WHO WOULD BELIEVE A PRISONER?

INDIANA WOMEN'S CARCERAL INSTITUTIONS, 1848–1920

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Methodology: “We’re Doing a New Thing”

Michelle Daniel Jones

Consider the plight of the incarcerated historian. At the Indiana Women’s Prison, we did not have access to the internet; that is still true at the time of this writing. Our library was minuscule and was primarily stocked with romance novels. Interlibrary loan requests could take months to process, if they were completed at all. And we obviously could not visit archives or other repositories ourselves. We consistently faced challenges while researching this book, some of which were compounded by our unavoidable institutional restrictions.

We also had to place our research on Indiana’s early carceral institutions for women in context. To begin, we studied the origins of prisons in the world, nineteenth-century U.S. history, and the contextual reasons that motivated the establishment of a separate prison and related facilities for women. We explored multiple additional fields of inquiry relevant to the various topics within the project, including historical definitions of crime, prison economies, and histories of medicine and public health.

Our professors and assistants invested countless hours searching for relevant material at the Indiana State Library, the Indiana State Archives, and across the internet. They spent hundreds of dollars photocopying material for us. Our research requests were always filtered through another person’s understanding of what was needed for each topic. As our focus developed and shifted, following up on leads took weeks or even months; some students received more information than others did; sometimes, the sources found by our proxies weren’t relevant or useful. While this was certainly a challenge, the consistent contact and engagement with these volunteer collaborators enabled us to grow and to develop expertise.

This improvised research process required asking pointed questions in order to expedite source discovery. For example, after we digitized and analyzed the prison registries and studied Indiana’s history, we realized that women convicted of crimes of a sexual nature like prostitution weren’t at the prison in its early years. Yet our reading of contemporary accounts of postbellum Indianapolis convinced us that women were indeed charged and convicted of sex crimes. We asked our professor and a state librarian to search county jail records for women convicted of prostitution, and when that failed to reveal the missing women they kept searching. It was this extensive search that led us to a critical article detailing the 1873 opening of a private facility for women prisoners, run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Incidentally, this was the same year that the women’s prison opened. This discovery sparked
for us a new chapter of inquiry of historical Magdalene Laundries and their heretofore unknown role in the incarceration of women in Indiana.

We were also extremely challenged with access to technology. Our research team shared five old laptops dedicated for our use. When possible, we used the computers used by the undergraduates enrolled in college courses. Some of us whose work assignments provided access to computers negotiated with supervisors for more computer time.

These unusual methods, stemming from the difficulties inherent to the pursuit of academic research inside a prison, set in relief the riches of discovery, the expansion of ideas and viewpoints, and the development of a clearer view of history.

**We Are Doing Something New**

We are doing something new: our qualitative inquiry centers the captive and tells the truth in ways that counter dominant narratives that historically exclude and devalue captive voices. The standard methodological procedures and approaches to research served as our starting points. Ultimately, however, they proved inadequate to reflect the work we are doing as incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women scholars, and they did not take into consideration all that we have read and all that we have lived. Our work has three components: (1) researching women’s carceral institutions in the state of Indiana, (2) excavating subjugated knowledge, and (3) critiquing the carceral state writ large. Formal shoes did not fit our feet; they were crafted by typically white, male, nonincarcerated academics who deem our feet unworthy. In this book and in all our work, we cobble our own shoes and we walk a new path: research conducted through the eyes of captive women.

Scholarly research rarely depicts incarcerated people as skillful, competent, and worthy human beings. Most research starts with criminality and assumes deviance. This research is never objective. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise, but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions.”¹ Subjectivity is inherent in all research, especially in ethnography. Nicholas Wolfinger iterates that the ethnographer is actively shaping the data by what they choose to notice or not to notice, to record or not to record.² A critical yet often uncriticized aspect of research about incarcerated people conducted by nonincarcerated people is the message that we are unworthy human beings viewed exclusively as research subjects and as policy objects through the lens of “reform” and “rehabilitation.”³ The risks and consequences of research conducted on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are relatively unseen by investigators themselves and by readers of their research. The risks and consequences of such research are the burden of the captive.⁴

As incarcerated and formerly incarcerated scholars, we seek to privilege our experiences of incarceration so that “the past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices” are not only “spaces of marginalization, but … also … spaces of resistance and hope.”⁵ Incarcerated scholars intimately understand and experience marginalization, secrecy, and subjection. We are also better able to comprehend through our own experiences the systematic subjugation of others. Unearthing human stories
and the structures and formations that created their subjugated experiences is a vital strength we bring to our work.

Approaching an archive against the grain of traditional research methodologies and institutional formations is a bold decision that celebrates our humanity and our right to value ourselves fully. By researching and by writing history, we make the experiences of incarceration useful beyond notions of rehabilitation and reform.\(^6\) We bring our whole selves to the work. Just as it is impossible to cut away one’s race, gender, and class when approaching the archive, it is impossible to wall off the influence of our lived experience of incarceration and its afterlife from our research. In our experience, this reality is rich and fruitful. As Joy James explained in *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, the scholarship and “analyses of imprisoned intellectuals both deconstruct dominant ideologies and reconstruct new strategies for humanity. [Our] writings proffer reactive and proactive readings of struggle and freedom.”\(^7\) James’s conclusions are concordant with our own experiences.

Patricia Hill Collins utilized the concept of the “outsider within” to describe the African American woman inside both the white master’s house and the traditionally white academy. She privileges the orientation of the outsider, a stranger who is then possessed of a particular perspective as the “marginal intellectual” that “may reveal aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches [to scholarship].”\(^8\) This is also true for the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated woman scholar.

