I am a product of a historical Black mecca: Harlem. In the early 1900s, Harlem was a major landing ground during the Black Migration, in which Black individuals left the South to relocate to the North. It became the heart of a Black cultural movement, the Harlem Renaissance, that inspired and nurtured Black artists. Harlem still houses the world-famous Apollo Theater and the Cotton Club, where legendary artists like Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, and Billie Holiday made appearances. Over time, Black activists like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Marcus Garvey, Angela Davis, and many others have drawn large crowds to Harlem to listen to their speeches against racial oppression and to internalize their words uplifting the Black Power movement. In the late twentieth century, however, Harlem was hard hit by the war on crime and war on drugs, which politicians used to justify political reliance on punitive sentencing policies and imprisonment. The public narrative of Harlem as a magnet for Black culture and civil rights activism shifted to dialogues that imagined and constructed Harlem as a place filled with crime, drugs, and turmoil.

This was the context of my youth, occasionally visiting historical landmarks in my community, yet constantly witnessing the growing takeover of penal control. While walking with my mother to C-Town, the nearest supermarket on 116th Street, I made sure to keep my eyes focused on the ground to avoid stepping on dirty needles and crack vials. Occasionally we would grab our shopping cart and walk to the
Pathmark supermarket on 125th Street for cheaper deals on groceries. Along the way, it was common—and somewhat expected—to see people actively using drugs or under the influence, including parents of peers from my school. Interventions from child welfare services meant that some of my school friends lived with extended family members or were placed in the foster care system, where they were sometimes exposed to worse conditions and emotional treatment. Eventually I began to notice the missing faces of people whom I had been accustomed to seeing under the influence of drugs or alcohol as I walked home from school or walked to the nearby bodega. Although their absence originally brought me hope that they were receiving help, I eventually learned that an absent face meant another person had been incarcerated and taken by the penal transformation in my community. People were being stigmatized for resorting to drug use as a coping mechanism to racialized poverty and oppression, and they were being incarcerated for merely surviving their circumstances. Witnessing these events at an early age allowed me to realize that the takeover of penal institutions was just another way for the government to avoid providing the much-needed resources that marginalized groups needed to survive. I realized that the purpose of state systems is not to help people in Black and brown communities like Harlem, but to keep us under state control and confine us. Instead of providing us with adequate social services, we as a people are criminalized, pulled from the community, and incarcerated behind bars.

My upbringing in Harlem sparked my growing interest in the disproportionate treatment of people of color in the criminal legal system. The return to the community post-incarceration—what criminologists call the “prisoner reentry” process—is full of systemic problems in finding housing and obtaining work with a criminal record. Jeremy Travis argues that these punishments are invisible in that they are additional punishments mostly out of the public’s eyesight, they are implemented beyond the defined punishments stated during sentencing, and they are typically excluded in national debates and decisions concerning sentencing policies.1 Discussions about invisible punishments, however, have largely focused on men in the criminal legal system, since men outnumber women across various components of the system: men make up 93% of prison populations (those with longer sentences, charged with more serious offenses), 84% of those in jails (awaiting trial and arrested for minor offenses), and the majority of people on community-based supervision (75% of those on probation and 87% of those on parole are men).2 Nevertheless, the focus on men obscures the disproportionate
impact of the penal takeover on women, particularly the drastic increase in incarceration rates that women experienced during the war on drugs compared to men. Growing up in Harlem during the war on drugs, I witnessed this growing removal of women firsthand. By being ignored and disregarded as victims of punitive carceral systems, women remain relatively invisible as potential recipients of reentry support.

Though feminist scholars have helped bring academic attention to women in the criminal legal system, the focus is often negative, centered around the negative effects of maternal incarceration on the children left behind. Of the women incarcerated in US state prisons, 62% are mothers of underage children. Only a few advocates and criminologists like Bahiyyah Muhammad explore the resiliency and success of these children as they overcome parental incarceration. Media, researchers, social service providers, and politicians predominantly emphasize the negative effects of incarceration on mothers’ children, both during and after imprisonment. These public discourses highlight the negative effects maternal incarceration has on children’s perceived academic performance and preparedness, residential instability, and behavioral problems. This focus on children is guided by notions of them as innocent bystanders or silent victims of their mothers’ decisions, perpetuating mother blaming. Blaming mothers for exposing their children to maternal incarceration disregards the patriarchy, misogyny, and systemic racism that marginalize and criminalize mothers of color, pushing them into the auspices of penal control. This book, *Invisible Mothers*, diverges from the focus on the negative effects of maternal incarceration on mothers’ children because it does not adequately problematize the oppression that influences maternal incarceration or explore the social-structural effects of maternal incarceration on the mothers themselves. Instead, *Invisible Mothers* shares the voices, challenges, and needs of traditionally silenced mothers in the criminal legal system.

Women’s (in)visibility to the general public as respectable human beings worthy of acknowledgment and inclusion is a function of their role as mothers and their enactment of motherhood. On the one hand, women are rendered invisible in a patriarchal society in which men are viewed as the more dominant group and are given positions of power and control. To complicate matters further, gendered expectations of women to become mothers and sexist ideologies that mothers should be responsible for childcare responsibilities place mothers in charge of parental labor. Women’s mothering labor, however, is largely private and invisible to others who are oblivious to mothers’ daily financial,
emotional, and practical struggles of caring for children. These gendered and undervalued caregiving expectations of women leave mothers generally unrecognized and undervalued as invisible mothers. On the other hand, mothering labor often only becomes visible through “othering,” in which the public critiques women and treats them as being different or “other than” mainstream ideals of how mothers should behave. When incarcerated, mothers are stigmatized for supposedly challenging dominant ideologies of motherhood that dictate good mothers are docile, fragile, innocent, and harmless. Incarceration therefore leaves mothers in a double bind as they remain invisible as mothers and unrecognized for their mothering, yet at the same time they are visible as “others” when it concerns their criminality and involvement in carceral systems. To demonstrate how mothers in the criminal legal system can be invisible as mothers yet simultaneously visible as others, I use “(m)others” throughout this book when referring to the stigmatized treatment or public perceptions of these mothers as supposedly mothering in ways “other than” what is normatively expected or accepted of women with children.

