The decades-long expansion of the U.S. prison system has captured the public’s imagination. Controversial practices like “stop, question and frisk” coupled with the near ceaseless stream of cell-phone video capturing police brutality almost-always directed against unarmed black Americans has reignited debate on the role of the police and the use of prisons in American public life. The prison even made it to the Oscars. Giving an acceptance speech for the song “Glory,” pop star and soul crooner John Legend remarked, “We live in the most incarcerated nation in the world. There are more black men under correctional control today than there were slaves in 1850.” Notwithstanding the salience of mass incarceration, a conspicuous, yet equally historic development remains hidden in plain sight—the rise of a supervised society. Nearly five million people are on probation or parole (Keable, Maruchalk
and Bonzcar 2015). Millions more are processed through county jails, prison diversion programs, and misdemeanor courts (Huddleson and Marlow 2011; Kholer-Housmann 2013). They overwhelmingly return to disadvantaged “inner-city” and rural-poor neighborhoods, designated “receiving communities” by social service providers (Peck and Theodore 2009). Put simply, community is where the action is, and the prison, despite its place in the public imagination, is just one (comparatively small) part of a vast carceral network (See Figure 1).

***FIGURE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE***

Returning prisoners face myriad social problems, ranging from poverty and social isolation to unemployment and premature death (Patterson 2013; Western et al. 2015). Their punishment, however, extends far “beyond the legal offender” (Comfort 2007). Their loved-ones are drawn into the penal dragnet, along with the universe of third-party actors, e.g. their employers, landlords, friends and social service providers, who de facto manage them in formal and informal ways (Author date). Formally, despite lacking the capacity to do so effectively, the state contracts social service providers to address former prisoners’ needs (Taxman, Perdoni and Harrison 2013). Families and a varied host of third-party actors are left to pick up the pieces, operating as an informal social safety net (deVuono-powell et al. 2016; Author date). These actors are endowed with inordinate power in the lives of the formerly incarcerated due to practices of social and legal exclusion. To grasp their full implications of this new social arrangement, one must reimagine prisoner reentry itself.

Prisoner reentry is most often defined as an event that almost all prisoners experience or the complex process of returning home from prison (Travis, Solomon and Waul 2001; Petersilia 2009). This article instead presents reentry as a social institution, originating from and occurring across varied sites of confinement and care. Doing so captures how institutional arrangements and the practices, interactions, and actors that converging within it “bring into being [the ex-offender], a new kind of person, conceived of and experienced as a
way to be a person” in the social world (Hacking 2007:2). Like any other social institution, e.g., the family, work, or education, arrests, incarcerations, and repeated rounds of reentry are routine and conspicuous social processes experienced by an appreciable segment of the population. In this case, black, Latino, and increasingly poor white Americans can expect to experience reentry repeatedly over the life-course. And, like other social institutions, reentry classifies social actors and stratifies resources accordingly (Wacquant 2016).

Given the number of people returning home each year from, and the costs (material and symbolic) of confinement, prisoner reentry has become a national policy priority (Travis 2009). The reentry program, as the nation’s primary, most visible and celebrated response to mass incarceration (Petersilia 2004; Western 2008; White House 2016), has thus become a key, if under-analyzed, organizational form. Like any other human service organization, reentry programs reflect, acts back upon, and in part produce changes in social policy, the political economy, and culture (Mcquarrie and Marwell 2009). They are hubs of activity where the “ex-offender,” the term most commonly used to designate a formerly incarcerated person, encounters the state through daily interactions with street level service providers (Lipski 2010). Their ascendance and proliferation can be traced to the decline of the rehabilitative ideal, an all-out assault on state intervention to address black and brown poverty, and the devolution of social policy, which shifted the burden of care for the poor from federal to local nonprofit actors (Author date; Haney 2010).iii Their “highly scripted” practices are designed to achieve policy objectives [with] origins in the political process,” yet they are contingent on the needs and actions of their clients (Lipski 2010: xvii). Consequently, reentry programs are ideal sites to investigate social life at the intersection of punishment, poverty, and social welfare policy.

Capturing some of the action “beyond [prison] bars” (Haney 2010:15), this article draws from a larger ethnography of prisoner reentry in Chicago. It takes seriously David
Garland’s (1990) admonition to reimagine punishment as a social institution and extends Patricia Martin’s (2004) institutional theory, revealing reentry’s operation as an engine of social inequality that produces a new human kind—the ex-offender. After discussing the article’s theoretical framework, research design and methods, I present data from observations at a residential prisoner reentry program. Moving beyond the reentry organization, I advance Ian Hacking’s (1986) theory of “people making” to reveal how discourses, practices and interactions “make up” the ex-offender, a novel “human kind” emergent in the carceral age. Locating the genesis of the ex-offender at the intersection of policy, practice, and interaction, this article contributes a microsociology of punishment, anti-poverty policy, and the state.

Prisoner Reentry and its Discontents

Some 600,000 people return from state and federal prisons each year, joining 4.7 million already on probation or parole (Keable, Maruchalk and Bonzcar 2015). Millions more are processed through jails, prison diversion programs, problem solving and misdemeanor courts, while 19.8 million are estimated to have a felony conviction (Huddleson and Marlow 2011; Kholer-Housmann 2013; Shannon et al. 2013). Roughly a third U.S. adults have criminal records, easily accessible through electronic background checks (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2014), but despite its scale, the hallmark of mass incarceration is the targeting of population groups (Garland 2001).

Empirical studies have demonstrated the especially deleterious impact of mass incarceration on poor people of color in the United States. Brame et al. (2012) find that 49 percent of black men will be arrested by their 23rd birthdays, as opposed to 38 percent of whites, while Bonzcar (2003) estimates that one in three black men, one in six Latinos, one in
18 black women, and one in 45 Latinas will be incarcerated in their lifetime, compared with one in 17 white men and one in 111 white women. Similarly, Pettit and Western (2004) find 60 percent of black male high school dropouts, and 30 percent of those who graduate will be incarcerated.

