Between Imprisonment and Citizenship

Jessica Kent's Navigation of Carceral Citizenship

Nina Heydt

Introduction

This chapter explores the ways in which citizenship and US corrections inform American legal and social identity building on social media. Specifically, it considers Jessica Kent's *YouTube* channel as an articulation of post-incarceration punishment in connection with the making of American citizenship in the twenty-first century.[1] Here, Kent problematizes spheres such as housing, employment, voting rights, and social life as a 'carceral citizen.' I argue that she employs prison survival guides on *YouTube* as a tool to reclaim her status in society socially, while access to political and economic avenues remain limited by the law.

Prison studies scholars agree that after imprisonment, one's punishment is not over but instead continues spatially, politically, and socially in that it ultimately limits full legal citizenship.[2] Michelle S. Phelps and Ebony L. Ruhland investigate the ways in which probation (originally declared as an alternative to prison) introduces close state mass supervision into communities—thereby expanding punishment's boundaries onto Americans outside of the prison. While Christopher Uggen et al. observe this marginalization and continued political punishment as a threat to democratic principles, they reason for the full re-instatement of rights and privileges as key to successful re-integration. They also assert that incarceration (as a form of corrections) and citizenship inform each other legally and socially, explaining how a criminal record has detrimental effects on a criminalized individual's status as an American citizen, both inside and outside of the prison's immediate reach. Researchers also agree on the changed public perception this status brings forth for these citizens, one that renders them most vulnerable and at the outer margins of society. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*,

1 See Loic Wacquant's *Punishing the Poor* and *Deadly Symbiosis*, which considers the periods before and during incarceration.

2 See Julia Velten's chapter in this collection for perspectives on the intersections of aging and citizenship.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY

Michelle Alexander emphasizes that this form of legalized discrimination creates "an *undercaste*—a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society" (13); this label declares criminalized Americans 'unfit' for full citizenship. She further underscores this phase of citizenship as "a permanent second-class citizenship" (13). Consequently, the criminal justice system further distances citizens with full participation rights socially from criminalized citizens that ultimately make up the so-called undercaste—Americans who remain in the most marginalized legal and social spheres of their communities.

In "The Price of Carceral Citizenship: Punishment, Surveillance, and Social Welfare in an Age of Carceral Expansion," Reuben Miller and Amanda Alexander describe the social effects of punishment. They write:

> [t]he carceral citizen experiences social, political, and economic life in ways that are unique to members of his or her class, or not typically shared by even the most marginalized people who have traditionally been marked by their race, religion, ethnicity, or gender. Indeed, the 'carceral citizen' is a novel legal and social category that has emerged in the age of mass incarceration. Carceral citizens face constitutionally justified forms of exclusion based solely on the presumption of legal guilt at some point in their lifetimes. (297)

The significance of this quotation lies in the understanding that the carceral citizen's legal citizenship status is not diminished but instead reduced socially; it seems to lay outside of and run parallel to full citizenship as an alternative form, a legally valid version of social citizenship for Americans marked by a criminal record. Carceral citizenship also shows how the legal label directly informs the ways in which the social, political, and economic spheres of life are equally tarnished. Miller and Alexander's emphasis, of course, is on the fact that 'carceral citizenship' defies already established categorizations. Lastly, they infer that this new mode of citizenship is automatically introduced upon entering the criminal justice system and that the complex layers that create the legal label magnify the maltreatment of already socially disadvantaged Americans.

Consequently, it seems that carceral citizenship as a legal brand reveals a new form of social citizenship. I thus focus on the social component of carceral citizenship in light of Joshua Price's concept of 'social death' and Reuben Miller's theorization of 'afterlife.' Price explains that "[t]o be sentenced to prison is to be sentenced to social death. Social death is a permanent condition. While many people integrate themselves back into society after imprisonment, they often testify that they permanently bear a social mark, a stigma" (5). In *Prison and Social Death*, Price emphasizes that while the actual legal punishment offers an expiration date, the social consequences last a lifetime. He describes a type of social death that the physical bodies seem to have survived. There is little chance to overcome this status socially, and this

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

leads to what Miller calls the prison's 'afterlife': "a supervised society—a hidden social world and an alternate legal reality. The prison lives on through the people who've been convicted long after they complete their sentences … because they are never really allowed to pay their so-called debt to society" (8). These concepts suggest that once one is legally vulnerable to punishment and pushed to the outer rims of society, the social ramifications that emerge with or after the legal punishment seem invisible to the public eye.

(Social) Media

As a next step, this paper makes the case for including media—and specifically social media—representations in the discourse on carceral citizenship. The role of the media, I argue, is complex: it can both work *with* and *against* common narratives. Within the American cultural self-imaginary, the media narrativizes punishment as having a definitive start and an end date. TV series such as *The Simpsons* or *Sons of Anarchy* portray exiting prison with a re-introduction to former standards of living. Sideshow Bob reunites with Krusty the Clown during his show and receives a hearty welcome. Likewise, a group of motorists leaves prison to be welcomed by club members, the scenes prior revealing how the homes are prepared for their expected return. As attorney imposter Mike Ross leaves prison in *Suits*, he exits the gates wearing his own suit; his former boss greets and reassures him with a confident smile and a handshake that everything is fine. Additionally, Ross's girlfriend elegantly ascends from the Lexus they both arrived in to pick Mike up. In slow motion she walks up to him, the sun is shining and "Beneath the Surface" by Demons of Ruby Mae plays in the background. They hug and kiss, foreshadowing the fulfilled life ahead of Mike that appears very similar to life before entering the criminal justice system: with a well-paying job and his future wife by his side ("The Hand That Feeds You" 39:34–40:56). The above examples thus represent a seamless re-entry and in so doing, implicitly and explicitly justify the institution as it stands.[3]