_Invisible Mothers_ highlights the voices of the most traditionally silenced mothers: mothers of color. They experience oppression and inequities not only as women but also as women of underrepresented racial-ethnic groups. Their social position as women of color leaves them cumulatively marginalized across gender, race, and ethnicity; then they are expected to navigate motherhood with such restricted access to opportunities. As an Afro-Latina mother who grew up in a marginalized community, I empathize with mothers of color and understand their plights pre- and post-incarceration. Therefore, I have made it my mission to share their personal narratives in this book, which draws on Black feminist thought as a critical social theory devoted to empowering women of color by resisting oppressive practices toward them and strengthening efforts that address their needs. _Invisible Mothers_ examines the paradox of visibility and invisibility in how social institutions treat mothers of color as invisible mothers who are restricted from equal opportunities but also are simultaneously treated as visible (m)others who are criminalized and penalized for surviving their marginalization. This book argues that the process of navigating motherhood as visible (m)others complicates the post-incarceration reentry process, and inversely that the reentry process for mothers of color makes navigating motherhood more difficult. The book treats mothering and reentry as two journeys that must be examined in tandem to fully understand
post-incarceration life for mothers of color. All things considered, *Invisible Mothers* is devoted to enhancing the visibility of mothers of color and to exposing and contesting their marginalization as they navigate motherhood and reentry after incarceration.

**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD**

Matricentric feminism is a mother-centered feminism that recognizes the unique social position and experiences of mothers and that specifically places mothers’ interests and needs at the forefront of theoretical, empirical, and policy work. Adrienne Rich highlights motherhood as an invisible institution—unseen and untouched—that functions under our patriarchal society, in which male control disempowers mothers and limits mothers’ decision-making power in everyday life. In this way, the patriarchal institution of *motherhood* shapes mothers’ oppression; the concept of *mothering*, however, concerns the experiences of mother work. Feminists argue that *motherhood* as an institution should not be confused with experiences of *mothering*, noting that the former is a controlling state of male-defined oppression and disempowerment while the latter is woman defined and can be viewed as empowering. As Andrea O’Reilly explains, “matricentric feminism understands motherhood to be socially and historically constructed, and positions mothering more as a practice than an identity.”

The concept of *motherwork* captures the unpaid and invisible labor of caring for children in which caregiving remains centered around mothers, despite shifts in gender expectations over time. Although mothering is work, women’s motherwork is not equally visible to the general public, and not all women’s motherwork is respected or validated. For instance, there is a cultural ambivalence in how society believes women should mother their children. Yet amid cultural images and ideals of motherhood, mothers “can never fully do it right.” Public interpretations of motherhood center around ideologies of intensive mothering, which is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.” Such high standards for motherhood, however, are embedded in a hegemony of racialized, gendered, and middle-class beliefs of what mothering should look like. Gender and race are social constructs that are coupled with one another and shape the mothering experience; “race is ‘gendered’ and gender is ‘racialized,’ so that race and gender fuse to create unique experiences and opportunities for all groups.” Fused together, racialized and gendered
treatment creates unique and diverging experiences between Black mothers and white mothers. Given the historical racial oppression of Black individuals as less than white normative standards, I intentionally capitalize Black throughout this book while avoiding such racial capitalization for whites as a means to counteract the white privilege and white supremacy that are ingrained in our society.

White mothers have historically been afforded racial privileges that provide them the generational wealth and financial stability to enact financially expensive mothering. Racial privileges generally give white mothers the flexibility of labor-intensive mothering when they are protected from systemic racism in health care, housing, employment, and educational systems, to name a few areas. White mothers benefit from white privilege, in which their lives or the lives of their children literally do not depend on surviving racial oppression, as those of Black families do. Still, white (upper) middle-class standards remain the most visible model of mothering.

Society expects all mothers to uphold primary caregiving responsibilities for underage children by specifically living up to white middle-class ideologies of motherhood. Yet white middle-class motherhood, as a normative cultural construct, essentially thrives on Black mothers being framed as “other than” their white counterparts, as well as on their motherwork being regarded as relatively deviant compared to that of white mothers. The term intersectionality underscores that individuals can experience multiple social inequalities that overlap with one another and affect the overall lived experience. Black mothers, in particular, experience discrimination at the intersection of multiple interlocking oppressions associated with gender, class, race, ethnicity, and more. For instance, “U.S. Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to inferior housing, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public treatment[,] and [these societal practices] hide this differential consideration behind an array of common beliefs about Black women’s intelligence, work habits, and sexuality.” Black mothers are rendered invisible when government structures do not allocate resources to their communities or to specific policies and practices that cater to their interests or needs. They run into a maternal wall that blocks Black mothers (and Black women perceived as mothers) from job opportunities, while reaching a sexist and racist glass ceiling that hinders Black women from progressing and moving up in the workplace. Black mothers routinely face brutality from law enforcers and public servants who verbally express a disregard for their pregnancies and who treat these mothers
and their children as fair game for physical harm and violence.\textsuperscript{18} Black mothers confront such public hatred directed against them and are forced to survive a patriarchal and racist society as perceived (m)others.

Black mothers are systematically restricted from available resources and stripped of equal opportunities given to white mothers to do mothering. Such racialized oppression makes motherwork particularly taxing on Black mothers. Society then blames Black mothers for their unfortunate circumstances by disregarding the presence of the racial-ethnic discrimination and prejudice that create and maintain social inequalities. In fact, white normative discussions often dismiss, belittle, and undervalue Black mothering experiences compared to those of white mothers. This Black/white racial dichotomy and binary way of thinking reinforces racialized constructions of intensive mothering that instigate othering, in which Black mothers are demeaned as (m)others who are less than or “other than” perceived norms of the white mother. \textit{Invisible Mothers} does not replicate or support white normative discussions of Black motherwork that vilify Black and brown bodies. Instead, this book intentionally uses an intersectional framework to highlight the role of interlocking social positions in navigating the institution of motherhood and also integrates Black feminist thought, which is designed to empower Black women and mothers and to resist their multifaceted oppression.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Dichotomizing Race and Homogenizing Ethnicities}

The shared struggle \textit{Invisible Mothers} aims to highlight is that the visibility of mothers of color is contingent upon their perceived adherence to or divergence from white normative meanings of motherhood. More specifically, if they adhere to ideologies of intensive mothering, mothers of color remain invisible under broad discussions of normative mothering; when they somehow diverge from these ideologies of mothering, however, they become visible through a blurred lens that focuses on them as “others” or, in this case, “(m)others.” In this way, visibility is not a zero-sum matter in which mothers of color either have it as a whole or do not; rather, they are in a double bind of being simultaneously invisible mothers and visible (m)others.