If incarceration is a life course event for poor black and brown people in the United States (Pettit and Western 2004), so too is the cycle of (re) arrest, (re) incarceration, and repeated rounds of reentry. Of 400,000 prisoners released across 30 states, 67 percent were re-arrested within three years, and 77 percent within five. A third of this group were re-arrested within six months and half within 12, while 44 percent were arrested 10 or more times. Those released are re-arrested frequently and in short order, spending hours to days in a detention center or lock-up facility, to weeks, months, or years in a jail or prison. Local data bring these trends into sharper focus. In Illinois, a state with 45,000 inmates, there is a 1:1 ratio of admitted and discharged prisoners (Peck and Theodore 2009). Over 17,000 prisoners return to Chicago each year, and half of them to six chronically poor, racially segregated, and under-employed neighborhoods out of 77 Chicago Community Areas (Vigne et al. 2003). Given the costs of incarceration, fiscal and otherwise, policy makers have turned their attention to prisoner reentry (Travis 2009).

Leading criminologists define prisoner reentry as “the process of leaving prison and returning to society” (Travis et al. 2001:1). Petersilia (2009) expands this definition, highlighting the role of organizations, the process of reintegration, and the outcomes of released prisoners. This work reveals the impact of incarceration on the life chances of the criminalized poor, yet their hardships are most often interpreted as a human capital deficiency (Author date; Hackett 2013). Holding employment and recidivism as gold standards in program evaluation (Gottschalk 2015), a cognitive-behaviorally inspired evidence-base has emerged on the effective treatment of the ex-offender. Reentry programs attempt to help ex-
offenders avoid crime and gain and maintain work. Recidivism and criminal desistance, however, are not neatly linked (McNeil et al. 2012). Nor are the soft skills economists associate with labor market success and employment (Author date). Even the literature on “collateral consequences” tells us little about how reentry is experienced. To capture the full implications of prisoner reentry, one must move beyond the evidence base and investigate the routine experiences of the ex-offender as they transition home.

On Punishment and Vulnerability

Scholars of crime and punishment have documented the social and legal exclusion of formerly incarcerated people. Recently, the American Bar Association (2013) compiled a database listing over 48,000 laws, regulations, and administrative penalties targeting people with criminal records. These restrictions, which vary across states, include 1,964 entries for “family and domestic rights,” 16,550 for “occupational and professional licenses,” and 25,864 under “employment.” Kaiser (2016:123) operationalizes these sanctions as “hidden sentences,” “punishment[s] imposed by law as a direct result of criminal status, but not part of a formally recognized, judge-issued sentence.” Such restrictions, which are unique to people with criminal records, limit social, civic, and political participation and have equally profound informal effects.

The precarious legal position of the ex-offender renders them subject to the vagaries of the labor market, the discretion of social service providers, and the kindness of strangers, yet simultaneously undesirable candidates for help. The stakes of offering them care is simply too high. A loved one may be evicted for housing an ex-offender, while employers, landlords, and social service providers may suffer lawsuits or reputation loss if they lease to or employ them (May 1995; Thacher 2008; Dolnick 2012; DeVuono-powell et al. 2016). Subsequently, to employ, lease property, provide services or overlook a mistake is often construed as a
favor, an action above and beyond reasonable expectations given one’s social position (author date). While such “favors” have serious consequences for well-meaning helpers, the stakes are even higher for the ex-offender. A failed drug test, an argument with a partner, or a misunderstanding with a case worker could warrant a trip back to prison, a bout with street homelessness, or restricted access to food, work, healthcare, or family visitation (Author date). This combination of precarity and derision amplifies the stakes of every interaction. The ex-offender must engage with members of public in ways that convince them they have “changed their lives (Author date; See also Maruna 2001). Unlike stereotype threat, where one carries the burden of disconfirming negative assumptions about their social group (Steele 2010), the ex-offender cannot credibly signal their freedom from criminality. They have, after all, been convicted of a crime. To elicit support, the ex-offender must convince others that they have been “transformed” (Author date). That is, that they have taken responsibility for both their presumed criminality and the dire social circumstances they face. This signals that participants not just “made good” (Maruna 2001), but that they are worth the risks associated with helping them. The state’s reliance on community-based actors signposts a larger process of devolution, where the responsibility to integrate the ex-offender into the economy, civil society, and culture is off-loaded onto community-based actors and organizations (Haney 2010; Martin and Price 2016), transforming urban and rural sociality.

Prisoner Reentry as a Social Institution

Gender scholars have considerably advanced our understanding of similar processes, highlighting the institutional dynamics of (mostly) women’s prisons, halfway houses, and drug treatment programs. They lay bare the stakes of punishment in the responsibilization of formerly incarcerated women and the embodiment of gendered identities given racialized discourses on crime, deviance and dependence (Haney 2010; McCorkel 2013; McKim 2008
and 2014). Paradoxically, there are far fewer ethnographies of men’s reentry (for exceptions, see Author date; Haluska 2015; Mijs 2016). Furthermore, beyond theories of social control and the important work on the production of gendered selves, little is known about reentry’s broader implications. To grasp what prisoner reentry produces and its role in the lifeworld’s of the raced and criminalized poor, one must re-imagine what it is and how it operates.

In her work on gender and institutional theory, Patricia Martin (2004:1256–59) presents social institutions as “profoundly social,” “constituted of people,” and consisting of enduring rules, meanings, and social positions. Distinguished by their practices, their operations and legitimating ideologies are “internalized by group members as identities and selves, and expressed as personalities,” yet they remain “inconsistent, contradictory … rife with conflict” and prone to change (2004:1557). Constitutive with the individuals operating within them, social institutions are “entwined with the state” and other institutions, and therefore cannot be studied in a vacuum (2004:1558). Prisoner reentry has all of these attributes. It is a profoundly social, routine experience for poor black, Latino, and increasingly white men, with enduring positions, labels, practices, and expectations, which are internalized as identities and selves. It operates across other institutions, e.g., the law, healthcare, and the family, and is co-constitutive with the people who operate within it. It is linked with the state, defined here as the political associations endowed with the power to govern, classify, and distribute resources. Its daily operations, trajectories, and the classifications it imposes are supported, constrained, and modified by public policy, philanthropy, and the state of art on the effective management of a politically defined target population. As such, it classifies social actors and stratifies resources, “making up” the ex-offender, a novel human kind (see Hacking 2007).

