarily considered in connection with the rest of Chemung County—the farms of surrounding townships, the development of regional shopping centers, and the competition for local resources. This is increasingly true as the City of Elmira—once the wealthier industrial center of the county—falls further into bankruptcy and relies increasingly on “shared services” for public works like policing, garbage collection, and fire departments. In this chapter, I show how the historical solutions for the bankruptcy of Elmira that come from Albany mesh the citizens of the city of Elmira to the city of New York. The connections coercively created by the carceral state necessitate an examination of the prison system that takes into account the political economy of the Elmira area and New York State as a region. Looking at our second theme, it is important to think through these regionalisms through the lens of prisons as economic development, born out of the urban crisis in American cities. Prison construction does not create profits for owners as manufacturing did in the past; rather, the prison’s “boom” is an infusion of state capital into Elmira primarily through wages, and to a lesser extent through DOCS contracts with hospitals, food companies, and, at irregular intervals, construction firms. While white working-class Elmiraans can hardly be considered elite in a grander sense, it is important to think through how

white working-class men can function as both the allies and perhaps even conduits of elite interests. Largely through “transfer payments” (Mullings 2003) made from the state to the county through the construction of prisons that expand the limited wealth, and therefore status and privilege of some members of the white working class as a “niche” population, the growth coalition secures a secondary gain in the alliance of this group into their growth coalition bloc. Who loses out the most in this project of economic development? Most explicitly, the men and women who are incarcerated in New York have their lives truncated, both physically and socially, by their incarceration. On another level, however, poor and working-class people who are left out of the plans for public projects—those not interested in or able to do prison work—are also on the sidelines.

### **The Roots of the Prison Boom: Prisons in the lives of Black and Latino New Yorkers**

The massive growth in prisons since the 1980s has been, of course, built on the massive numbers of young men and women entering the prison. As anthropologist Leith Mullings has written: “The dialectic of benefit and deficit regarding prisons has a clear racial and political character” (Mullings 2003: 14). Under the banner of the War on Drugs, millions of African Americans and Latinos, overwhelmingly men, have been policed and surveilled, arrested, indicted, sentenced and imprisoned for low-level nonviolent drug crimes. In 1973, New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed drug laws mandating minimum sentences for drug crimes. Part of the fervor of Nixon’s newly declared “War on Drugs,” the Rockefeller Drug Laws set a national precedent requiring a fifteen year minimum incarceration for the sale or possession of illegal drugs, the first law of its kind for a nonviolent crime. Combined with a growing violent crime rate (Mauer 1999: 26-32) and a powerful white populist and police response to the urban

riots of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Gilmore 2007; Mauer 1999; Mullings 2003; Parenti 1999), these factors laid the foundation for creating a political will for a different treatment of race and crime. The numbers of men and women being incarcerated in New York State and across the country skyrocketed and new prisons were built to ease the resultant overcrowding.

It is not an accident that poor Blacks and Latinos were more likely to be targeted by the police for arrest and by judges for incarceration; indeed, the enactment of the War on Drugs created this social fact. Racial profiling of communities of color for drug crimes, federal level sentencing guidelines that more often sentenced African Americans with tougher gang-related sentencing guidelines, and the ever-lengthening arm of parole are all tools of the criminal justice system in making race in an allegedly colorblind society (Brown 2003). Michelle Alexander's best-selling book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) has brought national attention to the issue of the racially charged history of policing and incarcerating men of color and its consequences. As research has consistently shown, arrests and convictions for drug crimes do not reflect racial disparities in drug use or sale, but only the racialized character of *policing* of those crimes. That is, while African Americans and whites use drugs at similar rates, African Americans are five times more likely to be arrested and sentenced for drug possession (Tonry 1996, Mauer 1999, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association 2008, Alexander 2010). Alexander posits that the American racial caste system is recreated through the criminal justice system, stating: "[w]e have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it" (2010: 2). She continues, "[o]nce a person is labeled a felon, he or she is ushered into a parallel universe in which discrimination, stigma, and exclusion are perfectly legal, and privileges of citizenship such as voting and jury service are off-limits" (2010: 63). Furthermore, mass incarceration has arguably led to an increase in crime; in

*Imprisoning Communities*, criminologist Todd Clear describes the incarceration of primarily young Black men as a key mechanism the erosion of social relationships that allow people reentering society to steer clear of illegal economic activity (2007). Clear describes how over a period of three decades, the 1970s through the 1990s, the combination of increasing numbers of people entering the prisons and staying for longer times account for the massing swelling of the numbers of people in prison, even as the crime rate stabilized in the 1980s and dropped in the 1990s (Clear 2007: 18). Lest we think that the mild reforms of the Rockefeller Drug Laws in 2009 undid the racialized policing of the 80s, we need only take a look at New York City Police Department's Stop and Frisk program. During 2011, 684,000 people, eighty-five percent of whom were Black or Latino, were stopped, often for the vague offense of "furtive movements." Through these stops, peoples' names and information were recorded and their lives ensnared in the criminal justice system.

Of the profound effects that mass incarceration continues to have on the social lives of Black and Latino America, I suspect we only understand the tip of the iceberg. Incarceration removes wage earners from homes and parents from families. It precludes people from harnessing their full human potential—schooling, work, creating a home—during young adulthood. Taken together in the form of twenty-first century mass incarceration, this has what Clear, Rose and Ryder call the disorganizing effects of mass incarceration (2001). Western writes that prison, what was once an "exotic" experience is now a "pervasive presence in the life of poor and minority men" (2007: 3). Citing a recent study that found white job applicants with criminal records were more often called back than Blacks with no criminal record, Anthony Thompson argues that media images of Blacks as criminal and dangerous further hinder programs that aim to aid those reentering society after a prison term (2008). Finally, Mullings

argues that the War on Drugs and the drug epidemic broadly disorganized social relationships and have stifled critical discourse in the larger society and dampened the ability of local communities such as Harlem to continue and extend their protest stances (Mullings 2003: 17). Thus, the catalog of consequences occurring as a result of involvement in the criminal justice system—loss of voting rights, limitations on employment, the trampling of political will and rights, and exclusion of access to public assistance, student loans, and public housing—coalesces in a dramatic, systemic exclusion of African American men and women from American political and economic life.

### **The Boom and the Bond Act**

In the spring of 1981, the Security through the Development of Correctional Facilities Bond Act of 1981 (hereafter “the Bond Act”) was introduced in the New York State Senate. The Bond Act proposed to sell bonds for the construction of three new prisons to house 1500 additional inmates at upstate prisons Wallkill, Woodburne and Coxsackie, as well as lesser amounts of money for state troopers and the expansion of facilities for juveniles. When the Bond Act was first introduced in the spring of 1981, there were thirty-two prisons holding 23,400 prisoners in New York State, and they were said to be at 104 percent of capacity (Kihss 1981a). In the *New York Times*, the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections described himself as “frantic” trying to figure out where to put the prisoners, insisting to the press that he might have to put inmates in tents in the yard of jails (Kihss 1981a). As the Bond Act was being introduced to the legislature, the guards’ union was suing the state over what they considered workplace safety issues in overcrowded prisons. The Bond Act was introduced to build more prisons and

begin to accommodate the growing number of young men (and to a lesser extent, women) being incarcerated. Despite some public opposition to the Bond Act, and prison expansion more generally as ill-conceived criminal justice policy, state officials appeared confident that the measure would pass (Kihss 1981b: 43). Indeed, Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Coughlin spoke assuredly about the bond issue as a bellwether for public sentiment about crime:

I believe this bond issue will settle this discussion [of the public's ideas about the criminal justice system]. If the people want tougher sentencing, better prosecution, and jail to go along with that, they're going to vote this bond issue in. If this bond issue goes down, then that's a clear indication from the people that they want to start looking at social programs to reduce crime (Kihss 1981a: E6).

Governor Carey and New York City Mayor Koch both stumped for the Bond Act's passage across the state. Then New York City Mayor Koch described the Bond Act as a "put up or shut up" matter: if citizens didn't vote to put the money up for the prisons, then they had better quiet their concerns about crime (Haberman 1981a). The State Senators and State Assembly largely agreed and the Bond Act was approved by the state senate in July of 1981.

However, the Bond Act was narrowly voted down by the electorate on Election Day, November 1981. The Act's defeat was indeed indicative of the electorate's concerns about crime across the state; somewhat surprisingly, it was upstate voters who tipped the scales *against* the initiative. In the midst of a crime wave and panic, voters in New York City cast their ballots two to one in favor of the measure; suburban voters evenly; but in upstate New York (defined as all of the counties north of Westchester County) the measure was defeated three to two. Koch made a veiled suggestion that it was the racism of upstate voters who did not want the prisoners in their towns, saying, "the measure was defeated by upstate voters who feared the construction of new

prisons populated largely by people from New York City” (Haberman 1981b). My data (described at length in chapter 5) gives credence to Koch’s suggestion. However, the statistical breakdown points to a more layered set of relationships between crime, policing, race, and public policy. In New York City, Ed Koch’s law-and-order campaign and apocalyptic crime talk undoubtedly swayed the vote. Therefore, it was certainly racialized fears of crime and criminality that led to the initiative’s approval by New York City residents and the vote against in Elmira. Furthermore, although it was the political will of upstate voters that led to the defeat of the measure, it was largely New York City based church groups and non-profits, notably the Correctional Association, a prison watch-dog group, that led the campaigning against the expansion of prisons.

The prison bond vote of 1981 is the only democratic record of public opinion specifically dealing with prisons and prison expansion in the history of Chemung County, and I consider it a marker of substantive division over prisons as criminal justice policy in the following years as well. In Chemung County, already the home to the Elmira Correctional Facility, the measure was defeated fifty-two percent to forty-eight percent, or 6633 voting yes and 7301 voting no (Lynn 1981). Considering the public’s conflicted views of both prisons after the completed construction of Southport Correctional Facility, it is conceivable that an underlying racism and mistrust and distortion of urbanness was part of the overall rejection of the measure by upstate. In my ethnographic research, I found that other forces may have contributed to the overall rejection of the measure by upstate voters, including: a progressive bloc that rejected the growth of prisons as criminal justice policy; conservative anti-government populism that rejected the growth of government spending; or a hope that a different kind of jobs, other than prison work, might be created. If in 1981 more than fifty percent of county residents in a conservative county voted

against the prison bond, can we assume that an equal percentage of the electorate would be opposed to the expansion of prisons in their backyards? Taken together, the defeat of the bond measure and the eagerness of some local politicians for the prison suggest a divided city underlying the soon-to-be-constructed prison.

Despite the apparent mixed public support for the expansion of prisons in New York State, the New York State Department of Correctional Services announced four weeks later that they would still build new prisons. Because there would be no public funding to be provided for the construction of prisons through the traditional means of selling state bonds, the state sidestepped the democratic process and opted to use the Urban Development Corporation (UDC) to fund the construction of the prisons. The UDC was a public authority and not a branch of state government (like the Department of Correctional Services) and the project could therefore be funded with UDC funds without, and in fact *in spite of*, a public vote (Dionne 1981). In 1983, the state legislature authorized the UDC to sell 380 million dollars in bonds to build two state prisons and expand five others. The bonds were underwritten by Goldman Sachs and traded as a commodity.

### **New Directions for the Growth Machine: Albany and the Urban Development Corporation**

At the forefront of the state's new regime of economic development was the New York State Urban Development Corporation. The Urban Development Corporation (UDC), a public authority charged with the infrastructural economic development of New York State, was created in the late 1960s to develop public housing and other large scale development projects

like the Jacob Javits Convention Center.<sup>12</sup> The construction of these projects, in addition to the State Office Building in Harlem and the Battery Park City apartment complex were hotly debated political maneuvers. The UDC made a mark in late 1970s as a vehicle for what Smith has called a revanchist reclamation of space for the uses of middle class and bourgeois interests, such as the transformation of Times Square and Bryant Park in New York City (1996). The broadly defined uses of the UDC waxed and waned through the tumultuous fiscal era of the 1970s and into the early 1980s (Scardino 1986). The appointment of Vincent Tese, a former state banking director as CEO of the UDC, coincided with a transformation in post-fiscal crisis New York State in the midst of a national neoliberal trend.

At the beginning of his term in office, Tese called for public recognition of the “crisis” in the political economy of New York State. He outlined a new agenda for the governance of New York State’s economy—laying the future squarely in the hands of private businesses following Reagan’s plan for tax abatements and relaxed labor regulations as a solution to the crisis. Announcing a new direction for New York State, Tese said: “[i]t is axiomatic that the private sector is the engine which drives New York’s economy” (Tese 1985: 6).<sup>13</sup> In a departure from projects that benefited businesses but were couched as public works, the major focus according

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<sup>12</sup> Public authorities are entities governed by political appointees as opposed to elected officials.

<sup>13</sup> An article in the *New York Times* in 1986 described the transformation of the politics of urban development and the UDC this way: “The traditional relationship between New York's powerful real-estate industry and the city government is adversarial. The developer wants to maximize his profits, to build the biggest building he can on the best site he can find. The city, through its zoning regulations and endlessly long review process, is the referee, balancing the developers' desires against the public need...When the city crosses the line from regulator to joint-venture partner, the issues become even more stark. The city is now in business with the developers, helping them to devise plans that will generate the highest financial return, choosing which proposal it will accept, then sharing in the profits” (Scardino 1986:35).

to Tese's new public directive would be to enhance the "business climate" of New York State by offering tax abatements and incentives (such as help paying workers) to private companies. The targeted beneficiaries of Tese's "overall economic strategy" were the poorest places in New York State, notably Elmira and Utica-Rome in upstate New York and East Harlem and Yonkers. The report cited the fact that Elmira had lost fifty percent of its manufacturing jobs since 1970: the fantastic image of Tese's rebuilt New York was to replace these manufacturing jobs with jobs in computers and biotechnology lured to the state with incentives offered to businesses. In a plan that followed the lead of the Reagan Administration's national push for what was then called Enterprise Zones, Tese created zones around neighborhoods deemed in need of help for tax abatement and relaxed work regulation, apparently aimed at keeping factories working and attracting new business.

The most significant shift in the use of the Urban Development Corporation under the direction of Tese during the early 1980s was the use of the public authority to build new prisons across New York State. The use of the UDC as a vehicle for prison construction was an oblique way of growing the prison system after the electorate voted down the ballot measure allowing the purchase of bonds for prison construction (Haberman 1981b). Despite the conspicuous absence of prisons from the public presentation of the UDC and its plan for New York's economic development, from 1982 to 2000 thirty-eight new prisons were built in New York State with investment dollars from UDC coffers for infrastructural growth. Looking at the process of distributing state funds for economic development from the perspective of Elmira shows how prison expansion fits into the changing patterns of urban development across New York State.

## **Taking Root: The Politics of Prison Siting**

Following the announcement of the planned construction of five new prisons after the legislative approval of the bonds, competition brewed amongst places across the state to be a prison site. The initial proposal announced by DOCS contained plans for the expansion of upstate prisons at Attica and Great Meadow and for the construction of new prisons along the Canadian border, now home to the Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemara, the state's largest prison. DOCS proposed an additional prison to be built on North Brother Island in the South Bronx just off of Rikers Island. While the Bond Act was electorally more popular in New York City than other parts of the state, it was a thornier political project to build a state prison in New York City. Like their upstate counterparts, city politicians were eyeing the construction of a state prison as a jobs plan: Mayor Koch supported the measure, saying: "We [New York City] intend to do our share," citing "the obligation of the city of New York and all other upstate counties to cooperate with the state in the building of state prisons (Oreskes 1983). The Commissioner of Correctional Services said of the chosen spot in the Bronx, atop a working New York City Transit Authority rail yard in the South Bronx: "If there's any place to build a prison in New York City, this is it" (Oresekes 1983). But unlike in Elmira and other locations upstate, New York City politicians were also responding to a more organized liberal element of the electorate, namely predominately African American and Latino districts which lost the highest numbers of men and women to the be incarcerated in upstate prisons. The State Assemblyman who represented the Bronx district where it was planned to be built, José Serrano, commented: "My initial thought is that the first major statement by the Cuomo Administration about the Bronx is not rebuilding housing stock but building a maximum security-prison" (Oreskes 1983). Shortly after Serrano's hesitation, the site was determined to be too costly. A less than warm welcome by

local politicians undoubtedly put the project at risk. The mayor lamented the loss of the prison for the Bronx because, “it was a hardship for relatives of prisoners from the city to travel hundreds of miles to prisons upstate for visits” (Oreskes 1983). It would be more convenient for the families of inmates, who are overwhelmingly from New York City, to have a state prison right to visit right there in New York City. It is indeed the case that siting prisons far from the city in distant upstate towns makes a hardship for New Yorkers visiting incarcerated kin.

However, Koch’s questionable sympathies with the families of incarcerated men and women cast a discursive shadow over his desire to compete for economic resources and jobs in a time of economic crisis. In addition to concerns over the cost of the land, which is inevitably more expensive in New York City, the NYS Department of Correctional Services chose to build prisons in places that welcomed the jobs provided by the prisons without significant negative public comment. They found that home in Elmira, Chemung County, New York.

### **A Small City in the Global Economy: A Growth Coalition Shifts**

Unlike the South Bronx, the City of Elmira and some of the surrounding villages in Chemung County put out the proverbial red carpet for the state’s economic development elites and the Department of Correctional Services. With the highest unemployment rate on record in New York State and the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs in the first half of the 1980s, Elmira was in a state of crisis. During this tumultuous period of economic restructuring, American LaFrance fire engines, Remington Rand typewriters, Ann Page Foods, American Bridge Works, and Bendix electronics factories all closed their doors eliminating thousands of jobs in the Elmira area. Store fronts in downtown Elmira that still were not open following the

flooding from Hurricane Agnes in 1972 showed no sign of recovery. In 1985, there was a wave of hope and promise as an unused manufacturing plant reopened. The plant moved rather quickly to temporary production schedules, and consequently, unreliable employment for workers. The dire state of the political economy made Elmira a ripe candidate for the state's budding mechanism of economic development: prisons.

When the Governor announced that the state was looking for a site to build a new prison, the County Planning Board and Southern Tier Economic Growth (STEG), the local economic development agency, sprang into action in Elmira. The STEG Director told a reporter, "We will do whatever we have to do" to get the prison built in Elmira (*Elmira Star-Gazette*, 1986: 4a). Eager for growth, Elmira's growth coalition coalesced to encourage the construction of a prison in the county and dispel any notion of local opposition to prison construction. In July of 1985, the Chemung County Legislature passed a resolution "Favoring the Construction of a 500-Bed Prison Adjacent to the Elmira Correctional Facility" (Proceedings of the Chemung County Legislature 1985). This was a clear indication that area lawmakers were keen on getting the influx of capital available through Albany's plans for prison construction. The resolution begins: "WHEREAS, the New York State Department of Corrections has indicated a need for two additional maximum security prisons in Upstate New York, to house 500 inmates each" and continues, "WHEREAS, it is estimated that 430 new jobs would be created by building an additional prison facility, thereby alleviating the severe economic decline this area has experienced recently" (Proceedings of the Chemung County Legislature 1985). There were no public comments made regarding the resolution, and the measure was passed unanimously. The Chemung County Chamber of Commerce and the mayor-elect of the city of Elmira wrote similar letters to Cuomo and DOCS. The mayor wrote: "For too long Elmira has been continually

devastated by the poor economic conditions of the region. There is no better time than now to show your support for Elmira and your commitment to the Southern Tier” (Gleeson 1985). The wording of the measure frames the debate in terms that would be difficult to challenge in a time of financial crisis: the hundreds of state jobs created by the construction of a new prison would “thereby alleviat[e] the severe economic decline” of the region (Proceedings of the Chemung County Legislature 1985). The local boosters put it bluntly to Cuomo and the DOCS Administration: to build a prison in Elmira was to support upstate. In September of 1985, the Elmira City Council voted unanimously to urge Cuomo and DOCS Commissioner Coughlin to build the prison in Elmira (Gleeson 1985). In September of 1985, the Elmira area was formally declared a preferred site for the construction of a new prison by the Department of Correctional Services.

Following DOCS choice of the Elmira area as the site of a new prison, a growth coalition with a common commitment to the expansion of prisons as a project of economic development emerged in the city of Elmira. In a second or even third tier city like Elmira, the local elite is not a conglomeration of global bankers or uber-wealthy politicians. Indeed, there is, and continues to be, a less robust concentration of wealth and lesser density of population in the area than in a global city like New York City, or even a larger city with regional importance such as Syracuse. However, there remains a parallel group of politicians, business owners and their allies who use their resources to shape the inflow of capital into the area. For example, the Southern Tier Economic Growth group (STEG) is a not-for-profit organization with a 501c3 status, more than a quarter of whose funds were derived from local businesses (*Southern Tier Economic Growth Coalition* 2011). In the period of proposal and construction of new prisons, this group made an

alliance with the growth machine in Albany, including but not limited to the governor, Goldman Sachs and New York City politicians, who each had their own stake in the expansion of prisons.

In the week following the announcement of Elmira as the chosen site for a new prison, the tone of the Elmira *Star-Gazette* was desperate:

“Great!

Call Elmira a prison town, call us anything you want.

But one thing we can add is that a spirit of cooperation has helped us to land a big victory. Thursday’s announcement that the state plans to build a second maximum security facility here means a fat new payroll – 400 jobs.

Now we need the same community unity that helped persuade Gov. Mario Cuomo and state leaders to build a multi-million dollar prison here. We must work together to build a suitable location.

Some opposition is likely to spring up over the prison site. Let’s hope people will be sensible during any debate and look beyond individual or parochial interests for the betterment of the entire region.

After all, being a prison town for years hasn’t really been such a hardship. Many residents hardly think of the “Hill” unless they happen to drive by or see it in the news.

As we recover from the loss of smoke-stack industries, the transition to more of a service-oriented economy will be helped along by the prison.

It will result in the development of more housing and businesses. Although prosperity won’t come in a burst, it can be nurtured along by community unity. The state has handed us the ball and it’s time to run with it (Elmira Star Gazette 1985b).

When Governor Cuomo formally announced the selection of Southport as the site of a new prison, an editorial in the *Elmira Star-Gazette*, boasted a “double dose of good news” for the area (Elmira Star-Gazette 1986: 4A). The paper gave a “formal tip of the Tier hat...to Governor Cuomo for fulfilling a commitment to help troubled areas of the state,” and added, “[c]onsidering

all of the advantages of being a two-prison town the greatest of these is the creation of jobs” (Elmira Star-Gazette 1986: 4A).

At a time when people were imagining their future without the “smokestack industries,” the paper was issuing a warning: what will happen to our home if we don’t have a new prison? What will come next for Elmira? With this editorial and others, the city’s only newspaper molded the construction of the narrative of what it means to be a prison town. The piece focuses attention on the idea that the “betterment” of the region is bound up in the expansion of Elmira’s role in the New York State prison system. Moreover, the article positions the prison as the *only choice* for the region, as the only resolution to the instability of working people’s lives in Elmira and the equally nervous local elites. If we can consider the 1981 bond vote an indication of the unease about prison expansion for a variety of reasons, the work of the newspaper here becomes all the more necessary and important. That is, the paper was working to create the Gramscian “common sense” of the prison’s construction in the city, a crucial part of the area’s political economy for what could be a century.

Within the county, various players were competing against one another for the prison, including the village of Horseheads, the town of Southport, and the town of Veteran. There appeared to be consensus among key figures in the growth coalition—STEG, State Assemblyman George Winner, The Chemung County Legislators, and the Elmira *Star-Gazette*, that land held publicly should be used for the prison so as to not further lessen the tax base. Rumors flew about where and when the new prison would come to Elmira as local politicians and development officials searched for the perfect site. The state required that the location have ready access to sewer and water lines, to be built and maintained by the “host” county. The

county preferred that the prison be constructed on a parcel of land already held publicly, so as to not lose tax revenues by converting a piece of private land to public land. Among the first proposals for the new prison site, as was noted in the Chemung County Legislature referendum, was a parcel of land next to the Elmira Correctional Facility but it was rejected for being “too hilly”. The same day, the *Star-Gazette* reported that Elmira might lose the prison because the Governor was looking for a site with a type of soil that doesn’t freeze as quickly and therefore allows for a longer construction season, a kind of soil not found in Elmira (Brooks 1985).

In December of 1985, the four locations under consideration for the expansion of the prison were the abandoned A & P plant (Ann Page Foods) along Route 17 in the village of Horseheads near the ever-expanding shopping mall, a defunct hockey arena owned by Elmira College in the town of Veteran a town just north of Elmira, a private parcel of land also in Veteran, and a privately owned piece of farmland in the town of Southport. The Veteran Town Board voted against encouraging the prison’s construction citing “environmental concerns” about the swamp lands and the possible lack of water supply.<sup>14</sup> In response, State Assemblyman George Winner, the co-chair of the Republican Task Force on the Corrections Crisis, collected 360 signatures in support of the prison hoping to counterbalance the town board’s rejection. Presumably, Winner thought that the Elmira College site in Veteran had a better chance of being chosen because it already had not-for-profit status. There was an additional concern that the area around the prison would lose its property values. Despite the effort by George Winner, a vocal conservative, to gather a petition in support of the prison coming to Veteran signed by 360

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14 The need for greater sewage infrastructure and other consequences of such a high human density population are an issue in many prison construction projects. See Gilmore and Pyle 2003; Huling 1999.

residents, there was deemed to be too much opposition to the site, and it was removed from the list of possible sites for the new Chemung Correctional Facility (Fleisher 1985). In the midst of discussion in various venues for the location of Elmira's second prison, the *Star Gazette* editors addressed "Albany" directly: "In case you're reading this, Albany, be advised: True, people here have been scrapping over a prison site. True, some will be disappointed by whatever decisions you make, but it's time to bite the bullet. We can take it. Honest" (*Elmira Star Gazette* 1985b). The piece tried to send a clear message to Albany and anyone opposed to the prison locally that Kuhl, Winner, STEG, and local business owners were all in agreement that the prison was a good for Elmira and good for the region's workers.

In February of 1986, Elmira was chosen as the site of a new prison by the Department of Corrections. Unlike the town of Veteran, the Town of Southport's planning board and many area businesses went out of their way to welcome the prison and encourage its construction on the proposed site (Image 3 and Image 4.) The Town Supervisor, Bob Masia, was central to the courtship with DOCS. Upon his retirement, Masia counted the construction of the Southport Correctional Facility in his town among his greatest accomplishments in public service. When in February of 1986 the farm land in Southport was chosen as the site of a new prison by the Department of Correctional Services, Masia said: "It will be a beautiful thing, up against that mountain. It will open up a lot of avenues" (Fleisher 1986). Indeed, Commissioner Coughlin spoke of his hopes for a "long and profitable relationship" between DOCS and the Town of Southport through the Southport Correctional Facility. "Institution Road," the road built as the entrance to the new prison, was formally changed to Bob Masia Drive following his death in 2007. He was eulogized as a man who did a lot for the area: he owned Masia's Restaurant, was a

thirty year volunteer firefighter, and was on the town's Enterprise Zone Council (Richards 2007a). But primarily, he took credit for his boosterism for the prison.

Despite the mantra of “jobs, jobs, jobs,” local politicians nevertheless had to work to create the image of wealth and prosperity in the shadow of a new prison. Perhaps the most distinct example of this kind of image creation is the photo in the *Star-Gazette* the day following the groundbreaking for the site: a photo of the granddaughter of a Southport Councilman, a smiling white toddler in a white bonnet seated next to the shovel, labeled “Chemung Correctional Facility” (Lion 1988: 1B). The choice of a child in the picture serves the purpose of both annihilating the human cost of incarceration and of prison work and disguising the ugliness of the projects. At the same time the young girl represents many workers' worst fears—their inability to provide for their own children. Abstracted from the social death of the prison and prison work, the prison is simply a building and jobs for workers and becomes Masia's "thing of beauty."

Given the pattern of deindustrialization and the reorganization of manufacturing within the city of Elmira, Southport was an obvious choice for a prison considered by its boosters to be a replacement for manufacturing work. Another picture notes that some area businesses supported prison construction. A sign reading, “Congratulations Southport, we got the prison!” was outside of a restaurant in Southport the day after Albany's announcement (Fleisher 1986). The Southside of Elmira and to a lesser extent Southport were the historically working-class strongholds of the city of Elmira throughout most of the twentieth century. As one CO pointed out, lamenting the impoverishment of his home neighborhood: “A lot of people who lived on the

Southside worked for the railroad, Remington Rand and American LaFrance. And those people lived in that area. And [now] there's nothing left on the Southside." The impetus, both locally and from Albany, to make Southport the site of a new prison reflects the state project that believed they could replace manufacturing work with a prison.

*Place photo here*

4. Photo by George Lion, February 22, 1986, *Elmira Star-Gazette*, with the caption: "Community support is reflected in this sign that appears in front of Tom's on Cedar Street in the Town of Southport on Friday," page 8A.

*Place photo here*

5. Photo by George Lion, *Elmira Star-Gazette*, B1, April 16, 1987: “[Child] was a spectator at Wednesday’s prison groundbreaking. She came with [her grandfather].”

### **Shortening the road home for Elmira’s workers**

While not a centerpiece in the public propaganda regarding prison construction, the union of Correction Officers, AFSCME Council 82 was a supporter of the prison expansion in Elmira and across the state.<sup>15</sup> (The independent union that represents the Corrections Officers today, New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association [NYSCOPBA],

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<sup>15</sup> AFSCME Council 82 represented the Correction Officers in New York State at the time. In the late 1990s the group decertified and organized an independent union, the New York State Police Benevolent Association. See Hill 2011.

remains a powerful lobbying force in opposition to prison closures.) Individually, Correction Officers from Elmira prisons regarded the construction of the second prison as a vehicle to improve their lives by allowing them to move closer to their place of work and spend more time with their families. At the time of the announcement of Southport, the Elmira Correctional Facility was reported to have one of the largest transfer lists in the state—meaning that there were men and women working as Correction Officers in prisons across the state waiting to earn enough seniority to bid for a job at their “hometown jail.” According to one guard at Groveland Correctional Facility, a medium security about eighty miles from Elmira was referred to as “Elmira II” because there were so many COs commuting to Groveland from Elmira and the neighboring towns of Bath, Corning, and Waverly to work in the jail (Maguire 1985). Workers carpooled the three hour daily commute until they gained enough seniority to pick a job at the Elmira Correctional Facility. This indicates that large numbers of people in Elmira were working for DOCS before Southport Correctional Facility was built and the four hundred to five hundred jobs added to the quality of life of current COs. The construction of Southport was clearly in the interest of these workers.