In addition, this book recognizes that there may also be intraracial nuances in mothers’ visibility that can shape their treatment and experiences in navigating motherhood. Despite the knowledge gained from research on mothering while Black, the use of a Black/white racial
dichotomy may treat underrepresented ethnicities (like African Americans and West Indians) as a homogenous group. Overlooking ethnicity suggests that society treats all Black ethnic groups the same, and a Black/white racial dichotomy likely misses some nuances in their treatment and experiences. Discourse about racial-ethnic experiences of womanhood and motherhood, however, are examined in great length in sociology, gender studies, and ethnic studies. This work shows that employers, politicians, and social service providers, among others, may interact with people beyond large racial umbrellas and treat them according to stereotypes and prejudices that are more specifically tied to ethnic background such as for African American, Latina, and West Indian women.

Due to the empirical limitations and social implications of Black/white racial dichotomies, from this point forward Invisible Mothers diverts from this racial dichotomy unless referring to research on Black mothers and their racialized experiences. Otherwise, Invisible Mothers specifically identifies the ethnicities of women and mothers as either African American, West Indian, or Latina and uses “women of color” and “mothers of color” as inclusive phrases for their shared experiences across ethnicity. The use of women of color and mothers of color in this book is more appropriate to capture both the similarities and nuances of navigating motherhood among underrepresented racial-ethnic groups. This approach is in line with Andrea Ritchie’s work on Black women and women of color: “When using ‘women of color,’ I do so in the hopes of gesturing toward common ground and sites of shared struggle, while simultaneously honoring [ethnic] difference.” The mothers are described as “mothers of color” when highlighting their common ground, and their ethnic identities are identified occasionally throughout the book when the mothers’ narratives are specifically associated with their ethnic background. For convenience, appendix B includes the ethnic background(s) for each mother.

Honoring ethnic nuances and recognizing that stereotypes may differ for ethnic groups, the following sections review various controlling images of African American, West Indian, and Latina women. Controlling images are essentially socially constructed depictions that are upheld by the general public and embedded within social systems like the child welfare system. Unfortunately, the “controlling” aspect of these images is that they may manipulate public perceptions of underrepresented women as (m)others and can be used to justify the social inequalities they face. Thus, it is important to understand the controlling images of
African American, West Indian, and Latina women to adequately grasp the unique obstacles they face in combatting gendered and racial-ethnic subordination and in navigating the institution of motherhood.

**African American Women.** As slaves, African American women “were classified as ‘breeders’ as opposed to ‘mothers.’”24 They were dehumanized as animals whose worth was based on their ability to reproduce more slaves and, in turn, provide slave owners with more product. This dehumanization and exploitation of African American women remains prevalent today, though it is more covertly reinforced within controlling images. Controlling images of African American women include the Sapphires, Jezebels, and Mammies. Historical caricatures of Sapphires are portrayals of “angry Black women” who are loud, outspoken, and bitter and thus disregarded as undeserving of public time or attention. The sexualized Jezebels (or modern-day “hoochie mamas”) are represented as sexually promiscuous and thus treated as deserving of sexual abuse or assault. The asexual and maternal Mammies are depictions of selfless house slaves (or modern-day domestic servants) devoted to providing childcare for white children. Compared to the Jezebel and the Sapphire, the Mammy is the only controlling image that suggests some maternal role, albeit to the extent that her maternal care is performed as an exploited service to white children while society disregards her personal maternal interests. In essence, Black women were visible as mammys to white children during their enslavement, while their invisibility as mothers justified forcibly removing them from their own children.

These representations of African American women portray them as violating social norms of “true womanhood” (as pure and passive) and of “true motherhood” (as the intensive mothering of biological children). These images not only reinforce patriarchal notions of gender roles, but they are intertwined with racial-ethnic biases and hierarchical undertones, intentionally degrading African American women and mothers to purposefully justify and maintain their oppression. Though these controlling images of African American women emerged from slavery as a means to justify labor exploitation, racial violence, and white supremacy, modernized depictions continue today as a way to maintain inequality (in labor, sexual exploitation, and racism).

**West Indian Women.** Scholars suggest that compared to the US context, racism is less institutionalized in West Indian countries given that these countries are mostly inhabited by people of color.25 They argue that...
in this region, conflicts are not predominantly “whites against Blacks. It is now mainly Blacks against Blacks; Blacks against browns; high browns against low browns; Africans against Indians.”26 As a result, we observe ample Afro-Indo conflict in West Indian countries like Trinidad and Tobago with large Indian populations. For instance, Caribbean feminist studies highlight how West Indian women of Indian descent are more likely depicted as sexually pure, innocent, and submissive women and mothers, while those of African descent are hypersexualized and stereotyped as being loud and independent.27 In her work conceptualizing “difference” in this global region, professor Rhoda Reddock argues that because Afro and Indo ethnic groups are “defined in opposition to each other,” these socially constructed differences promote more division across cultural spaces and further restrict opportunities for these women in a patriarchal society.28 Research shows that West Indian mothers, like many mothers across the world, may migrate to the United States for financial opportunities and as a means to feed their children who remain in their home countries.29 Although this is not the reality for all West Indian immigrant mothers, when they are of African descent their visibility as workers has become a function of what they can do for affluent white families and how much they can mother white children as nannies. More specifically, West Indian women of African descent are often offensively depicted as inferior domestic servants with the natural skills to be of service to those more dominant over them: affluent white families.30 Such controlling images of these West Indian women as domestic servants illustrate the paradox of their visibility as “the help” that is regarded for the services they can provide to affluent white families and their children, while simultaneously being invisible as mothers to their own children. The ethnoracial and classist “othering” embedded in these images works to justify their labor exploitation for low pay, their exposure to verbal and sexual abuse from employers, and their being (dis)regarded as disposable objects.31

Latina Women. We see considerable overlap between controlling images of African American, West Indian, and Latina women, particularly historical depictions of the Mammy and modern-day depictions of West Indian and Latina domestic servants to be exploited for their services.32 A controlling image of both African American and Latina women is that of the Welfare Queen, which wrongfully and condescendingly represents them as leeches on state services. These images emerged through
political rhetoric during the mid- to late 1900s. Politicians like Ronald Reagan tried to minimize welfare assistance by misrepresenting African American and Latina mothers as blameworthy for their circumstances for supposedly having “too many” children and as being undeserving of cash assistance due to their poor decisions and perceived abuse of the system. These controlling images of Welfare Queens attribute social inequalities to individual downfalls, reinforcing notions of African American and Latina mothers as bad (m)others who are subordinate to white mothers. These depictions also fueled an anti-immigrant narrative about Latina mothers “taking over” the country and draining state resources, supposedly justifying social and political action to restrict their citizenship and limit their access to state resources.

Some controlling images of Latinas can also be found within historical and cultural archetypes of La Virgen de Guadalupe as well as legends regarding and disapproving of La Llorona and La Chingada (La Malinche). These images depict the good, pure woman that others should aspire to, while illustrating the deviant women that others should avoid becoming. For instance, La Virgen de Guadalupe is idealized as a sexually pure, spiritual figure who is docile. Though there are some similarities with the Mammy in that both are pure and docile, La Virgen de Guadalupe is viewed as a model, religious figure (while the Mammy is not) and also serves as a protector to all (not just as childcare for white children). La Llorona is another controlling image of Latinas, which translates to “the weeping woman.” The legend of La Llorona is that she is a mother who drowned her two children in a river (whether through neglect or with her own hands) and is left crying in everlasting turmoil as she searches the river for her deceased children. Another controlling image is La Chingada (La Malinche), which translates to “the fucked one (the raped one)” and is a negative portrayal of a prostitute who has betrayed her community and the institution of motherhood. She is depicted as a hypersexualized woman—like the Jezebel—and she is scapegoated as a societal failure for not behaving like a nun (like La Virgen de Guadalupe). She can also be tied to modern-day notions and stereotypes of Latina women as being “hot-blooded” and caliente mamacitas (which translates to hot little mamas).

Sociologists Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila note that all things considered, “cultural symbols that model maternal femininity, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe, and the negative femininity, such as La Llorona and La Malinche, serve to control [Latina] women’s conduct by prescribing idealized visions of motherhood.” Put simply,
controlling images of La Virgen de Guadalupe are used to try to control Latina women’s conduct to fit preconceived notions of womanhood and motherhood as a sexually pure and religious protector. Mothers seemingly contradicting this normative standard are condemned as visible (m)others, exposing them to derogatory labels and condescending treatment.

Women of Color. These gendered, classed, and ethnoracial depictions of African American, West Indian, and Latina women reflect “the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination,” as noted by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought.* Controlling images of these women’s perceived deviance from white middle-class motherhood thrive within structures of inequality by affecting access to resources, such as welfare assistance. They influence how social institutions respond to women’s motherwork and reinforce differential treatment toward women of color. All in all, biased constructs of womanhood and motherhood present a distorted vision of African American, West Indian, and Latina mothers, with prejudiced assessments that seemingly justify their oppression in state systems.

Penal Control of (M)others of Color

Across various social institutions, mothers of color are criminalized for their motherwork; that is, they are turned into “criminals” by some socially constructed definition of crime tied to their mothering or that disproportionately affects mothers of color. As *Criminalized Mothers, Criminalizing Mothering* argues, “Extra-legal processes—social work, health care and medicine, child welfare—also function to criminalize certain kinds of mothering through a discourse and set of practices that blame, shame, and punish mothers.” For instance, in support of the patriarchal interests of society, state structures regulate women’s mothering from the moment a child is conceived, with state laws regulating what mothers are allowed to do with their bodies during pregnancy. Additionally, mothers of color are generally forced to mother through inadequate or unequal resources that complicate motherwork. Despite these structural inequalities, a maternal focus on having food on the table and putting clothes on their children’s backs is no longer sufficient in a society that emphasizes intensive mothering. Social workers in all fifty states are also considered mandated reporters who must report (though subjectively) any suspected incidents of child neglect, but the
heightened interaction that mothers of color have with social service providers generally increases the chances that their motherwork will be under state scrutiny and deemed as intentional child neglect. Mothers of color thus often find themselves losing the battle against normative white middle-class standards, then being penalized by the child welfare system that can remove children from their care. Research demonstrates that removing children from their mothers’ care is publicly defended by a focus within the child welfare system on “saving children” and providing them with “care,” yet this children-focused priority simultaneously reinforces the image and treatment of their mothers as visible Others who are to face “justice” and be punished in a state of penal control.

Mothers of color not only fight against patriarchal and class-based power structures in social services, they do so while also battling institutional racism. Known for her work on critical race theory and feminist jurisprudence, law professor Angela P. Harris argues that “racism constantly changes in form but not in effect.” A long-standing form of institutional racism entails carceral systems, which are essentially the legal oppression of women of color and, more specifically, mothers of color. Andrea Ritchie’s work demonstrates that oppressive policing results from state agents and state institutions policing motherwork with a blatant disregard for women of color as mothers: “Police officers commit violence against mothers of color with impunity, while simultaneously criminalizing them for the slightest actual or perceived harm to their fetus or child.” In this way, women of color are criminalized by discriminatory policies and policing practices, then pulled into correctional facilities.

