

**MILES AND BARS BETWEEN: QUASI-CARCERAL LIMINALITY  
AND TERTIARY PRISONIZATION OF PRISON VISITATION  
TRANSPORTATION SERVICES**

by

Dylan Haywood

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

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## ABSTRACT

Prison visitation transportation services provide an important yet understudied role in the process of prison visitation for many people with incarcerated loved ones. This project draws from the findings of an ethnographic study on the experiences of loved ones of incarcerated people using a small, Black-owned prison visitation transportation service. As the first study of its kind focused on the experiences of prison visitation transportation services, this project highlights the important role these services play in the lives of those who use them, and how these services are shaped by their relationship to the carceral state. Prison visitation transportation services help to mitigate carceral control over the lives of those who use these services to visit their incarcerated loved ones, but in turn these services are also subjected to an intensive form of carceral control themselves, extending the reach of the carceral state further into the lives of their customers. Caught between mitigating the harms of incarceration for loved ones on the outside and being forced to comply with the carceral state's control of visitors, prison visitation transportation services assume a "peculiar status" of quasi-carceral liminal spaces. Subjected to rigid forms of carceral control themselves, prison visitation transportation services and their staff experience a form of tertiary prisonization. This ultimately results in the drivers of these services experiencing a heightened and enduring state of layered liminality, which becomes attached to them as individuals.



## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The United States continues to lead the world in incarceration, with over 2.3 million people confined within more than 6,000 correctional facilities (Wagner and Rabuy 2017), the majority of whom are disproportionately drawn from poor communities of color characterized by concentrated, deep disadvantage (Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014; Western 2006). There has been an increasing number of calls for research to examine the effects of imprisonment, including on those who remain in the shadow of the prison and are impacted through the imprisonment of loved ones. In a political climate that continues to foster the draconian policies that fueled the project of mass incarceration, responding to these calls for research has never been more urgent.

Visitation is often regarded by researchers and advocates alike to be one of the most important mechanisms for incarcerated people to maintain social capital and important bonds with their loved ones during incarceration. Extant literature suggests that visitation helps incarcerated people maintain positive social ties, which has been shown to improve reentry outcomes, improve chances of finding employment, and increase the likelihood of desistance from crime (Bales and Mears 2008; Cochran et al. 2016; Cochran and Mears 2013; Glaser 1964; Holt and Miller 1972; LeBel and Maruna 2012; Visser 2013). Despite evidence supporting the importance of receiving visitation from loved ones during incarceration, research continues to demonstrate that the vast majority of prisoners never receive visitation while they are imprisoned

(Cochran et al. 2016; Duwe and Clark 2011; Hairston 1988; Mumola 2000; Siennick, Mears, and Bales 2013). Distance between the correctional facility – where an inmate is housed in a prison – and the home of the inmate’s loved ones is frequently cited as primary barrier to prison visitation (Christian, Mellow, and Thomas 2006; Cochran et al. 2016; Cochran, Mears, and Bales 2014; Mumola 2000; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). Existing literature examining the importance and experience of visitation has been primarily framed through the perspective of the incarcerated, and thus, with few exceptions (Christian 2005; Comfort 2003, 2008, 2016, Moran 2013a, 2013b; Moran and Schliehe 2017), has largely neglected to examine this experience from the perspective of the loved ones of the incarcerated. Moreover, only one known study has included an examination of the experiences of prison visitors using prison transportation services to visit their incarcerated loved ones (Christian 2005).

In this thesis I seek to fill this gap and advance the literature on prison visitation by detailing the important yet understudied role that prison visitation transportation services play in the lives of those who use them, and how these services are shaped by their relationship to the carceral state. This thesis relies on the findings from an ethnographic study examining the experiences of those using prison visitation transportation services to visit their incarcerated loved ones, using the framework of critical carceral studies and a critical race-grounded theory approach. A careful review of the relevant extant literature on prison visitation helps to highlight the importance of extending this body of research to prison visitation transportation services. First, I demonstrate the important role that prison visitation transportation services play in the lives of those who use them. Second, this work demonstrates how the carceral state’s coercive and forcible control ultimately results in these services assuming a “peculiar

status” as quasi-carceral spaces. Third, this work examines how, as a result of the carceral apparatus’ rigid control, prison visitation transportation services and their staff are subjected to a kind of tertiary prisonization, which results in a heightened state of layered liminality.

### **Literature Review**

The experience of incarceration in the American context can be characterized as severely isolating for many incarcerated people, effectively straining or cutting off connections to their normative social networks and key relationships. Studies have shown that one of the most prominent and consistently reported fears of those incarcerated is separation from their family and loved ones (Adams 1992; Liebling 1999; Siennick et al. 2013). Consistent with Sykes’s (1958) notion of the “pains of imprisonment,” research finds that social isolation of incarcerated people contributes to both immediate and long-term maladjustment (Adams 1992; Hairston 1991; Haney 2003; Liebling 1999).

Beyond those who are incarcerated in America’s expansive prison system, imprisonment also has a significant impact on the lives of the friends, family members, loved ones, and communities of those who are incarcerated. Often referred to as “collateral consequences” of incarceration (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999), a multitude of deleterious impacts on the lives of those connected to incarcerated people have been well-documented (Foster and Hagan 2007; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002).

Visitation is often regarded by researchers and advocates alike to be one of the most important mechanisms for incarcerated people to maintain social capital and important bonds with their loved ones during incarceration. Extant literature suggests that visitation helps incarcerated people maintain positive social ties, which has been

shown to improve reentry outcomes, improve chances of finding employment, and increase the likelihood of desistance from crime (Bales and Mears 2008; Cochran et al. 2016; Cochran and Mears 2013; Glaser 1964; Holt and Miller 1972; LeBel and Maruna 2012; Visser 2013). Visitation also has implications for family bonds, which is especially important given that men who are incarcerated are as likely as men in the rest of the American population to have children, regardless of race (Western 2006). Indeed, visitation has been found to help maintain family ties during incarceration, acting as a venue in which children, partners, and loved ones of the incarcerated can interact with the imprisoned person and plan for life post-release, in addition to increasing the likelihood of family support and reducing level of family conflict post-release (Mowen and Visser 2015; Tasca, Mulvey, and Rodriguez 2016). Moreover, incarcerated people who either maintain or develop strong bonds with family members during imprisonment are, importantly, more likely to find employment and maintain those family bonds, both of which are crucial to successful reentry (Berg and Huebner 2011; Mears et al. 2012; Travis and Visser 2005). As Moran (2013b) emphasizes, to date, “the most compelling evidence is perhaps that there are no published studies showing a negative influence of visiting on postrelease behaviour” (p. 178).

Visitation policies for state prisons vary tremendously between states, and often differ between prisons within the same state. As visitation research has continued to produce findings on the positive effects of prison visitation, there has been a subsequent increase in support of visitation from community organizations, social scientists, and other scholars. Various prison administrators’ studies have also echoed the positive effects of prison visitation on incarcerated people during imprisonment, on correctional officers’ safety, and on reentry outcomes (Boudin,

Stutz, and Littman 2013). Examining the available Department of Corrections policy directives and administrative regulations documents for each state, Boudin, Stutz, and Littman (2013) found that twenty-nine states either promoted or encouraged visitation formally at the outset of their documents at the time of their study.

Despite empirical support for its benefits, visitation is actually quite rare. Cochran et al. (2016:223–24) note that in the majority of states, an inmate’s ability to receive visitation is not considered to be a right of prisoners, but rather a privilege that may be taken away from an incarcerated person as a form of punishment. Although most incarcerated people are technically allowed to receive visitation, very few actually do receive visits during their periods of imprisonment (Cochran et al. 2016; see also Comfort 2008). Indeed, studies show that the vast majority of inmates do not receive any visits whatsoever during their incarceration (Cochran 2014; Duwe and Clark 2011; Hairston 1988; Siennick et al. 2013). For instance, a study by Bales and Mears (Bales and Mears 2008) found that among incarcerated people who had been released from a Florida prison, 58 percent of their sample had not received any visits during the year prior to their release. Cochran et al. (2016) found similar results, noting that only 26 percent of inmates in their study had received visitation at least once during their incarceration.

Various barriers to visitation may prevent family and friends from being able to visit their imprisoned loved ones. Each of these barriers represents a serious obstacle that makes achieving visitation either difficult or impossible, and therefore each also amounts to a potential hindrance to the chances of successful reentry post-release. Although there are few studies that have thoroughly examined barriers to visitation empirically, those that have managed to do so have found striking results.

Given that incarceration is primarily concentrated among the most disadvantaged groups in society, most of whom are poor people of color (Western 2006), it is not surprising that studies on prison visitation consistently report that people with incarcerated loved ones often struggle to make it to visitation due to obstacles such as lack of childcare, lack of reliable transportation, inability to take off time from work, and lack of excess funds for other visitation-related expenses (Christian et al. 2006; Cochran 2014; Comfort 2003, 2016; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Visser 2013). Early work on prison visitation pointed to the cost of travelling to prisons, finding, for example, that transportation costs alone to visit Attica Prison for a person living in New York City were more than 176% of a welfare recipient's total weekly income (Homer 1979). Similarly, Christian's (2005) study on family management strategies among families in New York found visitation to be a very resource intensive process. The findings of this study demonstrated that the most basic necessary expenses for one person to achieve a single visit to a prison facility cost at least \$80 but could easily cost up to as much as \$120, not accounting for visitation-related expenses such as childcare (Christian 2005:37). In a poignant illustration of the complex and intertwined potential barriers to visiting an incarcerated loved one, Christian (2005) explains that the resource intensive nature of visitation forces families of the incarcerated, often already suffering from resource deprivation, into situations in which "other aspects of their lives, such as spending time with and supervising children, or involvement with community or neighborhood organizations necessarily suffer" (p. 37).

## Prison Visitation: Effects of Visiting on Outside Loved Ones

Extant literature on visitation has primarily focused on the experience and impacts on the incarcerated. On the other hand, very little research has made its focus the realities of experiencing visitation from the perspective of loved ones of the incarcerated. Among the literature that does focus on this perspective of visitation, few scholars have developed such a distinctive conceptualization of the impact of visitation on loved ones of the incarcerated as Comfort's (2003, 2008, 2016) analyses. Working from data collected at San Quentin State Prison in California, Comfort (2003, 2008, 2016) traces the ways in which the visitation processing area and structure of the visitation policies function to control the bodies and actions of the mostly women visitors. Comfort (2003) argues that by applying Sykes's (1958) concept of the "pains of imprisonment," Goffman's (1963) "courtesy stigma," and Garfinkel's (1968) "ceremonies of degradation," an analysis of visitation areas suggests that visitors are subjected to "secondary prisonization, a weakened but still compelling version of the elaborate regulations, concentrated surveillance, and corporeal confinement governing the lives of ensnared felons" (p. 101).

The visitation processing area of the prison is characterized by its elements of liminality in that it acts as the "final 'free' space" inside the prison walls (Comfort 2003:86). This space inside the prison is one where visitors expect to be able to exercise some sort of genuine autonomy over their bodies and where they still maintain their legally "free" status, yet it is also the site at which they will ultimately be subjected to the control and regulation of the correctional apparatus, in very similar ways experienced by those incarcerated (2003). Following this, a handful of other scholars have similarly described this sense of liminality inside the prison. For example, Codd (2007:257) has explained that the liminal space of the prison is where

visitors “are not entirely prisoners; however... [are] within the prison establishment and thus are not entirely free,” and Moran (2013a:341) has described the space of the prison as one of “betweenness and indistinction.”

In Van Gennep’s (1960:21) original conceptualization of liminality, focused on “rites of passage,” he suggested three specific stages of passage: “the rites of separation from a previous world” as the preliminal, “those executed during the transitional stage” as the liminal, and “the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world” as the post-liminal in which the individual has been transformed. Central to Van Gennep’s (1960) notion of the “liminal” is that once in the “post-liminal” state, individuals have experienced a transformation. Applied to visitation spaces, scholars find that, while visitors do experience a form of transformation, these experiences are not due necessarily to reaching a final, or postliminal, stage. Comfort (2008:185) concludes from this body of work that “women partners of prisoners are themselves changed by their interactions with the correctional facility,” and contends that their ongoing contact with the penal apparatus, through their experiences in the liminal space of the visiting room, forces them into “the peculiar status of quasi-inmates” (Comfort 2003:103). Similarly, Moran (2013a) found that for visitors and incarcerated women in Russia, by repeatedly going between the liminal space of the prison visiting room and then back into their normal social worlds, women do not experience transformation as an event, as Van Gennep’s (1960) original conceptualization implies, but as a “subtle, cumulatively transformative effect” (2013b:183). According to Moran (2013b), the visitation space inside the prisons “operates as a location of partial and repetitive threshold crossing, where transformation is both temporary and fleeting, but also subtle, cumulative, and sometimes counterintuitive” (p. 183).



Importantly, Moran (2013b) has led the development of “carceral geography” as a subfield ideal for examining carceral spaces such as visiting rooms. As a subfield, carceral geography has been largely dependent on the work of theorists such as Foucault’s (1979) ideas of discipline, spatial control, and creation of docile bodies; Agamben’s (1998) notions of Bare Life and zones of exception; Goffman’s (1961) concept of total institutions; and Gilmore’s (2002) notion of prisons as a project of state-building. As Moran (2013b) notes, carceral geography fits well with those areas that have long engaged in examinations of the carceral apparatus. However, whereas disciplines like criminology and prison sociology have largely conceptualized incarceration as “prison time,” carceral geography emphasizes “experience of the carceral space, both in terms of individual’s movements into and out of that space and his or her experience within it, as well as the physical manifestation of the penal institution in space” (p. 175). For carceral geographers, spaces such as the visiting room are not simply physical contexts in which social interactions take place. Rather, space “does not simply exist as a ‘given’ but affects (and is affected by) things which are always becoming,” and is “constantly produced and remade within the complex relations of culture, power, and difference” (Hubbard 2001:51).

Despite the fact that literature on visitation primarily focuses on the negative effects that those who visit the incarcerated experience by entering the carceral space of the visitation room, visiting incarcerated loved ones still remains crucial to many left on the outside in the wake of imprisonment. The continuing inaccessibility of many distally located state prisons for those who have been the targets of mass incarceration residing in larger urban cities, and the fact that some do still find ways to visit, necessitates examining how those who are able to achieve prison visitation do so.

