Jailed! Observations of the Societal Structure of a Jail Housing Unit

Kim Lonzo

"Shut up," she shouted angrily in response to my question. Unaware of the circumstances that led me here, I thought that asking my court-appointed attorney for answers was a good place to start. Her responses were cold and followed by rapid-fire statements filled with phrases like "plea deal," and "you'll probably do three years," gave me a sinking feeling that this mystery was going to take a while to unravel. It was at this point that I began to mentally record, observe, and gain as much perspective on what was happening.

As I faced probable incarceration in a system that I discovered I knew frighteningly little about, I wondered what would happen to me. Everything that I assumed about the criminal justice system had been thrown into question when I was arrested just a few hours earlier in my apartment in Queens. As I unpack my personal experience with incarceration here, I will do so with what C. Wright Mills called "the sociological lens." The social structures and the people that I encountered when viewed through this lens reveals an interesting case study of anomie and the reactions to the breakdown of the systems we assume function to keep society functional.

When the New York City police detectives asked me so politely to turn around and place my hands behind my back, I asked for information on charges and received none. They were very jovial and accommodating though when I asked if I could put on a shirt. We re-entered my apartment where I had lived quite quietly with my longtime boyfriend, civil union partner and later that same year, my husband. As I was "perp-walked," paraded in handcuffs, down my block to the unmarked police vehicle stashed in the parking lot of the local bank on the corner, my neighbors stared, and probably wondered the same things that I did.

My arrest and subsequent questioning by the police detectives offered little information. On the way to the station, we spoke about the weather and other subjects so banal that I began to believe that this was just some misunderstanding that would be straightened out in a few hours. The detectives had not read me the Miranda warning, the statement so familiar to me from so many police procedurals that I proudly could say it by heart. I had not been advised of any rights. "I was being detained for questioning," I thought.

After mentioning that I had not had breakfast, the detectives offered to stop somewhere and pick something up for me to eat. We stopped at a fast-food restaurant. They bought me a meal which I was to be given at the station. One of them offered to feed me French fries but I declined. When we arrived at the station in Lower Manhattan, they removed the handcuffs, placed me in a cell,

gave me the food and allowed me to eat. It would be the last outside meal that I would enjoy for a while. As they walked away, I asked the question that so many people before me must have asked under similar circumstances, “When will I be able to go home.” The reply, “That depends on how you’re processed.”

My answers came slowly over the course of a few days. My public defender, clearly overworked and extremely apathetic, just gave me general information. This information included the alleged offenses, a strongly suggested plea deal that she had arranged prior to our meeting, and stern advice that seemed rehearsed from constant use. Her goal was to dispatch this case quickly with as little input from me as possible. I would come to understand later that this was standard. The criminal justice system as I understood it was a fable. The protections of the U.S. constitution drilled into my head in school didn’t apply to me in the manner in which I had been taught. I could not rely on this knowledge. I had to acquire a new understanding. My true criminal justice system lessons had begun and I had to become a quick student if I wanted to survive this ordeal.

There was much to learn and my professors were the very people who had fallen victim to this grand system that they would simply call, “The Game.” I was warned by my court-appointed attorney to not listen to so-called “jailhouse lawyers.” Her advice so far had been terrible. The place where I was incarcerated was notorious within the annals of New York City criminal history, The Manhattan Detention Complex, colloquially known as “The Tombs.” I would spend thirty days at the MDC before I would be able to post a bond and be released. In my fourteenth year living here, I would be introduced to my greatest adventure, incarceration in the form of detention.

MDC was designed to be a pre-trial detention center and not a place for punishment. It felt like a mix between a bank vault and a giant maze. Long large interlocking doors opened, operated by corrections staff who accounted for every person, prisoner or guard, who entered or exited various sections of this seemingly impregnable fortress of fear. Even if a prisoner panicked and decided to run, there would be no route towards escape. This feeling of total control was one that rivaled even the military– a feeling that readily came to mind from my past experience when I entered basic training for the United States Air Force. The difference was the lack of sunlight and the feeling of being entombed that permeated my entire time at MDC.