At the same time, media can help condemn its compliance in reintroducing simplistic images of punishment and Americans involved in the criminal justice system. Producers such as Ava DuVernay, John Oliver, and Comrade Sinque criticize both the prison industrial complex and the media's upholding and restoration of problematic depictions of the system's reach. They instead offer alternative representations of punishment that are vital to the analysis of prison survival guides on *YouTube*. Originally aired on *Netflix*, DuVernay's documentary *13th* has recently been added to *YouTube*.[4] DuVernay's documentary notes that: "the Thirteenth Amendment to the

3 See John Oliver's "Prisoner re-entry" for a montage of Hollywood film examples.

4 Thereby adding the documentary to an open-access platform, free of charge.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY

Constitution makes it unconstitutional for someone to be held as a slave. In other words, it grants freedom to all Americans. There are exceptions, including criminals. There's a clause, a loophole. Except as a punishment for crime" (2:20–2:35). This statement reveals how mass imprisonment must even be viewed as a continuation and new form of slavery for Black Americans within the system's reach. In short, this particular amendment allows for the systemic exploitation of Black individuals within the criminal justice system.[5] DuVernay's portrayal of a dysfunctional American criminal justice system stands in direct opposition to how the US usually understands itself (inter)nationally; namely: a granter of freedoms.[6] HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* demonstrates an idealistic notion of prisoner re-entry, only to immediately disrupt it. By juxtaposing popular cultural narratives with short clips of ex-prisoner interviews, Oliver paints a devastating picture of continued restrictions on and sanctions over criminalized Americans. The TV host uncovers struggles such as poverty and limited employment, housing, voting rights, and lastly, the social stigma attached to felony convictions in society (2:50–18:44). Oliver illuminates the discrepancy between state-perpetuated self-imagery and first-hand accounts, consequently disrupting the common media narrative of the system in place. Prison *TikTok* is a recent phenomenon that centers first-hand experience online. Here, Comrade Sinque criticizes continued limitations on his social life post-incarceration in the form of his ban from the vacation home platform Airbnb. When a background check causes his criminal record to resurface, he implicitly testifies to a form of social death as he is excluded socially and spatially. First-hand representations of carceral citizenship are rarely disseminated by criminalized individuals themselves, thereby enhancing the importance of social media representation.

DuVernay, Oliver, and Sinque thus represent the role of the media in criticizing not only *what* kind of stories are told about social punishment and carceral citizenship and *how*, but also *who* tells them in the first place. Their (pop) cultural media interventions thus attempt to bridge the gap between current scholarly research and (pop) cultural representations of the criminal justice system and its citizens. While

5 Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* traces the historical and legal perspectives on mass imprisonment "as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow" (4). Alexander outlines how crime and ideas on race and criminalization have been intertwined since slavery, and that since its abolition, new, supposed colorblind systems of control over Black Americans have been introduced. Since this discussion goes beyond the scope of this chapter, an analysis of prison survival guides by Black Americans, addressing their experiences, would be fruitful in a future project as they potentially testify to the ramifications that are particular to (Black) American history and the effects of incarceration on Black communities.

6 See *Human Rights, Narrated Lives*, in which Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith address the role US citizens play in calling out a discrepancy between the US's international and national self-image (157).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

the above explorations draw from prison studies and American cultural studies, they also raise important issues for citizenship studies: they offer to shed a new light on in the liminal spaces of citizenship that punishment brings forth socially in prison's afterlife. At the intersection of these diverse fields of research, particularly prison narratives on social media can play a tremendous part in how the treatment of Americans in the system and forms of punishment are viewed in the United States.

Carceral Citizenship and/on *YouTube*

In analyzing narratives on *YouTube*, I contribute to existing scholarship by exporting prison studies into the field of citizenship studies to analyze narrative explorations of carceral citizenship (Miller and Alexander 292). The emphasis here, of course, is on the fact that carceral citizenship defies already established categorizations that are indeed protected under the Constitution. Due to the significant reach of the "carceral state," the chances of becoming a carceral citizen at some point in one's lifetime are higher in the US than in other countries (Mitchell). As such, it is crucial to focus on prison reform activism and its role in the shaping of American identities and citizenship. It is against this backdrop that I analyze first-hand accounts in the form of prison narratives on social media, as the steadily growing number of formerly incarcerated individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds telling their stories, convey troubled versions of reintegration. In particular, I consider the genre of so-called prison survival guides that has emerged most prominently in the past five decades. These first-hand accounts exist somewhere between autobiographical writing and self-help handbooks, further contributing to the disciplines of prison and citizenship studies that together might uncover new ways in which carceral citizens can re-insert themselves safely into American culture. Anthony Accurso explains the newly emerged phenomenon as: "[s]uch videos maybe at times controversial or voyeuristic … but they draw attention to the stark realities of incarceration in America in a way that defies scripted stereotypes and sometimes misleading 'reality TV' shows" and hence "offer a window into the prison experience for many Americans" (24). In other words, the genre of recorded prison survival guides contributes to the umbrella genre of prison narratives and offers fresh perspectives on the criminal justice system to an audience detached from the actual experience at home.

Oral and written prison narratives play a crucial role in prison studies since the "out of sight, out of mind" expression no longer applies (Franklin). These narratives not only lend a stage to voices that are not to be heard, but in their mere existence force the fundamental gap between a state's treatment of Americans inside and outside of prisons back into sight. An analysis of *YouTube*, as an unrepresented platform that offers survival guides can address how carceral citizens navigate American cul-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY

ture in new forms. As a contrast to the first-hand written accounts of the prison experience, videos on *YouTube* present new dimensions that no longer allow viewers to detach a person's face and name from a story of incarceration and continued punishment. They thus counter dominant and problematic media narratives about prison's afterlife and shape how we understand carceral citizenship at large. Seeing *and* hearing about the carceral experience from a carceral citizen on a platform that a world audience can access free of charge strengthens the content creator's own voice and understanding of the carceral experience.