Perhaps one of the most obvious ways to start, then, is to begin by examining the neglected site of prison visitation transportation services. As Schafer (1991) contends, by 1973 the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals had formally recommended providing transportation, and subsidizing the cost of transportation, for those travelling to visit incarcerated loved ones, and yet by 1987, while there had been an increase in the number of facilities under Departments of Corrections that were subsidizing visits, private agencies were still primarily responsible for sponsoring such visitation transportation services. While prison visitation transportation services have long existed as options for people who lacked access to personal or reliable transportation, they have remained, outside of one study (Christian 2005), virtually ignored by researchers examining visitation.

Importantly, however, the carceral apparatus has begun exploiting technological advances, and in many jurisdictions, the move from in-person contact visitation to no-contact, distal “video visitation” is in full swing (Simms 2017; Wright 2018). Touted as a way to help greater numbers of loved ones of the incarcerated “visit” with their loved ones, video visitation, like most ways of accessing incarcerated loved ones, is a lucrative, highly profitable industry, that is being implemented with the direct intention to replace in-person contact visits (O’Very 2016; Rabuy and Wagner 2015). In recent years, long standing prison visitation services, including for-profit and state-subsidized entities, have begun to disappear (Oluhense 2017), leaving many families without access to visitation. Jurisdictions that have restricted in-person visits have been met with resistance from a variety of groups, which often advocate for more prison visitation transportation services. In light of both the lack of research on such services and these recent events, this paper examines the results of

the first empirical study focused on understanding the experiences of those who rely on prison visitation transportation services to visit their incarcerated loved ones.

## **Project Overview**

### Understanding Prison Visitation from an Intersectional Perspective

The first objective of this study is to advance the literature on prison visitation by detailing the important yet understudied role that prison visitation transportation services play in the lives of those who need to access visitation but lack the means to do so otherwise. Focused on the findings from an ethnographic study of the experiences of people using a small Black owned prison visitation transportation service, Better Together Transportation<sup>1</sup>, this study highlights important functions of these services, and how these services are shaped by the carceral state. While prison visitation transportation services do provide mobility to those living in conditions of deep disadvantage, they also serve a number of other important but less obvious roles. Owned and staffed by women of color who have extensive experiences with both having and visiting incarcerated loved ones, and who primarily serve women of color visitors, spaces on the services are characterized by their identity- and experience-affirming qualities. As a result of staff members' extensive lived experiences, they have a level of expertise about visitation processes and related topics which makes them ideal and accessible support resources for customers as they navigate the complex and difficult world of prison visitation.

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<sup>1</sup> Better Together Transportation (BTT) is a pseudonym as are the names for the co-creators of this project.

A range of emotions, which are sometimes seemingly conflicting - from joy to desperation to fear - are commonly reported by visitors, and at least partially linked to the emotionally, physically, and financially resource intensive nature of visitation (Christian 2005; Light and Campbell 2006; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005) and the process inherently involved in entering the prison for visitation (Schafer 1989). Visits are often also documented as being emotionally intensive in so far as even being considered traumatic (Dixey and Woodall 2012), which is a key way women regard their experience in this current work. The sort of ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild 1979) involved in managing one’s emotional expression inside the prison often creates a sort of buildup for visitors. In light of this, the spaces on the prison visitation transportation services are intentionally designed to serve as support-oriented safe spaces for the visitors using them.

While visitors’ use of emotional regulation strategies are documented in extant research on prison visitation, missing still is a recognition of how these strategies are complicated by race and religion, microaggressions, and explicit acts of discrimination they experience as they enter predominantly white-staffed prisons in rural, highly conservative towns where the prisons they visit are located. Racial microaggressions are defined as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority,” and include “commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the person or group” (Sue et al. 2007:273).<sup>2</sup> Microaggression research indicates that, in

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<sup>2</sup> Importantly, according to a taxonomy developed by Sue et al. (2007), there are three distinct forms of microaggressions: microassaults (explicit verbal or nonverbal racial degradations); microinsults (communications that denigrate a person’s racial or ethnic

the American context, it is extremely rare for white people to interact with people of color without engaging in racial microaggressions, which have serious cumulative effects. Experiencing racial microaggressions in normal day to day life result in significant and life-altering mental and physical health impacts for people of color (Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017). Particularly important in the context of this research, experiences of racial microaggressions and their impacts are heightened for people of color who are involved in predominantly white institutions. People of color whose lives involve regularly coming in contact with white-dominated institutions experience high levels of racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, research indicates that a significant portion of Mundane, Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES) that people of color experience in contact with these institutions are the result of microaggressions and social problems that they are subjected to in these contexts (Smith, Hung, and Franklin 2011).

Extending this literature on emotional regulation used in the context of prison visitation, it is necessary to pay special attention to the racialized nature of these experiences and needs, particularly from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991). As women experience both an onslaught of racial microaggressions in the prisons they enter to visit their incarcerated loved ones and the stress that is born out

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identity, characterized by rude or insensitive behavior); and microinvalidations (communications that belittle, devalue, or dismiss the experiential reality and feelings of People of Color) (p. 274).

<sup>3</sup> Racial battle fatigue is emotional, psychological, and physiological distress produced by experiences of microaggressive conditions (Smith et al. 2011:64). For an excellent overview of the lack of microaggression research in Sociology, see Embbrick et al. (2017), and Bonilla-Silva (2017) for more on ‘everyday racism’.

of having to continuously employ emotional regulation strategies, their need to express their true emotional responses to their experiences increases. Prison visitation transportation services, importantly, serve as a type of safe space for the expression of such “outlaw emotions,” and subsequently serve as spaces in which visitors create important informal social support networks.

### Carceral Control of Visitation

The second objective of this study is to examine how the carceral apparatus extends its reach into the lives of loved ones of the incarcerated by exercising rigid control over the operation of prison visitation transportation services. This carceral control is illustrated by two specific mechanisms: forcing van services into a coerced cooperation with the state in searching visitors, and by requiring van services to meet a complex web of regulations from various agencies through costly means, that are then, by necessity, passed on to visitors, serving as a sort of economic sanction.

The carceral apparatus also extends its reach by employing a number of complex requirements for prison visitation transportation services and their drivers, specifically through direct and indirect policies that typically either require drivers to remain on the property for the duration of the visiting time, or forbid them from parking on the premises. Prisons that forbid prison visitation van services from staying on the property during visitation hours consequently force drivers into the prison towns. In these towns drivers experience a wide variety of both subtle microaggressions and more overt, and sometimes threatening, racist assaults. As people with extensive lived experience of having incarcerated loved ones and visiting inside the prisons, drivers of prison visitation van services are subjected to a variety of difficult experiences imposed on them by the carceral state. Over time, the harmful

effects of their extended contact with the carceral state results in a re-traumatization of drivers and staff of prison visitation transportation services.

Subjected to a variety of harms by the carceral state, and repeated exposure to racial microaggressions, prison visitation transportation services and their staff members experience something similar to Comfort's (2003) "secondary prisonization." These experiences are ultimately consistent with Sykes's (1958) notions of the "pains of imprisonment," including deprivation of liberty, deprivation of goods and services, deprivation of autonomy, and deprivation of security, and Garfinkel's (1968) "ceremonies of degradation." As a result, prison visitation van services and their drivers ultimately experience a sort of "tertiary prisonization" in which their autonomy is severely restricted, they are subjected to a variety of forms of intensive carceral surveillance, their security is undermined, and significant psychic harm is inflicted upon them by the carceral apparatus.

### **Research Questions**

The gap in the existing literature on prison visitation raises several important questions, which constituted the guiding framework for this study: What are the experiences of those who go to visit their incarcerated loved ones, and how do they interpret their experience? More specifically, given that many of those most likely to experience incarceration of a loved one live in conditions of concentrated disadvantage, often including a lack of reliable personal transportation, what are the experiences of those who rely on prison transportation services to visit their incarcerated loved ones? How do prison visitation transportation services impact the maintenance of relationships during incarceration, and how are the lives of those traveling to visit their incarcerated loved ones impacted by the usage of such services?

## **Chapter 2**

### **METHODS**

Using the guiding framework of Critical Carceral Studies, which calls for research to examine the reach of the carceral state beyond the prison walls and to center the voices and lived experiences of those most impacted (Brown and Schept 2017), this project addresses these perspectives through an ethnographic study of the experiences of customers using Better Together Transportation (BTT). As a small, Black-owned prison visitation transportation service based out of a large East Coast city, BTT provides transportation to multiple prisons in the state in which it is located. This project collected data in three distinct ways: over 130 hours of ethnographic observation, demographic surveys of customers (n=58), and interviews with both customers and staff (n=13).

First, I conducted ethnographic observations on rides en route to and from state prisons, which involved both observation and engaging in dialogue with adult customers during the rides to and from the prisons in both group and individual dynamics. I also engaged in a methodical ethnographic observation of other areas and dynamics outside of the rides to and from the prisons including at the gas stations where I met the van each morning inside the city, and in between each leg of the journey during visitation hours at various locations such as the prison parking lots, and at restaurants, stores, laundromats, and gas stations in the prison towns on each trip. A primary goal of this project was to push the limits of extant literature on visitation, in part by exploring an unexamined, yet highly important, site of the visitation process (prison visitation transportation services), and also by collecting thick data on the complexities involved in visiting a loved one from perspectives “on the ground,”



making an ethnographic approach ideal (Werth and Ballesterio 2017). Moreover, an ethnographic approach was essential for allowing this study to be conducted across multiple locations, and multiple scales, and because of its flexibility in adapting the research design throughout the project.

During the hours in which visitors were inside the prisons visiting, I jotted down first-cut fieldnotes, particularly focusing on topics discussed, phrases used or quotes that stood out to me as significant, and the general dynamics of the rides, the interactions among both staff and visitors, and relevant observations of the environment of the prison town. On longer rides, which tend to pick up earlier in the mornings, it was common for riders to sleep on the van, providing an additional time for me to jot down important details in my fieldnotes. Likewise, on nearly every ride back to the city after visitation, many of the riders would take advantage of the time on the van to catch up on missed sleep before returning to their lives inside the city, which also gave me an opportunity to jot down notes and detailed descriptions of the experiences from that day. Once the van returned to the city, I often sat in my car to add to or develop my initial-cut fieldnotes or did so once I returned home that evening. Using a “seating chart” on the ride allowed me to retain important information including descriptions of riders, their relationships with other riders, events that occurred on the trips, and details of what they shared with me, which I was able to match up with their demographic questionnaires. Fieldnotes of each trip were developed as soon as possible following the rides and included a significant amount of detail, ultimately resulting in more than 350 pages of fieldnotes from the rides alone (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Ethnographic observation was conducted on rides

to 12 prisons, with hours spent in the field for each ride ranging between 15 to 17 hours, for a total of 130 hours of fieldwork.

Second, a demographic questionnaire was completed by all riders who participated in the project on each trip. This questionnaire aimed to collect basic demographic data on both the visitor and relevant information on the incarcerated person the visitor was travelling to see. The questionnaire was designed specifically to address shortcomings in current visitation research such as the lack of systematic data collection in visitation facilities of basic information on who visitors and the incarcerated people they visit are, the distance between their homes and correctional facility, and other important and related information (Cochran et al. 2016). This questionnaire was partially modeled on the demographic instrument Comfort (2008) used in her study of people visiting their incarcerated loved ones at San Quentin Prison in California. A total of 57 riders completed the demographic questionnaire (see Table 1).

Table 1      Select Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic		Characteristic	
<b>Gender (%)</b>	<u>Participants</u>	<b>Living together at time of arrest (%)</b>	<u>Participants</u>
Woman	96.49	Yes	36.84
Man	3.51	No	63.16
n/a	-	n/a	-
<b>Race/Ethnicity (%)</b>	<u>Participants</u>	<b>Relationship to Incarcerated Person (%)</b>	<u>Participants</u>
Black or African American	89.47	Partner	77.19
Hispanic or Latino/a/x	3.51	Child	8.77
White	1.75	Friend	3.51
Multi-racial	3.51	Former-Partner	3.51
Pacific Islander	1.75	Other Loved One:	5.26
n/a	-	n/a	1.75

<b>Income (%)</b>	<b><u>Participants</u></b>	<b>Age of Visitor (years)</b>	<b><u>Participants</u></b>
Less than \$5k	21.05	Average	34
\$5,001-9,999	12.28	Median	31
\$10,000-\$19,999	14.04	Maximum	65
\$20,000-\$29,000	10.53	Minimum	20
\$30,000-\$39,000	19.30		
\$40,000-\$49,000	12.28		
\$50,000-\$59,000	5.26		
\$60,000-\$69,000	1.75		
More than \$70,000	1.75		
n/a	1.75		

Data from this questionnaire was recorded electronically immediately following the rides, and the identifiable portion of each questionnaire was removed and destroyed.

Third, I conducted separate semi-structured in-depth interviews with both customers and staff members of Better Together Transportation. These interviews provided an opportunity to have follow-up dialogues with interested and willing customers and staff members. Importantly, these interviews provided the chance to engage in discussions of topics that were more appropriate for private dialogue than in a group setting. To be eligible for interviews, participants were required to be customers, former-customers, or staff members of Better Together Transportation, and at least 18 years of age. I initially met all of the customers and staff who participated in interviews through rides to various prisons they were visiting. Interviews with staff were conducted during the visitation hours after we had dropped off all the riders, and took place either on the vans, over lunch in local restaurants, or a mixture of both. Interviews with customers took place in one of three ways: during visitation hours on the van if they had been either refused entry or their visit had been terminated early, at

a mutually agreed upon location in the city such as a café, or at the home of the visitor. Interviews ranged in length from 1 to 6 hours in duration, with a median duration of 4 hours, for a total of 50 hours across 13 interviews. Interviews that did not occur on a ride were audio-recorded, and I later transcribed each recorded interview verbatim. When audio-recording was not possible, I took detailed fieldnotes during the interview, and immediately developed those notes after the interview ended to preserve as much detail as possible.