My assigned unit called a “house" was an open space with small single-person cells around the perimeter, a set of shower stalls in one corner, and

a series of round tables with chairs in the raised middle platform area which functioned as the common area. My cell was in the very back, below this raised area in a sunken place with a few tables. It was deemed unacceptable because it had the worst view of the television, the only source of an outside connection allowed. As I entered, I recognized a familiar face, it was Dalton. He was a young graffiti artist that I befriended in a nearby cell while I waited for my first meeting with the public defender. He smiled when he saw me, that was the first time that I felt safe throughout this whole ordeal.

Dalton would become my ambassador, my most trusted friend, and mentor. We are still friends to this very day. He introduced me to Mike, who was the "house father," a responsibility given to a more seasoned guest of incarceration who had low level offenses. I would also learn that Mike was a "snowbird," a term normally used to describe people who travel to sunny climes to avoid winter's bitter conditions. Mike was a petty thief who stole just at the start of the holiday season in order to be fed and housed during the colder months. He welcomed incarceration as his way out of extreme conditions on the street where he lived when he was freed. He had gained so much insight into how this game worked that he met with all the new detainees and offered his advice. After hearing the details of my situation, Mike offered his opinion. "That's straight up bullshit." His words made me laugh. He further opined that my case was a part of a larger game and then he gave me my first piece of true advice. "Ignore your court-appointed attorney, they work for the game." The next piece of advice was difficult to hear. "Fire that attorney!"

Mike had accumulated a vast knowledge of court procedures and legal speak. He understood statutes and timelines. He knew so much about the game that his advice seemed sound. Encountering a new situation where one has little understanding forces one to use the social information of others who are more familiar. I trusted Mike; I did not trust my public defender. Although Mike is considered deviant within society, he was respected here. What I assumed about the criminal justice system turned out to be false. Learning the rules within this new society required me to suspend my disbelief and acquire a new understanding. Mike cautioned me on taking my attorney's advice about ignoring "jailhouse lawyers," saying, "They don't want you to believe us because it messes up their game."

Upon my next meeting with my attorney, I learned the true severity of the trouble that I was in. Four serious felony charges taken all together that would spell at least 20 years in prison. I was immediately incredulous. I hadn't

murdered anyone or stole anything. I was an unwitting participant in a drug scheme. How could I get a lifetime of prison for that? My attorney was not my court-appointed attorney in the sense that I had grown up assuming they would be. She was a public defender and her role seemed to be to pressure me into taking this deal to save court time and expenses. There was no information that she wanted from me. When I spoke, she ignored me as in our first meeting. She told me what I was going to do, we were going to enter a plea in court. I was told to remain silent. Mike's advice came back to me and I shouted at her, "You're fired." She was not receptive to this idea. She told me that I couldn't fire her. Mike had prepared me for this response.

When a criminal defendant is deemed unable to afford an attorney, a public defender is assigned to the case. The public defender collaborates with the prosecutor's office and often negotiates outcomes that are based on what saves the court time and or money. A lot of assumptions from television and school informed my understanding of how a public defender works. I learned that my part in this process was to agree to the plea deal and thank my public defender. I was entitled to a different type of attorney if I chose to fire my public defender. This new court-appointed counselor was a private attorney made available under provision 18B of county law. These attorneys are known as "18B," for short (New York State Unified Court System). Being assigned an 18B attorney is an exceedingly difficult and rare thing in the criminal justice system. There are forms to fill out for a formal request. My likelihood of being assigned a different public defender was higher than getting an 18B .