In fact, African American women are overrepresented in correctional facilities. In 2017, African American women accounted for approximately 19% of women sentenced to imprisonment even though they are only 13% of the female population in the United States. The percentage of Latina women sentenced to imprisonment, however, is more representative of the Latina population in the United States: approximately 18% for both. In addition to their representation in carceral systems compared to their representation in the country, women of color are disproportionately incarcerated compared to white women. Before going to trial, prosecutors may use the threat of long sentences to encourage women to plead guilty for a reduced sentence, waiving their right to a jury trial even if they do not agree to the charges. Yet white women have a better chance of receiving no jail time with their plea deals, reinforcing racial and ethnic disparities in plea bargain outcomes,
rates of incarceration, and parental separation for nonviolent offenses.\textsuperscript{45} In 2018, African American women were imprisoned at twice the rate of white women, while Latina women were incarcerated at a rate 1.3 times that of white women.\textsuperscript{46} These incarceration rates do not result from committing more crime but rather from punitive carceral policies that affect women of color more under the guise of “public safety.”

This public safety rhetoric is evident in US drug policies, which criminalize substance use by incarcerating individuals for merely possessing their drug of choice.\textsuperscript{47} Even though whites are more likely to use drugs, the hypersurveillance of Black and brown communities overwhelmingly criminalizes women of color for their substance use, while politicians advocate for penal control of them instead of empowering community-based support and treatment.\textsuperscript{48} Public concerns about substance abuse have been centered around pregnant women of color, who are already systematically oppressed at the intersection of race and gender, then reported by medical professionals and neglected by social workers who are required to act according to punitive policies. Punitive policies designed to police the mothering behaviors of women of color are about state making—defining the institution of motherhood around gendered, racial-ethnic, and classed norms. This book shares a different way of thinking about the impact of punitive policies on the lives of mothers of color.

Scholars argue that once she is within the grasp of the criminal legal system, “dominant ideologies about good motherhood and good womanhood influence how the police, courts, and corrections staff treat and interpret a woman and evaluate her behavior.”\textsuperscript{49} Women in the criminal legal system have long been plagued by this notion of their double deviance for engaging in crime and challenging socially constructed gender roles. Thus, it is no surprise that even though the number of incarcerated parents in both state and federal prisons increased by 79\% between 1991 and 2007, the number of incarcerated mothers rose at a much faster rate than their male counterparts: 122\% and 76\%, respectively.\textsuperscript{50} Society expects mothers to perform intensive mothering, with the belief that this should be done while they are living with children. Yet when judges have some discretion in bail and sentencing decisions, carceral systems are more punitive toward criminalized (m)others of color who do not live with their children.\textsuperscript{51} More specifically, carceral systems are more likely to reprimand these mothers with incarceration for seemingly deviating from social constructions of motherhood. “Black women offenders,” as sociologist Jeanne Flavin argues, “are subjected to
a double-edged sword, rewarded if they are perceived as good parents but punished more severely if they are not.”\textsuperscript{52} These seemingly colorblind and gender-neutral policies aggravate social inequalities for mothers of color.

Even though most mothers provide for their children without engaging in crime, some who are less financially stable may commit crimes as a means of protecting and financially supporting their children.\textsuperscript{53} Additionally, the state punishes the survival actions of poor mothers of color as crimes while largely ignoring the survival crimes of wealthier white mothers. A prime example of this discrepancy is rich white mothers being given a slap on the wrist in college admission scandals, while poor mothers of color have been more punitively punished for enrolling their children in school districts where they do not live. This illustrates the differential state response to wealthy white mothers, who used their wealth to circumvent a system and “buy” an education (that they could have worked for), and to the poor mothers of color, who are deemed to be “stealing” an education that was not afforded to them (because they lived in less prosperous areas). These mothers made sacrifices to provide for their children, as any mother would, doing so by any means necessary. Yet compared to their white counterparts, mothers of color are disproportionately confined in the criminal legal system as offenders, rather than being understood as survivors of their environment and systemic marginalization.

Research shows that in some instances, holding an identity as a “bad mother” was likely worse than being identified as a “criminal.”\textsuperscript{54} Society views incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mothers as criminals first and mothers second, if they are even recognized and respected as mothers at all. Despite their resilience in mothering through social-structural barriers, public discourse about mothers of color criminalizes them as the problem rather than recognizing them for their survival mechanisms. These public perceptions and punitive carceral policies strip the visibility of mothers of color as being people who matter and reinforce blemished images of them as (m)others who need to be under penal control. Without centering the motherwork of women of color, we are essentially doing ourselves a disservice when we attempt to understand mothers’ experiences in carceral systems. Thus, \textit{Invisible Mothers} is grounded on the belief that maternal experiences post-incarceration cannot be detached from mothers’ treatment and experiences as criminalized people under penal control.
Mothering through Incarceration

Institutional barriers can undermine women’s mothering while they are incarcerated. Research shows that 54% of mothers in state facilities communicate monthly with their children by phone. Yet incarcerated mothers may be restricted by allotted time frames in which they can call their children or be discouraged from making prison calls by the expensive charges to family members. Approximately 66% of mothers in state facilities have monthly contact via mail, but children are often discouraged from writing back because they prefer direct contact with their mothers. Despite this preference for in-person communication, most incarcerated mothers—about 76%—do not receive visits from their children. Limited visitation from children is tied to barriers such as the long distances to correctional facilities, expensive travel costs, caregivers’ willingness or ability to take children to visit their mothers, inconvenient time frames for visits, and displeasure with one’s emotional state after a visit. Some incarcerated mothers also note that they do not want their children to visit them, preferring instead to shield them from unpleasant security screenings and prison environments. Such limited visitation, however, may interfere with women’s ability to do mothering to their liking. In fact, 64% of incarcerated mothers worry that incarceration affects their maternal role, and 55% of incarcerated mothers believe their children do not receive the maternal attention they need.

