Introduction

Melvin\(^1\) was the first person I met at the community-based reentry center\(^2\) in downtown Newark, New Jersey. At the time, he was fifty-one years old, with milk chocolate brown skin, a clean-shaven head, a prominent scar over his left eye, several chipped teeth, and a thin chinstrap beard peppered with gray hairs, and he stood six feet tall. Further, he maintained a well-built physique from a daily routine of push-ups, sit-ups, and pull-ups. Across both forearms he had several “homemade” tattoos, including a brick wall and his name, “Mel,” written vertically. He frequently wore a blue T-shirt with purple lettering that read “Made in Newark,” signifying pride in his city. Yet it is the same city that determined that more than half of his life would be spent within the New Jersey prison system. In fact, at the time we met, in November 2010, Melvin had been imprisoned for nearly thirty-five years—longer than I had been alive.

On an overcast and gray autumn morning in 2010, Melvin, who had been incarcerated since the early 1980s, was stepping into a world that had profoundly changed around him and, in many ways, left him behind. Technological advances such as cell phones, the internet, and social media were all things he could not fathom and was experiencing for the first time. Everyday items that many of us take for granted were unrecognizable.

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\(^1\) This is a fictional name.
\(^2\) This is a fictional location.
During one of our first conversations, Melvin reached into his pocket and pulled out a worn brown leather wallet. “I don’t know why I have this,” he said. Naively, I began to explain the purpose of a wallet, a response that was received with a smirk and a brief laugh. “What I mean,” he said, “is I don’t know why I have this. I don’t have money, credit cards, or family pictures. It just takes up space in my pocket.” We both sat for a few minutes in silence, and I reflected on his statement and its profound meaning. I broke the silence by asking if he would share more of his story.

Melvin, who had been born in the summer of 1960, described growing up in Newark—a city that less than a decade later would become a place of urban unrest and uprising in response to decades of social neglect, police misconduct, and economic disparity—and having a normal childhood, playing with friends, going to barbecues, and being a baseball fan. While he could not recall a lot of specific memories from his adolescence, he vividly recollected the 1967 Newark riots.

“I remember it was around my birthday and it was hot in our apartment, and we couldn’t go outside,” he said. Raised by a single mother, Melvin had no relationship with his biological father. “He died when I was locked up so we never got a chance to meet, but I heard stories he was a jailbird, so I was always expecting to run into him on the inside.” He described his mother, however, as a hardworking Black woman from the South who worked in a hospital during the week and cleaned “rich folks” homes on the weekend. By the time he was ten, his mother had saved enough money to move them out of the projects where they were living and into a house. Two years later, when he was twelve, his mother was murdered.

“She had been dating an older man and they would argue a lot and he use to hit her,” he recalled, “but back then you didn’t get involved in grown folks’ business and wasn’t much I could do. She broke up with him because he wasn’t coming around. It was a Saturday afternoon, and my mother had sent me to the store around the corner to get milk, eggs, and sugar,” he went on. “She was going to make a cake. It’s funny, I’ve never forgotten what she told me to get. While I was gone, he came to the house and shot her. My mother saved my life sending me to the store.”

Melvin described this life-altering trauma in a calm and matter-of-fact manner, but it was clearly something he had not spoken about much over
the course of his life. While unsure whether his mother’s killer was ever charged with her murder, he learned that the man was eventually incarcerated out of state. By the time I met Melvin, his mother’s assailant had died, and he described making peace with himself, letting go of the guilt and anger that had consumed him much of his adolescent and young adult life.

Melvin’s maternal uncle became his legal guardian, marking the end of his childhood. “My uncle was a gangster,” he said, “so I grew up fast under him because I had to earn my keep. He did right by me, but he wasn’t really looking to raise a kid.”

Although Melvin lacked concrete memories about his childhood, he vividly recalled incidents that occurred while he was under his uncle’s care. “I was around thirteen, and he picked me up from school and saw someone who owed him money. He sped up and cut the guy off and ran up and hit him in the head with a pipe.” By the time Melvin was fifteen, he was the one with the pipe. “I was always bigger and good with my hands,” he said, “so I could fight. If something went wrong or people got out of line I would go, I had a reputation.” By age sixteen, Melvin had dropped out of high school, was working full-time for his uncle, and had been arrested in connection with a shooting.