Making Up the “Ex-offender”
Hacking (2007) acknowledges that “people making” has no standard process. He, however, offers a framework with five interactive elements: *people, classifications, institutions, knowledge, and experts*. These elements converge during prisoner reentry, making up the ex-offender as a new human kind, that is, a new way to be a person in the carceral age. First, there are millions of people *classified* as “ex-offenders.” Although the term ex-offender dates back to at least the 1800s, it was first used in a published congressional hearing in 1969 (91 H.R. 11956), it first appeared in a published court opinion in 1971 (State v. Rowley), and it has been since widely adopted. Recent contestation over its use in favor of “person centered language” (e.g. returning citizen, formerly incarcerated person) to allay its perceived effects provide some evidence of its ubiquity (Mason 2016).

Second, prisoner reentry is itself a *social institution* comprised of people interacting within sites of coercion and care, like parole offices, day reporting agencies, alternative courts, and human service agencies, in between their jail and prison stays. The unique relationship of the ex-offender with the law make them uniquely vulnerable to the whims of these third parties who decide where they live, work, and socialize. Third, the practices taking place within these institutions are shaped by (often stereotypical) *knowledge* about the ex-offender. This includes an evidence-base on effective reentry practices, and popular accounts of prison life and the post-prison experience from ex-offender’s themselves. Finally, the ex-offender is the subject of *experts* and new kinds of expertise. Criminologists, public health scholars, sociologists, psychologists, policy makers, social service providers, and ex-offenders who have made good are all considered specialists on prisoner reentry. They draw from, modify and advance scientific and clinical discourses on ex-offender mobility, family life, culture, and psychology.

To say that reentry “makes up” the ex-offender is not to say that formerly incarcerated people did not previously exist. Rather, “people did not experience themselves [as ex-
offenders], they did not interact with their friends, their families, their employers, [or] their counsellors, in this way” (Hacking 2007: 2). In the carceral age, “this [has become] a way to be a person, to experience oneself, to live in society (Hacking 2007:2).” Much like Foucault’s (1977) delinquent, the ex-offender emerges from the discourses, practices, and modes of scientific, clinical and folk inquiry emblematic of the carceral age. Yet while the delinquent is a subpopulation derived from hardened criminals and subject to the control of discreet institutions (i.e. prisons and psychiatric hospitals), the ex-offender is a human kind managed through daily interactions with a vast universe of actors and organizations. The pages that follow demonstrate “people making” at work within one of these organizations, the prisoner reentry program.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To understand the inner working of prisoner reentry and its sociological implications, I conducted a 42-month ethnography of the reentry experience in Chicago. Chicago makes a compelling case study given its social, political, and geographic landscape. It is home to a consortium of 68 prisoner-serving organizations, half of which are faith-based. My research took place between October, 2009 and April, 2013. Findings are drawn from observations at Emmaus Road, a six month, faith-based, residential prisoner reentry program. Emmaus serves 200 men each year who matriculate in groups of 40, depending on bed space. It is well regarded by formerly incarcerated people, reentry staff, and local politicians given its wide programmatic offerings and six decades of service as a model of effective evidence-based practice. Participants complete 12 weeks of programming, which consists of seven, 60 to 90-minute group and individual therapy sessions to prepare the men for work, sobriety, and “pro social” relationships. The remaining time is spent seeking housing and employment.
I conducted observations, participating as a program volunteer three to five days per week for no fewer than four hours each day. By volunteering I was able to access services, leisure activities, and interactions between residents, staff, and other volunteers, while avoiding the power dynamics associated with a more formal role. For example, I did not reward or punish client behavior and no one expected me to. I was not responsible for the men’s service outcomes. In addition, the men were used to volunteers. People from faith communities, businesses, and neighborhood organizations worked onsite, hosting leisure activities and educational workshops as an expression of their ethical commitments. It was also a field placement for social work interns and service learning students. I observed group therapy sessions, leisure activities, and job-training and resident governance meetings. I set up and broke down plastic tables and steel folding chairs, passed out materials, took attendance, and led discussions when asked. I ate with the men in their dining hall and chatted with them in break areas, discussing their lives, their court cases, and anything else they wanted to discuss.

It was not possible for me to establish a causal link between the various social positions I occupied and my reception in the field, but they seemed to matter to my research participants. I was a black, heterosexual male graduate student, father, and husband in my early 30s who grew up poor on Chicago’s Southside. I built instant rapport with men like Lonnie, a 21-year-old black westsider with a young son and a series of girlfriends. His mother, a registered nurse, persuaded him to take college courses. We’d chat about sports, women, or life after prison. During our first encounter, his eyes wide, a smirk on his boyish face, he asked, “Are you a professor?” After explaining my work and the study’s rationale, Lonnie said with a wide smile, “I’mma help the brother do big things.” Likewise Ron, a black man in his late 30s who initially told me, “I’m just glad somebody gives a fuck,” later confided he was pleased to “associate with positive brothers.” Others avoided me altogether.
For example, one middle-aged black man declined to meet with me but called a year after I left the field, asking for a white volunteer’s phone number.

I took notes on a small black pad that I kept in my back pocket. While initially conspicuous, the men embraced my constant note taking. For example, when Ron shared something he thought was insightful, he made writing motions in his palm, saying, “Write this shit down!” I refrained when the men discussed sensitive topics out of respect for the moment, but wrote jottings from memory at the first opportunity. I revisited and expanded those notes at night, drafted narratives, reviewed them each week, and analyzed the data for emergent patterns. I thematically grouped my observations, juxtaposing them with previous findings and the extant literature. Finally, I conducted follow-up interviews with residents to ensure the accuracy of my renderings. The vignettes below represent frequently occurring themes.