Carceral systems not only restrict women’s resources to do mothering, they simultaneously reinforce white, middle-class social constructions of motherhood. For instance, correctional facilities implement parenting programs to teach women how to “do” motherhood through communication skills, such as how to bond with children during reading time and playtime. This individual focus of carceral programs assumes that “success,” which is subjectively defined, is a matter of “fixing” the mothers to fit into normative motherhood, as if their circumstances were devoid of structural oppression. In fact, Carolyn Sufrin found that within one carceral program that claimed to be evidence based, “there is no mention of institutionalized racism, poverty, lack of access to mental and medical health care, sentencing laws, or other sociopolitical factors that have contributed to the mass incarceration of parents over the last four decades.” This demonstrates a problematic paradox in restricting women’s resources and disregarding the carceral role of these barriers that render them invisible mothers while simultaneously
encouraging and sometimes forcing mothers to aspire to social constructions of motherhood (in order to be seen as visible mothers).

Although research shows that motherhood is a vital source of motivation during incarceration, the invisible punishments of carceral systems present several hurdles that persist well after mothers’ incarceration. Mothers of color are exposed to structural injustices in society that not only ensnare them into correctional facilities but also follow them back into the community post-release. They face obstacles in gaining employment with a criminal record, in obtaining suitable housing after losing it during confinement, and in securing custody of their children given state-imposed requirements—all of which may overlap and complicate the mothering experience. Everything considered, sociologists highlight that “competing demands may seriously interfere with successful reintegration: The woman will need an apartment to regain custody of their children, she will need a job to get an apartment, she will need to get treatment for her addiction to be able to work, and initial contact with her children may only be possible during business hours if they are in custody of the state.” These competing demands on formerly incarcerated mothers amount to interwoven needs, yet—as invisible (m)others—social supports are severely limited due to state neglect to provide them with adequate resources.

Invisible Mothers demonstrates these competing demands from state structures, which intervene in women’s mothering efforts after their release. As a result of such state interventions, mothers are hypervigilant in protecting their children from racialized state violence, they purposefully support each other through “collective motherwork” in communities of color, and they try to minimize state disruptions by gathering all available resources and managing the emotional impact on children. In these ways, formerly incarcerated mothers of color exercise a variety of motherwork strategies to tackle competing demands during reentry and to overcome oppressive carceral regimes. To more effectively assist these mothers, Invisible Mothers highlights their motherwork efforts and the interwoven needs for motherwork during reentry. This assistance, however, requires an understanding of mothers’ experiences and treatment within a web of conflicting hierarchies regarding ethno-racial and gendered images of “bad” (m)others.

Underrepresented racial-ethnic groups like African American, West Indian, and Latina women are typically considered together as “minorities,” with little attention to how social-structural nuances in their treatment and circumstances might impact their motherwork and its place in
the reentry process post-incarceration. All three groups of mothers share similar experiences in mothering as they raise their children through discrimination and oppression, yet *Invisible Mothers* explores how minor nuances in social prejudices, family support, and community networks may complicate or mitigate these barriers differently among mothers of color.  

**Research Approach**

Though social science research has examined social perceptions and treatment of mothers of color in punitive carceral systems, less is known about how they understand their own experiences amid histories of oppression and how social service providers can use this information in anti-oppressive approaches. *Invisible Mothers* addresses two central questions. First, how do mothers navigate motherhood through various aspects of their reentry into the community after imprisonment? Second, how is this reentry process shaped by mothers’ treatment and experiences at the intersectionality of gender, motherhood, racial-ethnic background, and criminal status?

Researchers often quantify the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and mothers in quantitative research, which may reinforce notions of “unfit” or bad (m)others when presented without a clear understanding of their full and personal narratives. Qualitative interviews are an ideal approach to study the navigation of post-incarceration motherhood because they can capture complex phenomena from the perspective of those who are most knowledgeable about their own experiences. In 2014 I began interviewing formerly incarcerated mothers of color in New York City to gather the personal narratives that are often overlooked in other less-interactive data collection approaches. To preserve their anonymity, I present and highlight their narratives here using pseudonyms (i.e., fake names). *Invisible Mothers* explores how mothers understand their challenges and experiences navigating motherhood post-incarceration and examines how navigating motherhood shapes reentry into the community. Appendix A includes detailed information on how I recruited mothers for interviews, the interviewing process, and data analysis procedures.

*Invisible Mothers* aims to highlight intraracial experiences and nuances among mothers of color by focusing on formerly incarcerated mothers of African American, West Indian, and Latina background. Existing quantitative data sets may be limited in their ability to detect these nuances
between ethnic groups when labeling them under the “Black” racial umbrella or classifying the racial group and its ethnic subgroups as “Black or African American alone.” If ethnicity is known, quantitative researchers may still exclude or overlook ethnic groups like West Indian and Latina mothers, deeming their presence relatively small and unimportant while reinforcing Black/white dichotomies. Qualitative data, on the other hand, is particularly useful to understand mothers’ self-identification, provide an accurate representation of their experiences, and suggest resources and practices that tie in with their maternal realities post-incarceration.

In total, I interviewed 37 formerly incarcerated mothers of color. As many as 21 identified with an African American background, 15 identified with a Latin American background, 8 identified with a West Indian background, and 1 participant identified as Black but could not describe an ethnicity with which she identified. Given the high chances of inter-ethnic relations in a diverse city like New York City, I expected some mothers to identify with more than one ethnicity; some did, describing themselves as ethnically mixed and shaping the overlap in numbers for ethnic representation. This demonstrates the variety in ethnic background that can go unrecognized in criminal justice research exploring large racial dichotomies. The represented Spanish-speaking countries and US territories include the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Spain, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Cuba. The represented West Indian countries include Jamaica, Haiti, Barbados, St. Croix, and Trinidad and Tobago. Appendix B charts the ethnic background(s) of each participant. Throughout Invisible Mothers, I identify the ethnicities of the mothers as either African American, West Indian, or Latina when ethnicity is directly associated with their narratives, and I use women of color and mothers of color as inclusive terms for shared experiences across their ethnicities.