Melvin spent the next four years in a New Jersey prison. During that time, his uncle was murdered, leaving him with no immediate family members. He was on his own. When released, he described going right back to a life defined by criminal activity, particularly armed robbery, as a means of survival. Within months of his release and just shy of his twenty-first birthday, he was back in police custody for robbery and murder.

Melvin discussed committing these crimes with a partner and explained, “This guy and I had done a few jobs together,” he said, “and he told me about a bar that had a lot of cash. While we were robbing the place, I thought it was going to be ‘business as usual,’ but my partner had other plans. Out of nowhere, he starts arguing with someone, but I could tell it wasn’t random because they start hollering at each other over some personal shit. Next thing, he shot the guy.”

Because Melvin was already on parole, his situation was compounded by these new charges. To add, his partner flipped and became an informant and snitched on Melvin, who was now facing a long prison sentence.
Ultimately, his partner served ten years, and Melvin was given a life sentence.

When I asked Melvin if he had tried to take a plea bargain to reduce his sentence, he responded, “First, I was and still not a snitch. Second, I’m a man and you got to take what’s coming to you. Third, even if I wanted to [take a deal], them crackas [White people] wasn’t having that. I became an example case, the poster child for the tough-on-crime era.”

By this time, Melvin had served a total of thirty-five years in prison. Part of the terms of his conditional release was that he remain on parole forever. In other words, any sort of violation would send him back to prison, as his parole does not end until December 31, 2999.

Embarking on reentry—the transition from imprisonment to community—Melvin has never had a driver’s license, opened a bank account, or rented an apartment. He lacked a high school diploma and had never worked in the formal economy. Additionally, he had limited social networks as many extended family members are since dead or fell out of
touch with him. He expressed an interest in politics with the election of Barack Obama. Yet he understood that his current condition would prevent him from being able to vote for the rest of his life, as many formerly incarcerated individuals are not allowed to vote in the United States.³

In many ways, Melvin’s reentry is not a story of second chances but one of initial opportunities. As someone born into a postindustrial society, in a racially segregated, low-income community, and coming of age during the rise of mass incarceration, Melvin faced the daunting task known as reentry, which includes diminished legal rights and amplified social stigmas. For him, and for countless others in similar situations, the reentry process is not linear or clearly outlined but a much more complex and imprecise journey in which individuals must actively participate in doing reentry. Ultimately, I argue that reentry is an extension of, not a termination of, the carceral continuum,⁴ which exacerbates surveillance, punishment, and restrictions, creating a purgatory citizenship that places individuals in a precarious state of limbo somewhere between confinement and freedom.

**REENTRY: A (BLACK) AMERICAN STORY**

In the 1980 film *Stir Crazy*, a comedy starring Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder, a pair of city slickers are charged with bank robbery in rural America and sentenced to 125 years in prison for a crime they did not commit. At one point Gene Wilder’s character discusses the inhumanity of prison conditions, saying, “I think more Americans should spend a little time behind bars to understand that.” His lawyer eerily and prophetically replies, “Well, more Americans probably will.”⁵

Since that time, exponential prison growth has expanded the American carceral system, peaking in the late 2000s with over 2.4 million people in jails or prisons.⁶ Additionally, more than 7.3 million people are under some sort of criminal legal supervision.⁷ Here, Black Americans are disproportionately overrepresented in carceral and surveillance terrain. Remarkably, in 2010, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that for the first time since the agency began collecting jurisdictional data in 1977, prison releases exceeded prison admissions in the United States.⁸ This marked a new era within American punishment and incarceration, which
piqued interest in what is more commonly referred to as reentry—the transition out of incarceration.

Today, approximately 650,000 to 700,000 individuals exit prison institutions annually. Unfortunately, the cycle of incarceration remains extraordinarily high, as roughly 67 percent of the people released are rearrested within three years and nearly half of them go back to jail or prison during that time.9 These numbers underscore the abysmal inability of public policy to create social safety nets for communities as well as the failure of incarceration as a deterrence or rehabilitation.

Yet the story of reentry is not necessarily new but uniquely part of the Black American experience that traces its lineage back to American slavery and the release from bondage, which in turn was replaced by a racist criminal legal system of captivity. Therefore, Black Americans have been in constant flux moving between spaces of confinement and freedom, with liberties and rights simultaneously given and stripped away, making upward mobility a challenging, if not a near impossible, endeavor.