**“It was the 80s. There were no jobs.”**

A number of the Correction Officers I spoke with were newly retired or on the brink of retirement, men who were hired during the Cuomo construction boom. When talking about why they had taken jobs in the prison, many described taking the job because there was little other work available to them in a time of economic crisis. Greg Shaunessy, who had worked in a factory manufacturing cardboard boxes and as a janitor prior to taking the civil service exam for

Correction Officer recalled, “At the time when I took the guard test, it was coming off the Carter years...Chemung County had the highest unemployment in the state. You couldn’t find a job.” Over the years, he had supplemented his income as a CO with the family farm that his wife helped him run. He was eager to return to farm work after his upcoming retirement. Gordon Gaughan, a retired CO said, “It was the 80s. There was nothing else. I had a BA in Criminal Justice and Psychology. I was going to take it ‘til something else comes along.” Gordon said that many of his coworkers had college or advanced degrees or worked in skilled trades—“people with master’s degree, bachelor’s degrees, welders”—took jobs in corrections. “Their goal in life wasn’t to be a prison guard,” Gordon added, “but once they locked into it, it’s good money for the area.”

The idea of steady work with good benefits as an anchor to family life was a common theme in discussions with Corrections Officers and a common defense of keeping prisons open by upstate politicians. Rosie Ferrari, a local union official, put wages from prison work in the broader perspective of the local economy:

*See, when you lose high paying industrial jobs or a union job with good benefits, and then you make it up in retail, I mean, it’s a joke. It’s minimum wage or part time. All of these department stores are hiring a handful of people part time...So it’s okay if, say, your husband is a guard and you’re just filling in part-time. But if you have to live on that, like a single income, you’re gonna die.*

The average annual income of a state worker in Elmira was \$60,000 in 2005, roughly double the average household wage in Elmira, and triple the household income of poor and working-class neighborhoods on the Southside, Eastside, and Downtown Elmira.<sup>16</sup>

Many Elmirans, prison workers and others, spoke of prison work as a “good job” because of the package of benefits that come with state work. Before the onset of the economic downturn in the 1980s, Roy Meyers was working in a warehouse and decided to take the civil service test for Correction Officer. Roy said, “We knew that that was a more secure employment than where we were at, even if the plant was still there and going great guns, a state job would have been better time off, better benefits. There’s no doubt there.” After he was accepted into a new class of correction officers, Roy considered not taking the job, because, he said,

*We were making ends meet, the lifestyle wasn’t too bad, my wife was working at the time. One day I was in the [warehouse]...I put the forklift in reverse and I’m ready to back out in reverse and [a supervisor] was right behind me. And he says, ‘Roy, I gotta ask you a question. There’s a rumor going around that you’re going to turn that job down with the state’. And I said ‘I been toyin’ with the idea, yeah, I thought about it’.*

*He says ‘let me tell you one thing. If you do, I’m gonna kick your ass all the way around this warehouse’. He said, ‘you’re the only one who passed the written test, who passed the physical test. If you turn this down, I’m gonna kick your ass all over this warehouse’. He says, ‘git outta here’.*”

Roy took the Correction Officer job, and the warehouse where he had worked closed a few years later. In Elmira, jobs that carry health insurance, a middle-income salary plus the possibility of overtime, paid vacation, a pension after twenty-five years, and job security are a rarity. From the

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<sup>16</sup> Compiled from New York State Department of Labor, Labor Statistics and compared with U.S. Census 2000 maps. <http://www.labor.ny.gov/home/>

perspective of many Elmirans, it is the fact that prison work is government work that makes this a development policy and a job worth fighting for.

### **Prisons and Enterprise Zones: Neoliberal Urban Governance in Elmira**

When warehouse and factory workers like Roy lost their jobs, few men had work in corrections to fall back on. (The fact that Roy passed the civil service test while others in his job did not demonstrates that there was, and continues to be, some level of educational attainment necessary to get work as a CO). That is to say, the growth in Corrections may have ameliorated the conditions of some workers, but there were still many men and women left out of the mainstream economy in Elmira. The problems faced by Roy and other downsized workers are inextricably linked in the history of New York State's postindustrial landscape: namely the 1980s twin development projects of prison expansion and the implementation of Empowerment Zones. For this reason, the state project of creating and expanding empowerment zones is important to intertwine with the discussion of prisons as economic development. At the dawn of the neoliberal city, these two projects together -- prisons and public abatements and incentives for private companies — emerged as solutions to the disinvestment by the federal government and the experience of job loss for working-class New Yorkers. These were also offered as solutions to parts of New York State that varied in their demographics, geography, and the specificity of their postindustrial experience. For example, in the first round of demarcating the urban land for Enterprise Zones, Ogdensburg, in the “North Country” of New York State along the Canadian border was chosen as one of the first ten cities, along with East Harlem, New York City and Auburn, another prison town, to receive state funding to “support” private businesses. Eventually

three new prisons were built in Ogdensburg, suffering a fifteen percent unemployment rate after the collapse of the mining industry (*New York Times* 1987). While they seem to be opposite sides of the coin—one the expansion of a “public work”—prisons, and the other, the classic neoliberal trope of self-sufficiency in giveaways to corporations, these urban/rural development plans dovetailed in Elmira in the notion of rejecting “municipal welfare.” That is, local development officials followed the state line: feed the axiom of privatization while growing punitive state projects. (As head of the UDC, Tese was highly involved in all of these projects, from prison siting to more traditional UDC activities like finding tenant businesses for the massive abandoned A & P plant.)

In a public hearing in Chemung County on the formation of Enterprise Zones in New York State, local public officials, business people, and advocates for the unemployed described a desperate situation in the city of Elmira and the surrounding areas: the highest unemployment rate in the state, the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs, and the shrinking tax base. Facing the loss of the federal grant monies, local politicians and their growth coalition partners were equally desperate for assistance from the state. Following the entrepreneurial rhetoric of the era, the mayor of Elmira explicitly stated that the city was not looking for “municipal welfare,” but rather an opportunity to thrive, insistent on the fact that “we have done everything we can to help ourselves” (New York State and Smith 1986). The head of the Southern Tier Economic Growth Group, a non-profit group that receives half of its funding from the private companies it “represents,” pleaded, “instead of becoming liabilities and cost and burdens to the state, we feel that this area can be taxpayers, they can be part of a healthy strong economy that makes a contribution to the state and doesn’t have to be a burden to the state” (New York State and Smith 1986). The political moment during which the Enterprise Zone proposals arose coincided with

Reagan's anti-welfare rampage, a strain of rhetoric that is quite visible within the discussion of the enterprise zone. State giveaways to private companies in the form of tax abatements and wage subsidies are not construed as "welfare"—a word stained with the racialized language of hard-working Americans versus lazy people who get stuff for free. The federal subsidies of the past became the Cadillac-driving welfare queen writ large (In Chapter 4, I explore the notion of dependency in depth.)

What emerged from the public hearing about the possibilities of creating an Enterprise Zone in Chemung County is a picture of the political economy of Elmira on February 26, 1986. Elmira had an unemployment rate of sixteen percent. A third of the people in the proposed zone, carved out of the city's lost manufacturing sector, lived below the poverty line. The numbers of Elmirans on public assistance had increased by twenty-five percent in four years (New York State and Smith 1986). The hours of testimony from growth coalition boosters from across the Southern Tier, including the Kennedy Valve fire hydrant plant operations manager, and representatives from Conrail and the Southern Tier Regional Planning Board, were filled with the pleadings for an influx of capital and hope for the future of their cities and towns. Two final presentations from members of the Greater Elmira Unemployment Council and the Pine City Chapter of the National Unemployment Council recentered the discussion on jobs. The Elmira group noted that no plan for the Enterprise Zones involved the unemployed workers. They cautioned that the legislators introduce something new every year and nothing seems to work. The Pine City group reminded Winner that giving public subsidies to corporations as an attempt to anchor private companies is not a new tactic for the Elmira area. In fact, through the UDAG program, American LaFrance had been given two million dollars to stay in Elmira and keep the jobs, and shortly thereafter moved their production to South Carolina. The "American LaFrance

fiasco,” as all parties referred to it during the hearing, was not remembered kindly, but rather as an example of how local people were swindled. During the same period, a twenty-year tax abatement was given to Toshiba Westinghouse to relocate to Elmira. This company subsequently closed the factory in the late 1990s, before its twenty years was up. The only incentive given to a company in the 1980s that might be considered successful was a 1.8 million dollar grant given to Diamond-Bathurst Corporation to keep the doors open on Thatcher Glass (now Anchor Glass Container Corporation) which is still a viable manufacturer in Elmira. These grants were eliminated by President Reagan, and enterprise zones subsequently became a popular state response to the crisis. The voices of advocates for the unemployed were raised in a comparably empty chamber and were overshadowed by the previous crowd’s eagerness to get to the task at hand: capitalist urban development.

In their application to become an Enterprise Zone, the city of Elmira proposed to use economic development funds from the state to expand daycare, build roads and bridges, and give incentives to lure new businesses back to the area (*New York Times* 1987). How did the need for the basic infrastructure in the city of Elmira in their application to become an Enterprise Zone fit into the architecture of Tese’s Enterprise Zones--a model of development that forefronts the need to “make them compete” and “make the counties throw in some goodies that we need”? (New York State and Smith 1986). As George Winner, a prominent local conservative asked at the hearing, “how will the poorest counties compete?” the counties with very little to give away? (New York State and Smith 1986). Elmira’s first round request to be considered an Empowerment Zone was denied. The state later expanded the program and Elmira was included in the project. The construction of the Southport Correctional Facility fulfilled the state’s duty to

“help out” the Elmira area and the many other prison towns, new and old, dotting the upstate rust belt.

### **Are three prisons too many?**

The only “growth industry” of any economic or political consequence seeking to take root in Elmira in the 1980s was that of state prisons. Cuomo’s first one billion dollar budget Corrections budget in 1987 did not go unnoticed by State Assemblyman George Winner or State Senator Randy Kuhl. In the beginning of that year, just as plans were being finalized for the site of the Southport Correctional Facility, the *Star-Gazette’s* headline read, “Tug of War Begins for Prison Site” (Louise 1987). Another battle began as more state investment dollars were announced to expand the prison system: when Cuomo announced the need for more prison cells, an optimistic Winner said, “We’re talking about a growth industry here” and suggested that the prison already promised to the Elmira area could expand from 400 beds to 750 beds. The possibility of a third prison revealed a fissure in the local growth coalition. The local paper, which as we have seen was a steady supporter of prisons as an engine for local development, changed its tone: “Jobs are important, but at some point the negatives of a prison outweigh the job benefits” (Louise 1987). Three prisons, the editorial board of the *Elmira Star Gazette* wrote, were too many. The image the editorial board—and undoubtedly other business people who made up the growth coalition—preferred to project was “Mark Twain County.” They envisioned creating Elmira as a tourist destination built around the fact that Elmira is the place where Mark Twain wrote his great books, and where he lived and died with his wife, the daughter of Elmira’s wealthiest business man. This theme, that the anchor of a prison industry precludes other kinds

of development, particularly tourism, has remained a constant tension in the political economy of Elmira (and other prison towns) over the past three decades. However, the newspaper changed its tune a few months later: the new prison would be a “nice nugget for the Tiers” (*Elmira Star-Gazette* 1987). Their backtracking had to do with the rumored site of the third prison: the shuttered A & P plant. Until it was leveled in 2006-2007, the plant was a constant reminder of the area’s manufacturing decline and struggle to overcome economic changes of a global economy. The symbolism of using the A & P plant rather than constructing a new prison cannot be underestimated: it was quite literally a vision based on retooling the factories to create something else deemed socially productive. Like many other deindustrializing places, citizens sought to make use of spaces and places that had gone fallow (see Cowie and Heathcott 2003). The Southport Correctional Facility was constructed as planned, but another area of the state was eventually chosen as the site of prison expansion.

### **Searching for opposition**

Over the course of my fieldwork, I was concerned with how, if, or to what extent local residents were involved in opposition to the construction of the Southport Correctional Facility. I eagerly asked local advocates of prison reform if they had voiced their resistance to the construction on new prisons. I found that such a history did not exist. In truth, it seems as though the catalyst for prison construction came from Albany, which included representatives with strong ties to the area, and its businesses and local civic groups seemed relatively resigned to the fact of prison expansion. While the union of Correction Officers, NYSCOPBA (New York State Correction Officer and Police Benevolent Association), may have been a silent (but active)

supporter of the prison, there were many silent, inactive detractors. I asked Priscilla Moore, “What did you think when they opened Southport”? Priscilla, who had been inside the prison many times through volunteer work with her church, replied, “It was just, oh yeah, it’s a lot of jobs, but look at the cost of these people in these jobs. What’s really happening? What’s giving them the jobs? And if there could be something else that we could do to prevent another prison and create more jobs?”

Many I spoke with, both detractors and supporters of prison expansion, spoke frankly about the area’s economic problems and the use of prisons as economic development. Reverend Ruben Johnson, the pastor of a local African American church said, “Well, people didn’t want that [Southport built]. They didn’t want Southport here. The citizens were against it and they still are. But they can’t do nothing about it.” While he had not voiced opposition to prison construction, a local businessman recalled graffiti on the retaining wall against the Chemung River in downtown Elmira: “Cowards Build Prisons.” In his estimation, the construction of prisons can be linked to the uses of upstate in the New York State economy: “The upstate area can be used for a dumping ground for garbage or violent offenders, or really anything.” According to Maria Adamzisk, a white woman whose husband is incarcerated in another part of the state, the town of Southport requested that the prison, originally to be named the Chemung Correctional Facility (see Image 4), be changed to the Southport Correctional Facility. She chuckled at the irony – incredulous that the village would seek such an honor.

Irene Simons, a white college professor active in many local causes, recalled the history of Southport. “At the opening of Southport, I don’t think any people wanted a second large prison here, and then there was some fear about the fact that it was going to be a maxi-maxi. And

then there was a kind of little riot over there. Then there was the idea that the lethal injections or death penalty would be exacted and a number of us resisted that by weekly vigils and things.” Professor Simons, who was almost run over by a worker on the road to the prison during one of those vigils, noted, “I don’t know how much effect we had.” These silences are indicative of a larger culture of fatalism: in the climate of the period, the construction of Southport was considered inevitable.

### **Value Added?**

Despite the lack of concerted effort to introduce alternative modes of development, there continues to be considerable unease in Elmira regarding the centrality of prisons in the local economy. Faith Bell, a young white professional who is part of a larger network of young people working to fight the brain drain and encourage young college educated people to stay in the area, commented that with the prisons, “there is not value added, really, beyond the steady employment.” She made the comparison with a small, privately owned business team that might stay anchored in the area: “Beyond providing jobs it’s not like you’ve got the prisons so invested. DOCS isn’t invested in Elmira and ‘let’s make Elmira a better place.’ It’s not like, for instance, a restaurant sponsoring a baseball team. Elmira prison isn’t doing that.” In her assessment, a private company might be more interested in improving Elmira than a state enterprise, which she sees as less a part of the place.

When I spoke informally with a member of the Chamber of Commerce asking about the prison’s relationship to the larger economy, she said, ‘Nobody moves to Elmira to be a Correction Officer. It’s more like the prisons are there and there just happens to be a job there.’

She added, incorrectly, that the prisons are ‘self-contained units’ and the medical facilities in Elmira are only used by prisoners in acute emergencies. She added that, ‘not everyone is able to do that job.’ The tone of both of these residents, both of whom are concerned with Elmira’s image as a place, is that this is not work that we are or should be proud of. Again, we see the notion that the prison industry precludes other types of development, most notably gentrification and tourism, two marketing patterns of “place” that have helped other small cities succeed. One local doctor who had treated inmates at the St. Joseph’s hospital noted that the jobs were important to the area, but, “the negative situation is that the prison industry is a pretty rough industry. It’s not like the tourist industry. It’s not like the wineries.” Prisons, put forth as a “solution” for Elmira’s economic woes, continue to produce a broad set of questions about the meaning of Elmira as a place of work, a place of leisure, and a place to live.

### **Cuomo’s Tombstone**

In the early 1990’s, after New York State had doubled the size of its prisons in twenty years, Cuomo himself expressed concern that the prison boom might cloud his legacy. Despite the ever expanding numbers of men and women being sent to prison by New York’s judges, the Department of Corrections and Governor Cuomo began to look at “reducing demand” for prison beds. Cuomo said, “It disgusts me that they’re going to put that on my tombstone” (Lyll 1992). In 1993, Cuomo and H. Carl McCall publicly denounced the “backdoor financing’ of prisons” by the UDC, as 216 million dollars of bonds underwritten by Merrill Lynch were passed through the UDC in the State Assembly in the same way that investment had been secured to build

Southport (Freurbringer 1993). It wouldn't be until his son's governorship twenty years later that the state would finally look at closing some of the prisons that were opened during these years.

In this chapter, I argued that as a second or even third tier city, Elmira had, and continues to have, limited uses as a commodified place in the global economy. I showed how a growth coalition emerged in Elmira, in and through Albany, and how prison work was construed by members of the growth coalition as a replacement for losses in manufacturing jobs. Building prisons to spur economic development remains a controversial project and was thought of as detrimental for Elmira's image as a place. I described how local boosters found tensions between constructing prisons and working to create other avenues of economic development. In the following chapter, building on this historical and ethnographic analysis of the expansion of the carceral state into Elmira, I shift my focus to thinking through a prison town as both an analytic category and a part of a "carceral region."

#### **Chapter 4: Doing my Zero to Eight: Prison Work in a Prison Town**

*“I don’t know anybody that grows up and says, ‘I’d like to be a correction officer.’ I never did. And my uncle worked at Elmira. My cousin worked at Elmira... We used to drive by at [age] seventeen and say, ‘God, who in the heck wants to work in there.’ But there you be.”*

--Greg Shaunessy, Correction Officer

*“To you, the parents, friends and loved ones: thank you for sharing your loved one with this agency...I also know that you are all very proud of what these recruits have accomplished, as you should be. I also suspect that you are a little worried about their new careers. You need to understand that this agency’s first concern is for the safety of our staff - your sons and daughters, husbands and wives. I will not tell you that their new career is not without its dangers. That would be untrue. Managing a prison is serious. I can tell you, however, that everyone pulls together to help one another, especially in times of problems.”*

--Commissioner, NYS Department of Correctional Services Brian Fisher, Training Academy Graduation, January 2009

*“I don't need to be anything other  
Than a prison guard's son*

*I don't need to be anything other  
Than a specialist's son  
I don't have to be anyone other  
Than the birth of two souls in one  
Part of where I'm going, is knowing where I'm coming from”*

-- “I Don’t Want to Be,” 2003, Gavin DeGraw, pop music singer, son of New York State Correction Officer

In this chapter, I look at the lives of prison workers on the front lines of social control. Considering that prisons were welcomed almost exclusively as a source of relatively high

income jobs, in my interviews and observations with prisons workers I sought to understand how and why workers took corrections work and how they saw the costs and benefits of their choices. My ethnographic focus here is on prison guards as workers both on the job in the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities. I look at how their work in the prison might affect their “civilian” lives in the city of Elmira and in their families. By looking at prison guards and, to a lesser extent, civilian workers such as vocational counselors and teachers, as workers, I foreground how prison work and the expansion of prison work as an economic development project function on the quotidian level.

The massive expansion of the prison industry has, of course, led to a concurrent growth in the number of men and women working in prisons. There are currently 18,560 correctional officers in the state of New York, and 518,200 in the entire U.S. (Karlin 2010). At the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities alone, 815 people are employed as correctional officers. According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, the number of correctional officers nationally is projected to increase nine percent over the next ten years, largely on account of mandatory sentencing guidelines and the related growth in the numbers of incarcerated people.<sup>17</sup> In addition, while security work is the majority of salaried work in the prisons, there are hundreds

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<sup>17</sup> This is true in states other than New York State. New York State has bucked this trend, apparently because of the growth of military style boot camps for first time offenders and the mild reforms to the Rockefeller Drug Laws. See 1 in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections, The Pew Center on the States. March 2009. [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/PSPP\\_1in31\\_report\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_3-26-09.pdf](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/PSPP_1in31_report_FINAL_WEB_3-26-09.pdf)

For labor statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos156.htm#employ> Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition, Correctional Officer, Job Outlook. Accessed 9/1/10.

of people who work as teachers and administrators and even more who work at hospitals and courts outside the jail. For these people the daily reproduction of the prison regime is a regular part of their “civilian” jobs. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on Correction Officers in order to illuminate how prison work impacts social relationships and the social life of a place.

### **Care, Custody, and Control**

There are 1200 workers employed by the New York State prison system in Chemung County. The 815 people who work as correction officers and low-level supervisors, referred to as security personnel, are charged with the day-to-day maintenance of physical control over the men incarcerated at the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities. The official Department of Correctional Services phrase to describe the job is “care, custody, and control.” In three shifts, Correction Officers escort prisoners through daily tasks (meals, showers, exercise, laundry, cleaning the facility), and perform “security” duties such as maintaining an arsenal, securing the perimeter of the building and frisking visitors. In addition, Correction Officers take men to sites outside of the prison, including hospitals, courts, and “death-bed” and funeral visits with the families of incarcerated men.

As of January 2008, the security staff at the Southport Correctional Facility was ninety-four percent white men, and ninety-six percent white overall including the small number of white female officers. At the Elmira Correctional Facility, this figure was ninety-five percent white men, and ninety-seven percent white including white female officers. The 451 men and women civilian workers employed by the area’s two prisons, including maintenance and clerical workers, counselors, and teachers, are a more diverse group: the civilian staff is majority female

and the majority marked “other” as their ethnic identity. There are a total of nine workers (seven men and two women) and twelve workers (nine men and three women) at the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities, respectively, who identify as Black or Latino: this is less than two percent of the workforce. For the purpose of comparison, throughout the state as a whole, seventy-nine percent of security workers are white men, and eighty-four percent of both male and female security force taken together, with most of the Black and Latino staff working at the downstate facilities such as Sing Sing, Downstate, or Bedford Hills closer to New York City (NYSDOCS 2008; Conover 2002). Roughly half of the statewide civilian workforce is white.<sup>18</sup> And while, in the words of Dylan Rodriguez, the U.S. prison regime is not “an apartheid arrangement in the orthodox sense” (Rodriguez 2006: 10) in that the growing numbers of Black and Latino security workers in state prisons across the country, the overwhelming demographic of Correction Officers in Elmira and most of the New York State system is that of a white, male worker charged with the “care, custody, and control” of largely Black and Latino men. I use this data to support an assertion that none of the following can be read without understanding that race and racism color every experience of prison work and life and it is difficult, if not impossible, to unweave the texture of race from the institutional roles of guard and inmate.

The roles of white guard and Black and brown inmate in Elmira and Southport reflects a pattern of experience in the New York State prison system as a whole: 78.6 percent of New York state Corrections Officers are white men; 83.7 percent white men and women together; 10.9 percent of Corrections Officers in New York State are African American (NYSDOCS 2008). This shifts based on geography, as prisons closer to New York City, Sing Sing Correctional Facility in

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<sup>18</sup> New York State Department of Corrections, Quarterly Workforce Report, Ethnic and Sexual Breakdown, Facility- Elmira, 01/01/2008. Obtained from the Department of Corrections.

particular, have a majority of African American and Latino guards. While across the country the racial topography is not uniform, the use of racial divides to “order” the relationships between inmate and guard has a long history. Furthermore, research indicates that the social distance between guard and inmate is not a fixed divide: there are countless stories in prison towns across the country and in popular culture about prison workers and prisoners who knew one another from before their work or incarceration in the prison. Omi and Winant’s idea of a racial formation is useful because of the theory’s emphasis on the historical, contingent nature of racialized patterns; that is, race is not a set of boundaries permanently set in history, but rather the use of racial patterns to maintain disequilibrium of power and wealth for working people of all colors (Omi and Winant 1994). Anthropologist Leith Mullings has described racism as a source of cohesion for the inequalities of the global economy, saying that “racism is the glue” that holds an unequal world together (Mullings 2005). Considering the overwhelming racial division between white Correction Officers and black incarcerated men in upstate New York State prisons, I posit that “whiteness” through the lens of class experience, taken as the set of privileges that are negotiated, maintained, and limited every day, is an important trope through which to view the organization and enactment of prison work in New York State.

Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” frames my understanding of the process of racialization—what the authors call a racial project—at work in the prison (Omi and Winant 1994: 56). Omi and Winant’s insistence that racial projects live in “human bodies and social structures” suits an anthropological analysis of race-making in prison because it recognizes the different scales of physical and social control required to maintain hegemonic authority. Borrowing from Karen Brodtkin’s idea that “race is a relationship to the means of

production” (Brodkin 2000: 239), I use the theorization of a *classed site of racial formation* in order to convey how class position in relation to racial categories sheds light onto the process of racial formation in New York State and how race and racism make institutions “work.” I show how race is made through workers’ relationship to the architecture of punishment and how racial hierarchies within the working class are fortified through the lived categories of guard and inmate.

I look at prison work as a node in the racial formation in New York State in two ways: first, in New York State there is racial architecture to a relationship of power between guard and inmate--white Correction Officers maintaining physical control over overwhelmingly black and Latino inmates—and secondly, in the larger scope of the political economy of New York State, the addition of more state jobs in prisons in rural areas has meant both that more white men become more affluent members of the working class while more young African American and Latino men are impoverished and/or incarcerated. At a time of white working-class fragility (Newman 1988; Pappas 1989), the state project of prisons as economic development held some members of another generation of white workers in the limbo of middle class income.

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In order to become a Correction Officer in New York State, an applicant takes a civil service exam. The test-takers are then ranked by their scores, earning extra points for military service, and are then called into classes to join the academy. New recruits train for eight weeks at

the Correctional Services Training Academy in Albany followed by an additional three months of on-the-job training at what Correction Officers call their “hometown” jail—the prison where they prefer to work once their seniority allows.<sup>19</sup> Generally, Correction Officers, many from upstate areas where new prisons have been built, work for their first year following their training at a downstate facility such as Sing Sing or Greenhaven where there are more prisons but fewer workers taking the exam for Correction Officer. For the next two to three years after becoming a Correction Officer, like migrant workers, they often commute a long distance to work in a prison.<sup>20</sup> While working away from home Correction Officers often share rental apartments or trailers with other COs and sleep and work in shifts. They often work double shifts (two eight hour shifts back to back) in order to return home for longer breaks. Gradually, through a gradual process of moving up the ranks of seniority, most Correction Officers come to work in a prison closer to their homes.

In 2011, the starting salary for the new class of workers was \$36,420, became \$38,310 after six months of training, and increased to \$43,867 upon the completion of the entire year of training. Many Correction Officers at the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facility work enough overtime to make between fifty and sixty thousand dollars a year, with a very rare worker

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<sup>19</sup> See also Ted Conover, *Guarding SingSing* (2002). This sentiment about the regional differences in jails is echoed by prisoners and formerly incarcerated people and their families who described vastly different experiences from jail to jail. For public information on the civil service exam for Correction Officer, see <http://www.docs.state.ny.us/PressRel/1999/coexampr.html> accessed 5/30/2011.

<sup>20</sup> I refer to COs as migrant workers because they are traveling long distances for the purpose of work. Corrections Officers are salaried state employees and are therefore not typically referred to as migrant laborers, but I make it a point here to use the term migrant worker to trouble a racialized notion of migration.

making over \$100,000 with a large number of overtime hours worked.<sup>21</sup> In addition, workers have health benefits, disability and life insurance, and can retire and collect a pension after twenty-five years no matter their age. Correction Officers belong to an independent union called NYSCOPBA (New York State Correction Officer and Police Benevolent Association) and participate in the collective bargaining process for their contracts every three years. Despite the relatively good pay and benefits, there is a high rate of turnover among new recruits. Among the men I interviewed, a few described fellow workers who walked off the job in the first few days of work, ('it wasn't my cup of tea,' said one) and were uncomfortable working in the prison. Others, they remembered, left the job because the odd hours of the job meant that they missed kids' birthdays and holidays with their families or because long commutes to prisons meant that they were away from their families for years while they awaited a job at their "hometown" jail.<sup>22</sup>

### **A middle class job of last resort?**

Before becoming Correction Officers, most of the men I spoke with worked in factories, but others had worked in restaurants, attended college, or worked in lesser paying county level civil service jobs. Some were high school graduates, a few had college experience, and one had a college degree. Correction Officer George Hanley had sought a different state job as a state trooper and took the job as Correction Officer while he waited to be called from the state trooper list. The work as a state trooper "never panned out." As I have described throughout this

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<sup>21</sup> Compiled from Department of Correctional Services data obtained through [www.seethroughny.com](http://www.seethroughny.com).

<sup>22</sup> See Conover 2000; Lombardo 1981; BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos156.htm>

dissertation, in Elmira, as manufacturing jobs moved away or were restructured, prison expansion became a jobs program and allowed some of the mostly male workers who had lost work in the manufacturing sector access to relatively well paid blue collar work. What Greg Pappas has called the “fragile affluence” achieved by workers under Fordism was thus prolonged for some by state work (Pappas 1989). Prison work, while regarded by workers and their families as difficult and misunderstood, has provided a platform for a small sector of the working class in Elmira to own homes, nice cars, send their children to parochial school or go on vacation: to live a “middle class” life. While there are many people in Elmira who continue to be unemployed or underemployed, the men who scored high enough on the civil service test to become a Correction Officer had the opportunity to opt out of this impoverishment through prison work.

Despite the access to middle income salary and benefits that work in the state prison provides, Correction Officers are often balancing this “affluence” with what they see as the general drudgery of the work, the threat of danger, and their friends and neighbors’ perception of their job. Many described a feeling of being undervalued or misunderstood—a public perception of the work of prison guard is always balanced with a sense of pride that they can provide for their families (see also Hill 2011; Page 2011). Phillip Kahan, a lean, sandy-haired white man in his fifties, had worked in sales and attended a few semesters of college before becoming a guard after the arrival of his third child. Phillip had an easy-going demeanor and a good sense of humor, and characterized himself as neither a Republican nor a Democrat but described being ridiculed for his liberal views by other guards. “That’s like the worst thing you can say...That’s a cut, ‘You’re a liberal’.” He chose a familiar local pub for the interview site. He spoke openly about his job, but he was self-deprecating on the topic of his career:

*“To me, it was a thing of last resort for everybody. I mean, I’m not that (hesitates) I mean, I’m proud of what I do, but it’s almost like, you know, you couldn’t do anything else. In some aspects. I mean I look at it, I drive to and from work in my uniform and I might stop at the store in the morning and get coffee or something but I would never...but there’s guys that go up to the mall and wear their uniform. It’s not that I’m ashamed of what I do, but almost. Because number one, people don’t understand what we do. They have no clue.”*

When I asked if he felt like his uniform marked him, he continued, “It just... yeah, I’m a loser, look at me. I couldn’t make it in the real world, so I had to become a prison guard.” Another guard, George Hanley, also said he did not wear his uniform in public and made fun of other guards he saw wearing theirs outside of the work place, adding ‘C’mon—you’re just a prison guard’. George said he specifically avoiding talking about his job publicly. When strangers asked what kind of work he did, George said he “worked for the state.”