A summary of the mothers is available in appendix B, which provides demographic characteristics of the mothers such as their ages, the lengths of their last incarcerations, length of time since their release, ethnic backgrounds, degrees of contact with their children, and employment statuses. The mothers ranged from 24 to 63 years old, with an average age of 43. They had 2 to 3 biological children on average, with one mother having as many as 10 children. The 37 mothers had a total of 101 children among them. The youngest child was 3 months old, while the oldest was a 44-year-old son, but the average child’s age when the mothers were interviewed was approximately 19 years old. When relevant to the discussion, children’s ages are identified; otherwise, the children’s underage or adult status is available in appendix B.
Given that women’s visibility as (m)others is a function of their criminal record, it is important to understand the mothers’ involvement in the criminal legal system and what they were last incarcerated for. Of the 37 mothers, 21 (57%) had been incarcerated more than once, while the remaining 16 (43%) had pled guilty to or been convicted of only one offense each, excluding technical violations. Mothers were incarcerated on a variety of both misdemeanor and felony charges. Drug crimes (i.e., the possession or sale of controlled substances) were the most common causes of incarceration. Twenty-six of the thirty-seven mothers (70%) had histories of substance use; for the majority of them, this use had developed prior to motherhood, then later influenced their entry into the criminal legal system as mothers. In addition to drug crimes, the mothers were commonly charged with money crimes like identity theft, shoplifting, burglary, and grand larceny. While some had committed money crimes as teens and young adults for monetary survival and personal protection prior to motherhood, these crimes were typically ways to uphold familial responsibilities and to financially protect a collective unit. Other crimes included prostitution, assault, weapons possession, and driving under the influence. On average, the mothers’ most recent bout of incarceration ranged from a span of seven days to as long as five years, with an average of one year and three months.

Mothers had been in the community for an average of three years and four months when I interviewed them; this time ranged from as early as one and one-half weeks after release to as long as 16 years after their release. Over half of the mothers I interviewed were currently or had previously been on parole. It is possible that retrospective accounts several years after release might differ substantially from reentry narratives when recently released. As time passes, mothers may forget certain details, and their memories may over- or underestimate their emotional responses to things that happened a long time ago. For these reasons, criminologists generally focus on the first few years after incarceration to explore reentry obstacles. However, I did not impose limitations on who I interviewed based on how long mothers were in the community post-release. I interviewed 14 mothers within a year after their last incarceration, an additional 9 between one to three years post-incarceration, another 7 within three to five years post-incarceration, and only 7 mothers with more than five years in the community. Interviewing mothers with a range of time in the community can be beneficial because the impact of carceral systems extends well after mothers’ incarceration. When I spoke with the mothers, 14 lived in transitional housing, 9 lived in shelters,
5 lived in families’ homes, 4 lived in their own homes, and the remaining 5 lived in a variety of living situations like homelessness, an in-patient drug treatment program, with a roommate, in a bedroom that a stranger was subletting, and one whose living situation was unknown. The 37 mothers lived in four of the five New York City boroughs, excluding Staten Island. Most of the women lived in the borough of Queens (N = 13), followed by Manhattan (N = 10), Brooklyn (N = 9), and the Bronx (N = 4); one woman (N = 1) was homeless and awaiting shelter placement at the time of her interview. Of the 37 mothers, 25 (68%) were unemployed and 28 (76%) had at least a high school diploma or had successfully passed the general equivalency diploma (GED) exam.

Two mothers had regained custody of children who were in the foster care system, two had children who were still in foster care, and seven had children who were adopted from foster care (three by family and four by nonfamily), including one mother with an additional child awaiting final adoption by her maternal grandmother. It is worth emphasizing, however, that custodial arrangements are not accurate representations of mother-child relationships or interaction. Mothers without custody of one or all of their underage children can still live and interact with them or remain the primary caregivers; similarly, mothers can legally have custody without living with or having contact with their children. Mother-child interaction shapes motherwork beyond dichotomies of being residential versus nonresidential mothers or having custodial versus noncustodial arrangements. Thus, I did not limit my recruitment to mothers with normative classifications of motherhood such as having custody or living with their children.

Approximately one-third of the 37 mothers lived with at least one of their children: 6 lived with underage children, 3 lived with adult children, and 4 lived with both underage and adult children. However, the most common arrangement was for the mothers to have some form of contact with their children without physically living together (29 of 37 mothers, 78%; see appendix B). Residential expectations may differ according to children’s ages, as society expects mothers to live with underage children more than with adult children. Invisible Mothers demonstrates that these nonresidential relationships are influenced by a variety of things such as barriers pre- and post-incarceration as well as social expectations that children will eventually transition into adulthood and move out of their parents’ home.

As shown in appendix B, 9 mothers had no communication with a child. Of these 9 mothers, 6 had no communication with their adult
children, while the remaining 3 had no communication with underage children. Additionally, no mothers with multiple children lacked communication with all of them; instead, the mothers often had differing degrees of communication with each of their children. For instance, of the 9 mothers without contact, 7 did not have communication with at least one of their multiple children but maintained contact with the rest; the remaining 2 mothers did not have contact with their only child.

Overall, *Invisible Mothers* presents reentry narratives from mothers living with their children, mothers not living with their children but remaining in contact, and mothers without communication with their children. Some individuals may question the extent of motherwork without having custody, living with, or communicating with their children, but it is important for reentry scholars to take an inclusive approach in thinking about motherwork. Doing so allows mothers to define their own maternal identities and acknowledges mothers’ visibility across different circumstances. The mothers’ narratives presented in this book demonstrate the importance of maternal inclusivity in understanding what motherwork entails, without imposing normative standards.

Given the various ways to incorporate and discuss interview data, it is important to highlight that *Invisible Mothers* uses a combination of two approaches. I present the mothers’ narratives as transparent windows into their lived experiences and, in presenting their narratives, I also unpack the mothers’ meaning making in how they understood their lived experiences. I treat our conversations as rich insight into the reality of mothers’ experiences, eliciting information about their feelings, personal timelines, social circumstances, and the context of family relationships. To help readers understand the mothers’ lived experiences, I contextualize their narratives by integrating information about larger social contexts like parole stipulations and state policies. When relevant, I also unpack their narratives for readers to understand how mothers made sense of their experiences and described their experiences to me as an outside person.