FINDINGS: MAKING UP THE “EX-OFFENDER”

Emmaus used reentry services to “change the lives” of group participants, filling skills deficits, addressing presumed addictions, and helping them to hold their criminal proclivities at bay (author date). Group work, the lynch pin of the program, was designed to get “gut level” (McKim 2008), refashioning and, in some cases, producing an “authentic self” (McKim 2008; McCorkel 2013). Through interactions, group work teaches participants to become what I will call “good ex-offenders,” those who acknowledge the structural barriers they face but address them through taking on an ethic of self-improvement and community wellbeing largely directed at people “like them,” e.g. other group participants, their families and community members. To do so, they must master their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to negative social situations, which, according to staff, required strength of will and submission to a lifelong process of introspection and change (Author date).”
describe this as the activation of one’s “will to transform,” ix a two stage process in which participants first identify their character flaws, sharing their trials and triumphs with others, and then “give back” to their “communities,” performing acts of kindness, and helping others to recognize their need for change. Staff and group participants classify those who accomplish these tasks as “successful” and those who do not as “resistant.” Benefits and sanctions follow these classifications, mirroring resource distribution channels that extend far beyond the program. Emmaus’ services were divided into four broad program types: drug treatment, social skills, “criminal thinking,” and workforce development. As a human service agency, Emmaus’ practices reflect and in part produce public attitudes toward the poor, and political, cultural, and economic trends (Mcquarrie and Marwell 2009). The observations that follow exhibit the inner workings of each program type, beginning with drug treatment, revealing how the men I studied experience broader social forces at work.

“What Mask Do You Wear?” Classifying Actors within the Reentry Scene

Mr. Harris, an experienced, masters-level social worker leads the Monday morning Intensive Outpatient drug treatment group (IOP). A short, affable black man in his late 50s, Mr. Harris strikes an empathetic, if disciplinary tone with the men. Under his leadership, group participants learn to master their language, communicating messages about their road to recovery. Along the way, they learn to take on appropriate bodily habits like when to provide eye contact, how to sit, or how to signal that they are listening. While not an explicit part of the curriculum, these behaviors are modeled by “successful” group participants. Mr. Harris’ sessions are popular and well attended. Participants often express their appreciation for his deep intellectualism and tempered, often humorous sensibility. Richard, a black resident in his mid-40s once told me, “He reminds me of my grandmother with them quips!”
Most groups begin with “check in.” Fifteen men sit in a circle, some hunched forward, others reclined on scarred grey or light blue steel folding chairs. They take turns “sharing” their weekend adventures. I usually pass out two-page vignettes written with large font in clear, accessible language that the men take turns reading. These vignettes cover topics ranging from the neurobiology of addiction to romantic relationships. The “mask” was a recurring theme. Mr. Harris often began the discussion by asking, “What mask are you wearing today?”

During one session, Jason, sitting hunched over the worksheet, dutifully stumbled through his assigned paragraph. His Puerto Rican accent was especially pronounced despite his attempt to enunciate each word with careful, accent free diction. After laboring through the passage, he sat up in his seat. His posture erect, his demeanor confident, he gave an unsolicited reflection: “The masks we wear can hide what we don’t want others to see.” Pushing up his glasses from the tip of his nose he continued, “I feel we all wear them, and can’t deal [with life] until we acknowledge [it].” Mr. Harris reminded Jason not to use “we and us.” Jason responded, “I can only talk for myself. Speaking softly but with intention, Mr. Harris followed up, “What mask do you wear? It’s a question we need to ask ourselves. We may seem right, but who are we. What are we really?” Jason, now making eye contact with Mr. Harris, paused, nodded, and then launched into a confession: “Well, I wore many masks when I was out there. You have to—” correcting himself. “I had to. When you using— when I was using,” he continued, rapidly bouncing his right knee. “I said I got it under control.’ But the hard thing is you gotta put that mask away man.” Relaxing, but sitting up straight in his chair, he continued, “You gotta be real. I had to be real with me, my family. That’s how I get by man. Day-by-day. One day at a time.”

Jason averted his gaze to Uriah, a tall, pudgy black man, who was the newest member of the group. Described by his colleagues as “clean” (well dressed), his Derrick Rose
basketball jersey seemed newer than the worn, button down denim shirt and donated jeans Jason wore. The T-shirt underneath gleamed white, unlike the guys’ in the circle who had been there longer. Whether it was his collarless leather jacket, freshly braided hair, new gym shoes, and youth or his limited tenure at the organizations that made him stand out, Uriah’s comments were often corrected by other group participants. Chiming into the discussion with great confidence, Uriah said, “I feel like you got to be honest … When you gonna change?” At that point, little Jerry, the youngest group member who arrived just two weeks before interrupted, “Pardon the body (Excuse me). You got to talk for you. We all doing this (trying to change).” Uriah responded, “My bad, Joe (Pardon me, man),” and explained that he spent the weekend with his nephew. “Little man was watching me. That fucked me up,” he explained, ostensibly apologizing to the group, relaying his urgency while acknowledging his need to change.

Confessional practices are well covered in treatment ethnographies. For example, Haney’s (2010) research at Visions, a recovery home for incarcerated women and their children, shows how participants used “I statements,” autos (20-page autobiographies), and “safe-to-speak” (a “mantra” that translates the auto into “I statements”) to demonstrate that they acknowledged the presumed causes of their emotional pain (child abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, etc.), identified their vices (addictions and men) as coping strategies, and took responsibility for their role in wrongdoing. Mastery of this “program speak,” a discursive technology that individualizes social problems, signaled that the women were “working the program,” changing themselves, and moving beyond their “masks” (tough exterior).

Similarly, Emmaus’ organizational practices and the interactions between staff and group participants send messages about who the men “really are.” After reading a vignette about their masks, the men were encouraged to share the contradictions between their public
and private lives. Taking Mr. Harris’ cue, Jason discussed the “true nature” of the “addict” and “ex-offender” (terms often used interchangeably at the program), saying “we all wear [masks].” That is, “people like us” are dishonest and guarded. Like at Visions, Jason was dissuaded from engaging in communal discussions, translating his narrative into program speak to demonstrate that he internalized the day’s lesson. Upon confession, the wielder of such a narrative can shift the group’s attention from his guilt onto the guilt of others. Put differently, Jason demonstrated his proficiency in the confession, one of the group’s central routines, which allowed him to advance his positon within the group from confessant to advisor and potential confessor—one who mastered program speak and may now help others. Ending on a triumphant note, and now able to give advice, he turned to Uriah, shifting the groups’ attention to the least seasoned member whom had not yet mastered the use of the confession or learned how to demonstrate that he internalized the day’s lesson. He took an advice-giving posture prematurely and was swiftly corrected by little Jerry, the youngest group member. Like Jason before him, Uriah acquiesced and told a story about his nephew who pushed him to acknowledge (and by extension confess) his shortcomings and his need to change his life.