Feeling like a “failure” in relation to those who have “succeeded” in a competitive capitalist economy is an aspect of working-class identity that has been repeatedly captured by social scientists (Hall et al 1988; Willis 1977; Aronowitz 1992; Kelley 1998). With the growing strength of neoliberal discourses of self-help and self-reliance, Americans find increasing pressure to succeed despite the increasingly limited class advancement to higher income and education levels. Anthropologists have described how this discourse of self-help and self-reliance is particularly powerful among white working-class men who for generations have enjoyed access to jobs in sectors that often paid a family wage (Newman 1988). Furthermore, many working-class people, particularly during periods of economic shift that include lay-offs and wage and benefit cuts, describe a profound sense of loss and alienation (Cowie and Heathcott 2003).

## Doing 25 to life, 8 hours at a Time

I found that among Correction Officers, however, the idea of failure centered on balancing between the stigma of the job and the pride in the relative affluence of their wages. This tension emerges in everyday conversation. For example, when talking about how many people don't understand the good that the prisons do for Elmira, Phillip Kahan defensively pointed to all of the new trucks and SUV's in the employee parking lot at the Elmira Correctional Facility. This parking lot is easily seen from Davis Street, a main thoroughfare through the city of Elmira to the neighboring village of Elmira Heights. The cars and trucks were, to him, a symbol of workers' success and their important contributions to the economy of the region. Phillip was a well-paid blue-collar worker and struggled with how others saw his decision to work at what he repeatedly called a "shitty job" with low prestige despite the material benefits. "I've talked to so many people that don't make anywhere near the money that I do, don't have anywhere near the benefits I do and might bitch about their situation but say I would never do what you do. It's like, I'd rather be poor. I'd rather be in debt, than become a prison guard." Like many other Correction Officers, Phillip made \$70,000 a year including overtime pay. Considering that the average home value in Elmira was just under \$70,000 in 2010, making homes even in the fancier middle income neighborhoods of West Elmira and Horseheads accessible to the average prison worker, this is the kind of salary that he described to me as "hard to pass up."<sup>23</sup> Gordon Gaughan remembered taking the job as a young man in the 80s because he had a difficult time finding work with his sociology degree and he wanted a "nice car." The tone

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<sup>23</sup> The average home value in the city of Elmira was \$69,173 as of May of 2010, <http://realestate.aol.com/Elmira-NY-real-estate>. Accessed 5/30/2011.

in his voice, a fatalism, suggested that this was a decision he regretted. For some Correction Officers, a sense of “failure” is marked by the nature of security work regardless of the achievement of a middle-class lifestyle.

Returning to Phillip’s assertion that “people don’t understand what we do,” I found this sense of being misunderstood echoed in literature written by Correction Officers and civilian prison employees for the audience of their fellow workers and in sociological literature more generally. John Pecchio, a career vocational counselor at the Elmira Correctional Facility published an example of this literature entitled, *Hell Behind Prison Walls: Shams, Charades & Circus from 25 Years of Instructing Inmates* (2003). The key themes of Pecchio’s book are the lack of “traditional” discipline for the inmates and the incompetence of management, particularly in their lenience with inmates but also in their wastefulness of taxpayers’ money. He concludes that prisons are a “sham” and that his insights could help reform the system.

The primary narrative of the books is the hard working civilian, in Pecchio’s case a shop teacher, misunderstood by those on the outside, coming up against the violent and manipulative inmate and the incompetent and uncaring manager. In a study of Correction Officers’ work experiences done by a sociologist at Auburn prison, seventy miles from Elmira in the late 1970s, one officer mentioned that the negative view of a Correction Officer—and how to overcome it with brotherhood—was included in the training at the Correctional Services Training Academy. The newly minted officers were told that “people don’t think much of you, but [they] try to show you how corrections officers stick together” (Lombardo 1981: 35). In these tracks, COs see themselves as victimized by both the inmates who are always looking for a way to gain advantage over them *and* the bosses who use them as tools without concern for their safety

(Pecchio 2003; Lombardo 1981; New York State Commission on Corrections 1991; Rhodes 2004).

In 2002, journalist Ted Conover wrote a book, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*, based on his year-long experience working as a prison guard at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Westchester County, thirty miles north of New York City. I asked a few informants their opinion of the book: most men had a negative opinion of the book, but only one informant, Phillip, had read the book. (Based on my data, I believe that Conover provides an accurate account of the life of a guard.) While Phillip enjoyed the history sections of the book, he explained that the book was “bullshit” and there was no way that Conover could understand what it was like to be a prison guard having worked only one year.

*“He knew what he was doing. He was going to do this for a year and get out. Well, great. You know. Going to the job when you got twenty four more years to go of doing this. Yeah, I could do that. It’d be a hell of a lot easier to do. He didn’t have that hanging over him. Where there is no light at the end of the tunnel. You’re a newjack. All of the jobs are done by seniority. You’re gonna have a shit job—a place like Elmira you’re gonna have a shit job for like ten or fifteen years because there’s so much seniority. And you’re just waiting for your raises and then...You know, just to the everyday drudgery of, Christ, I gotta do this for eighteen more years. I got six years on the job, but I got eighteen more years, nineteen more years, whatever. He didn’t have that. So, to me, he couldn’t accurately depict what it’s like to be a prison guard. When you got a year on the job—yeah, he had a year on the job, but he had eight months on the job, he’s got four months to go. Gee, (laughs), how about having eight months on the job and having four months and twenty four years to go? Then, tell me how you feel.”*

Phillip had objections to the book, but his primary concern manifests itself in the books’ inability to capture the drudgery and boredom of a life spent working in the prison.

Like many civil service jobs, Department of Correctional Services workers are

guaranteed a pension after twenty-five years. Phillip's sense of entrapment is both the cost and the benefit of civil service work. Unlike most industries in the U.S., work in the government "industries" generally means steady work that can be relied upon as a career. This reflects a national pattern of unionization: thirty-six percent of U.S. public sector workers are unionized as opposed to seven percent of workers in private industries (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). The seniority system keeps workers focused on the "better" jobs that lie ahead—better hours, better days off, and better working conditions (in corrections this generally translates to less contact with inmates).<sup>24</sup> Faced with the economic pressures of raising families, this is a job where, in the words of one CO, "ten years becomes fifteen" and workers become accustomed to higher salaries and reliable health care.

Like many prison workers, Phillip paralleled his own work in the prison with the "bids" or prison sentences, of the men incarcerated at Elmira. Phillip called it "doing zero to eight," –or working his eight hours a day— alluding to the common phrasing for prison sentences or bids "doing a four to six." Another CO, Gordon Gaughan, told me he was doing twenty-five to life, eight hours at a time. It was not uncommon for my informants to talk about the amount of time they would spend in the prison over the course of their time in corrections and point out to me that they would spend a third of their lives in the jail.

Despite what many informants described as intergenerational legacies of prison work, including grandfathers, fathers, sons, cousins all having worked "on the Hill," my informants desperately hoped their sons would not follow in their footsteps: being a Correction Officer was

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<sup>24</sup> See also Pappas 1989 for narratives of a few workers feeling freedom in lay-offs to pursue jobs that were more enjoyable but paid less. This was not the case for most workers, for whom the ability to support their families with high wages took precedence.

not viewed as an achievement. At the same time, Phillip felt fortunate to have the job. He issued a challenge to workers who complained about their jobs in this prison: “[If] it sucks so bad here, go take your little high school diploma from Horseheads and tell them what you want.” His voice dripped with sarcasm: “Go to someplace with a GED, yeah— after seven years I’d like to be making 60,000 with six weeks paid vacation, fifty percent pension in twenty-five years and kick ass medical benefits.” This was an unlikely scenario for any worker in Elmira, other than those employed by the Department of Correctional Services.<sup>25</sup>

Some of the social stigma of the job seems to stem from the notion that security work in prisons is not “productive work.” Michael Morgan explained to me that not making anything accounts for a crucial aspect of the experience of a prison guard. Michael said:

*The other thing that goes on with being a prison guard and I think this is one of the biggest problems, (he asks me: what are you going to be when you grow up? Me, I ask? Yeah. A professor, I say). Okay, professor. At the end of your day, or your semester, or your year, if you do your job right, you have produced a viable product, something that you could be proud of that you built whether it’s the character in your students or their learning abilities or that one student who was giving you troubled and you grabbed them by the hand and helped them along. As a prison guard you produce no product, you have nothing that you can be proud of at the end of the day. It’s not there. So it’s not the same as working in a factory and saying yeah, that’s my transmission out there in that car. So, there’s nothing that you can produce that is something that you can be proud of.*

There is a clear working-class perspective in Michael’s view of the lack of “production” in security work at the prison. While not a classically Marxist notion of labor, in the sense that widget-making labor creates all wealth, from Michael’s vantage point, it is his friends and

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<sup>25</sup> The only “blue collar” job in the area that has some economic parity would be nursing work (outside of the prison), jobs that require more training.

neighbors in working-class jobs that *make* things. The other working-class jobs that are available for men in Elmira are work on production lines in the few remaining factories, construction, and on the low end, work in retail. Michael eventually left prison work to focus on his more profitable landscaping business. American producerisms derive a distinct masculinity from one's participation in the act of making something. In contrast, I heard prison work described more than once called being a "babysitter for New York State." Being a babysitter for New York State is a description that demeans the work by feminizing the job and categorizing the work as poorly paid work traditionally done by women. At the same time, it infantilizes the prisoners and their needs as childish. Another important source of differentiation for Correction Officers is their "lower" status within the larger category of police. During my fieldwork, a common refrain from Correction Officers was that police officers were given more respect, and along with it, benefits. This often arises as a question of danger. John Davies, a civilian worker at the Elmira Correctional Facility, who had a cousin who worked as a guard, had very little respect for guards who, in his estimation, treat the job of CO as a "feet up" job where they get to sit around and drink coffee.

The shame of the job of correction officer has its limits or may be particular to some workers. On the contrary, it seems that in some circles being a Correction Officer is a position of relative honor. To begin, despite George's and Phillip's disdain for wearing the uniform in public, I did on occasion see Correction Officers out in their uniforms-- including at Christmas mass at a working-class Roman Catholic Church on Elmira's Southside. A young man with a blond buzz cut, perhaps in his late twenties, sat in the row next to my family with his wife or girlfriend, presumably on his way to or from work. On the Southside, a working-class part of town that has been impoverished by the process of economic restructuring of manufacturing, having a "good

job” as a Correction Officer could be a relative social and economic position of privilege to the many people living on meager seasonal wages, working in retail, or relying on public assistance. Furthermore, there are men who work as Correction Officers who volunteer as school coaches, sit on the boards of the diocesan Catholic schools, and participate in church volunteering, all positions with a degree of moral authority in the community. Taken together, this adds credence to the idea that the job of Correction Officer is riddled with tensions--the primary fault line of this tension is that this good job offering middle income privileges often trades in other forms of stigma.

### **Professionalizing Prison Guards**

*“Elmira Correctional Facility—Located on a large bluff and operated on the same principle.”  
--Kevin Clancy, Correction Officer*

In the aftermath of the Attica Rebellion, and by some accounts in response to the rise of the Black Power Movement more generally (see Irwin 1980), an ideological battle emerged in U.S. prisons between those that sought to carve the rehabilitation out of the work of corrections and those who wanted to see the rehabilitative focus of prisons grow. Irwin describes a prison system in California in the late 1960s and early 1970s with two competing philosophies--a more treatment-oriented staff, such as counselors and certain administrators, who favored college programs, vocational courses and group therapies, and another group of custodial or security staff that eschewed helping the inmates for more punitive terms of incarceration. In Irwin’s analysis, the custodial staff emerged victorious, making way for a more conservative organization of our country’s prisons. Many Correction Officers I spoke with talked about the Attica Rebellion (one officer pointedly referring to it as a riot, and not a rebellion) as the turning

point in the lives of many prison guards. In addition to the hiring of more African American and Latino officers, some gestures towards the civil rights of inmates through grievance procedures and towards better food and access to basic necessities, one major consequence of Attica was what has been called “professionalization” of Correction Officers.<sup>26</sup> For the COs, this is often described as a time when the work became “all about inmates rights” and they finally earned decent salaries.

In name, the efforts at “professionalizing” the work of custody meant that prison guards became Correction Officers and prisoners became inmates. While the most glaring result of the process of change was the dispossession of prisoners from their access to education and skills advancement, this process also has had consequences for the workers. According to the official NYSDOCS history of the transition, “[t]his is far more than a change in title. The rehabilitation-oriented corrections officer is an integral part of the rehabilitative services of the modern correctional institution and exerts crucial influence on the inmates” (NYSDOCS 1970: 2). At the same time that DOCS began to formally require more training for COs and to employ words like

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<sup>26</sup> From their perspective as criminologists, Schaufeli and Peters have described this shift from guards to Corrections Officers as based on the following seven sets of changes: “(1) growing size and changing composition of the inmate population (i.e., increasing number of drug addicts, mentally ill, and aggressive inmates); (2) introduction of new rehabilitative programs; (3) liberalization (e.g., conjugal visits, inmate access to telephones); (4) influx of new treatment professionals; (5) growth of more middle-level supervisory positions, which provides better opportunities for career advancement; (6) recruitment of better-educated officers; (7) an increased sense of professionalism through improved pay and fringe benefits, increased training in legal matters and inmates’ rights, and stricter adherence to written policy and procedures” (2000: 20). This set of changes accounts for the heightened security responsibilities of officers at the expense of their involvement in what might be called rehabilitative functions. Philliber calls this balancing, or imbalancing of the work of guards as security personnel or rehabilitators “role conflict” (1987: 17).

“rehabilitation” to describe their work in corrections, the delineations between security staff and support staff become more clearly defined. Lombardo writes that in the late 1960s, the Presidents’ Commission Task Force on Corrections “drew a distinction between professional and nonprofessional correctional functions” (1981:2). Because COs were not involved in the tasks associated with treatment, they were viewed as “custodial personnel, who man the walls, supervise living units, escort inmates to and from work and supervise all group movement in the institutions” (Lombardo 1981:4). Although COs go through a more comprehensive training, the training is geared toward the tools necessary to communicate with inmates in order to maintain control, including interpersonal communication, how to write reports, cultural awareness, basics of law, and unarmed defense tactics-- what Parenti has called the “science of kicking ass”— and not towards tactics to somehow positively mold the prisoners’ behavior (Parenti 1999: 69).

Part of the process of professionalization includes submitting proper paperwork to account for assaults on inmates, ostensibly the same processes of physical intimidation used before Attica. CO Phillip Kahan described how every officer must account for an act of physical violence against an inmate with paperwork. For example, Kahan told me that when an officer submits a report stating that he had to assault an inmate in order to get him under control he must legitimize each of his actions with paper work. If the officer states that he used his baton three times and the inmate is found to have nine baton marks on his body, then the paperwork is returned to the CO to fix his mistake. As long as proper paperwork is submitted, Phillip told me, the officer should be fine.

The work of a Correction Officer has never been a clear dichotomy between controlling and rehabilitating inmates. Workers’ interpretations of what exactly their role was varied. A key

part of the process of professionalization is what might be called a style of management: Correction Officers, who are custodial staff, are encouraged to ignore the guilt or innocence or kind of crime that an incarcerated man has committed and just “do their job.” Maynard-Moody and Musheno suggest that few workers follow the order of the law in a strict deontology (2003). They argue that “front line workers”—cops, teachers, and social workers— “are constantly attentive to who their clients are, acting on their assessments of people’s character and identity” and that this kind of work necessarily involves “tensions between legal mandates and workers’ beliefs about what is fair or the right thing to do” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 13).

In one view, CO Michael Morgan took the anti-rehabilitation to the extreme, stating that:

“[b]asically, society has taken these people and said you are not fit to be on the street and you are one step above an animal but you have to be in a cage now and you can’t be with other people. That’s what they’re saying when they put them in jail. As a Correction Officer, I’m not there to rehabilitate them or anything else; I am there for care, custody and control.” Based on my data, it seems that Morgan enacted this ideology in his interactions with prisoners.

Although there is some amount of leeway in how guards interpret the work of “care, custody, and control” of prisoners, ultimately their work is to maintain physical control over the inmates at the direction of the state. In her ethnography of an Oregon Special Housing Unit prison, Lorna Rhodes’ informant describes himself as a “dog on a chain” for the state, his ability to physically dominant other men unleashed when the state deems it necessary (Rhodes 2004: 171). This resonates with my ethnographic understanding of the role of guards, and with Mushenko and Moody’s interpretation of policing and “front line workers” more generally. I met at least two officers who reported following a more rehabilitative philosophy (though not explicitly so). This entailed offering insight and advice and “putting them [the prisoners] to work cleaning” the cell blocks where they worked. These officers enjoyed this aspect of their work. Furthermore, some

guards described having relationships with certain inmates that allowed for some laxity and a feeling of accomplishment for those who are “pretty good at talking to them,” in the words of Roy. The professionalization of guards is therefore more correctly called a stricter delineation between the tasks of control. As Ted Conover writes, the “term ‘correction officer’ is imbued with the promise of reform and assistance” (2002: 318). He continues that the general functioning of prisons might improve, “if officers taught some of the classes, did some of the counseling, were allowed to engage their own hearts and minds on the job, instead of just having to pretend they don't have any” (2002: 318-319).

The same law and order politics that catalyzed the growth in New York State's prisons over the past forty years have also tightened physical control over movement and activity of prisoners *within* the prison. Importantly, the push towards what the Department of Corrections calls the professionalization of guards comes at a time of new measures of austerity within the prison: professionalization, then, is part of the process of giving inmates less, but articulating the social and emotional needs and risks of inmates as bigger problems. In addition to stripping down educational programs to bare bones, this is made most apparent by the rise of the Special Housing Unit facilities (SHU, often called “the box” by prisoners) where all inmates are held in solitary confinement prisons like the one constructed at Southport in 1988. The hyper-segregation of all prisoners (as opposed to a large maximum security prison like Elmira which houses a small SHU section within it) changes the way the entire prison functions and changes the nature of the work. The “purity” of the security aspect of the prison guard's work is further amplified in an all SHU facility because there is little interaction between guard and inmates or among inmates. A set of skills taught at the academy—interpersonal communication, learning to talk people down when they get upset, or even watching incarcerated men interact with one

another in mess hall—are simply not physically possible at Southport Correctional Facility.<sup>27</sup>

Pearl Brown, a defense attorney who visits clients in prisons across the state, describes a dramatic difference in the work of guards in a high security environment of the SHU. A maximum security prison can be chaotic as men move from recreation to mess hall to classes or work or visits, she described, whereas in the Special Housing Units, guards spend a lot of time “looking at inmates through slats on the door.” One chaplain who worked with men in solitary confinement described in detail reading the Bible every week to an inmate, crouched on the floor so he could hear and see the man through the meal slot on the front of his cell. This work, what is called “individual cell study,” is quite different from the more open movement in the prison chapel. When New York State’s all solitary facility opened up at Southport in 1988, the nature of prison work for security personnel and counselors and civilian staff at Southport took on a whole new life.

### **A Damaging Job**

Michael Morgan worked as a Correction Officer in maximum security prisons in New York State for eight years. When we met, Michael began our interview by explaining how prison work changes a person’s disposition, making a person “at the height of their career” (which I took to mean the time when they have the most contact with inmates) more confrontational. Unlike other Correction Officers who at least spoke of avoiding fights with inmates or allowing their sergeants to handle confrontations, Michael gave animated descriptions of his brutal methods at maintaining order in a solitary confinement block of the prison—from beatings when

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<sup>27</sup> The only other all SHU is another recently built facility, “Upstate Correctional Facility” along the Canadian border.

the inmate was in the shower, to turning a five gallon hose on men and their possessions. While other men made more general comments such as “prison makes you skeptical” of people and insisted that they never sit with their back to the wall in a restaurant, Michael said that his time as a prison guard “warped him”: “I knew it was warping me, because I started looking forward to it. And it’s not normal for somebody to look forward to going in and using force on a person, extreme force on a person to get him under control. And looking forward to it. Okay, it’s not normal. It’s not human nature. Or, it shouldn’t be human nature, okay.”

I was often surprised by the perception of many Elmirans (including COs) that Correction Officers were damaged by their work and/or their work environment. In fact, the mayor of Elmira, in a public plea for the census to continue to count incarcerated men where they are incarcerated but cannot vote as opposed to their home districts, described the “soft costs” resulting from alcohol abuse and family counseling for the city of Elmira on account of the “high stress jobs” at the prison (Finger 2011.<sup>28</sup> More often, however, it seemed that criticism of prison guards, or more precisely, a clearer discussion of the job itself, are a somewhat taboo subject

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<sup>28</sup> The United States Census counts institutionalized populations in the place where they are located, as opposed to where they are from. On account of this policy, mass incarceration and the density of the population of prisoners in poor Black and Latino neighborhoods has heightened inequalities in political representation. In rural areas of New York State, particularly the North Country along the Canadian border, the large number of prisoners pads the population count of Republican districts resulting in a power shift toward Republicans and toward rural prison districts and away from poor districts populated by people of color. In 2010, the New York State legislature passed a bill to count prisoners at their last known address—their home communities—in order to reverse this pattern (see extensive coverage of this topic on [www.prisonersofthecensus.org](http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org)). The federal census still counts prisoners where they are incarcerated. Considering how often census numbers are used in academic work, it is very difficult to use that data and represent real “local” trends, as frequently researchers and journalists are discussing patterns in the non-incarcerated population of a place but using numbers that include the incarcerated.

among Elmirans. Many women in particular said that they understood men needed the work, but were skeptical of how and what COs actually did in the prison. Priscilla Moore, an African American retired social worker, put it most succinctly: ‘I understand they have a difficult job, but I don’t agree with everything they do’ — a veiled critique of prison brutality. These views of Correction Officers as brutes were often similarly oblique. Over the course of my fieldwork, I heard that prison guards were depressed people; were more prone to be violent or macho; might be the kind of person who wants to dominate another person; and “he’s not like the others-- he’s a gentle person.” Carmen Velasquez, a counselor, described pressures from prison guards not to befriend or help inmates: “It’s a big pressure there, so you have to shut your emotions off--shut it off.” Almost across the board, there was a sense that the work was dangerous and difficult, sometimes with a suggestion of blame for the inmates and sometimes for the guards for the stress, and that prison work was regarded as a kind of work that changed people.

Some of this notion of damage seems to be rooted in a sense that proximity to the inmates “sullies” the guards. This was a criticism levied by guards and civil workers against other guards. Michael Morgan, who left work after ten years on the job said, “If I had stayed any longer I’d become just like them.” Kevin Osbourne, a recreation leader at the Elmira Correctional Facility, used this argument as a basis for his general distrust of guards. “There’s a lot of them that are worthless. And a lot of the correction officers’ thinking...is bad or worse than the inmates. The inmates impact or affect, have a bigger effect on their [COs'] behavior than they [COs] have on the inmates behavior.” While some of the stigma of prison work is similar to much blue collar work in that it carries no status enhancement, it seems that part of the job’s shame is that their lives are spent in close proximity with “criminals”, who are viewed as lesser human beings.

## **Hating the inmates, hating the boss**

One tension that frames the experiences of many Correction Officers is a sense that they are sandwiched between the prison administration, which they see as more interested in the rights of the inmates and in fiscal austerity, and the prisoners, who were innately self-interested, or worse, “real bad asses,” “losers”, “sexual predators”, and people who do “nasty” things. In the words of one guard, for the administration, it's “all about inmates’ rights” which makes the job more difficult and leaves “no room for mistakes.” While hating the boss is not an uncommon sentiment for any worker, guards regard the inmates with at least equal animosity. While talking with Phillip, the conversation turned to the difficulties the Department has been having recruiting new officers, and Phillip perceived the new recruits to have fewer physical and intellectual skills than the officers who went through the academy with him in the 80s. When I asked him why he thought the Department was having difficulty getting people to take the job, he replied:

*Because it just sucks. Because it's a shitty job. You know, it pays good, it's good benefits, it's a good retirement. It sucks. I mean it's...you know dealing with these guys, these inmates. It's just like, it sucks. I mean it's terrible, you know. You want to kill every one of them. Literally, you wish they were dead. You wish every one of them were just dead... [pauses]. And that's an exaggeration. There are some good inmates.*

According to Phillip, the terribleness of the job lies in the tedium and the day-to-day interactions trying to control inmates. Following his critique of Conover's book, Phillip said what can't be captured is:

*[J]ust the drudgery, every day going back in and doing the same thing. Then you've got a problem with a guy. You take the same gallery to chow every day, that same gallery to rec. And there's that one guy on it that's just driving you nuts. He's not doing anything that*

*you could write up his behaviors report. It's just constant. You want to kill him. You want to punch him in the face. But you can't. You just can't.*

While some officers clearly *do* take the next step to physically assault prisoners, it seems to me what Phillip calls the “shitty” aspects and an overarching “drudgery” of the jobs lies in the impossible task of keeping other humans under total control without violating policy, and not the general drudgery of work described by laborers in general.

The conflicts between guards and inmates, guards and prison bureaucrats—the groups COs see as their two adversaries—manifest themselves along familiar American fault lines. Like welfare, Americans cannot or do not see the prison as an experience of dispossession, but rather view it as a product of the inmates’ pathological dependency on the state. In Correction Officers’ discursive treatment of inmates and their families echoes a belief that poor people, and poor people of color above all, are disproportionately the recipients of entitlements from the government. This is manifest in prison workers’ ideas that inmates are always trying to get something for free: health care, cigarettes, food, etc., and that their families are moving into Elmira’s public housing and getting welfare. Fraser and Gordon trace the historical trajectory of notions of dependency in relationships of subordination, which legitimized inequalities of enslaved people and women’s subordination to men by characterizing their “dependence” as a character flaw. A sign of personal weakness, the supposed dependency (ultimately embodied in the fictive omnipresence of Black mothers on welfare) was juxtaposed with white working men’s “independence” through access to waged labor (Fraser and Gordon 1991). In the postindustrial landscape, I argue that incarcerated men and women and their families have been semantically included in what Fraser and Gordon call the expanding “moral/psychological register” of the

racialized notion of welfare dependency when “all dependency is suspect and independence is enjoined upon everyone” (1991: 324). Within this historical framework, many workers see their own dependency on the state (as their employer) as a problematic and to some extent an entitlement of their citizenship and their work.

When I began this project eight years ago, I often heard prisons guards, and anti-prison activists trying to understand the class politics between guards and incarcerated people, describe how prison guards were angry that prisoners could get college degrees and yet COs could not afford to send their own kids to college. While this narrative is clearly an indication that Correction Officers share many common struggles of working-class life with inmates, there is another strain in this narrative: correctional officers believe that inmates are getting something for free. I heard that same refrain during my fieldwork in 2007, despite the fact that all college programs funded by the Department of Correctional Services were dismantled in 1997.

However, a new imagined entitlement is emerging to replace the old. A few Correctional Officers talked about the high number of inmates taking psychotropic medications as both an example of state waste and a shameful example of coddling prisoners.<sup>29</sup> In the words of one CO, “I’d love to have in my pocket what I see the state spending on mental hygiene and medication. Oh, I’d be living large. I’d be doing better than the governor.” Another CO contrasted the inmates’ access to health care, which by the accounts of prisoners’ advocates is quite dismal, to the rights of more deserving citizens in the city: “I look at these people in Elmira, they don’t have health insurance. They’re not gonna get this stuff done [medical procedures]...But you go

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<sup>29</sup> There is no public data to contrast the use of prescription medications and/or drugs and alcohol among Corrections Officers, but abuse of alcohol and drugs is, as I have discussed, always noted as a problem for Corrections Officers.

into the state system, you're gonna get it done." My point here is not to say that the rate of use of psychotropic medications is not either unproblematic and unconnected to the inhumane operation of the prison, but rather, to show how, in a country where health care is not a right but a luxury for poor and working-class people, health care sits on the giant fissures of race, class, poverty and the role of the state in American life. These workers, who have health insurance through their jobs undoubtedly, have friends, family, or neighbors who have no health insurance or limited access to health care. However, like welfare, many working-class people cannot or do not see prison as an experience of dispossession, but rather, that prisoners, or African Americans more generally, are "getting something for free."

Correction Officers sometimes expressed an understanding or identification with the larger social problems faced by the incarcerated men that they guarded. Phillip shared:

*You know, and you kind of feel bad for them, growing up down there in the city. Or I guess any of the cities now, Albany, Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo...you get the bad sections. But I guess all it takes is somebody gettin' out of there for somebody to say, well if they can do it, then anybody can do it. You chose not to. You chose this. You chose this path in your life. You could have buckled down and studied. Done the right thing. Colin Powell. He came from the South Bronx, didn't he?"*

I interjected, "But, certainly a lot of them had a lot harder time than I did."

He said emphatically, "Oh yeah, but you're not gonna get any sympathy from prison guards."

"Why not?," I asked.

Phillip answered crisply: “Because that would probably humanize the inmates. It would make you seem weaker.” In his understanding, a distancing of oneself from the inmate is a necessary part of the job to maintain of tough or “macho” sense of one’s self and one’s relation to the men they are there to guard.

There were other inklings that despite the need to maintain a social distance from inmates to sustain the role of jailer, COs and other staff questioned the architecture of the prison’s inequalities. One CO described the war on drugs as a “joke” and the men incarcerated for those crimes as unlucky. (It is family lore that my mother’s father, while not remembered for a racial progressivism, thought many of the people in the jail were not there out of a proper carriage of justice, but because they had been at the wrong place at the wrong time.) It remains a question what strains of this process of differentiation are inherent to the prison and what strains are reflective of national patterns of race, class, and masculinity.