Furthermore, reentry narratives are found in Black history and cultural expression. For instance, human rights activist and Black Muslim leader Malcolm X is one of the most notable examples of reentry. Before becoming a leading spokesperson advocating human rights, he had been incarcerated as a younger man.

Moreover, reentry has been showcased in Black theater, film, television, and music. August Wilson’s 1984 play *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* tells the story of Herald Loomis, a Black man, who was forced to work for a White man, Joe Turner, for seven years in the early 1910s, separating him from his wife and daughter, illustrating how the convict leasing system was used to reenslave Black folks after emancipation.

The 2001 film *Prison Song* deals with various themes of race and the criminal legal system, notably highlighting draconian criminal justice policies such as the “three strikes” law, which sends the protagonist’s stepfather back to prison for life. In television, the comedy series *The Last OG*, which premiered in 2018, illustrates change and gentrification when the protagonist does not recognize his Brooklyn neighborhood after serving fifteen years in prison. J. Cole’s song “4 Your Eyez Only,” released in 2016, elucidates legal barriers of reentry such as limited employment opportunities, underscoring many of the current issues within the reentry process.
The motivation behind this project is to understand the lived experiences of those returning to society after being incarcerated. Before I began my research in 2010, much of the prominent literature on the subject took a top-down quantitative approach to the topic. In other words, it was very much statistically driven research discussing “what works” in reentry. While this research has its place in the larger scope of criminological inquiry, a major absence in these reports were the lived experiences of those going through this process. Therefore, it was important to take an ethnographic approach to understand reentry, particularly for low-income urban inhabitants of color, the people most affected by the criminal legal system.

Over the past decade, several books have been written that offer insight into the reentry experiences, highlighting many of the difficulties and challenges that face those coming out of incarcerated settings. However, my work differs from these books in several ways.

First, I explore how individuals navigate and negotiate the reentry process by doing reentry. In other words, reentry is not simply a static occurrence but rather a fluid mechanism that folks must actively participate and engage in a myriad of ways. If they fail in this regard, they could be subject to both formal and informal penalties.

Second, this work wrestles with the notion of citizenship. A felony conviction interrupts legal status, limiting opportunities for employment, housing, health care, civic engagement, and social relationships. Ultimately, it creates a purgatory status, which builds upon scholarship that engages notions of citizenry. Here, I provide an alternative term, purgatory citizenship, to describe how criminal conviction and postimprisonment legal status is altered as individuals are neither fully integrated nor expelled within the American populace, but rather further pushed to the margins without the ability to have a voice or agency, limiting access to power in society, and creating a cyclical perpetual punishment.

Finally, this book differs from others examining reentry because it addresses abolition—the concept of formally ending systems, practices, and institutions of punishment and surveillance, such as jails and prisons—particularly through the lived experiences of those returning to
society. Here, notions of abolition are discussed from the perspective of those returning to society in their early days of reentry.

This book is based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from November 2010 to September 2013 in Newark, New Jersey, primarily within a community-based reentry program that offered social services to recently released men and women living in and around Essex County, New Jersey. Newark was chosen as a place to conduct this research for several reasons. First, Newark is the most populous city in the Garden State, with more than a quarter of a million residents. Second, the city is often associated with criminality, which stems from the 1967 Newark Rebellion and subsequent crime rates. Also, Newark lies within Essex County, which consistently has the highest incarceration rate of commitment by county (15 percent) in the state. Finally, my own family connection to reentry and the city drew me to explore and understand these intricacies in this metropolis.

Drawing upon formal life-history interviews, informal conversations, focus groups, and participatory ethnography with recently released individuals, this book investigates how people navigate and negotiate the reentry process with diminished legal rights and amplified social stigmas. Reentry is often presented as a story of redemption, as it signifies the moment of release back into society, giving the impression of a new beginning. This is often where the headline stops. Yet the story continues. This book seeks to tell the stories of people trying to make the transition back to their community.

In this book, readers are introduced to a myriad of people. The stories told are based on the strictest confidentiality that names, situations, and other potentially identifying characteristics would be modified for discretionary purposes. Many of these narratives do not have the traditional “clean” endings. In some cases, participants ended up back in prison. For example, Melvin has been reincarcerated twice, most recently released in February 2021. As this book illustrates, the reentry experience is often unresolved and a story of incompleteness.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that participants in this research (also referred to as clients by the community reentry center) display perseverance and resilience that is often ignored if a “happy” ending does not occur. Despite the outcomes for these clients, all were processing and