These interactions demonstrate how sharing is policed during the treatment group. This is not, however, simply a story of social control. By asking, “What mask do you wear?” and not, “Do you wear a mask?” Mr. Harris ascribes particular characteristics to the group. Such interactions situate participants, and by extension people “like them,” as specific kinds of people, while providing an interactional task for them to master, advancing their position within the group. Jason’s and Uriah’s acquiescence indicate their assent, justifying these practices and the social positions they reflect, reinforce and in part produce. This is why Mr. Harris raised an ontological question, “What are you really?” We could rephrase this question as, “What kind of person are you?” To answer this question, we turn to interactions within an
outpatient treatment group (OP), a less restrictive, less demanding form of drug treatment at Emmaus.

“You’re in a Room Full of Addicts!” Learning to Change the Lives of Others

From the moment they arrive it is obvious that Julius and Victor have a long history. They graduated from Emmaus two years earlier but, as testament to Mr. Harris’ high regard among residents, Julius returns frequently to attend OP sessions. Staff members tell me that Julius was a “successful” resident before his graduation and would later describe him as a “model ex-offender” (see Hackett 2013). Finding work at a grocery store, Julius moves back in with his wife and three teenage daughters. He looks young for 49. He is well dressed, thin with a muscular build, and charismatic. Only his missing front teeth betray his decades-long struggle with a crack addiction. He hasn’t been arrested since his last “bit,” a 36-month stint in prison.

Victor, however, was arrested while still on parole a few months after he graduated. He was remanded to prison for 10 months and did two additional bits at Cook County Jail before reenrolling in the program. He is tall with broad shoulders and usually wears a distressed plaid shirt, jeans, and work boots. He does demolition for construction crews who would pick him up from the parking lot of the local hardware chain where he waits with a group of Spanish speaking brown men in the early morning hours. Victor manages to make enough money to contribute to his family—a wife and three teenage girls. His low haircut and gold fillings provide evidence of his class background and age—a well-worn 46. Despite his family, job, and years spent in treatment, he “fell into [his] madness,” relapsing frequently.

Julius and Victor hail from the same Puerto Rican neighborhood on Chicago’s northwest side and did time in some of the same facilities, but they first met at Emmaus.
Having arrived together, they bonded over being two of few Puerto Rican men there. When it is Victor’s turn to check in, his report is somewhat defiant:

To tell the truth, I didn’t have no good weekend. My girl, she thinks things are cool. I can’t tell her I got caught up (high), but that’s how it is … We all make mistakes. I’m human. The last time, I was sick. This time, I ain’t have no excuse. I did what I wanted. I was like, fuck it. I’m keeping it real, you know. I fucked up. I’m human.

“You a little too human,” Mr. Harris dryly interrupted. Everyone laughed, except Julius, a look of surprise and anger flashing across his face. Abruptly turning his folding chair to face his old friend, Julius asks, his voice raised, “We all need help, right? I understand that. But you can’t walk up in here … What you saying? That was yesterday! We were on the phone the day before, man!” Victor humbly responded, his eyes wide and empathetic, “I’m just being real with you. I’m supposed to be able to be me, right? If I can’t be honest here …” Uriah chimed in, “I don’t mean to interrupt you but let me ask you this though, brother. We all been there. But what do you think you could have done differently.” He continued, “Could you have reached out to one of the brothers? Hit him (Julius) up. I see this brother with you all the time.”

Julius, now seething, looked directly at Victor whose gaze shifted repeatedly from Julius’s eyes to the floor. His voice tense, and shaky, Julius explained, “You can’t walk up in here all cavalier like, ‘I was just using all weekend.’ You don’t know what that does? You’re in a room full of addicts!” Sam, a stocky black man in his late 20s who typically jokes to break the ice interjected. His delivery, muted, his affect nonchalant, he offers a cautious voice of reason. “I struggle with mines, too,” he said, looking at no one in particular. Cracking a devilish smile, he looks at Victor, pulls a pen from his pocket and scribbles his number on a
white slip of paper. “I don’t even know you man. Here,” handing Victor the slip. “You might get one use out this shit. That shit might change tomorrow.” Everyone laughs, including Julius. After a few seconds Sam adds seriously, “You need to hit me up. We all could use someone to listen to.”

As in IOP, exercises of confession and correction, what participants call “pulling up,” are central to each group’s dynamic. The exchanges shape the interactions that take place, classify participants as particular “kinds” of people (addicts, ex-offenders, etc.), and nest these classifications within the broader reentry apparatus. Reentry programs cannot directly address the barriers participants face. They instead teach them to re-interpret their social circumstances in order to get by. This process is relational, emanating from above, staff to group participant, and from below, group participant to group participant. From above, Mr. Harris takes a strong if subtle position in the group. He asks few questions and makes few suggestions, but he captures the organization’s goal to foster the will to transform in each interaction. The mask becomes a narrative device to progress the group beyond an examination of their practices to their very natures. His well-received joke (“You a little too human”) raises the same question in its effect. From below, group participants require and police each other’s confessions. To be successful, they must display the will to be transformed, using “I” language to acknowledge their faults and taking responsibility for the social problems they faces. Jason employs this strategy in IOP, positioning himself as a successful ex-offender. His demonstrated proficiency in group work routines advance him from confessant to advisor. In OP, Victor’s tone, presumed attitude (“cavalier”) and the content of his confession are deemed insufficient and corrected by both the group facilitator, his friend of many years and even Uriah, the unseasoned participant from the IOP group. Having failed to demonstrate his will to transform, Victor is deemed resistant.
We see then the work of the will to transform in the emergence of new classifications, the successful and resistant ex-offender. The successful ex-offender admits their faults and shares their trials and triumphs with others. More importantly, they are able to correct and instruct other group members. This is a dynamic process. That participants become successful suggests their classifications can and do change. Uriah, for example, was initially seen as resistant. He however learned to demonstrate his proficiency in the group process, appropriately correcting Victor. In doing so, he positioned himself as one who corrects others in the group. This work of classification extend beyond group participants, where the ontological question Mr. Harris raises in the first group (What are you really?) is answered by Julius in the second (You’re in a room full of addicts!). These assertions (1) locate group participants as particular kinds of people (addicts, successful or resistant ex-offenders); (2) govern how correction takes place; and (3) promotes and maintains group norms. Put differently, such interactions fabricate the ex-offender as a particular kind of person with corresponding sets of needs, attitudes, and proclivities.