Not surprisingly, there were tensions between prison workers and their bosses at DOCS. Union campaigns past and present paint prison bureaucrats’ as wasteful, top-heavy and incompetent. In interviews, prison workers described being denied disability claims by the state compensation board from on-the-job injuries, unforgiving supervisors, and navigating unhealthy or hazardous working conditions. Some men retired early from injuries incurred during clashes with inmates, or more mundanely, walking concrete floors for thirty years and developing bad feet. A recent union campaign by NYSCOPBA showed a full parking lot at the Albany headquarters of DOCS when the state was forcing closures of prisons and layoffs.<sup>30</sup> Phillip

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.nyscopba.org/files/legis/building2parkinglot.pdf> Accessed 5/30/11 “Parking Lot Challenge 2010”

explained that some guards would do whatever they could to “screw the state.” He described an experience working overtime by doing transportation of inmates to funerals or death bed visits in New York City. The inmates would be transferred to Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Westchester County, and guards would have the evening to themselves in the city. Phillip described he and his fellow workers being excited to be at the hotel bar by 6:00, still being paid and thus “screwing the state” in this situation.

For the NYDOCS bureaucracy, the prison is a balance of managing complaints and needs of inmates and workers, capricious societal ideas about the purpose of incarceration, and fiscal missives from the organs of state governance. In this fragile mix, inmates’ needs are most often placed at odds with those of the guards. Given this delicate triangulation of needs between inmates, guards, and bosses, it is important to consider the ways in which the docility of the workers is just as necessary as the docility of the inmates to “successfully” run a prison.

### **Prison work as a site of racial formation**

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that prisons are a force in the making and remaking of inequalities in the U.S. How do racializations function within the institutional roles of guard and inmate in the prison regime? When I encountered the racialized descriptions of Black and Latino prisoners by white Correction Officers, I questioned: how do these stereotypes of people of color coincide with or diverge from “everyday” racisms that circulate across New York State? To that end, I look at the prison, and more specifically the set of relationships that exist within prison work, as a site of racial formation. I posit that the prison, and for the purposes of this

chapter, prison work, is a key point of contact where an image and experience of whiteness and Blackness are created and recreated: the dialectics of race and racism at work.

A number of white guards and their families described the Elmira Correctional Facility as a place where COs “learned” about African Americans. This “racial encounter”—the moments when whiteness is created and recreated—was often a simple description of fact for the workers. But it must be examined as a larger question about how New York State’s prisons, in largely white rural areas, function as a part of the racial geography of New York State. Growing up in Elmira, I often heard people talk about prison work as something that can “turn” a person more racist. Heightened racisms were often attributed to “learned” ideas in the prison and the lack of exposure to African American life outside of the jail. The first memory that Jon Rivera, a long time Afro-Latino housing activist from Spanish Harlem in New York City shared about his incarceration at Elmira in the 1960s was meeting a particularly racist officer who claimed he had never seen an African American man before. He described in detail how a guard turned the fire hose on him in his cell as punishment for having brought some bread back from the cafeteria back to his cell. For him, his experience of the city of Elmira is molded by these encounters with brutality and inhumanity of the guards during his incarceration. Beverly, a young white woman I spoke with in Elmira, described a friend’s family, including three uncles who are teachers and guards at the prison, rejecting the friend’s recent marriage to an African American man. Beverly attributed the family’s discrimination to their work in the prison. She said, “You would think that they would be understanding as to the fact that it's color, it's not – but it was a big deal for her family because the only Black men that they knew, Black people they knew were Black men or women in prison. And so, their only perception of what it meant to be Black was that you had the same issues, I guess you could say, as a prisoner or an inmate.” Here, Beverly describes the

prison as a racial encounter, as the place where her friends' family learns negative stereotypes about Black people that influence their view of a proper marriage partner.

Correction Officer Michael Morgan stated quite clearly that his experiences as a Correction Officer heightened his racialization of prisoners and of people more generally:

*When I went to Watkins Glen School District, there was a class of about 600 people. Out of that 800 people, there were like eight or nine Black people. I was never exposed to Black people. When I walked into a mess hall at Elmira Correctional Facility and there were four or five hundred Black people all yelling and screaming and eating lunch, it was an intimidating factor. Until you got used to it and knew how to handle it. I don't really view myself as a ra...I don't walk down the road and see a Black man there and have the urge to shoot him, okay? I don't. That has never been part of my...okay. But you are predisposed to thinking, are they good or are they bad?*

Considering that the population of New York State's prisons is roughly fifty to sixty percent African American, it is remarkable that Morgan remembers the mess hall as an African American place and indicative of his racialized perception of African American inmates as more threatening.

Unlike other Correction Officers I spoke with, who I often assumed were shielding me from the grittiest and most violent (and perhaps illegal) aspects of their jobs, much in the same way as they described keeping details of work from their wives, Morgan was eager to tell me about his experiences physically controlling inmates. Also unlike my other informants, who were more likely to use coded language to describe a man as a "large...African American" to characterize a situation as more dangerous, Morgan described to me a time when he physically assaulted a man in the Special Housing Unit in an overtly racist way: "I am not politically correct. A true Rastafarian is a Jamaican nigger...[H]e got pulled out the shower room by his

dreadlocks and got drug all the way down the gallery in front of his friends.” Dreadlocks, a historical symbol of power and identification with anticolonialism and Black Power, here are both dominated and feminized by Morgan. He continued, “Okay, this type of person is nasty. They have codes they live by: the gold is the wealth the green is the land, the red is the blood--yours if you are a white man or a law enforcement official.” This drastic distortion of this man’s culture and history, ascribed to a racial group and marked with moral inferiority through a white nationalist lens, provided the foundation for this guard’s treatment of a prisoner.

Moreover, distancing himself from “this type of person” through an extreme racialization allows him to complete the job assigned to him by the boss—to clean up the unit (see also Marquart 1986). By his own account, Michael had a reputation in the jail for his severity with inmates. (In fact, he told me excitedly he could speak openly about his history because he was no longer a guard and the statute of limitations for convicting him for these assaults was up.) When a unit at Southport Correctional Facility was experiencing so many “shit downs” that guards were wearing raincoats when walking along the unit, a sergeant assigned Michael to the unit to clean up the unit and take control.<sup>31</sup> His boss, knowing his predilection for violence against inmates, used Michael in order to achieve a desired submission from the inmates in a classic example of being a “dog on a chain” for the state. There are certainly checks on this kind of behavior, but guards who assault prisoners, or who are encouraged to assault prisoners by their bosses, certainly know how to hide their actions (see also Conover 2002).

It is difficult to ascertain whether or not Michael is an outlier amongst guards. Some research suggests that the use of violence against inmates is actually a *de riguer* aspect of the

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<sup>31</sup> A shit down is when a prisoner throws his or her own feces at a guard.

job— a way of creating the brotherhood that is the basis for the day to day functioning of the prison (Marquart 1986). Most criminological research posits that there is a continuum of CO behavior (labeled the “Correctional Officer Control Ideology” by Gordon 2006) that varies by race, gender, and context. More than any of my other CO informants Morgan described a need for confrontation with inmates, and not coincidentally, a family history of Ku Klux Klan leadership (but, according to Michael, not personal involvement). Nonetheless, I surmise that Michael was more brutal than other guards, more eager to dominate other men, and more ideologically committed to white supremacy. The question remains: how are men like Michael tolerated, encouraged, or deemed useful by the state?

Racial encounters vary in prisons across New York State, built around the racial geography of the state. In contrast to the very few guards of color at Elmira and Southport, roughly fifty percent of the COs at Sing Sing Correction Facility in downstate are African American (Conover 2002). According to workers, the process of moving to work at a jail closer to home, a “hometown jail” where, in the words of one CO, the prison is “run by people from Elmira,” has serious implications for the way the prison works. The phenomenon of a “hometown jail” often surfaced in discussions of workers’ experiences as junior guards at prisons in other parts of the state. While Elmira (and to a lesser degree Southport) was talked about as a hometown jail, a jail where they don’t “take a lot of bologna” and fellow security workers can be relied upon to have one’s back, a few Correction Officers I spoke with didn’t trust men from other areas of the state:

*Downstate was different than up here. Up here everybody in Elmira, 99.9 percent you can trust ‘em. They didn’t run from a fight. If you were in a bad situation they were there with you. They didn’t run. When I was at Greenhaven, the rule was that the guys coming in, you trusted the guys from Elmira, you trusted the guys from Clinton, Dannemora up*

*north—you trusted the guys from Attica. Those three prisons. If you were upstate and when you ask someone where they were from, and they said Elmira, they'd back you up.”*

Considering that fifty percent of the COs at Sing Sing Correction Facility in downstate are African American, this notion of trust, or even brotherhood, based on how a Correction Officer does his job is informed by the racial geography of prison siting and the workers' racialized notions of criminality. This fact is captured in the notion of a “brotherhood” as described by my informants. I assert that this bond of brotherhood is built within racialized notions of masculinity, its lineage in the ideologies of dependency outlined previously in the chapter. Thus, the brotherhood is based on trust of other men who are more “like” them.

The few Black and Latino workers at Elmira's prisons describe tense relationships with white co-workers. William Jennings, who was one of the first African American guards at Elmira in the 1960s, said that when he began the job at Auburn prison his fellow correction officers refused to explain to him how to do the job and he was forced to rely on the inmates to explain the jail protocols to him, for example, explaining the facility's process for moving inmates to mess hall. “Let me tell you what they did to me at Auburn. At Auburn it was a family affair, with their brothers and cousins, and what had happened to me...I had to ask the inmates. Because your coworkers won't tell you? Nothin'. Nothin'.” William assumed that conditions would improve when he gained enough seniority to return to Elmira, where he was born and raised, but found that he was not included in the brotherhood of white prison guards at Elmira. “When I went back to Elmira, I thought, ‘This was really a redneck’...it means that I should be back at Auburn, it ain't no different. I ain't talkin' about no strangers, I went to school with these guys.” William describes the point when he was able to make friends among the guards, many of them

men that he had gone to school with his whole life. First, he challenged the chief purveyor of his harassment to a fist fight and fared well. Then he made it clear to his fellow guards that he wasn't interested in "marrying their daughters or playing golf with them," and the tensions eased.

A retired counselor with a quiet, strong voice, Carmen Velasquez stated pointedly about her work at the Elmira Correctional Facility: "They didn't want a Hispanic woman there." After applying for the job and seeing it advertised in the paper for years, Carmen was eventually hired four years later as a counselor after years of fighting discrimination in the hiring process. She worked for fifteen years making referrals to programs, dealing with requests to transfer to a different prison, and, in lighter moments, teaching inmates to crochet. According to Carmen, the inmates liked her because, in her words, "She cares. She does the program. She does her job. She talked to my mother [for me]." But, she recounts being "hated" by the guards for not going along with their ruses against inmates, such as refusing to write up an inmate for no reason as retaliation. She said speaking Spanish to inmates and treating them with respect earned their respect in return, but earned her distrust from prison guards. Carmen says the guards assumed, "Well, nothing happens to her, she must be having sex with them or bringing them drugs or weapons." Carmen was clear that her mistreatment and outsider status was both because she was a woman and because she was Latina and spoke the same Nuyorican Spanish (as opposed to the white Spanish-speaking workers who learned a more academic Castillian Spanish) as many of the inmates.

This reinforcement of racial hierarchies within prison staff was at times strengthened and encouraged by union officials. Historian Rebecca Hill documents recent historical discrimination by white union officials against African American COs attempting to grieve their unfair

treatment by the guards' union (2011). Hill writes that during a 1979 union meeting discussing a request by a group of African American officers, the union officials expressed their clear animosity towards the cause of these workers. The response of Council President Burke, which Hill notes, "someone took care to record in the meeting minutes, was 'take a suck of this.'" (Hill 2011: 92). In further evidence that racism was one of the hallmarks of the corrections "brotherhood," Hill highlights one of the union's grassroots campaigns on behalf of a member's involvement in the KKK. After one CO, Joe Curle, was dismissed for his work as a Grand Dragon in the Ku Klux Klan, the union took up Curle's defense on the basis of the "constitutional rights" of Correction Officers. Union leaders argued against the Department of Correctional Services that membership in the KKK doesn't interfere with the job and were ultimately successful (Hill 2011: 89). Taken together, these accounts suggest that workers of color interfere with a "neat" racialization -- white male guards and Black and Latino inmates -- which is a part of what structures the upstate prison experience.

### **Guarding the home**

The Commissioner of the New York State DOCS offered some words of advice to the January 2009 graduating class of Correction Officers Training Academy: "Treat everyone as you would want him or her to treat you, including the inmates... Listen before you act or react... Make sure you laugh at least once a day at all of the crazy and silly situations you will find yourselves in... Do not take home your personal prison problems, and do not bring to work your personal home problems."

Despite the commissioner's exhortation that prison workers take care not to bring home the work of the prison, prison workers' "bring home" the securitized, racialized masculinity of the all-male environment of the prison. For Correction Officers, whose job is to control men incarcerated by the state of New York, the "skills" of prison work come into conflict with other realms of their lives— as fathers, husbands, friends, and coaches. For example, the use of force necessary to escort an incarcerated man in shackles to his mother's funeral in another part of the state, does not translate well in another context-- for example, managing car rides with their own children. As the commissioner's statement demonstrates, a deep separation is required by Correction Officers between their workplace and their home lives to maintain the efficient operation of New York State's prisons. The high rates of domestic violence and substance abuse among Correction Officers indicate that this separation is difficult to maintain in a historical pattern similar to the institutional legacies of policing and the military (Lutz 2001).<sup>32</sup> My data shows how relationships between men and women were altered by the "skills" and hierarchies gleaned from prison work.

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<sup>32</sup> What I learned from my informants, and from the discourse in Elmira related to the stress of work of Corrections, suggests a correlation made between police work and increased rates of domestic violence in recent research by social scientists. In 1991, testimony was given to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families in which it describes that police families have double the rate of family violence as the general population and a stronger incidence of depression, suicide, and marital problems (Johnson 1991). In general, the heightened marital stress and resultant violence is taken as a given in studies of stress amongst police and Correction Officers (see Philliber 1987; Lambert, Hogan and Tucker 2009). This is not to suggest that intimate violence is not a widespread and underreported problem (see D. Davis 2006), but rather to show how the work of physically controlling other humans may mold COs' behavior in their civilian lives.

Like many of my informants, Michael Morgan did his best to shield his family from stories about his work in the prison, which were viewed as too violent or too sordid for women and children, and misunderstood by civilians. Despite his best efforts to compartmentalize the job, Michael's sons were hearing stories at the local bars even fifteen years after he retired.

*The worse thing my wife knew one time was that one time I was involved in a riot and I was bloody after I was done. Not from me. But my shirt was covered in blood... Well I go home that night and my shirt was a bloody mess. I walk in the house, my wife happened to be up. She says, what's goin' on? I says, I'm fine. Nothing major. And I burned my shirt. And I threw off my shirt and threw it in the garbage. The wood stove actually. My wife and my family never knew some of the altercations I was in, nothing. 'Til now. I always felt that I was able to keep that life where it belonged. And my life out here where it belonged."*

While some of his motivation for burning his bloodiest shirt may have come from a desire to destroy the evidence of a crime against an inmate, destroying the shirt before entering the house provides a measure of distance between the repressive realm of the prison and his life with his family.

Conover writes about putting on his gear: "baton, latex glove holder, key clips"—elements of the uniform—as a part of packaging up the emotions of his home life and preparing himself to enter the prison (Conover 2002: 245). Jackie Zuretsky was married to a Correction Officer for eight years; she recounted to me how her husband used his "job skills" on her at home. She said: "He knew how to beat me without leaving marks because they learn how to beat the inmates without leaving marks." His efforts to control her mimic his work in the prison in eerie ways, including locking her out of the house and hiding her money, both mechanisms of control used by guards against inmates. In her experience, Correction Officers treated their wives like they treated the inmates; he would often beat her while still wearing his uniform. A local

domestic violence counselor was hesitant to say that Correction Officers in particular were overrepresented among her clients in a batterer's support group. Rather, she noted that law enforcement officers more generally have "issues" with power and control. Carmen Vasquez, the retired counselor whose words were described above, related the experience of prison work to a battle: "It's just like sending them to a war because you have to be on guard all the time." The enemy, however real or imagined, is within striking distance.

While these quotidian actualizations of domination permeate the jail, here I focus on how these relationships influence workers' lives outside of the jail, particularly in their familial relationships. Recounting an interaction with his son, Michael explained to me how it was difficult for him to step away from physically dominating his son during an argument:

*"My one boy pushed my buttons once really hard after I was outta being a guard. And I snapped for just a second. And he was on a motorcycle, and he was off the motorcycle and he was on the ground and I was on top of him and I was gonna smack him. My wife went spaz. And I snapped to real quick and I felt really bad. I did, you feel real bad. He had it comin' though. He did have it comin'."*

Here, his use of the word "snapped" indicates that he crossed the border in and out of the more violent world of the prison.

Michael's narrative of his encounter with his son reveals another theme in the gendered world created when Correction Officers come home: it is often the women that are most conscious of how the prison affects the men in their lives. A few retirees noted that their wives or daughters were eager for their retirement and said that the retired men had changed and become more relaxed since their retirement. In a conversation with one mother, whose son had recently taken the test for prison guard, she told me that a prison guard had to have a wife to help calm

him down after work. She mimed looking over her shoulder as she said it, imitating an often heard remark that Correction Officers have a difficult time not being “on guard” even when they are in their own homes.

Like many law enforcement agents, COs described a difficulty letting go of their skills in social spaces outside of the prison (Philliber 1987). Roy remembered, “You get a crowd of people... you know how many years—actual years— I spent in mess halls? And hundreds of inmates that were thinking of fighting? You do it. It’s all second nature.” One’s role, one’s work as a jailer is seen as a set of learned skills that are difficult to limit outside of the jail. The most common examples COs gave of this consequence was refusing to sit with their backs to the door in a public space or sensing when tense situations in crowds might become a fight.

Often, the imbalances of power and control between men and women are more subtly economic. In the history of Fordism’s family wage, men have been assumed to be the breadwinner and bear the brunt of the responsibility to earn wages. This “tradition” has become a part of the lived realities of many working-class people and a social barometer of middle class lifestyle expectations. As Lutz writes in her study of a military city, *Homefront*, the materialities of gender inequality, men earning wages and women providing unpaid domestic labor, are strengthened by “solidification of the ideological association of full citizenship with being male, white, and putatively economically independent (Lutz 2001: 176). Because the high paying jobs in the prison in Elmira and many places in the country are “male jobs,” women are categorically more reliant on men to earn a living wage. This becomes a double-edged sword of male/female relations: many of the Correction Officers I spoke with were proud to support their families with relatively higher wages. At the same time, in the succinct words of one civil rights worker, "The

women want the men to have these jobs for the wages, but they don't think about what they're doing."

As I have demonstrated, prison work is heralded as a jobs program but lamented as a career. The everyday details of work as a Correction Officer are often buried in the machinations of profiteering and the crime talk of local politics. By looking at the work of Correction Officers, I examined the class content of their lives and their work in order to illuminate how race, class, and gender ravel and unravel in this context. Through an analysis of Correction Officers' work and the consequences of this work, I have shown how racial projects work through the hierarchies of guard and inmate, state worker and incarcerated men in the prison. These stratifications of race and class created and recreated in the prison are not confined to the prison walls. The architecture of value permeates guards' relationships with women in their domestic lives, in interracial and intra-racial relations on the job, and relations with others in and out of the brotherhood. Indeed, a guards' work gives him or her a racialized script that is difficult to shake loose outside of the prison. Given the shame workers described about the career that they chose but did not seek, and the numbness with which they often carry out their jobs, the motives for expanding prisons as a jobs program are dubious.

## Chapter 5: Policing the Prison Town

*“In Elmira, the situation is so terrifying that some residents have likened it to a ‘civil war’ and suggested that ‘martial law’ be declared.”*

-- Weeden Whetmore, Candidates’ statements, Chemung County District Attorney Race, 2007

*‘Elmira is a nice place to live, with the trees. A nice place to raise a family.’*

Dawn Stevens, Jamaica, Queens, New York City native, Elmira resident

In 2004, Chemung County Executive Tom Santulli, presiding over an increasingly cash-strapped county, began voicing his concerns in public meetings about the growing Medicaid budget. He was convinced that the area had become a magnet for prison families—interlopers from other parts of the state in search of good social services. Cheryl Walker, a career social worker, grew tired of hearing rumors that the families of inmates at Elmira’s two prisons were moving to Elmira in order to commit crimes and collect undeserved welfare benefits. She embarked on what she called an informal research project to determine how many people were moving to Elmira from New York City, Rochester, and Buffalo— places where large numbers of prisoners come from and cities with the state’s largest African American populations. Walker said that that Santulli’s presumptions were common in Elmira: “I hear from time to time in my travels around the community, ‘Oh, those people moved in from New York City, Rochester, and Buffalo.’ And I have, with some frequency, heard people try to connect the dots between people coming out of the city because their loved one, significant other, whatever, happens to be residing in one of our prisons.”

Cheryl thought that if there were large numbers of people moving to Elmira from New York City, then perhaps the rumors were true. She asked fellow case workers to look at all of the new applications coming in to the department, and ask people where they were moving from if there was not a previous address listed on the application. But she found no dominant pattern of migration. “There was no pattern. We had people from all different states. If you looked at states, maybe more from Pennsylvania than other states.<sup>33</sup> But I mean, the number was so small that it was just, you know, not significant.” Despite this lack of a larger pattern of migration, the fact that *anyone* had moved to the Chemung County to be near a loved one in prison was an anecdote with powerful ramifications, according to Cheryl.

In this chapter, I explore the recurrent discourse stating the idea that families of prisoners and former prisoners are moving to the area causing a rise in crime and swelling welfare rolls. I describe how this discourse is shaped by, and shapes, racializations, upstate/downstate divides and the dynamics of the political economy in Elmira. Considering my data and analysis regarding the nature of prison work and the way social ideas about incarcerated people leak into the public life of Correction Officers on the outside, I analyze discourse about prisoners’ families within a dialectic between social ideas about crime and urban landscapes (see Hall et al 1978; Muhammad 2010). Thus, I show how the prison emerges as a site of racialization in a prison town through the practice of policing and the provision of social services. This chapter sits at a

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<sup>33</sup> Chemung County sits along the northern border of Pennsylvania. Many residents of the counties of northern Pennsylvania come to Elmira for services, entertainment, and work. This may be an indication that there is some level of urbanization occurring on a small scale: poor residents are moving to Elmira to be closer to these services. See also Greg Donaldson’s *Zebratown* (2010).

crossroads of two bodies of anthropological knowledge: first, literature that describes how legal practices contribute to the racialization of marginalized groups (Merry 1981; Mullings 2003); and second, anthropologies of the city that describe how people navigate increasingly unequal landscape of social power (Williams 1988; Maskovsky 2006; Sanjek 2000). While this discourse seemed to gain tenacity in Elmira during my fieldwork (following a few crimes apparently related to the drug trade), this correlation between the prison and local sentiments about crime and welfare, what Cheryl called trying to “connect the dots” between the prison, crime, and welfare, was not new to twenty-first century Elmira. Jason Hinnard, a veteran counselor at the Elmira Correctional Facility, described deciding to buy his first home in Addison, a rural village thirty miles west of Elmira, shortly after starting his job on “The Hill” in the early 1970s. He recalled that this decision was based on two fears: fear of living on a flood plain (after experiencing the devastating floods of the Chemung River following Hurricane Agnes in 1972) and fear of crime from prisoners and their families. Moreover, a brief glance at historical newspapers from Elmira with long discussions of a “murderer” who returned to the area to assault a young woman dating from the 1890s demonstrates that this tension is a deeply ingrained part of being a prison town; it is a consequence of the necessarily incomplete project of containment in incarceration. In the current context of Elmira, against a backdrop of twin processes of the massive expansion of New York State’s prison system and the decline of the area’s manufacturing industries, I ask: What are the ideas about crime and criminality that are in circulation? From where does this set of ideas—these anecdotes—emanate and what does it have the potential to mask? I highlight this discourse in order to understand the complex ways that race and class anxieties manifest in a prison town.

As Schneider and Schneider have pointed out, “crime” itself is a category that requires interrogation, as poor and marginalized groups are deemed in need of control by ruling groups and thus subject to a process of criminalization, often through “crime talk,” or heightened discourse of danger that creates an atmosphere of fear (2007: 357). This perspective allows me to illustrate how this discourse creates and recreates a trope of racial order in local politics and police actions that stigmatizes Blackness and rewards whites for their participation in the project. For example, many Elmirans, including guards, described to me how guards are known to be involved in domestic violence, assaults, and drunk driving incidents. These crimes are seldom discussed in Elmira as “crime” but rather as a “problem.” While some of these crimes are prosecuted (a few correction officers thought perhaps their own crimes were more of a media sensation than those of their civilian neighbors), they are not regarded as the source of the area’s “problem.”<sup>34</sup> The powerful “anecdotes” about the families of incarcerated people moving to Elmira obtain their power from the history of racial segregation and oppression in the United States and create and recreate incarceration as a “necessity” in the future to maintain a peaceful life through the maintenance of that segregation.

Clearly, fear of crime is not a social phenomenon that is geographically or socially specific to prison towns. The growth of gated communities, the increasingly militant vigilantism on the

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<sup>34</sup> While it lies beyond the scope of my dissertation to fortify this specific claim, it was insinuated many times that Corrections Officers are complicit in the illegal trafficking of contraband drugs, money, and cell phones into the prison. This is another way that crimes by white working class Elmirans (and to a lesser extent, poor whites) are diminished in crime talk. See also, Wheaton, Sarah, ‘Inmates in Georgia Use Contraband Cellphones to Coordinate Protest,’ NYT, December 13, 2010, A13. This article describes how most of the cellphones used during a 2010 protest in Georgia prisons were purchased from guards who smuggled them in. This seems to be a national phenomenon. See also An Omar Broadway Film, 2008, dir. O. Broadway and D. Tirola, which shows the same from the prisoners’ perspective.

U.S. borderlands, heightened movements of citizen militias and relaxed gun laws indicate that these racial anxieties and the need to police them are deeply ingrained in American life.<sup>35</sup> In her ethnography of gated communities in Long Island, New York, and San Antonio, Texas, where guards secured the entry to private neighborhoods and private parks surrounded by security walls, Setha Low describes a parallel process (2003). She found that the gated communities, which were spaces sought out for the purposes of safety, did not accomplish their objective. Rather than alleviating fear, they created more fear among inhabitants. In Elmira, this policing of the prison amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy: these very American racial anxieties became projected onto a captive population which needed to be policed on the outside of the prison as well.

Teresa Caldeira has described the proliferation of luxury housing developments in Sao Paulo, Brazil, as “fortified enclaves” for middle income residents specifically designed to minimize contact with poor and working-class people (2001). For residents of the enclaves, this segregation from poor and working classes is a marker of elevated status, while at the same time, there is a striking dependence on these populations as domestic workers and security guards in the fortified enclaves. The tension of containing and separating from poorer people who enter this segregated space as workers while depending on them for their livelihood and the maintenance of the enclave is a central theme in Caldeira’s work. Turned on its head, I find this analysis useful to understand a fundamental tension in Elmira; that is, despite the fact that there are 2500 prisoners who live in Elmira’s prisons, these men are rarely discussed in public life in Elmira other than as apparitions who commit crimes. While the separation from the community is clearly a highly securitized containment, there still exists anxiety that the prison walls are not

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<sup>35</sup> For more on the growth of gated communities, see (Low 2003; Caldeira 2001).

containing the prisoners. The segregation from the inmates *within* the city of Elmira is seen as insufficient and incomplete. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, this anxiety rarely emerges as fear of prisoners *escaping* from the prison. Rather, in the discourse in Elmira, prisoners, more specifically, recently released prisoners and/or the families of prisoners, emerge as the “problem”—presumably dealing drugs, consorting with local women, and not working.

### **“Our Slowly Dying City”**

Jim Pfeiffer, a local journalist with a weekly, often humorous column in the *Elmira Star-Gazette*, published a front page article entitled, “Blame it on the prisons?” a month before I began my field research (Pfeiffer 2007). Pfeiffer interviewed a former chaplain at the Elmira Correctional Facility, a social service worker, a former inmate at the Elmira Correctional Facility who lives in Elmira, the chief of police and a criminal court judge in order to get at the heart of the question that is on the minds of many Elmirans: *is it true that the prisons are responsible for the crimes?* In Pfeiffer’s article, only the chief of police and a criminal court judge considered former inmates settling in Elmira to be a problem that warranted inquiry and suspicion. On the contrary, the Department of Correctional Services media relations person cited the fact that inmates are transferred quite often as a reason that, logically, families of inmates would not settle in Elmira. (Of course, it is in the interest of the Department of Correctional Services, for the purposes of future prison citing and general maintenance, to convey the message to prison towns that prisons are well contained and policed to the extent that they are spaces separate from the city or town where they are located.) The article is sandwiched in between articles on recent crimes and the police response to the sale and distribution of crack cocaine in the area that are

written from the perspective of the police. In the end, Pfeiffer came to the conclusion that “it probably happens, but not as often as most people believe.” This is the same general conclusion I came to after my fieldwork, but the question remains: why is this “anecdote” as so many of my interlocutors called it, so powerful?

As I have described throughout this dissertation, the reduction and geographic reorganization of manufacturing work changed Elmira as a place. Most importantly, this pattern of economic restructuring and resulting impoverishment is not specific to Elmira but, rather, reflective of national shifts in the political economy of cities. Cities close to Elmira, like Binghamton, New York, Rochester, New York, and Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, Pennsylvania, in addition to bigger cities like Detroit and Philadelphia, mirror this pattern of economic restructuring and shifting racial geographies. As high-paying manufacturing jobs left, the value of housing on the Southside and the city center of Elmira decreased creating new housing opportunities for poor Blacks and poor whites. More affluent middle income residents are leaving Elmira city for more “suburban” towns and villages surrounding Elmira City, such as West Elmira or Horseheads. Moreover, as I detail in the introduction, small cities experience patterns of economic restructuring in both more acute and more limited ways. Small cities have been more likely to survive periods of economic restructuring by managing to secure and/or fulfill a “niche market”— such as a vacation destination and “arts center” in Northampton, Massachusetts or a university town like Ames, Iowa. As was the case in many other small cities in the rust belt, there were very few economic development choices in Elmira.