Social media fosters virtual socializing and allows the display of content on any topic to a world audience. In this way, I argue, *YouTube* can support prison reform efforts.[7] *YouTube* as a platform promotes an easy access to American social and cultural life in video form; consumers engage with content creators (and vice versa) and find like-minded communities. In search of a place in society after re-entry, content creator, prison reform activist, and formerly incarcerated individual Jessica Kent[8] uses *YouTube* to share stories of her carceral experience with more than 700,000 subscribers. She explains how incarceration impacts her freedom today, eleven years post-incarceration, and thus broadcasts her story in a digital space. Sharing her experience on her own terms and quasi-facing an audience online allows Kent to engage with viewers of many backgrounds either through the comments section, or by reaction or Q&A videos, and live streams. In referring to her subscribers as a "ride or die crew," she stresses identification and belonging (Kent), and ultimately participates in culture virtually. Kent therefore joins a greater movement of prison activism that we can see unfolding on social media as former prisoners also begin using platforms such as *TikTok* to disseminate their first-hand experiences with the criminal justice system.[9] I am particularly interested in the new contributions the discussion of *YouTube* narratives and prison studies make toward our understanding of carceral citizenship. On her channel, Kent paints a more somber picture of prison's afterlife

7 See "American Civil Liberties Union," "The Equal Justice Initiative," or "The Sentencing Project," to only name a few important organizations that bring together prison reform activists on the local, national, and federal level.

8 I am unaware of Jessica Kent's self-identification, but from her videos one might read her as a white woman. The number of women with incarceration experience has "increased by more than 525%" since 1980 which hints at alarming rates of imprisonment. (Monazzam and Budd)

9 The movement has gained momentum in social media outlets with the Prison *TikTok*-hashtag (#PrisonTikTok) which would be important to scrutinize as a follow-up discussion to this analysis of articulations found on *YouTube*. There is an entirely separate development underway, e.g., and in addition to prison survival guides: prisoners' usage of "contraband" phones to film and post either entertaining *TikTok*-dances or shed light on housing and meal conditions while in prison, possibly facing extension of their sentence length or other forms of punishment if detected.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

by primarily discussing the stigma she encounters daily, even though she officially "did her time" and thus supposedly exited state supervision. This is why I read these stories as counternarratives to common media narratives revealing that one's involvement in the US criminal justice system expires with either the end date of one's prison sentence or serving one's sentence in the community ("Prisoner Re-entry").

I read these *YouTube* representations as narrative explorations of the criticism against the persisting punishment under the criminal justice system and the way criminalized individuals' identities are constructed and commonly negotiated in American society. Within her marginalized status in society, Kent takes new paths of actively engaging in American cultural life by making her voice heard on *YouTube*. Therefore, I argue that her *YouTube* channel reclaims the social component to her status as a carceral citizen, a participation that had been denied to her on the path of employment and political participation under state supervision. She consequently withstands an "unlearning" of citizenship, as explained by Amy E. Lerman and Vesla M. Weaver and similarly reassesses Price's concept of social death through social media in prison's afterlife.[10] Her social media account hence reimagines carceral citizenship at the intersection of legal label (formerly convicted felon)[11], social stigma, and denial of a full political voice which continues to shape her reintegration. In reviving her carceral experience online, Kent joins a broader anti-discrimination movement on social media.

Methods

Within the scope of this chapter, I primarily explore video prison survival guides that I consider an addition to written prison survival narratives. Viewers get to see, hear, and watch Jessica Kent speak about the criminal justice system's impact on her life in a familiar and comfortable setting, filming herself in either her car, kitchen, or on the living room sofa and thus inviting her audience into her personal space. My aim here is to lay bare the ways in which prison studies and citizenship studies

10 This "unlearning" process signifies an ultimate withdrawal from political and civil public life as an individual response to post-incarceration life or other state sanctions and imposed supervision. The expanded scrutiny of groups of citizens by the state, in which every encounter with state officials is experienced as predominantly negative or even dangerous/life threatening then leads to what they then observe as a "custodial lifeworld," a group of individuals experiencing the role of the state and democracy different from Americans unaffected by the criminal justice system (Lerman, Amy E., and Vesla M. Weaver pp. 15, 110–38).

11 This term is frequently used in legal documents. As I am aware of the derogatory connotations this expression carries, I choose to use "formerly incarcerated individual/person" or "criminalized individual/person" in my paper to reflect the person-centered standards of the field.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

intersect when it comes to social media articulations of American lives stained by criminal records. In other words, I ask: in what ways does Kent's social media presence impact her status as a carceral citizen? How does she experience prison survival guides as a tool to reinsert herself socially, when other avenues remain limited in prison's afterlife? Hence, I close-read the *YouTube* prison survival guide in light of Miller and Alexander's carceral citizenship, Miller's conceptualization of prison's afterlife, and Price's social death, and thus focus on videos that predominantly comment on Kent's carceral experience during the early stages of reentering society. Here, Kent addresses housing, employment, voter restrictions, and a limited social life as core aspects of her carceral experience. In doing so, Kent points to how carceral citizens navigate this liminal space differently. Kent subsequently uses social media as a way out of social death by primarily socializing virtually, exploring housing and employment options, and reassessing political agency to navigate carceral citizenship.

Literature Review

In *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*, Marie Gottschalk explores the misconception of redemption after legal punishment "ends." Here, Gottschalk sketches how the US criminal justice branch controls "more than 8 million" Americans and she alludes to the carceral state as an extension of mass incarceration (1). She adds that this control marks an entrance point into the system, but instead of offering an end date, she highlights other forms of state supervision that limit a restoration of full citizenship. But what then constitutes this liminal space between criminalization and full citizenship?