Julius seems disappointed that Victor cannot proficiently navigate group routines. He is a confessant when he should be a confessor, helping others through their transformative process. Confessions locate the participant as a willing subject, ready to receive mentoring—that is, the participant has a will to be transformed. Engaging in appropriate helping practices, however, shows a different, more complete level of transformation, what I refer to as the will to transform others. Like the will to be transformed, this is also a process of classification. Helping positions the ex-offender as a mentor who (1) embraces the transformative process; (2) has attained expertise in it; and (3) is willing and able to shepherd others through it.

The language employed within these groups must be self-referential, and the classifications require that participants acknowledge their character flaws. Therefore, personal transformation is an ongoing process of introspection, re-evaluation, and change that
takes up most aspects of one’s personal life (Author date). On any given day, group
discussions cover the complex world of addictions recovery, the emotional intelligence
needed to resist temptation, or the best ways to extend the self to others. Former prisoners
demonstrate their mastery of this process by “giving back” to a perceived community of
similarly stigmatized people—visiting schools to lecture “at risk” youth, volunteering at soup
kitchens and social service agencies, and, most often, providing mentorship to other formerly
incarcerated people. For example, Sam uses humor to defuse the tension between Julius and
Victor, offering himself as a sounding board. This demonstrates his emotional maturity,
expertise, and willingness to help to others.

By “giving back,” Sam transitions from mentee (a confessant who needs
transformation) to mentor (one with a will to transform others), constituting a self-referential,
introspective, and caring masculine subject. This is not the “street” masculinity that eschews
vulnerability and valorizes independence typically discussed in the literature on this group
(Anderson 1999; Connell 2005; Messerschmidt 1993). By this, I do not mean that street
culture does not exist, that the men are not “code switching” (Anderson, 1999), or that
hegemonic masculinity Messerschmidt (1993) is not accomplished during the group process.
Group work is in part a response to a presumed street culture (author date), but combats it
through practices designed to produce an interdependent, supportive, relational, and nurturing
masculine subject—what Diana Polson (2013) would call a “caring precariat.” Like Polson’s
(2013) home health aides, the ex-offender is tenuously connected to the labor market and
excluded from most meaningful forms of social support. These men learn to accomplish their
masculinity by reframing their social circumstances, and take control of their lives by helping
others (giving back). To do so, they use humor (Sam’s cell phone joke), their bodies (sitting
forward, making eye contact), intellectualism (“the mask”), and expressions of empathy
(Sam, extending himself to Victor), employing interactive techniques that re-classify and
refashion their social positions altogether. Their expressions of an altruistic masculinity are but one component of this process.

This will to transform is not inculcated through a seamless, top-down pedagogy, but through competition and contestation. Divergent understandings of the group process emerge in each session. The final vignettes, drawn from workforce development, life skills, and criminal thinking groups, capture the productive side of this convergence, as organizational goals, practices and interactions intersect with resident experiences and expectations.

“They Give Them Latinos Work!” Incorporating Success and Resistance

During a workforce development, a middle-aged, white male activist leads a discussion on the Chicago labor market. The 21 attendees sit at a square table, some listening, some taking notes, others disinterestedly peering out the window of the Mann Workforce Center. A disagreement breaks out between Ricky and Jimmy, two black men in their mid-50s. Ricky, agitated by the presentation, interrupts the facilitator, “All you get is fucking day labor. That ain’t shit. Show up six days, you might get work two, three. They pay you $40.00? You eat that shit. Pay that in gas.” Jimmy interrupts, “I came up on day labor.” Looking around, taking note of the group’s now rapt attention, he continues, “I always get work. You show up, be consistent, they see you.” Ricky replies, “They give them Latinos work! We (black people) don’t get no work.” Jimmy, now looking like he’s had enough, pans the room, sighs loudly, looks at the facilitator, turns to me and then to Victor, the sole Latino in the group, “Ain’t nobody gonna give you shit! They pick Latinos because they work.”

With the exchange growing more heated, the facilitator steps in, asking Jimmy where he works. “The Beach Bistro,” Jimmy explains. “That was a come up. I show up on time every day. People talk that race shit, but it’s on you!”

The remaining minutes are quiet and tense. Jimmy sticks around afterward, laughing
and joking with others. Ricky remains quiet, leaving when the group ends. His observations align with studies of the Chicago labor market. Nearly all day labor organizations are located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrant workers, and almost all of Chicago’s restaurants, meat packing floors, waste disposal and construction sites are staffed with undocumented workers (Martin, Morales and Theodore 2007). Yet, his attempt at what Teresa Gowan (2010) calls “system-talk,” locating the employment outcomes of poor black men within larger social processes, is redirected. For Jimmy, one’s employment prospects hinge on their work ethic, despite evidence that black men traveling miles to day labor sites have less than a 50 percent chance to earn less than a day’s wage. His analysis is supported by his success at the Beach Bistro, an outdoor lakefront restaurant in a city notorious for unpredictable weather. He would later complain that bistro employees are sent home during rain storms, paid only for the short hours they work, and put “on call” during “inclement weather.”