At my first court appearance, called the arraignment, I was supposed to enter my plea and that was all. I interjected as soon as I was given the opportunity to speak," Your honor, I would like to fire this attorney." This statement, in open court and on the record, sent my attorney into a rant. She proceeded to tell the judge that I was "stupid," " too thick to understand the charges," "potentially mentally ill," and a host of other very unflattering things. She stressed that I had never been arrested and that I did not understand anything that she told me from the very beginning. I did not counter any of her statements. In fact, I laughed throughout her rant. The judge looked at me and smiled. What he said and did next surprised me.

"It is refreshing to have someone stand before me who hasn't been through the system," he said. He continued as he smiled at me, "Mr. Lonzo does not appear to be stupid." With that he granted my request and a new court-appointment was made for an 18B attorney. I couldn't wait to meet them. I

had my very first victory and I felt powerful even if only for a moment. The shenanigans of my previous public defender it seems were extremely helpful in persuading the judge that the public defender's office was not going to properly defend me. I smiled and I winked at her as I left the courtroom. She was visibly livid.

I believed that once I was arraigned, I would be given the opportunity to make bail and I would leave jail. Unfortunately, there was more for me to learn from my Incarceration University. As a shy kid growing up, observation was one of my most important tools for coping in especially uncomfortable environments. My skills at observation were constantly evaluated by my family, friends and teachers. I was a boy detective in my neighborhood solving minor mysteries, such as the case of the stolen bike or the missing charity funds. I read *Encyclopedia Brown*, the boy detective novels for children. I was in my own estimation an amateur sleuth.

I read voraciously as a kid. Another skill that I would cultivate as I grew older was being a "know-it-all." My parents purchased a set of encyclopedias for me and my siblings to use for school reports. I read them like novels. My strong academic output earned me scholarships, award certificates and trophies that would rival any sports team captain. My favorite personal triumph was turning down a full scholarship to Columbia University to join the United States Air Force to work in intelligence instead. After I left the military, I traveled extensively to return to my hometown of New Orleans on many occasions broken, emotionally battered yet ready for a new adventure. I would ultimately travel to forty-seven of the fifty states before landing in New York City in 1999.

At MDC, I learned that the criminal justice system is designed to trip up a particular kind of person. If you're a poorly educated Black male with limited or no family resources, the criminal justice system is quicksand. You will be ignored; your civil rights will be violated and you will disappear amongst an ever-growing number of new detainees. My horrible experience with my public defender was normal. Others tried to fire their attorney like I did only to be given another public defender from within the very same office. Why was my experience different? I wanted to understand this so I observed my treatment versus the other detainees in my house.

My vantage point for observation in my housing unit was the table near my cell on the lower tier from the common raised area. Two others shared this table with me: Daniel, a white middle-aged effeminate man who was known to

be queer; and Ray, a twenty-something year old Puerto Rican in jail for public lewdness after a night out that he couldn't quite or wouldn't quite remember. They kept to themselves at this table of outcasts and I joined them as it seemed that I wasn't invited to join any of the other groups.

There was a table of youths who all belonged to a gang called the "Crips." They were from different neighborhoods but decided that the shared affiliation was enough and they reformed as a new unit inside. There was a table of Black Muslims not to be confused with adherents of Islam who had their own table. Black Muslims believed many interesting conspiracy theories and one theory about gay people meant that they were not allowed to talk to me or acknowledge me. There was a table of twenty to thirty-something year old Latino males who spoke predominantly Spanish. There was a table of twenty to thirty-something year old Black males who didn't identify with the Black Muslims or the mini-Crips. There was a table of repeat offenders mostly in their late thirties to sixties who knew each other from other various incarcerations throughout the New York City and state jails and prisons. The most prized table, the one with the absolute best seats and the most centralized location in the common area, was a table of detainees who had the most privileges and connections at MDC. They worked in the MDC commissary and the kitchen.

From my table down below, I made some interesting observations. This house had its own societal structure. There was a hierarchy, an economy, and social mobility. When food was delivered from the jail kitchen, the first to be allowed to eat was determined by your place within this society. The same was true with showering or using the three payphones supplied as outside contact. One phone, the best working one, was guarded by one of the young *cripplings*, as I called them. With help from Dalton and Mike, I was able to decipher how this society functioned. As I became more familiar with this community of detainees, I set out to disrupt it and change it. If incarceration were to be my new normal, I decided to alter this society in small ways to see if I could make it a bit more equitable and respectful.

Compared to every other person there, I was as rich as Rockefeller. I learned this on my first visit to the commissary. The commissary sold many products that made the time pass a bit more comfortably. As my family and friends attempted to navigate the world of bail bonds and secure my release, I was well provided for with a hefty commissary tab. I bought a lot of coffee and some random snacks to share with my tablemates. A custom in jail is to "tip" the person working in the commissary by adding items that they would like to

purchase onto your bill. A guy who sat at the best table who worked at the commissary, a guy who rarely engaged me, waited on me. I asked him what he would like to have as a tip and he asked me timidly for a box of his favorite treats, Drake's cakes. I said," Is that all?" He pointed to some coffee and I asked," How many do you want?" After a few more items, he smiled and asked me if I was rich. I had purchased maybe ten dollars in treats for him more than five times what he ordinarily received.

When he returned to the house, he spread the word that I tipped him quite a lot. People would approach my lowly table and ask me for a spoon of coffee. Coffee was the hottest commodity in jail. People traded a spoon of coffee for practically anything. Sugar was also a valuable commodity. The people who worked in the kitchen had access to sugar and would bring it back to trade for coffee or snacks. Ramen and Drake's cakes were the last two commonly traded items. With this knowledge, I set out to use my commissary purchases to accumulate vast stores of three of the hotly traded items. Sugar was something that could not be purchased.

On my sixth day at MDC, a jail job was assigned to me. Thanks to Dalton's intervention and the knowledge that I was a particularly good cook and baker; I was placed in the MDC kitchen. I was not given a job cooking though to my surprise. I would unload, clean, and reload the wagons that moved food throughout the complex. This was a remarkably simple task assigned to two to four people per shift. I was the third man in my shift. A new society existed with the world of the kitchen. A contract catering company ran the kitchen activities with supervision from correctional officers.

The head of the kitchen was a rather stern-looking older Caribbean woman in her sixties who assigned cooking tasks. There was her assistant, an affable younger Caribbean man in his mid-thirties who directed all the operations, and a few twenty-something helpers. The kitchen manager was a woman of few words. In her terse Patois, she would bark out orders and corrections from her desk near the entrance gate. Surrounded by correctional officers, two women and a very tall imposing male, she would run her kitchen typically seated. If she stood and walked around her mini-kingdom, we all stood like soldiers at attention awaiting her approval or disapproval of our varied sections. She rarely laughed, chuckled or smiled. A nod was her approval and an eye-roll followed by sharply spoken words that cut through your very soul marked her disapproval. Her disapproval could result in exile from your duties onto something far more embarrassing like pots and pans duty to the ultimate

punishment: being reassigned to garbage duty and out of the free atmosphere of the kitchen.

Working in the kitchen gave me my only sense of freedom in this whole situation. The atmosphere was quite relaxed. It resembled working in a kitchen at a busy restaurant. Bored with the menial tasks that I had been assigned, I created a streamlined version of my duties. This saved me an immense amount of time and when I completed my tasks I found more than two hours of down time within this kitchen world. I learned that all sugar came from one source, the kitchen manager. At the end of each shift, people lined up at her desk and she handed out four to six packets per person.

One day, the assistant to the kitchen manager asked me where I was from. I responded "New Orleans", a world-famous city known for its cooking. His eyes lit up and he asked me if I could cook. As we began swapping recipes and cooking techniques, I no longer felt like an incarcerated man. I longed to be home and get into my kitchen and cook something wonderful from home like red beans and rice with cornbread on the side. I cooked this dish often when I was homesick for New Orleans. Our conversation would lead to a particularly important meeting with the kitchen manager and shift my social status upwards not only in the kitchen but also in the housing unit.

As I was leaving my shift one evening and standing in line to receive my packets of sugar, the kitchen manager stood and addressed me. She gruffly said that she was making chicken for dinner and that she heard that I was a chef. She asked me how she should prepare her chicken in a new way using my New Orleans training. Nervously, I offered her some suggestions and tips to infuse more flavor and taught her a new cooking technique for chicken. She simply said that she would try it and let me know. Then she gave me a handful of sugar packets. More than I had ever seen her dispense. I smiled and so did she.

When I returned to the house, I knew that these sugar packets could be added to my growing store of tradable commodities. In the week that I had been working in the kitchen, I had amassed many packets of sugar. I began offering spoonfuls of coffee for free to anyone who would ask me as soon as I acquired them from my first commissary visit. They cost fifty-cents a packet and contained quite a few spoonfuls. I had so many that I was labeled a "coffee baron" which amused me.

Barons have a nasty reputation for hoarding and controlling prices on resources. I wanted to be seen as a benevolent baron so I gave the coffee away, sometimes I gave away whole packets. If a price were affixed it would be this,

my wish that I conveyed each and every time that I dispensed whole bags of coffee to someone who asked. “Share this with everyone at your table,” I would say. I wanted to encourage a greater sense of community. I thought this would be accomplished if I introduced sharing of valuable resources.

I observed the sharing of scarce resources at tables before my coffee experiments began. Scarce resources included food, coffee, candies, cookies and cakes. This sharing introduced me to the idea of cross-table sharing. I further observed that valuable resources like sugar and coffee would remain within tables but hoarding occurred due to the scarcity within groups. I believed that flooding the tables with more coffee and later sugar would relax the hoarding since an abundance of precious commodities was happening. This injection of resources spurred more cross-table sharing of not just coffee and sugar but also encouraged sharing foodstuffs that could be used for “jailhouse cooking.”

Food is an important and magical need. Sharing food builds stronger relationships. “Jailhouse cooking” is the creation of dishes that require imagination with the ingredients to produce an edible and deliciously unique dish. This was one of many innovations I observed in my housing unit. A common dish made was cheese crackers and ramen soaking in hot water with bits of baked chicken saved from Thursday dinner. Various ramen dishes floated through our house. Tables began sharing recipes and stories and soon the oft-quiet tables began to blossom before my eyes into a vibrant community. Trade often took place by being invited to a table or asking to sit at a table. Whenever I observed this in action, I smiled. Friendships were being established. New alliances were being made.

My greatest ally in jail became the kitchen manager. She had taken my cooking tips and created an amazingly succulent chicken. Her family loved it so much that her estimation of me rose considerably in her mind. She would ask me for suggestions for the dishes she was preparing in the kitchen, give me a plastic bag filled with sugar packets, and allow me to take food back to my unit. Baked chicken, which was served only on Thursdays, was probably the best food made in the kitchen, it was the most sought-after ingredient of jailhouse chefs.

I became a baked chicken baron thanks to my relationship with the kitchen manager. I also had access to pre-packed halal meals. These would come in handy to trade with the Black Muslims who had previously interacted or engaged with me because I was known to be gay. They chose to associate with me individually and in secret. Preserving their privacy was tantamount in all my

interactions with any of them. This trust would sow respect that would eventually lead to me being acknowledged publicly by the most senior members of this group; a level of respect many other prisoners did not have.

Respect, I slowly learned, was the most important commodity in this society. I had been trading in something that few people had in the outside world. I had been blind to the power of this resource. Had I introduced a new way of thinking into a mechanism designed for detention that was administered like punishment? On one occasion, as I was walking down the back area stairs to the lower level, a "Crip" lieutenant was clearing the stair area so that the leader could walk up. We came face to face on the stair and as the young lieutenant was beckoning me to "stand aside," his leader tugged his arm and told him," Nah, let the O.G. go first, man." I thanked him as I passed him and he nodded and said, "respect." From that moment on his followers showed me deference in all things from usage of their phone to allowing me to go first for all meals. I usually allowed others who were marginalized within our society to go before me and by extension anyone that I showed respect to received new-found respect.

Daniel, my tablemate who was initially picked on and did the laundry of other more respected detainees in an attempt to gain respect, was no longer forced to do laundry. I shared my commissary with him because he had no one on the outside to help him. Daniel was in MDC because his drug use was fed by his constant shoplifting which occasionally landed him in jail. Once a thriving and well-positioned employee in cosmetics sales, his descent into drug use came over his constant depression as a transgender woman trapped inside of a male body. Without the money to transition or pay for hormone therapy, he often used methamphetamines or prescription drugs to anesthetize his feelings. The respect he began to feel in jail allowed him to act more feminine and assert his truer female self in this house of male detention. Seeing Daniel become comfortable with himself in this environment led me to become more involved in the personal stories of my fellow detainees. Could I use the power of respect to alter the way each individual saw themselves? Would this inner change translate into a shift that could be felt throughout the unit?

Comradery is not an idea that many people think about whenever they hear about incarceration. Violence and fear readily spring to mind whenever we picture a jail or prison environment. The act of incarceration or detention is a violent one to any person who values their personal freedom. Many people lack agency in the outside world. Many lack a role that garners respect in the traditional sense. They play out social dramas in order to feel agency and gain a

modicum of respect. Family structures are often our first introduction to the idea of societal roles. A weak family structure fraught with hardships and obstacles, like violence and poverty, can create an environment where one determines a sense of justice in the world.

Many of the people that I encountered came from weak family structures. Many of the people that I encountered saw a game being played with their lives. Many had little hope that they could escape this game and they had taken up the idea of "gaming the game." They often lost. Incarceration did not discourage or frighten my fellow inmates. It was a circumstance many saw as a badge of honor or a rite of passage; a gateway to respect or a way to build their own family structures.

The event that would forever bond me to my fellow detainees was an ordeal that we shared called the "tossing of the cells." For me, the "tossing of the cells," or a controlled, and often hectic search by corrections officers for contraband was the most dehumanizing act that I have ever experienced or witnessed. It began unannounced early one peaceful morning before breakfast arrived. There was a rumor a few days earlier that another house had contraband and an MDC-wide search was imminent. A bullhorn and a show of corrections officers in force, some in riot gear, filled the unit before our cells were unlocked. With instructions to remain inside our cells, I anxiously awaited the coming intrusion. I did not know what to expect but the screams and general sounds of disarray as items were being tossed into the center common area made me extremely uneasy.

My heart pounded; I was scared for my life. Soon a twenty-something year old male corrections officer entered my cell. Our eyes locked. He looked as scared as I did at that moment. I could tell that he had not experienced this activity before. He spoke softly and his superior or training officer encouraged him to be more forceful. He asked if I had any contraband that I wanted to declare. Weapons, money, phones, or any other unauthorized items such as perishable foods or pornographic materials were considered contraband. I had some fresh fruit in my locker which was considered contraband. As he threw items from my room out into the open area, I was to stand in the center of my room. Then he looked more afraid than before. He ordered me to strip naked so that he could do a full cavity search with a flashlight. I began to cry and surprisingly so did he.

A commotion outside distracted the training supervisor. He went outside to participate in what sounded like controlling an unruly detainee who

was shouting something about his civil rights being violated. My crying was uncontrollable. The full-cavity search had been a part of my weekly visits. I was never asked to do more than drop my underwear and squat before they allowed me to change into the baggy, orange jumpsuit that I had to wear for visits. This time would be more invasive. As I moved toward the officer per his direction, our eyes remained locked and he too could not hold back his tears. Did he feel a human connection? Did he question the humanity of this action?

Whatever his reasoning, I did not know and he simply told me to put on some clothes and join the others outside. I thanked him. As I stood outside my cell, I saw for the first time the scope of the inhumanity of this process. There standing on a table was a female corrections captain. She was the person on the bullhorn shouting commands. She was filming this process on what I assumed was her personal device. She was laughing and joking with subordinates near her. They were enjoying this. They pointed at naked and half-naked detainees young and old. They seemed to relish this whole chaotic scene of their making. They appeared to relish in this aggressive, mean-spirited show of authority. I promised myself that I would never forget this moment. I burned this horror into my memory through tears, fear, and sadness.

Forgiveness is not something they could ever ask for after participating in this injustice. I would find a way to extract a payment for the cost in human dignity from the criminal justice system. This moment watered a seed that my mother planted deep within my soul when I was a child. She wanted me to be an attorney. She encouraged my education through great personal sacrifice. She showed me how to be an advocate for people. I learned to be of service wherever you are by watching my mother. The detainees here needed someone to carry their stories and make someone accountable for the failings of this system. It would take a pandemic that shut down the world to send me back to college.

It took thirty days forf my family to bond me out of MDC. Although they were able to secure the bond sooner, the process allows the prosecutor's office to question the source of the income of anyone who posts bonds for certain offenses or above certain amounts for three days. Sometimes they don't question the source and you are processed and released that day. No one that I spoke to as I waited in a cell underneath the courthouse for the three times that I had returned had heard or experienced this quick release. As a direct result of the protracted timeline, I turned forty-five in jail. It was a Sunday. The kitchen

manager marked my birthday by giving me peppermints and sweet treats that she brought from home for me.

The label of felon has not impeded my life in the ways that it hobbles the lives of so many other felons as they reenter society. My stable socio-economic status growing up with both parents, my early private school education, my access to resources, and a community of support throughout my life has buoyed me against the ill-effects the felon label traditionally incurs for others. It has not excluded me from housing. It has not affected my employability. As a self-employed private contractor in the field of student travel services, my experience was welcomed. The companies who used my services did not care that I was a felon and I was encouraged to share my experience as a learning tool.

I am very aware of the privilege that I hold in relation to others who are not as fortunate. It has for me been a badge of honor as well but in a different way than the other people I encountered while incarcerated. For too long, the felon has been identified and characterized as a reprobate; someone who lies outside of the margins of redeemability. Labeling theory of the symbolic interactionist describes the process of being labeled by society as a deviant, owning the label, and then engaging in the self-fulfilling prophecy. After my experience with the criminal justice system, felon holds quite a different meaning to me. It informs me that many will not be able to escape the criminal justice system and incarceration without outside intervention and disruption. Many will be entangled in the traps that are set to capture them. Many are in environments that are targeted. Many will sink and drown in this system but many will also thrive in this system.

Detention in many cases is an introduction to a lifetime of incarceration. The hurdles one will face seem insurmountable. The isolation that is reinforced by the spaces of incarceration and the destitution that is inflicted upon one as they enter into this world, fraught with challenges and unknowns, combine to create a sense of anomie. While many will not survive this system, others will challenge this system, and develop innovative ways to navigate it. Robert Merton theorized that innovation is a form of deviance that is acceptable. Within housing units of incarceration across this country, small societies exist that offer us a unique window into solutions to transform the lives of people otherwise trapped in their rejection by society at large.

We can begin to redress these injustices by investing in the communities that organically sprout up while in incarceration. Our reentry

efforts can be shaped with regard and respect for the societies that develop while in incarceration. With encouragement and support, a jailhouse cook is a potential new chef or a jailhouse lawyer is a potential legal advocate. I am hopeful that the experiences that I have shared here will help to serve as insight into new research questions for further study. I know that those experiences have shaped me into a future legal advocate.

References

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