Social scientists have described how the process of deindustrialization created a profound feeling of loss for working-class people who experienced a dispossession of previously won gains. Gains previously made by some working-class, mostly white, men--what Pappas called a "fragile affluence"--have been seriously eroded (1989: 13). For some Elmirans, this loss of stable, relatively well-paid work and the access it provided to homeownership and status has translated into a larger feeling of loss; poor and/or racial minorities were scapegoats for this feeling of loss. Berlet and Lyons describe how right wing populisms, "baked into the American apple pie," can offer explanatory frameworks for understanding social inequalities (2000: 11). Elmira, even without the racialized shadow of two prisons, was ripe for the growth of these movements. The most pertinent aspect of Berlet and Lyons' work for understanding the growth of right wing populist ideas is the idea that a "middle group"--in this case, white working-class and middle income people--feels squeezed between the owning class and poor people and heightens feelings of loss. The particular discourse that I focus on in this chapter, at its most virulent, 'let's tear down the prisons so that the welfare families go somewhere else,' couples the fear of crime with animosity for the poor—a touchstone of American right wing populism. The authors write that a common producerism, "posits a noble hardworking middle group constantly in conflict with lazy, malevolent, or sinful parasites at the top and the bottom of the social order" (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 2). In the presence of the prison as an employer and the absence of left wing social movements, many Elmirans, and indeed, many white working-class people, rely on the explanatory framework of criminality and moral inferiority to make sense of everyday life in a prison town and in a prison. Many prison workers feel they are at the mercy of both the prisoners, whom they see as having an expanded repertoire of rights, and the bosses at DOCS who control the conditions of their working lives. Following this distorted logic, there is no

location for them other than between these two groups. Indeed, prison work provides the architecture of such a world view—it makes visible and “true” the hierarchies of race and class as the “anecdotes” tell them.

### **“Small town America”**

Unlike the fictive image of an all-white “small town America” that circulates in the United States, Elmira has been home to a sizeable African American population, between two and ten percent of the total population of the city since 1850. Dozens of Black men and women were recorded as being held as slaves in the 1820s and the city was home to an African Methodist Episcopal Church that opened its doors in 1841 (Chemung County Historical Society 2001: 5133). Since the 1860s, a Black enclave in Elmira’s East Side, at that time called “Slabtown,” has been home to many Black-owned businesses and churches. Some residents were formerly enslaved men and women who settled in the neighborhood after reaching Elmira via the Underground Railroad (Byrne 1968). As I describe in chapter two, African American Union army soldiers were used as guards of Confederate soldiers to aggravate the racial anxieties of the Confederate soldiers in the Civil War prison camp located in Elmira. The east side of Elmira underwent profound changes during urban renewal in the 1970s when many parts of the neighborhood were bulldozed for the purpose of building a “parkway” through the center of town -- a boulevard commonly known as the “road to nowhere.” Since the 1970s, perhaps because of dislocations from urban renewal and/or due to somewhat of a relaxing of historical spatial segregation (different Elmirans suggested both) there has been some movement of Elmira’s African American population out of the east side and into downtown Elmira and the

Southside of Elmira. This process somewhat shifted the racial geography, but not the racial makeup, of the city of Elmira. These shifts in the spatial segregation the city, and moreover, of New York State as a region, may have reinforced a feeling of loss and change.

There is some indication that African Americans are moving to Elmira for reasons unrelated to the prison. Dawn Stevens, an African American woman in her forties, moved to Elmira from Jamaica, Queens, New York City in 1999 with her husband and young son. Dawn was in search of a cheaper cost of living and an escape from the guns and drugs of her old neighborhood in New York City. Having always worked in financial services, a nearly nonexistent industry in Elmira, she said finding work was one of the most difficult aspects of her move. When we spoke at her home, a modernly decorated apartment on the Southside of Elmira, she listed the things she liked and disliked about living in Elmira:

*The cost of living is lower. When I lived in the city, the whole time I lived in the city – well, you know, you've got trains, you got buses, and you don't have to drive anywhere. I never had a car in my life. Never had to. Since I've been up here, I've had two [cars]. I like that. What I don't like is the fact that jobs are scarce. I don't like the fact that there is nothing for youth. There's nothing for the kids here, which is probably why kids get into all kinds of mischief. What else are they going to do?*

Dawn describes the challenges of urban life, big and small:

*I left the city because there was a lot of – you know, there was crime increasing and there was this and that, and I never felt afraid walking up and down the street, or coming home from a club, 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. riding the subway; I was never afraid of that type of thing. But when you get to the point where you gotta look over your shoulders to go to the store, your kids can't go outside and play, that kind of stuff, then it's time to leave because you're living in a prison. You're living in a prison. So I came up here to get away from that, so if you're reading in the newspapers about, oh, well, there's shooting over here, this one got shot, and there's big drug dealers here, I'm like, wait a minute, didn't I come up here to get away from that stuff?*

Dawn shared with some other Elmira residents some concern over the possible increased violence as a result of the prison. Despite her concern over the violence, which she also believed the media ‘went after’ in search of a good story; Dawn liked her new city and her work in social services. When I asked her if her son experienced more police scrutiny in Elmira than white teenagers, Dawn said that although she did not prescribe to a “whitey’s holding us down” attitude, she did believe that her son was more scrutinized by the police. She noted she had told him “not to do a little bit of anything” because “you’re the first person they’re going to look at if something stupid happens.”

Unlike many of my other informants who worried about the influx of prisoner’s families, Reverend Ruben Johnson and his wife, Betty Johnson, were more concerned that Black men were being racially profiled in Elmira. The Reverend Johnson, the pastor at an African American church in Elmira said that undoubtedly at “one point” there were higher numbers of young men coming out of the prison and staying in Elmira, a pattern he saw continuing today to a lesser extent. “I knew these guys personally,” he added.<sup>36</sup> Mrs. Johnson added, “well, there are people that don’t want *us* on the street. And we’re not in prison.” Echoing Sally Merry’s ethnography of a “high crime” area that suggested that African Americans are more likely to experience crimes, but more likely to understand the social conditions that undergird crime (1981), Reverend Johnson and Mrs. Johnson were not concerned that these men would bring more crime to the area. They attributed the crime to drugs and a need to find income to survive. They were,

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<sup>36</sup> Other people also suggested to me that in the 1970s there were more men moving to Elmira when they were released from the Elmira Correctional Facility. I was told that this was brought to the attention of the Department of Corrections by locals who had connections with social services. As I was told, this was “stopped” by restricting access to public housing.

however, concerned that the local police and DOCS would do “anything in their power” to keep the ex-prisoners out of Elmira.

In addition the Reverend expressed some confusion and concern that young women from his parish, located in close proximity to the prison, were visiting men at the prison as potential mates.

*[T]he girls could visit them on The Hill. I mean, there's a shortage of men, I guess, and they needed a man, and these girls that would come from this community would go up on the hill and visit these guys. And they would end up getting married...So a lot of guys in New York married some girls who lived here and they ended up, because the girls didn't have a job either, you know, Black girls didn't have any jobs, so they're on welfare. When they got out of prison, they had a built-in support with her.*

Indeed, in popular culture, and over the course of my fieldwork in Elmira, I heard many African American women referencing the idea that “all of the men were in jail.” Yvette, a young woman from Elmira who described herself as “mixed” Black and white, said people look down on her when she tells them her husband is incarcerated. People assumed she was a ‘stupid girl’ who had been swindled into marriage by a conniving prisoner. She did not go looking for a man who was in prison, she said, but her then boyfriend, who is also mixed race, was incarcerated after they met. Other friends of hers had gone to meet men in prison, but she distanced herself from them and what she considered their desperate search for a partner by noting that she had known her husband before his incarceration.

## **Finding the families**

There is little evidence that men formerly incarcerated at the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities move to Elmira in any significant numbers. Undoubtedly, there are men and women who leave state prison and come to Elmira. In fact, it is the state policy for men and women to be paroled to the county in which they are arrested; everyone sent to state prison by a Chemung County criminal court judge will be released to the city of Elmira. More succinctly, if a person's last residence was the city of Buffalo in Erie County, but they were arrested for an assault in Elmira, they would be paroled *to* the city of Elmira. Considering that it is state policy to release inmates who commit crimes in Brooklyn to Brooklyn, it reduces the likelihood that prison release is a direct conduit for the movement of families of prisoners. According to the local homeless shelter, in one month in 2007 there were three men and one woman, all of whom were originally from Elmira, who wrote requesting housing upon their release from Albion Correctional Facility, Adirondack Correctional Facility, Cayuga Correctional Facility, and Groveland Correctional Facility. The county received thirty-eight total similar referrals in 2007 (Catholic Charities of the Twin Tiers 2007). According to a local social service worker, these men were paroled to a homeless shelter directly from the prison *because* it was state policy to be released to the county where you were arrested; many of these men and women moved on from the emergency shelter. At the time of writing, the city's only shelter had been shut down and condemned. Men and women who need emergency housing are rented rooms at a small hotel on Elmira's east side called the Mark Twain Motor Inn.

Rather than envisioning the prison as a magnet for poor African Americans and Latinos—the imagined and feared "families"—we should rather understand the Elmira Correctional

Facility, and the New York prison system more generally, as contributing to the general dislocation of poor people of color throughout New York State. Due to the large numbers of people incarcerated, the prison has become part of the orbit of social life of poor Elmirans and poor New Yorkers.<sup>37</sup> An analysis of visiting patterns based on geography sheds some light on whether or not there are families of inmates living in Elmira. Based on an analysis of records kept by the visitor's center, there is on average ten visits each weekend day from local people to the Elmira Correctional Facility. To give an example, the visitor's center was open ten days in the month of March of 2007 for a total of five weekends. There were 909 people who visited 596 prisoners that month. That is an average of 140 total visits (often more person is visiting one inmate, so it counts as one visit) per weekend to a facility housing 1800 inmates, indicating that fewer than ten percent of inmates got a visit on any given weekend. (It is highly likely, too, that individual inmates are getting repeat visits in a single weekend, thus making that number even lower.) One weekend in March, there were 11 local people who visited inmates at the Elmira Correctional Facility, including 10 women and 1 man. Three weekends previous there were 29 visits to inmates at the Elmira Correctional Facility from the Elmira area, including 21 women, 2 men, and 6 children. In one month in 2005, there were 36 visits from the Jamestown area, 39 from the Utica area, 123 local visitors, and 296 from New York City. From this data, it is clear, at the very least, that there are Elmirans who have family or friends who are incarcerated at the prison. Notably, DOCS has a general pattern of moving inmates away from their families; upstate men and women are incarcerated in other parts of upstate or downstate, and men and women from New York City, who make up the overwhelming majority of the state's prison population, are generally incarcerated in prisons upstate. Incarcerated men and women and their

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<sup>37</sup> See also *Random Family*, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc (2003)

families consider the geographic distance from their families a part of their punishment. Because of this general pattern of placing prisoners far from their homes, it is possible to extrapolate that there are a few families who have moved to Elmira to be closer to a man incarcerated at the Elmira Correctional Facility. However, it is also clear that these numbers are quite low, considering that there are on average twenty visitors per weekend, including children. In a county of over 90,000 people (and this analysis counted an ever larger swath of surrounding rural areas as “local”), this is a statistically insignificant number of people.

There was some debate among my informants about whether this data was a misrepresentation of visiting patterns because the numbers only covered visits that occurred on weekends, when the visitor’s center is open. One informant said that local people tended to visit during the week after work because they wanted to beat the weekend crowds. On the weekends, because there are limited numbers of visits that can occur simultaneously, visits can be “terminated”—to use DOCS language—if there is deemed to be not enough time. In the event of a crowded visiting room, visits from local people will get “bumped” if the guards know that the visitor can easily return. Another frequent visiting informant said the opposite was true— a person might work during the week and therefore visit on the weekends, possibly visiting both days. We do not know how many visitors are coming to see kin, a lover or a friend, versus local religious people on missionary visits. (One of my informants met her currently incarcerated husband on such a religious visit). These missionary visits are a relatively common occurrence. Thirdly and finally, it is unclear whether or not the inmates receiving visits are from the Elmira area originally, as opposed to the group that populates the panicked imaginaries of some locals— “outsiders.” Perhaps most importantly, we must analyze not just the statistical insignificance of this group in relationship to the larger population of Elmira, but rather, think through what it is

imagined that this group of people do once they get here and “settle.” The data here shows that there are local people who visit their loved ones or friends at the Elmira Correctional Facility. It is quite clear, however, that families of incarcerated men and women are not moving to Elmira in any large numbers.

### **Prison worker as citizen of a prison town**

Rather than prisoners and their families, it is prison workers who serve as a more productive conduit between social life “inside” and “outside” (as they are colloquially referred to) of the prison. My fieldwork suggests that the experiences and narratives of prison workers legitimize a discourse of fear of inmates and their families and contribute to what defense lawyer Jack Johnson called a “law and order mentality,” thus deepening racializations in Elmira. Prison workers’ stories about their experiences in the prison “make real” the stereotypes of Black and brown criminality rampant in U.S. popular culture. Let me return briefly to Caldeira’s concepts presented at the beginning of the chapter. In Sao Paolo, Caldeira describes domestic workers and security guards as “leaks” in the walls designed to segregate and “protect” middle income people. As I discussed extensively in chapter four, many guards and their friends and families described prison work as warping one’s sense of their self and other people, particularly creating and instilling skewed ideas about African Americans. Prison workers’ interactions with a largely African American and Latino inmate population, then, impact the social life of a struggling, multicultural city as workers and perhaps their families act out these ideas as citizens.

Having heard stories from guards about seeing men that they had known during their incarceration at the grocery store, at the mall, and at high school basketball games, I asked prison

workers and families of inmates about encounters with one another outside the jail. I received an incredibly varied response regarding the presence of men formerly incarcerated at the Elmira Correctional Facility on the streets of the city of Elmira, a set of viewpoints that may be linked to my informants' views of incarcerated men more generally. That is to say, it seems that those prison workers who considered the inmates "low-lives" were more likely to see former inmates having a negative impact on the civic and social life of Elmira and offer more stories about negative encounters with formerly incarcerated people. While a few guards said that they had seen former inmates around the city, Gordon Gaughan, a career Correction Officer, described an encounter that he viewed as particularly distressing:

*I remember one time it was Sunday, Palm Sunday. I was going to St. Savior's Church with my wife and my two kids. And the priest was right up on the front there greeting people as they came in. As we were coming in... across the way there's a convenient store and there was two ex-convicts there. And across the street they yell to me, 'Hey you fucking pig'. Can you believe this? Palm Sunday, I'm going to church, and they yell this across the street. And I looked at my wife, and I said, who's yelling like that? And my wife she goes like that, [points], and I looked over and I recognized them right away and they're laughin'. So I went into the church, used the phone and called the police and had them charged for harassment.*

When Gordon relayed this story to me it was clear that this was not a common exchange; rather, this rare encounter was disruptive to his experience of living in Elmira. Despite "often" seeing inmates on the street, this worker was, for the most part, able to shield his family from the "grotesque" world of the prison, as most guards saw as the appropriate way to do it. I would like to highlight what lies in the background of this narrative, what might be called the day-to-day policing of the prison. When Gordon, a law enforcement officer for the state, called the local police they respected his role as a law enforcement official and arrested the young men. In another situation, it is possible that this would be considered a minor infraction, something in

which it would be unnecessary to involve the police. In this case, the hierarchical relationships formed in and by the prison between prisoner and guard, Black and white, police and policed, are then replicated on the streets of Elmira.

In an opposing narrative, Keith Rollins, a bespectacled white haired, civilian worker, a self-described “white liberal” who spoke respectfully about incarcerated men, looked surprised when I asked him if he had ever encountered someone he knew from the “inside” on the streets of Elmira. Keith said he had never seen anyone whom he knew to be incarcerated at Elmira outside the prison. After thinking for a minute, he corrected himself to say that once he had run into a former inmate on the streets of downtown Corning, New York, a town about twenty miles east of Elmira. The man was a native of the area and returned after getting out of prison. They shook hands and the man thanked him for his help while he was in prison, and they moved on. Keith had worked at the Elmira Correctional Facility for twenty-five years.

Despite describing uneventful encounters with former inmates on the streets of Elmira, Greg Shaughnessy, a man retired from thirty-four years as a Correction Officer, had some anxieties about his prison life bleeding into his home life. Early in his career, on a job doing transportation for inmates, Greg took an inmate from the Elmira Correctional Facility to a doctor’s appointment at St. Joseph’s hospital in downtown Elmira, where inmates regularly receive medical care. Greg described the man, a Native American, as a “Big Indian” and recalled thinking, “holy creep, he’s huge!” According to Greg, the man asked him during a ride in the prison van down a main thoroughfare to the hospital, “you live in this shit town? Well, you can have it.” Greg was rattled and vowed never to take an inmate on transportation again.

Greg's recounting of the incident and his decision not to do prison work that took him outside of the prison brings together interwoven issues. First, the description of the man's race and physicality—his largeness a symbol and marker of dominance within the prison and his brownness a racialized marker of “badness,” centers Greg's image of the man. The “Big Indian” is set against a backdrop of Greg's own town—a set of power-laden relationships he would rather not, and chose not to, have to deal with outside of the jail.

In a very roundabout way, Greg described how men did their jobs in different ways and that a violent temperament on the job would mean a different experience at home. He repeated to me many times that:

*[T]he job never bothered me. I never drank from it. I never took drugs from it. None of that. I never – I just never did. I left the job there and when I went home, I was home.” He described a recent experience on the streets of Elmira. In fact, my nephew was up one day and he says, ‘hey, uncle’, he says. ‘The guy’s looking at you’. I said, ‘What guy?’ ‘That guy over there.’ ‘What guy?’ This kid came up. ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ ‘Oh, yeah,’ I says, ‘I remember him.’*

Greg told me this story in a matter of fact tone.

In the midst of relaying his encounters with inmates on the streets of Elmira, he returned to the idea that the he didn't let the job bother him:

*Because if you do something that you're not too proud of, you know, then all of a sudden, well, you've gotta deal with that. And I always tried to be on the up and up. I really did. I didn't hate anybody. I didn't like some of the stuff that I was seeing and hearing, but you know, hey. Everybody gets theirs at the end. That's the bottom line. You're gonna get yours, good, bad, or indifferent, you're gonna get what you've got coming to you.*

For Greg, how one does the job, or rather, “if you let the job bother you” and, as he is

insinuating, treat inmates unfairly or with a heavy hand, it may come back to haunt you, even in your own town. How one approaches prison work, then, affects both how you live in a place. Prison workers often talked about living in more rural parts of Chemung County and outlying counties in order to avoid the problems of city life such as crime, loud neighbors, parking, and sometimes specifically to avoid confrontations with former inmates. Workers may also choose to socialize in places that are more hegemonically white, like an old Italian Elmira restaurant versus the TGIFridays by the mall which may be more mixed. Yet, it is difficult to differentiate individual choices made by Correction Officers to live in an all-white rural area or village adjacent to Elmira from the national pattern of white flight and whites choosing the privileges of segregation. Rather, the old hierarchies of race and segregation are being reinvented with the new language of criminalization, backed by the institutional power of the prison.

There seem to be a few threads of discourse in Elmira that could be traced back to prison workers. For example, in the following quote from a chat board on a website generally about cities, it is likely that the idea that prisoners are getting something for free can be traced back to the prison workers:

*Elmira has two federal maximum prisons that hold many NY City criminals. The Prisons encourage the prisoner's family members to move into Elmira and even provide temporary housing at a converted motel. The small city has big city gang and drug problems as it is a drug stop between NYC and Rochester. Want big city crime and a dead economy? Come to Elmira!”<sup>38</sup>*

Ensclosed in this narrative is the idea that the prison is somehow soft on prisoners—a

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.city-data.com/forum/new-york/77810-why-does-everyone-dislike-elmira-ny-9.html#ixzz0tUbsVPP8>

commonly held view among Correction Officers. Many guards saw that it was their job in Elmira Correctional Facility to make people uncomfortable, more so than “cushy” prisons. This idea that the families are getting something for free extends out into the city to the belief that former prisoners and their families are getting free housing. Like a game of telephone, the ideas about families that come from prison workers mix into the discourse of race and privilege and who gets what in Elmira. As I describe at length in chapter four, the idea that African Americans are dependent on the state, as opposed to whites who are independent, masks the incredible dislocation and disruption caused by the prisons in the lives of poor people, including poor whites. Certainly, Elmira is not the haven for the poor and families of incarcerated men with fruitful access to services that many people fantasize it to be.

During my fieldwork in Elmira, I met only one man who described himself as a former inmate at the Elmira Correctional Facility. Steven Sommers, a middle aged African American man, had met his girlfriend when her friend was visiting a friend of Steven’s at the prison. She visited him frequently while he was in prison. When he was released, he returned home to the Bronx before coming back to Elmira to be with his girlfriend, where he has lived for ten years. Steven argued that men incarcerated in Elmira’s prisons very rarely settle in Elmira upon release. "It’s a myth," he said. According to Steven, people accustomed to city life saw Elmira as "so spooky, it’s so quiet, it’s too scary," thinking of Elmira as a "hicktown" full of "rednecks". This fear of the unknown in rural areas is not specific to incarcerated men, but a common fear of urbanites across race and class divides. DOCS manipulates this fear by using the distance from family (for men from the New York City metropolitan area) and the rurality of the prison as an additional aspect of punishment. This supports Steven's assertion, echoed by many families of incarcerated people, that most incarcerated people aren’t interested in living in Elmira when they

are released from prison.

Steven encountered some problems with the police when he first moved to Elmira ("because I drove a nice car," he said) but now felt that the police left him alone because they were familiar with him. When I asked him if he felt he experienced more racism in Elmira than at home in the Bronx, he responded that here he could date a white woman; to him, this signaled that he was experiencing less racism in Elmira. He described a few encounters with Correction Officers whom he knew in the jail, none of which he described as particularly confrontational. One encounter was with a CO he considered "fruity" or effeminate. While relaying the story to me, he described to me mocking this CO's sexuality with other inmates while he was in prison. However, when they saw one another at a local sub shop, Steven describes it as a casual, uneventful meeting:

*I go in there and I say, 'Fruity, is that you?' He turns around and he says, 'Hey what you doin' up here?'. I was like 'What you mean what I'm doing up here'. And he says, 'Ain't you from New York?'. I was like, 'Yeah, I got a girlfriend up here and I'm just working.' So he said, 'You stayin' out of trouble?' And I was like, 'Yeah I'm staying out of trouble. You know, working, doing my regular thing, my routine.' But that was it basically.*

Steven's narrative of his encounters with guards is similar to the descriptions of some of the COs.

Jack Johnson, a criminal defense lawyer who regularly represents clients incarcerated at the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facility and poor Elmirans in criminal court found the idea that former inmates and their families are moving to Elmira absurd:

*People say this all the time, and again, being one who represents prisoners and who represents poor people generally that are charged with crimes, I can't think of a single instance, and I mean this sincerely, where somebody's moved here, that I'm aware of, to be closer to their incarcerated family member. People allege this all the time, and it may happen, but I can't think of a single instance of that. And I think the reality is that there's*

*such a big cultural difference from where these people come from in New York City and then moving up here to be close to an inmate, I think they'd have a tough time.*

When I asked if he thought this was fed by discussions of crime in the local paper, where it is often noted when a defendant is from New York City or other parts of the state, he said, “oh, yeah, and people just assume it’s the incarcerated family member that brought them here.” A menacing triumvirate emerges—race, urbanity, and dependency—making and remaking the racialized criminal justice system.

## **Prison Break**

Here, I return again to the idea that the prison serves as a scapegoat for impoverishment and resultant anxieties about crime and the necessary failure of the project of containment as a force of racialization. A brief analysis of a recent escape from the Elmira Correctional Facility helps to make my point. In the summer of 2003, two men chiseled through the ceiling of their top floor cell, going through the air ducts and rappelling down the side of the prison with a string of bed sheets tied together. At this point, the Elmira Correctional Facility was one of the few maximum security prisons in the state with no perimeter fence, and the men escaped into the woods to the west of the facility. They were captured a few days later a short distance from the jail.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Both men who escaped were white men from rural parts of New York State. They were caught after a few days. One man’s injury was a major factor in their capture. The fact that these men were white was perhaps a contributing factor in the success of the men’s escape and in the fact that they made it as far as they did. The ordeal was recently the subject of a reality TV

In the weeks following the prison break, then-mayor Stephen Hughes organized a meeting in order to "bridge the gap" in communications between the prison and local officials. The mayor, the warden, a representative from NYSCOPBA (the police officer's union), the police, a city councilman, the city manager, and three unidentified "city residents" all agreed to participate in the group. DOCS again underplayed the creation of such a group as an indication of problems, stating that thirty of the seventy facilities in the state also had a sort of community liason group (Murray 2003a). The one "concerned resident" quoted in the *Star-Gazette* article was the superintendent of the Elmira Heights School District, who expressed her concern that a school located very near to the prison did not hear about the breakout via DOCS, but rather on the radio. However, many other residents were apparently unruffled by the prison break. One neighbor commented that, "I think we are living in the safest place, right next to the prison. They're not going to come here for coffee and a cab. They are going to head for the hills" (Aaron 2003).

When I went to the home of one informant, Carol Lewis, I was shocked that she lived quite literally in the shadow of the prison. I asked Carol, a white woman and herself the wife of an inmate at a medium security prison, if it worried her to live so close to the prison. She wasn't worried, she told me, but the escape had made her children concerned for her safety. Carol, on the other hand, said she never wanted to leave Elmira. She explained that her low

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"documentary" on the National Geographic channel show "Breakout". <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/series/breakout/3921/> (accessed February 1, 2011). The show's filmmakers suggest that there were a few instances in which prison guards looked the other way. I question whether quiet white men from rural parts of New York State, who according to the show were viewed as not a problem for guards, were more likely to avoid being frisked and therefore be allowed to pass contraband into their cell. The film does an interesting job of showing how there are varying levels of freedom of movement in the cells of inmates at the facilities and how security may or may not be more lax for prisoners whom guards trust more.

*Place photo here*

Image 6: Photo caption, as printed in the *Star-Gazette*: “Armed Elmira Correctional Facility officers stop traffic around 8:30am Monday on West Water Street in Elmira as they search for two escaped convicts.” Photo courtesy of the *Elmira Star-Gazette*, July 8, 2007, 1A. Photo by John P. Cleary.

cost of living allowed her to maintain her well-kept home with a huge backyard ("I paid \$40,000!" she said, "Where else am I going to go to get that?"). A hundred of her friends and neighbors had signed a letter welcoming her husband, who is also white, to the area upon his release. While often serving as a lightning rod for the causes of social problems, the day to day running of the prison is generally not a controversial aspect of the landscape of Elmira. "Nobody seems to pay any attention to the prison, to be perfectly honest with you," added Carol. The meeting of public officials regarding the prison, which arose from the only prison break in

Elmira since 1984 (when two men escaped by way of a garbage truck and were caught soon after), was not mentioned again in the newspaper or in any archival information I had access to.

The fact that the prison/town relations committee fizzled out has a few likely causes. First, although the Elmira Correctional Facility (unlike the Southport Correctional Facility, which is on a rural road) is quite centrally located and visible as a part of the city, the day-to-day functioning of the prison -- and moreover the everyday lives of the men incarcerated there -- is out of sight. After the initial concern over the escape, the work of the prison again faded into the mundane daily life of the city. Secondly, it appears that the creation of a panel to deal with concerns about the prison was solely a public relations move. While there appeared to be, in this instance, a disconnect between the DOCS high level bureaucracy and City of Elmira officials, there are many rank and file Correction Officers living in Elmira and Chemung County who have connections to local public officials and would share information with police. Therefore, a representative of NYSCOPBA and not of PEF, the union of civilian prison workers who are not considered law enforcement, signifies the city's containment oriented response. This panel's convening solely at a moment of crisis suggests two things. First, the prison was not considered any great threat to public safety in that local government did not need to manage public ideas about the prison on an ongoing basis. The prison was brought into the local (and national) spotlight by the prison break, and this crisis created a problem which quickly faded. Secondly, this suggests that the panic about the prisoners' families and former prisoners causing crime has very little to do with the ability of the prison to control the prisoners within the prison from escaping. Rather, it was a larger question about the containment of a "criminal element". I would argue that this criminal element has more to do with a racialized policing, then, than a fear of the white "murderers" who escaped from the prison in the summer of 2007. The prison, then,

provides a useful scapegoat for the larger question of demographic shifts and changes, namely the impoverishment of Elmira and the shifting racial geography of poorer African Americans into previously whiter areas, as I discussed earlier in the chapter.

There was one change in the built environment after the escape. The state spent more than three million dollars to construct a double perimeter fence around the prison. According to one informant, for years the city had declined to sell the Department of Correctional Services a small piece of land necessary for such a fence to be built, only to be up in arms that such a fence would have kept an escape from happening. The fence makes for a dramatically different facade of the prison, which sits on a hill on the northwestern edge of Elmira city but in the middle of a residential neighborhood.

### **Policing Elmira, Policing the Prison?**

The idea that former inmates and/or their families are responsible for the bulk of the crime and welfare rolls reached relatively high levels of power in a small city. In an article in the local paper in 2006, and heard and repeated by my informants in local meetings of social service workers, the Elmira City Chief of Police commented that he had no doubt that there was a connection between the prison and what he considered high rates of crime (Pfeiffer 2007). Furthermore, this discourse is put forward by the criminal court judges who, out of such suspicions, regularly ask defendants if they are "from around here" and if not, "what brings you to the area?" While this does not explicitly show how the police are profiling people, it does show how the prison is on the minds of law enforcement when they are policing poor neighborhoods. Considering that the police believe that they are policing inmates paroled from a

maximum security prison, the police here function both to define crime as a problem related to an already marked population of "ex-convicts."

An analysis of policing during my time in Elmira highlights both the racialization of crime in Elmira and outlines what I see as the Elmira Police Department's increasingly militarized response, including the media campaign highlighting a series of arrests for drug crimes. In the summer of 2007, twenty-one people were arrested for various federal and state level drug trafficking crimes—ten African American men, seven African American women, one white man and one white woman—under the umbrella campaign "Operation Crack Hammer." The mug shots of these defendants were shown innumerable times on the television news, and were printed together in the front section of the newspaper accompanied by a quote in the adjacent story from the Chief of Police: "I don't think any of them were born in Elmira. They have no vested interest here" (Richards 2007b). In one of the strings of arrests as a part of Operation Crack Hammer, heralded by the Elmira Police Department as making a major "dent" in local drug trafficking, five people were charged with crimes. These included one twenty-seven-year-old man who was charged with third-degree possession of cocaine, and four others, including two seventeen-year-olds and an eighteen-year-old, who were charged with loitering and misdemeanor counts of marijuana possession, indicating that these arrests were hardly a takedown of drug traffickers (Richards 2007b). One local business man, John Cooke, involved with a local group working on "intergroup relations" saw this newspaper story as one of the most damaging and racist occurrences in recent Elmira history. The usage of a series of mug shots along with police bravado surrounding the arrest of the men and women was unprecedented. Indeed, a few days after the story ran, I was fifty miles away chatting with a cousin's neighbor who mentioned that he saw "Elmira was having a lot of problems with drugs"—a direct result of the story.