With unpredictable hours and a rotating shift, it is nearly impossible for Jimmy to find a second job or adequately budget for his monthly expenses. In addition, the Bistro opens in early spring and closes in the late summer, leaving Jimmy unemployed three quarters of the year. Despite this, he counts the Bistro as a success, which is understandable given his record and Chicago’s already hostile labor market. “People like Ricky talk that race shit,” Jimmy told me, “to hide their lack [of] character.” Ricky challenges the idea that the “will to be transformed” can produce favorable employment outcomes. Their interaction, however, positions Jimmy as a successful ex-offender and Rico as a resistant one, legitimizing group practices. Jimmy was able to secure work, while Ricky, who is resistant, was not. The next vignette, drawn from a “life skills” group, examines the material impact of these classifications.
“They Hook You Up.” Understanding the Stratification Process

During “check-ins” for “life skills,” a social skills group, Joseph, a Puerto Rican resident in his late 40s, discusses the importance of “spot jobs”—on demand labor assignments brokered by the program manager. Fidgeting with his empty coffee mug, Joseph reports, “My weekend was good. I was a little pissed off because of some things that happened.” He continued, “I didn’t have the best start, but I talked to Freeman (a case manager). He was like, ‘Don’t let that bullshit get you. Enjoy that weekend.’” Thomas, the facilitator, nods slowly, signaling that he understands. Joseph goes on, “I stayed here on Friday. Watched some movies. Got up. Went on my way. Got some Puerto Rican food. Shared some with Freeman. Stayed to myself, really. Got a spot job.” Thomas asks, “So you put a little money in your pocket?” Joseph replies, “Yeah, I put a little money in my pocket. It felt good, you know.” Sitting up in his chair, his voice firm but still friendly, the contours of his face soften as he pans the group:

I don’t be like those other guys. I try to save. I put it away. They see that.

See you got some money saved. You got a plan. I’m trying to get an apartment. They see you got goals. When some work comes, they hook you up.

The “hook up” refers to a spot job. The program manager’s role and job brokerage is as important to resident employment outcomes and as it is to how they come to understand themselves. Staff discourage residents from seeking employment until after they complete the 12-week program. In the face of a weak labor market, well documented discrimination (Pager 2008) and conditions of release that constrain mobility, the staff want to first ensure that residents are ready and able to secure and maintain work. From their vantage, this is not small task. It requires deep levels of preparation. “Without education,” a staff member Lenny tells
me, “they a job. Get in a situation. Get discouraged. What good’s a job if you can’t keep it?”

Workforce development and life skills groups address these very issues, providing the men training in conflict resolution and working to bolster their tenacity, trustworthiness, punctuality, grit, and the other soft skills believed to help them address challenges in the labor market.

Spot jobs, like most jobs, are scarce. They are typically reserved for residents with a successful track record. They do not pay enough to meet the residents’ needs, but are used to reward good behavior and provide workplace training, acclimating men to the routines of the job market while signaling to others that the men who are selected are “successful” residents. Few are picked for spot jobs, but those who can demonstrate their embrace of workplace values are rewarded. They get “hooked up.” For example, Joseph shows impulse control, thrift, and an ability to manage conflict, saving money, sharing Puerto Rican food with Freeman, and talking through his problems. As a successful resident, Joseph is consistently rewarded with a spot job, referred to supportive housing upon graduation, and eventually hired at a partnering social service agency as a janitor. Thus, resource distribution channels beginning within and extending beyond the organization follow this classification scheme.

Upon graduation, successful ex-offenders are given access to employment placement, housing assistance, counseling, and transportation. A select few are hired within the reentry apparatus, for example, 85 percent of Emmaus’ staff are program graduates. This is unsurprising given Speck’s (2010) finding that former prisoners are overrepresented among reentry program staff. At Emmaus, successful residents are hired as grounds keepers and promoted through the ranks, with many going on to become counselors and some becoming program managers. This arrangement aligns with the goals of many residents who shared their desire to “give back.” They often find work at other reentry programs, in recovery homes or thrift shops throughout the city. Very few work outside of prisoner reentry,
suggesting that it is one of few viable pathways for the long term employment of the ex-offender. This raises questions about what it means to be successful, given the concentration of reentry programs in the inner-city, low staff wages, and the over representation of black and brown people. Conversely, “resistant ex-offenders” are held responsible for their social outcomes. Having refused to avoid the “people, places, and things” thought to keep them in legal trouble, they transition home without social service support. There is, of course, a fair amount of resistance, but this is incorporated into the group process in much the same way that relapse is built into many drug treatment regimes. The final vignette examines the process of reincorporation, providing an opportunity to discuss reentry’s broad implications.

“Tell Me What to Do!” Justifying the Classification System

Steny James, a short, slight, energetic black man in his late 60s leads “Going Home,” a “criminal thinking” group designed to promote desistance by helping men to anticipate the challenges they’ll face after graduation. Steny’s approach to group-work is informed by his many decades in sobriety and his rich history with Emmaus, having been a resident in the late 70s, a counselor in the 80s, a case manager in the 90s and a sponsor in the AA tradition for over thirty years. Steny marshals deep biomedical and philosophical expertise, leading men through a series of puzzles that cover topics on the science and ethics of addiction and crime while sharing rousing narratives from his personal life. Known for his ability to reach the “hard to serve,” there is little wonder why he is a sought after public speaker.

Despite his skill and popularity, the 37 participants are especially fidgety. The hour-long Friday morning group begins at 11:00 a.m.—the only thing between lunch and liberty, when the men leave campus on weekend pass. Jenny, Steny’s 20-something social work intern will lead the group for the first time. Jenny decides to walk the men through a “role-play,” where the men act out a scenario they might encounter “on the street.” She plays “an
old friend looking to have some fun,” while Bill, a 40-something, well-built black man not more than a month out from a 27-year prison sentence, plays a friend who needs to tell Jenny “her behavior is leading down the wrong path.” As the role play begins there is a playful tension in the room. Jenny and Bill hug and exchange pleasantries. The men who observe smile easily. Bill, who is noticeably awkward, stays in character, engaging in labored small talk, and prepares to address Jenny’s behavior. As he pauses to gather his thoughts, Jenny asks playfully, “So what are you supposed to do?”

Micah, the relatively young and newest group member who had been vying for Jenny’s attention jumps into the discussion when Joe, an older black man approaching his graduation interrupts, “I’m tired of hearing fucking addicts talking!” Torres, a fifty something Latino man who had been there just as long chimes in, “Maybe what this brother know, you may not know. Maybe it’s for somebody else,” when Joe responds angrily, “Addicts always talking in these fucking groups! I’m not here for no addict. I’m an addict!” Lenny, a well-respected staff member in his early 30s and who graduated from the program intervened, “So what you here for?” “You tell me,” Joe responds, noticeably more calm. “You got clean. Got out. I’m sick of hearing from addicts, man. You tell me what to do!” At that point Steny returns from the back where he was counseling a resident, walks to the center of the room and launches into a parable:

A man came home one day complaining about the house, “This house ain’t never clean. You don’t cook. I’m tired.” His wife took off her pants, threw them in the middle of the floor, looked him square in the eye, and asked this question: “Can you get in those?” He say, “You know I can’t get in those.” She say, “And you won’t until you change your attitude.”
Everyone laughs. Steny, who is almost always long winded, gives brief closing remarks about the importance of respecting each other’s position, speaking “only for self,” and self-control. Following custom, the men stand in a circle and hold hands, pray for strength, to resist temptation, for God’s blessing on their families, and protection “on these streets.” As we left, Sam turns to me saying, “Steny’s a beast man, straight up.”

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Joe resists the culture of advice-giving rife within the reentry scene, but expresses his desire to learn the tricks of the trade, which must be learned from a “successful” ex-offender, a mentor with a will to transform. He asks Lenny, “tell me what to do,” when, seizing the moment, Steny uses humor to affirm the group’s process. Such interactions reveal reentry’s normative and evaluative nature, but also speaks to its material consequences. “Successful” ex-offenders, like Richard in the previous vignette, and Lenny in this one, are rewarded with access to employment opportunities (spot jobs, work at Emmaus), and ongoing social service support. Their life experiences are used as examples for others to follow. “Resistant” ex-offenders are held responsible for their social outcomes, legitimating group treatment techniques, the statuses they extend, and the corresponding flow of resources, obscuring the hand of the state in the successes or failures of the very people it classifies.

CONCLUSIONS: THE PRODUCTION OF A NEW HUMAN KIND

The ascendance of prisoner reentry has broad implications for the sociology of punishment, poverty, race and the state. As a criminal justice-welfare state hybrid (Author date), the reentry program serves competing state functions, monitoring, managing, and chastening the ex-offender while meeting their basic human needs. The proliferation of reentry programs throughout the inner-city at once signals the expansion of the welfare state in an age of austerity, and the deepening of crime control logics within systems of care,
extending the scope, reach and consequence of the state. The practices and interactions associated with prisoner reentry programs encourage residents to internalize social problems while activating their sense of responsibility for the outcomes of others “like them.” To do so, they demonstrate emotional intelligence, intellectualism, empathy and vulnerability—traits atypically associated with poor, criminalized black and brown street men, giving birth to a new form of masculinity that the targets of carceral expansion learn to embody. Thus, reentry is an individualizing process that turns agency inward and a collectivizing process, turning the agency of the ex-offender toward an imagined community of people like them.

Beyond their conscription into the enactment of criminal justice and social welfare policy, the expectation that formerly incarcerated people “give back” raises important questions about the intersection of legal troubles and care work for the urban poor, and demonstrates an additional, largely unaccounted for burden this group shoulders. This alone warrants scholarly interrogation, along with the cultural and institutional dynamics of social care agencies in the wake of what McNeil and Beyens (2013) aptly designate “mass supervision”—the many legal sanctions and penalties used to control criminalized populations. This article speaks to both the formal and informal dynamics of such processes. In this case group work “makes up” “successful” and “resistant” ex-offender categories. These classifications activate resource distribution channels that begin within but extend beyond the organization. As such, the reentry program is an engine of stratification that constrains and advances certain kinds of mobility while producing new ways to be in the world. Reentry, the social institution, works in much the same way. Interrogating reentry’s productive side reveals its most impactful contribution to contemporary social life, the making up of the ex-offender, a distinct human kind made vulnerable through practices of social and legal exclusion yet responsible for the care of others. Rather than being managed through discreet institutions, the ex-offender is managed through daily interactions with a
varied network of social actors who are all drawn into the penal dragnet. Prisoner reentry has therefore ushered in a new form of social stratification, a new system of classification, new population management strategies, and a new kind of person to manage, altering the very nature of social life.

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1 In *Big House on the Prairie*, John Eason (2017) notes that incarceration rates in poor rural towns often exceed those in the inner-city, and calls attention to the role of local policy decision makers in prison proliferation and the rise of a “rural ghetto.”

2 Less than 25 percent of jail and prison inmates and 10 percent of those in community corrections have daily access to addictions treatment (Taxman, Perdoni and Harrison 2007).

3 Lynne Haney (2010) describes similar processes as “governing from a distance.”

4 Building on Collins’ influential work, Gary Allan Fine (1991) reminds us that structural constraints and the force of physical and social infrastructure contribute to the sense making and behavior of social actors, connecting the dots between macro and micro sociology. In this case, trends in punishment, social welfare and the conditions of urban poverty shape the reentry experience and can be viewed in a reentry program’s routine practices and interactions.

5 Shadd Maruna (2001) notes that ex-offender is a retrospective category. One simply cannot know if an offender has desisted from crime until after they die.

6 The ubiquity of faith-based actors is unsurprising given reentry’s redemptive logics (Author date). From the establishment of the prison to the moral reform efforts of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, religion has been central to punishment in the U.S. and Europe (See Green 2014).

7 Pseudonyms are used throughout.

8 Barbara Cruikshank (1999) would likely describe similar phenomenon as the “will to empower,” a governance strategy that produces and responsibilizes democratic subjects, facilitating and constraining particular types of political action. Empowerment is a central to reentry, i.e. program participants are empowered to change their lives (Author date). I am here examining the institutional arrangements that facilitate empowerment and that activate a form of communal responsibility, that together produce a new human kind—the ex-offender.

9 The “will to transform” is an adaptation of Nietzsche’s (2006) will to power, which he describes as the “essence of life” (pg. 52), one “that wants to be master, not over something in life, but over life itself and its deepest, strongest, most profound conditions” (pg. 86). The will to transform animates a similar struggle for position, reflecting a mastery of one’s social circumstance through mastery of the self—i.e. bodily habits, language, and one’s presumed psychological, cultural and emotional dispositions.

10 Avoiding “people, places, and things” is a common refrain among AA and NA participants. Andrea Leverentz (2014) invokes this expression to understand women’s desistance strategies.
Figure 1: Currently Incarcerated Population vs. the Carceral Continuum

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics 2014; Wagner and Raybuy 2016

Figure 2: U.S. Adults Under Correctional Control

Source: Shannon et al. 2010; Bureau of Justice Statistics 2014; Wagner and Raybuy 2016