Citizenship studies scholars stress "a social process" to conceptualizing emerging articulations of carceral citizenship (Isin and Turner 4). Here, citizenship by birthright or naturalization granted by the fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution includes the category of "action" (Miller and Alexander 296). Egin Isin and Bryant Turner trace social lines on top of the legal framework of how citizenship is defined in the American understanding. They argue for the agency of individuals to actively shape and define what this assumed legal status of personhood means to them and how they express it on a social level (1–4). Miller and Alexander highlight that the social dimension becomes crucial as carceral citizenship, a social classification, is a direct legal consequence of the policies arising from mass imprisonment and extended state supervision (296). Consequently, not only are the same rights and protections no longer applicable under the law, they instead craft a new path that carceral citizens are left to explore on their own.

Individual social explorations can negotiate the negative legal connotations inherent to carceral citizenship. Given how citizenship shapes identity within the

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY

social realm, citizens themselves can actively reassess their personhood under the law. At first glance, however, this assumed ability to redefine social capacity seems to confirm neoliberal ideas of the penal state.[12] Yet, if we recall the discussed paradigms so far, we conclude that carceral citizens are ranked the lowest among the American legal and social hierarchies—even lingering outside constitutionally granted protections—, the mere idea of being in charge of one's status seems too far away to grasp. Additionally, Price's concept of social death seems too powerful a consequence to defy for carceral citizens. However, at precisely these intersections of citizen and carceral citizen, legal punishment and social ascension, the genre of so-called prison survival guides makes a valuable contribution. As I argue in this chapter, the growing genre of prison survival literatures offers to reclaim and thus reassess what carceral citizenship looks like when expressed not through criminal justice officials or the American government, but carceral citizens themselves. Carceral citizenship's liminal space blurs stark contrasts and binary oppositions and instead gives criminalized individuals a chance to express their carceral experiences on their own terms. H. Bruce Franklin describes this phenomenon, stating:

> By the late 1970s the river of prison literature was overflowing its banks, pouring out into public in books, journals, and major motion pictures. Then came sweeping repression. Most states enacted laws making it illegal for convict authors to receive money from the writings. Creative writing courses in prison were defunded … The repression of prison literature coincided with the phenomenal growth of the prison system.[13] (Franklin)

Besides alluding to the rise of mass incarceration and simultaneous mass appearance of prison narratives, Franklin asserts that the written and visual genres feed into the fascination with crime, criminalized individuals, and forms of punishment. At the same time, Franklin addresses a discrepancy between silencing prisoners living in the system, former prisoners that have re-entered society, and their audiences. While for outsiders to the system access is easy and demand for these stories high, inside prison facilities the producers of such narratives are struggling to compile and financially profit from their stories. We could hence draw the conclusion that the carceral citizen's legal status automatically denies them a voice to convey these narratives in the first place and finally a potential financial yield.

12 See Wacquant's *Punishing the Poor*.

13 Book bans in prisons around the country are worth perusing in a future paper. Denying prisoners access to literature is a common practice in today's prisons. For example, Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* falls under this ban in many regions in the US. For more on book bans, see Casey Bastian's "In Prisons, the Press also Yearns to be Free," Lee V. Gaines's "Illinois Prison Removes More Than 200 Books From Prison Library," or Jonah E. Bromwich's "Why are American Prisons so afraid of this book?"

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

It is at the stage of re-entry that many criminalized people regain the freedom to share their experiences without intervention from the American judicial branch. Their reclaiming of a voice is what I understand as individual expressions of their carceral experience, and a testimony to their understanding of carceral citizenship. Additionally, I read prison survival guides as a reaffirmation of Gottschalk's assertion that "[s]tate actors and state agencies are considered part of the problem rather than part of the solution" (18). With this, Gottschalk demonstrates that "these problems are regarded 'as either the product of chance or individual action'" (18), thereby pushing responsibility away from institutional state agents and into the laps of the citizens facing destructive consequences. What we witness here is the judicial branch making stark the contrast between being considered guilty (and thus "deserving" of punishment) and a victim (hence "deserving" of rights). To be more precise, Gottschalk notes that: "we live in an oxymoronic age of DIY that is, do-it-yourself social policies. Those individuals deemed unable or unwilling to change must be banished either to the prison or to the prison beyond the prison" (18–9). This quotation reflects a neoliberal approach to carceral citizenship in two ways: the first being that of self-responsibility, of the citizens involved in the criminal justice system; and the second being communities citizens return to as both the limit to restoring full citizenship and the chance of exploring carceral citizenship on an individual level. Gottschalk addresses the multiple paradigms the carceral state taps into, leaving seemingly no other option than to self-organize as carceral citizens on a local level. What at first resembles a bottomless pit, the DIY character here frames a nearly unattainable goal for carceral citizens to prove their "worthiness" and restore the capacities full citizenship entails.

At a second glance, however, a DIY character already reflects the core of grass roots rights activism. Prison rights activism takes up the notion of DIY not only in the form of documentaries, such as DuVernay's *13th*, but also as social media content. Thus, born out of public silencing, the need for self-reliance, and continued mass punishment and supervision, the rich history of prison literature has gained new narrative forms that are disseminated on social media. These prison survival guides are what I consider the newest addition to the DIY character of prison rights activism. Within convict criminology, "individuals use their first-hand experience of incarceration and apply it toward justice activism" (Smith and Kinzel). In doing so, Justin Smith and Aaron Kinzel emphasize the strength that lies within carceral citizenship: "to reshape boundaries around individual and collective identity" (Smith and Kinzel). This in turn "holds the capacity to transform discourse" and hence influences how we perceive criminalization and its institution (Smith and Kinzel). Prison rights activism and its activists then mirror these goals, oftentimes both implicitly and explicitly, voicing critique of the current criminal justice system. I contribute to this current discourse by demonstrating how Jessica Kent, as a content creator ad-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

dressing punishment post-incarceration on *YouTube*, helps shape the representation of carceral citizenship.