Much like the stereotyped Black woman described by Black feminist scholars, incarcerated women, especially Black women and other women of color, carry the burden of stigma and derision expressed in the dominant social narratives informed by academic research.\(^9\) In the Black feminist tradition of self-definition and self-valuation, we epistemically privilege our right to be knowers. We also privilege our right to use our background and our history with the criminal legal system, especially the prison, to be one lens through which we view the archive.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Tuhiwai Smith demonstrates how research in the Western imperial and colonial context is the standard by which “proper” research is measured and in which Indigenous people historically are represented as Other. Conversely, many Indigenous people regard “proper” research by Westerners as forms of “amateur collecting, journalistic approaches, film making or other ways of ‘taking’ indigenous knowledge that has occurred so casually over the centuries.”\(^10\) Another word for this method of research is *extraction*. Smith situates Indigenous researchers in a place of primacy when conducting research with their own people and with other Indigenous populations. “Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell, these stories not only question the assumed nature of those ideals and the practices they generate but also serve to tell an alternative story: the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized.”\(^11\)

Within our work, our ability as incarcerated scholars to ask critical questions and to excavate subjugated knowledge is nurtured by the process of qualitative inquiry. Our research is not confined to quantitative measures, which criminologists critique as profoundly limiting what is possible to know about crime and punishment.\(^12\) Qualitative inquiry, as opposed to
statistical measurement, focuses on lived experiences and on the complexity of people’s lives. It cares about the ephemeral processes of human endeavors. It is idiosyncratic. Qualitative methods recognize that subjugated knowledge may be delicate and fragmented and that it requires reconstruction using various sources. Qualitative inquiry requires a willingness to wrestle with the pieces and parcels of knowledge to complete a different historical picture of the dominant narratives. For example, the dominant narrative surrounding Rhoda Coffin and Sarah Smith, who in 1873 founded what is now called the Indiana Women’s Prison, is about pioneering, benevolent prison reformers who fought to create a haven of reform for fallen and wayward women and girls.\textsuperscript{13} This narrative presents the founding of the first state-run prison for women as progress. However, in sifting through the collections of knowledge from the women and girls themselves and in privileging their right to be knowers of their own experiences, a more complex picture of Rhoda and Sarah comes to fore. Most important, the process of qualitative inquiry allows for the excavation of subjugated knowledge. This process supports intellectual inquiries such as genealogies and critical histories of the present.\textsuperscript{14} Genealogy as practice “is, then, a sort of attempt to desubjugate historical knowledge, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse.”\textsuperscript{15} Genealogies throw into question institutionalized narratives, such as the perspective of nineteenth-century Indiana women reformers as selfless and benevolent, like we see in the portrait of Sarah Smith as presented by the authors of her 1900 memorial.\textsuperscript{16} Through genealogy, we expose the imperialist, patriarchal underbelly of racial and cultural formations, such as the “cult of domesticity.” We witness how Rhoda and Sarah sanctioned the use of ducking, sexualized physical abuse, and deprivations to control women’s and girls’ sexual expressions. And we discover how the prison doctor, Theophilus Parvin, boldly used incarcerated women and girls as subjects of experimentation and gynecological research. Research then becomes a viable collection of information that reveals the roots of problematic institutionalized practices and ideologies that plague the carceral state today.

In resurrecting subjugated knowledge, narratives are always incomplete. Michel Foucault suggested that subjugated knowledge is hidden \textit{within} the dominant historical narratives and has to be desubjugated, excavated, and justified because it is disqualifed by the powerful.\textsuperscript{17} In our case, as incarcerated scholars in the Indiana Women’s Prison History Project, we grappled with two forms of disqualification: the disqualification that comes with our incarcerated status and the disqualification of the perspectives of our historical subjects, incarcerated people.

What is at stake in this double disqualification? Failing to recognize that knowledge continues to be subjugated is an ongoing struggle. What knowledge is and whose stories are heard and believed remain fields for engagement. At stake is the potential loss of our collective stories and of our experiences as incarcerated people. At stake is the loss of our common humanity, our interconnectedness with one another. At stake is the perpetuation of penal policies that assault the personhood of the incarcerated and dehumanize and demean us all.
When incarcerated scholars privilege their experiences of incarceration as one lens through which to view the archive, we question the authority of the dominant scholars who write about the jailers and the jailed. We question through our actions whether those scholars can create an accurate and valid capture of history, knowledge, and experience. By so doing, incarcerated people, and incarcerated scholars in particular, defy and denounce the stereotypes and labels that superimpose false limitations on our intellectual reach and capacity. Just as Black feminist scholars “create their own standards for evaluating Afro-American womanhood and value their creations,” we also create our own standards for evaluating the carceral archive of captive women in Indiana. While I disagree with famed sociologist Erving Goffman on many things, I agree with his statement: “There’s no way in which, if you’re dealing with a lower group, you can start from a higher group, or be associated with a higher group.” I disparage the use of terminology like “lower” and “higher,” but I agree that problems of understanding across perspectives exist when power imbalances persist.

What does it mean to imbue a viewpoint with epistemic privilege? This question should be considered in context with the force that operates in direct opposition to epistemic privilege: epistemic injustice. Prejudice regarding the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated is “linked to structural discrimination.” It produces an indelible taint of criminality. This prejudice is naturalized in society, floating in the background of minds and hearts as productive othering. Gayatri Spivak, in her work on the practices of silencing, uses the term *epistemic violence* to explain how this othering happens to the “lowest strata of the urban subproletetariat” in the United States. Miranda Fricker’s work on the believability of witness testimony in legal proceedings considers the ways race, gender, and class discrimination intersect with the right of the witness to be a “knower.” In courtrooms, people of color, women, the poor, and the working class are denied the basic respect of knowing their own experiences. This is epistemic injustice.

Epistemic injustice has a significant impact on the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated in this country. Our voices and contributions are devalued. In most cases, we are silenced. Millions of people in the United States and in the world who have criminal records experience epistemic violence; we are defined and othered by the dominant group, who are not ensnared in the carceral state and who are not subject to the worst effects of the biographic mediation process.

Biographic mediation facilitates lasting discrimination. It affixes labels that justify stigma and exclusion. Institutional agents demand personal information as a requirement for access, including information that is directly linked to inherent and entrenched biases. For example, when a person has completed a sentence and has been released, a university admissions office can demand that the hopeful student produce officer arrest reports and court documents that narrate their conviction through the lens of criminality. From this vantage point, institutions create the frameworks within which we must tell our stories. The institutionalization of organized prejudice and discrimination disadvantages the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated at our space of being and is thus a form of epistemic violence.
Many acts of discrimination come fast and loose, attacking and exacting a cost not seen on the body but experienced in one’s being, in one’s ability to be and move about the world. It is disruptive and confusing and can cause targeted people to regress and not to progress.

We are not participant-observers. The very definition of participant forecloses this standard practice of ethnography from our usage. If we are using the lived experience of incarceration to inform our reading of the archive and incarcerated people cannot go home, then we are not participants, because the fact of doing research as incarcerated scholars is not voluntary. Anthropologist Hugh Gusterson argues that participant observation is not enough on its own and that “polymorphous engagement” offers opportunities for greater understanding and greater experience of a subject or topic. A polymorphous engagement, in our case, is the fact of our involuntary confinement, coupled with our gender, race, class, sex, and academic work.

Participant action research (PAR) is oriented toward enacting social change through elevating the experiences of the participants in the design and implementation of research projects, using standard research methodologies, like participant observation and ethnography. PAR is designed also to inform the researcher, their processes, their findings, and ultimately their actions. Another goal of PAR is the empowerment of the participants as contributors to social change, based on collection and analysis of data, which can inform the actions that a group could/should take: “PAR is not only research that is followed by action; it is action that is researched, changed, and researched within the research process by the participants.”

Critical participatory action research (CPAR) is realized in the work of Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre, who expand the reach of PAR to include and foreground social justice and change for marginalized people. They critique the extractive nature of traditional ethnography, particularly with regard to justice-involved people: “CPAR is an approach to … research in which research collectives intentionally investigate these power differentials and inequities that hide under the banner of ‘normality’ as part of their methodological praxis.” PAR and CPAR are powerful and extremely valuable methodologies for research conducted about, on, and for incarcerated people. In a similar fashion, our method elevates the experience of the incarcerated researcher as an individual and carceral expert. However, while PAR and CPAR do not entirely foreclose the possibility of investigating conditions of confinement through historical archival research, they also don’t require centering the condition of confinement as a unique key component in conducting historical research on captive populations, as our methodology does.

Historians contend with which sources to use, the accuracy of those sources, and how to credit them. Historically, the voices of women and girls in Indiana’s carceral institutions have frequently gone unrecorded. Our methodology acknowledges the voices of women and girls and privileges their accounts.

Our methodology considers the reality and the everyday consequences of living in prison. At no point would facility staff and the Indiana Department of Correction (DOC) permit us to research our current living conditions and experiences as incarcerated women in the same
way we researched the living conditions of women and girls in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They would have shut us down if we had set out to expose abuse perpetrated by currently employed prison officials. The choice to focus on a historical time period is therefore a key aspect of our methodology. Researching, writing, and publishing about the facility’s nineteenth-century origins proved to be a “safe” project—at least in the eyes of facility authorities and the DOC. Bringing primary source data to the facility and analyzing a supposedly distant past did not seem to pose a threat. To many administrators, it seemed safe enough for us to present our research at local, state, and national conferences, using the facility’s videoconferencing equipment. The chronological distancing afforded by history is essential to our methodology. By researching incarcerated women of the past using primary source documents, we could revive and tell their stories while slyly critiquing the current carceral state. Lastly, additional courses offered us rich continuing education experiences that fed directly into our reading of the archive and into the development of the methodology we used in writing our book.

As we researched and wrote based on our unique perspective, our faculty looked for opportunities for us to publish and to present at local, state, national, and international conferences, and we followed up on all opportunities. Our forty-plus conference papers often served as the starting point for publications, which helped several of us to pursue higher education post-incarceration. Creating opportunities for incarcerated scholars’ professional development is germane to this methodology.

There is a precedent in Indiana history for aspects of this methodology. Harrie J. Banka (real name, Harry Youngman) was incarcerated at the Jeffersonville men’s prison from August 12, 1868, to May 20, 1871. He proclaimed at the start of his book State Prison Life: By One Who Has Been There: “A true narrative of State Prison Life can be written only by a convict, in a convict’s cell; for he, and he alone, knows that life in all its phases.” Banka wrote to reveal the horrors happening inside the Jeffersonville prison because he understood that the “outside world” knew very little about the “inner workings of a prison.” He believed that he owed it to himself, to his fellow incarcerated men and women, and to humanity to tell the story. He argued that his viewpoint is critical and necessary to counter the “nicety” narratives and the reports of “House, Senate, and select committee” officials. Banka promised that he “shall write truth. And if it is stranger than fiction, it is truth, still.” His writing countered that of a person “with a contented mind, benevolent fancy, and flowing pen,” who sought to “smooth away the sufferings of prison life…. What I write, I shall be able to prove.” Most important for this work, Banka’s account includes firsthand observation of the women who were incarcerated at Jeffersonville prior to the founding of the separate prison for women. In particular, he recounts the horrible experiences these women faced at the hands of the warden and guards. Our methodology has much in common with Banka’s, such as humanizing the incarcerated, countering dominant narratives, privileging the narratives of the incarcerated, and critiquing the ideology and practices of the carceral state.

Access and audience are also key elements of the methodology we have built. Because
prisons are cordoned, secretive spaces and because the people in them are often forgotten or ignored, we knew that our work had to reach more than just those in academia. Funneling our research into public-facing projects has been important to us, to ensure that more people can engage with our work and can experience this new understanding of incarceration. Included in this book is an excerpt from the original play by Anastazia Schmid, which brings new life to characters and key historical moments in our research through script and storytelling. Schmid also wrote a play about Mary Schweitzer, one of the women in prison, and the illegal operations performed on her by Dr. Parvin. We have made a point to present our work to as many diverse groups as possible, engaging with feminists, historians, undergraduates, activists, researchers, and teachers. We even have challenged our own faculty and program administrators in legitimizing the artistic production of our research. Converting our traditionally trained historians to our cause and gaining their support required them to see research as art. Our 2017 production of The Duchess of Stringtown, performed at the prison for the National Council on Public History conference, is evidence that art and research work together to shift narratives and open opportunity. Our goal is to transcend traditional disciplinary and stylistic boundaries to share our methods and knowledge widely.

What then is epistemic privilege in the context of academic research performed within conditions of confinement? For us, it has a specific meaning: the recognition and the validation of the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people through time. From the very beginning, our work on this project has sought to privilege, elevate, and center our lived experiences with the criminal legal system, and with the prison in particular, and to use our experiences as a lens through which we analyze the archive. As C. Wright Mills said, “The most admirable things within the scholarly community … do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other.”

Our methodology is not quite participant observation as seen in standard ethnography because it is embodied in forced captivity. And it is not quite participatory action research because it reaches through time to better understand the origins of the present moment. We offer a new terminology: the embodied observer, one who views the archive from the position of the captive, from the inside of their experience. For example, as embodied observers, each one of us took seriously the allegations of sexual and gendered violence reported by the women and girls incarcerated in the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls from the moment it opened. No other scholar captured the investigations of abuse perpetrated by the two prominent Quaker reformers who founded the reformatory. No other scholar recognized that the histories and stories of those imprisoned women and girls are likely factual and need to be told. We, as incarcerated scholars and thus embodied observers, know the truth of the conditions of confinement, the realities of carceral trauma, and the presence of gendered and sexual violence in our personal prison experiences. All this informs our examination of the archive: we captured the voices and the experiences of those women and girls, captives like us. Presenting these narratives alongside the stories of the prison reformers provides a more complex, nuanced, and accurate history of these spaces in this
period.

The concept of an embodied observer captures the difference between the body under literal confinement and that same body subjected to the taint of criminality, a type of confinement post-incarceration. The embodied observer, however, is not limited to the experience of incarceration or the physical prison. Carceral geographic spaces writ large are key for the inscription of confinement that remains on the body, and therefore this methodology could apply to other carceral spaces, like asylums, orphanages, hospitals, mother-baby homes, Magdalene Laundries, juvenile homes and schools, and jails. Indeed, as our research expanded, we considered the histories of related Indianapolis institutions, such as private, religiously affiliated homes for “fallen women” and the state facility devoted to the care of the “feeble-minded.”

We maximized our position as new researchers, as embodied observers, and we embraced the difficult answers and complexities of understanding that came from our pursuits. Others have written histories of the Indiana Women’s Prison and its related carceral institutions, but we have uncovered much that previously has been omitted or unknown. We are committed to the pursuit of true contextual insight from our primary sources, and we engage with our secondary sources to form strong and compelling arguments. There is great power in incarcerated women writing these histories because we know which questions to ask. We are here to counter the dominant narratives, to expand the canon of knowers and knowledge, and to rewrite history justly.
Sallie, likely Sarah Martin, was incarcerated at the Indiana State Prison South from 1865 to 1867. She was a woman in crisis. Prison officials had sexually assaulted her numerous times by the time she spoke with Harrie J. Banka, an incarcerated man who in 1871 would publish an exposé on the conditions at the prison. She told Banka that prison officials would regularly summon her to the warden’s office or guards’ quarters to be raped.

Well, the worst of those brutes F____r, (the deputy warden), has ordered me to be prepared to receive nightly visits from him, and he is coming this very night! Oh, it was bad enough before, to be called to the warden’s office, or waylaid when about my work in the guard’s quarters, and outraged by the chief devil of this State hell! You know very well, Mrs. B. (the matron), that there is not a day passes but I or some other girl is insulted by Col. Merriweather. But that is enough. This devil-dog must now come and bid me entertain him by night! … Oh, if I were out of here, I would kill him if he touched me; here, he will kill me if I oppose him; he told me so…. Next will come the guards; then we poor girls, instead of being mistress to two men, must act mistress to twenty. (Emphasis added.)

If not for Banka reporting what he saw and what Sallie and other women said to him, the voices of these victimized women from Jeffersonville would be lost to history. Personal narratives are one of the most potent forms of resistance. They tell any reader or listener that control of one’s story won’t reside solely with one’s oppressor. Fortunately, Sallie’s voice echoes across time, and her anguish and anger foment from the loss of control of her own body. Her voice scathingly condemns the designing men, lawmakers, executors of the law, and grasping brothel-owning women who took advantage of her and her body and, in turn, labeled her deviant and consigned her to prison. While Sallie spoke for herself, she also spoke for the other women who suffered alongside her:
Before, I prayed for night, now I shall pray for death; for night and day will be hell alike. And they convict us of crime, and send us here to reform! We, who have fallen through misfortunes and temptations that they have never known; we, who have been led step by step astray, until obliged to commit crime to save us from starvation or shield us from cold! First death or some unseen calamity throws us upon the world. Do men reach out a strong hand to guide us in the straight course that leads to respectability? Do our own sex throw over us the protecting mantle of sisterly love? No! Sleek, smooth-tongued villains—the very men, perhaps, who help to make our criminal code—with glitter of gold and protestations of love, tempt us to ruin, rob us of our virtue and self-respect, crush the last spark of womanly love from our hearts, and then fling us from them as a thing to be despised. Female devils stand ready—the law licenses them to trade in our shame. When we have fallen so low that none will traffic with us, we are arrested, tried by the very law that aided in our ruin, sent to prison by the law, outraged by the executors of the law, who fight each other like devils to see who shall insult us first. Did I ever commit a crime so bad as will be done in this cell-house today? Mrs. B. (the matron), there is no use—no use! I wish I could die and end it all.  

Although Sallie often used the pronoun “we,” if we read deeply into her speech, we can hear her personal story. Harrie Banka, in telling Sallie’s story using titillating Victorian prose, aimed to capture the reader. His sensational style of writing was common for the era. Nevertheless, we can hear Sallie’s anguish and can extract the meat of her story.

Sallie had been pursued by a man holding a political, possibly judiciary, position of some power and influence: he helped “make our criminal code.” This man was affluent, “glitter of gold,” and approached her with “protestations of love.” She believed in him and was willing to lose her “virtue,” most likely with the belief that marriage would shortly follow. Her tone was bitter because she probably loved this affluent, law-enforcing, respectable man, and he broke her heart. He robbed her of “self-respect and crush[ed] the last spark of womanly love” from her heart. Discarded by her lover and left with a ruined reputation, Sallie became a sex worker to feed and provide for herself. She lamented that no respectable man would marry her now.

Sallie’s story is not unusual; many “ruined” women were left with few options, as many employers would not hire them. In her story as told to Banka, she was taken advantage of by brothel owners, “female devils” who failed to offer her the “mantle of sisterly love” and to help her rise above her desperate circumstances. Sallie found herself degraded, sunk “so low that none [would] traffic” with her. Sallie was likely imprisoned for petty larceny; it was the most common charge women received in Indiana in this period. Sallie expected the prison to be a place of reform. To her horror, she discovered a warden, a deputy warden, and guards who threatened, violated, and exploited her, in a place where “night and day would be hell alike.” Her story takes us deep inside the blurred lines between sex workers and unfortunate women “ruined” by men, according to the societal standards of the day. Prison reformers like
Sarah Smith, who would found Indiana’s separate prison for women in 1873, believed they could draw a line between the two, saving unfortunate women while condemning prostitutes. The reality was more convoluted and complex.

Sallie was not even able to find peace, to find rest, in her cell. The inebriated deputy warden forced her to have sex with him repeatedly and strangled her into silence, promising to twist her “infernal neck off” if she alerted anyone. She was made to perform degrading sexual acts, beaten with a cat-o’-nine-tails, and raped repeatedly for three months straight. She couldn’t fathom how the deputy warden could justify sexually abusing her along with the use of the “cat.” She cried, “Oh, you brutish dog, you ravish me one minute and whip me the next.” This particular beating occurred after the deputy warden accused Sallie of having sex with someone else. Sallie’s story gives us a glimpse of women’s experiences in prison in the 1860s.

The state of Indiana opened its first prison in 1822, just six years after achieving statehood. When it opened, the prison housed a single man. From the beginning, the prison operated under a convict lease system, meaning that a private contractor leased the physical prison as a whole and the incarcerated men within it. A cost-effective way to pay for a prison, the convict lease system disregarded decent living standards for the incarcerated. In 1846, famed prison reformer Dorothea Dix visited the Indiana prison and reported in a local newspaper that “the lodging cells are worse beyond all comparison than any cells I ever saw allotted to human creatures. They are horribly disgusting, filthy, and wretched.” She made other observations about poor ventilation and the failure of the administration to keep a punishment record. Dix suggested that the prison be abandoned. In 1847, it was.

The state prison moved to Clarksville, Indiana, located just outside Jeffersonville, but most people continued to erroneously call the prison “Jeffersonville.”

Moving the location of the prison did little to change the conditions for the men incarcerated there. The convict lease system subjected the men to a private contractor whose primary goal was to extract as much labor and make as much profit from the men as possible. As Banka explained in State Prison Life, the needs of the men were only marginally accommodated. They worked long, arduous hours at brickyards and lumberyards, farms, docks, railroad stations, and the prison. Some were skilled tradesmen and worked as blacksmiths, shoe makers, carpenters, and coopers (makers of casks and barrels). The lessee in charge when Dix visited the prison was Samuel Patterson, who won his first contract in 1836. Some legislators and governors argued that the lease system in Indiana was exploitative, but nothing was done about it until 1846, when the Indiana General Assembly learned about Patterson’s abusive methods: “It was his aim to get the last stroke of work out of the men with just as little outlay as possible.” According to Banka, the prison’s first warden, William Lee, actually reduced the abuse the men experienced. However, after 1849, the warden Colonel Lemuel Ford permitted wide use of the cat-o’-nine-tails. Officers swung the weapon and “cut and slashed to suit their own ideas.” Eventually, the revelation of abuse, and even torture, at Jeffersonville led the state legislature to appoint a warden to
oversee “the government of the prison,” and the legislature later appointed a board of directors as well. In 1856, Patterson’s lease expired. He fought to renew it, but a report from the new board of directors to the assembly sunk his bid:

![Image of Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls in the 1890s](image)

We beg leave to the state, that at the time we took charge of the prison it was in a very dirty and filthy condition, and very much out of repair. The bedding was miserable, being nearly worn out, and dirty beyond conception, and entirely unfit for a human being to sleep upon. The clothing of the prisoners was very shabby, and a number of them were suffering from an attack of scurvy, superinduced, no doubt, by bad diet and loathsome bedding; and their general appearance indicated a mode of treatment most assuredly not contemplated by the laws of the State.²⁰

Convict lease practices did not end, however. They spiked during the Civil War. The state
of Indiana ran the prison as cheaply as possible and allowed the warden and board to lease individuals for labor, even though a smallpox epidemic removed several men from the contract rolls. 21

In 1865, a turnover of Jeffersonville staff took place. Many of the new officials and guards were Civil War veterans. As Banka described them, “men whose sensibilities had been blunted by camp-life, and whose consciences had been seared by years of debauchery in the lowest haunts of our worst cities.” 22 In the wake of the war, the conduct of the staff prompted Governor Conrad Baker to enlist the help of Rhoda and Charles Coffin to investigate the northern and southern Indiana state penitentiaries. 23

Affluent Quaker leaders and a true power couple of their time, the Coffins were known for their reform efforts throughout the state, including establishing the House of Refuge, a reformatory for juvenile boys, in Plainfield, Indiana. 24 When they visited the prison in 1868 on the request of Baker, several incarcerated men told the Coffins about the widespread violence against the women held there. At that time, there were about twenty women confined at the Jeffersonville Prison, in a building designated for them. Here is one report from an incarcerated man, as recounted in Rhoda Coffin’s memoir:

A number of the guards had keys to the women’s prison and entered when they wished to gratify their lusts. If the women could be bought up, they gave them trinkets or goods out of the government stores, if they did not yield, they were reported as incorrigible and stripped and whipped in the presence of as many as wished to look on. 25

Prison officials also made up cruel, sexually exploitative games for their own entertainment. In one such game, a group of women were stripped naked and made to race one another along the prison grounds:

In the court of the prison there was a large reservoir where the men prisoners were obliged to bathe once a week. On Sabbath afternoons, the women prisoners were brought out and compelled to strip, and thus exposed, required to run from the opposite side of the court and jump into the water, the guards using, if necessary, their lashes to drive them out to the howling amusement of the guards and their friends who were permitted to be present; keeping it up as long as they pleased. 26

Coffin saw that rape and sexual violations were easy and frequent at Jeffersonville and that the all-male staff worked together to tyrannize and silence the women. Twenty-six women were incarcerated there between 1823 (the year the first matron, Mary A. Johnson, was hired) and 1859. The matron locked the women in the female department at night, but she did not reside on the grounds, and was therefore unable to protect the women in her charge.

Colonel J.B. Merriweather, the prison’s warden from 1865 to 1868, was abusive, often
inebriated, and just as culpable as his subordinates. He instituted the practice of keeping a
mistress in the female department, a practice that the officers and guards quickly imitated.\(^27\) As a result, women lived under the constant threat of violation and violence. Harrie Banka, incarcerated at Jeffersonville from 1868 to 1871, described how Merriweather commanded a
young woman working in his residence to sing for him.\(^28\) When she refused, the outraged
warden left to retrieve the cat-o’-nine-tails. It was only the intervention of the warden’s wife
that prevented the assault.\(^29\) According to Banka, Merriweather shamelessly charged prison
officials $10 a month for open-ended use of the women in the female department. One prison
official who took advantage of Merriweather’s offer was the hospital steward, Jo Vanoy. In
addition, when a staff member discovered Merriweather sexually assaulting a woman in her
cell, the employee received a sudden promotion, ensuring his silence.\(^30\) Allegations in the
local news that the warden practiced concubinage in the facility recast the prison into a “vast
bawdy house.”\(^31\)

In 1866, a young woman named Eva Green entered Jeffersonville and was immediately
set on by the hospital steward, Jo Vanoy. Banka described Eva as a “very beautiful girl.”
Vanoy took advantage of Merriweather’s open season and coerced and then blackmailed Eva
into frequent sexual intercourse with him in the doctor’s office. To Eva’s horror, he infected
her with a sexually transmitted disease, most likely syphilis. The disease caused lesions and
scarring of her face and body.\(^32\) Once Eva was infected, Vanoy discarded her. Before Eva’s
release in 1868, “covered with the eternal marks of her disgrace, and smarting from the
keenest of anguish,” she sat and wrote a complete account of Vanoy’s abuses and demanded
an investigation, with her physical body as evidence. She was not denied.\(^33\) At the trial, Eva
presented her case. Standing before the prison directors, she revealed that Vanoy infected her
with a “loathsome disease, which festered and covered almost her entire person with putrid
sores,” and she was no longer “beautiful.”\(^34\) Several other Jeffersonville women testified
about Vanoy’s deeds and stood with Eva for justice. According to Banka, the women
convinced the prison’s board of directors of the hospital steward’s guilt.\(^35\) Vanoy reportedly
hung his head between his legs as Eva bared her disfigured face and pointed at him. Eviscerated with guilt from “her simple but truthful tale,” Vanoy asked to leave. Yet he was
cleared by the directors. This is not surprising. Col. Merriweather was Vanoy’s counsel in the
presentation before the board of directors, and two of the directors were also lawyers.
Merriweather summed up Vanoy’s argument against Eva with a resounding imperative: “You
can’t believe that woman; caught her in a thousand lies.”\(^36\) The gavel sounded to deny justice
for Eva. It echoes through time as the carceral system continues to strip confined women of
their personhood, to deny them justice, and to invalidate of their experiences.

The prominent Quaker couple mentioned earlier, Rhoda and Charles Coffin, visited the
prison in 1868 to investigate allegations of abuse and corruption. They published their
findings the next year in their *Report of the Committee on Prison, Together with the Evidence
of the Officers and Others before the Committee at the Southern Prison (Jeffersonville).* They
noted that “very grave charges were presented to the committee against officers and guards
formerly in charge of the prison, of drunkenness, and treatment of prisoners, prostitution of
female convicts, and demoralization generally.”\(^{37}\) The Coffins’ report triggered a legislative investigation.\(^{38}\)

Col. Merriweather and the guards presented a fit and decent prison to the investigating committee. Some incarcerated men were paid to play along, and the warden kept the committee tied up in long conversations with the men in the shops and dorms.\(^{39}\) The legislative committee’s report after visiting Jeffersonville was glowing. The brutish warden and his conspirators evaded exposure.\(^{40}\)

Banka recorded all this arrogance, Merriweather’s certainty that he would never be taken down, and certainly not by an inmate of the prison. After all, as Banka wrote, “Guard’s word is always taken in preference to the prisoner’s.”\(^{41}\) Yet Banka refused to let such flagrant abuses of power go unaddressed. In his 1871 exposé, he addressed the corrupt Jeffersonville guards directly:

You think you are safe from exposition, because the frowning walls of a prison shut out the world … and you think a prisoner dare not raise his voice or pen against “us!” “Besides,” you argue, “who would believe a prisoner?” Well, we shall see. I expect to live, please God! to see you work your own ruin.\(^{42}\)

The title of this book comes from Banka’s exposition about the prison officials. Banka was keenly aware of the epistemic injustice that protected violent state employees while discrediting the testimonies of people like himself who had experienced incarceration. He still asserted the power and validity of his own narrative, writing and publishing to raise public awareness about the horrors at the prison. Banka was not the only person concerned for the well-being of the women at Jeffersonville. The Coffins’ 1869 report took their informants’ claims of widespread and systematic sexual violence seriously, with additional evidence likely presented by the number of children born to women incarcerated longer than nine months.

After the failed investigation of 1868, Jo Vanoy and another prison employee went on a thirty-day debauchery spree in the town of Jeffersonville. The citizens demanded their immediate dismissal, and Col. Merriweather bowed to the public pressure.\(^{43}\) Vanoy pressured the warden for his job back. When the reinstatement wasn’t forthcoming, Vanoy decided to tell the prison’s board of directors everything he knew about what Col. Merriweather allowed to occur inside the prison. Much of it was reported in newspapers.\(^{44}\) Vanoy charged that Merriweather was a “murderer, adulterer, abortionist, swindler, cruel tyrant, and father of the prisoner-woman’s babe, and a monster guilty of every crime that it had been possible for him to commit.”\(^{45}\)

Col. Merriweather came before the prison’s board of directors. After hearing the evidence presented by Vanoy, they suggested Merriweather resign to avoid prosecution.\(^{46}\) Before he went, Merriweather had the young pregnant woman swear the child on Vanoy, which ensured Vanoy wouldn’t be rehired. This failing of the state of Indiana in prison management found its way to the \textit{New York Times} in 1869:
The legislative report in which all of these outrages are related abounds with such sickening details that the conclusions at which the members of the Committee who framed the report arrived appear exceedingly tame; and the honor of the State requires most imperatively that the villains who perpetrated these atrocities should not be permitted to escape the punishment due to their crimes by merely resigning their offices. 47

Unfortunately, none of the villains were prosecuted. But Banka rejoiced: “Col. Merriweather has resigned.” The removal of the warden was enough for him. Considering that children were born into what was essentially a state-operated sex trafficking ring, it is no wonder Banka was relieved. The Greencastle Press reported these scandals, adding that the guards provided incarcerated women with whiskey, tobacco, and opium, such that “the women in the prison wing … led lives not a whit better than before their imprisonment. Such a thing as reform was never heard of.” 48

Upon Merriweather’s resignation, he, like Vanoy, began to tell about his experience in the prison. He sent a letter to the Senate Committee, and a second investigation was launched in 1869. 49 Col. Merriweather came before this committee and readily admitted that he had sex with the women, was drunk on the job, allowed guards to board at his mansion, and made use of state supplies, but he denied that he beat or allowed a man to be beaten to death. 50

Merriweather alleged that two members of the prison’s board of directors, F.M. Meredith and M.P. McGhee, extorted money from him regularly, essentially making him pay for the
privilege of being warden. “They frequently wrote me for money, and I sent it to them,” Merriweather claimed. He alleged that these two board members made contractors pay for the privilege to “exercise of their official authority” and that Meredith was compensated by an incarcerated man, Jon L. Mathews, to obtain a pardon on his behalf. Feeling unable to keep up with Meredith and McGhee’s demands for funds, Merriweather started asking employees to help him pay. Was this the moment in which Merriweather began charging the guards $10 a month for open access to the women? Of course, Meredith and McGhee refuted Merriweather’s testimony, and with a new warden, Colonel Lawrence S. Shuler, officials expected changes for the better.

Col. Shuler, like Merriweather, was a former military commander. At the outset of the Civil War, Shuler recruited a company of soldiers and quickly earned a captain’s commission. After being injured in battle, he returned home, entered politics, and was promptly elected auditor of Hendricks County, Indiana. When Col. Merriweather resigned in 1868, Col. Shuler applied for the position and was appointed warden of Jeffersonville. His arrival offered a reprieve from Merriweather’s cruel and exploitative regime. Banka reported that Shuler got rid of the indiscriminate use of the “cat,” and put on notice the guards who had served under the previous warden to change their behavior or be dismissed. Banka offered a glowing tribute to Shuler, describing him as wise and decent to the incarcerated men. In praising Shuler’s reformation in the management of the prison, Banka included snippets of dialogue between Shuler and the guards who were resistant to reducing corporal punishments and testimony from newspaper clippings presenting the findings of the first legislative committee.

By 1871, however, Col. Shuler was himself under investigation. Like Merriweather, Shuler had a problem with the women held in the prison. The matron charged that Shuler used inappropriate language with the women, allowed incarcerated husbands to visit their incarcerated wives in their cells, acquired a pardon for one woman who became pregnant, and maintained an inappropriate relationship with Nancy Clem, a “notorious murderess.” Many formerly incarcerated men, Jeffersonville businessmen, local officials, and guards and other prison staff testified that Shuler used incarcerated men to work outside the prison (essentially reinstituting convict leasing) and enhanced his private property using state equipment and incarcerated labor. In contrast to the testimonies against Merriweather, the testimonies against Shuler were that he failed to provide the discipline of the cat-o’-nine-tails to make the men work, he allowed several men to escape on his watch, and he permitted Harry Youngman (Harrie Banka) to write a book.

Regarding Harrie Banka’s book specifically, the chaplain stated the following:

I know the book spoken of; the book was written by Youngman, a convict; he commenced writing the book before Shuler became warden. Soon after Col. Shuler took charge of the prison he [Youngman] was appointed as my assistant in the Library; he brought all his manuscript with him and had perfect liberty to write when not engaged in his duties of distributing books to the prison…. I did not assist him in
writing the book—not one word; and so far as reference is made to acts done while I was there, they are true; I mean so far as the printed book conformed to the manuscript…. Youngman got access to the records of the prison by the consent of the Warden.60

An investigation into Shuler’s tenure, published in 1875, showed gross fraud and misappropriation of state funds, not only in contractual obligations to the lessee but also in the conversion of his private house and grounds into a luxurious estate.61

Merriweather’s and Shuler’s prison leadership proved ineffective, dangerous, and corrupt. The effects of their leadership, or lack of leadership, touched everyone in Jeffersonville, especially the incarcerated women. In the 1869 congressional session, Governor Conrad Baker implored legislators to create a separate prison for women:

I therefore urgently recommend that a separate prison for female convicts be established with the least practicable delay, and that there be connected with it on the same grounds and under the same direction and management, but in different buildings, a reformatory for girls…. I commend the subject to your careful consideration, with the expression of the hope that the result of your deliberations will show that the cause of these unfortunate women has not been presented in vain.62

Col. Shuler, the deputy warden, the director, and the moral instructor were all dismissed in the wake of the investigation. By then, just over 160 women had been incarcerated in the chaotic and corrupt environment at Jeffersonville since its opening. In 1873, in preparation for the transfer of women to the new reformatory, approximately 13 women were discharged or pardoned.63 Interestingly, approximately 5 women were incarcerated at Jeffersonville after the reformatory opened, but all the women were gone from there by 1877.

From what we can surmise from the existing records, Sallie and Eva Green were not transferred to the new women’s prison. One hopes they were able to heal from the trauma they experienced in the Indiana State Prison South, aka Jeffersonville.

A portion of this chapter was presented via videoconferencing by Michelle Jones (Daniel), “Rhoda Coffin and the Fallout of the Cult of Domesticity in Indiana’s Gilded Age,” presented at the Indiana Women’s Bicentennial History Conference, Hoosier Women at Work, Indianapolis, Indiana, March 26, 2016; Michelle Jones (Daniel), “Failing the Fallen: Sexual and Gendered Violence on Incarcerated Women in the Gilded Age,” the American Historical Association Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, January 7, 2016; Michelle Jones (Daniel), “Origins of the Indiana Women’s Prison and the Criminalized Sexuality of Incarcerated Women,” American Correctional Association Annual Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana, August 14, 2015; and “Sexual Violence Is an Old Hat: Criminalized Sexuality of Incarcerated Women in Indiana in the Gilded Age,” presented via videoconferencing by Michelle Jones (Daniel) to Women and Gender Historians of the Midwest Annual Conference, June 12, 2015. I would like to thank everyone at those early conferences and institutions that gave us the opportunity to present our research via videoconferencing.