In keeping with the framework of Critical Carceral Studies for research (Brown and Schept 2017), both the discussions on the rides and the separate in-depth interviews allowed participants to lead the direction of the conversation. Partially modeled after Comfort's (2008:206) method of using core themes to guide her semi-structured interviews, I created a research instrument identifying four broad themes to be covered in both dialogues during ethnographic observation on the rides and in-depth interviews:

1. **Relationship with Incarcerated Loved One:** type of relationship; how incarceration has impacted relationship; difficulties or benefits from incarceration of loved one
2. **Experience Visiting Incarcerated Loved One:** means of transportation used to visit; frequency of visits; barriers to visitation; planning trips to visit; strategies for being able to afford trips to visit; resources required for visiting; importance of visiting; description of experience visiting loved one
3. **Impact of Loved One's Incarceration on Home Life, Social Life, and Self:** frequency, method, importance of communication; changes in home, social, or personal life from incarceration; impact of loved one's incarceration on other loved ones; desired changes to the criminal punishment system
4. **Experience with Carceral State:** earliest experiences with carceral state; views on prison, police, probation officers, correctional officers,

judges, etc.; how incarceration of and/or visiting loved one has changed view of criminal punishment system

However, I encouraged visitors and staff alike to steer the direction of the conversation to allow them the opportunity to discuss whatever they felt was most important to share about their experiences, and after the first ride, the need for the research instrument was obsolete. Moreover, both discussions taking place on rides and in-depth interviews provided an important opportunity for visitors to provide detailed accounts, interpretations of experiences, and evaluations of points of analysis they felt were most important to be reported from this project. Almost every person who participated in this project, including staff members, chose their own pseudonym.<sup>4</sup>

### **Data Sampling and Sampling Distribution**

This project relied primarily on convenience sampling of participants. Recruitment of participants was accomplished with the help of the staff of Better Together Transportation. As customers signed up for rides, staff members provided information about the project to visitors and asked if they were interested in participating. The decision on which rides the study included were primarily determined by whether or not, according to the discretion of the owner of BTT, there were enough riders interested in participating on a particular ride. At the beginning of each ride, either the owner or the staff member driving for that trip would introduce

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<sup>4</sup> The participants, who were the co-creators of this project, were asked to choose their own pseudonyms. Visitors chose a total of three pseudonyms, ranked in order of their choice, and those names were used except where the name corresponded to either the real name of a person using BTT, or had already been chosen by another person. In all but 4 cases, I used the pseudonym that the co-creator chose.

me, and then I would proceed to talk about the project, explain what was involved in participating, and carry out the informed consent process with those who wished to participate. Importantly, in line with extant research that demonstrates the importance of compensating participants for the time and emotional and psychological labor that they contribute to research, each visitor that participated in this project was compensated (Thompson 1996). Visitors who consented to participating in ethnographic observation and dialogue on the van services were paid \$10 per hour for the average total hours the ride took to and from each specific prison, regardless of how much they chose to participate in either the group dialogue or one-on-one dialogue with me. Likewise, visitors who participated in separate in-depth interviews were also compensated at \$10 per hour for the duration of interview time.<sup>5</sup>

This project was specifically designed using the framework of critical carceral studies in conjunction with a critical race-grounded theory approach that centralizes the tenets of Critical Race Theory (Brown and Schept 2017; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Malagon, Huber, and Velez 2009). Keeping in line with Critical Race Theory's specific tenets of challenging dominant ideologies, maintaining an anti-racist social justice commitment, and centering people of color with experiential knowledge (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Malagon et al. 2009), this project was intentionally designed to center the lived experiences of riders, staff and drivers of BTT. Given that they were actively involved in the creation, adaptations, and analysis of this project, the riders, staff and drivers served, not as participants, but as the generous co-creators of this project.

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<sup>5</sup> The owner, staff, and drivers of BTT, who are also the co-creators of this project, were ineligible to be paid because of Institutional Review Board restrictions.

This ethnographic study involved a total of 57 riders, and 4 of the staff members of Better Together Transportation, and they are the co-creators of this project. Consistent with the findings of extant studies on visitation, 97 percent of visitors involved in this project are women (Comfort 2003; Girshick 1996), and the median age rests at 31 years old, but ranges from 20 to 65 years of age. Also consistent with trends in extant research on visitation, 89 percent of these women self-identify as Black or African American, 3.5 percent identify as Latinx, 3.5 percent identify as multi-racial, 1.7 percent identify as Pacific Islander, and 1.7 percent identify as white (Lee et al. 2015). The vast majority (77.2 percent) of these visitors were travelling to visit their incarcerated partners, and nearly 9 percent were visiting their incarcerated children, while the remaining 14 percent were visiting incarcerated friends, ex-partners, or other incarcerated loved ones. Distinct from much of the existing research on visitation, over 50 percent of these visitors are Muslim, with more than 72 percent of Muslim visitors practicing covering at the time of the study.<sup>6</sup> Roughly 58 percent of these visitors report earning an annual income of \$29,000 or less. The average distance to the correctional facility from home for these visitors exceeds national estimates at over 230 miles (Mumola 2000), and just short of 37 percent were living with their incarcerated loved ones at the time of their arrest.

Following each trip, I transcribed multiple cuts of ethnographic fieldnotes, ultimately producing a final, detailed set of fieldnotes for each individual ride. Half of the in-depth interviews were audio-recorded, each of which were carefully transcribed verbatim. During interviews where audio-recording the dialogue was not an option,

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<sup>6</sup> The term “covering” is used to broadly describe the various type of coverings, or hijab, that Muslim women in this study wear (i.e. niqab, khimar, and al-Amira).

highly detailed hand-written notes were taken during the interview, and then fleshed out immediately following. In order to remain consistent with what participants said, many of the interviews that were not recorded necessitated going back to the co-creator and asking them to state something they had mentioned, or to provide clarification on what they meant. I made a point of listening in full to interviews that had been audio-recorded multiple times after transcription in order to make sure that the transcripts were accurate, transcribed verbatim, and that they accounted for tones, emphases, pauses, and the like.

Once fieldnotes and interviews were transcribed, I read each set of fieldnotes and interview transcriptions in full at least twice. Because data collection and data analysis were occurring simultaneously, I used this method partially to discern what was working well and what needed to change so that I could adapt the research process accordingly. Co-creators' experiential knowledge of the issues in this project was especially important to how this project developed in that they routinely provided insights otherwise often not apparent to me given my own social location. Serving as "creators of knowledge" who have a "deeply rooted sensibility to name racist injuries and identify their origins," the co-creators actively facilitated the research process throughout its duration, particularly throughout the analysis (Malagon et al. 2009:257). Central to this process was making a point to ask co-creators on the rides as a group and individually what they thought worked well about the project and what they felt needed to change. While most of the co-creators said that they did not feel that there were parts of the research process itself that needed to change, many had suggestions of what else I should study in the future. Whenever possible, I incorporated these suggestions into the research process of this project, and I have maintained a list for



suggestions that I was not able to include in this research for future directions of my own research as a commitment to my co-creators of this project.

### **Analysis**

For the qualitative analysis of this project, I focused primarily on using an adapted form of grounded theory (Glasser and Strauss 1967). Critical Race-Grounded Theory (Malagon et al. 2009) was ideal in that it allowed me to frame the project and analyze the data in a way that is consistent with the five tenets of Critical Race Theory Research: centering an intersectional perspective on race and racism with other forms of subordination; challenging dominant, and especially race-neutral, ideologies; keeping a commitment to anti-racist social justice throughout; centralizing experiential knowledge of co-creators of the project; and using a transdisciplinary perspective, all of which are consistent with the related framework of Critical Carceral Studies. This adapted form of grounded theory allowed me to remain committed to my co-creators of the project, their perspectives, and the patterns of racialized inequality which intersects with other identities that shapes their lives. I first conducted line-by-line coding for each set of fieldnotes and interviews, allowing me to focus my attention to using the co-creators own words and descriptions of their experiences and stories as the basis for my coding strategy. Throughout the process of analyzing the data, I spoke with co-creators of the project often to ask for their opinions about how I was understanding the interpretations that they provided to me. During the rides and interviews, I also used an adapted form of ethnographic eliciting procedures (Black and Metzger 1965; see also Kotarba 1979) to develop a more detailed and nuanced perspective that was as closely aligned as possible with the co-creators' perspectives. Throughout the project, I did my best to refrain from imposing my own interpretations

of the data, instead centralizing those my co-creators, and asking for guidance from the co-creators whenever possible for how to make sense of conflicting perspectives or statements.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

My positionality shapes this project in a number of important ways that I am cognizant of, and, undoubtedly, in ways I am not aware of. I approached the design of this project, the related fieldwork, and the analysis as a white, cis woman, who is almost always read as straight, and able-bodied. Born and raised in the South, my unconventional upbringing as a white person and my own connections to incarcerated loved ones necessarily impacted my research in ways that both helped me build rapport with co-creators of the project and, I am sure, in ways that resulted at times in “blind spots” in my understanding of myself, the context, and the co-creators of this project, and that likely resulted in incorrect interpretations throughout the project. Given that the vast majority of co-creators in this project are people of color, are primarily from backgrounds of disadvantage, and majority Muslim, racial, class, and religious differences certainly played a role in how people responded to me, and what they chose to discuss, and what they chose not to discuss with me throughout the project.

My involvement in higher education, specifically as a graduate student, also impacted how I was perceived, especially due to academia’s problematic legacy of research on Communities of Color. I was open about the intentions of this project throughout the process as a way to push back on prison visitation research in the American context that had not adequately centered the voices of women of color. My dedication to the project of abolition, which includes acknowledging and attempting to

disrupt my own complicity as a white woman in institutions that systematically target, harm, and often kill people of color, also influenced this project in its design, implementation, analysis, and write-up. In an effort to safeguard influencing how people chose to share their own perspectives with me, I did not share my interests in abolition up front with most co-creators; however, whenever co-creators or others asked what my opinion was, I was as transparent as possible. In all but one instance, this was met with a positive response from co-creators, and this certainly impacted the way the project subsequently transpired. While I did not reveal my abolitionist leanings unprompted, I did make an intentional effort to always verbally recognize my positionality as yet another white woman doing research in this area, and by doing so, this often lead to questions about my opinion on what should be done about the criminal punishment system. My comfort talking about race, and the power of white supremacy and white domination, as I was told by many of the co-creators, often helped people feel more at ease discussing their racialized experiences with me. Importantly, however, it is also highly likely that this either did not help build rapport or may have even prevented me from being able to build rapport with some.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF PRISON VISITATION TRANSPORTATION SERVICES**

As is true of the origins of many prison visitation transportation services, Better Together Transportation was founded by the owner, Naomi, in response to her own experiences and those of other visitors around her. Strict and inflexible visitation hours at far-flung prisons located in rural prison towns many hours away from the city means that those who wish to visit their incarcerated loved ones are forced to begin their travel to the prisons early in the morning, often well before sunrise. Naomi often relied on carpooling with other people travelling to the same prison for visitation as a way to cut down on the cost of gas, make long trips more manageable, and foster a support network among people on the outside. Before long, limited seating available in a car became an increasing issue, and as the cost of gas still strained the budgets of people she was carpooling with, Naomi and her friend Kim decided to create a transportation service of their own. Better Together Transportation was founded as a low-price service providing transportation to people needing to visit their incarcerated loved ones across the state, and is now a highly respected service in the community they serve.

As a service that caters to the same community to which the owner and staff belong, Better Together Transportation holds a specific commitment to serving the needs of their community that might otherwise be overlooked. BTT provides rides to at least two prisons each visitation day, typically operating 5-6 days per week. Most prisons hold one of the first counts for the day around mid-morning, during which the prison goes on lockdown, though the time varies slightly at each prison. With visitors required to arrive at the prisons before count takes place, staff typically begin picking

up in the early hours of the morning. Once all of the visitors have been picked up, the vans stop to get gas before departing the city, typically before the sun rises. Only the longest rides include stops at rest areas on the way to the prisons, and even on those rides, rest area stops are short, usually no more than 10 minutes, since drivers are responsible for ensuring that visitors arrive in time to be given entry into the prison. Once arriving in the prison towns, drivers drop off all visitors at the prisons, typically waiting for 20-45 minutes in the prison visitor parking lot to make sure that no visitors are denied entry or kicked out for any reason. Depending on the prison, between each leg of the trip, drivers often leave to refuel, get food, and sometimes run errands, before typically finding a suitable place to park so that they can nap in the van before having to make the final drive back to the city. Aside from facilities that have a habit of terminating visitation early, visitation at most prisons ends mid-afternoon, at which time drivers return to pick up all visitors. Drivers are very conscious of the time, and always aim to be out of the prison towns and back on major interstates before dusk for their safety. Once at a reasonable distance outside the prison towns, drivers typically stop at a rest area or gas station so that visitors can get food, which is often the first time they have eaten since the early hours of the morning before leaving the city. When vans arrive back in the city, drivers typically meet up at a central gas station, and riders switch off of the vans depending on what part of the city they live in so that drivers can make drop-off as efficient as possible. After all customers are dropped off, typically around mid-evening, drivers must clean out the passenger areas of the vans, and inspect each one before being done for the day.

Visiting an incarcerated loved one in prison is not an easy task, even for those who have extensive experience visiting. When asked what motivates them to visit,

visitors identified a variety of reasons to make these difficult trips. Nearly all of them explained that visitation is the best way that they can provide support to their incarcerated loved ones. However, for many women, visiting is a mutually supportive experience for them and their loved ones. Many also feel that it is crucial to visit as frequently as possible so that they are able to see their loved ones in person to know that they are okay, as they do not feel it is safe to rely on what is communicated by letter, email, or phone since channels of communication in prisons are monitored. Moreover, many visitors feel that visiting is the only way that they can make sure prison staff are aware that they are “paying attention.” Like the families in Christian’s (2005:41) study, visitors feel that visiting demonstrates to prison staff that they are “watching the system,” indicating that people on the outside care about the incarcerated person to keep the prison accountable.

Being a service that is owned and staffed by Black women plays an important role in the services that Better Together provides as well as in how they are perceived by their customers. As predominantly Black women, visitors using BTT’s services have a deep appreciation for the fact that the staff and drivers are not only Black women, but are also women from their communities. As BTT is a small service, many visitors develop a deep connection to the staff and drivers, and regular riders often express a sense of loyalty to BTT. Naomi has made an effort to hire drivers who have similar identities and experiences to their customers, including an extensive lived experience of having and visiting incarcerated loved ones. These experiences provides staff and drivers with a level of expertise on prison visitation policies and practices, navigating the systems effectively, and on the small towns where the prisons are

located. For visitors, these aspects of BTT foster a space that is both identity- and experience-affirming.

### **Navigating Complex Prison Visitation Regulations**

The difficulty that many visitors face in trying to navigate complex prison visitation regulations and policies has been well-documented (Comfort 2003; Girshick 1996). Visitors are often subjected to unannounced visitation policy changes, such as those governing dress code or needed identification for children, and extant research demonstrates that visitation rules and policies are often applied inconsistently in prisons (Comfort 2003; Schafer 1989, 1991). Visitors are routinely forced to carefully monitor how they react to inconsistencies at prisons where they visit frequently, and especially when they are visiting a facility for the first time. Importantly, the drivers and visitors provide mutual support to each other and to riders visiting for the first time.

Navigating prison regulations and policies, even for the most practiced visitor, can be a difficult and overwhelming experience. Van services like BTT that are comprised of staff members with direct and extensive lived experiences of traversing the complex web of visitation policies and regulations serve as a source of expertise for both new and experienced visitors alike. For Naomi and Kim, the ideal driver is someone who is intimately familiar with state prison policies and with at least one prison where they have visited. Drivers who have this kind of expertise are able to answer questions on the vans from riders about complex, and often convoluted, rules that either may not be clearly communicated by the prison or state DOC, or that may not be directly listed anywhere accessible to a visitor outside of the correctional facility. The ability to ask questions about visitation policies or practices prior to

arriving at the facility allows visitors to gain a sense of expectation of what is supposed to happen when they enter the facility, in turn providing them with a sense of self-confidence. This is important as visitors enter facilities that often take advantage of gaps in their knowledge of policies and regulations, and systematically subject visitors to degradation (Comfort 2003), especially when a lack of confidence is detected.

Visitors frequently depend on driver's expertise about the prison system not only for answers to specific questions about policies or practices, but also for mentorship and guidance on a variety of topics regarding managing relationships that take place across the prison walls. Those visiting often take advantage of the fact that most of the staff members have extensive experience with the prison system as people on the outside who have visited, navigated appeals with their loved ones, assisted loved ones in reentry processes, and more.

Many visitors and drivers are keenly aware of research on visitation, both on the positive effects of visitation on recidivism and behavior inside, and also on the extant work from the perspective of visitors. Moreover, visitors and drivers regularly discuss the racialized nature of mass imprisonment, frequently comparing their experiences of the carceral state to "modern day slavery" (Alexander 2012). Referring to her exhaustion after a visit to see her partner on her first day off of work in three months at which she experienced racism and harassment from a correctional officer, Latanya explains, "I mean you just know they [prison staff] don't care [about visitors efforts or hardships]... it's all just modern-day slavery anyways," as she shakes her head back and forth, jaw clenching in frustration. This lens through which many if not all visitors of color see their experiences often lends a sense of powerlessness to the



system. But drivers, who understand their experiences and who are highly knowledgeable on such conceptualizations of the punishment system, are well-skilled in both validating their feelings and helping visitors reframe their perspectives in empowering ways. Nazira, on the way to visit her partner, talks about the importance of having access to van service staff who not only understand what she is going through, but who also symbolize a kind of elder to her. Like many riders, Nazira looks up to the staff members as role models of what it means to not give up on visiting. Speaking about how one of the drivers encouraged her to keep going when she became tired of dealing with the difficulties of visitation, Nazira explains that the driver helped her see that giving up was letting the system win “because that’s what they want you to do... they want you to not come back [for visitation].”

While Naomi and her staff serve as a set of role models and elders, often functioning in mentorship role, they also actively seek out ways to foster these types of relationship between visitors. They are well-versed in picking up cues that new visitors need assistance, and frequently make concerted efforts to pair them with regular riders with knowledge about how to navigate a certain facility’s policies and practices. Visitors who are new to BTT tend to be relatively quiet and shy on their first rides, often in part because they are nervous about their first time going to a prison visit. On one trip Annette, a long time driver for BTT, noticed that there were two women she did not know:

Annette turns down the music on the van as we near the prison, reciting a well-rehearsed, memorized speech the visitors call her “flight attendant speech” to remind the riders of some of the most important rules for going into the prison: no bringing in cellphones because they

are considered contraband<sup>7</sup>; medications brought in must be considered “life-sustaining,” have non-expired labels, can only be prescription, and must be accompanied by medical documentation; and a reminder that this prison is not consistent in letting visitors stay through the end of the scheduled visitation hours.

Once she finishes, she asks if it’s anyone’s first time visiting. No one raises their hand or speaks up, so Annette repeats her question, and Marie and another woman quietly say “it’s mine,” almost in unison. Annette asks if they have ever visited before and both say no. Annette announces, “okay! I need one of my [prison name-] regulars to volunteer to take these ladies in since this be they first time at [prison].” Two of the regular riders volunteer to help, and Annette asks them to make sure to stay with them to make sure they get through security and into visitation without problem. Within a couple of minutes one of the regular riders that volunteered is enveloped in conversation with the two new riders.

New visitors often quickly realize that drivers tend to foster mentorships both with visitors and between visitors that are based on humility. Staff members and visitors with extensive lived experiences of having incarcerated loved ones and visiting inside the prisons, perhaps counterintuitively, know that expertise on the policies and practices does not make one immune to occasional issues inside the prisons. By creating an environment in which these kinds of informal mentorship relationships between staff and visitors are premised on a sense of humility and solidarity with one another, mentorship relationships between visitors tend to take this same shape. This

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<sup>7</sup> What is considered to be contraband varies from state to state, and often between prisons. Some common examples of contraband include: prescription or non-prescription medications unaccompanied by original, unexpired bottles, and valid medical documentation; scissors, metal nail files, or other sharp instruments of any type; cellphones (if brought inside the prison); any personal items (such as purses or clothing) that have or are suspected to have any trace or residue of drugs; and cash or coins (if brought into the prison).

dynamic is well illustrated by a particular instance in which Kim, a driver for BTT, attempted to visit one of her incarcerated loved ones:

Kim's cousin, Justin, is incarcerated at [prison] we are driving to today, and on the drive up she mentions feeling like she probably should go inside to visit him this trip since she hasn't been in recently. [Prison] is a facility with several notorious correctional officers who work the security area on visitation days and are well-known for their nasty attitudes towards visitors, purposefully making security extremely difficult, and for terminating visits on an arbitrary, ad-hoc basis.

We are sitting in the van at the prison, both of us exhausted from a couple days of particularly difficult rides, and with several visitors who have already come back to the van after being denied entry, when Kim decides she wants to go visit Justin. Not even 10 minutes later, Kim comes back to the van, laughing as she climbs back into the driver's seat, and explains to me and the other visitors on the van that she, too, was denied entry because she forgot that she has on an underwire bra. Having experienced this several times now, I offer her a pair of sharp scissors I keep in my bag on rides for the purpose of being able to cut underwires out of bras, and as she laughs, she jokingly says, "oh girl, definitely not. Visiting that boy is not worth cutting up a perfectly good bra for" and we all laugh.

Situations like this one, albeit frustrating, represent important moments for many of the visitors using BTT's services. Visitors frequently explained that one of the reasons they prefer BTT over other comparable services is due of these kinds of dynamics in which staff members reflect the same experiences, frustrations, and reactions that are common to visitors, and particularly because the staff do so with humility. A sense of solidarity is created both among visitors, and between visitors and staff, as visitors' experiences are affirmed by these instances.

## **As Support-Oriented Safe Spaces: Resisting Emotional Regulation and Racial Microaggressions**

One of the most frequently mentioned frustrations of women visitors in particular is the lack of access to support networks for loved ones of the incarcerated. Regularly confronted with the overwhelmingly complex and multifaceted nature of the criminal punishment system, visitors are excruciatingly aware of how families and loved ones on the outside are almost entirely neglected by the state in regards to support. Visitors see the criminal punishment system's inattention to loved ones on the outside as an intentional slight, and many women visitors in particular find themselves struggling with their mental health as a result of the incarceration of their loved ones (Lee and Wildeman 2013; Massoglia 2008; Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012).

Using prison visitation services like BTT often provides a sense of community support for visitors, who otherwise recognize a pervasive lack of organized support services focused on their needs; this support takes shape in a variety of different ways.<sup>8</sup> On rides to the prisons, visitors frequently swap tips on keeping in touch with their incarcerated loved ones in meaningful ways, avoiding some of the excessive costs of communicating with an incarcerated loved one, and legal knowledge they have picked up throughout their loved ones' cases. Many visitors also act as sounding boards for women who are struggling with their relationship with an incarcerated loved one, often advocating for women to take care of themselves first and to put the

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<sup>8</sup> Importantly, there are a number of organizations that do provide support groups for families with incarcerated loved ones, but these groups tend to be primarily focused on providing support for children whose parents are incarcerated, or on teaching families how they can better support their incarcerated loved ones. Notably, there are very few organizations that provide support services focused primarily on women who have incarcerated partners, friends, etc.

needs of their male partners second. Understanding the strain that incarceration puts relationships of all types under, women visitors are especially adept at providing significant support to one another despite their own struggles and feelings of despair.

A support-oriented environment is a powerful experience for many visitors. This is particularly true for women who have not had loved ones incarcerated before. Asked about whether she has people she can talk to about her experience, Linda explains:

I don't really tell other people that much. Well... well, the one lady ... I would tell her sometimes that, you know, this happened, that happened and stuff, but... then after a while, you feel like, they aren't really listening. They don't really... really hear what you're saying... 'cus they become sick of it maybe? Or yeah, they can't relate to it. Yeah, they don't understand. So... there's really nobody you can talk to... It is... it's isolating. Because you can't talk to anybody about it.

Residing in a community where incarceration is highly stigmatized, women like Linda find their experiences using prison van services to be socially liberating as it allows her to be surrounded by people, even if only temporarily, who she does not feel judged by. A welcome respite from the isolation she feels by not being able to talk about her experience, like many women, BTT's vans serve as a space where she is able to lift some of the shame imposed upon her in her community (Braman 2004; Fishman 1988; Girshick 1996). While the importance of support for visitors who are otherwise socially isolated by their relationship with their incarcerated loved one is undeniable, it is notable that most visitors using BTT's services actually have extensive ties to incarcerated loved ones.

Perhaps one of the most unique and crucial aspects of van services like BTT is the fact that the space on the van where this community support is fostered is a distinctly women of color's space, and more specifically, a distinctly Black women's

space. In the context of visiting prisons in which the vast majority of prison personnel are white, access to a space of community support to travel to and from the prison that is distinctly Black- and women of color-centered has significant implications. Women of color experience a wide array of racial microaggressions upon entering the prison to visit and along the journey to and from the prison, making the safety of an identity- and experience-affirming space crucial for visitors of color. Nearing the prison where she was visiting her incarcerated partner, Lee motioned to the surrounding area in the small prison town and remarked, “they be really prejudice up here,” referring to both the residents of the rural white town and the nearly all-white correctional officer staff drawn from the area. Describing some of the more subtle microaggressions she experiences each time she visits, Lee explains:

They just be... they be doin’ things because they so prejudice. Like... they be... these white guards be side-eyeing me inside like they watchin’ us but not [white] people lookin’ like them. They just be doin’ things like rollin’ they eyes at us when we ask questions or talk to them. That’s just how they is.

Importantly, the experiences that Lee describes above occurred at a prison that is widely held among both staff and visitors alike as the most desirable prison in terms of visiting, as they are known for being the most respectful to visitors and for being one of the only prisons that consistently properly minds visitation policies.

Experiences of racial microaggressions are largely intensified for women of color visiting in certain prisons where majority white correctional officers and prison staff are well-known for engaging in degrading visitors, and women of color are keenly aware of how white guards often apply rules differently to visitors depending on whether the visitors are white or people of color, as described in this excerpt from my fieldnotes:

Exhausted from our two days of back to back long rides, Kim and I recline our seats in the van in the parking lot of the prison and close our eyes to try to take a nap knowing that we probably don't have much time to since it's likely visitors will get kicked out of the prison early given [prison] is well known for that. After lying there for about 15 minutes unable to sleep, there is a quiet knock on the van door, and I sit up and open the door for a woman who has been kicked out already. She says that her no-contact visitation got cut short because there were people in line to have no-contact visitation as well. Waking up and hearing this, Kim scoffs at this frustrated for her, and asks why she had to leave early. She explains that when she left she realized it was because a white family needed to have a no-contact visit. She complains, however, that it's completely hypocritical because she's never seen anyone else, when there was a Black person or Black family needing a no-contact visit, have the privilege of the guards making a person currently visiting leave. Her eyes well up with tears and her voice begins to tremble as says, "I'm just so tired. I am so tired, man. I just... the racism... I am so tired," as Kim expresses her irritation at this, especially since visitation just began within the hour. The woman lays down on the van seat, and Kim reclines her seat back down as she says "I hate this prison."

Visitors who have experiences like those described here often feel obligated to refrain from expressing their feelings of anxiety, frustration, sadness, or anger until once back on the vans. Some prisons have rules against showing excessive emotion during visitation, but even in prisons where such rules are not formalized, visitors, and especially women, feel the institutional pressures to restrain their emotions. Women visitors in particular often express that they also do not want to burden others in their lives with their emotional needs. Expressing her lack of a support network with whom she can talk to about her experience of her son being incarcerated and the toll it has taken on her life, Linda explains:

And like sometimes when you're there [at the prison] you feel like you wanna cry but you can't. You always say, "I can't, nobody's crying. I can't cry!" I have to be strong because everybody else is... being strong. So I have to be strong too. And I have to make it through... and try to make it pleasant for him [son]. When you visit you want to make

it pleasant for them. Yeah, so that's what you do. We... mothers, that's what we do.

The experience of visiting an incarcerated loved one produces a range of emotions for visitors using BTT's services, which sometimes appear to be incompatible, yet are well-supported by extant research on visitation (Christian 2005; Light and Campbell 2006; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). Diane, traveling to visit her incarcerated son, explains that she hates visiting, although she loves seeing her son, saying, "for me... visiting.... it's just a very dark place." Many women echo Diane's expression, emphasizing that there is a difference between visiting, which is something that they perceive as being a negative experience overall because they have to go inside the prison, and being able to visit with their incarcerated loved one, which they view as a positive experience. As Nazira explains on the ride to visit her boyfriend,

Visits are like... you know, they really emotional. Like, they take so much to do... just to do it... and then you get there, and it's just like... like, I would just describe it like... emotional.

In the mornings when the vans pick up everyone, many women express their excitement about getting to see their incarcerated loved ones, which often creates a positive atmosphere on the van. This is, however, largely dependent upon which prison women are travelling to. For visitors travelling to prisons that have positive reputations among visitors for being consistent, excitement and positive anticipation usually characterize their feelings heading to the prison. However, for women travelling to prisons that are known for mistreating visitors the anticipation of poor treatment and the unpredictability about what will happen, knowing that chances are high that they will have a negative experience, can be very overwhelming (Schafer 1991; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). As one woman poignantly explained:



I be so nervous. You just never know like, like you never know how it's gonna be tryin' to get in, you know. It's... I don't know. I'm always so nervous all the way until I finally get through [security] and then it's like, it's like then you can finally breathe.

For women who have spent out limited resources for a visit, but are faced with the unpredictable nature of a difficult prison, the fear that their resources may be wasted if something happens and their visit is compromised in some way is anxiety-inducing. Visitors also often cite that part of their anxiety comes from not just anticipating that they may have a negative experience, but also in anticipating how they will have to control how they react. This sort of 'emotion work' (Hochschild 1979) that visitors do to manage their emotional reactions, and, perhaps more importantly, their emotional expression, creates a sort of emotional buildup for visitors both on the ride to the prison and during the visitation.

While emotions tend to run high for nearly all visitors, visitors of color are subjected to a variety of racial microaggressions in the prisons, which adds to the emotional burden they must endure and regulate while inside. Visitors of color have the additional emotional toll of anticipating, experiencing, tolerating, and having to carefully control their reactions to racial microaggressions while inside the prisons.

Extending this literature on emotional regulation and the importance of informal spaces for visitors, particularly in the context of the American prison system, it is necessary to pay special attention to the racialized nature of these experiences and needs from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991). Black women visiting prisons are particularly vulnerable to experiencing the double burden of both racist and sexist slights from white (and mostly male) correctional officers and prison staff. In one particularly illustrative instance, visitors were given entry to the visiting room very late (more than hour after they were dropped off) and then kicked out nearly two

hours prior to the end of visitation hours at a prison facility that had recently been reprimanded by the state DOC for arbitrarily terminating visits early:

Boogie, who was visiting her friend and who has extensive experience visiting at [prison], argued with the white male correctional officer who terminated visitation early. She made an effort to make it known to him and other correctional officers nearby that they [visitors arriving on Better Together Transportation] were aware that the prison was not supposed to be terminating visits early like this anymore. The correctional officer dismissed her, but she demanded his attention by not backing down and explaining that they [correctional officers] need to care more about what it takes visitors to travel and visit, and that this effectively punishes them for no reason.

When the correctional officer continued to dismiss her and the other women of color riders, Boogie called the correctional officer racist. As soon as she did this, the white male correctional officer called over his radio for backup, which infuriated Boogie and the other visitors who up until that point had remained extremely calm given the situation. At this point, Boogie explains that she went off on this correctional officer and several others that he had called in for ‘backup’ saying, “I told him and all them, I said you all out here stereotypin’ us, callin’ for back up like you gon’ do somethin’ all cus’ you got some Black women in here you disrespectin’ and now we upset and askin’ why you terminating visitation and all this, so now... now your racism is showing! Over here stereotypin’ us as “dangerous” [mocking correctional officer] cus’ we Black women and we upset, so now we that “angry Black woman” stereotype!”

Boogie very poignantly identifies her experience with the white male correctional officer as being particularly influenced by the intersecting aspects of her identity as not only a visitor, but also as a Black woman. Pointing to the correctional officer’s use of the tired trope of “angry Black women,” and directly calling out his behavior as racist, Boogie raises a pervasive issue at the prisons that Black women visiting frequently discuss with each other and BTT’s drivers. Telling me about what she has learned from one of the few Black residents in the area of the town where the prison we traveled to is located, Naomi explains, “most of these guards never been...

never seen, never been ‘round a Black person outside these walls... outside these prisons.” Correctional officers’ lack of exposure to people of color outside of the context of the prisons is compounded by the negative impacts of their socialization as penal employees, which influences how they view people on the outside who come into contact with the prison. Taken together, these realities for correctional officers often foster inaccurate, racist, and sexist beliefs about visitors, and particularly visitors of color. Latasha and Annette echo a similar sentiment exemplified in this excerpt:

Describing how white correctional officers, and especially white male correctional officers, react to her inside the prison, Latasha says, “it’s like they ain’t even seen a Black women before.” Annette responds, saying, “yeah, but you ain’t just a Black woman, you are a Black and [visibly] Muslim woman.” Latasha says, “mmhmm” and pauses before saying, “sometimes up here it be like Black comes before Muslim,” to which Annette agrees.

When women are Black, Muslim, and covered, their experiences of microaggressions inside the prison are often intensified. Black Muslim women, and especially those who practice covering, frequently point to the deeply rooted Islamophobic sentiments among white guards, which are fostered in the small, predominantly white, highly conservative prison towns. For these women, these discriminatory sentiments among correctional officers heightens the risk that any non-conforming emotional reaction they have inside may be taken as a sign of them being “dangerous.” In turn, Black women visiting, and Muslim women of color, are forced to carefully control their reactions inside the prison to the constant barrage of microaggressions and Islamophobic slights they endure, in addition to being forced to carefully control their emotional reactions to visiting their incarcerated loved one in the prison. Knowing that these correctional officers are the same ones that their incarcerated loved ones deal

with inside the prison adds to their emotional distress as they fear for the well-being and, quite literally, the lives of their loved ones inside.

For women of color like Latasha, Boogie, Naomi, and Annette, such interactions with prison staff and correctional officers result in strong emotions, including anger. However, as a site of hyper-racialized surveillance, people of color, and especially women of color and Muslim women, are forced into a constant state of self-policing in how they react to microaggressions and blatant racism inside the prison. Almost any expression of an emotion that conflicts with the expectation of them to be “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977) represents an “outlaw emotion” that is “distinguished by [its] incompatibility with the dominant perceptions and values” of the white, predominantly male, correctional officers and prison staff (Jaggar 1989:166). Expressions of anger, or expressions that could otherwise be stereotyped as “dangerous,” by the prison, are particularly hazardous for visitors of color and Muslim visitors. Despite the fact that, as Meiners (2007) explains, “anger is a legitimate response to an oppressive political state,” institutions enacting hyper-racialized surveillance, like prisons, stand ready to sanction expressions of anger; as a result, “communities of color are tracked into further state control and management” (Meiners 2007: 40). Consequently, women of color and Muslim women who visit, “like all subordinated people, especially those who must live in close proximity with their masters,” are forced to practice particularly strategic forms of emotional management and regulation inside the prison “as the price of their survival” (Jaggar 1989:171).

At pick up from visitation, visitors frequently continue to withhold their reactions and emotions until everyone has boarded the van and the doors have closed.

Once out of the gaze of the prison, however, visitors regularly make use of the safe space that the van provides to express these “outlaw emotions” with the driver and other visitors. As a space in which it is safe for visitors, and particularly women of color and Muslim women, to both release their outlaw emotions - be it of rage, sadness, or fear - and receive emotional support is a crucial benefit that these kinds of van services provide. As Foster (2016) poignantly asserts, “informal support networks” such as those that occur in the space of the van are “preferable, less paternalistic and ultimately more empowering” than formalized support networks like those that are created by state institutions (p. 9), which are likely to intentionally overshadow the fact that these same institutions are the ones that depend on and encourage loved ones to maintain relationships for the benefit of the correctional system (Codd 2002; see also Dixey and Woodall 2012).<sup>9</sup> These informal social support communities formed on the vans provide an important sense of safety where their emotions are supported and validated in an identity- and experience- affirming environment. Whereas populations “under forms of hyper-racialized surveillance do not have the power to interrupt how their emotions are named, framed, and interpreted” inside those institutions, vans, as safe spaces for expressions of these “outlaw emotions” provide an important opportunity to visitors to resist the carceral institutions’ efforts to form them into docile bodies (Meiners 2007:29–30).

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<sup>9</sup> Foster (2016) is referring to formalized support networks instituted in penal facilities in the UK.

## **Chapter 4**

### **CARCERAL CONTROL OF PRISON VISITATION TRANSPORTATION SERVICES**

Both state Department of Correction (DOC) and individual prisons impose a variety of formal and informal rules on prison visitation transportation services in regards to how they operate when providing transportation to each facility. Prison visitation transportation services are often licensed and certified under certain state policies that determine regulations of commercial, interstate, or motor transport services.<sup>10</sup> Despite a number of detailed accounts of the problematic way in which prisons search visitors' vehicles (Comfort 2008; Girshick 1996:89), the law continues to allow prison personnel to conduct these searches with very little, if any, reason required (Molina 2006). Prison visitation transportation services are often caught between several different sets of constraints including requirements set by state licensing and certification-granting agencies, state-specific regulations on searches of visitors' vehicle prisons, in addition to the varying policies and practices of different prisons. Meeting this variety of standards and regulations by state agencies involves significant costs to prison van services. Forced to pass off these costs to visitors, these services often impose difficult rules on their customers whose backgrounds are already characterized by resource disadvantage.

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<sup>10</sup> Regulations not only vary by state, but by a variety of specifications related to the services themselves including, but not limited to, their vehicle types, their organization qualifications, and where they provide transportation to.

## Coerced Cooperation

While vehicle searches may seem like a rather insignificant aspect of the broader process involved in visiting an incarcerated loved one, these searches can have extreme consequences on visitation services and visitors alike. In many cases, state DOCs hold ultimate power over prison transportation services' ability to access prison property. Since prisons are often far from visitors' homes and typically do not allow visitors to arrive on foot, prison visitation transportation services need to maintain legal compliance with state laws and remain in good standing with the state DOC and each prison they service to be able to drop off and pick up visitors as needed. This "cooperation" is forced by laws that stipulate that vehicles like these must cooperate entirely with prison, state, or law enforcement officials' decisions to search the vehicle, almost always looking for drugs, paraphernalia, or other contraband. Despite anecdotal and empirical evidence that visitors are not the primary sources of contraband import in prisons, visitors, and by extension, visitation service vehicles, continue to be primary targets for carceral surveillance. Failure of a prison visitation transportation service to "cooperate" with searches would lead to being barred from prison properties, and in the event that contraband was brought in by a visitor, it would put these services at grave risk of being put out of business and prosecuted for being implicated in such crimes. Because of this, services like BTT are often either required to or forcibly coerced into not just *cooperating* with prison search policies but *aligning* themselves with carceral rhetoric and threat to visitors. This creates a complex dynamic for prison visitation services like BTT, as Naomi explains:

It's almost.... like.... we out here tryin' to provide a service for these people so that they can see their loved ones inside... but at the same time we... you know... we have to comply with these rules and so we end up having to put control... you know... like put rules on these

people so that we can be a good business. So... you know... it's like, we kinda like a part of the system, you know? It's like we puttin' control on them just like they [the prison system] put control on us.

In rare instances where visitors are accused of having contraband during a prison search of the service's vehicles, the stakes are particularly high for the visitor by virtue of the fact that services like BTT are unable, due to the rules that force them to cooperate with the DOC, to intervene, resist, or advocate for the visitors in any way.

This is illustrated particularly well by this excerpt from my fieldnotes:

On the drive back to [the city], Annette and another rider begin to tell me about several instances in which the vans were searched. The rider says to me, "you know, they [searches] be dangerous for us, you know... like they [van services] are perfect for the prison... like they [prison personnel] love it cus' we all up in there, packed on a van and it's... it's like easy game for them," referring to how riders, staff and drivers feel that the vans provide an easy way to target a large number of visitors to search by only having to justify it by saying that they're suspicious of the van, though it appears to be often be motivated by the fact that many of the visitors are Black and Muslim.

In one instance when the van was searched, Annette explains that a K-9 unit found and seized a bottle with 5 pills, claiming that they were not properly in the original prescription bottle. When the correctional officer asked who they belonged to, a young visitor said that they were his and were prescribed by the drug rehabilitation facility where he was currently a resident. Upon hearing this explanation, Annette explains that the correctional officer accused the young visitor of "tryin' to be out here, like, trafficking in[to the prison]... you know, fake heroin," which caused the situation to escalate when the young visitor became defensive with the correctional officers accusing him. After a dramatic ordeal during which the driver was unable to vouch for the young visitor who was adamant that the pills were not heroin, a white shirt<sup>11</sup> who was exiting the prison at shift change was called over to the van by the correctional officers. When he was asked to examine the pills and

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<sup>11</sup> The term "white shirt" is a common term used by correctional officers, incarcerated people, and loved ones of the incarcerated referring to prison personnel who work in the prison's medical units or infirmary.



the prescription bottle, the white shirt supported the young visitor's explanation by indicating that they appeared to be a valid prescription pill and bottle. Dismissing the white shirt, Annette explains, "the guards accused him... like they said he [the young man] was lying, and you know, it's not like *I* could do nothin' anyway... and so they arrested him even after all that with this white shirt sayin' he [the young visitor] wasn't even doin' nothin' wrong!" I asked Annette and the rider what happened to the young man, and they both shake their heads back and forth, and the driver responded, "we had to leave him there [at the prison]... guess he be locked up now too then."

Visitors, drivers, and staff frequently told me about instances like this in which visitors are accused of or caught with contraband during searches of the vans as examples of how visitation can be a risky endeavor for both visitors and services due to the increased level of carceral surveillance, and the subsequent heightened threat of carceral punishment. While this excerpt recounted a story involving an individual rider, visitors and drivers point out that many times when vans are searched, if correctional officers do identify some kind of contraband item but are not able to determine which visitor is responsible, they further search visitors on the van to "keep looking" for who is at fault, effectively heightening the surveillance both visitors and the services are subjected to. Moreover, in instances where an individual is not easily identifiable, correctional officers frequently either threaten to or actually deny all of the visitors on that van from visiting that day as a tactic aimed at coercing a visitor to claim responsibility or other visitors to out an individual as guilty. Regardless of whether an individual responsible is identified, these kinds of incidents involving searches have harmful impacts on services like BTT. If visitors are caught, services like BTT are forced to cooperate with the arrest and detainment of the visitor. However, if the individual responsible is not identified, and all visitors on the van are denied entry as a result, tensions rise among the visitors and between visitors and the services' staff and drivers. Moreover, the increased surveillance by the state during

these searches is inherently threatening to the prison visitation transportation services as prisons often treat the drivers and staff as if the services are suddenly at risk of being deemed suspect by the state themselves by their association with the alleged contraband.

Always at risk of being put out of business and potentially legally implicated in a crime in the rare event that a visitor is caught with contraband, prison visitation transportation services are subjected to carceral control that they are then forced to impose on their own customers. This kind of coercive carceral control forces prison visitation van services like BTT to articulate these kinds of rules as their own, in turn, effectively forcing the service, which otherwise emphasizes its existence as one *by and for people in the community it serves*, into a public stance that implies that these are the values of the company itself. It also risks implying to an unknowing potential customer that the company itself believes, as is contentiously purported by the carceral state's stance, that visitors are likely to be engaged in such criminal behavior.

### **Forced Economic Sanctions**

To complicate this further, due to the various state regulations that they are required to meet in order to stay in business, services like BTT must impose certain rules and policies to protect themselves from legal and financial liabilities that could otherwise threaten their ability to continue providing transportation. For example, most van services, including BTT, must impose a no-refund policy to protect their service's financial standing in the event that visitors are denied entry, visitation is terminated for an individual, visitation is entirely cancelled for any reason after arrival, or because the visitation room is overcrowded. The owner and staff know from their own experiences that prisons regularly deny entry and terminate visitations to

reinforce the power dynamics of prison staff over both incarcerated people and their “free” loved ones.<sup>12</sup> Rules like this protect services from being legally liable to provide refunds to customers who use the service to reach the prison they are visiting, but are unable to actually visit their loved one for whatever reason, and are necessary to protect the financial security of these services, especially for those like BTT who provide competitive prices for their customers.

Nevertheless, imposing rules to protect the financial viability of the service often serves as a sort of “*secondary sanction*”<sup>13</sup> on customers. That such situations may have been either partially (i.e. dress code violations or lack of proper identification) or not at all (i.e. visitation room overcrowding, prison emergencies, or lockdowns) in the control of the individual has deep implications. Given that the majority of customers come from conditions characterized by deep resource disadvantage, such economic sanctions quite literally jeopardize the customers’ ability to afford exactly what BTT strives to achieve: reuniting people who are otherwise not able to afford visitation with their incarcerated loved ones.

Indeed, even among those who use prison visitation transportation services regularly, and are therefore very familiar with the rules and practices of the prisons, it is not uncommon for at least one visitor on each ride to be refused entry or have their

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<sup>12</sup> There are a number of small infractions that may cause visitation to be terminated such as kissing ‘too intimately’ or outside of when permitted (once at the beginning and once at the end of each visit) or if other physical contact lasts ‘too long’ (typically more than a few seconds).

<sup>13</sup> The concept of *secondary sanctions* that are imposed on visitors by prison visitation transportation services was developed by one of the co-creators of this project (who has asked not to be given credit by name).

visit terminated. Latasha's experience illustrates what it means to be denied entry to visitation after spending significant resources to afford the ticket for the service:

Getting back on the van, Annette (long-time driver) gets a call from [prison] to pick up one of the riders. Annette shakes her head on the phone as the correctional officer explains we need to come pick the rider up from the prison, and suddenly my heart sinks as I hear the rider, who I realize is Latasha, crying on the other end of the phone. We head back to the prison and Annette gets off the van to go inside to talk to the correctional officers. She pauses as she climbs out of the driver seat, telling me to tell them [prison staff] that she will be right back if they ask, and then as she passes the passenger side window, she points at the K-9 unit in front of the van, and says "watch out, okay?" Latasha returns to the van a minute or two later, and climbs onto the van, doing her best not to express her emotions. She closes the door and I ask her if she's okay, and tears stream down her face as she says with a trembling voice, "no... no. I'm just so upset. I'm so upset right now. I'm just so upset right now. It just... it makes me so mad. He just got out to the hole, so it was already [a] no-contact [visit]."

After we leave the prison, Latasha explains that she was already through the security area and walking into the no-contact visit room when a correctional officer grabbed her arm and made her go back to the entry area, where the K-9 unit had supposedly alerted the correctional officers to a "suspicious substance" in her purse inside one of the lockers. She told them they could search it because she didn't have anything in her purse, and despite the fact that the correctional officer didn't find anything, they told her that her visit was terminated. Latasha and I walk to get lunch from a nearby fast food place, and I tell her I will buy her lunch, but she is hesitant to accept my offer, telling me that she's not used to eating lunch because money is so tight. When we return to the van with our food, Latasha, between shallow breaths from crying, tells me that she's scared she won't be able to afford diapers. After her husband lost visiting privileges during the 4 months he spent in the hole, in which she only heard from him via letter one time right before his confinement period ended, she says she had hoped coming to visit today would renew her energy to keep going, but that this experience has totally defeated her. Latasha explains, "even this was \$45... that's a lot of money... that's so much... so much money. Like, I got 3 kids... \$45 is... [motioning in the direction of the driver seat where Annette's was sitting] it's just so hard to afford," referring to the service's no-refund policy. "I just don't .... I don't know if I can

do this anymore. I don't know if I can survive this" Latasha tells me as tears stream down her face.

For women like Latasha, the no-refund policy in conjunction with the inability to predict what will happen at the prison itself, makes visiting a huge financial risk. On a different ride, Ebony, handing me her infant to hold so she can get ready to go inside to take him to see his incarcerated father, tells me that she has an uncle serving life in a different facility, but that she does not go to visit him anymore because he no longer wants visits. I ask why he doesn't want visits and, in a resigned way, Ebony explains,

He just... he... like, he know how much it cost me... us [family] to be doin' this. So... he said he just don't want us out here tryin' to be spreadin' ourselves so thin... He don't want us wastin' money to go visit 'cus he know we... I be havin' to do this for [son's] father."

Taken aback by what this means, I ask Ebony if she thinks she'll be able to visit at a later time when things are easier financially, she says "I mean... I... I don't know. He says he... I mean he got life. He don't want us comin' up there 'cus he feel bad 'cus he worried 'bout that cost on us. So... I mean.. probably not.

Families from backgrounds of deep disadvantage often have to make sacrifices in their lives to be able to afford visiting their incarcerated loved ones. Like many women using BTT, Comfort (2008) notes that women sacrifice eating several meals during the week to save money for visiting, and Christian (2005), too, notes that visitation's inherently resource intensive nature requires sacrificing time and money that would otherwise be spent differently. For many women using BTT, however, these "resource sacrifices" mean, at least temporarily, forfeiting the security to provide essentials: such as diapers for your child so you can visit to make sure your husband is alive, like Latasha's experience, or, as in Ebony's case, giving up plans to visit another incarcerated family member again so you can make sure your son has a relationship with his father.

Lacking access to institutional funding, such as grants or assistance from the government or the state DOC, for providing what essentially amounts to social services, many prison visitation transportation services function in ways that appear, on the surface, to be profit-oriented. Yet, many of these services yield little to no profit. As Naomi explains, BTT makes barely enough money to cover the cost of the licenses, certificates, gas for the trips, maintenance on the vehicles, and insurance to keep them in compliance with standards set by the various state agencies and DOC. While Naomi and her staff would much prefer to actually be able to function as a true not-for-profit service, the lack of funding, and especially the increasing competition for limited grants and state funds that do exist, ultimately prevent them from being able to do this. For Naomi, this is one of the most troubling parts of owning Better Together:

You know... it's like there are other [services] out here chargin' you know, like, \$20 or \$30 more than us... but you know.... And like, it would be helpful to have that extra income for the bus maintenance issues whatever else like insurance costs that be out here killin' us, but I just... I just can't justify that when I know a lot of these women are literally spending half to all of a pay check on our tickets to go see they incarcerated loved one.

Despite the strict policies BTT must abide by and subsequently impose upon their own customers, Naomi and her staff do the careful labor of attempting to balance these constraints with their deep commitment to their mission of providing affordable access to visit incarcerated loved ones. This devotion to serving their community is apparent by the fact that two-thirds of BTT's total staff, including Naomi, who all work more than full time for the service, also hold at least one other full-time job. Like many women of color (Higginbotham and Weber 1992), Naomi and her staff feel a deep commitment to their community, and frequently find creative ways to raise money,

which is used to provide assistance to women who cannot otherwise afford the rides to visit their incarcerated loved ones.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned previously, the subsidization - or more accurately, the lack thereof - of prison visitation transportation services has been a concern among researchers for decades, and states have long been strongly encouraged by national advisory committees to do so (Schafer 1991). While some states did successfully adopt a practice of subsidizing prison visitation transportation services, it is difficult, at least from the data available in this project, to determine how intentional other states were in choosing not to move forward on these recommendations. It is, however, possible and necessary to consider the fact that even as states were reporting increases in the number of facilities subsidizing visitation transportation in the late 1980s, the vast majority of those services were being still being sponsored by private agencies, not by states (Schafer 1991). In many ways, this reflects the neoliberal project in the US, which includes the deep retrenchment of the welfare state and that rests “on privatizing failure and denigrating the role of government to solve economic and social problems” (Gottschalk 2015:11).

### **Quasi-Carceral Liminal Space**

Taken together, these realities of prison visitation transportation services demonstrate how the carceral state extends its reach by exerting control on the service

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<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the visitors who are the co-creators of this project are also deeply committed to giving back to their communities. Most co-creators are involved in one or more organizations, non-profits, or other service roles, and several run their own non-profit services that cater to the needs of people in their neighborhoods or broader community.

itself. Services like BTT navigate a complex and multifaceted relationship with the state's carceral apparatus. The themes discussed in this chapter also indicate that the application of the concept of "liminality" to prison visitation rooms and family centers is too limited (Comfort 2008, 2016, Moran 2013b, 2013a; Moran and Schliehe 2017).

Prison visitation transportation services such as BTT play a number of important roles for people living in deep disadvantage and desiring to visit their incarcerated loved ones. Yet, because of the requirements of the carceral state, prison visitation transportation services both extend and mitigate the carceral control that is imposed upon the lives of visitors travelling to see their incarcerated friends and family members. More than just providing loved ones of incarcerated people accessible mobility to visitation inside the prison, van services like Better Together also provide an identity- and experience-affirming space for visitors. Moreover, providing access to staff and drivers that have extensive lived experiences of having and visiting incarcerated loved ones empowers and protects visitors as they navigate the complex carceral system. The safe spaces inside the van services foster a network of support to visitors of all types, and provide an important venue for visitors of color to process the near constant onslaught of racial microaggressions they face each time they go to visit their incarcerated loved ones. Taken together, these functions of the van services are similar in the ways that they protect visitors from the carceral control of the state by providing a variety of resources to them they are unlikely to otherwise be able to access.

On the other hand, by virtue of being forced to cooperate with the hyper-racialized surveillance of the prison, especially by cooperating with vehicle searches on the prison property, prison visitation transportation services are, by the forceful



nature of the carceral apparatus, coerced into inadvertently extending the reach of the carceral state. Moreover, as services like these provide access to spaces of social exclusion (i.e. prisons), by being forced into cooperating with prison or law enforcement officials for vehicle searches, these mechanisms of control on transportation services “makes traditional punishment - criminal justice sanction - possible when it would not otherwise be” (Beckett and Herbert 2010). Similarly, because services are required to meet an elaborate web of costly requirements by various state agencies to provide access to correctional institutions, without subsidization or even access to funding, prison visitation transportation services have no choice but to pass off some of these costs to the visitors they serve. In stark contrast to BTT’s mission of providing accessible and truly affordable transportation for their customers, the complex economic pressures that the carceral state applies to these services necessitates that they distribute these costs among their riders, once again inadvertently extending the reach of the carceral state.

Comfort (2003:103) contends that once inside the prison, visitors “assume the peculiar status of *quasi-inmates*, people at once legally free and palpably bound.” As an organization that is centered on values of negating the harms that incarceration has on families and loved ones outside, and yet forced to comply with the carceral state to provide the services it does, BTT is also forced to assume a “peculiar status” as a *quasi-carceral space*. Though dedicated to supporting incarcerated people and their families and loved ones, the need to maintain proper certification and licensing as an approved transportation service by the state, at times begins to make it harder to clearly define where the punitive state’s reach ends and where the organization begins.

As demonstrated, the physical space of the prison transportation bus and the “condition” of the service more generally is very much one of “betweenness” and “indistinction.” The liminality of the prison bus services suggests that the carceral state’s reach is not just present in an abstract form in the ties that people on the outside have to their incarcerated loved ones. Rather, this analysis suggests that the liminality is maintained through an active relationship that is forcibly imposed upon prison visitation transportation services like BTT that seek to serve and reunite families, and in turn, inadvertently reinforces the control of the carceral apparatus beyond the prison walls and into the community they serve.

## **Chapter 5**

### **TERTIARY PRISONIZATION OF PRISON VISITATION TRANSPORTATION SERVICES**

Individual prisons have a variety of rules regarding what is considered acceptable in regards to prison visitation services parking on the property. Some prisons do not allow prison van services to remain on the property during visitation hours, while others indirectly require van services to remain on the property by way of rules that visitors may not remain inside the visitation centers in the event that they are denied entry to visit, kicked out of visitation, or dismissed because visitation is terminated early.

#### **Carceral Sociospatial Control: Expulsion**

At prisons where van services are not allowed to stay on the property, drivers must leave the property after dropping off the visitors. These prisons typically do not allow drivers to even remain on the property long enough to ensure that no one is denied entry as the visitors enter the security area. In cases like these where drivers must leave the prison property, they have no choice but to spend the duration of the visiting hours in the prison town. Depending on what the driver needs to do that day, some drivers will run errands, such as picking up non-perishable groceries at a store they feel comfortable going to, or perhaps doing laundry at a local laundromat. Regardless of what they choose to do, however, drivers are largely unable to do anything that would require a significant amount of time since they will have to return to the prison to pick up any visitors who are denied entry or kicked out of visitation. This is noteworthy as it means that as a result of these kinds of institutional rules, the

autonomy of drivers is heavily limited due to the control that the carceral institution has over driver's mobility.

Just as the women of color and Muslim women using van services are painfully aware of the wide variety of racist and sexist experience inside the prisons where they visit, drivers too are subjected to a consistent onslaught of racial microaggressions, in addition to more bold racism and Islamophobia in the prison towns. Most of the staff of BTT have spent a significant amount of time in the prison towns due to the nature of the job, and as a result, are typically highly attuned to the racial makeup of the prison town and where people of color who are local residents might live and how those residents feel about both the area and the prison system. When running errands around the prison town, many of the drivers have found themselves in conversation with the few people of color they encounter.<sup>15</sup> This provides drivers a useful opportunity to understand more about the racial dynamics of the town, such as what areas are considered by local residents of color to be safe and what areas should be avoided, in addition to the racial composition of the prison system staff and visitors. This sort of information gathering has important implications for how staff members manage themselves, the business, and visitors using their service:

As we are sitting in the parking lot at [prison] waiting to make sure that everyone is admitted entry through security, Naomi begins to point out various aspects of what visitors are wearing or taking with them as they make their way across the parking lot to the visiting center. In almost

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<sup>15</sup> On nearly every trip when the driver and I would see a person of color who was a local resident of the prison town, they would make a concerted effort to come over and acknowledge us. The drivers and I frequently talked about how surprised many people of color would look to see another person of color in the area.

sort of rapid fire kind of way she points to 5 different white people making their way towards the visiting entrance, pointing out the reasons they will not be allowed in. Pointing to each one she says things like “sweatshirt, can’t wear that,” “she forgot her phone is in the back pocket of her jeans, she’s definitely comin’ back to her car”, “those jeans too tight on that girl,” “can’t wear that color shirt,” and so on. We laugh as every single visitor she points out returns to their cars a few minutes later to change or drop items off that Naomi correctly identified they would be turned away for.

One man, who Naomi pointed out was wearing a belt and whose partner was wearing jeans too tight, comes back out of the prison for the fourth time to drop off an item for them or change something about what he is wearing, with his partner walking back to the car a few steps behind him looking distressed. They get in the car and drive away. I say that it would be really difficult for me to drive all the way there only to be repeatedly returned to my car for infractions pointed out one at a time, and then ultimately turned away. Naomi laughs when I say this and says that she is positive they’re going to go to the nearby [store] to pick up clothes. Sure enough, about 45 minutes later the couple returns, and each takes turns removing the tags from the cheap clothes they just purchased, and they head back inside.

Naomi explains that she often sits in the van and passes time by doing this, and that she often feels bad for knowing but not being able to tell visitors when she spots something immediately that she knows they will be sent back for. Naomi says, “You know it’s... like it’s one thing if I see a Black woman, I might be like “you ain’t gon’ be able to wear that shirt inside” but when it’s white people... you just can’t be doin’ stuff like that even though I wish I could help them. I just... in this area... most of these white people ain’t ever been around Black people, so I have to be careful as a Black woman here. You have to protect yourself from white people in this area. They ain’t ever gon’ be receptive to listenin’ to a Black woman.”

Similarly, feeling like she has to be consistently concerned about her safety as a Black woman in the towns where the prisons are located, Annette elaborates on her experience as a BTT driver detailed in this fieldnote excerpt:

Referring to some of the talks she has had with the few local residents of color in this prison town over the last number of years, Annette explains that this small town has a lot of KKK activity. She explains

that because of this information, the advice she has been given by local residents of color, and her own experiences, whenever she has some free time while visitors are inside, she drives around the town as much as she can so that can learn how to navigate the town easily. Annette explains, “I always, always be drivin’ around figurin’ out all the back roads, and where things be, you know, and how to get out [of the town]... ‘cus I will be damned if I’m getting’ caught in one of these towns not knowin’ the way out [in the event something happens].” Having noticed that she was scoping out the parking lot at the store we stopped by earlier, I ask if that is the reason why, and she says yes, explaining that she feels like it’s really important for her to know where all the various parking exits are, even in parking lots of big stores, because she never wants to get caught unexpectedly should something happen and not know the way out.

For drivers, many of these concerns for their safety are not simply born out of the warnings they receive from others, but from their own experiences of both subtle and blatant racism.

Naomi and I stop at the gas station to grab a few snacks after we finish dropping off at [prison]. After we find what we want, we head up to the cash register to pay. When we get up the cash register the attendant looks at her strangely, which begins to make me uneasy. I tell him I’m going to pay with cash for everything, but my hands are full so Naomi hands him the money for me. When the attendant, who still has not spoken to us once, gathers the change from our purchase, Naomi extends her hand to collect it from him and raises her hand to be closer to his so that she can receive the change, and suddenly the man quickly lifts his hand up above hers to put distance between their two hands, and then proceeds to drop the change several inches in the air above her hand, which, of course, immediately sends the change spilling all over the floor. I am shocked by how rudely he has just treated her, but my shock is interrupted by him slamming the cash register door loudly, as he backs up against the wall lined with cigarettes behind him, and crosses his arms, as he glares at us as we leave. The moment we get to the door Naomi says “this is the exactly what I mean!” referring to how she has warned me about these kinds of experiences. I tell her I am stunned by what just happened, and she says that she is completely used to it by now, but that it still bothers her nonetheless.

Drivers, like visitors, are constantly exposed to racism, but experiences differ from that of visitors due to their prolonged experiences in the prison towns with area locals during the visitation hours and the fact that they travel to these towns multiple days each week. These experiences range from subtle microaggressions in which they are ignored, dismissed, or treated rudely, to more blatant instances in which locals yell racist or Islamophobic slurs at them, local store employees follow them as they shop looking to see if they will steal, and white residents express their shock to learn that “not all Black women are welfare queens” as one local white correctional officer mentioned to a driver. Drivers frequently told me about how exhausting these experiences make the drives, referring to feeling overwhelmed by the racism they encounter on each drive. Consistent with research on racial stress, drivers experience intense hypervigilance on every trip, particularly when they are forced to spend hours of their days inside the prison towns due to not being allowed to remain on the property. Moreover, these drivers often experience a variety of emotions from their experiences such as anger, shock, frustration, and feeling unsafe, all of which are related to racial battle fatigue (Smith et al. 2007).

### **Carceral Sociospatial Control: Containment**

At prisons where van services are required to stay on the property, drivers must remain on the property during the visitation hours, regardless of their own needs and desires or the needs of the van service. In these cases, drivers will often drop off visitors, then quickly leave the property to go get gas at the nearest gas station, which subsequently restricts BTT’s drivers from being able to go to a gas station with the lowest prices or to one where they feel comfortable. Drivers often feel obligated to get gas for the van immediately after dropping off at visitation in order to ensure that they

do not have to risk doing so once visitation is released for the day since that risks the van services still being in the prison town close to dusk. Moreover, having to return to a gas station following visitation in the prison town with all the visitors, who are predominantly Black, is often more of a risk than most drivers are willing to take in the prison town. In addition, requirements to remain on the property almost always force the driver to get food from the gas station where they stop for gas, at which there tends to be very limited options in the way of what would constitute an adequate lunch for drivers.

It is common practice at these prisons for correctional officers or prison staff in the lobby of the prison not to allow visitors to call the van service to request being picked up, and often, correctional officers will refuse to call the van service drivers for visitors. The refusal to call drivers when a visitor needs to be picked up reinforces the unwritten rule on van services not being able to leave, because if drivers have left the property to go to the gas station, a visitor may be kicked out of the prison and left outside the visitor center with no way to contact the van service themselves. These incidents create a significant risk for van services, particularly during cold months: if drivers leave immediately after dropping off to get gas and food from a local gas station, and a visitor is kicked out during that time, visitors are stranded outside the visitor center, not allowed to be inside if not visiting, and not allowed to be on the property unless on a van. Even in cases where visitors are able to talk a correctional officer into calling the van service, these kinds of incidents are risky, as illustrated in this excerpt from my fieldnotes:

Just after we arrive at the gas station and start pumping gas Kim's phone begins to ring, and it is the prison calling to let us know that a visitor has been kicked out. As soon as Kim is off of the phone, we have to rush back to the prison to pick up the visitor, which is about 20



minutes away. Although we both checked the gas station for food, there was not any substantial food outside of candy and gum, and being forced to rush back to the prison means we will not have time to get any food elsewhere before we get back to the prison property. On the way back to the prison Kim expresses her frustration at not being able to get something to eat as both of us are already hungry and this means we will have to skip eating lunch.

As we drive, Kim and I talk about being concerned about the visitor who has been forced to stand outside in the snow while waiting for us to return to the prison, despite the fact that there has just been an ice storm the night before and the temperature outside is below freezing. Even more concerning, [prison] does not allow visitors to wear any type of jacket, meaning that he is likely stuck outside without one.

As soon as we get back to [prison], we park the van in the parking lot and the young visitor, who is standing outside the visitor room on the icy sidewalk with his arms crossed and head down shivering, comes over to the van as soon as he spots us.

When he gets back on the van, Kim asks him why he was denied entry, he explains that the security guard that checked his ID told him that his ID was several months expired. This surprised him as he has been up to visit several times in the last two months and has not had any issue getting through security. A few minutes later the young man's incarcerated loved one, who had been waiting to go down to visitation to see him, calls to ask what happened as he has just heard the young man was denied entry. He explains to his incarcerated father what happened, and both cry on the phone as he promises his incarcerated loved one that he will try to get enough money to renew his ID so that he can come back to visit soon, before exchanging emotional 'I love you's' to one another as the call nears the end of the allotted call time, and then is suddenly cut off.

In instances like this in which visitors are denied entry to visit, especially when due to a rule that is inconsistently applied, visitors' tensions are often high. When this happens in unfavorable weather conditions at prisons where the van services need to stay on the property, but need to get gas, visitors' stress is compounded by being forced to wait outside in inclement weather for the service to return. This often creates a feeling of dissatisfaction with the van service for the visitor, and this can strain

customers' trust in the van service, and ultimately risks BTT losing that visitor as a customer.

When drivers of van services cannot leave the property during visitation, they are also often not allowed to enter the prison during the visitation hours for any reason, unless they are going in to visit someone as well. This typically means that drivers are not allowed to even use the restroom during the visitation hours, unless the prison has provided a portajohn in the parking lot.<sup>16</sup> Since most prisons also prohibit anyone except correctional officers from "loitering" in the parking lot, drivers who have to remain on the property are typically not even allowed to step out of their vans to stretch their legs or move around, without risking being harassed by the correctional officer on parking lot duty.

Since most drivers have been up since the early hours of the morning on the day of the drives, they tend to utilize at least part of the time during visiting hours to nap on the van so that they are adequately rested before having to drive back to the city after visitation. At prisons where visitors are allowed to either use the phone in the facility or are able to have a correctional officer call the van service, drivers tend to be more comfortable taking a nap as they can leave their phones on a loud volume setting to wake them up if they receive a call. At other prisons, however, where visitors are not allowed to have the van service called, drivers are often not comfortable napping on the van. This is, quite counterintuitively, often due to the fact that even though the vans are required to remain parked in the prison parking lot, visitors may not be able

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<sup>16</sup> Notably, on more than one occasion, access to the portajohns in the parking lot was blocked by snow that had been shoveled from the surrounding areas in the parking lots up against the sides and door, effectively making it inaccessible to visitors.

to find them because they are not allowed to walk around the prison property. If the visitor cannot see the BTT vehicle from the visitor center, and the driver cannot see the visitor from the van, visitors must either wait uncomfortably right outside the prison visiting center or risk violating prison rules to find the driver, who may not be on the property because they are refueling. For example, at one prison where the driver and I were parked and napping:

The driver and I are both inside the van napping, and I have just been able to fall asleep only a few minutes when there is a knock on the van door, and I sit up in my chair and unlock the door. A family of four is at the door, and they explain when the door opens that they were just kicked out of the prison without a reason stated by the correctional officer who terminated their visit. One of the women explains that she asked the guards to call the driver to see if we were back on the property, but the prison refused. When the family asked if they knew if we were on the van, the correctional officers in the prison told them they didn't know, despite the fact that we had been in the parking lot at that point for several hours and the guard on duty making rounds in the parking lot had been keeping a close eye on us, clearly aware that we were there. One of the women explains, "I knew we wasn't gonna be able to see you from the visitor entrance, but they insisted we leave" as her teeth chatter from being cold. She explains, "we complained and asked real nice and polite and all that 'cus I mean... we got a baby with us! But they still wouldn't. I was like, "so you 'bout to make us stand out here in the cold with a 4 year old baby when it's under freezin' outside and they did!" Thankfully, after about 10 minutes outside, one of the women worked up the bravery to leave the visitor entrance area, where she was finally able to spot the van, and then motioned for the rest of her family to follow. I ask if it's common for this kind of thing to happen, especially since the prison clearly knows we are here and since a child is involved, and the driver scoffs and says "yeah, every time... wantin' me to stay awake on the van 'cus they don't give a shit about the safety of the visitors... they be knowin' the reason I sleep is 'cus I gotta get them up here by count. And they don't give a shit about the families or a baby," with which the family agrees.

When visitors are unable to spot the van from the visitor center, they often feel scared to go look for the van since they know that they are not allowed to walk around the

property, which tends to compound their emotions after being kicked out of visitation, which they are also unable to express. Similarly, drivers, who are often exhausted and in need of sleep before driving back to the city, are unable to feel comfortable napping as it puts them at risk of not spotting an ejected visitor. For visitors and drivers alike, these rules are extremely frustrating, and they often express feeling that these rules are indicative of prisons intentionally trying to make visiting difficult in an effort to both discourage visitation and services like BTT from continuing to provide transportation to visits.

The issues with how prisons place carceral control on the drivers extends far beyond the drivers having to submit to the inconvenience of being required to stay on the property such as not being able to get adequate food or use the restroom. For many of the drivers, given their extensive individual experiences with incarcerated loved ones of their own, the process of being forced into extended contact with the prisons can be a triggering event. While this is also true for drivers who travel to prisons where they are allowed to leave the property, the effects of being unable to leave the property are often especially heightened since it means that drivers cannot take a break from the control and surveillance of the prison by leaving the property. This excerpt from my fieldnotes provides a clear example of what this extended contact can mean for drivers:

Naomi and I begin to talk about how she is able to cope with having to drive to many of the prisons where her own loved ones were previously incarcerated. Naomi says that on a good day, it's difficult, and that some days are a lot worse than others. She explains that she had to stop driving to [prison] and [prison] for a while because the anxiety that she had from having to come here prior to then as a visitor was too much for her to handle, especially after one of her loved ones was released. Naomi explains, "like... it was just too much. I mean... it's like hard, yeah it's hard. I was havin' to come back up to the places I knew had

destroyed my [family member]. I know they was torturin' him up here... you know, mentally, with this incarceration, 'cus that's what it does to 'em." Naomi goes on to explain that her anxiety about driving the vans became too much after her loved one was released because it became even more clear to her then that not only had incarceration ruined her [family member], but it had also caused many of the problems her family is still trying to heal from today. Explaining what it means for her to have to come back to the prison at this point in her life, Naomi says, "you know... it's really just... there's no other way to put it. It's just completely traumatizing... Comin' back up here... it's just a reminder of the.... of the immense pain me and [family members] had to be in because of [their] incarceration."

Extant literature on the emotions experienced by visitors indicates that people often experience trauma when they visit incarcerated loved ones (Dixey and Woodall 2012). Yet, the stories of drivers for van services like BTT suggest that drivers are often subjected to a deep level of re-traumatization by virtue of having to return to correctional facilities. Over time this consistent re-traumatization wears down drivers' ability to continue driving, and they often experience a "burn out." Perhaps the most salient evidence of this is the fact that prison visitation transportation services frequently go out of business because staff and drivers become too emotionally worn down to continue. For services like BTT, the prevalence of "service burn out" among other visitation transportation providers creates a sense of fear in many of the staff and drivers as they experience their own bouts of temporary "burn out" that they fear will eventually lead to BTT having to go out of business.

### **The Tertiary Prisonization of Prison Visitation Transportation Services**

Whether prison visitation transportation services are required to stay or are banned from staying on the property during visitation hours, these carceral requirements highlight Foucault's (2003) concern regarding spatial regulation as a form of the carceral state's methods of social control. Moreover, this forced regulation

of the mobility of prison visitation transportation services coincides with what Beckett and Herbert (Beckett and Herbert 2010) have identified as the “two main modalities through which spatial control is exercised: expulsion and containment” by the carceral state (p. 2). As entities that inherently resist this kind of spatial control that removes and contains visitors’ incarcerated loved ones, prison visitation transportation services exist to provide access to otherwise inaccessible carceral spaces. In response to these services, however, the carceral state exercises a particular form of control over them and their drivers, either forcefully constraining their mobility by limiting them to remaining on the prison property during visitation hours, or by banning them from the prison property, which effectively forces them into the white, conservative, rural towns in which the prisons are located. The spatial control of prison visitation transportation services, specifically as services that provide access to those effectively socially excluded (Saraceno 2002) by their “banishment,” suggests a need to reconsider how strategies of containment and expulsion are still exercised on a less obvious and weaker but important level (Beckett and Herbert 2009, 2010). Just as women in Christian’s (2005) study do the important work of “watching the prison” to help protect their incarcerated loved ones from carceral abuse by visiting, prison visitation transportation services, too, work to invert the surveillance of the carceral apparatus by standing at the ready to protect visitors who are ejected from the prison for any of a number of reasons. Not keen on this kind of outside oversight, carceral institutions enact a salient form of spatial control of such services and their staff.

The experiences of these drivers are also consistent with Sykes’s (1958) notions of the pains of imprisonment including deprivation of liberty, deprivation of

goods and services, deprivation of autonomy, and deprivation of security.<sup>17</sup> Prison rules on whether services are allowed to leave the property or forced to remain on the property are consistent with the notion of deprivation of liberty, which ultimately restricts drivers' ability to go where needed and do so on their own time frame. The inability to use the restrooms at the prison, or access food at prisons when the drivers are required to remain on the property during visitation, is consistent with Sykes's (1958) notion of the deprivation of goods and services, as it restricts drivers from meeting their own basic needs. Being forced to abide by rules that are irrational and arbitrary, such as being on the property but not being able to communicate with visitors or correctional officers when visitors are kicked out and need to be picked up, fit Sykes's (1958) notion of deprivation of autonomy. Prisons take away drivers' sense of safety by regulating whether they are forced to remain confined to the property or banned from the property, effectively forcing them into the prison towns, which is consistent with notion of deprivation of security.

Moreover, the experiences of drivers parallel the kind of "psychic pain" that is both psychological and symbolic, and which is a central aspect of Sykes's (1958) pains of imprisonment.<sup>18</sup> Extending Sykes's (1958) original conceptualization, Beckett

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<sup>17</sup> Though Sykes's (1958) pains of imprisonment also includes the notion of "the deprivation of heterosexual relationships," the complexity of this notion in its relation to the context of prison visitation transportation services is outside of the scope of this paper.

<sup>18</sup> Beckett and Herbert (2010) use the term "psychic pain" to refer to Sykes's (1958) emphasis on how "the most fundamental kind of pain imposed by imprisonment is psychological and symbolic in nature" (p. 28). While the original conceptualization was restricted to the experiences of imprisonment, Beckett and Herbert (2010) demonstrate how this concept is applicable to those who are not imprisoned but still subjected to the carceral state.

and Herbert (2010) illustrate that this “psychic pain” is applicable to the experiences of groups targeted by the carceral state that are relegated to a status based on their exclusion and rejection. Drivers frequently refer to being re-traumatized by their consistent and extended exposure to the prison system, and by being forced into spaces in the prison towns where they are subjected to rampant racism and sexism that work to keep them keenly aware of their outsider status. Though outside the walls of the prison, but still within the grasp of the carceral apparatus, the emotional and psychological experiences of these drivers are consistent with this conceptualization of “psychic pain” (Beckett and Herbert 2010; Sykes 1958).<sup>19</sup>

Similar to Comfort’s (2003) concept of “secondary prisonization,” staff and drivers of the van services are subjected to a variety of conditions by the prisons and in the prison towns that coincide with Garfinkel’s (1968) notion of “ceremonies of degradation,” as they are forced to deal with repeated exposure to humiliating and degrading treatment by both the prisons and the local residents that is highly racialized (see also, Gustafson 2013). Likening the experience of drivers and staff to the idea of “secondary prisonization,” co-creator of this project, Roxy, explained: “it’s like... if we, by visiting, are secondarily imprisoned... then you [staff and drivers] are... you experience third prisonization. That third level is where it is.” Building from Roxy’s important insight, it becomes clear that prison visitation transportation services, and their staff members and drivers, experience a sort of *tertiary prisonization* as a number of institutions within the carceral state exert mechanisms of control which both control

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<sup>19</sup> Importantly, Pearlin et al. (2005) suggest that psychic pain results from both past experiences of *and* the anticipation of future experience of identity-based slights or microaggressions.



the transportation services themselves and effectively extend the reach of the carceral state further into the lives of those impacted by incarceration of their loved ones.

Importantly, visitors are not the only ones to experience the spaces of prison visitation transportation services and prison visitation as spaces characterized by their liminality. Drivers and staff also experience the van space of their services as one that is characteristically liminal, as is their experience of the time they spend waiting during visitation hours. Pointing to the experiences of formerly incarcerated women who later experience prison visitation of their own loved ones, Foster (2017) suggests that liminality might also be applied, not just to spaces and circumstances, but to individuals who are “in a liminal state of being between free and prisoners, unable in their encounters with liminal prison spaces to shake off their past” (p. 193). Drivers and staff of services like BTT have experiences that suggest that through their near daily direct contact with the criminal punishment system, this “persistent entanglement” of their lives and the carceral state has a transformative effect on them as individuals (2017:193). By virtue of their jobs, drivers and staff of prison visitation transportation services appear to be unable to fully return to their pre-liminal context, as scholars have suggested is possible for visitors (Comfort 2008; Moran 2013b, 2013a). Moreover, as women who have had extensive experiences of visiting their own incarcerated loved ones in prison, drivers and staff of these services appear to experience what Foster (2017) refers to as “layered liminalities,” or multiple liminal experiences that combine and overlap in distinct yet complex and parallel ways. Like the customers they serve, these drivers and staff experience the liminality of being former or sometimes current visitors, whose experiences inside both the prison and the van are liminal in nature. Simultaneously, their liminal experience does not end when

they return back to the city due to the nature of their jobs which requires ample amounts of their time each week. As these different experiences of liminality combine, it becomes clear that their lives are characterized by a more enduring liminal experience, as one that becomes attached to them as individuals.

## **Chapter 6**

### **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Whereas much of the recent qualitative research on prison visitation from the perspective of visitors has involved interviews or qualitative surveys, this project relies on a combination of ethnographic observation, demographic questionnaires, and in-depth qualitative interviews, which provides rich data that allows us to develop a more in-depth understanding of the “process, nuance, and contradiction” inherent to experiences of the carceral state (Wacquant 2002:388). Prison visitation transportation services play central roles in the process of visiting for many people with incarcerated loved ones, and are also important sites for being able to study carceral control. Studying these services, and specifically by using ethnographic methodologies to do so, allows an opportunity to “direct our attention toward less visible or ignored effects of penal practices” (Werth and Ballesteros 2017:25).

Prison visitation transportation services provide important insight into the experiences of those who visit. When staffed by people of color who share similar lived experiences of having incarcerated loved ones and who have extensive knowledge about visitation, prison visitation transportation services provide visitors not only with access to mobility, but access to valuable sources of knowledge that help visitors navigate the complex visitation experience. These services provide important opportunities for visitors to have support-oriented safe spaces, where visitors are able to both provide and receive support, which is especially helpful given the emotionally-intensive nature of visitation. For visitors, and especially women of color, who routinely encounter micro-aggressions inside the prisons, these services represent

important spaces where they can express “outlaw emotions” otherwise not allowed to be expressed in the prison (Jaggar 1989; Meiners 2007).

While prison visitation transportation services help to mitigate carceral control over visitors’ lives, these services themselves are also subjected to intensive carceral control. Prison visitation transportation services are required by law to cooperate with a variety of carceral policies, including vehicle searches that are threatening to visitors and that put them at heightened risk of being sanctioned by the criminal punishment system. Moreover, these services are faced with the challenge of meeting a number of costly requirements by several state agencies, which create a financial burden that services are ultimately forced to pass on to their customers, often limiting who can afford to visit and how often. Taken together, the carceral state’s coercive and forcible control over these services makes the service’s physical space on the vehicle and the “condition” of the service one that is characterized by its liminality. Caught between its original intentions to be a service that helps mitigate the harms of incarceration for loved ones on the outside and being forced to comply with the carceral state’s control of visitors, especially through hyper-racialized surveillance, prison visitation transportation services assume a “peculiar status” of *quasi-carceral spaces*.

The carceral state also engages in sociospatial control of prison visitation transportation services and their drivers by either forcing them to stay on the prison property during visitation hours, or by banning them from the prison property, effectively pushing them into the white rural prison towns where they experience extensive racist treatment. The experiences of staff and drivers navigating this kind of carceral control are consistent with Sykes’s notions of the “pains of imprisonment,” and Garfinkel’s “ceremonies of degradation,” ultimately resulting in what amounts to

a sort of *tertiary prisonization*. Moreover, drivers' experiences of this tertiary prisonization results in a heightened state of layered liminality (Foster 2017) that ultimately attaches to them as individuals.

Comfort (2008) makes an important point by highlighting that the foundational work on prison visitation from the perspective of visitors by Fishman (1990) and Girkshick (1996), who studied the experiences of women partners of incarcerated men, primarily focused on the perspectives of white women as a result of their samples. Fishman's (1990:292) sample included 30 white women who were wives of incarcerated men, and Girshick's (1996) sample of 25 women had just 8 women who did not identify as white. In comparison, Comfort's (2008) study, seeking to compensate for some of these sampling flaws of earlier works, included a total sample of 50 women, 50 percent of whom identified as African American, and 13 percent who identified as Hispanic. Yet, what is missing from this body of work and many of the qualitative studies of the experiences of women who visit their incarcerated loved ones, is a specific centering of race in the analysis that takes into account their other intersecting identities that shape their experiences.

A critical race-grounded theory approach in this study, however, begins to fill this gap in important ways. By centering race, racism, and other elements of subordination that create intersecting identities, this project develops a critical understanding of the highly racialized experiences of visitors, and particularly women of color, who enter white dominated prisons in predominantly white, rural towns to visit their incarcerated loved ones (Crenshaw 1991; Malagon et al. 2009). Moreover, by examining the experiences of the women who run these prison visitation transportation services, this study highlights that their experiences both parallel and

depart from those of the visitors they serve in important ways. Importantly, this project suggests the need to expand our view of what prison visitation scholars see as relevant to our research.

### **Limitations**

This thesis has looked at only some of the important roles that prison visitation transportation services play in the process of visitation, and at only a few ways that the carceral state interacts with and ultimately controls these services. While there are certainly many other aspects of these services and their relationship to the carceral state that would be interesting to critical carceral studies and critical race theory scholars, such as the strategies drivers use to navigate racialized threats in the prison towns and the ways correctional officers overtly reinforce racialized power dynamics with drivers, this thesis has only highlighted a few that were of particular interest to the co-creators of this project.

The narrow focus of this project is also one of its key limitations. This project examined the experiences of a specific type of prison visitation transportation service, as BTT is a small, Black-owned service that is staffed by Black women, and therefore may have produced findings not applicable to other services. While this service's small number of staff members made it possible to engage in in-depth examinations of their experiences, the findings may be limited or skewed by the small number of perspectives, especially in comparison to services with larger staffs. This project was conducted in a specific environment on the East Coast, in a state in which prisons are located in overwhelmingly white, rural towns, and where prison personnel are representative of these areas. Therefore, the experiences of visitors and drivers alike

may not translate well to experiences of services in which the prison personnel, or the towns in which the prisons are located, are more diverse.

I have not addressed how these services are maintained over time, how they manage to create enduring relationships with certain prisons, or how and why visitors use multiple services for transportation, all of which are important dynamics of these services. Moreover, this work primarily focuses on the broadest patterns overall across the prisons that were included in this study. A more nuanced perspective is likely to arise from a focused sample of repeated rides to a smaller number of prisons. Furthermore, while this project provides insight on how visitation is experienced by those using small Black-owned prison visitation transportation services, it is likely that experiences would differ for those using larger, more established companies. Moreover, while this project highlights important experiences that are consistent with research on racial microaggressions and racial stress, this project is not suited to make scientific psychological claims on the impacts of these experiences beyond these observations.

### **Future Directions**

This study suggests that prison visitation transportation services play an important role in the process of prison visitation for those who depend on them to access the prisons where their loved ones are incarcerated, and future research should consider further examinations of these services. Research examining multiple services would be particularly useful in order to develop a comparative analysis between services. This is likely to reveal important implications and nuances in regards to how services' "quasi-carceral status" impacts visitors. Moreover, future projects examining the "tertiary prisonization" of prison visitation transportation services should consider

examining how this may differ between service types. For example, there are many different types of prison visitation transportation services - free, state-sponsored, state-run, state-contracted, for-profit, non-profit, DOC endorsed, DOC contracted, etc. - and this is very likely to impact the extent and nature of the “tertiary prisonization” of these services. Given the concerning findings from this project, research that further examines the racialized experiences of visitors and prison visitation transportation services’ staff and drivers travelling into homogenous, predominantly white, rural prison towns should be prioritized.

Perhaps most importantly, future research should consider specifically examining how these multifaceted experiences contest the viability not only of the project of mass imprisonment, but of America’s continuing reliance on the carceral apparatus. Prison visitation is similar to many “reformist-reform” efforts in that it is employed by the carceral state as a way to lessen some of the harm done by imprisonment, and is widely held by the carceral apparatus to be non-punitive (Gorz 1967). Yet, this project demonstrates that prison visitation extends the reach of the carceral apparatus further into the lives of those most impacted by the project of mass imprisonment, and by doing so, extends the harms created by the “fatal couplings of power and difference” inherent to the carceral state (Gilmore 2002). This project seeks to highlight one of the many nuanced and counterintuitive aspects of the carceral state, which should encourage us to ask more subversive, and transformative questions about our research, and about the world we live in. As Brown and Schept (2017) ask, “how can we create safe, healthy communities, and flourishing lives? What kind of community (world) do we want to live in - do we envision?” (p. 9). Moreover, how



can we build a liberating future where there is genuine “possibility of freedom and emancipated forms of life” (2017:6)?

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## Appendix

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



RESEARCH OFFICE

210 Hulihan Hall  
University of Delaware  
Newark, Delaware 19716-1551  
Ph: 302/831-2136  
Fax: 302/831-2828

DATE: September 19, 2017

TO: Dylan Haywood, BA  
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1097582-1] Riding The Bus - Examining the Experience of People Using  
Prison Transportation Services to Visit Incarcerated Loved Ones

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: September 19, 2017

EXPIRATION DATE: September 18, 2018

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # (6),(7)

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Farnese-McFarlane at (302) 831-1119 or [nicolefm@udel.edu](mailto:nicolefm@udel.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.