This round of drug arrests was a major topic during the Republican primaries for District Attorney in Chemung County in the fall of 2007. (There was no Democratic challenger, or any other party for that matter, in the race). John Trice, the incumbent, spoke along with his challenger, Weeden Whetmore, to a group of about twenty people in a small community room at the downtown public library. I was surprised at how candidly Trice described the problems with crime, compared with how such crimes were reported in the news media. Trice spoke about the wire taps that brought twenty-six drug cases to indictment and the “zero tolerance” policing, which has its origins in Giuliani’s New York that was being used in the City of Elmira.<sup>40</sup> He said that the main problem in Elmira was now cocaine, specifically crack cocaine, which because of high demand and relative isolation is a more expensive drug in Elmira than in major cities with easier connections to suppliers. Trice described how Giuliani’s policing pushed the drug crime and gangs out of New York City to cities along the Hudson and into upstate cities. He further noted that Iceberg Green, a man arrested on drug charges in Elmira in 2006, had told state police that ‘Elmira was his next stop’ [to sell drugs].

While Trice’s description of the scene was, in part, intended to scare the audience and convince us that he was keeping us safe as district attorney, his analysis deserves further attention. Importantly, Trice accounts for how criminal networks are shifting geographically based on the intensification of policing in New York City. There is some suggestion in my fieldwork and literature that poor people are leaving New York City in similar patterns—to small towns along the Hudson and upstate cities like Elmira (see LeBlanc 2003). Trice offered a clearer explanation of crime and criminality in Elmira than I had heard previously, and there was no mention of the prison.

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<sup>40</sup> See Smith 2001 for more on zero tolerance policing in Giuliani’s New York.

## **Urban Danger, Right Wing populisms, and the Guardian Angels in Elmira**

In April of 2008, City Councilwoman Susan Skidmore organized a community meeting with Curtis Sliwa, the notorious founder of the New York City-based Guardian Angels, a so-called “citizens’ response to crime.” Skidmore’s district in downtown Elmira, for many years a mixed race working-class neighborhood, has nonetheless seen the most significant demographic changes in the county over the last thirty years. While other neighborhoods have stayed relatively stable, the downtown area has seen a growth in the number of African Americans living below the poverty line and a departure of more economically stable white working-class households in the last thirty years. It remains a mixed income, mixed race working-class neighborhood with a high number of publicized drug arrests. Members of the Guardian Angels, trained in martial arts, “patrol” the streets and the subways in red berets and shiny baseball jackets to deter crime and make citizens’ arrests when “necessary.” The group, built largely on Sliwa’s masculinist swagger and populist antagonism, grew in popularity in the 1970s and 80s in New York City, particularly among working-class Black and Latinos who comprise most of the membership of the New York City chapter. He remains a popular figure in New York City, providing six hours a day of right-wing commentary on 970 AM and a nightly appearance on a political show on local news channel NY1.

The meeting to consider founding a chapter of the group in Elmira was announced in the local paper and on the television news. Held in the auditorium of Elmira Free Academy, the high school that serves Skidmore’s district, the meeting was largely blue collar men and women, mostly white and a few African Americans and Latinos in the group. The crowd was, as my mother who accompanied me to the meeting pointed out, "not a West Elmira crowd," a middle income residential town that lies directly to the west of Elmira City, but a working-class crowd.

The Chief of Police of the City of Elmira, Scott Drake, and the Chemung County Sheriff, Christopher Moss, were both in attendance.<sup>41</sup> Television crews from the local NBC affiliate greeted us when we entered the room, asking attendees why we were interested in the meeting.

While we awaited the arrival of Sliwa, who was stuck in traffic on his way from New York, we were addressed by the members of a newly formed Guardian Angels group from nearby Bath, New York. Bath, New York, a small town about forty miles west of Elmira, is home to a large state Veteran's Hospital. The "Bath Unit", as the presenters called themselves, was seven men and women dressed in the Guardian Angel's uniform of red beret's and military style clothing. The founder of the group, a slender, middle-aged white woman, wore combat boots. She talked about the group's goals not to make arrests but to be 'eyes and ears for the police'— who, she added, 'do appreciate that.' On Liberty Street, the main street in downtown Bath, she said, 'women walk down the street and guys approach them and I'm sick of it. And I'm not leaving.' She spoke about what spurred her interest in starting the group: she wanted people to feel 'safe and secure' in their own neighborhoods.

According to the Bath Unit, Bath, like Elmira, has changed: crime, in their view, is up and the Guardian Angels are needed. The group was optimistic that they were already making an impact on Bath. One younger man, perhaps adopting Sliwa's style of language in addition to his beret, shared that 'the hoods and the dirtbags, they see us and they go the other way.' He attributed this to the uniform. The group took questions from the audience, and one woman

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<sup>41</sup> Moss was elected the first African American Sherriff in Chemung County's history. Moss expressed some concerns about the kinds of people that 'gravitate' toward vigilante groups and argued that the group, rather than solving the crime problem might simply "push the criminals into someone else's neighborhood." A Bath Angel responds, "Maybe we'll keep 'em movin' right out of Chemung County!". In a deadpan voice, Moss responds: "Back to Bath."

asked how they were different from the already formed neighborhood watch group in the area. Unlike neighborhood watch, said the leader, the Guardian Angels had martial arts training and did foot patrols, training that they believe makes them more like police and thus, as their argument goes, closer to legitimacy. The Guardian Angels viewed the neighborhood watch groups as providing a complimentary service and one that produced a favorable balance, 'more good guys than bad guys.' The bad guys that inhabit the racialized fictions of the Bath Unit are remarkably similar to the anecdotes about "their [prisoners'] families" in Elmira. However, what brings the outsiders to Bath in these anecdotes is their status as veterans: Bath is home to one of the state's Veteran's Administration's hospitals, with services that include an inpatient drug treatment facility. These services draw working-class veterans to the area from across New York State, with a number of African Americans and Latinos coming from urban areas.

When Sliwa finally arrived more than an hour late, his energy and his bravado filled the room. Sliwa waxed romantic about a time when doors could be left unlocked and we 'protected our women and elderly' and floated a question: Why should people have to sacrifice their quality of life in small town America?' Yet, despite shifting his target from "reclaiming" urban space to recapturing small town nostalgia, his performance of New York's racial stereotypes gave us no doubt that this was a race problem we were facing. 'Yo! Yo! Yo! Sliwa! Brooklyn in the House!' he reported a "homeboy" yelling to him from his SUV in Bath. 'And that ain't nothing but trouble,' he added. 'There's poison in the well' in Elmira, he told us, 'Somebody gets out of jail and they stay here...' his tone and his pregnant pause trying to lead the crowd to his conclusions. Sliwa made a similar connection between crime and the VA Hospital in Bath quite explicit: he demonstratively declared that "like sagebrush" people from the Veterans Hospital "rolled into their community and ruined their quality of life." Sliwa, who has

honed his crime talk as a right wing political commentator, changed his register to address a more rural, small town audience, but he was singing the same tune.

In the climate of a bankrupt city and county, and the loss of social services in the area, the idea that you cannot rely on the government for everything, including policing, holds some common sense relevance. Indeed, in the experiences of many Elmirans the retraction of social services and public welfare, not to mention jobs, are the clearest dislocations experienced by Elmirans. Sliwa's view of social disorder is quite expansive. While his impression of a "thug" is very distinctly drawn in a Black working-class New York accent and expression, his call to "challenge the thugs" and root out the "homeboys" appeals to a cross-race, largely working-class audience in New York City, and in Elmira. It's not clear yet if Sliwa's message holds a lot of political traction in Elmira.

City councilwoman Skidmore addressed the audience at the beginning of the meeting to express her disappointment in the low turnout for the event. She added that the previous summer, the summer of Operation Crackdown, when there were a few violent crimes that hit the news, there was standing room only at a meeting about crime. "If we had gun shots going off, we would have filled this room," she said. Perhaps Skidmore is right: if there is another "wave" of crime that takes center stage in the media, Sliwa's message will take hold. The attraction of Sliwa's over-the-top racial language—and his message to fight back with vigilantism—demonstrates the active fissures of race and class in the mythic small town.

Racial caricatures of criminality continue to be drawn and redrawn in local discourse. From the quotidian crime talk to more organized responses to crime like the Guardian Angels and, in a more concerted way, the Elmira Police Department, it is difficult to discern what racialized responses to crime emerge from Elmirans' experiences with the prisons. As I have shown in this chapter, the "anecdotes" of Black dependency and criminality are made through the institutional authority of the prison, the patrols of the police, the decisions of the judges who spurn the out-of-towners and politicians who look for them in the welfare rolls and public housing units. Through this discourse and, moreover, the actions people take to make and remake its "truth," the prison serves both to recreate the myths of African American and Latino criminality and limits the access to "legitimate" participation in New York life. For many white residents of Elmira, Black residents of Elmira are often viewed as "new." This distinction is often made, in coded language as "prisoners and their families," between the African Americans that are "from here" and those who come from other areas—Brooklyn and Rochester, NY, and are assumed to be part of the drug trade. As we have seen, the anxiety about prisoners rarely emerges as fear of prisoners escaping from the prison, but rather as a general racialized fear of crime and poverty. Black residents of Elmira and men and women who visit their kin in Elmira's prisons bear the brunt of these raced and classed anxieties.

## Chapter 6: Prison Town: Circulations and the Carceral City

*"The perception [of Elmira] from the outside, of course, is negative because we've got two prisons. We've got Southport and Elmira, and the Elmira Reformatory comes up in various films. The Elmira prison used to be on NYPD Blue all the time, always mentioned; 'you're going to Elmira', 'you're coming back from Elmira.' It was enough already."*

*--Lou Campbell, Small business owner*

On a random day in March 2011, I opened the *Elmira Star-Gazette*<sup>42</sup> to find two articles in which Elmira's prisons provided the backdrop for the city's daily news. On the front page, the first story covered the opening of new daycare center, the owner promising to add second shift hours in the coming year. The proprietor pointed out the center's usefulness for those "working two jobs" or people who work at "Lowe's [a retail chain home improvement store] or the prisons" (Finger 2011a). In a second article, police noted they were looking for former Correction Officer David Perry who retired from the Elmira Correctional Facility and was wanted in the disappearance, or perhaps murder, of his girlfriend in Florida (Murray 2011). (Perry was subsequently charged with grand larceny related to fraudulently collecting a disability pension and released on bail, but was never charged with murder.) Despite many Elmirans' efforts to downplay the centrality of the prisons to the everyday life of the city, Elmira is a prison town. While many criminologists write about a prison as a society or city within itself (Clemmer 1940), it is a more expansive analysis to look at the carceral nature of the city itself. Following

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<sup>42</sup> A relatively small paper, the *Elmira Star-Gazette* often publishes articles of interest regarding the prisons across the state, and sometimes around the country. After I finished my fieldwork in 2009, the paper reduced its size and relied even more on inserts from national papers like USA TODAY for national coverage. The paper relies on reporters for other Gannett News Service papers for many New York State stories.

Gilmore's theorization of the prison town as an "abandoned space," or "*desakota*," here I highlight the "movement of resources—whether transfers of meager social wealth (welfare to domestic warfare) or migrations of persons (voluntary or not) intraregionally or across superregional spaces" (Gilmore 2008: 38).

This chapter is about the lived experiences of Elmira, an abandoned space, and its uses as a prison town. I use the term prison town here as a theoretical tool to explore the prison as a carceral place in the context of the urban space which it geographically, and as I attempt to delineate here socially and economically, inhabits. The examples of a daycare and domestic violence show how the prison becomes part of the lives of a residents of a place, creating shift work, dictating family schedules and moving troubling correlations between domestic violence and prison work into the realm of the everyday. In looking at Elmira's two prisons and the city of Elmira and their inhabitants, workers, and visitors in circulation, I consider both how mass incarceration becomes enacted in a place *and* how places, their geographies and histories, shape the nature of incarceration.

Thus, this chapter is framed by a set of questions anthropologists have called the "politics of place" -- the debates about the meaning, purpose, and function of the prisons in Elmira and the extent to which Elmirans identify with the carceral role of the city (for more on the "politics of place" see Gregory 1998; Rutheiser 1996). In the first half of the chapter, my ethnographic focus is on the social and economic boundaries of the prison, both the spaces of enclosure and spaces of porousness, and how Elmirans and men incarcerated in Elmira's prisons navigate these boundaries. Extending Caldeira's theorization of different populations as important points of contact in cities increasingly segregated by walls, the anxieties of a carceral city are brought

forth through the thousands of visitors coming to Elmira to visit their kin. Prison visitors, associated with prisoners, their brownness, their urbanity, their class, and their poverty are feared as a source of crime and of migration in the increasingly impoverished city of Elmira. Through the lens of prison visitors and the volunteers who run the hospitality center at the Elmira Correctional Facility, I highlight both the work of social reproduction in the work of prison visiting and the often contested terrain of welcoming and serving the families of incarcerated men in Elmira.

### **“Transfers of Meager Social Wealth”**

While the overall economic benefits of the prison for a prison town remain highly debatable it is certain that wages from prison jobs were the political impetus for local boosters rallying in support of prison expansion (Hooks et al 2004; 2010; Bonds 2006). The economic impact of the prison is positively felt in salary dollars from work at the Southport Correctional and Elmira Correctional Facilities; security workers brought home almost eighty five million dollars in salary in 2009 -- 1350 workers, \$62,622 average annual earnings in 2009.<sup>43</sup> In addition, in 2010 retired workers from these facilities earned 18.5 million dollars in pensions -- 779 pensions, average, \$27,623 in 2010.<sup>44</sup> Of course, there is no certainty that these are local dollars, as many workers spend their first three to five years as Correction Officers working in prisons downstate, and therefore may live and work in another area of the state. However, my ethnographic work indicates that this pattern also works in reverse, that is, men from Elmira are working at Greenhaven and Sing Sing further downstate before returning to Elmira. Counting the

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<sup>43</sup> \$84,539,223 Complied 3.10.2010 from seethroughny.com

<sup>44</sup> \$21,518,625 Complied 3.10.2010 from seethroughny.com

1350 workers at both at the Elmira Correctional Facility and the Southport Correctional Facility, the Department of Corrections is the third largest employers in the Elmira/Chemung County area, only behind the Elmira City School District employing 1500 people and the area's largest hospital system, Arnot Odgen Medical Center employing 1400 workers. It is not surprising, then, how commonplace it is to hear area residents talk about prison jobs as a kind of safety net for a dying area.

There are secondary monies that circulate in the political economy of a prison town, although these are not as much of a focus in Elmira when compared with the idea of prison jobs and prison expansion as a safety net for the city. In Elmira, this influx of capital includes small amounts of money from state contracts for prison health care and other services such as pest control (\$151,345 since 2003 to a Utica, New York based company for services at ECF), garbage and refuse removal (\$179,495 since 2008 to an Elmira based company for services at ECF), and electrocardiograms (\$1509 since 2009 to a California based company for services at SCF).<sup>45</sup>

There was some indication that the influx of capital into the area during the construction of the Southport Correctional Facility lifted the housing values in the surrounding area. Shortly after ground was broken on the new prison, the business section of *New York Times* noted that a ten to twenty five percent increase in home prices in Southport and on the Southside of Elmira might signal an end in sight to the area's to a "twenty year housing slump" (Fleisher 1987). This might be conjectural and not, as the article states, directly correlated to the new state investment

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<sup>45</sup> Contracts by private companies for Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities, Compiled 6/1/11.  
<http://www1.osc.state.ny.us/transparency/contracts/contractresults.cfm?sb=a&a=CCC10&ac=&v=%28Enter+Vendor+Name%29&vo=B&c=-1&m1=0&y1=0&m2=0&y2=0&am=0&b=Search>

for the construction of Southport Correctional Facility. Nevertheless, causal narratives such as these in major newspapers create this as social fact. Bearing in mind the debatable effects of secondary profits from prisons, including food and lodging for visiting families, there is a notable media focus on these apparent profits. Days after the riot at the Southport Correctional Facility in May of 1991, an article in the *Star Gazette* was headlined “Business jumps for Southport stores near prison.” Tucked on the bottom of a page in the local section, the article details how the prison uprising brought a windfall of business to area retail chains. The manager of the Dunkin’ Donuts on Elmira’s Southside is interviewed about a big increase in donut sales, noting the many extra, hungry guards there as part of an emergency response team.

Amongst the private employers in the area, there are businesses that are impacted by investment either directly or indirectly supplied through the business of prison maintenance. The largest impact may be at the Arnot Odgen Medical Center and St. Joseph’s Hospital, where inmates regularly receive medical care for conditions that cannot be dealt with at Prison Health Services. Another of the area's largest employers, Wegmans, a local high-end grocery store is, according to one informant, a popular spot for women to buy their products while preparing for weekend “trailer” visits with their husbands.<sup>46</sup> Families also went to the Wegmans because they would arrange for packages of dried goods for the prison inmates—such as ramen noodles. Yvette, a biracial woman in her mid-twenties from Elmira whose husband is incarcerated further upstate, went out of her way to avoid Wegman’s on Thursdays, a day when the store was crowded with women were preparing for their trailer visits.

The influx of capital into Elmira certainly benefits some businesses and workers in

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<sup>46</sup> The trailer visit is a forty-seven hour visit by a married partner in a trailer on the grounds of the prison set aside for such use.

Elmira, but there remains a considerable question of balancing these benefits with the costs, both social and economic, of maintaining a prison. Anti-prison activists have brought attention to the fact that prisons are a serious drain on local resources. In addition to infrastructural issues such as the maintenance of roads and water supply, prisons burden local mail systems, non-profits and social services, and county criminal courts (see Pyle and Gilmore 2005).

### **The Social Reproduction of Confinement**

Anthropologist Lorna Rhodes writes that the “prison complex remains a massive—though partially hidden—presence that matters to our public life in a myriad of both obvious and subtle ways” (Rhodes 2004: xiii). Rhodes’ idea that the prison is both concealed and omnipresent echoes my ethnographic observation that the prisoners are out of sight but often on the mind of Elmira residents. The Elmira Correctional Facility is located on a hill overlooking a main thoroughfare through the city of Elmira to Elmira Heights and Horseheads, the next two villages to the north of Elmira. Locals often refer to work in the prison as working “on the hill.” Deliberate or not, this subsuming of prison into a “hill” obfuscates the nature of prison work and the existence of the men in the prison and their social needs. A person’s incarceration and their physical removal from a social support structure necessitates that the state provides for—or withholds the right to—basic aspects of human life. For the men incarcerated at Elmira Correctional Facility, who are involuntarily residents of Elmira, their needs and desires for food, intimacy, education, culture and art, and hygiene become the “care” work of the Department of Correctional Services. When these needs are not fulfilled by the prison, by other inmates, or by their visiting families, these fundamental aspects of human social reproduction are either left unmet or, sometimes,

fulfilled by residents of Elmira. It is in examining this set of relationships created in the day-to-day life of prisons, that we can reveal both what is the prison and what is the town in order to push deeper theorizations of each of these entities that we consider separate.

Playing a supporting role to the prison is woven deeply into the fabric of everyday life of many of Elmira. For some coaches, town supervisors and representatives, their community work was supported by their work as Corrections Officers. A week never passed during my fieldwork without seeing an obituary for someone who had worked in one of the prisons in the local paper. The mother of famed local Eileen Collins, the first woman to captain a NASA space shuttle, worked as a clerk at the prison for twenty-seven years. I even overheard two women discussing the money one can earn from the provisioning of prisoners in the Southside library: ‘The inmates need everything—so someone has to supply them with toothbrushes—so that’s what he does,’ said a woman matter-of-factly. On the TV news, in the newspaper, on the lips of residents—the goings-on within the prisons are newsworthy.

For example, between March 27<sup>th</sup> and April 2, 2006, there was a series of articles in the *Elmira Star-Gazette* following a lockdown at the Elmira Correctional Facility after what the newspaper called several inmate fights.<sup>47</sup> The article quotes the Department of Corrections spokesperson that fourteen homemade weapons were found during a search of all of the inmates’ cells, some in common areas and some in cells, and noted that the men who had the weapons would face discipline. Articles over the course of my fieldwork discussed further lockdowns, the state policy regarding maintaining Medicaid for inmates following their release in order to streamline medical coverage, and the proposed shutdown of juvenile facilities in North Country

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<sup>47</sup> See for example, “Three fights trigger prison lockdown,” *Elmira Star-Gazette*, March 27, 2006, A1; “Local News,” *Elmira Star-Gazette*, March 28, 2006, C1; “Local News,” *Elmira Star-Gazette*, March 30, 2006, C1; “Local News,” *Elmira Star-Gazette*, April 2, 2006, C1.

counties. These articles serve multiple functions. First, by generally echoing the press releases of the Department of Correctional Services they provide information for prison workers that may be useful for them to know, or useful for their bosses that the workers know. Furthermore, the local news coverage indicates that the prison is part of Elmira, a notion that is relatively absent in other avenues, at the same time that it lends an aura of control. The message, however, is that the Department of Correctional Services is handling the problem and residents need not worry.

For some non-profit social service organizations, work in the Elmira Correctional Facility is an extension of their work in Elmira. Sylvia Roth, a white social worker, talked about being invited by a Latino AIDS education inmate group to give a presentation to the men incarcerated at Elmira. HIV rates in New York State prisons are extremely high, and Sylvia's educational programs would ostensibly add to the services provided by counselors at the prison.<sup>48</sup> The discussion was, according to Sylvia, a relatively typical discussion of sexually transmitted diseases, but the men also had questions about sex and relationships related to their incarceration, most commonly: how would they know if they were the father of their partners' children? Like all non-profits that rely on grants and donations, the work would continue at the prison, Sylvia said, based on the interest and comfort of the workers of working in a prison and funding for public sex education more generally.

The physical boundaries between incarcerated people and the world outside of the prison, and the relationships allowed by these changing boundaries, have shifted over the years, along with dominant ideologies about the nature of incarceration. The Reverend Ruben Johnson

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<sup>48</sup> A chaplain recalled that during the height of the AIDS epidemic there were men dying every day in the jails with little or no medical care. The officers and prison officials often sent in the chaplains to "deal with" dying patients and the incarcerated men grieving the loss of dead and dying relatives, because it was "death" which was not part of their jobs.

recalled that inmates had much more freedom to leave the facility for organized activities in the 1970s and 80s. During this period, he remembered, there was an academically minded, liberal warden and incarcerated men were allowed to visit a local African American church and were trained as choir members. It ended when one of the men got drunk on his time outside. Priscilla Moore recalled the time fondly, “[b]ack then, it wasn’t this maximum thing. There were younger ones [prisoners] and we could easily go in. We even had a program. Now this was really-- can you imagine--they could even come to our church, the gym, the community. But now, everything’s so closed up.” (I discuss more about the limits of this openness and how Elmira’s imagine this boundary in chapter five). Kevin Osbourne, a recreation leader at the Elmira Correctional Facility, described bringing teams of Elmira residents to play against the inmate softball team and inmate basketball team. When compared with the intense physical segregation of the 800 prisoners at Southport, this illuminates the dramatic shift toward a more “complete” containment in penal policy in the past thirty years.

Social service work in support of prisoners is not only within the prison, but also work that might be called “reentry” work, demonstrating the New York State prison system's effects on poor and working-class people in Elmira. The county’s only housing shelter often receives letters from prisoners being released home to Elmira from prisons across New York State asking for emergency housing upon their release. Phyllis Light, a social worker associated with the shelter, noted that the prisons were not doing re-entry work that would prepare prisoners for their release because, “a shelter is not a reentry plan” (for more details on prisoners returning home to Elmira, see chapter six). A Single Room Occupancy hotel on Elmira’s North Side, the Mark Twain Motor Inn, serves as “overflow” from the local shelter, and men and women are sometimes released from prison to the hotel. Despite local gossip on the subject, Phyllis emphatically told me that

she has never seen an inmate being released from the Elmira or Southport Correctional Facility ask for assistance to relocate to Chemung County. Rather, the men and women seeking assistance are being released from other prisons across New York; they are Elmira residents returning home. As inmates are paroled or released to the county where they were charged with a crime, men and women returning home to Elmira from prisons around the state or people who committed crimes in Elmira regularly seek help from social services. Importantly, this “reentry” work is not exclusively taxing to social services in prison towns. Rather, the need for low-income housing for men and women returning from prison and poor people more generally is in great demand in nearly every city in the state.

### **Criminal courts in the carceral city**

One of the most under-discussed aspects of the social life of a prison town is the fact that all of the crimes that occur in the state prison facilities are tried in the Chemung County Court system by Elmira judges with local attorneys as representatives for the county and the inmate. This includes guard-on-inmate crime, inmate-on-inmate crime, and prisoners or their visitors charged with promoting prison contraband when caught with a forbidden product or item. One District Attorney estimates that thirty percent of the felonies that are tried in Chemung County’s courts are prosecution of crimes that occur within the prisons. According to one local public defender, an “extraordinary amount of our time is spent defending crimes that occur within prison.”

Despite having a number of people ineligible to serve on juries because they work for the prisons or are related to law enforcement officers, Jack Johnson says that he finds that the juries

are quite fair and there is a fifty percent acquittal rate on the cases. Jackson adds that “the inmates are scared to death— ‘We’re gonna have an all-white jury, and I’m a Black guy, we’re in town, I’m an inmate’—But our juries are fair.” Johnson concludes that most juries are skeptical of prison guards, even in a town where prison work can be highly regarded.

*The thing that’s interesting about defending inmates... and I don’t think people realize it, if you look at our popular culture, every movie, TV show, and anything that’s ever set in a prison setting, the inmate is the good guy and the guard is the bad guy, and that is in the back of people’s heads. So that if you can paint a good picture about how hard this guy’s life is in prison and that these guys make it worse, you can give them a plausible story, well, most of the time, that version wins out.*

When I asked further, he added, “Our acquittal rate is way better than it is anywhere else. So, I can’t conclude that the juries are bigoted because they are more often than not ruling for the Black felon convicted of the state prisoner over the state. I don’t think so. I mean. I’m sure that there are bigots out there, and God knows during jury selection we get a bunch of hands going up or detected talking to people [when asked about their ability to be impartial]. Part of the hardest part of my job is trying to convince these guys that you know you are probably going to get a fair trial and it is in your interest rather than copping a deal if you think you’ve got the chance.” Johnson’s analysis of the racial politics of inmate trials in Chemung County courts may indicate that the law and order element remains firmly entrenched but there remains tension in some the city residents’ relationship to the prisons, or it may not. If he is right, this divergence suggests a separation between common sense notions of justice and the enactment of justice when presented with a real interaction between jailers and inmate from the prison. Considering the circuit of social services, law enforcement and courts, caretaking and sex for prisoners and residents of the prison town, it behooves us to theorize the prison town as a place of circulation of people and of resources.

## **Prison visiting in a prison town**

Visitation to the men incarcerated at the Elmira Correctional Facility as a potential conduit for crime causes great concern for safety among Elmira residents (I detail this “panic” in chapter five). Here, though, I briefly look at prison visiting by local residents and residents from the men’s home cities who are in search of romantic companionship. A common discourse in Elmira asserts that local women from Hathorn Court, a privately owned and managed low- income housing complex that a few hundred yards from the Elmira Correctional Facility would “walk from the projects” to meet men. This narrative straddles fact and fiction. Reverend Ruben Johnson claims to have seen some young women from his congregation going to the prison to meet men. In another instance, Mel Klein, an African American CO, described being called down to the prison to collect his niece, as she was coming to visit an inmate and another CO recognized the family name. A co-worker phoned Mr. Klein and he came and collected his niece and brought her home. It was clear that dating or visiting inmates was not acceptable for families of Correction Officers.

Two of my informants told me about friends who had visited incarcerated men whom they were romantically interested in, but most looked down upon this. In fact, it was important for one informant, Yvette, whose husband was incarcerated at Upstate Correctional Facility, to distinguish herself from women who went to the prison in search of companionship. Maria Adamzisk and her husband, both of whom are white, met while he was in prison, and they visited for twelve years before they were married in the prison. He is still incarcerated at a facility further north where she has trailer visits with him every six to eight weeks. Given this information, it is clear that there is a pattern of young women from Elmira, both Black and white,

going to meet men in the prison.

It is also apparent that the idea that young women are meeting and entering romantic relationships with men at the prison is distorted by racialized fears. While I heard that both white and Black young women were going to meet young men, the discourse prominent in Elmira includes a narration of protecting white women from the dangers of Black men in the prison. Like the idea that prisoners and their families are moving to Elmira in droves, the discourse about “walking from the projects” to meet incarcerated men rests on historically grounded fears of African American men’s predatory relationship with white women.<sup>49</sup> Donaldson’s recent book, *Zebratown*, has stirred up these fears in recent months (2010). The book recounts the life of, in Donaldson’s words, a “Black ex-con” a man formerly incarcerated at the Elmira Correctional Facility, as he meets and settles down with a woman, originally from a rural area of Northern Pennsylvania, in Elmira. The author's focus is on the interracial relationship: an African American man “from the ghetto” and a poor white “country” woman, and how an “ex-con” makes his way in a prison town. The book has made its way around Elmira and, in my estimation, has the potential to amplify fears that young African American men are “taking advantage” of poor white women from the area. The book fails to indicate how romantic relationships in less segregated poor places like Elmira might vary from places such as New York City, where there are relatively few pockets of poor whites and highly segregated neighborhoods. Instead, it focuses on the working lives and sexual proclivities of the protagonist and his partners.

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<sup>49</sup> Many white people live in public housing in Elmira. It is not segregated in the same way as in many major cities with a greater density of people of color.