The multidimensional genre of prison survival guides emerged in response to mass incarceration in the US (Mitchell). Interviewing the producers of *Survivors Guide to Prison*, Mitchell learns that the genre serves to "give you tips on what to do if you get arrested, since you have more of a chance of going to jail in America than anywhere else in the world" (Mitchell). The content of prison survival guides oftentimes runs along formerly "unwritten rules of prison life," now in written form, that generally describe *dos* and *donts* of behavior inside prison, out on parole or probation (Pisano 39–47).[14] They provide exemplary lists of possible future employers (133 ff.) and other guidelines to successful reintegration into society (109 ff.). Survival guides leave the reader with the impression that no one exits the system for good, but that one's chances are higher the more one actively does on the inside to improve life on the outside (101 ff.). Ultimately, the declared goal of these manuals is disrupting the vicious cycle of criminality, avoiding recidivism, and restoring a future that is "productive" and "successful" (Pisano). Authors seek to equip future prisoners with knowledge only former prisoners can testify to and prepare newcomers for a system that extends far beyond release from prison (Pisano). Consequently, if we are to take the guides at face value, they seek to address a DIY approach to understanding life as a carceral citizen in the US; only with the help of such guides will one be able to withstand what authors describe as a dangerous criminal justice system. Prison reformists label criminalized individuals as survivors of the US prison system, which is especially striking, since this self-identification blurs the guilty/innocent dichotomy and the realms of perpetrator and victim (Gottschalk).Therefore, in a DIY fashion, Americans themselves seek to prepare to survive a system that swallows them whole.

Jessica Kent's *YouTube* Prison Survival Guide

This section examines carceral citizenship in prison's afterlife by analyzing Jessica Kent's *YouTube* channel as a prison survival guide. In 2015, Kent established her *YouTube* channel which chronicles her experience inside and outside of prisons in what I consider five thematically interrelated chapters: addiction and recovery, motherhood, life in prison and after re-entry, and rehabilitation. In her nearly five hundred videos with eighty-four million views to this date, the content creator shows how her carceral experience works against attaining full American citizenship, long after she officially "paid her debt" to society. I study how Kent's portrayal

14 See also Cory Henderson's *It's Jail not Yale* andAbdullah Ibraheem's *The Black Peoples Prison Survival Guide: How to Survive Mentally, Physically, and Spiritually while Incarcerated.*

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

of the above examples defies the assumed unworthiness of formerly incarcerated Americans and hence renegotiates carceral citizenship on *YouTube*. Kent implicitly challenges social death and a potential unlearning of citizenship through her own carceral experience. Her presence on *YouTube* reflects a reinsertion into social life by reinventing her place in the US as a carceral citizen and thus reinjects a social dynamic into her status that has been denied to her in other avenues of life.

In "My last Day in Prison / Walking out Homeless," Jessica Kent describes a very different exit from prison than we observe in *Suits*. As opposed to leaving the prison in her own clothing, she testifies: "they have nothing to dress me out in, because I have no clothes. I have my prison shirt with my number 711548, my prison sweatpants with 711548 and prison shower shoes" (11:51–12:10). With little to no personal belongings, she describes her exit:

> I'm just pacing in in-take, pacing and pacing, for one hour, two hours, three hours have gone by. I don't know if my ride is outside … Lunch trays come. I'm like: (sighs) I cannot eat, I'm shaking, I'm nervous. I'm pacing. No one's telling me anything, I don't know what's gonna happen. Then finally, they say: 'Kent to Sally Port,' (her eyes looking beyond the camera now, she holds her breath). Sally Port is where you walk in (holding her breath again, now holding back tears) and it's where inmates leave (voice breaks) … I hear it on the radio. And she pops the door for me, and I walk up to Sally Port and … I'm just overcome with emotion … I was terrified. (12:11–13:34)

Kent's behavior shows how the memories still seem to take her back into a difficult moment, many years later. Her out-processing experience is marked by nervousness, uncertainty about what is to come next, and a sense of being at the prison's mercy to the very last minute of her stay. This experience, and having to leave in prison clothing, reveals how her introduction to carceral citizenship is described more negatively than positively. To Kent, being unable to grasp what life will bring after this point, re-entry signifies foremostly an emotional challenge. When she is greeted by the friend that comes to pick her up, the stark reality sets in when she is met with the words "Girl, you look homeless" (14:27–14:32),[15] to which Kent replies "Bitch, I am! Like, I had nowhere to go," followed by insecure laughing (14:33–14:36). Kent's relief having left prison and her worries about the future thus shape her first experience of re-entry as a carceral citizen. These sequences expose a counter image to common media representations such as *Suits*, one that complicates the representation of carceral citizenship through social media. Here, Kent lays bare how she perceives that re-entry comes with a shift in identity and one's place in society.

---

15 Kent was incarcerated in Arkansas but her family lives in New York State. Hence, it is not possible for her family to be close to her upon release ("My first year out of prison").

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Her feeling of metaphorical homelessness adds to the new space she explores spatially. Kent's survival guide thereby criticizes the nonexistent guidance for housing options as well as the space she inhabits socially post incarceration.