**Organization of the Book**

This book is organized into four chapters exploring the invisible punishments women of color encounter while navigating motherhood post-incarceration. Although society and scholars often frame mothers of color in reentry as “criminals” or “offenders” first and mothers second, in this book I purposefully center how they perform post-incarceration
motherwork as criminalized (m)others, without centering their criminality. I also shy away from a blanket understanding of mothering practices that stigmatizes formerly incarcerated mothers of color and devalues their motherwork. Instead, I present the women’s reentry narratives as they reflect on various aspects of maternal life, illustrating their battles with normative standards of motherhood and highlighting their resiliency from controlling images of them as “criminals first, mothers second.”

Combating the stigma and defamation of formerly incarcerated mothers of color as “bad” (m)others, chapter 1 demonstrates how they resist these labels and construct their actions as being motherly in nature and with a maternal purpose. Despite complicated circumstances and complex maternal relationships, their involvement in the criminal legal system does not prevent motherwork altogether. Chapter 1 explores how women of color engage in maternal labor and how they understand their motherwork within various living arrangements, custodial circumstances, and degrees of contact with their children. This chapter reviews common mothering efforts to gain positionality in their children’s lives as their mothers, to make up for lost time with their children, to improve their children’s circumstances, and to shift or expand attention to mothering their grandchildren as second chances to mend relationships. Mothers largely want to do right by their children and try to do so, yet this chapter highlights how penal control continues well after incarceration as mothers are released into the carceral state in Black and brown communities. Although their motherwork is typically overlooked or ignored as invisible mothers, they are simultaneously supervisible as they are hypersurveilled by law enforcement and judged by society based on social norms about “good” and “bad” behaviors. Chapter 1 illustrates their efforts as criminalized (m)others of color to overcome state surveillance and interventions that threaten their mothering under the carceral state. This chapter also highlights their concerns and struggles to protect their children in a society that criminalizes people of color even when they are innocent. As law professor and social justice advocate Dorothy Roberts explains: “It is impossible to explain the depth of sorrow felt at the moment a mother realizes she birthed her precious brown baby into a society that regards her child as just another unwanted Black charge.” The mothers’ narratives in chapter 1 suggest a unique maternal need to protect their children from racialized state oppression, from controlling images of ethnic groups, and from ethnic nuances in social treatment. This first chapter provides a broad context of post-incarceration motherwork and mothering as criminalized
(m)others, followed by three additional chapters with in-depth discussions of focus areas within women’s reentry into the community.

Chapter 2 explores mothers’ experiences between the criminal legal system and the child welfare system as the state critiques their mothering, denounces their worthiness to mother, and then legally regulates their motherwork as visible (m)others through custody decisions. This chapter reviews how mothers of color are forced to demonstrate maternal fitness according to preconceived notions, defined by the state, of what it means to be suitable mothers. To regain custody of underage children, mothers are forced to meet a number of prerequisites, such as certifications from parenting programs; clean urine samples to demonstrate sobriety; and suitable housing for themselves and their children, which requires a form of income. Although these mandates have been put in place to ensure mothers’ preparation for custody, they represent obvious tensions between notions of care in the child welfare system (to protect children) and notions of justice in the criminal legal system (to control their mothers). Chapter 2 demonstrates that African American, Latinx, and West Indian family members generally supported the mothers through motherhood and in collectively fighting against state interventions that strip or suppress mothers’ custodial rights. Yet the formerly incarcerated mothers expressed that these state interventions and custodial prerequisites were an extra load attached to the already heavy burdens of reentry. For instance, this chapter shows that the mothers experienced many difficulties trying to accommodate or negotiate with their children’s caregivers as they underwent constant housing changes and strove to create a home environment post-incarceration. They discussed some of the racialized barriers to establishing a home as criminalized (m)others of color—whether or not this home environment was expected to include their children. Yet all in all, they attempted to establish a home with dependent children, they tried to please their children across different age groups, and they tried to maintain and enhance maternal relationships from within the shelter system and other forms of transitional or temporary housing arrangements.

Chapter 3 highlights mothers’ efforts to enter and progress in the workforce after incarceration, situating their narratives within what we know about invisible punishments and marginalization across gender, race, ethnicity, and motherhood. Research shows that gender plays a significant role in the organization of the labor market and workplace as women face gender discrimination in hiring practices, lower pay compared to
men, and systemic barriers to promotion, as well as gender harassment that pushes them out of male-dominated professions. Such experiences with gender discrimination in the labor market and workplace are complicated by maternal expectations and obligations. Chapter 3 examines the role of motherhood in how women think about job opportunities as criminalized (m)others and highlights what they perceive as suitable employment for their maternal needs post-incarceration. Chapter 3 also explores how formerly incarcerated mothers are able to do motherwork despite low pay and unemployment. For instance, motherwork differed among the mothers based on their level of communication with children as well as their children’s ages and dependency on them.

In addition to the mother-child aspects that shape motherwork and (un)employment experiences post-incarceration, chapter 3 also highlights differences in mothers’ experiences tied to their social positions as African American, West Indian, and Latina mothers. Women of color, as a collective marginalized group, are hindered by common assumptions about their work ethic when they have a criminal record, which often positions them as united against racial discrimination. Chapter 3 demonstrates, however, that African Americans and West Indians were also positioned as rival competitors to progress in the labor market and workplace because of public perceptions about each group’s work ethic. In addition to this conflict between the ethnic groups, chapter 3 also demonstrates the stigma and defamation from within their own ethnic communities and families. For instance, the mothers’ narratives suggest nuances across ethnic communities in their willingness to support formerly incarcerated (m)others, pushing those of West Indian and Latin American background to take extra steps to avoid further stigma and dishonor to the family name. More specifically, even though family was generally essential in supporting mothers after incarceration, West Indian and Latina mothers were more likely to describe family’s reluctance to offer financial help when (m)others had committed money crimes, since these contradicted cultural values about legitimate work and honorable income. Thus, in regard to racial-ethnic background, this chapter unpacks how cultural expectations about work and integrity intimately shaped mothers’ reentry into the community after release.

Substance use has a vast presence among women in the criminal legal system and among the formerly incarcerated mothers I interviewed. Chapter 4 examines their goals, efforts, support networks, and challenges to recovery while navigating motherhood post-incarceration. Though motherhood often encouraged them to seek sobriety, it simultaneously