In documenting and analyzing the romantic relationships of poor men and women, anthropologists have often asked a different set of questions from Donaldson: how is prison changing the nature of human relationships, particularly in African American and Latino families? How does social class affect romantic relationships between men and women across race and class? There seems to be a higher than average number of white women with biracial children in Elmira (five percent of the city of Elmira), but there is no evidence of a correlation between this statistic and the presence of a prison in Elmira.<sup>50</sup> While many white and Black families in Elmira take issue with white women having romantic relationships with African American men (just take a glance at the comments section of any article in the *Star-Gazette*), this set of fears about prison visiting seems to be amplified by a racialized anxiety that erupts as a thinly veiled pretense of protecting the white women from Black male predators.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to meeting the intellectual and sometimes sexual needs of prisoners, bringing ethnic foods unavailable in prison, and maintaining social ties, visiting incarcerated men and women is part of a system of care for prisoners in Elmira. This is achieved not only through intimacy, but also through millions of dollars of what I call “caretaking dollars” deposited into commissary accounts. For example, the purchase of \$16,238.88 worth of shoes purchased

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<sup>50</sup> Based on my analysis of the data categories of “two or more races” in the 2010 U.S. Census, the city of Elmira has a higher percentage of people who identify as both African and White (3.4% including prison population, 5% excluding prison population). In the surrounding area, the cities of Rochester (1.8%), Binghamton (2.2%), and Ithaca (1.1) report smaller percentages. Notably, the city of Auburn, New York, also the home to a New York State maximum security prison, has a percentage of people that identify as both white and Black much lower than Elmira at 0.9%. Like Muhammad (2011), I posit that statistics divorced from social context do not offer “truth.”

<sup>51</sup> See also Stoler 1989 for examples in colonial context; Berlet and Lyons 2000: 59-60 for white nationalist protection of white women in U.S. history.

through the commissary by inmates at the Elmira Correctional Facility (not to mention millions of dollars of office supplies and food items also from the commissary and food from the vending machines during visits) comes from money provided by family and friends “on the outside” as inmates do not otherwise have access to money during their incarceration.<sup>52</sup> A vast difference in the total cost of supplies provided to the Elmira and Southport Correctional Facilities points to a divergence in the visiting patterns at these institutions, and the even greater social isolation of inmates at Southport when compared with the Elmira Correctional Facility. Officially, prisoners at the Southport Correctional Facility are generally being held at the facility as punishment for behaviors or actions at other prisons, but there are also an extraordinarily high numbers of mentally ill men in the all solitary confinement facility. The lesser degree of money spent in commissaries, more infrequent visits, and poor mental health of the inmates reflects a higher degree of isolation. Perhaps one of the most important shifts from 1971 to 1991 was the gradual process of de-institutionalization of the mentally ill. It is commonly noted that many of the severely mentally ill who were not properly served by community mental clinics ended up in prison. These men, often called “bugs” who scream all night and bang their heads against the walls, are often the men who are deemed the most “troublesome” to be controlled and thus moved to Special Housing Units. Jack Johnson, a local defense lawyer who represents many prisoners in Chemung County criminal court cases, suggested that fifty percent of inmates at the facility are seriously mentally ill. So few men get visitors at Southport that there is a lesser need for a visitors' program (as I discuss in chapters five and six). These men appear to be even more socially isolated from their families than inmates at a maximum security facility. I attribute this set of characteristics overall to a very different relationship to the prison town more generally.

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<sup>52</sup> Compiled from DOCS documents accessed on seethroughny.net, 6/11/11.

## **Upstate: Prison Visiting across Abandoned Spaces**

*“Visiting [should be viewed] neither as a right to be claimed nor as a privilege reluctantly tolerated, but as a major developmental and correctional technique that can benefit the Department, the general public, the inmate and his/her family.”*

--1984 Commissioner’s Task Force on Visiting, New York State Department of Corrections

At the foot of the Elmira Correctional Facility, looked down upon by the main brick building on the “Hill,” sits a small pre-fab building with yellow siding that houses the prison’s visitors' center. The building is set apart from the prison by a large tiered parking lot and hundreds of steps up to the front entrance of the facility. On weekends, the front entrance ramp of the hospitality center is busy with people talking, planning, preening their children, smoking or waiting to be called for their visit to a man incarcerated at the Elmira Correctional Facility. In the late 1990s when the building first opened there were some complaints from neighbors that the architecture of the building didn’t match the more ornate nineteenth century style of the prison or the neatly kept houses of the working-class residential neighborhood surrounding the prison. Others complained that the construction of the building was unnecessary— that it was more needless coddling of inmates and their families. Now the building has become integrated into the built environment of the city. Julia, a five year volunteer at the facility said of the prison, “It is a formidable institution. From the road it looks like a fortress.” Other than the Correction Officers, the visitors to the Elmira Correctional Facility are the only regular conduit of exchange into and out of the prison town.

Contrasted with the intimidating brick building surrounded by a double perimeter fence with razor wire atop the outermost fence, the pale yellow aluminum siding of the hospitality

center is more welcoming. Inside the visitors center there is a large desk at the front of the room where volunteers check people in and help to prepare visitors' paperwork. It is a simple, almost industrial space: there is a bathroom, an area for children's toys, a few decorations on the walls, and folding tables and chairs. Cheerful curtains in a country print, sewn by a volunteer, decorate the windows. Every Saturday and Sunday, the visitors' center building is the first stop for every visitor to the Elmira Correctional Facility. When entering the hospitality center, women, men and children stop and check in with the coordinator who helps them organize the paperwork necessary for them to visit—birth certificates for each of the children and state-issued identification for each of the adults. Each visitor is eager to have the first visit of the day as the longer a visitor waits, the more likely that their visit will be cancelled, or “terminated” in DOCS jargon, as there is often not enough time allotted to get all visitors into the prison in a single day. Visitors use the restroom, change their clothes and fix their hair, have a cup of tea, or just stretch their legs while they wait. If it is a long wait, visitors from further distances are given preference over “local” visitors, who can more easily return (in the mind of DOCS) during a less busy time.

When people are called to visit, they walk up the hundreds of stairs to the front door of the prison. “They will get you,” says one visitor about the massive steps to Elmira Correctional Facility, “They will get you even if you're really well and healthy.” On the weekends, a volunteer drives elderly and disabled visitors to the top of the step. Perhaps unsurprisingly, for many Elmirans, including Correction Officers, the treatment of the families of incarcerated men becomes synonymous with the treatment of the criminality and “badness” of the inmates. Volunteers at the Visitors Center often describe themselves as a buffer between the families of inmates and the Correction Officers—a complicated and often heated set of relationships. For visitors to the Elmira Correctional Facility, who arrive early in the morning on overnight buses

from New York City or drive from across the state, Elmira the city is encapsulated by their experiences with Correction Officers and stops at fast food restaurants along the way.<sup>53</sup> Visitors are often scared of their potential or historical maltreatment at the hands of the guard.

In the late 1990s, a member of a Christian social justice group that met at Mount Savior Monastery, the home of a Catholic order of brothers located in the rural hills of Chemung County outside the city of Elmira, was troubled by the sight of young mothers standing in the rain with their children while waiting for a visit with their loved one. She brought her concern to the group, and together they sought a way to provides services and shelter based on their Christian beliefs, as what they called a ministry. After research, they found that every weekend 3000 people visited upstate prisons on buses from New York City alone, and that visits were considered essential by many DOCS administrators and scholars to keeping the prisoners in touch with their families, an important part of the reentry process. Group members went to the prison parking lot on Saturday mornings, got on the buses and spoke with visitors to figure out their needs. The group called their project the “Dorothy Day Center” after the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who started communal houses and farms for the poor and preached a radical doctrine of distributism (Day 1956). They later changed the name to the Elmira Visitor’s Center to reflect and recruit a more ecumenical group of volunteers. After four years of meetings, DOCS gave volunteers a space inside the prison for the area’s first welcome center for the families of the men incarcerated at Elmira Correctional Facility, one of the dozens of similar

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<sup>53</sup> For more information on the prisoners’ perspective on the prison town, see Greg Donaldson’s *Zebratown* (2010).

hospitality centers in the state.<sup>54</sup> A few years later, the Department of Correctional Services built the yellow building at the foot of the prison to house the hospitality center.

In November 2006, the visitor's center at the Elmira Correctional Facility was open nine days. On those nine days, there were 1018 visitors, 168 of whom were men, 628 women, and 222 children. One hundred and two, or slightly less than ten percent, were categorized as local. A plurality of the visits were people from New York City (277) with other concentrations from New York State's Metropolitan areas: Buffalo (98), Syracuse (128), and Rochester (224). Despite the distance and walls between them, each of these visits represents an extraordinary amount of carework done for men in the prison by their families and lovers. Lillian Tillson, an African American Brooklynite who has visited two husbands and a brother in the Elmira Correctional Facility and other upstate prisons over the last forty years, described the long bus ride from New York City to upstate New York's prisons: "the bus. Sometimes you don't sleep. Maybe you can't get to sleep. So, you stay up [until 1 am] to meet the bus. You fry you some food...[w]alking into a prison, being checked, like I had no substance, but like I was a second class citizen because I was coming to see someone locked up." She said that there was a huge build up for a visit—"I'm

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<sup>54</sup> There are a series of what are called "gateside" visitors' hospitality centers, at least partially funded by a foundation out of New York City called the Patmos foundation. Although many people believe that the center is funded with public investment, following state law the majority of funding from the center comes from volunteer hours and fundraisers. Volunteers raise money from private donations, and fundraising projects like the sale of flowers. During my fieldwork, there were also donations from inmate organizations, like the Elmira Correctional Facility branch of the NAACP, who donated cookies for families visiting on Christmas Day. Despite initial hesitation by the funders that they don't actually help 'local people,' the IHC has received small grants from the Community Foundation of Elmira, a grantmaker for small non-profits in Elmira. In addition, the center receives fifteen thousand dollars a year from the Department of Correctional Services that apparently comes from a fund created by the ridiculous cost of phone usage by inmates. Visitors also give donations from time to time. Yvette noted that when visiting her husband at Wendell, there is a civilian taking "voluntary" donations for the center, who made it abundantly clear that the donations were not considered voluntary.

going on June twenty-fifth!”— so that there was a huge disappointment if something got in the way of the visit. Lillian outlines both the chaos created in her life by having a loved one incarcerated across the state and the level of control this creates over one’s social life. Although she first visited her husband and then her brother in New York’s prisons, Lillian empathized with women who left their sons behind in the jail after the visit: “a mother is realizing that she is leaving her son with these people. Will they protect him?”

Yvette visits her husband every few months at a prison near the Canadian border. She takes the bus to the prison town and pays sixty-five dollars a night for a hotel room. If she stays for a forty six hour trailer visit, there is an extra sixty dollar charge for the hotel owner to drive Yvette and all of her things to the prison for the visit. Yvette brings money to purchase food to prepare meals during their trailer visit, to add to her husband’s commissary account, in addition to cost of calling her husband a few times a week. He can’t be one of these ‘spoiled men,’ Yvette added, expecting a call every day. (However, she participated in the organized call-out against the exorbitant cost of the phone service in the Spring of 2006.) She cringes at the way she is spending her money to maintain her relationship with her husband. Working in childcare and other low wage jobs, these expenses are a huge portion of her income.

*Like the woman in the hotel where I stay, Betsy, she tells me that she gets the guards that come there and they, you know, they live there for about a week, and tell her all the horror stories. It’s just unbelievable. And she tells me that her hotel is running because of the prison. I mean, that’s not very nice to hear, you know, my money that I could be spending taking care of myself is going to a prison run hotel, basically. That’s what I call them.*

Of the myriad businesses that spring up to cater to the families of prisons, or existing businesses whose business expands on account of the income from families of prisoners, hotels are often the biggest expense of prison visiting.

Maria Adamzisk described the experience of going through the security clearance as the worst part of the visit. She recalled the “humiliation” of having to take off her bra when going through the metal detector. DOCS warns women to wear non underwire bras which are not allowed in the prison for fear that the wires could be turned into a weapon, but Maria said, “I don’t have these 32As that these young women have, and if your bra has more than two hooks, you’re gonna get beeped”: that is, required to remove your bra in the bathroom before you enter the prison. Despite the humbling experience of visiting, Maria drives more than two hundred miles to visit her husband a few times a month, including trailer visits. When I interviewed Maria in her home, she showed me a bag of prepared foods in a back bedroom that she buys as she sees sales and saves for her husband. Her husband’s next package included noodle soups, crackers, and canned meat that are deemed acceptable by DOCS policy. The collective work of Lillian, Yvette, and Maria is a part of the social reproduction of urban life in New York—across and within the *desakota*.

### **“Have a cup of tea”: Welcome Migrations**

The work of the visitor’s center is decidedly mundane—getting coffee, helping with paperwork, providing snacks and coloring books for the children. Yet, according to volunteers, including a few women who frequently visit their husbands in other prisons, families of men incarcerated at Elmira are happy with the service. They are glad to have somewhere to sit and

have a snack and clean up for their visit. Volunteers report that visitors are most happy that there is someone to watch their cell phones, which they are prohibited from bringing into the prison. DOCS rules for visiting include a dress code for visitors; volunteers are also charged with helping women who are deemed to be dressed too scantily to find additional clothes to cover themselves before entering the building. IHC members were proud of the quality of the services they provided, which they contrasted with the work of other centers across the state. Judy, a longtime volunteer, recalled that while visiting other hospitality centers, they found the hospitality center at the Attica Correctional Facility depressing and poorly cared for. This indicated to them the less welcoming environment of Attica the city more generally. According to Judy, when clergy are hired at Attica churches, they must sign a contract stating that they will not do ministry in the prisons. Most of the tasks of the volunteers are basic measures of communication between visitors and guards -- asking maintenance to fix the toilets, negotiating where the smokers stand, and dealing with the hostility from rank and file Correction Officers. But in the minds of the volunteers, unlike Attica, the Elmira center is a symbol of welcoming the families of prisoners.

While most of the volunteers at the center identified as religious they also identified with a counter-narrative to the role of jailer for Elmira's citizens. Like many volunteer run organizations, the set of volunteers changes regularly. During my fieldwork, it was a group of about sixteen volunteers, twelve white men and women, three African American women, and one Asian woman. Noting that many of the women and men coming on the buses from New York City were African American, Priscilla Moore, an African American woman in her sixties, a long-time volunteer and a retired social worker, said of her decision to volunteer, "and, of course, being an African American, I knew I needed to do this. They [the visitors] needed to see a Black

person greet them, to know that there are Black people in the community that want to help.” In contrast to the many Elmirans, overwhelmingly white, who feared the families of incarcerated men as interlopers in their city, Priscilla sought to acknowledge the commonalities in the experience of African Americans and build a bridge with the visitors. She added that just greeting people who come to the center and saying, “I know you’re tired. Have a cup of tea,” helped people to prepare for their visit.

Jenny Mulvaney, a white working-class grandmother who is the center’s most prolific volunteer, recalled that her own brush with the law—a decades old felony conviction— was on her mind the day IHC volunteers came to her church. Jenny was drawn to volunteer because, “that could have been my family [coming to visit her in prison].” Jenny was only given probation but believed that others should have the same opportunity for redemption that she had. At the same time that Jenny identified with the struggles of the prisoners and those who visit them, she recounted to me that COs often told her that she would make a good CO. Her calm demeanor and her ability to talk to prisoners were good assets for the jobs. She, too, had considered taking the civil service test for CO because she enjoyed working with the inmates (who worked alongside her as porters when the visitors’ center was still inside the prison), but declared that she was “too old to start something new.”

Most of the volunteers and Board Members were either a part of the original group of founders or were recruited from their churches. A sense of moral or religious mission often undergirds their decision to volunteer with the center. A few volunteers carefully noted that this was not a project of evangelism, but rather in the words of Irene, a local community college professor and long time volunteer, “the motivation for most people getting involved is because of

their faith, and we try to reach out to them [the visitors] in a loving way.” Irene spoke about her work at the IHC in terms of a larger social project of care-taking:

*And here they are, and they're gonna spend a day in this terrible place [the prison] in the visiting room and then get kicked out at 3:00 and get on a bus and go back to New York. What an incredible effort on their behalf—on behalf of this guy who's in prison. Then, I look at the numbers. On a busy day, we have one hundred visits. Well, the population at Elmira is 1800. Something like that. It's tiny. What about all of the rest of these guys? There's nobody.*

This common strain of humanitarianism wove through the volunteers' work. Other volunteers expressed admiration for the men and women who come. Heather, an African American social worker in her early forties, said, “They may be the nicest people in the world. But looks at what they've just gone through. Getting their babies up out of the bed at one o'clock in the morning to go see whoever they are visiting in the prison. Which is beautiful. I couldn't do it. If it were my man, I'm not sure I could do it.” Many volunteers noted the totality of the destructiveness of the prison—one injurious to both “keeper and captive”. Volunteers clearly have a commitment to the inmates as persons who have experienced discrimination or limitations in their life experiences, or both, and included poems by prisoners about their incarceration in their first newsletter. Not all of the volunteers did the work at the IHC with a sense of religious or moral mission: One young woman said she felt no particular affinity for prisons or prisoners, but a broader concern for social justice, and said she had started volunteering because she was ‘incredibly bored out of my mind’ in Elmira and liked the work.

In recent years, the center has struggled to recruit new volunteers as many aging members of the founding group have become less involved. I accompanied two senior citizen IHC volunteers on an appointment at an Elmira city senior center in search of new volunteers. The first question asked of us, after we were introduced ourselves, was, “are you all guards?” The woman gingerly explained that her daughter worked on “The Hill” and thought perhaps we

might know her. Stan, a long-time center volunteer, explained that we were not guards, but representatives of the visitors' center, looking for volunteers who could work with the families of inmates. Stan and Allie looked for support for the project by telling their audience of potential volunteers that the families of inmates, particularly children, are also victims of crime—the crimes of their loved ones having cost them a father. Most of the elderly members of the crowd had come for the free lunch, but there was a fundamental tension at work here: how does one present the work of hospitality to inmates' families to a city where prisons are the dominant industry?

Earlier, Stan, who had worked and volunteered with prisoners for over thirty years, had shared, “I think the hospitality center is a good program. I think it really provides a needed service and provides a real connection point between the community and the prison in some way. It’s kind of a less threatening connection, for a lot of people, than actually working with the prisoners, which is good.” As Stan suggested, the prison is a place of apprehension, if not fear, for many local residents, and as this situation suggests many are reluctant to engage the prison, particularly in a way that might be considered “pro-prisoner.” While historically there have been more supportive interactions between at least one historically African American church congregation and the prison, the visitors' center is the only organization in the city of Elmira that works to bridge the gap—in many ways, to recognize the fact that the prisons are not only sources of jobs, but rather, that there are men in the prisons who have families.

### **Guarding the carceral city: Prison guards and prison visitors**

Shedding light on the prison and the prisoners in a prison town reveals the tensions within the city about its role in the carceral state. As I outline extensively in chapter six, families of prisoners are decidedly not welcome; their distorted ghosts haunt the racial politics of everyday policing in Elmira. Because of these tensions, the Center tries to keep what one volunteer called a “low profile” over concern that attention might bring controversy and disrupt their work. There is an annual volunteer reception dinner, announcement of their activities in the local paper and church bulletins, and periodic open houses attended by the mayor. But for the most part, the Center’s functioning requires maintaining a balance between their favorable view by a relatively small group of Elmirans, the DOCS top level brass, and visitors, and some of the population of Elmira that is hostile to the inmates and their needs. As she saw it, Irene said that this act of welcoming was at the heart of the project of the IHC. In a half hour news interview in 1997 when the center opened, Irene explained, “It has really been a privilege to get to know some of the people who spend all of their savings coming almost every week to come and visit their men... We want them to know that here in Elmira we admire their courage and there is a welcome for them.”

Correction officers’ distrust of and distaste for prisoners and their families is not always so subtle. The volunteers are sometimes sneered at by guards who see them as “coddling the inmates.” This hostility emerged in other ways, too. On one occasion when the visitor’s center building was used by guards for a meeting, volunteers returned to find that the coffee urn had been ruined after it had been used as a spittoon for chewing tobacco, and “fuck these people” had been written on one of the tables. In the words of one Correction Officer, Greg Shaunessy, who during most of our interview had struck me as a rather mild man (in that he described never worrying about seeing inmates on the streets outside because he had treated them respectfully

enough -- which I began to take as a sign that men were less likely to be violent on the job), “ninety percent of the time, the families are bigger scumbags than the inmates.”

There is, however, a generally congenial relationship between DOCS and the volunteers who run the center. While volunteers often rolled their eyes at DOCS’ bureaucratic requirements, members had to encourage a DOCS representative to sit at the table with the rest of the group during board meetings. One long-time volunteer called DOCS a “secretive agency” that allowed for little public scrutiny. He noted that volunteers had no idea what happened once the visitors went through the front door of the prison. The hospitality center was a friendly place to be, but once visitors entered the prison they were treated like “scumbags” just as the inmates were.

There is a single correction officer who staffs the hospitality center along with two volunteers every weekend day. While many officers avoid the visitors' center when they can, there are still moments of hostility from the rank and file Correction Officers towards the volunteers from the visitors’ center. Stan spoke about a time he saw an officer he knew from the visiting area at a restaurant in town. The officer refused to acknowledge him and say hello, despite Stan’s belief that the CO recognized him. There are also somewhat hopeful moments; there is a suggestion box that sits on the table, mostly filled with notes from visitors thanking them for their work. One guard puts in a note every week suggesting that the coordinator be given a raise. Jenny commented on her relationship with the guards:

*In the beginning, I was interfering, but by the end of the day, they [the guards] appreciated it, they understood the service I was providing to make their jobs easier. There’s officers who have their opinions about the Visitors’ Center, and it’s not a good opinion. They think we’re just a bunch of bleeding-heart liberals and we’re just there because we feel sorry for the inmates and they don’t appreciate what we’re doing. They weren’t real receptive to us when we opened up. They didn’t want us there. It was the state*

*who said we could do it...The officers who work with us, they get it. They say to me, 'I could have used you this week on Thursday, I was swamped.'*

Considering prison visiting is one of the sole sites of contact between prisoners and their homes, it is not surprising that it is a site of surveillance and tension. It is in these everyday experiences that we shed light on the debates about how and what people and capital should circulate in a prison town.

### **On Not Visiting Southport**

After what the Department of Correctional Services saw as the positive work of the visitors' center at the Elmira Correctional Facility, DOCS asked if they would also consider opening and staffing a hospitality center at the Southport Correctional Facility. Despite their concerns that they were already having some challenges staffing the current center, a group of volunteers toured the prison to consider the project. Virginia Stanfield, a Visitors' Center volunteer who scouted out Southport as a potential second project, said of Southport that the visiting experience is vastly different there because it is an all Special Housing Unit prison. "It's like the old prison movies—there's the bar and you can put your hand through," and visitors are not allowed to hug. In addition, the numbers of visitors to Southport are significantly fewer than at the Elmira Correctional Facility. Other than the prisoners who work as porters helping to clean the prison, the men who are in solitary confinement get far fewer visits. Part of this pattern may be related to the fact that a move to Southport means being moved away from another facility for a generally short time as a punishment for behaviors in a regular maximum security prison, often

six months. However, there seems to be some suggestion that because there are very high numbers of men incarcerated in SHUs who have serious mental health problems. The lower number of visits may be indicative of an even greater level of social isolation than men at maximum security prisons. Lillian Tillman described visiting Southport as a qualitatively different experience than a “regular” maximum security prison.

*The SHU, I didn't know what this was about. Oh, my brother looked so fearful in that place, he was shaking. They bring them to the room. Chains on their feet, chains on their hands. And you got the glass here, then you got this little grate, and then they can put their hands to touch you. But you I didn't really know the significance [of him being in a Special Housing Unit]. I heard he went to the SHU. But hell I didn't even know what the SHU was. You know, I used to watch those shows “Lockdown Raw.” I didn't equate them as the same thing. I know he was locked in twenty-three hours. I just didn't put two and two together. You know, what I seen on TV seemed so foreign. Yeah, but he was there.*

Largely due to their inability to provide volunteers at two facilities, board members of the visitor's center declined to open a center at Southport.

As I have shown in this chapter, people—those who come voluntarily and those who are forcibly compelled to come by the state— and capital—in amounts negligible for the state and meaningful for working-class families—circulate through the prison town. Salaries and the provisioning of a few commodities needed by prisoners are important sources of income provided by the prisons to the town despite the prison's drain on municipal resources. Prison visiting is also an important site of migration across the abandoned spaces of New York State. In prison visiting, the tensions of incarcerating thousands of men from across New York State emerge most clearly. While in this chapter I focused on the carceral quotidian, in the next chapter, I discuss how the prison town's purpose emerges in times of crisis.

## **Chapter 7: Prison Town in Crisis: A Label “Sewn Tightly on the Community”**

*“[I]t’s possible that Attica has the state’s best pizza or a top-notch quality of living standard. I don’t know. What I do know is that the prison there was synonymous with violence two decades ago and that label is sewn tightly on the community.”*

*--Wayne T. Price, Elmira Star-Gazette*

*“We have been a community with a prison for so long that I think for the most part it’s been viewed as just another place people go to work every day.”*

*-Hugh Monroe, small business owner*

In this chapter, I look at the prison town, as a place and as an analytic tool, using the historical examples of the Attica Rebellion of September 1971 and the uprising at the Southport Correctional Facility in May 1991. I look at how the carceral state is actualized in these historical moments and in and across this geographical space. These narratives from periods of crisis demonstrate how prisons are inextricable from the political economic landscape of the state of New York. Thus, I show how the politics of place mesh or conflict, or both, with Elmira's role as an outpost of control in larger society. In Elmira, the prison town, these raced and classed politics of the moment become triangulated into tensions between prison administrators, rank and file Correction Officers, and prisoners and those allied with each of these camps. Moreover, I show how prisons function as laboratories for new carceral designs and serve as sites of political struggle and how blocs of alliance are not set in stone, but shift with the winds of politics. Because of what I perceive to be a reluctance to discuss the prison as a part of public life (or perhaps a purposeful obfuscation), these crisis points, the Attica Rebellion and the Southport Uprising provide an unparalleled entre into the relationship between prison bureaucrats, workers, and prisoners in their lives inside and outside of the prison. This chapter's data demonstrates how

the prison works within the city of Elmira and a carceral city within New York State, and not merely as the institution “on the hill.”

### **Attica through the Eyes of Elmira**

In the late 1960s and early 70s, New York State’s prisons were seething with the revolutionary politics of the period, and Elmira and the Elmira Correctional Facility were no exception. In the late 1960s at the Elmira Correctional Facility and across New York State, prisoners protested the conditions at the prisons with hunger strikes and other forms of nonviolent protest. Prisons across New York State were at full capacity, including Attica, where more than 2000 inmates were incarcerated in a facility designed to house 1200 men. Basic hygiene essentials, including showers and toilet paper were severely restricted and inmates suffered frequent beatings by guards (Correctional Association 1982). On September 9, 1971, after years of protests through peaceful means, twelve hundred men incarcerated at Attica Correctional Facility just outside of Buffalo in upstate New York, took over the prison taking forty-two corrections officers and civilian employees hostage. Initially confined to one cell block in the prison, a group of prisoners eventually took over the prison after breaking through a single bolt that held the door separating Cell Block A from the rest of the prison (Wicker 1975: 15). When the National Guard was ordered by Governor Nelson Rockefeller to crush the rebellion on September 13<sup>th</sup>, four days after it had begun, forty-one men were killed: thirty-one of them inmates and ten prison employees, making it the bloodiest prison uprising in U.S. history. All forty-one dead were killed by gunshot wounds discharged by the national guardsmen/state

troopers. No guns were found with inmates.<sup>55</sup>

In the ninety-seven hours that the inmates held the prison and the world at attention, the group organized two lists of demands and called upon lawyers and Black Panther leaders from across the country in order to negotiate their positions. Sparked by a protest of one inmate's treatment, the rebellion at Attica quickly became rallying point for social movements for racial and economic justice and a turning point in the history of U.S. prisons. Sam Melville, an inmate at Attica before and during the uprising remembered it as a time of solidarity between routinely rival ethnic groups—the Black Muslims, the Black Panthers, and the Young Lords. According to Melville, it was a time of:

*[s]o much more awareness & growing, consciousness of themselves as potential revolutionaries, reading, questioning, rapping all t time. Still bigotry & racism, black, white & brown, but one can feel it beginning to crumble in t knowledge so many are gaining that we must build solidarity against our common oppressor—the system of exploitation of each other & alienation from each other” (Melville's Letters from Attica, c.f. Wicker 1975: 7-8).*

The radical political organizing of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the streets was strengthened by organizing in jails and prisons across the country, and vice versa.

The Attica Rebellion and the revolutionary Black politics of the period had a particularly deep impact on Elmira, 115 miles southeast of Attica. First, Elmira was, from many perspectives, "another potential Attica." The connections with Attica were more real for those who worked or were incarcerated in the prisons: prison guards and administrators from Elmira Correctional

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<sup>55</sup> For a more complete narrative and analysis of the Attica Rebellion, see Wicker, Tom. 1975. *A Time to Die*. New York: New York Times Book Co.; Attica Talking History Project from Pacifica (<http://www.talkinghistory.org/attica/index.html>), and the McKay Commission report and hearings, audio archives of which are available at the Attica Talking History Project.

Facility were called to Attica in the dawn of the rebellion as part of the initial emergency response team. This circuit of exchange was not unfamiliar to security workers in Elmira's prisons and prisoners. On account of the seniority system, many corrections officers were (and still are) assigned to prisons in other parts of the state until they have enough seniority to pick their "home town jail." Some men, including a young guard who was one of the hostages who escaped, were commuting to Attica from Elmira for work in the prison. This Elmira's experience as a hostage provided the local angle on the story for the *Star-Gazette*. At a tavern near the prison immediately after being released, he describes taking three straight shots of alcohol, still wrapped only in a towel, and says that he was released "for some reason" by a "Muslim." Another voice from Elmira that echoed through papers across the state was that of the facility's Roman Catholic Chaplain, Fr. James Collins. Speaking at the memorial for guards slain at Attica, he called for the creation of a separate "maximum security institution for about 150 hardcore, militant, Marxist revolutionaries" and predicted more rebellions similar to what happened at Attica if these individuals weren't isolated (Phillips 1971). While this sentiment was echoed by many more people within the prison administration, Collins' role as a religious figure that ministered to inmates made this position more controversial and reflected the conservatism of the Catholic Church and many of the white ethnic men who served as guards in Elmira's prisons. Furthermore, with the backdrop of Elmira behind him, the DOCS Commissioner Harold Butler described guards hindered by lack of money to do their jobs, inmates from broken families, and a "new breed of militant inmate" an unveiled belief that a non-white menace was threatening the prisons (ABC News 1971). The potentialities of Elmira as a site of rebellion were

viewed with great trepidation by workers and by the Department of Correctional Services administration.

On September 11, 1971, the third day of the Rebellion, guards at the Elmira Correctional Facility threatened to call a job action. (It appears that this was in response to a set of demands by the whole state-wide union, but the demands were put forth at a press conference in Elmira). The call for a job action was a direct response to the Attica uprising, but the staff of 265 corrections officers at Elmira was also protesting recent changes in the prison as a place of work. The COs argued that the recent passage of a law that limited the scope of their ability to use force against inmates led to disciplinary issues. In order to "avoid future Attica's," the union representatives for the guards sought more training in the control of inmates. Moreover, the guards wanted the state to rehire workers who had recently been laid off due to fiscal austerity measures. The hint of a job action directly preceding the Attica Rebellion, in a way that is eerily repeated at Southport twenty years later albeit under vastly different political circumstances, is rarely discussed in the history of the Rebellion at the Attica Correctional Facility. The guards included some of the inmates' demands in their public comments, focusing on how some improvements in conditions might make the prisoners more manageable. In public comments in response to the rebellion and the union's potential job action, the president of AFSCME, Jerry Wurf, said, "[t]his business of toilet paper every three weeks, one shower a week, and bad clothing and shoes, does not contribute to a reasonable environment (Phalon 1971).<sup>56</sup> During the

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<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Hill (2011) argues that the AFSCME's discussion of inmate demands at this time represented a shift in tactics for the union and its members, who generally did not place inmates' social needs on their own list of demands.

Attica Rebellion, the fault lines of race and class, the hierarchies of waged work and unemployment boiled to the surface. A job action by the guards at AFSCME -- itself a melding of populist social movements and retrograde business unionism -- worked as part of a reactionary social coalition of guards to the politics of racial justice coming forth at Attica.

### **“Solidarity with the brothers inside”**

For the growing social movements for Black Power, the Elmira Correctional Facility, the "former reformatory that now [was] a big town prison" was equally a symbol of Attica's failures (*Elmira Star-Gazette* 1971a). Quite literally in the shadow of the Elmira Correctional Facility, the week following the Attica rebellion, on a Thursday afternoon, September 17, 1971, students from Corning Community College about twenty miles west of Elmira organized a demonstration in front of the Elmira Correctional Facility. The group of about fifty people, mostly young African Americans, identified in the *Star-Gazette* as a coalition between the Black Students Union and the Committee to Support Political Prisoners who sought to “show solidarity with the brothers inside” and to “express concern about the intolerable conditions-- (i.e. beatings and solitary confinement) that prisoners, especially Blacks and Puerto Ricans, are subjected to” (*Elmira Star-Gazette* 1971b). The students carried signs that said “Free Angela and Ruchell,” demanding the release of political prisoners in California.<sup>57</sup> Other signs read “Jail the Rich, Free

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<sup>57</sup> This refers to the campaigns to free political prisoners Angela Davis and Ruchell Cinque Magee. Magee has been incarcerated since 1963, when he began serving a life sentence for charges related to a fight. While incarcerated, Magee was serving as a witness for a fellow inmate at a trial at a Marin County Courthouse when a young man, Jonathan Jackson, brother to Soledad Brother George Jackson, entered the court room guns ablaze and took five hostages in an attempt to free the defendant. The judge, the DA, and two prisoners from San Quentin were

the Poor.” When they reached “The Hill,” the demonstrators were greeted by twenty-five police officers from the federal, state, county, and city levels and three corrections officers who stood behind barricades blocking every exit of the prison, but the demonstrators were apparently not arrested (*Elmira Star-Gazette* 1971d). Prison officials closed all of the windows, hoping that they could avoid “any inmates hearing chants shouted by demonstrators” (*Elmira Star-Gazette* 1971c). Harold Butler, the state’s deputy commissioner of Correctional Services, told the paper, “I don’t mind them demonstrating downtown, but deliberately agitating right in front of the reformatory upsets me” (*Elmira Star-Gazette* 1971d). The coverage in the *Star-Gazette*, that included an editorial denouncing the march, interviews with the group's campus advisor, and one solely devoted to listing the group’s plans and platforms, including text from a leaflet handed out by the group outlining their plans to do outreach to the Black community, was both rumination on and reaction to the Black Power movement's growth in Elmira.

A Black Power march and rally was unprecedented in Elmira. While this was a rather small action (I would argue that any protest in a small city tends to make a big impression), this demonstration connects a segment of Elmira’s populace with a powerful national counternarrative about the Attica Rebellion and racial justice. Despite the powerful role of the city’s only paper in shaping the interpretation of both the demonstration and the rebellion itself, this was a moment of dissonance with the state project of incarceration. These students were

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killed in the incident. An activist and a member and future presidential candidate of the Communist Party, Angela Davis was charged with supplying the young Jackson with weapons. After an international campaign for her release, she was cleared of these charges. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/08/home/davis-campaign.html>.

challenging the idea that this town placidly and righteously defended itself as a place that accepts the role of policing and confining poor people—a prison town. The group instead marked Elmira as a place of injustice. Following Steven Gregory’s *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place*, in which he noted the importance of looking at race and racism through an analysis of a set of relationships of power, I look at how, despite having a substantial African American population since before the Civil War, Elmira (like many places in the United States), was considered a “white” city with a Black ghetto -- Slabtown on the East side of Elmira (Gregory 1999).<sup>58</sup> The normative whiteness of Elmira, as a small American city and an American prison town, casts African American students as outsiders. They, like the Black and Puerto Rican inmates in the prison, are not “*from here.*” The space, both literal physical space and intellectual space, for this organizing to occur was no doubt in part spurred by an increased access to community college for poor students and students of color through open enrollment and affirmative action programs. The expansion of this program in the area represents another brush with the national movements for racial equality, both the Civil Rights and Black Power social movements. That the waves of change and protest reached the foothills of the Elmira Correctional Facility only speaks to the strength of these movements at this point in history. I found no evidence in my research that a demonstration like this one has been replicated in the forty years since the Attica Rebellion.

Unlike residents of the town of Attica, many Elmirans have only faded memories of the

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<sup>58</sup> Elmira's Black population has been two to four percent of the total population of the county, largely concentrated in a small part of the city (U.S. Census 1850; 1900; 1950).

Attica Rebellion. (This is less true for Correction Officers at Elmira, some of whom worked at Attica before their transfer to their hometown jail. Gordon Gaughn, for example, marked Attica as an important historical turning point for a time when "real bad asses" flooded the prisons and their work became "all about inmate rights.") And yet, the memory of the death and violence at Attica continues to haunt penal policy in New York State, most distinctly through the expansion of solitary confinement as an ordinary tool of incarceration in New York State.

### **Uprising at Southport Correctional Facility, May 1991**

The Southport Correctional Facility was built in 1988 during the massive prison construction boom of Governor Mario Cuomo's administration (I discuss this process in detail in chapter two), it was built as a maximum-security facility. In January of 1991, as part of a new state experiment in corrections, the prison began a conversion to what the state calls a "punitive segregation" facility, meaning that every man is held in a solitary cell called a Special Housing Unit. While there are a section of solitary cells designed for disciplinary confinement in many New York State maximum security prisons (referred to as the "SHU", "The Box," or "The Hole") it was a penal experiment to design a prison specifically to house 600 inmates all in cells by themselves for twenty-three hours a day, with an hour a day of recreation in a metal "exercise pen." Born in the wreckage of the Attica Rebellion, this "no frills" prison finally took seed when proposed by the 1983 New York State Assembly Republican Task Force on Correctional Crisis (of which the Elmira representative, George Winner, was the chairperson).<sup>59</sup> It was seen as a

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<sup>59</sup> At the hearing following the uprising, the commissioner insisted that Southport is not a

budget cutting strategy for the gargantuan and growing corrections budget. According to this taskforce, holding all of the inmates deemed “troublesome” at a single location with severely restricted services meant that fewer workers were required to staff “excess” programs. By May 1991, there were 650 men living in solitary confinement at Southport and an additional 150 cadre inmates (men in general population) that served as cooks, cleaners, etc. Because Southport was originally built as a maximum-security prison the metal cages designed for recreation were built on top of basketball courts. The speedy and haphazard conversion from maximum security to an all SHU facility was at the heart of the events that unraveled.

On May 28, 1991, just after the prison was fully converted to an all solitary confinement facility, fifty-three<sup>53</sup> men in the A-Block of the Southport Correctional Facility broke through their exercise cages using homemade knives and took four correction officers hostage. The uprising at Southport again thrust Elmira the prison town into the spotlight. The prisoners asked specifically for a TV reporter from the Binghamton television station, WBNG CBS Channel 12, who stayed through the night to tape and then air their grievances, conducting interviews with the inmates through a 30 thirty-foot fence. Once these grievances were broadcast to the rest of the inmate population at Southport Correctional Facility, the inmates freed their hostages (Wade

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“maxi-max” jail, which according to him, “connotes maximum security and maximum programs” and not the “no-frills” Southport punitive segregation. However, in Elmira, I heard the prison referred to as both a supermax and maxi-max facility, and the individual cells referred to as SHUs or Special Housing Units, or “the box.” These differences in how people refer to Southport seem to follow a broader debate about the purpose of solitary confinement as a tool of social control and/or punishment (see New York State Commission of Correction 1991).

1991). The stand-off lasted just over twenty six hours (Pfeiffer 1991).

The following summer, members of the state review panel could not agree on what happened that day at the Southport Correctional Facility, or more specifically, who was to blame. Indicative of the isolated nature of the riot and the relative absence of social movements of prisoners and their allies, there was, unlike Attica, no eye-witness literature created by the incarcerated men who took their captors hostage. In the testimony from Corrections insiders and area politicians, this uprising was treated as a labor-management conflict. Union leaders describe a poorly constructed, ill-managed and understaffed conversion to an all Special Housing Unit facility as the primary cause for the “incident” and a stressful work environment more generally. One nurse administrator testified that “it was his combat experience in Vietnam more than any other in his twenty years in the health profession which best describes his every day working environment at Southport (*New York State Commission on Corrections* 1991: 35). Department of Correctional Services administrators, on the other hand, saw the uprising as precipitated by a job action by Corrections Officers who wanted the all SHU experiment at Southport to fail. Administrators testified that one officer was moving and unshackling inmates in a yard while three other men who should have been assisting the CO who became the first hostage were eating in an “informal lunch situation.” Three workers going to the break room to take a break and eat was indicative, at least to the administrators, of a lack of cooperation with the new work conditions. In short, DOCS officials accused Southport COs of engaging in a work slowdown. In the public hearing, Commissioner Coughlin "concluded his testimony by saying that a correction officer's job becomes routine after a short while. Southport was a situation where the inmates

capitalized on that boredom and routine” (New York State Commission on Corrections 1991: 9).

The shifting political alignments between 1971 and 1991 between prison administrators, Elmira public officials, COs and their union, and prisoners and prisoners' advocates highlight changes in prisons in the same period. The tension within the prisons, then, between bureaucrats and rank and file workers arose as a tension in city politics over the future of Elmira as a prison town. When compared with the response to Attica, which led to a large increase in salaries for Correction Officers and in services for prisoners, the uprising at Southport occurred in the context of the shrinking of public resources and responsibilities. Shortly before the uprising at Southport, DOCS announced a plan to lay off 296 Corrections Officers, the first layoffs in twenty years, largely as a result of the increase in the use of solitary confinement. Twenty years after Attica and the urban crisis, Elmira had undergone serious changes; it was now a place deficient in federal funding for urban development and wanting for jobs. (I go into the processes which led Elmira to woo prison expansion for the purposes of job creation at length in chapter two.) Perhaps not surprisingly then, the mayor of Elmira, state Senators and union leaders representing both security and civilian workers spoke out against the "no frills" prison under the auspices of protecting the safety of the workers *and* the jobs created by the construction of Southport. Local politicians were clear in their request that the Department of Correctional Services return Southport to a general population prison, and brought DOCS a petition signed by 8000 residents of the county to this effect. Tom Tranter, the County Executive, took it upon himself to speak for the entire city: “the community feels a strong sense of betrayal because of the conversion of the facility,” adding that, “[i]t is now time for DOCS, the officers’ union and the

community to work together to restore the sense of partnership that once existed” (New York State Commission on Corrections 1991). State Assemblyman George Winner uttered words he might not utter again: “Management failed at Southport, not officers” (New York State Commission on Corrections 1991). The new penal experiment at Southport was viewed as a threat to the jobs, and to an apparently lesser degree, the safety of the officers. The will and needs of the “community,” as decreed by Elmira's politicians, were tightly hinged to the demands of the Correctional Officers' union, NYSCOPBA, which was at odds of the Department of Correctional Services mandate for cheaper prisons and more docile inmates.

This rebuke of the Department of Correctional Services and Governor's stripped down prison facility created an alignment between COs and advocates for prisoners. Other than testimony of some civilian workers regarding cuts in services such as mental health and education to inmates, at the official hearing on the subject, only the lawyers from Prisoners Legal Services suggested that inmates' legitimate grievances and, indeed, the nature of this kind of punishment, were the basis of the unrest. The radical social movement politics that shaped the leaders of the Attica Rebellion have essentially dissipated from American life, but Prisoners Legal Services, based out of the upstate New York town of Ithaca, about thirty-five miles northeast of Elmira, is a remnant of a social movements that precipitated Attica, having been created to deal with inmate problems in NYS prisons after Attica. An attorney from the organization:

*[T]estified that the real cause of the May 28 incident was not that guards were away from their posts, but that conditions were intolerable for some inmates. A significant number of complaints have been received to the effect that staff at Southport don't make their rounds,*

*that medical staff do not come by each day as required by law, and that mental health visits are insufficient. Inmates also are routinely complaining about a lack of sanitation at the facility* (New York State Commission on Corrections 1991: 49).

Additionally, the director of the organization pointedly stated that the prison should be returned to a general population prison on account of the fact that, “[t]his extreme punishment only increases hostility and frustration” (New York State Commission on Corrections 1991: 53).

Prisoners Legal Services observers were in the Southport prison (along with the entire Republican Committee on Corrections, chaired by George Winner) at the beginning of May of 1991 and noted that increasing violence between inmates and guards was seen as a problem by both Correction Officers and prisoners. Prisoners Legal Services described a lack of regular (state-required) medical visits and ubiquitous plastic shields over the bars of cell windows, intended to keep inmates from throwing things (namely urine and feces) at guards, as limiting air flow for inmates.

When the uprising began, despite "local" conflicts with the State Department of Correctional Services, many of Elmira's services were geared towards aiding the work of the prison. Two local hospitals, St. Joseph's Hospital, a local, private Catholic hospital, and Arnot-Ogden Medical Center, a secular private hospital, treated guards who received stab wounds during the initial fight. (It is a common occurrence that men incarcerated at Elmira and Southport receive treatment from one of the area's two hospitals.) The Chemung County Sheriff drove the wife of a Correction Officer being held hostage to the prison to wait there for her husband. A local ambulance company, Erway ambulance, had five of the company's ambulances on stand-by to transport victims of violence.

Unlike the mayor and State Senator Winner, the District Attorney after the uprising chose to quickly shift focus away from the safety of the prison to the crimes that were committed by the inmates during the riot. There was cooperation with this project between law enforcement officials both in Elmira and at the state level. The investigation into the uprising began with Chemung County District Attorney, James Hayden, with the help of state police and a DOCS inspector. Despite the fact that local courts have no control over the day-to-day functioning of the prisons, the Chemung County District Attorney is charged with prosecuting the crimes that occur within the prison. In this situation, county law enforcement officials worked with the Department of Correctional Services inspector and the state police to carry out the investigation. These actions are a part of the normal legal activity for the Chemung County DA and local defense attorneys (Pfeiffer 1991).

### **Good for the jobs?**

When the prisoners were troubling Elmira's waters, some locals began to question the extent to which the prisons were good for Elmira. One *Star-Gazette* writer's weekly column focused on how the internationally reported incident at Southport could harm the image of Elmira to outsiders. A political writer with a Sunday column, Wayne Price saw out-of-town reporters waiting eagerly to report on another Attica as a potential threat to the already stymied development efforts of a poor, broken city. Leery of the legacy of the Attica Rebellion, the Chemung County Executive and the president of the Chemung County Chamber of Commerce noted that when potential investors "see prison standoffs in a place like Southport—and the

decrepit Elmira Correctional Facility is no Marriott either—the last place they would probably want to locate is anywhere near here” (Price 1991). The president of the Chamber of Commerce, however, says that doesn’t think it will stick like at Attica because, “[f]ortunately we didn’t have any loss of life and it was of shorter duration. Our hope is that we can put this behind us and really get back into building the image of this community in a positive way” (Price 1991). The message of the editorials is not get rid of the prison, or even to work toward prison reform. Rather, the editors believe that the best interest of the community is a well-guarded, well-funded prison whose riots are buried in the graveyard of history.

Unfortunately for the town's prison boosters, Elmira’s image from the “outside” reflects the harsh realities of the life of a prison town. After an hour discussion of her work as a social worker, working with the poor and incarcerated in Elmira, Sylvia Roth quoted a friend’s succinct analysis of Elmira: “this whole place seems like somebody has their foot on your neck.” Others echoed this same sentiment. A young woman whose student teaching brought her to Elmira said, “I think Elmira just has a reputation that it’s not necessarily a happy place.” While some of this sentiment may be tinged with other “failures” of the place—the high levels of unemployment and increasing poverty, a general sentiment among people from small towns and cities that their city is not as “cool” or exciting as, say, New York—there is some suggestion that this also emerges from Elmira’s role as a prison town.

Roy, a retired CO, remembered animosity towards Elmira as a place when he left: “when I was in the service, I met a kid from New York City, and he found out I was from Elmira, he hated me. He hated me from the day I met him.” As he recalled, a young Italian-American

soldier associated him with Elmira's prison and judged him on account of the work of his hometown. While I was in Elmira for fieldwork, a local judge joked with me that I was “doing my hard time in Elmira,” commenting that when he was in law school in metropolitan New York City others had the same association. He and I, like many others whose schooling or careers had brought them into contact with New York City residents, were accustomed to the knowing look and an “oh, I know Elmira” -- a place whose only public recognition was for its role in New York State’s regime of crime and punishment.

Despite their histories being swept under the rug in Elmira, the legacy of rebellion lives on in Elmira. Jack Johnson spoke about his work on a lawsuit brought by the COs held hostage during the Southport uprising. On account of workers' compensation laws, the COs could not sue their employer for damages. Rather, the CO's brought a products liability case against the fence maker that held the company accountable for the uprising because the bolts that held together the fenced in exercise yards were insufficient as they went up too fast. After pending for twelve years, the case was settled out of court. The uprising at Southport arguably left its mark on the COs held hostage at Southport; Mr. Johnson later represented three of the four men on DUI charges. While many in Elmira regard the prisons as an economic safety net for the area-- "thank God for the prisons-- because there's nothing else!"-- another question emerged during the Attica Rebellion at the uprising at the Southport Correctional Facility: What does it mean to be a prison town?

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion: Toward a Political Economy of the Carceral state**

By using the prison town as a unit of analysis, I argue in this dissertation that the prison is part of a regime that extends beyond the prison's walls. I demonstrate that despite increasingly intricate fences and barriers aimed at maintaining the separation between the incarcerated men and "free" Elmira, ideas, money, and relationships circulate between increasingly connected places. An ethnographic focus on the prison town, as opposed to the prison as an distinct institution or an arbiter of ghetto relationships, allowed me to delineate the ways in which the prison leaks into the everyday life of the city of Elmira: the circulation of prison monies and state investments, homemade foods brought into prison waiting rooms, doctors at private hospitals caring for state inmates, and the stench of prison brutality brought home to children. Thus, the Elmira Correctional Facilities and the Southport Correctional Facilities are a part of a carceral state, equally political and economic, that makes use of Elmira as a place of confinement.

The stories of prisoners and prison guards in Elmira are not narratives of grandeur; they are, in Gilmore's words, "marginal people" making their life voluntarily and by coercion in "marginal lands" (Gilmore 2008: 38). Yet, the work of the prison, inside and out, is not marginal to the function of capitalism. Prison workers in Elmira, and the civilian populations that supply everything from milk to toothbrushes and do other forms of support work are a crucial part of making and remaking social inequality. Moreover, as a result of the crises of deindustrialization and as a project aimed at alleviating the poverty of some citizens and not others, Elmirans were recruited to do this work. As a mechanism of social control, prisons organize disorganization, creating and recreating the conditions of poverty in poor Black and Latino neighborhoods. I

show how the policing of Elmira, both in the quotidian and at times of crisis, is inflected with the racial character of control in the prisons. The carceral state heightens the racial inequalities and the resultant criminalization serves as narrative of causation.

I demonstrated how the construction of the maximum security prison in Chemung County in 1988, now called the Southport Correctional Facility, was unabashedly put forth as a jobs program for Elmira, an upstate city undergoing a rapid economic transformation. I described how a growth coalition in Elmira, along with the Department of Correctional Services and the state economic development forces, created the political conditions for a prison to be built in Elmira, New York. Through an examination of the marriage of local and statewide shifts in urban governance and local economic development in prison expansion, I have shown how mass incarceration expands into the lived experience of a prison town. Thus, my research moves beyond studies of the prison as an institution and toward a theory of the prison as a part of a carceral state.

The massive expansion of the New York State prison system was predicated on finding willing host sites for new prisons to be built; these sites, largely in rural areas of central New York and the northernmost counties of the “North Country” were chosen on account of their impoverished postindustrial or farming economies. Through negotiations that largely left out the citizens of Elmira, the construction of Southport Correctional Facility was imagined in Albany, financed and built with money raised through bonds and welcomed by a small group of business people, politicians, and local media in the town of Southport and across Chemung County. The “fat new payroll” introduced into the area by the Department of Correctional Services jobs – the rising tide which promised to lift Elmira’s collective boat — has failed to produce a dynamic

local economy in Elmira. Indeed, my data builds on the work of scholars who demonstrate how the prisons are an industry that drains local municipalities. This includes the large amount of local land in the service of the state and not-for-profits which functions as a drain on Chemung County's tax base. Moreover, the legacy of a prison built and maintained in Elmira has a legacy that endures in poor Black and Latino neighborhoods across New York State. What happens in Elmira does not stay in Elmira. For many New Yorkers, the experience of Elmira is one written on the body: Elmira exists in the memories of their incarceration and marks their reentry into a society.

The construction of the Southport Correctional Facility in 1988 and the continued maintenance of the Elmira Correctional Facility as projects of economic development have failed to alleviate the downward trend in standard of living for most of Elmira's workers. Prisons *did not* and *could not* replace manufacturing as a centerpiece of the economy. The social crises created by the loss of manufacturing employment, which were at the same time economic crises and political crises, were far-reaching. In this period, Elmira lost nearly half its population and working people's lives were thrown in chaos; the "solutions" put forth by New York State's economic development agency—prisons and enterprise zones—reflected a lack of interest in seeing that Elmira actually had a future. While the prisons have functioned as a drain on the municipal life of Elmira, a small niche population, those employed as Correction Officers and civilian workers such as teachers and counselors in the prisons, have benefited from the relatively high wages and the stability provided by union jobs in civil service. This niche population is both reflective of and reproductive of historical labor segmentation in the U.S.: correction officers at Elmira Correctional Facility and Southport Correctional Facility are ninety-seven percent white men and have the educational access and literacy skills necessary to pass the

civil service test. As my data indicates, prison workers are often respected participants in local politics who make an important tactical alliance with area business owners and politicians. These three groups of stakeholders form a bloc of power in Elmira's politics. The presence of a large number of COs in Elmira has increased what one informant called a "law and order mentality" in Elmira, most notably in the police department and the courts, but in addition in grassroots formations such as the Guardian Angels. The divisions within working people in Elmira are reinforced through the expansion of the carceral state: poor Elmirans, particularly poor people of color, are not only left out of the waged-based benefits of a prison economy, but subject to heightened levels of criminalization of the carceral state, on the state level and through the day-to-day policing of Elmira. In this sense, prisons structure inequality by expanding opportunity for some working people and eliminating opportunities for others through their increased surveillance and control by and through an expanded carceral state.

The eagerness with which some Elmirans embraced the prison as a source of jobs belies the disordered lived experience of a prison town. My research also shows that prison work is weighed with considerable contradictions. While the more comfortable architecture of life created by prison work (and civil service work more generally) was and continues to be welcomed by many Elmirans, many workers indicate that prison work is considered a job of last resort. First, some Correction Officers described a feeling of shame when wearing their uniform in public and a reluctance to talk about their work in public. COs talked about feeling misunderstood by other law enforcement agents and by their peers in Elmira. The hazards, both emotional and physical, of their work and the feelings of isolation may add to a sense of brotherhood amongst Correction Officers. Thus, being a correction officer is often regarded as a good job as a career, but undesirable work. The conditions of incarceration, as a job and a

punishment, and the nature of security work in particular must be at the center of any discussion of prisons as projects of economic development for American cities and towns in the future and regarding the proliferation of incarceration as a tool of social control.

### **Policing the Poor**

This study provides evidence of a growing discourse linking crime and race to the prisons in Elmira, manifested through the idea that the families of inmates are moving to Elmira to be closer to their loved ones in the prison. My data demonstrates that while there may be a handful of people who return to Elmira following their incarceration there or wives who move to Elmira to be closer to their husbands, it is negligible as a pattern of migration. Furthermore, my data indicates that other forces, social and economic, may be driving a migration of poor people out of the “booming” cities like New York; the growing concentration of capital in New York is forcing dislocations of the poor through gentrification and of middle income workers in search of more home for their money, to the southern U.S. but also to smaller cities across New York State. Elmira, is changing, but how? The city is increasingly poor despite millions of dollars in wages from the prisons. Building on my research that highlights the growing “law and order” mentality in Elmira, I showed how Elmira police officers believe that they are policing formerly incarcerated people, but are rather policing the poor. These findings build on and contribute to generations of research about the policing of inequality in American cities, particularly the criminalization of African Americans as a “dangerous” class.

In examining these claims, I show how Wacquant’s “ghetto and prison” mesh as an inadequate theorization of the connections between poverty, race, and prisons. Rather than producing and reproducing a hypermarginality of African Americans and the isolating experiences of poor neighborhoods, I argued that the experiences of poverty and racism are at the

very heart of the American experience. Across varied geographies and varied urban and rural landscapes, the criminal justice system structures human access to goods, services, and freedom. This study provides evidence that social inequalities based on race, class, and gender, are produced and reproduced everyday through the prisons as mechanisms of political and economic control. The unequal distribution of resources—at the core of the maintenance of capitalism—is naturalized in the architecture of punishment.

### **Prison Towns: Past, Present, Future**

Importantly, there has been a sizeable drop in the numbers of people incarcerated in New York State in the last decade due to reforms to the Rockefeller Drug Laws—from nearly 70,000 incarcerated people to 59,000 in 2012. (The declining rate of incarceration in New York can be traced to both the intense lobbying of criminal justice advocates and the atmosphere of fiscal austerity in New York State politics.) Despite pressure from the guards union, NYSCOPBA, and a handful of North Country legislators where many new prisons were built in the 1980s, New York State is now closing prisons. Since 2008, thirteen prisons have been closed by New York State, two under the direction of the Patterson administration, and eleven during the current Cuomo administration. All of the prisons closed were either medium security or minimum security prisons or juvenile facilities. The closure of prisons in New York was a highlight of Cuomo’s State of the State address in January of 2011. Reaching the most emotional pitch of his speech, he thundered, “an incarceration program is not an employment program. If people need jobs, let’s get people jobs. Don’t put other people in prison to give some people jobs. Don’t put other people in juvenile justice facilities to give some people jobs. That’s not what this state is all about and that has to end this session” (Cuomo 2011). Cuomo was using his state of the state

speech to propose an economic development project with its roots in his father's plans of the 1980s, but without the prisons. Mario Cuomo led the growth of the corrections and policing budgets at the expense of social programs; his son took on the project of further dismantling the redistributive state *and* aspects of the security state, namely prisons. Throughout this dissertation, I showed how prisons were construed and constructed as a solution to the loss of manufacturing work in Elmira. I argued that this plan for economic development has, rather than alleviating the economic conditions created for workers in a deindustrialized economy, contributed to an exacerbation of race and class tensions and the materialities of such inequalities in the city of Elmira.

My data demonstrates that many people in Elmira have an uncomfortable relationship with the growth coalition's plan for "helping Elmira out" through the construction of prisons. Prison work is believed to damage people and their relationships and teach racial scripts. Tinged with race, the prison is viewed as a brew of unrest, aggression, and victimization, sometimes of guards and sometimes of prisoners. While the chorus "thank God for the prisons" is still sung in Elmira, there is another verse always sung with it: What *else* would we do? Elmira's two prisons were not the economic cure-all the state said they would be; Elmira remains a poor place with severely limited economic outlook. (Recently, there has been a move to begin drilling for natural gas that eerily echoes the 1980s discussion about prisons.) Given these conclusions, I pose the question: what does the future hold for prison towns across New York State as more prisons are shuttered?

In keeping with his vow to downsize, or as he says, "right-size" New York State's civil service budget, Cuomo called for the closure of the seven prisons in New York State, two in the New York City and the rest across New York State (Kaplan 2011). In exchange for the closure of

prisons and the job loss by the county's workers, Cuomo offered an economic development package valuing \$50 million.<sup>60</sup> Despite Cuomo's exhortation that we "get people jobs," his administration's proposed program for economic recovery in cities and towns where prisons have closed is unlikely to do so. Rather than public money for job creation in the public sphere, Andrew Cuomo, similar to his father, relies on the axiom of the 80s that private business creates jobs and grows the economy. The governor and the Empire State Development agency created a new program specifically for prison towns where a prison is closing: the Economic Transition Program. The program is guided by, and in many ways, replicates, the program of economic development active in the state since the 1980s: tax credits and grants for businesses creating jobs. Based on the site of the prison, rather than a city or a village, the \$50 million dollars for Economic Transition Areas would be available for new businesses creating at least five new jobs within a short distance of the closed prisons (Empire State Development 2011). For example, any new businesses in the area within a ten mile radius of Camp Georgetown in the village of Georgetown in Madison County in rural New York State would be eligible for the credits. Local development advocates doubt that this would bring any new business, considering that similar programs have been in place for years and have attracted little interest.

What is clear from Cuomo's new plan is a sharpening his approach to the role of the state in times of fiscal crisis. During the massive shifts in manufacturing employment in the 1980s, prisons were a critical part of the attempt to "fix" the political economy of New York State; in this current crisis of 2012, closing prisons emerges as a key part of further dismantling the state.

In order to stimulate a politics that eschews the use of prisons as a project of economic

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<sup>60</sup> The job loss by area residents is, at this point, only figurative. The COs at these prisons will not be laid off, but reassigned to other prisons, some of which may require a long commute. Those with higher seniority will have more choices.

development but values the redistributive role of the state, it is necessary to theorize the human links created between prisons and towns that trouble the project of containment and create more humane projects of economic development for cities big and small.

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