In "Leaving Prison / Halfway House," her audience learns that the halfway house she stayed at charged one-hundred dollars per week, which introduces the next re-entry challenge: finding employment. As a criminalized person on parole, Kent offers a window into what her first job interview was like after release in "Whats [sic] it like being a FELON." She explains that

> [one of] the first challenge[s] to anyone getting out of prison is to find a job … the prison I went to did not give me a state-issued ID, so I didn't have like a driver's license or anything. I didn't have a prison ID, I didn't have a birth certificate or a social security card, so like literally, you guys, like I just sales-talked them into giving me a job. I just told them straight up: I am who I say I am; I'm saying: I need a job. I'm wearing prison shower shoes right now, like flip flops, to this interview, like, I'm sorry. (1:12–1:37)

Without any government-issued identification, Kent describes an exceptionally precarious state financially, emotionally, and legally. Her experience as a carceral citizen is thus defined by the absence of government identification; she rejoins society with only prison identification. Further, she emphasizes the desperation derived from this precarious state, nearly begging for the chance of employment against all odds. The primary issue here is that Kent is without official papers validating her personhood *in combination with* her criminal record. This example points to the limited chances of success in the job market as a carceral citizen on a legal level. To challenge the continued punishment on the economic level, Kent includes the above example of how to get a job in her survival guide.

Secondly, the absence of valid identification highlights the in-between status Kent suffers from: being legally somewhere within American citizenship and at the same time outside of its reach, setting the limit of her agency at the mercy of employers recognizing her "worthiness." Consequently, her "being on paper"—what Kent calls her criminal record—quite literally substitutes for her government ID ("Whats it like" 8:26). She also suggests that wages from companies that do employ formerly incarcerated people, such as McDonalds or Walmart, oftentimes are not high enough to survive ("Whats it like" 6:34–6:46), implying that the degradation of citizenship comes with economic hardships for carceral citizens. Consequently, these videos address the limited employment opportunities criminalized Americans struggle with by saying: "we just put all these offenders out into the world and we tell them to go get your life together … and then they're pushed into a society that is not welcoming to them … ("Whats it like" 7:55–8:06). Here, Kent directly refers to

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - [cc] BY

the marginalized status that emerges from the legal label and illustrates the stigma socially attached to a prison experience.

The above quotation also gestures at a neoliberal approach to punishment in American society, one which Kent openly criticizes but uses for her own benefit. It is precisely this subordinate status that Kent attempts to escape when she recalls that "because no one wanted to hire me I decided to get my bachelor's degree and eventually I started *YouTube*. So I took my own path" ("10 Things" 7:06–7:16). Here, we recognize the DIY character that Gottschalk alluded to earlier, as Kent transforms her precarious situation into a self-determined route of "strength" that sheds light on how economic challenges can be tackled differently (Smith and Kinzel). Further, Kent demonstrates how her self-redirection into social media parallels her ambitions to attain a university degree to then support the carceral community in the future. She promises that "next year I'll graduate with my Bachelor's degree and I wanna work in any prison or rehab it will take me but I started my *YouTube* channel to bring awareness to that life and to bring awareness to how difficult it is for felons outside of prison" ("Whats it like" 7:05–7:17). Kent's social media presence signifies a new option on the job market for carceral citizens: that of being a content creator on *YouTube* that specializes in prison survival guides. Ultimately, Kent's guide clarifies that the list of future employers might be short and pay might be low; further options for carceral citizens include working with other criminalized individuals as professional exes, pursuing higher education to later join the scholarly discourse, or becoming content creators on social media.[16]

Jessica Kent also uses her platform to address the political consequences of carceral citizenship. In 2018, she resided in the state of Arkansas and decided to register to vote after she had finished her parole in the same state.[17] As the content creator recalls:

> I applied to vote and they told me: NO. (chuckles, showing the undecipherable letter into the camera) So, I'm gonna read that to you guys. 'Your application has been cancelled.' Underlined—like no! 'Due to the following reasons: information was received from the department of community corrections per the Secretary of State office, indicating that you have been convicted of a felony' (or seven, she adds). 'Arkansas law requires that voter registers cancel their voter registration

16 Kent supports her family from her income on social media ("How Much $ Did I make on Youtube in 2021?").

17 Kent, originally from New York State, also briefly addresses the differences in states' laws on voter registration as a criminalized individual. Within US borders, regional/spatial varieties in rights reveal an ambiguous gray area of either granting or withholding entire clusters of voting rights granted to Americans without a criminal record. A discussion of the regional varieties to carceral citizenship would thus be interesting to dive into in a future paper.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY

> of a convicted felon within 10 days ... So, basically, nooo! The felons cannot vote in the South ... or live or breathe (chuckles). ("Whats it like" 9:08–9:39)

The rejection letter confirms that due to her status as a criminalized person, Kent is denied voter registration. Even though her hesitant laughs and comments imply that she is taking the state's dismissal lightly, Kent also equates the embarrassment with suffocating under the voter restriction. This stark contrast reveals her confusion in being excluded from voting even though she is officially declared off state supervision. With state laws denying her a political voice, Kent feels yet again defined solely by her status as a carceral citizen, seemingly unable to overcome the political consequences of a label that renders her "unfit" to exert political action. Katherine Petus notes that "what is presented as a moral justification for franchisement between those 'worthy' and 'unworthy' of political rights as a result of crime is in fact a political justification ... Disadvantagement is a direct result of conviction for crime, not of the criminal act itself" (129). In other words, the mere fact that one has a felony conviction on record results in reduced political agency while emphasizing the moral culpability as an element that remains for life. The fact that Kent tries to register, however, signifies a discrepancy in how the state views her and her own identification as a carceral citizen. In addressing Arkansas voter restrictions in the video, she illustrates how continuous punishment takes place after prison and thus disrupts mainstream narratives. However, the fact that she is continuously impacted by the prison's afterlife makes her pursue a degree in criminal program support services, which is not only in line with the work that convict criminologists do, but simultaneously reveals how she plans to exert her political voice in the near future. For the time being, her work as a prison activist on *YouTube* already follows the same intentions but in a virtual space. Kent thus succeeds in contributing a political voice grown out of her social media work.

Lastly, Kent comments on her social experiences in "TOP 10 HABITS PR!SON N A LIFE OF CRIME CAUSED." She explains that she suffers from PTSD and anxiety from life in prison and as a former drug dealer who subsequently has to avoid crowds. For example, she recalls a visit to the aquarium with her children: "and people were just bumping into me ... and that was driving me so crazy. I don't know if that was the combination of the crowd or being touched constantly—it just triggered me. I felt so anxious. And I started to get really really hot, and I was not able to enjoy even being in the aquarium" (5:31–5:59). What Kent planned as a fun outing became a site of struggle. She experiences severe emotional and physical responses to everyday situations that she considers remainders of her carceral experience. Additionally, the radio at places such as Target, or the sound of keys "sends [her] straight back to prison. I don't like it, I get on edge" (6:37–6:45). The mental strain that Kent experiences continues to linger over her life even though she is no longer physically imprisoned; this strain thus shapes how she perceives herself as a carceral citizen in

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

a "prison beyond the prison" (Gottschalk 18–9). She concludes by adding that she is an "introvert ... People always think *YouTubers* are extroverts because we make videos. But, I (stuttering) I'm alone in house" (8:40–8:49). This need for social (physical) distance also makes her career path as a content creator on *YouTube* so intriguing. Kent has found a way to experience social life online to make up for encounters in person that would further strain her mental health. It seems her work on *YouTube* and her interactions with subscribers signify a stand-in for interactions with the public sphere. Hence, through social media Kent has found a way to reintroduce a social component into her life that her experience as a carceral citizen denied her after imprisonment.

Kent self-identifies "as a mom, a student, and a *YouTube*r and I'm not breaking the law" but at the same time she cannot seem to shake the realities of prison's afterlife (11:25–11:27). What we observe in Kent's accounts about her social life after re-entry recalls what Reuben Miller describes as "a new form of prison. It's one that has no bars, and sometimes no formal connection to the police or criminal courts" (18). Miller refers to what carceral citizens experience, and the subsequent *vulnerability* that emerges is unique to the carceral experience in its afterlife. Kent is made socially vulnerable and hence balances out social distance with virtual presence. This socially precarious state also reflects what Lerman and Weaver describe as a "denaturalization" and a subsequent "unlearning" of citizenship for people affected by the criminal justice system. This unlearning stems from the anticipation of negative or traumatic encounters with state officials in public, deriving from former experience (94 ff.). Being legally within but affectively excluded from full citizenship causes carceral citizens to internalize their status as social, political, and legal outcasts. This phenomenon plays out in Kent adding the line "and I'm not breaking the law" and in the adjectives she uses to describe how she sees herself. Her statements allude to the liminal space she occupies as a carceral citizen that she considers formative to her social status. While in-person and close physical interactions continue to fall short for Kent, her work as a content creator making a prison survival guide on *YouTube* clearly marks a path for her to successfully and safely interact online. Because she presents and implicitly and explicitly criticizes commonly disseminated images of criminalized people, Kent manages to transform her social death into a powerful depiction of what carceral citizenship as a lived reality looks like on social media.

Ultimately, Kent's channel offers a DIY exploration of the social components to carceral citizenship, one that defies an unlearning of citizenship and instead introduces a re-learning, even re-inventing of the definitions of "how to show fitness" in carceral citizenship (Gottschalk). Her version of DIY primarily grows out of her involvement in social media, but her success—many followers, a source of income, connection with others through social media has led to a much wider range of possibilities for prison's afterlife. Kent presents a new version of what reintegration after

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

prison might look like and offers a how-to guide for prison's afterlife on social media in which she redefines what a "new normal" can mean for carceral citizens.

Conclusion

This chapter explored (social) media narratives in which carceral citizenship is renegotiated and extended beyond the actual prison sentence and state supervision. I read Jessica Kent's *YouTube* channel in light of citizenship studies and prison studies to show how social media articulations transform the marginalized and muted voices of American carceral citizens into a site of strength within the cause of prison activism. A new category adjacent to constitutionally granted full citizenship, carceral citizenship economically, politically, and socially redefines what legally granted birthright citizenship looks like for millions of Americans today. Jessica Kent's *YouTube* prison survival guide is a local cultural and social example of a wider, even national social media phenomenon that is magnified in light of citizenship studies. The spheres in which legal labels inform our understanding of carceral experience should thus be broadened by analyzing social media articulations and this consequently can impact the ways in which we are given a window into *how* and *which* aspects of American life these groups want addressed: namely that punishment does not end with one's supposed exit from the system. Between formal citizenship and lived experiences, the primary goal lays in the visibility and recognition of carceral citizenship as a double status: blurring the victim/perpetrator dichotomy and thus humanizing the "villain," and painting a less heroic image of the criminal justice system. Here, legal, political, and social realities continue to mutually inform what carceral citizenship looks like, testifying to what survivors address as life-long parallel paths to full citizenship. By publicly addressing the issues of limited housing and job opportunities, restricted political action, and narrow social avenues, Kent sheds light on how carceral citizenship belongs differently in American society. Her take on carceral citizenship also reveals an active social membership, which illuminates the negotiation of the social and cultural components of a legal label. Kent shows how, within her marginalized status as a carceral citizen, she finds new ways of engaging in American life by speaking from her own experience on social media, denying the state's take on refusing her that voice. Ultimately, Kent's narrative explorations on *YouTube* challenge common media narratives that speak for carceral citizens but that lack the first-hand experience of this lived reality. By contributing to the genre of survival guides, she joins a collective effort for a renegotiation of "justice" and thus carceral citizenship in social media representations of carceral experience (Smith and Kinzel).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Works Cited

"10 THINGS I CAN NOT DO AS A FELON." YouTube, uploaded by Jessica Kent, 29 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFNOks5lx44.

"About." *The Sentencing Project*, 29 June 2023, https://www.sentencingproject.org/about/.

"About the Equal Justice Initiative." *Equal Justice Initiative*, 6 Sept. 2022, https://eji.org/about/.

Accurso, Anthony. "The Popularity of *YouTube* Prison Lifestyle Videos." *Prison Legal News*, 1 July 2020, https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2020/jul/1/popularity-youtube-prison-lifestyle-videos/.

"Airbnb vs Felons." *TikTok*, uploaded by Comrade Sinque, 05 Oct. 2021, https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMLVh972H/.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. 2010. The New Press, 2012.

Bastian, Casey. "In Prisons, the Press Also Yearns to be Free," *Prison Legal News*, 01 Jan. 2021, https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2021/jan/1/prisons-press-also-yearns-be-free/.

Bromwich, Jonah E. "Why are American Prisons so afraid of this book?" *The New York Times*, 18 Jan. 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/18/us/new-jim-crow-book-ban-prison.html.

DuVernay, Ava. *13th*. Kandoo Films and Forward Movement, 2016.

Franklin, H. Bruce. "Prison Literature." *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, edited by Simon J. Broenner, Johns Hopkins UP, 2018, https://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=111&from=search&query=prison%20literature&link=search%3Freturn%3D1%26query%3Dprison%2520literature%26section%3Ddocument%26doctype%3Dall#biblio.

Gaines, Lee V. "Illinois Prison Removes More Than 200 Books From Prison Library." *Illinois Public Media*, 29 May 2019, https://will.illinois.edu/news/story/illinois-prison-removes-more-than-200-books-from-prison-library.

Gottschalk, Marie. *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*. Princeton UP, 2015.

Henderson, Cory. *It's Jail not Yale*: *How to Stay Out If You Can or Survive Prison If You Must Go*. OnDaNose Publishers, 2017.

"How Much $ Did I make on Youtube in 2021?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessica Kent, 19 Feb. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7B2pXVDLoB8.

Ibraheem, Abdullah. "The Black Peoples Prison Survival Guide: How to Survive Mentally, Physically, and Spiritually while Incarcerated." *The Talking Drum*, http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/prisonguide.htm.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY

Isin, Engin F. and Bryan S. Turner. "Citizenship Studies: An Introduction." *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, edited by Engin F. Isin and Bryan Turner, Sage Publications, 2002, pp. 1–10.

"Leaving Prison | Halfway House." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessica Kent, 31 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rp1lQEFB2M.

Lerman, Amy E., and Vesla M. Weaver. *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control*. U of Chicago P, 2014.

Miller, Reuben J. *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration*. Little, Brown & Company, 2021.

Miller, Reuben Jonathan, and Amanda Alexander. "The Price of Carceral Citizenship: Punishment, Surveillance, and Social Welfare Policy in an Age of Carceral Expansion." *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, vol. 21, no. 291, 2016, pp. 291–314.

Mitchell, Molly. "'Survivors Guide to Prison' tackles a broken criminal justice system: More movement than movie." *Prison Legal News*, 23 Aug. 2018, https://arktimes.com/news/cover-stories/2018/08/23/survivors-guide-to-prison-tackles-a-broken-criminal-justice-system.

Monazzam, Niki, and Kristen M. Budd. "Incarcerated Women and Girls." *The Sentencing Project*, 17 May 2023, https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/incarcerated-women-and-girls/.

"My first year out of prison." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessica Kent, 26 Nov. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwkRxRIQbQc.

"My Last Day In Prison | Walking Out Homeless." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessica Kent, 12 Sept. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Z1VTzGoLjk.

"Out." *Sons of Anarchy*, season 4, episode 1, FX, 6 Sept. 2011. *Amazon Prime Video* App.

Petus, Katharine Irene. *Felony Disenfranchisement in America: Historical Origins, Institutional Racism, and Modern Consequences*. LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2005.

Pisano, Angelo. *Prison Guide: Survival Secrets: Revealed*. Page Publishing, 2016.

Price, Joshua M. *Prison and Social Death*. Rutgers UP, 2015.

"Prisoner Re-entry: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)." *YouTube*, uploaded by LastWeekTonight, 8 Nov. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJtYRxH5G2k.

"Prisoners' Rights." *American Civil Liberties Union*, 15 Feb. 2022, https://www.aclu.org/issues/prisoners-rights.

Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith. "Life Sentences: Narrated Lives and Prisoner Rights in the United States." *Human Rights, Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. pp. 153–86.

Smith, Justin M., and Aaron Kinzel. "Carceral Citizenship as Strength: Formerly Incarcerated Activists, Civic Engagement and Criminal Justice Transformation." *Critical Criminology*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2021, pp. 93–110, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-020-09538-w.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

"The Hand that Feeds You." *Suits*, season 6, episode 9, USA Network, 20 Jul., 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com.

The Simpsons, created by Matt Groening, 20th Century Studios, Gracie Films, and Film Roman, 1989.

"TOP 10 HABITS PR!SON N A LIFE OF CRIME CAUSED." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessica Kent, 28 Feb. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrGZH2HuIiA.

Uggen, Christopher et al. "Citizenship, Democracy, and the Civic Reintegration of Criminal Offenders." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 605, no. 1, May 2006, pp. 281–310, doi: 10.1177/0002716206286898.

Wacquant, Loïc. *Deadly Symbiosis: Race and the Rise of Neoliberal Penalty*. Polity Press, 2010.

—. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Duke UP, 2009.

"Whats it like being a FELON." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessica Kent, 6 Dec. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4y0E0V0oPIg.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470190-008 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY