Prisons and power: carceral coloniality in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela

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PRISONS AND POWER: CARCERAL COLONIALITY IN HYBRID POST-NEOLIBERAL VENEZUELA

by

Cory Fischer-Hoffman

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Prisons and Power: Carceral Coloniality in Hybrid Post-Neoliberal Venezuela
Cory Fischer-Hoffman

ABSTRACT: This dissertation examines contemporary Venezuela’s dual prison system—in which half of the prison population is incarcerated in internally controlled prisons run by armed inmates, and the other half are locked up in the Bolivarian Government’s restricted “New Regime” prisons. The Venezuelan state formation is conceptualized as ‘hybrid post-neoliberal,’ demonstrating how rationalities of a liberal rentier state and neoliberalism, combined with anti-neoliberal logics all act together in competing yet co-existing ways in the post-neoliberal era, which was initiated by the 1999 Bolivarian Revolution. The central question examines the “work” of the prison in the (re)production of power relations and how policies, neoliberal rationalities and anti-neoliberal logics shape the prison, reflect the nature of the Venezuelan state, and impact the everyday lives of Venezuelans who come into contact with the penal system. The research is based on over fifty interviews with incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people and their family members as well as prison volunteers, government officials and representatives of NGOs. The author argues that the prison does not simply discipline and punish but that the carceral institution cannot be divorced from its colonial antecedents; the mutually reinforcing concepts of euro-centrism, race, sex and sexuality, nor from neoliberal capitalism and modernity/coloniality; a concept that she introduced as “carceral coloniality.” Building off of the anti-neoliberal sentiments present in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela, the dissertation examines how thinking “del otro lado”/from the other side holds promise for decolonial epistemologies that could aid in the transformation of Venezuela’s prison system.
For all of those who work to tear down the walls that divide,
from this side and
from the other side
in Venezuela
in the US
and everywhere
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# Table of Contents

Abstract- ii

Dedication - iii

Acknowledgements- iv

Prologue: Post-Chavez Venezuela - 1

Introduction: The Cages of the Revolution – 15

---Section I---

**One:** Hybrid Post-Neoliberal Venezuela - 41

**Two:** If these walls could scream: A brief history of Venezuelan prisons from the Colonial period to Present Day - 69

**Three:** Post-Neoliberal Penality and the Political Economy of Prisons in Venezuela – 112

---Section II---

**Four:** Yendo a Cana: Entering the Open-Regime Prisons - 142

**Five:** 'La Revolución Penitenciaria en Marcha': Venezuela's New Regime Prisons - 231

**Six:** An Oral History “Del Otro Lado: ” The Impact of Incarceration on One Venezuelan Family – 284

---Section III---

**Seven:** Carceral Coloniality: Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality and Venezuela's Prisons - 310

Conclusions: De-linking from Carceral Coloniality – 342

Appendices - 348

References - 362
Prologue: Post-Chavez Venezuela

As I waited for my two checked bags at Maiquetía International airport in Caracas, I wondered how Venezuela would be different. I had spent nearly a year in the country and watched the Bolivarian Revolution develop, shift, change, grow, and contract from 2005-2011 but, this time I was arriving to a different Venezuela, one without Comandante Chávez. I pulled my two heavy bags—filled with my personal items, gifts for friends, and various consumer goods that I had been warned to bring due to the unpredictable shortages that made it difficult, if not impossible, to find things such as soap, shampoo, cooking oil, toilet paper and more.

I could hear my friend Yanahir yell my name the second that I had passed through immigration and I felt the humid air in La Guaira. She had also just arrived to the airport from a vacation on the eastern beaches with her partner Yozue, and her brother, Alfredo had been kind enough to meet us at the airport and bring us back to Yanahir's home in Caricuao, a neighborhood—but a city in its own right—in the southwest of Caracas. Along the way, there were many billboards of Hugo Chavez, far more than of Maduro, the current president and successor of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). “Things have changed since you were last here, chama,” Yanahir said, as if she were carrying the burden alone. “You'll see, the economic situation is bad but there are lots of good changes too, you'll see.”

Yanahir was working with children and mothers in the barrio of Antímano when I met her in 2008. She had grown up with the Bolivarian Revolution and is deeply devoted to the revolutionary process. She has moved between grassroots work with women, children and families and working for government institutions, trying to advance the revolution from within the system. She is a committed feminist and a trained doula, and at this point she is the director of programming at the ministry of nutrition and she is deeply involved in promoting breast-
feeding and healthy eating in Venezuela. An interview with Yanahir appears in *Venezuela Speaks! Voices from the Grassroots*. Since her interview in 2008, the Bolivarian Revolution has become more complicated, and her perspective always provides insights into the nuances that many people avoid in such a polarized context.

When we arrived to the high rises where she lives with Yozue and her mother, I was grateful to see that the elevator had been repaired from the last time that I had been there. In fact, the elevator was brand-new. She pressed the button and proudly turned to me to demonstrate, in very concrete terms, one of the benefits of the revolution. “We didn't pay anything for this,” she said as she stepped in, “this arrived right before *la guarimba*, so, in our building, this neutralized people a bit.” Just months before I had arrived, the outbreak of protests and violence in Venezuela made international headlines. Protests that had been fueled by the notoriously anti-democratic right-wing opposition but had managed to pull in some additional support from those fed up with the high inflation rates/soaring prices, and the shortages of basic good, had created conflicts that resulted in the deaths of 43 people, and the rise of new leadership for the political opposition. Despite many friends in Venezuela assuring me that the international press and Venezuela's own private media were blowing the situation out of proportion, all of them conceded that people were fed up with the high costs of food and the shortages of basic goods.

The following morning Yozue and Yanahir woke up not feeling well, so they decided to go to the *Barrio Adentro*, a Health Clinic which is a stone's throw from their house. They were attended to by Cuban doctors, and they were referred to a clinic for blood tests. The *Barrio Adentro* is perhaps one of the most successful Missions, or social programs, from the Bolivarian Revolution. It has provided healthcare in poor communities throughout the country at absolutely
no costs. The following day, when I escorted them to the clinic to get their results, I was in disbelief that they didn't have to pay anything for their consultations, tests or medicine. Luckily, they seemed to have the common cold, something that I could never imagine going to the doctor for in the United States.

While they took a day to sleep off their illness, I ventured out to explore Caracas. I had lived in La Pastora, close to Miraflores for six months in 2005-2006, and again in 2008, as I conducted research for my master's thesis on Mision Madres del Barrio, a social program that remunerates women in recognition of their house work. The last time I had been in Venezuela, in 2011, the Bolivarian Revolution had been facing serious challenges of a housing crisis in Caracas, corruption, institutionalization, and the consolidation of the social movements into a political party that failed to inspire the poor and working classes as much as Hugo Chavez did. Nonetheless, I visited with community media projects, worker-run cooperatives, members of the Afro-Venezuelan movement, and participants in the self-governing communes. Despite a sense of frustration with the government and the boliburguesa (the new elite growing out of the Bolivarian Revolution), grassroots Venezuelans were constructing new ways of communicating, new types of identities, and new forms of organization- all inspired by the values put forth in the Bolivarian revolution.

This time, I was on a mission: to buy laundry detergent, toilet paper, and shampoo- all of which had been hard to obtain in Caricuao. I walked down, what seemed to be endless rows of steps, before arriving to the Metro station Zoológico. I befriended a woman, waiting in line, and she proceeded to tell me about her daughter living in Pennsylvania. “All people do in the US is work, they lead very solitary lives,” she said. “I think that Venezuelans are happier,” she added. We chatted as the metro car filled up with people and we exchanged numbers right before we
parted ways at the end of the line.

The most obvious thing that had changed in Venezuela, since my last visit- were the prices. With inflation at 63% and a ludicrous exchange system, the prices for food were exorbitantly high. The informal (& illegal) exchange rate from dollars to bolivars was exceptionally high. In 2011, one could change dollars to bolivars at 1:8, double the official exchange rate. In 2014, dollars could be sold for 75-85 bolivars, nearly 7 times the official rate, and by the time I left in 2015, 30 times. This influx in illegal dollars, coupled with speculation-both on dollars and basic goods, the smuggling of subsidized commodities to Colombia to earn a profit, government corruption and mismanagement, and what could only be defined as malicious sabotage by the right has left the Venezuelan economy in a fragile and precarious state and it is the Venezuelan people that must wade through these murky and uncertain waters.

After stopping at numerous stores and asking about the items on my list, I finally found shampoo and I bought the last bottle. Rain drops began to fall and I headed down Avenida Baralt, hoping to arrive to Quinta Crespo, a large market, before it closed. I rushed through the stalls and found the items that I was looking for; olive oil and apple cider vinegar, both luxury items by any definition. By the time that I arrived back to Caricuao, a news report on state TV was showing the site of a new bust. Two-Three tons of “contraband;” goods being hoarded for the moment when prices rise again, or to be trafficked out of Venezuela for a profit were discovered at Quinta Crespo market, exactly beneath where I had stood just two hours earlier.

Later that night, we all gathered in the kitchen to share a meal. As we cleaned up, each of us focusing on a different task, storing leftovers, wiping down counters, doing dishes and emptying the dish tray, our conversation quickly turned to Chavez. “We are still in mourning.” Yanahir said with a sigh, “we lost our leader.” She continued. “People support Maduro, but they
do not love him, not like they love Chavez, they don't accept him.” Maria Theresa, her mother, quickly declared “yes, I accept him.”

“No, mami, many people don't, you don't”

“Yes, I do. I accept him,” she insisted.

“No, Maduro is not our leader. He has a difficult role to play, he is the executor of Chavez's plan. He is not our leader, chama, we are still mourning the loss of our leader.” The pain in her voice was palpable. “If he only had more time, he really had very little time.”

It was ironic to me, considering that one of the major criticisms of Chavez (of the internal opposition, and even progressives internationally) was that he stayed in power too long. This was never a concern for those that I met who supported the Bolivarian Revolution from within Venezuela, however. His leadership provided the possibility for a class-conscious unity that seemed impossible without him.

Our conversation continued to reflect on Venezuela, how things were changing and what could be done. We started talking about the social problems in the United States, specifically the massive deportations of (largely Latino) immigrants; and the role that the US plays in the world. “You know, though, I've had it with this victim-based logic. I'm sick of blaming everything on imperialism, on Bush, on Obama, we have to take responsibility for what is ours.” Yanahir stood resolute, wearing her “Yo Soy afro-descendiente” t-shirt, and assumed her own role for the revolution to happen. “If there is no sugar; it runs out…well, I won't have sugar. I have to take responsibility for making this revolution.”

She saw the greatest hope in the commune movement, but she described the work as “hard and slow” and the “culture of consumerism” a formidable foe in the struggle. I asked them
what they thought about the situation in the prisons and what could be done to make them better. Yozue insisted that a proposal has been on the table since the early years of the revolution; to build schools and training for youth instead of constructing more prisons; but the money never seemed to arrive to make this possible or at least it was not implemented in a way that linked educational alternatives in clear contrast with incarceration.

The following day we went down to Caricuao to buy groceries, and Yozue and Yanahir took me to the new skate park. I had never seen anything like it. Young people scaled climbing walls 100 feet high, an impressive choreographed dance class was practicing on the stage, skateboarders were whizzing by, and many older gentleman were deeply engaged in dominoes-as they sat at tables at the building that hosted the new Venezuela café- a state-run coffee-chain that sells subsidized Venezuelan-produced products and can now be found throughout the country. “This is one of the benefits of the Revolution, before this did not exist.” Yanahir said with a proud smile.

We headed to el 23 de enero to visit with Yozue's family, this is a community notorious for its rebellious spirit and its role in kicking out the dictatorship of Perez Jimenez in 1958. In parts of el 23 de enero, people organized and successfully kicked the police out of their community; they even reclaimed the former police headquarters and turned it into a community radio station. As we watched the sunset over the mountains, we stared at an imposing white building that used to be where the notorious retén de catia stood. An infamous violent massacre had taken place there in 1992. The prison had been closed in 1994, and it now functioned as National University for Experimental Security (UNES)- a school for security, police and prison workers that purports to have a revolutionary framework that breaks from the legacy of corruption. The project is a part of wider police reforms instituted in 2008 and UNES opened the
On our way out of the building where Yozue’s family lives, we noticed a woman carrying a bag of diapers. We quickly stopped to ask her where she had purchased diapers. Yanahir’s brother and sister-in-law had run out and they had been searching frantically, with no luck. We followed the woman’s recommendation and found the store that was selling diapers- and laundry detergent- two items that we had not been able to find for days. This practice of scoping out what other people were carrying in their shopping bags and where they bought and how much they paid for it was a common practice. We bought the diapers and detergent and headed out to wait for the metro bus, a service that was relatively new and did not exist during my prior stays in Venezuela. We sat under a sliver of the rising moon, watching all of the lights- of so many people concentrated in this valley- surrounded by a ring of mountains.

When the metro bus finally arrived, we boarded- relieved to be heading home. Yanahir leaned over and announced “before these buses didn't exist, because they go through the barrios.” With a ticket for the subway in Caracas, one could ride the metro bus for free- and now with these new bus lines, a new geography has been developed; one in which the popular sectors are now connected through affordable transportation. “This is another benefit of the revolution” Yanahir whispered as the bus pulled into the La Paz metro stop, where we caught a train back to Caricuao.

Fifteen years after Chávez assumed his position as president and spearheaded the political process called the “Bolivarian Revolution,” the inertia of his leadership continued to move forward but his absence was deeply felt. Billboards with his smiling face are still common throughout the country, perhaps now more than ever and reruns of his famous ‘Aló Presidente’ television show can still be seen on state TV but the reality is that Venezuelans face innumerable
challenges moving forward and the *Comandante* is no longer alive to create the moral compass
or to spearhead the march, indeed this is a decidedly new era for Venezuelans.
Introduction:
The Cages of the Revolution

A Delicate Topic

“This is a delicate topic” I was told by friends in Venezuela when I said that I would be returning, for my fourth time, to the country to investigate the prison system. After popular movements thrust Hugo Chávez into power and initiated a series of transformations throughout the country, much attention by leftist scholars and activists had been given to the Venezuelan state, and the accomplishments of the Bolivarian Revolution. I myself, had spent 6 months in Venezuela in 2005-2006, just as the social missions were booming and Chávez had begun to articulate el proceso in terms of building Socialism of the 21st Century. It was a hopeful time; it felt like another world—separate from the tyranny of neoliberalism—was being constructed in Venezuela. I returned in 2008 to do fieldwork for my Master's thesis on the social program Misión Madres del Barrio, the first program in the world to remunerate housewives in acknowledgement of the social and economic value produced by housework/reproductive labor. Now, just shy of a decade from my first stint in Venezuela, I had come, not to highlight one of the great successes of the Revolution but to explore one of its greatest failings; the prison system. Hence, a very delicate topic.

I was compelled to examine Venezuela's prison system because of my own experience of activism around prisons and policing in the United States. After years of working as an organizer on community media and social justice issues, I started to produce a monthly radio program called the Prison Voices Project in 2011. The goal of the show was to cover diverse issues related to the prison system as a means of sparking public dialogue about mass incarceration in the US and to also utilize the radio as a means of creating lines of communication with the
people incarcerated in some of the 7 prisons within listening range of the radio transmitter in rural New York. Just a few months into producing the program, a violent standoff erupted in El Rodeo prison\(^1\) on the outskirts of Caracas. With the few details that I could glean from the media, I announced what had happened, or more likely what was being reported in the mainstream press, during the headlines of my radio show. I remember being perplexed; why would the Bolivarian National Guard, the class-conscious revolutionary forces that spent much of their time helping with infrastructure projects in poor communities; why would they fire on and massacre some of the most vulnerable people in Venezuela?

I was not the only one who wondered. A few weeks after the show aired, I received a letter from one of the most astute and loyal listeners, a man who is still serving time at Coxsackie prison in Greene County. He had heard the headline about Venezuela, and he thought it sounded terrible. He is a Puerto Rican nationalist who had long admired the Venezuelan government’s political project aimed at benefiting the poor and he wanted to know more about the incident inside ‘the cages of the Revolution.’ Inspired by his request and my own curiosity, I began to do some research to see what I could find. I had considered producing one radio show about prisons in Venezuela but quickly, it became clear that I would not find answers to my questions on-line and that my investigation would require fieldwork.

Over the following three years, I paid close attention to the media coverage of Venezuela’s “prison crisis.” I read the Venezuelan national private press, the government press, and also the international media which primarily highlighted riots that resulted in the loss of lives but occasionally did more human interest-style stories reporting from the inside.\(^2\) The standoff at

\(^1\) The uprising took place in both El Rodeo I and El Rodeo II prisons, which are located next to one another but are enclosed separately.

\(^2\) See Time Magazine, See NPR
El Rodeo I & II also grabbed the attention of former president Hugo Chávez (whom at that point was already in the late stages of his treatment for cancer). In July, 2011, following the incident, Chávez mandated the creation of the Ministry of Penitentiary Services (MSP) and appointed long-time Chavista militant, Iris Varela to spear-head the newly formed agency. From 2011-2014, I watched from afar as the leftist government attempted to take over prisons that were under the control of a powerful organization from among the incarcerated population as well as to institute penal policy that was nested within the broader political process dubbed “the Bolivarian Revolution.”

This mandate has resulted in the formation of a divided prison system in Venezuela. While there are a handful of new or rehabbed prison facilities internally-run by the MSP (referred to as “closed regime” or “new regime” prisons); over half of the prison population in Venezuela are interned in “open regime” prisons that are controlled by hierarchical organizations comprised of incarcerated people who are heavily armed (Antillano et al, 2013). The image of the prison bosses, referred to as pranes or principales, are now widely known throughout Venezuela and they have especially captured the imaginations of young people in the barrios. The Venezuelan state has positioned itself on the side of the poor and marginalized but through examining the prison system, it is clear that this narrative must be re-imagined to reflect the current struggles for power within the prison system. Indeed, a delicate situation.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

My research seeks to create a broad understanding of the dual prison system in Venezuela, especially because there is minimal scholarship focusing on penal policy, prison ethnography or “the carceral” in the Bolivarian Republic (1998-2015). My central questions are:
What is the “work” of the prison in the (re)production of power relations in contemporary Venezuela? How do neoliberal and anti-neoliberal rationalities and policies shape the prison, reflect the nature of the Venezuelan state, and impact the everyday lives of Venezuelans who come into contact with the penal system?

The prison does more than simply discipline and punish (Foucault, 1977). By exploring “the work” of the prison in the (re)production of power relations, I examine the prison beyond its stated purposes to punish and/or rehabilitate convicts or incapacitate pre-trial detainees accused of crimes. I explore the broader political economy of the prison in Venezuela and the “work” that the prison does in Venezuela’s dual prison system—in which half of the prison population is incarcerated in internally controlled prisons run by armed inmates, and the other half are locked up in the Bolivarian Government’s restricted “New Regime” prisons. I contend that the prison “works” to manage the surplus pool of labor, expand sectors of the informal economy, generate profit through exploitation in the de-facto privatized open-regime prisons, reinforce racial categorizations that associate criminality with blackness, reproduce sexist gender roles, separate Venezuelan families, create semi-autonomous zones controlled by organized crime, create a point of encounter between the social-service complex of the Bolivarian Republic and the marginalized sectors of Venezuelan society and the “new-regime” prisons also “work” as a controlled environment for the government to experiment with building a ‘socialist’ ideology among the poor. This line of inquiry into the “work” of prisons incorporates questions of identity and power that transcend the economic realm, thus I draw from critical race studies, cultural studies, post-colonial theory and feminism in addition to political economy.

I argue that an exploration of the “carceral” in Venezuela cannot be separated from the colonial encounter and its subsequent legacies. Through use of Quijano’s concept of the
colonyality of power—I propose an historically rooted framework that I call carceral colonyality, as my theoretical contribution for examining prisons in Latin America, because the neoliberal economy is not only capitalist but also colonial/modern and euro-centered and therefore requires additional bases for understanding how the colonyality of power is manifested through the prison (in which popular thinking on Neoliberal Penalicy are insufficient) (Taylor, 2014).

Venezuela’s historical position as a colonized peripheral nation and its current role as a global counter-hegemonic petro-state inform its geopolitical position and also the politics of its prison system. In exploring Venezuela’s “seemingly contradictory” role as a rentier-state ensnarled in the global capitalist economy and also a leading global player against the doctrine of neoliberalism, Sujatha Fernandes(2010) theorizes Venezuela as a ‘hybrid post-neoliberal state.’ Fernandes argues that this hybridity is composed of competing yet co-existing rationalities that draw from Venezuela’s history as a liberal rentier state, in which the boundless wealth of the “magical state” is expected to be shared; as a neo-liberal state, where market-based logics, individualism and consumerism dominate thinking; and as an anti-neoliberal state, that invokes values of solidarity, equity, and political participation from those marginalized from the preceding neoliberal and liberal state formations. It is a hybrid of these three ways of thinking that shape the policies and logics present in the post-neoliberal era in Venezuela.

While it is important to examine the rationalities that inform state policy, there is a significant rupture between government discourse on penal policy and what is really taking place inside of prisons. Both are important but it is essential to distinguish between them. In my research, I focus on the everyday lives of people who come into direct contact with the prison system; incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people and their family members. I emphasize the strategies that they employ to rationalize, survive and resist the carceral state and
how this impacts broader state-society relations. Reorienting my gaze to the everyday interactions between people and institutions serves to “illuminate the workings of neoliberalism even within an avowedly antineoliberal order” (Fernandes (2013, p.55).

As I explore how Venezuelans confronting the prison system experience the hybrid-post neoliberal state in their everyday lives, I draw from theories on neoliberal (and postneoliberal) statecraft. (Goodale and Postero, 2013; Wacquant, 2009) Bourdieu’s (1996) description of the contradiction between the “left hand” (social welfare) and “right hand” (punitive)—what Verónica Schild (2013, p. 196) calls “the caring state” and the “punitive state”—is fundamental for exploring Venezuela’s post-neoliberal statecraft and especially the “work” of prisons. This formulation of what I call “the ambidextrous state” provides the analytical and political tools for transcending the polarization present in much scholarship on Venezuela; in which scholars highlight the state’s pro-poor agenda but overlook the role of the police and prisons in poor communities; or fetishize the militaristic hierarchical style of the former President while ignoring the presence of state-supported innovative participatory structures of self-governance like the communes and communal councils. These blind spots have created distorted machinations of the Venezuelan state which serve political interests but fail to engage with the pressing questions about struggles against exploitation and dehumanization, revolution, decolonization, post-neoliberalism, and the possibilities and constraints of “de-linking” from the global capitalist economy (Amin, 1990).

Through my research on prisons—which are institutions of exploitation and dehumanization—I situate them within the geopolitical positioning and political economy of the Venezuelan state, continuously drawing upon the fact that the majority of the poor claim the state as theirs, and that through top-down and bottom-up policies, with support from the highest levels
of government, significant advances in the reduction of inequality and poverty have been accomplished over the past fifteen years. (Valencia, 2015; Wilpert, 2007) Despite this progress, the prison population has doubled between 2009-2015 (See Table 1. in Appendix) and prevalent theories of “neoliberal penality” fail to explain this phenomenon in Venezuela because unlike the neoliberal penal states that have seen booming incarceration rates over the last two decades, the Venezuelan government has increased social spending which has resulted in a decrease, not increase, in “social insecurity.” (Wacquant, 2009) While the case of Venezuela requires new theoretical tools for analyzing a rapid growth in the prison population, scholarship on prison expansion and neoliberalism provide a sturdy basis for exploration and adaptation (Gilmore, 2007; Wacquant, 2009; Muller, 2013).

In order to explore the “work” of the prison in the (re)production of power relations and how neoliberal and anti-neoliberal rationalities and policies shape the prison, reflect the nature of the Venezuelan state, and impact the everyday lives of Venezuelans who come into contact with the penal system, I am using a theoretical framework that I call *decolonial critical cultural political economy*. This approach allows for the examination of the intersections of material conditions, discourses, rationalities, policies, subjectivities, and epistemologies within an expansive context of political economy and modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. It allows for each of these aspects to be examined, not only in isolation but as interrelated; for example, how inequality and identity connect to neoliberal and postneoliberal logics and how “a range of unresolved contradictions interconnects various projects for change and resistance to change.” (Postero, 2013, p. 3). This framework relies on examining neoliberalism beyond its most recognizable economic policies of privatization, liberalization, and deregulation but as rationalities and practices that focus on “the regulation of every day conduct,” what Foucault has
termed “governmentality” and what Wendy Brown (2015) describes as “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms.” (Fernandes, 2013, p. 57; p.2).

My familiarity with prisons in the US—corresponding with incarcerated peoples and to a lesser degree spending time in US prisons and jails—clearly informs how I see prisons in Venezuela. While I did not set out to do a comparative study, the critique of prisons that I have developed through my experience as an activist, researcher and journalist in the United States (the world's largest jailer), is present throughout this dissertation. As a radio journalist, I covered the US prison system just as the issues of mass incarceration were moving into a national spotlight in part because Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color blindness* sparked a much-needed debate about incarceration and systemic racism in the United States. Just weeks before I left for Venezuela to conduct my research, Michael Brown, an 18-year old unarmed black man, was shot by police and then left bleeding in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri for hours before he died. This instigated an already-brewing nation-wide movement under the banner of *Black Lives Matter*. Venezuelan state-television constantly covered the conflicts between protestors and police in Ferguson as well as the on-going killing of black people at the hands of the police throughout the United States. The visibility of these conflicts through Venezuelan state media created an impetus for many Venezuelans to discuss policing, racism and therefore prisons with me. Comparing prison systems in the United States and Venezuela was useful for analyzing how prisons are used to punish and warehouse poor people but there were times that the comparison created a trap, like when I analyzed the role of race in the prison system or, when I confronted the self-ruled open regime prisons, I had to check my assumptions that prisons are institutions based on total state control.
Field Work during the Economic War

At the time that I conducted my field work in Venezuela (2014-2015), the country was in a full-fledged economic war, inflation was out of control, and the informal exchange rate in dollars was over 30 times of that of the formal rate (and climbing). Not even two full years since the indisputable leader of the Bolivarian Revolution, Comandante Chávez had died from cancer, his successor Nicolás Maduro faced serious challenges. Venezuelan inflation was at 64% in 2014, which meant that I literally saw prices rise on a weekly basis. The largest bill—100 Bolívares Fuertes—was valued at roughly $50 USD in 2006 at the time that it was introduced and during my field work in 2015, the value of the bill fell to just over fifty US cents and within months of leaving, it was valued at a mere fifteen US cents (Dutka, 2015). This meant that people were walking around with huge wads of cash, as the highest bill that exists could no longer pay for a lunch. Since the few functioning ATMs limited withdraws to 600 Venezuelan Bolívares (VB), long lines at ATMS and lack of availability of cash created difficult practical problems especially due to a high demand to take out cash amidst constantly rising prices. When I lived in the popular sector of Caricuao, prices changed before my very eyes. Each week that I bought vegetables and fruits from the same vendor, the prices went up by 200 VB, after a month, the price had essentially doubled. With prices constantly changing and 4 separate exchange rate, it is impossible to give a value in dollars that has any intrinsic meaning, so I have decided to give values in Bolívares and then to relate those figures proportionally to the minimum wage at the time that the figures were measured, or use some other anecdote to explain their relative value. (See Table 4. Exchange Rates, Minimum Wage & Cost of Living in Venezuela – August 2014-March 2016 in the Appendix)
The period in which I conducted fieldwork was also marked by shortages of basic consumer goods such as corn-flour, cooking oil, sugar, coffee, milk, toilet paper, soap, laundry detergent, diapers and sanitary napkins. The root cause of these shortages rests in a power-play made by the capitalist class to oppose the _Precios Justos_ law which first went into effect in 2011, when inflation was at 26%. The law capped profits to 30% and regulated the prices of basic goods. When a new set of price controls was established under Maduro in February, 2014, the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce, _Fedecamaras_, which represents the capitalist class who have been the leading opposition voice, deeply criticized the law, claiming that it was “unconstitutional.” Ironically, leaders of _Fedecamaras_ had been active in the 2002 coup, which temporarily removed President Chávez from office and dissolved the National Assembly as well as the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution which had been created through broad participation of Venezuelans in a Constituent Assembly.

In addition to public critiques from the organized business sector, the Venezuelan capitalist class used their economic power to sabotage the economy by slowing down imports, hoarding basic goods (to create shortages and/or wait for price increases to maximize profits), or by just refusing to import goods altogether. In some cases, goods that had been imported at the highly subsidized preferential exchange rate of 6.3 VB to the dollar (while the informal rate was at 70,100, 200… VB to the dollar from 2014-2015) would then be trafficked to Colombia or Brazil and sold at a remarkable profit. Since Venezuela’s primary export has been oil for nearly the last century, the Venezuelan state and capitalist class has largely brought in large amounts of foreign exchange through oil rents made by leasing land to multinational corporations that extract petroleum from the subsoil. This influx of foreign exchange made through oil rents and especially when combined with government subsidies have kept imported goods cheap and
historically stunted Venezuela’s productive capacity. Therefore Venezuela’s capitalist class extract surplus from oil rents so, as opposed to owning the means of production, many own the means of importation and control profitable distribution networks of imported consumer goods. The largest food and beer company POLAR, which controls 40% of the food market in Venezuela is owned by the Mendoza family and while their company does produce many goods in Venezuela, they still extensively rely on imports.

But the capitalist class are not the only ones at fault for the economic situation. A controversial study by Louis Enrique Gavazut (2014) examined capital flight from 2004-2012 by tracing the distribution of highly-subsidized dollars by the Venezuelan government. The results showed that the rhetorically anti-capitalist Venezuelan state had been subsidizing multinational corporations, largely in the automotive and telecommunications sectors, with little oversight or enforcement of the terms for receiving these dollars. For example General Motors, Toyota and Ford—all in the top five—received an astounding combined $10,223,970,974 between 2004 and 2011; and in 2012 alone they had received just under one billion dollars at the preferential exchange rate of 6.3 VB. Venezuelan companies also received the preferential dollars; Provenseca, a grain processor owned by POLAR, had received $1,898,326,767 USD over the period examined.3

But, it is not only the capitalist class and the state that are fighting the economic war in Venezuela, in fact it is everyday people who are bearing the brunt of the hardships created by scarcity, inflation, insecurity and lack of predictability all of which are accompanied by increased state and paramilitary repression. Regular Venezuelans, and not only the poor but people in the middle class are forced to develop survival strategies in this context, some of which contribute to

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3 Government officials responded to these allegations, which were raised by members of the Troskyist organization Marea Socialista, by accusing their leadership of being funded by the CIA.
the growing the economic crisis. For example, when a scarce item shows up either at a subsidized rate in a government-run supermarket or, at a private business, huge lines would form for people to obtain those precious goods and the logics of supply and demand would dominate daily life. People paid others to wait in long lines for them. Individuals at the front of the lines would purchase whatever item was available and then go to the back of the line to sell it at five times the price that they paid. And, because the value of hard currency was decreasing by the minute, all Venezuelans were trying to spend the cash that they had on consumer goods (which would hold value or even increase in value as they became scarcer) instead of letting it lose value by sitting in their bank accounts.

The shortages caused innumerable inconveniences in people's daily lives and everything in Venezuela became extremely unpredictable during this period. Due to the shortages, many taxi and bus drivers could not access new tires, car batteries or other parts and therefore transportation suffered. Despite virtually free gasoline many buses stayed off of the road for lack of parts. Bus tickets could no longer be bought in advance, as they had been in 2005, 2008, and 2011 when I was last there and transportation throughout Venezuela was, like most things, precarious and unpredictable. The shortages included medicines and surgical equipment, invoking a sense that Venezuela was living under a de-facto blockade or economic sanctions despite there being no formal policy as such.

The well-documented polarization within Venezuela which tended to fall along class-lines and is often expressed as “chavistas” versus “the opposition,” became even more entrenched as each group followed the divergent logics presented by their respective new sources. The private media blamed the shortages on socialism, government interference in the economy, and mismanagement. The government press drew from the historical parallel of
shortages and rationing in pre-coup Chile, dubbing the process an “economic war” and pointing fingers at the political opposition colluding with Washington and transnational capitalist interests.

While I worked as a journalist (and personally struggled to find laundry detergent and toilet paper) I reported on the discovery of warehouses of hoarded goods. In January of 2015, the National Guard seized a warehouse in the state of Zulia which is owned by Herrera C.A., inside they found over 1.5 million diapers; 360,000 kilos of detergent, 277 thousand units of soap, and 14,000 units of baby formula, in addition to corn flour, black beans, rice, shampoo and more (Fischer-Hoffman, January 14, 2015). Politicized grassroots Venezuelans saw this as a right-wing assault on the people themselves. Enrique Velasquez, a former political prisoner who had fought against 9 consecutive governments prior to Chávez coming into power said, “I spent three years in the guerilla, and where did we go to fight? We went to the mountains, we didn't go into supermarkets, and we didn't prevent people from getting medicine for their loved ones…”

Velazquez, like many other Venezuelans, felt that the economic crisis served to highlight the greed of the capitalist class and the destruction that they were willing to cause to assume power and make profits.

At the end of 2014, the price of oil plummeted to a 10-year low on the international market, creating further economic alarm in Venezuela, a country of which 95% of its GDP comes from exporting oil and the associated petrol derivatives. The international press began its doomsday reporting, claiming that the economy was about to collapse, that Venezuela would default on its loan payments and that this was the end of President Maduro and the political project that he had taken up from his predecessor. In addition to negative predictions based on

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4 Interview, September 12, 2014.
macroeconomic indicators the Venezuelan opposition buoyed by the international media also pointed to high levels of crime, human rights violations in the prisons, and the existence of “political prisoners,” such as jailed opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez as illustrations that the Venezuelan government is a despotic regime and that the Bolivarian project has failed.

The psychological impacts of the media-induced frenzy surrounding the economic war only heightened the sensations of scarcity which in turn lead to more buying and thus longer lines. This had a broader impact on people’s daily lives and their institutions, both public and private. During 2014 and early 2015, it was not uncommon to go to a bank or government office during business hours only to be told that the one person that could help you was waiting in line for milk somewhere else and therefore you would have to come back tomorrow. While people adapted and adjusted to a different pace of life and constant uncertainty, it was a complicated and tension-filled time to be conducting field work. But, it was also a fascinating time to study people’s everyday lives and their relationships with institutions.

While hysteria around public safety has been present in Caracas for decades, fears surrounding personal security were heightened and in general it was a common feeling that being out at night, anywhere in Caracas is not safe. I was warned to ‘be careful,’ ‘be safe,’ ‘not stay out late,’ ‘don't walk alone,’ ‘don't take things of value with you’ by virtually every Venezuelan that I came into contact with. One woman stopped me on the street to ask if I was a tourist and before I could answer, she assured me that she would pray for me. And then, when I told people that I had been going into the prisons, places that many assured me were “worse than hell,” most people thought that I was crazy or reckless. But, the fear of crime was not pure hype. Virtually every taxi driver that I met had been robbed at gunpoint, and most of them had lost a family member to street violence. In my six months in the country, I was in close proximity to a
handful of people who had been robbed or assaulted. These lived experiences of being victims of crimes, even if they were just for property, was only exacerbated with the constant fear-mongering media coverage of insecurity in the country.

In the face of such challenging daily living, creativity was born through necessity. By the time that I left Venezuela in April of 2015, most people that I knew were making their own soap and many people were meeting some of their needs through barter markets. It was also a very powerful and interesting time to be in Venezuela, to witness this stage in the revolution and to come face to face with on-going struggles for power, limitations of the revolution, and the maturing analysis of grassroots revolutionaries in this context. It was also a distinctly different context from when Sujatha Fernandes first formulated the hybrid-post-neoliberal state and when she observed the “every day wars of position” that grassroots urban residents took as they organized in the context of Chávez’s Venezuela. In some ways, the hybrid-post-neoliberal state is even more applicable now since many Venezuelans are meeting their basic needs through individually resolving shortages by engaging with an illicit and unregulated market, meanwhile the discourse of the Venezuelan government officials has only gotten more militant, and decidedly Socialistic despite a contradictory hybrid of actual government monetary, economic and social policies.

For the first four months of my field work, I also worked as a part-time journalist for the independent progressive website *Venezuelanalysis.com*. My job involved keeping a close eye on mainstream, government and international media coverage of Venezuela. At least four days a week, I spent the morning surveying different news sites in English and Spanish and selecting topics to write news briefs on or to do deeper analysis. The themes that I explored in some depth over those months include monetary policy and the exchange rate, the economic war, “political
prisoners,” international relations between Venezuela and other countries, including US sanctions towards Venezuela, dropping oil prices and the economy, grassroots strategies in the face of the economic crisis, indigenous struggles in Venezuela, the opposition, and climate change. I benefited greatly from the analysis developed through the editorial decisions made with my fellow editors and collective members who were also engaged in their own exploration of the hybrid post-neoliberal state. While not all of these topics directly relate to my research, the experience of covering these broader issues and following the media regularly helped to provide a much stronger context for my field work and provided an opportunity to monitor the “mediascape” in Venezuela over the period in which I conducted my research.

**Methodology**

I spent 6 months conducting fieldwork in Venezuela from August-November, 2014 and January- April, 2015. I lived in Caracas for roughly 3 months, splitting my time between the working class neighborhood of Caricuao in the south west of Caracas and a wealthy Eastern part of the city which bordered Petare, the largest barrio in all of Latin America. In Caricuao, I stayed with my friend, Yanahir, her partner Josue, both government workers and revolutionaries; and Maria Theresa, Yanahir’s mother, a cigarette-smoking feisty chavista who was always ready for battle.

My ethnographic work was built on doing participant observation in prisons which I entered on visiting day, without official permission. I also conducted semi-structured oral history style interviews with formerly incarcerated people and family members of currently incarcerated people. Additionally, I did more investigative style interviews with academics, activists and representatives of the government. In total I did 50 recorded interviews; 21 with currently
incarcerated people; 8 with family members of incarcerated people; 8 with formerly incarcerated people; 5 with cultural workers who do work inside prisons; 4 with government officials; 2 with youth organizers and intellectuals with the Afro-Venezuelan network; 1 with a criminologist; and 1 with a lawyer with a NGO. The names of public figures such as the government officials, members of the Afro-Venezuelan network, scholars and NGO workers, appear as they are.

The list above of interviewees does not include the dozens of people that I had informal conversations with in my time in Venezuela or the roughly 50 people who I had conversations with and 20 people that I “interviewed” inside of the five prisons. Since I entered three out of the five prisons as a regular visitor, I could not bring in an audio recorder. Space is of high value and during visiting day there are even more stringent rules about where in the prison one can be. For that reason and due to the established code of conduct inside of the prisons, I was almost never completely alone with anyone while inside the prisons. My presence, as a young white foreigner woman did not go unnoticed and in many cases, I needed to get special permission from the pran (prison boss/leader) to carry out interviews. I had no paper, no pen and no audio recorder. While this was frustrating to me at first, I came to appreciate how my research consisted of just chatting with small groups of people about a wide variety of topics.

Both because there was ample curiosity as to who I was and why I had come to the prison but also because there was some fear about talking to me alone, it really worked to have conversations in small groups. This way people felt like they were accountable to others for what they said or, they couldn't be accused of saying something that they shouldn't have. It seemed to provide a small sense of security for those who spoke to me but spending times in groups also showed me a lot of the internal dynamics between people in prison, at least on visiting day. But even within the group dynamic, I had opportunities to engage with one or two
people at a time and go more in depth with certain individuals. In the prisons where I needed to get formal permission from the pranes, such as San Felipe and Vista Hermosa, my interviews were slightly more formalized. During my three visits to El Rodeo I prison, I engaged in informal group conversations that seldom took on the air of an interview. I found this approach to be effective in building a style that did not reproduce the dynamics of an interrogation, which could trigger old traumas and make people feel unsafe. Furthermore, I wasn't trying to get people's biggest secrets, or force anyone in to be more vulnerable than they already were, I mostly wanted a chance to spend time on the inside, see it with my own eyes and learn about the perspectives and experiences of those who are in prison. After each visit, I returned to my laptop, notebook or recorder and wrote down or dictated every detail that I could remember. In some cases I tried to memorize exact quotes but more than likely what follows are approximations. I changed most of the names of the people that I met in prison, however some people insisted that I used their names (most of which were nicknames anyways), and so I am honoring that agreement.

Before I went to Venezuela to conduct my field work, I gave a presentation on my research, the research questions that I had, the goals of my project and how I would accomplish it during a special lecture through the library at Greene Correctional Facility in Greene County, New York. One of the young men who came to the lecture asked me “So, what is this gonna do for them [the people in prison]? What are you going to tell them? Why should they talk to you?” These were all questions that I myself had struggled with, but for the first time since I had wondered I could talk about it with people who were incarcerated (albeit in the US). I answered by saying that no one had to talk to me, and that my plan was to be as real and honest as I knew how to be, to answer any questions that they might have of me about my research, my
perspectives, what I was hoping to get out of it and to be straight-forward that I didn't know how, if at all, the research would benefit them personally and that they had every right to not participate in it if they didn't want to. The guys at Greene agreed that this was a good approach, some of them bemoaned stories of social workers, researchers and NGO workers coming “to help,” or people making promises that they could not deliver on; or simply taking without giving back and not being honest about it.

Through my prison visits, I was guided by the advice that I had gotten. Sometimes, it felt like I was the one being interviewed. People had lots of questions for me: Why was I interested in prisons? Was I scared to come to prison? What did I think that they would be like? What are prisons in the US like? Are they like what you see in the movies? What is the newest model of smart phones? Was I married? What did my partner think about my prison visits? What was I going to do with my research? Would I make money off of it? I tried to answer each of these questions, to the best of my ability, as honestly as I knew how. My experience was that it made for a much richer conversation; I was not asking them to be vulnerable and open without also being willing to share things with them about my life. While some of the guys on the inside were cautious about being exploited for research purposes; most people I spoke with actively encouraged me to try to make money off of publishing a book; it seemed to go without saying that everyone was trying to get paid somehow, and why should I be different?5

In general, I embraced what Joe Kinchloe and Peter McLaren (1994) describe as Critical Ethnography:

We are defining a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concepts and object and signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the

5 This is similar to how Bourgious describes the reaction of Primo and César in his ethnography of the Crack economy in Spanish Harlem.
social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression which characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g. class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. (p. 139-140)

I drew inspiration from the politics and ethics of the Oral History tradition as a means of exploring practical solutions to address and acknowledge power dynamics in research. For the interviews with people on the outside, family members of people in prison and formerly incarcerated people, as well as cultural workers who go inside of prisons, I utilized Oral history principles and practices to guide the interviews. Each of these interviews went over 40 minutes and some lasted an hour and a half. Through this style the interviewees were not my subjects in a social science study, but they were narrators of their own lives, the authorities on their own experience, given the space to reveal (or not) whatever felt relevant and comfortable for them. In these interviews, I utilized open-ended questions that made no assumptions which allowed the narrator to direct the interviews. I also utilized life-history and structural-historical context as an important part of any story and a great jumping off point for understanding the present. I approached each interview as a relationship between the narrator and the interviewee, and I utilized techniques of active listening to create more rapport and make a narrator feel at ease. I would also often leave space for silence in the interview which, in some cases, created powerful opportunities for going deeper without specific questions being used as prompts.

Oral History is guided by reciprocity, a sense of giving back to the person/or community where research is conducted, a commitment that I strive towards. In addition to providing narrators with a full-length un-edited copy of their interviews, I also produced an audio documentary on the Venezuelan prison system which I distributed to most of the people whom I
The documentary, called *Más Allá de las Rejas*, provided the people that I interviewed with a sense of the work that I was doing and left them some preliminary results of my research (in a digestible and reproducible format), and it created a useful conversation piece about prisons. I also distributed the documentary to members of ANMCLA, the National Association of Free and Autonomous Community Media, some of whom aired the program on their community radio stations and I was able to send a link to the documentary via text message to people that I had met on the inside. The main goal of the documentary was to create an analysis that connected the prison to issues of class and poverty instead of crime and violence. Through this research, my goal is not to simply criticize the Venezuelan government although I am certainly planting a “social criticism” of the dehumanizing practice of locking people in cages; which is something that all states currently practice.

**Organization and Chapter Outline**

I have divided my dissertation into three sections, each one represents one prong in my trident method of examining my research questions. In Section I, I explore the theoretical and structural-historical foundations, in Section II I provide an ethnographic examination of the dual prison system in Venezuela, in Section III I examine *carceral coloniality* and I summarize the results of my research in the Conclusions.

In order to examine prisons in Venezuela, it is essential to build off of a theory of the state. In Chapter 1, I theorize the hybrid-post neoliberal state by examining the unsettled co-

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6 The documentary was not without its problems. Some of the people who gave me feedback thought that it was too critical of the government, others felt like it portrayed the *pranes* in too negative of a light and others still felt that the government was portrayed too positively. My foreign accent as narrator also had mixed reviews, community media makers that listened to it thought that my *Gringa* accent completely discredited the piece while youth in the rural and urban areas felt that the foreign accent made the topic seem “important.” Through getting feedback, I also learned that I used prison lingo that a general Venezuelan audience isn’t familiar with.
existence of liberal, neoliberal and post-neoliberal logics and policies, adding further hybridizations to Venezuela’s state formation.

In Chapter 2, I trace the historical development of the Venezuelan prison system and the Venezuelan state, by examining the “work” that the prison has performed since the colonial era and how certain historical continuities are present in Venezuela’s prison system today. I explore how the prison “works” to create a racialized division of punishment; how the prison is utilized to cement the historic class divides between “common prisoners” and political prisoners; and how prison policy has consistently offered a distorted reflection of the actual prison experience, in part due to the lack of resources required to implement penal reforms. Additionally, I explore how prison reforms in Venezuela have embodied Euro-centric concepts of modernity, and enlightenment era thinking on individual rights; all of which were vital in the construction of the liberal nation-state.

In Chapter 3, I explore the shortcomings and utility of theories on prison expansion and rising rates of incarceration in the age of neoliberalism by juxtaposing them with a brief overview of the political economy of crime, policing and prisons in Venezuela. In this chapter I argue that by theorizing Venezuelan statecraft as a hybrid post-neoliberal formation, it is possible to reconcile how “real challenges to the ‘neoliberal world order’ coexist with and even reinforce enduring patterns of exploitation and violence,” such as those seen in the dual prison system (Goodale and Postero, 2013. p 4).

In Chapter 4, I explore the every-day lives of people who interact with the open-regime prisons as a way of shedding light on the neoliberal order and state society relations in post-neoliberal Venezuela. Through tracing my own observations as a visitor inside of El Rodeo I, San Felipe and Vista Hermosa and through the insights that I gleaned through conversations with
inmates and visitors, I investigate how people navigate their everyday relationship with the state, as well as the *carro*, the internal prison authority. While the media tends to refer to these organizations as gangs or mafias, I found that in addition to categorizing the *carros* as such, it also made just as much sense to call them governments and so, I use all of those terms interchangeably.

In Chapter 5, I examine the new regime prisons—comparing them to the open-regime ones in which they are supposed to be antithetical to—and I look at the theoretical discursive underpinnings of contemporary state penal policy in Venezuela by examining the work of the newly-created Ministry of Penitentiary Services and the everyday experiences of people incarcerated in their new regime prisons. I propose that there is a substantial chasm between the progressive and innovative thinking about prisons by leadership in the MSP and the practical reality of life inside of the new regime prisons under their direct control. Despite some radical rhetoric that marks a notable departure from the logics of neoliberal penality and governmentality, the Venezuelan government is not only failing to move *beyond* prisons, but they are moving in a worrisome direction towards prison expansion, *mano dura* style disciplinary measures, anti-gang taskforces, increased surveillance and towards an expansion of the carceral state. I argue that the new regime is a hybrid of neoliberal penality and liberal rehabilitation similar to the past two major prison reform efforts in 1937 and 1961 in Venezuela.

In Chapter 6, I explore the impact of incarceration on the everyday lives of Venezuelans who have loved ones in prison by presenting an Oral History of the Perez family. Through reproducing the testimony of Olivia—whose brother Oscar is in prison—along with the narratives of their parents, Gabriela, and Orlando, I hope to show the practical challenges, humiliation, and frustration that come with supporting a loved one in prison (and through legal proceedings), but
also how the experience altered their lives in such dramatic ways. Their stories demonstrate the deep stigmatization that comes with having a family member in prison in Venezuela and how perceptions of “criminality” create divides within poor and working class communities. Oscar’s experience, as told by his sister and parents, also illuminates the disparities between the new-regime and open-regime system because over the period in which I conducted interviews, he was transferred between these different types of prisons. I am particularly interested in how the experience of Oscar’s incarceration shifted their perspectives on the government, on “justice,” on “criminals” and on the prison as an institution. I argue that there is a change in thinking that results from the experience of seeing prison “from the other side,” and that this perspective creates the possibility to think beyond prisons. I will explore this concept in relation to “border-thinking” in the following chapter.

In Chapter 7, I present a historically and ethnographically rooted framework to demonstrate how Venezuela’s prison system “works”—beyond its stated function as a bureaucratic institution designed to dole out punishment and enforce discipline, but—to (re)produce hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. I present the conceptual framework of carceral coloniality as a lens for understanding the interconnected and overlapping themes of power and domination, on both the material and symbolic level, as they play out in relation to penal confinement in Venezuela. By utilizing Quijano’s concept of coloniality of power as it relates to the prison system, I explore how the “work” of the prison is done through “structures of controlling power” such as authority, sex & sexuality, subjectivity, labor and race. (Taylor, 2014). Based on the notion that the prison is a border, I also introduce Mignolo’s (2005) concept of border-thinking, which I argue holds decolonial promise for a new way of thinking about prisons (Dent and Davis, 2001)
I conclude the dissertation by returning to the two main theoretical threads of this work as they relate to prisons: coloniality and neoliberalism. In Venezuela and Bolivia, the two Latin American countries where the recent political processes underway have demonstrated the greatest rupture with neoliberalism, Goodale and Postero (2013) argue that the movements themselves have made a “discursive link between antineoliberalism and decolonization.” (p.5). I summarize the results of my findings and conclude that the current policies instituted by the Ministry of Penitentiary Services in Venezuela relies on a liberal framework of rights and rehabilitation and not on anti-neoliberal or de-colonial rationalities. Additionally, the open regime prisons in Venezuela today reflect on the continuity of neoliberal policies and practices, as they precisely reflect privatization born out of state abandon and extreme conditions of marginality even within the context of a state geared towards anti-poverty policies. If prison advocacy and activism are to be effective in Venezuela, they must be supported by popular movements and make a decisive break from foreign-funded NGOs that are politically motivated and viewed suspiciously by the Left and by social movements.

Through my findings I engage with a politically urgent debate about the possibilities and constraints of “delinking” from the global capitalist economy and the colonial matrix of power. (Amin, 1990; Mignolo). The prison as an institution cannot be divorced from its colonial antecedents, the mutually reinforcing concepts of euro-centrism, race, sex and sexuality, nor from neoliberal capitalism and modernity/coloniality; therefore, the exploitative and dehumanizing nature of prisons will not be changed by a new regime or a set of reforms; instead, there is a need for new ways of thinking about prisons that do not accept the current systems, structures and ways of thinking as “the only game in town.” (Mignolo) Building off of the anti-neoliberal sentiments present in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela “border-thinking” or thinking
“del otro lado” holds promise for examining transformation of Venezuela’s prison system as connected to a broader decolonial project and therefore as a part of the process of ”delinking.” Within Venezuela’s current shifting political economy, I offer my work, and specifically the elaboration of Venezuela’s state formation as a hybrid in the post neoliberal era, as a key for interpreting the current contradictions and impending economic and political crises. Far from being disillusioned by the failures of the Bolivarian project, I contend that important lessons can be drawn from its successes to counter neoliberal hegemony within the broader context of the colonial neoliberal global capitalist economy.
Chapter One: Hybrid Post-Neoliberal Venezuela

Introduction

Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution has been the subject of much debate and study. In a period when neoliberal restructuring plagued Latin America, transformations in Venezuela re-invigorated the concept that the state could be an engine for development and redistribution. Beyond this, the political process in Venezuela birthed a participatory political protagonism that created venues for self-governance and offered a counter-hegemonic model of politics that challenges long-standing US domination in the region. Communal councils and communes can allot resources towards a wide range of community initiated projects because they are direct recipients of state funds from oil revenue. The nationally supported forms of self-organization and self-rule have spawned the development of housing, distribution of land-titles, the expropriation and collectivization of land, the creation of community-owned productive enterprises, a wide array of cultural initiatives and community media outlets, the designation of communal space and proposals for “communal” property. These truly fascinating and innovative forms of organization warrant examination which is why they have been the focus of study by many scholars on the left who seek to understand the methods by which self-determined communities govern themselves and the complex relationship to the petro-state that backs such experiments. These localized models of organization function alongside national programs that guarantee free education and healthcare, improved transportation, subsidized food and housing, and virtually free gasoline.

Under the dynamic and controversial leadership of the late President Hugo Rafael Chavéz, Venezuela became a breeding ground for experiments in new state-society relations and
the reinvigoration of a strong state as a key actor in guaranteeing the basic needs of Venezuelans, which stands in stark opposition to the politics of neoliberalism that had dominated the region in the decades following the 1980’s. But, critical scholarship on Venezuela’s Bolivarian Republic has failed to fully engage with all aspects of the state, while focusing on the social welfare side or the state-as-benefactor and distributor of oil rents or even the premise suggested by social movements that Venezuela could develop into a “communal state,” these analyses fail to account for many other important and increasingly relevant functions of the Venezuelan state, namely the prisons.

For Boudieu (1996), the welfare state is composed of contradictory forces, which he divides into the little State nobility (social workers, teachers, nurses, public servants, etc…) and the grand state nobility (judges, military officers, politicians, etc…) which he refers to as ‘the left hand’ and ‘the right hand’ of the state, respectively. He notes that “shifts to neoliberalism…have intensified the contradiction between these forces” (Christoforou & Lainé, 2014, p. 59). This is demonstrated best when, due to crisis and austerity, the right-hand often imposes cuts on ‘the left hand’ of the state. The promise that the market would ultimately replace the state through neoliberal restructuring not only failed to be true, but the move towards neoliberalism created a necessity for new theories on the state which could reflect the shifting ways in which some aspects of the state were noticeably weakened and starved while other parts of the state remained intact or, in some cases were expanding to play an even greater roles in people’s lives.

Wacquant (2009b, 2010) builds off of and re-adapts this configuration of the state by characterizing the ‘left hand’ broadly as ‘the social welfare’ side which is considered to be symbolically ‘feminine’ since it plays the care-taking roles of state function. The ‘right hand,’ especially in the neoliberal age is described as ‘the disciplinary’ side of the state that is
symbolically ‘masculine’ and is charged with punishment. Wacquant utilizes this formulation, in which he attributes prisons and policing to ‘the right hand of the state,’ to theorize about the growing rates of incarceration in the US and Europe—despite falling rates of crime—in the age of neoliberalism. The separation of these two aspects of the state enable him to theorize about varied functions of the state and their interaction with neoliberal economic policies. Veronica Schild utilizes a similar lens for examining institutional transformations in Chile and she concludes that, far from creating a post-neoliberal order, the Chilean state is entering a new phase of neoliberal formation, which she calls “the enabling state.” In the enabling state, there is the ‘ameliorative’ side of the ‘caring state’ combined with the ‘disciplinary’ side of the ‘punitive state.’ While each of these theoretical configurations have their own variations, they all demonstrate attempts to fill gaps in theorizing the neoliberal state formation and the contradictory and varied roles that the state plays in the neoliberal era. While states have historically played these roles, as providers and disciplinarians, this theoretical tool is most useful when examining the contradictory elements within the state in the neoliberal and post-neoliberal period which is why it is so useful for examining the tensions within contemporary Venezuelan statecraft.

Much of the analysis on Venezuela produced by scholars, journalists and the international left have focused on ‘the caring state’ but have rarely looked at the punitive and disciplinary side; the prisons and the police. The political danger with examining ‘the right hand’ of the Venezuelan state is that ‘the opposition’—which is inclusive of the Venezuelan right-wing elite, international capital, the US government and the media that represents their interests—have been trying to wrestle the state out from the hands of the Leftist government for over a decade and therefore the bulk of critical exploration of the Armed Forces, the prisons and the police are
nested in the political interests of the opposition who claim that the Venezuelan government is a “dictatorship,” and a “repressive regime” as fodder to advocate for regime change. My research takes up the challenge to analyze both ‘the caring’ and ‘the punitive’ dimensions of Venezuelan statecraft in the post-neoliberal era. Since there is a large and diverse body of knowledge on the social welfare programs, political organization, and the community councils and communes, I have chosen to focus my research on prisons and the penal system in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela as a means of examining ‘the punitive’ side of the state (Wilpert, 2007; Fernandes, 2010, Martinez, Fox and Farrell, 2010; Smilde, D., & Hellinger, 2011).

Recognizing that the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela could not be categorized cleanly as either neo-liberal or anti-neoliberal, Sujatha Fernandes (2010) conceives of Venezuela as a “hybrid post-neoliberal” state. She arrives at this conclusion through observing how barrio residents must reconcile the pro-poor social programs and government rhetoric with their lived experiences of police harassment and racism within their neighborhoods and government agencies. Additionally this “hybrid” formulation of the state addresses the contradictions between Venezuela’s national policies and rhetoric and its position as an oil producing nation within the global capitalist economy.

While doing research in Venezuela's prisons, I repeatedly found this concept extremely useful. When I asked people in prison about their perspective on the government, most people immediately started talking about the police or the National Guard (GNB). While many of the same people supported the policies that maintained the subsidized food markets, and the healthcare programs that they and their families benefited from, for them ‘the government’ was first and foremost, the police. The most cogent and relevant insights on Venezuelan statecraft and neoliberal logics are gained through examining how marginalized people reconcile the
contradictions between the left and the right hand of the state, between government rhetoric and their own experiences. Since the prisons are full of people from poor and marginalized communities that are held captive by the state, they are incredibly fertile terrains for examining state-society relations and for further theorizing the hybrid post-neoliberal state.

In this chapter I establish the theoretical framework for analyzing the “work” of prisons in Bolivarian Venezuela and also how neoliberal, liberal and anti-neoliberal rationalities and policies shape prisons, the Venezuelan state and the everyday lives of people who come into contact with the prison system through exploring the hybrid post-neoliberal state formation suggested by Fernandes and augmenting this formulation with three additional hybridizations of the state. I conclude by presenting a theoretical framework that balances the examination of structures with subjectivities and utilizes neoliberalism—both in terms of policies, rhetoric and governmentality—as a lens for examining prisons in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela.

**Dissecting the Hybrid Post-Neoliberal State**

The hybrid post-neoliberal state is constituted by liberal, neoliberal and post-neoliberal rationalities and policies; a hybrid that borrows from these varied political and economic traditions in potentially contradictory ways. In this section, I will dissect the hybrid post-neoliberal state by examining each component, liberalism, neoliberalism and anti-neoliberalism. While these ways of thinking, governing, and managing the economy are generally associated with particular historical periods in Venezuela, I argue that a hybrid of these rationalities are employed in the post-neoliberal period (Fernandes, 2010). While the Bolivarian Revolution promoted anti-neoliberal thinking and policies, neoliberal governmentality has not been fully abandoned. The neoliberal trajectory that has been a hegemonic force in Latin America for
nearly two decades has simply been “interrupted” and Venezuela is now “grappling with the legacy of neoliberalism” (Postero, 2011; Fernandes, 2011, p.24) After outlining the characteristics and underlying logics of rentier liberalism, neoliberalism and antineoliberalism, I will engage with Sujatha Fernande’s characterization of Venezuela’s state formation as hybrid that encompasses all three aspects, just as some definitions of hybrid vehicles attest to “using more than one power source” (plurg)

**Rentier Liberalism**

Any analysis of the Venezuelan state from the 20th Century on must place an emphasis on the production and export of oil. Coronil (1997) argues that the Venezuelan state, as owner of the oil-rich subsoil, became the central focus of political struggle; whomever controlled the state would also control the oil wealth (p. 139). As the Venezuelan state became consolidated around the management and distribution of oil rent, struggles for democracy were synonymous with the redistribution of oil wealth (p. 89). The visions of grandeur, decadence, and escape from third-world poverty became key components to “the Venezuelan Dream” (p. 5). The state and its appearance of unimaginable wealth, stemming from oil, was made to appear fantastic, or as Coronil (1997) calls it, “magical” because of its seemingly supernatural powers to unite the nation (p. 4).

During the growth of the oil economy, the state was converted into both a landlord and capitalist because it charged oil rents to private corporations for their right to explore for, drill and extract oil (Coronil, 1997, p. 65). Since the incomes derived through the payments of oil rents are not inherently linked to production—and therefore defined as a source of unearned income—the Venezuelan state became a rentier state in the 20th Century, as a recipient of this
form of economic ‘rent.’ The state became a player in the global capitalist economy, with the foreign exchange accumulated through oil rent and derivatives from the petro-sector, the state-run oil company (PDVSA) did less extracting, processing and exporting of crude than they did of negotiating with transnational oil companies. The particularities of an economy organized around oil rents creates inherent dependencies that are difficult to escape.

On a structural level, this economic model based on “nature exporting”, trapped Venezuela in an affliction that he calls “neo-colonial disease.” (Coronil, 1997 p. 7)

Even when these nations seek to break their colonial dependence on primary exports by implementing development plans directed at diversifying their economies, they typically rely on foreign exchange obtained by exporting primary products, intensifying their dependence on those commodities (Fernandes, 2011, p.7). For Venezuela, since the 1920’s oil became the primary export and today, 95 percent of Venezuela’s foreign exchange come from exporting petroleum. This “magic” of the state is that “thousands of individuals and families live off its fruits of power and wealth” (Dennis, 2015).

Additionally, this dynamic marks the very nature of the Venezuelan capitalist class which, for the past century has largely been comprised of financial capitalists as opposed to industrial capitalists. This classification of Venezuela as a rentier state helps to explain some of the particularities to their political economy. For example, since conflicts tend to surface between labor and the industrial capitalist class, Venezuela’s position as a rentier state with a financial capitalist class marks how labor relations are negotiated, and in Venezuela a series of labor struggles have taken place specifically within the oil sector. In rentier liberalism, traditional ideas around “the republic” as espoused by Bolívar and the nation’s “founders” were mixed with the “transfigured liberal ideals of social actors who imagined modern Venezuela as a community of citizens bound by a common link to their motherland’s natural body” and therefore to the oil-wealth that it spawned (Coronil, p. 84).
The shared organizing principle was that in the rentier state, all members of the Republic are entitled to the wealth generated through charging foreign corporations rent to exploit Venezuelan resources. Since the founding of the Fourth Republic, which birthed the Petro- Democracy through the Punto Fijo pact of 1958, a trickle down of oil wealth generated work in the services and financial sectors in cities and many poor and working class Venezuelans cashed in on the easy money made available in urban centers through the rising cost of oil on the international market. As a result between 1958-1960 “400,000 mostly poor people, moved to Caracas in little more than a year” in a process of rapid urbanization that Davis (2006) describes as growing at “African velocity” because in the first decade of the petro-democracy (1960s) Venezuela went from being “30 percent rural to 30 percent urban” (p.59). The popular idea of wealth-sharing that characterized this period (1958-1970s) was also based on clientelistic political relations in which resources were distributed in exchange for political votes and loyalty for the two dominant political parties (AD & COPEI).

The “magical state” explains how the Venezuelan state is intimately linked to the international capitalist economy through the sale of oil; how the domestic capitalist class are more closely aligned with financial capital than industrial capital; and how struggles for democracy in Venezuela have been historically rooted in struggles to control the state and share the wealth that naturally flows from the country’s subsoil. The tenets of wealth-sharing inherent in the liberal rentier state were sharply challenged when oil prices fell and the debt crisis of the 1980s ravaged the region. With a drop in income generated by rents, hyper-inflation, and a mounting debt, if the financial-political class were to continue enriching themselves there would simply not be enough to go around. It is within this context that there was a rupture with the past and a new political-economy was imposed on Venezuela, this new era was marked by neoliberal
Restructuring shock therapy that ushered the newly-made middle classes and the residents of the highly populated urban centers into extreme poverty.

**Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is comprised of three core components; a strict application of economic policies wedded to the neoclassical doctrine of “free trade”, privatization, deregulation, and austerity; the orientation of economies towards export (and growth of GDP) as opposed to self-sufficiency; and, a cultural-political project and logic that is rooted in individualism, consumerism, rational-choice and the market. This last component includes Foucault’s concept of governmentality, which Fernandes (2010) combines with Gramsci’s use of hegemony to also define neoliberalism as “contested forms of power that play out in people’s everyday existence” (24). Wendy Brown (2015) sees this process as an “‘economization’ of political life and other heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities” (p. 17). For most Venezuelans, neoliberalism is associated with an historical era, specifically the 1990’s.

In Venezuela, neoliberalism was applied through “*El Gran Viraje,*” an IMF loan package that was conditional on the implementation of structural adjustment policies. Within months of signing the agreement, mounting poverty, rising costs of food and transportation, and scarcity of goods (largely due to speculation by the financial capitalist class) pushed poor and middle-class Venezuelans to their limits. Venezuelan urban centers erupted into popular protests during the *Caracazo* uprising on February 27, 1989 in what is said to be the first popular revolt against neoliberalism in the world. (Ellner and Tinker Salas, 2007). The National Guard was sent in to control the protests, and they killed hundreds of thousands of people when, in the days following the revolt, they indiscriminately shot rounds into densely populated high-rise housing units.
Poor Venezuelans swiftly rejected neoliberal policies in spite of a deeply entrenched consumerist logic stemming from “the Venezuelan Dream” (Coronil, 1997). This early, and near instantaneous denunciation of neoliberal reforms created pathways for a popular anti-neoliberal sentiment. In Venezuela, neoliberalism is popularly associated with poverty, hunger, unemployment, scarcity, and state violence.

Despite movements towards privatization throughout Venezuela, the oil sector remained nationalized and even though it was run like a private enterprise (as a capitalist rentier) the state remained the rightful owner of the valuable subsoil even during the neoliberal era. But because the logic of “the market” dominated in the neoliberal era, state control of oil was viewed as an “impediment rather than a tool for progress” (Fernandes, p. 21). While the state maintained control over the oil sector, the state itself was weakened on many fronts, making room for the hegemony of “the market.” For Venezuela, this meant becoming even more entrenched in and dependent on international markets as the mediators and distributors of oil rents. The deep economic dependence between the Venezuelan state and international markets forged during the liberal era only became exacerbated through neoliberal globalization.

State subsidies on gasoline were removed which instantly led to price increases on food, transportation and all imported goods. The capitalist class, who are linked to the oil sector and have strong ties to international capital economically benefited from the re-orientation of the economy away from minimal wealth re-distribution towards a hey-day of the concentration of wealth, spurred by their total control of the oil sector (by means of control of the state apparatus), deregulation of the financial sector, and through control and distribution of imports which allowed for speculation on highly-demanded consumer goods by poor Venezuelans. In 1990, 6.7 percent of children under the age of 5 were malnourished in Venezuela (the number fell to 2.9 in
As the façade of democracy became increasingly transparent, regular Venezuelans who had participated in the clientelistic two-party machine for decades, some of whom had strongly identified political loyalties became skeptical of the entire political class and associated politicians, the rich and anyone who was prospering, while the majorities were suffering. Even the *Reganomics* logic that have served to maintain the power of the elite did not translate in a Venezuelan context, the capitalist class were not understood as “job creators” nor “investors” they were instead seen by the popular classes as “parasites,” living in opulence of a resource that rightfully belonged to all Venezuelans. This popular discontent fueled 2 military coup attempts in 1992 and 1993, the first led by Chávez and the second led by other members of his Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement (MBR). It is these two coups, combined with the 1989 popular uprising, that are the antecedents to the election of Hugo Chávez and the spread of anti-neoliberal values associated with the Bolivarian Revolution (Ciccarelli-Maher, 2013). It is these ruptures with the tyranny neoliberalism, taken on by popular movements, that ushered Venezuelan into a post-neoliberal era guided by anti-neoliberal thinking.

**Anti-Neoliberalism**

President Chavez was elected 9 years following the 1989 Caracazo Uprising on the platform of ending corruption (and the rule of the entrenched two party-system), creating a new Constitutional Assembly, and reducing poverty. After the political opposition—which represented the interests of the international capitalist class, the United States government and the former political elite—attempted to remove President Chávez from office by launching a

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military coup in 2002 and organizing a manager’s lockout of the oil sector in 2003, polarization between the *chavistas* and the *opposition* grew and the political project initiated was transformed into a decidedly anti-neoliberal platform (Wilpert, 2007).

As opposed to austerity programs, the government launched a series of Misiones or social programs intended to reduce extreme poverty by directly funneling resources from the state oil company, PDVSA into programs around housing, healthcare, education, nutrition, job training, water, etc… Instead of following the doctrine of free-trade, Chávez spoke out adamantly against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), a proposed US backed regional trading block that was finally defeated in 2005. Rejecting the principles of Free Trade, President Chávez also initiated ALBA (*Alternativas Bolivarianas para las Américas*) a regional trading bloc built on principles of solidarity and cooperation instead of comparative advantage and competition. Another goal of the proposal was to foster cooperation in Latin America as a means of challenging US hegemony in the region.

The Venezuelan state went through distinct phases and what began as nationalism and belief in the “endogenous” developed into the concept of “21st Century Socialism” as a means of promoting a third way that included private and public ownership and relied on both the market and state planning. From 2005-2013, under Chávez’s leadership the Venezuelan government experimented with various models of production; the state offered loans, training and incentives for cooperatives which lead to a gigantic boom in 2006 (which was followed by a bust since many cooperatives were merely incorporated on paper and others lacked the markets, transportation, skills, organizational know-how or state accompaniment that would have been required for their success). In 2012, the state re-oriented towards Enterprises of Social Property (ESP), state-run productive initiatives, few of which were self-managed by the workers, and in
2014, the push focused on Networks of Free and Associated Agricultural Producers (REPLA)s which simply attempted to organize all producers independent of their form of organization or their status as a cooperatives, ESPs or as private producers.

The government also promoted the formation of socio-productive projects through micro-credit loans and training, which oriented production around satisfying localized needs therefore creating production-based income-streams. *Mision madres del barrio* and many communal councils and communes formed socio-productive projects between 2008-2015, some of which were successes and others which struggled or ultimately fell apart. While the Venezuelan government did not find the key that unlocked productive capacities in Venezuela and overcame their reliance on the oil sector and the cheap imports that accompany, the government did not follow the trend towards privatization in this period.

In 2005 land expropriations in Venezuela were initiated, following the 2001 Land Laws which set the legal precedence for reclaiming fallow land so that it could be utilized for production. Between 2005-2012 it is estimated that the government appropriated roughly 4 million hectares (9.9 million acres) but other notable land occupations led by peasant organizations over the last few years have failed to garner government support (Carlson, 2012).

The 1999 Constitution, Venezuela’s *Magna Carta* also protects Venezuela’s natural resources, making privatization of natural resources unconstitutional and protecting indigenous land rights. Title deeds to land have been slowly handed from the government to indigenous communities such as the Yukpa, but other indigenous communities have not received titles to their land or do not recognize the governments’ authority to grant titles in the first place. This is controversial as some people see land titling as creating legal claim to land (and thus the ability to take loans, sell it or profit from it) whereas others see land titling as pushing control of land into the market-
place and therefore a move towards privatization (Davis, 2007).

The Bolivarian Constitution and the web of new laws and policies that stem from it also place regulations on work-place safety, worker’s rights, and protections for indigenous territories and the environment. For example, the Venezuelan government just walked away from a potentially lucrative government driven mining project, supposedly due to concerns over contamination and the violation of the rights of indigenous peoples but struggles with social movements and indigenous communities against coal mining in the Perija continue (Koerner, 2015). In an era of mass deregulation, the Venezuelan Constitution and the subsequent organic laws and regulatory policies that followed have actually extended government as a regulating force of the business sector. These actions have been wildly unpopular with the capitalist class, the Right, and to a certain degree, small and mid-sized business owners alike.

One of the greatest efforts and formidable challenges of the Bolivarian Revolution has been to spark a cultural-ideological battle against neoliberalism and capitalist logic. And while there has been a dramatic shift in the ideology of the popular classes, changing cultural habits and shifting social relations has proved to be far more challenging. My favorite story that I like to share on this topic (and I have many,) demonstrates the pervasiveness of a popular rejection of neoliberalism in Venezuela.

Early in 2006, I joined a brigade of volunteers to dig trenches and set up a temporary campsite at a park outside of Caracas that would host international attendees of the World Social Forum. After working in the hot sun for many hours, we all stopped to take a break. Two young chavistas, wearing their iconic red t-shirts sat a few feet from me under the shade of a tree. One of them opened a coca-cola and began to gulp down sips and then, this is roughly, the dialogue that I overheard.
Chavista 1: Did you know that Coca-Cola is bad?
Chavista 2: No. Why?
Chavista 1: Chávez said that it has to do with neoliberalism.
Chavista 2: No, I had no idea. Well then, Coca-Cola is bad.

This conversation took place between two working class Venezuelans in a moment when the concept of neoliberalism had barely made its way into college classrooms in the United States. As Venezuelans re-oriented their own ideological compasses and wide swaths of the popular classes and middle-class government-supporters developed political positions rooted in anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism and anti-neoliberalism, many Venezuelans struggled to reconcile these new beliefs with embedded social practices, reliance on corporate products and deeply brand-conscious style and savviness that developed from decades of dependency on imports. For over a decade, many social movement leaders have commented on how the culture of individualism, corruption, and consumerism in Venezuela remain as the most difficult internal obstacles for the creation of socialism (Martinez, Fox and Farrell, 2010).

The “post” that precedes neoliberal, when referring to the post-neoliberal era, does not imply that the state has fully escaped neoliberalism, it simply means that some of the programs that I mentioned above are “incompatible” with neoliberal logic (Fernandes, 2010, 23). While there are conflicting statistics about the increases in national production had increased under Chavez, 95% of the GDP in 2014 came from the oil sector. Venezuela’s state formation can be defined as post-neoliberal because, it “has adopted significant anti-neoliberal reforms, while ongoing subjection to the requirements of a global economy [that] has given impetus to neoliberal rationalities and techniques in a range of state and non-state arenas” (Fernandes, 2010, p. 22). As I use this framework of post-neoliberalism throughout my dissertation, I am referring to a time-period following the election of Hugo Chávez in which anti-neoliberal policies and
rationalities co-exist with the enduring logics of neoliberalism and liberalism. Additionally, I distinguish anti-neoliberal projects, which imply a progressive moving beyond neoliberalism, with non-neoliberal policies that regressively revert to and reinforce the liberal state formation. Post-neoliberalism is a triad-hybrid that draws from these three traditions.

Roland Dennis (2015), a public intellectual, scholar and former Director of Planning of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuelan (2002-2003) argues that “history continues to be defined by the confrontation between these three forces” which he names as “a corporate-bureaucratic republic which stands in confrontation to [both] the self-governed republic created by the grassroots, and, of course the neoliberal republic driven by the Right.” I argue that the contemporary Venezuelan State is not only a key battleground between these forces but it is also an actor that contains, reproduces, and perpetuates these conflicting forms of power, organization and thinking in the postneoliberal era.

Hybrids

Nestor García Canclini (2005) develops the concept of hybrids as he rejects euro-centric concepts of social evolutionism and attempts to explore the tensions between liberal emancipatory (modern) characteristics inter-woven with authoritarian and archaic (traditional) features, understanding that Latin American states are “caught between traditions that have not yet gone and a modernity that has not yet arrived” (Rosaldo, 1989, xi). Canclini(1995) suggests that hybrids could be used to explain the “multitemporal heterogeneity of each nation” (p. 3). Borrowing from this formulation, I see the liberal, neoliberal and anti-neoliberal tendencies not as only specific and contained historical moments but as embodied by the hybrid post-neoliberal state in a “multitemporal heterogeneity.”
Describing Venezuela as a “hybrid state formation that has mounted certain challenges to the neoliberal paradigm but which remains subject to the internal and external constraints of global capital,” only represents one aspect of its hybridity (Fernandes, 2010, p. 23). I propose three additional meanings of the forms of hybridization of Venezuelan statecraft; the first builds off of Bourdieu’s distinction between the two hands of the state, the second conceptualizes the hybrid nature of neoliberalism’s classed policies, and the third explains the divided nature of the Venezuelan government itself. These formulations are described below as the ambidextrous state; the “centaur state”, borrowing from Wacquant(2010); and, what I call the divergent state. Thus, the hybrid post-neoliberal state that is central to my examination of prisons in Venezuela is constituted by an inherently hybrid post-neoliberal order as well as the following forms of hybrid statecraft.

The Ambidextrous State

While it was French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who first suggested this distinction between the left hand the right hand of the state, others have adapted this conception specifically to analyze the caring side or the social welfare side of the state versus the disciplinary or punitive side of the state (Schild, 2013; Wacquant, 2010) But in an interview with Le Monde Bourdieu defines the social workers, nurses, and public administrators as

…what I call the left hand of the state, the set of agents of the so-called spending ministries which are the trace, within the state, of the social struggles of the past. They are opposed to the right hand of the state, the technocrats of the Ministry of Finance, the public and private banks and the ministerial cabinets.

He goes on to assert that “A number of social struggles that we are now seeing (and will see) express the revolt of the minor state nobility against the senior state nobility.” Bourdieu is referring to the crisis of neoliberalism in Europe and the state’s withdraw from “sectors of social
life for which it was previously responsible: social housing, public service broadcasting, schools, hospitals, etc.,” Interestingly, Wacquant thoroughly re-adapts this formula of the right and left hand of the state and focuses on the punitive aspects of the right hand of the state, which Bourdieu sees as punitive in terms of slashing budgets and restricting social spending, and Wacquant expands to refer to the repressive and disciplinary function of the state, primarily the police, prisons, and courts.

The re-formulation of Bourdieu’s ambidextrous state is perhaps more relevant to analyzing prisons in Venezuela than his original meaning. For Bourdieu and the Europe that he examines, it is the austerity imposed by the right hand of government onto the left that demonstrates “the failure of the state as the guardian of the public interest.” In Venezuela, the context is different and while social spending has increased over the last decade (although more recently, it has slightly contracted) it is the disciplinary function of the state, the right hand the Wacquant describes that best illustrates “the failure of the state as the guardian of the public interest” more-so than the harsh reality of economic austerity.

So while Wacquant(2010) and Schild(2013) pay homage to Bourdieu’s formulation, they drastically alter its meaning so that the theory better serves them in analyzing neoliberalism in the Americas. The metaphor of two hands is simply an illustration of the hybrid nature of the state which can and often does have opposing interests; this is not to preclude a brain or a general coordination between these two aspects but nonetheless the flesh and blood personnel of each side may find themselves in direct conflict with the other. But despite the tensions and conflict, these two hands serve a common master and they enable one another (Schild, 2013).

The ambidextrous state illustrates how in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the state exercises broad responsibility over the social needs of the population and simultaneously plays
the role of punishing the poor. In other words, what is the relationship between the social missions and the prisons? How do poor Venezuelans make sense of the government when they are assisted through social programs and yet harassed by the police? And, as theorists, journalists and critical activists, how do we reconcile the progressive extension of social spending in Venezuela with the alarming increases in the prison population? I propose that separating the two hands—even if just as an intellectual exercise—will actually provide a sharper analysis of the whole.

**The Centaur State**

Neoliberal policies, despite the doctrine of lasseiz-faire, do not in practice amount to a universal withdraw of the state from the political, economic, and social lives of people in a given society. While friends and foes of neoliberalism have traditionally asserted that the market assumes centrality over the state, this practice is varied among different social sectors. While neoliberal restructuring may imply less state intervention in the financial sector and therefore less state intervention for the capitalist class, the poor tend to experience an increased state involvement, namely through interventions by the police, military, paramilitary, courts or prisons.

The appropriate visual for this hybrid is a “centaur,” the body of a human on top and below the body of a horse below, demonstrating a gentle touch to the classes on top and brute force aimed at the classes below (Wacquant, 2010, p. 212). Wacquant (2010) explains: “the soft touch of libertarian proclivities favoring the upper class gives way to the hard edge of authoritarian oversight, as it endeavors to direct, nay dictate, the behavior of the lower class” (p. 214). This is premised on the assumption that with rising inequality and social insecurity as a
result from neoliberal restructuring, the state is called on to manage, control, repress and warehouse the poor people for whom legal means of survival are no longer options.

This sketch of the neoliberal “centaur state” handily applies to Venezuela in the 1990’s, during the height of neoliberal policies. The IMF loan package, that was dubbed “El Gran Viraje,” enacted a series of deregulatory measures that cut government subsidies, reduced or eliminated taxes in an effort to attract foreign investment and generally unburdened those at the top from state interference in their business practices and wealth accumulation schemes. Although corruption was widespread prior to and throughout this period, government controls were lessened and corrupt politicians were not held accountable for their theft. The lack of legal means of survival following neoliberal restructuring pushed many Venezuelans into the informal and often illicit marketplace. Directly following the widespread rejection of neoliberal policies that culminated in the 1989 Caracazo popular uprising, the Venezuelan Armed forces were sent to repress the looters and rioting that had erupted throughout Caracas and other north-central urban centers. Soldiers indiscriminately fired on the huge housing projects and poor barrios, killing residents and filling the concrete structures with bullet holes, some of which can still be seen today. Just as neoliberalism was being forcefully imposed on Venezuelans, the state presence dramatically increased, instead of subsiding, as posited by neoclassical theory.

Despite broad participation by diverse sectors of Venezuelan society in the looting and protesting as well as class variance among those who live in the barrios, popular images associated barrio residents with uncontrollable criminal dark-sinned masses, which fueled heightened policing and an increase in the prison population (Tablante, 2006). Venezuela’s prison population rates soared in the early nineties, even despite the implementation of policies aimed at decreasing the numbers in over-crowded prisons (Morais de Guerrero, 2011, p.276).
So, while the state most certainly withdrew subsidies on oil, food, and transportation and the social service sector was marked by austerity, the policing of poor communities and the growth of prison population demonstrated a clear expansion of the state’s reach. In this period, crack-cocaine had also been introduced into poor communities and much of the increase in the prison population can be attributed to the war on drugs, especially among the female prison population. (Morais de Guerrero 2011, p. 276; Del Olmo, 1995).

While the right hand of the state expanded through increased policing and higher rates of incarceration, the “caring” left hand of the state contracted both inside and outside of Venezuela’s prison walls. There were harsh cuts in spending on social services on the outside, but the lack of services inside of Venezuelan prisons, especially considering the massive overcrowding, were even more dramatic. In a 1997 Human Rights Watch report on the Venezuelan prison system, the authors describe poor infrastructure, lack of access to healthcare (resulting in the outbreak of Tuberculosis and HIV), overcrowding, violence, and an inhumane slow judicial process. Ironically, while state power expanded to intervene in the lives of poor people by putting record-high numbers of people in prison, the lack of social spending that marked this era also meant that there was a verifiable retreat of the state within the prison walls and it is largely due to this dynamic that inmate self-rule developed inside of Venezuelan prisons. While the particularities of state withdraw from the prisons complicates the narrative, the picture that Wacquant paints of the neoliberal hybrid “centaur state” accurately describes the state’s varied policies towards the rich and the poor during the neoliberal era in Venezuela. For the poor in Venezuela, the concept that neoliberal restructuring implies a disappearance of the state is absurd because in practice, the neoliberal era was marked by increased policing, a military presence in the barrios, state repression, and rising rates of incarceration.
The Divergent State

The third hybridization of the Venezuelan state rests on the fact that the government is not uniformly engaged in the Bolivarian process. While this may be obvious, and it is most certainly the case that the personnel that make up the government do not uniformly hold a shared political vision, as is the case everywhere, this has some important implications for the organization of state power in Venezuela. The media portrays Venezuelans as “government supporters” and government “opposition,” especially since the passing of Chávez has complicated the short-hand use of chavistas. But, these categorizations fail to explain the forms of state organization that have been developed in the face of the political turmoil and state transformation since the formation of the Bolivarian Republic.

Despite national leadership from Chávez and now Maduro, large portions of the technocrats and bureaucrats as well as notable amount of elected officials at the national, state and local levels are not, as defined by social movements, actively advancing the aims of the Bolivarian Revolution. This divide cuts two ways: there are government institutions and personnel which are firmly linked to the ancien régime and they are considered “the opposition from within” the government and, on the other hand, there are technocrats and bureaucrats and elected officials that assumed their positions in the name of the Revolution but whom are suspected by social movement leaders to use their positions for personal gain or to maintain power as opposed to advancing Chávez’s legacy. In 2011, debate started to surface about “oficialismo” versus “chavismo” on various online forums. The class of red-t-shirt touting state-workers who were living comfortably off of the state whether or not they were actually working in support of expanded resources for the poor, came to be known as the Boliburgesa. So, the
terms “government supporters” and government opposition fail to explain the divergent state in Venezuela; the ways in which the state actually developed in different directions as a result of the divides. This divide might be best illustrated by the divergent experiences of dealing with state institutions. For example, I have visited with offices of government officials in opposition controlled parts of the country, in which the culture of the elite class permeates their ongoing operations; cafeitos are served in porcelain cups by darker-skinned servants and the office is adorned with high-end imported furniture and an abundance of computers, telephones and other markers of technological modernity. Meanwhile, across the tracks, there are government offices that have no bathrooms, no running water, no functioning telephones or internet; giving off the air that these are the institutions “of the people.”

During the founding of the Bolivarian Republic, there has been a consistent presence of opposition that are overtly or covertly working against the stated aims of the Revolution from within the state apparatus. This has been accomplished through using positions of power and influence to create intended inefficiencies and sabotage or simply to fuel forms of corruption that have long been practiced in the Venezuelan petro-state. But this creates a complex predicament because there are many individuals who “oppose the government” that are actually themselves in the government, and they still control certain institutions. Despite various attempts to weed out corrupt officials, some of the old guard has remained within the very institutions that are most relevant for my research; the judiciary, the prosecutors, the prison administrators, municipal police forces, and so on because

it is rare that a political or social revolution is so complete that judges, elite lawyers, and other legal functionaries are displaced entirely, in part because it is so difficult to replace them. They are the enduring personnel of state structures.” (Hay, p. 417).

In the early years (1998-2002) of Chávez’s first term, this was true of almost all of the government ministries and institutions. His election, and the election of other members of his
popular electoral movement (MVR) did not transform the government overnight and tough internal battles were fought to actually assume control over various sectors of the state apparatus. After advancing a series of political reforms in 1999-2000, the political opposition utilized their ongoing control of PDVSA, the Venezuelan oil company to organize a manager’s lockout in 2003, in response Chávez initiated a popularly-supported take-over of the oil company and replaced a large portion of government personnel. Control over the state apparatus by the Chavista leadership was a slow process, formulated on numerous mini-coups, takeovers and reorganizations of the government but because the Bolivarian Revolution was always predicated on democracy, elections and non-violence, many personnel, habits and institutions from the previous regimes endured well into the era of economic and state transformation (2004-2008) and some persist today. To avoid or maneuver around the opposition from within as well as the entrenched corruption in the Ministries and state and municipal governments, Chávez created National Social Missions, with the goal of funneling oil money directly into social programs that focused on education, healthcare, employment, homelessness, and nutrition. The Missions were designed to sidestep existing government institutions and ministries so that resources could be distributed from the newly-commandeered oil sector directly to those in need of the services.

From the era of political reforms (1999-2000), through the opposition’s attempt at destabilization (2001-2003), and into the period of economic transformation (2004-2008), stagnation and uncertainty (2009-2013) and even economic crisis and recession (2013-2015), the state has been re-formulated, re-organized, and “shaken up.”

The early part of this process has been through the creation of new government institutions and Ministries, some of which immediately replace

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8 This periodization was provided via personal communications by Gregory Wilpert. The reference to the “shake up” refers to President Maduro’s reorganization of Ministries and Ministers in September, 2014. (See: TeleSUR, Maduro Announces ‘Five Big Revolutions’ in Venezuela, Overhauls Cabinet” September 8, 2014.)
older systems but others which co-exist alongside the older forms of organization, acting as a shadow institution advancing a counter-politics from existing institutions.

Through the peaceful electoral process that ushered Chavez into power and the constitutional reforms that accompanied it, a cornerstone of the strategy for state transformation in Venezuela was guided by how to create structures that would avoid the existing government institutions that represented the old corrupt political class. The social missions were the first attempt to do so, and later the various development banks, the communal councils and then, the communes were all mechanisms to deliver resources to people who needed them without utilizing pre-existing government institutions. This strategy was initially based on avoiding and the opposition within the government rather than confronting it but through the period of the greatest economic transformation (2004-2008), control of institutions responsible for the allocation of resources had largely been taken over and incorporated into the project towards 21st Century Socialism. Personnel and institutions representing the right hand of the state, the police, the prisons, and the courts still remained in the hands of the old political class, despite various attempts to institute sweeping reforms.

Forcing out the notoriously corrupt old political elite from key institutions did not put an end to corruption. The expansion of the state and the workforce of state employees expanded greatly, as the transformations advanced by government leadership required an army of personnel and numerous new institutions and structures and as social movements developed new forms of political participation and self-governance grassroots Venezuelans began to identify their communal forms of organization as part of the state, this logic gave legitimacy to communal claims to Venezuela’s valuable subsoil and, through communal councils, communes, and missions, sizable sums of oil money were placed into the hands of local organizations as a
part of the ongoing redistribution of oil-rents combined with attempts to avoid whole sectors of the state. Corruption persisted and during the period of stagnation and uncertainty (2009-2013) concerns about corruption inside of the chavista government and communal councils grew. The privileges of government officials and the blatant displays of wealth contrasted sharply with the still struggling poor communities who were the electoral backbone of the chavista wave and following the 2008 recession, the class disparities became magnified. A new class of government officials, the boliburguesa had emerged from the legitimate extension of privileges of government workers combined with illegitimate uses of public funds, special privileges, government connections, and access to cheap US dollars. This new economic class developed alongside critiques of “oficialismo” within the government.

The divergent state describes the multiple tendencies and varied forms of control of state power alive in Venezuela. Despite a Chavista majority in the National Assembly, key parts of the Venezuelan state apparatus are controlled by opposition elected officials. Main opposition leader Henrique Capriles is Governor of Miranda state, where there is the highest concentration of prisons in the country. And, there are numerous mayors who also represent opposition interests and who have police forces under their control. Alfredo Peña, one of the right-wing mayors of Caracas, along with the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce held a symposium in 2000 with the Manhattan Institute, a right-wing, tough-on crime US-based think tank that seeks to export the US model of “zero tolerance policies” and mass incarceration as answers to rising social insecurity (Wacquant, 2009b, p. 169). While President Chávez ultimately kicked out the Manhattan Institute, Peña utilized his control over some of the Metropolitan Police Force in Caracas to advance classic neoliberal policing tactics’ in Venezuela’s capital.

Even among the die-hard chavistas, the task to transform the country is unimaginably
huge and as they navigate uncharted territories individuals and government institutions “continue deploying market logics. Even as they pursue a commitment to a pro-poor agenda” (Fernandes, 2010, p. 23). All of these examples illustrate that there is no uniform political project embraced by the various sectors of the Venezuelan government and that the varied logics, techniques, and practices reflect divergent forms that have manifested in the functioning of the state apparatus.

**Conclusions: Hybrid Post-Neoliberal Venezuela**

As I examine prisons in Venezuela’s contemporary political economy, the varied hybrids present in the state’s formation will provide the theoretical lens for exploration. I have built off of Sujatha Fernandes’ (2010) description of Venezuela as a “hybrid post-neoliberal formation” and added three additional hybridizations of the state to account for the often under-examined punitive side of Venezuelan statecraft, the inherently hybrid nature of neoliberalism’s “centaur state,” and the contradictions and multi-directional courses exemplified in the divergent state. It is with all of these combined uses and understandings that I use the term the hybrid post-neoliberal state moving forward.

Venezuela’s political economy and state formation is deeply molded by rentierism which binds the country to the global capitalist economy, therefore entrenching neoliberal rationalities into the modes of governance and ways of thinking. But, the rejection of neoliberalism from the grassroots to the highest positions of governance has opened up a new era and trajectory which marks an “interruption” of neoliberal hegemony and therefore the entrance to a post-neoliberal era (Goodale and Postero, 2013). The widespread rejection of neoliberalism has led to two non-neoliberal trajectories; one that reverts to the liberal notions of democracy as a form of wealth-sharing from the riches of the state with an emphasis on individual rights and the other is a decidedly anti-neoliberal path that strives to redefine social relations, trade, citizenship and the
state in non-market terms that focus on cooperation, the communal, and solidarity— all the while expanding political participation to those most marginalized through the Fourth Republic and the era of neoliberalism. It makes sense that through rejecting the ‘devolution’ of the state, some propose a resurgence of the liberal state as benefactor but this form of nation-state was birthed to maintain capitalist social relations, not to transcend them. Venezuela’s hybrid state formation is shorthand for expressing that the country has taken all three paths at once, operating with “multitemporal heterogeneity” that Canclini (1995) imagined.

Liberalism, neoliberalism and anti-neoliberalism shape the forms, policies, rhetoric, and knowledge/power in competing, conflicting and co-existing ways in contemporary Venezuela; this is the premise of the hybrid post-neoliberal state. This hybridity also encompasses the two hands of the ambidextrous state, the classed policies of neoliberal reform depicted in the “centaur state,” and the politically divided and unaligned facets present in the divergent state. Venezuelans face this hybrid formation as they engage with state institutions in their daily lives and attempt to reconcile the inconsistencies that they confront.

Before examining these interactions it is important to ground an analysis of Venezuela’s prison system within its proper historical and structural context. In the following Chapter, I will explore the development of the prison system in Venezuela from the Colonial period to the present and then in Chapter 3, I will explore the political economy of Venezuela’s contemporary prison system; all of which will create a strong historical, structural and theoretical foundation for exploring the ethnographic experiences of the prison in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela.
Chapter Two:
If these walls could scream:
A brief history of Venezuelan prisons from the Colonial period to Present Day

Introduction

Prisons—despite their design to isolate—are institutions that cannot be studied in isolation. Those trained to examine crime and punishment in isolation from an analysis of political economy and social marginalization, tend to ask research questions and utilize methods that are confined by problematic assumptions and narrow categories that present the prison as a world unto itself as opposed to an institution embedded in social relations of the political economy. While Venezuelan penologists and criminologists and to a lesser extent, anthropologists and historians, have scrutinized certain aspects of the prison system, many gaps remain in the historiography of prisons in Venezuela.

Most criminologists and penologists examine prisons in relation to other aspects of the punishment system, such as policing and the judiciary. There is an undeniable interconnectedness between these institutions, but the prison does not solely function as a system of punishment, the “work” of the prison is impacted by the economy, changing views around crime, security, race, and the individual, and it is also employed by ruling regimes for certain political ends. Prisons impact the neighborhoods where they are located, family members of incarcerated people, communities with high rates of incarceration, those who work there; prisons can create financial burden, absorb surplus, or be a source for generating jobs, incomes, and the trade of goods and services. Prisons are portrayed in plays, described in poetry, represented in the media, on television and in movies and they can be the subject of debate for candidates during an election;
or the subjects of research or art. Prisons exist as mortar and brick, metal and concrete structures and they also exist as an idea, a fantasy, a symbol, or a threat.

This chapter addresses the history of penal policy, prison life and the history of the development of prisons from the colonial era to the present day as a means of creating context for Venezuela’s current prison system. I draw from records from the Memorias and other official documents as well as testimony, letters, court documents, poetry, journals, newspapers, human rights reports and scholarly publications. Additionally, I utilize interviews that I conducted in Venezuela between August 2014-April 2015 to supplement the documented record. This chapter also provides an ample review of literature on prisons in Venezuela, since I utilize a wide-reaching sources in order to present the historical reconstruction that follows.

Beginning with the creation of the Penitentiary in 1937 in Venezuela and the subsequent growth in the fields of study of penology and criminology in the 1970's accounts for a significant boom in prison research in that period. While the proliferation of published studies on Venezuela's prisons in this time period helps to create a historical record of prisons, the studies each have shortcomings or limitations. For example, since many penologists were tasked with making policy recommendations, they tended to create a body of research that identifies more strongly with prison administration than with system-impacted people. This is especially the case in the periods of prison reform in the 20th Century when scholars conveniently moved between the academy and holding posts as prison administrators, testing their theories in real settings. And of the few studies that actually focused on the lives of incarcerated people, most tended towards a positivist approach that reifies individual behavior as a means of testing social science and psychological theories. Some of the most prominent studies use quantitative data, creating a breakdown of the prison population at a given time based on categories such as age,
education level, conviction type, class background, etc... often arriving at conclusions which aim to create a “criminal profile.” Others zoomed in to the cultural norms, the codes of conduct, and the cultural and linguistic practices inside specific prisons, decoding the (intentionally) secret language of the carceral world. Despite their shortcomings, these studies still provide valuable material for a more complete understanding of prison life, philosophies on crime, trends in prison research, and penal policies.

Examining prison reform in Venezuela is also problematic because while the political battles or language in penal policies can reveal the attitudes and beliefs of the time, the on-paper-policies seldom translated into actual transformations in the prison system and therefore an overemphasis on top-down reform will provide a misleading representation of the lived reality in prisons in that time period. Even the policies that did translate into concrete changes were rarely universally applied to all prisons or to all incarcerated people. For this reason, it is essential to balance the more widely available historical record of top-down reforms with the more bottom up perspectives from people on the inside.

Of the first-hand narratives and testimonials of incarcerated people throughout Venezuelan history, there is a sharp divide between “political prisoners” and “common prisoners.” There is a much more prolific documentation of the perspectives of political prisoners, many of whom were literate, had more relative access to publishing options, and immediately perceived their incarceration as 'political' and therefore combined their lived experiences in the prison with their already established activism against the government. The most common narrative to come from imprisoned dissidents was the testimonio but other forms of prison-based literature in Venezuela was common in the 20th century as well, the vast majority of which came from elite or middle class perspectives. It is rare to find narratives from
the perspective of the criminalized classes of poor who have been the majority of those confined in Venezuela's prisons since the colonial period (Gomez Grillo, 2000, p. 3). I utilize these perspectives in this chapter whenever possible.

I also attempt to offset the lack of available sources from an “inside perspective” by including a broader analysis of the political-economy and social conditions of each era, recognizing that carceral space can also extend beyond prison walls, and therefore connecting prison narratives with the experiences of people in criminalized communities, as well as public policies and popular notions of morality and criminality in different time periods. This approach is consistent with the proliferation in current research into how “the ghetto and prison meet and mesh” (Wacquant, 2001) however in this chapter, I take a longue durée approach as opposed to exclusively focusing on this relationship in the neoliberal era.

This chapter helps to provide historical context for this dissertation through examining the continuities in the prison policies and practices form the colonial period to present day. In doing so, I can see the evolution of “the work” of the prison and therefore the antecedents of the prison in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela. I present a brief history of prisons, penal policies, prison research, and prison life in Venezuela. I also include stories of organized action and individual resistance, demonstrating that incarcerated people were not and continue not to be simply subjects of broader policies but that they have also played a role in shaping the prison and penal policy. I have organized the following section through a periodization that emphasizes major shifts in penal policies which are often accompanied by a reformulation of the state itself as the state adapts to the changing requirements of capital, modernity, and social struggle.
A Social History of Venezuelan Prisons

Punishment in Colonial Venezuela and Beyond

Prisons—where political dissidents, indigenous people, enslaved people and those charged with crimes languished and served their punishments, have been used, in one form or another, since the colonization of the territory now called Venezuela. It could be argued that the prison is one of the primary institutions brought to the Americas through European colonization. The Colonial era exemplifies the racialized and gendered dimensions inherent in social-control and punishment in Venezuela.

There were many different forms of prisons in Colonial Venezuela due to the high levels of social differentiation. Different forms of punishments were applied based on one's rank within the racial, religious, gender, and economic hierarchy (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1998, p.61). This diversity of forms of imprisonment included; ecclesiastical institutions, serving the mandates of the inquisition; la Casa de Corrección, where non-white, especially Afro-descendent men and women would be sent; la Cárcel Real where white men would be imprisoned (if they were not detained in town halls or placed on house arrest); Cárcel de Corte functioned as a debtors prison, for whites; the Hospicio-Cárcel de Mujeres served as a women's prison for upper-class white women who conceived out of wedlock or were accused of adultery; Military Barracks were used to imprison political dissidents, both Independendistas and non-white militia members; and “Indian Prisons” existed within and were managed by Indigenous communities. All of these forms of imprisonment, as well as corporal and capital punishment were utilized to punish individuals; rehabilitation was not yet a part of the logic of incarceration in the colonial era (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1983).

Escapes were commonplace in this era and the work of guarding prisoners was often
done by trusted members of the elite political class (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1998). The Spanish monarchy attempted to control the availability of arms within the colonies and so, only those who proved their loyalty to the crown were rewarded with the privilege. There is also a record of numerous requests to the Vice-royalty and to the throne of Spain for iron and other metals to make bars and shackles to create a further impediment to escaping imprisonment (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1998). In 1771, a Real Pragmático from King Charles III set the maximum time of imprisonment in the Spanish colonies at ten years. He even clarified that this applied to all, “de cualaquier clase que sean...” independent of social class (Suárez, 1969, p. 603).

The costs of incarceration were assumed by imprisoned people (and by extension, their family members) and so, in addition to the racial, religious, economic, sexual, and gendered hierarchies enforced in colonial society, there was additionally another caste system within incarcerated populations: those who had material, economic and emotional support from their families and those who did not (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1998, p. 66.) This difference was also clearly related to and reinforced by social status. Family members were expected to bring breakfast (which in the earlier era consisted of chocolate and later, coffee), lunch and dinner at set hours, every day. Family members were also expected to bring clean clothing. If incarcerated people and their family members could not afford food and clothing, inmates were permitted to ask for alms to those passing by the prison and in some cases, collections were taken to pay for their imprisonment. (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1998, p.65).

In 1789, the proposal to create a Casa de Correcion de Caracas was approved. By 1797, la Casa de Corrección was created “para contener a los que empiezan a ser malos y prevenir las consecuencias de la ociosidad” (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1983, p. 43). Non-whites incarcerated there were often brought to labor on public works projects such as constructing hospitals and
cemeteries or making hats. They were compensated so that they could pay the costs of their own imprisonment but they were paid far less than free laborers doing the same work. Enslaved inmates were the first to be sent on works projects, and the income that they earned went directly to their “owner” who was responsible for paying for the costs associated with their incarceration. The population of the Casa de Corrección was described in official records as “Esclavos y demás que no tienen otra profesión que el vicio y para artesanos tramposos, esclavas viciadas, mujeres libres, escandalosas y pobres voluntarios” (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1983, p. 43). The Casa de Corrección was, therefore explicitly for the incarceration of blacks and afro-descendants of mixed heritage, who were largely portrayed as lazy, prone to vice and scandalous. The Casa de Corrección served as a place of punishment that reinforced a racialized narrative that associated blackness with laziness, criminality and “being bad” and therefore utilized forced labor as a punishment for the perceived moral problem of laziness. (Troncis de Veracoechea, 1998, p. 67).

In the official records of prisons in the early 1800's, each inmate is also classified by their racial categorization as well as their status of being “free” or enslaved. The racialized classifications in 1813 include the following: “moreno, esclavo,” “mulato, esclavo,” “parda, libre”, “pardo libre,” and “moreno, libre” (Troncis de Veracochea, 1998, p. 19) Those who were unclassified, were most likely seen as white and while some of the unclassified people were accused of theft (including theft of slaves), most people racialized as white were in prison for treason or for “expressions and songs scandalous and offensive to the kings vassals”(Troncis de Veracochea, 1998, p. 72). This distinction is important; the imprisonment of non-whites was largely associated with their inherent criminality whereas the incarceration of whites, ever since the colonial era, was more often associated with political values or property disputes.

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9Feudal lords who were obligated to work on behalf of the King in exchange for privileges.
Indigenous communities had their own forms of punishment, and the little that is recorded notes that in the colonial era, some indigenous communities in the territory now called Venezuela, had their own forms of prison, managed by members of their own community but sentences were generally for one day and were often accompanied by a lashing. (Troncis de Veracochea, 1998, p. 69) The punishment, therefore was based on shaming an individual in the eyes of their community as opposed to enforcing a separation between an individual and their community. A common crime that received such a punishment was drunkenness. Indigenous people accused or convicted of “witchcraft,” “sorcery” or other crimes related to the Inquisition would be forced to serve time in an Ecclesiastical Prison, which were run by Bishops and Monks and were rumored to be the locales of the most gruesome torture accompanied by mandatory bible study. Indigenous people were also punished for speaking their own languages, and not attending school; this punishment often came in the form of lashing, instead of incarceration. When indigenous people were placed in prison, they were put in the Cárceles Reales, with whites, instead of the la Casa de Corrección, alongside blacks and afro-descendants (Troncis de Veracochea, 1983, pp. 58-60). This demonstrates a continued association of blackness with criminality and an approximation of “corrections” with blackness as well. With the creation of race in the 16th Century, blackness was associated with criminality and laziness as a means of bolstering the racist premise that blacks were naturally inferior to whites. The racialization of indigenous people however was more firmly established by associating indigeneity with backwardness and heathenism, and therefore their discipline was more often managed by the church than the state.

While Afro-descendant and black women were often detained alongside their male counterparts, the locales of punishment for white women were separated from that of white men.
Since women could not own property in the colonial and immediate post-colonial period, crimes involving property such as theft or debt were not among those which they could be legally liable. For lesser offenses, women were placed on house arrest; not all that different from the condition of many upper-class women of this era; placed in the custody of their husbands or male family members, or in some cases sent to be domestic workers in the homes of “honest” people (Troncis de Veracochea, 1983, p. 40). Women convicted of adultery or “illegitimate pregnancy” (which included any pregnancy for a single woman) were detained in hospitals and convents and often made to work under difficult circumstances as a means of repaying their debt and many women had their “illegitimate” children taken from them after they had birthed them.

Slavery went into decline in Venezuela roughly around the 1820s and many enslaved Africans and Afro-Venezuelans fled to the mountains to form Cumbes.¹⁰ Those who had escaped slavery were considered “fugitives” and the Venezuelan police had the duty and obligation to “capture runaways” and return them to their “owners” (Lombardi, 1971, p. 129). After the formal abolition of slavery in 1854, police codes were designed “to enforce labor law and control” which aimed to control all aspects of the lives of rural workers and ensure a transition “from slavery to peonage” (Lombardi, 1971, p. 52). These labor laws—which policing mechanisms of the time were never truly able to enforce—are comparable to the “Black Codes,” which were instituted in the post-reconstruction United States and served to control and criminalize black people through the regulation of their daily lives (Lichtenstein, 1996).

The US “black codes,” which criminalized activities such as walking on the sidewalk, looking a white person in the eye, or being intoxicated in public, were laws that were explicitly designed only to apply to black people. While prior to 1865 (the emancipation proclamation),

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¹⁰Also known as Palenques, mocombos, and Quilomos- these were maroon communities formed by people fleeing enslavement.
there were very few blacks in US southern prisons, the “black codes” lead to a jump in the incarceration of blacks which was accompanied by the convict-leasing system, where former slave-owners, and corporations could “lease” incarcerated people to labor on their plantations, in mines, and industrialization projects in the US south. In the historiography of prisons in the United States, “the black codes,” and the convict-leasing system, demonstrate the clear linkage between chattel slavery and the development of prisons, especially for profit prisons (Mancini, 1996).

While Venezuela's labor laws were not explicitly based on racial categorization, the policies to discipline the rural work force were implicitly meant for formerly enslaved Afro-descendants. An inability to enforce these codes minimized their significance (as compared to the “black codes”) however; they symbolize how police and prisons were relied upon to enforce racialized divisions of labor following the decline of slavery and they demonstrate the extension of the newly-formed nation state into the private lives of workers who were vulnerable to lose their freedom yet again, directly following the abolition of slavery in Venezuela (Lombardi, 1971, p. 103-104).

After Venezuela gained Independence from Spain, rebel leaders mobilizing against the agrarian oligarchs became the new political prisoners, replacing the elite criollos who had rallied for Independence from the Spanish crown. Many members of the militias and rebel armies were described as “pardos,” nonwhites. Newly independent Venezuela established decrees that created a category of crimes, which could come with either a fine or prison time, creating a class divide in the practice of incarceration. If one could pay the fine, no prison time was necessary. Despite numerous proposals to expand and “modernize” the prisons in Venezuela in this period, lack of resources due to expensive wars such as the Independence battles (1811-1823) and the Federal
Wars (1859-1863), as well as low prices for coffee, the main export crop, meant that the resources were never available for such a project. The reliance of the Venezuelan economy on external markets reflected Venezuela’s position in the capitalist world-system so despite the political will to expand prisons, the Venezuelan state relied on surpluses produced by external markets to enable this policy.

**The Era of “Order and Progress” (1864-1907)**

Antonio Guzman Blanco ruled Venezuela in various spurts between 1864-1888 but did not officially assume the Presidency until 1870. His main political project was to modernize Venezuela, especially Caracas, which he attempted to transform into a little Paris; and to create “order” through the consolidation of the state, a new constitution, and new civil and penal codes, and to create economic “progress,” largely through foreign exchange used to purchase cacao, coffee or sugar (Brunilde Liendo, 2001; Nichols and Morse, 2010). Guzman's push towards modernity was manifested in the construction of a large number of monumental buildings, and under his rule the currency was consolidated into a national system, and he made significant advances in infrastructure projects and in this time period the Venezuelan state was partially consolidated (Coronil, 1997, p. 72). In addition to investing in public works projects, roads and transportation and purchasing modern weapons for the army, Blanco initiated political reforms that focused on “public behavior, work habits and morality” (Nichols and Morse, 2010, p. 46). This “Moral Regeneration Plan” asserted that “its people's discipline [is] the government's proper work” (Diaz, 2004, p. 58).

The 1873 Penal Code criminalized individual behavior such as gambling (as well as those deemed to be cheating in gambling) and grave-robbing but it also penalized violations of
religious freedoms and public health infractions such as selling unsanitary food or water, demonstrating the government's assertion of control of both public and private life (Nichols and Morse, 2010 pp. 46-47).

The role of the law, then, was to foster the creation of a modern state through the regulation of issues related to the public good as well as the regulation of private behavior. No detail fell outside the purview of the law in a modern state, at least on paper... (Nichols and Morse, 2010, p. 46).

Despite this change, women's position was not very different, in the eyes of the law, than during the Colonial era (Diaz, 2004). The “Moral Regeneration Plan” placed an emphasis on women's roles as chaste, nonviolent, submissive, religious and moral characters. Diaz (2004) argues that, “[t]he project integrated patriarchy, the new family morality, and the promise of individuality and equality with the liberal ideal of limited state powers, the need for tranquility, and the desire to exclude lower classes from power (p. 72). The attempt to create “moral regeneration” through order, served to marginalize the working-classes, peasants, indigenous people and formerly-enslaved Afro-descendants by reinforcing a modern liberal state based on their exclusion. Despite the liberal ideals embodied in the attempt to build the Republic, similar to other Latin American nations,

[the penitentiary was rarely imagined as a pedagogy in civil participation and republican government... Few saw in the new disciplinary technology the possibility of building a “moral community” capable of self-government. Indeed, moralizing the working poor was often the response to elite fears about working class or peasant challenges to oligarchic regimes (Salvatore and Aguirre, 26).

This form of constitutional liberalism also served to reinforce patriarchy and the state's control over the private and public conduct of all Venezuelans. Again, the “work” of the prison was to discipline and punish those who were perceived to be rebels, however, since the feared threat to elite interests were now the nonwhite rural peasantry, and the urban poor (as opposed to other factions of elites) this period marks a convergence between those imprisoned for “political”
reasons and those categorized as “delinquents,” thus problematizing the neat divide between political prisoners and common prisoners. While Guzman Blanco fled into self-imposed exile in 1880, his successor, Rojas Paul carried out his vision by opening a House of Correction that was specifically for vagrants as opposed to “delinquents.” The incarceration of vagrants simply criminalized the existence of those who lived in extreme poverty. In the building of the modern state, the exclusion of the poor which was executed on many fronts, included their physical removal from society and prisons were employed to play this role.

**Prisons “Too Torturous for Delinquents” (1908-1935)**

Prisons are emblematic of the Gomez dictatorship. In this era, the “work” of the prisons was “exorcising sin of political dissent” which was seen as “more important that reforming delinquents” (Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996, p. 13). In fact, politicians argued that common delinquents did not belong there because prisons were to be reserved for the “literate and articulate” (Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996, p.13).

While ambitious architectural proposals for new prisons had been made as a part of Venezuela’s modernizing project, Gomez decided that the archaic and crumbling structures of the colonial era would serve their purpose—punishing political prisoners—without having to undergo the costly investment of constructing new prisons. The prison played such a central role in Gomez's rule that directly following the moment when he claimed power in a 1908 coup,

[his] first move was to release from prison his foster brother, Eustoquilo, who had killed a high government official in cold blood. Gomez's second move was to throw into jail the two judges he had selected to acquit Eustoquilo; his third, to appoint Eustoquilo commander of the prison behind whose bars he had formerly been sitting (G.P Jr., Milwaukee Journal September, 24, 1936).

This media account demonstrates that taking control of the state is, in part achieved
though taking control of the prisons. The three decrepit prisons, San Carlos, El Castillo Libertador (Puerto Cabello) and La Rotunda were soon filled with the dictator's “guests.”

Gomez, the former cattle-rancher, was infamous for hanging people alive on cattle-hooks until they were dead or near-dead. A newspaper reported that eight-pound shackles were fitted to prisoners' ankles and that some had to amputate their feet to save their lives. The article continues to describe the gruesome torture of Gomez's political opponents including the torture and death of Captain Entrenera, who Gomez's vast networks of spies had reported as a traitor. A Colombian anarchist, who went by the pen name Biophilia Panclasta (2013), wrote of his entrance into a Venezuelan prison, where he would spend the next seven years of his life.

The prisoners who had seen me enter into the cell were careful, in their entrance, not to trip over my cold, weak body. One of them felt with his hand my flesh, which did not shudder because I had already suffered all pain, and observing that I neither moved nor spoke, exclaimed sadly and softly, ‘They hung this one in the Police Station and brought him to die here.’ (p, 95).

In the early 1900s, the economy in Venezuela was deeply indebted to European powers and the “progress” achieved at the end of the 19th Century was fleeting (Coronil, 2011, p. 68). Gomez “sought to restore order by inviting foreign capital to invest with the guarantee of labor peace and flexible business conditions” (Coronil, 1997, p. 76). Under Gomez, Venezuela opened up its subsoil to exploration and extraction and as a result foreign corporations hauled away tons of Venezuelan crude initiating a process in which Venezuela rapidly became transformed from an agricultural exporter into an oil nation (Coronil, 1996).

In the transition from an agricultural exporter to petro-state, the Venezuelan state was consolidated through its need to negotiate with foreign corporations and create investment friendly conditions which implied using mechanisms of social control to discipline its labor force. The prison was utilized to control labor supply, discipline workers, and to extract cheap

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labor from incarcerated people while still serving the function of punishing political prisoners or those who threatened a “peaceful” environment for foreign investors. In 1916, the Task Laws went into effect in which the large prison population, comprised of political prisoners and “ordinary inmates” were sent to labor on public works projects for no pay. The Trans-Andean freeway, which still operates in Venezuela today was laid by shackled workers, incarcerated under the Gomez regime (El Universal, 2009).

In 1928, massive student strikes took place throughout Venezuela and the young student movement at the forefront came to be known as Generation 28 (Coronil, 1997, 91). The Venezuelan Student Organizations were outlawed, but they organized clandestinely within the Gomez's prisons and a sizable contingency of their leadership was incarcerated in Puerto Cabello/Castillo Libertador. In August on 1929, Juan Bautista Fuenmayor, Juan Montes, Alberto Ravell and the poet, Pío Tamayo organized a conference on Socialism inside of the prison walls. A manuscript that was sketched in pencil on paper, attempting to address the themes of the time—the Russian and Mexican Revolutions, class struggle and rebellion in Central America and the Caribbean and debates between Bakunin and Marx—and built largely from memory, was miraculously smuggled out of the prison. In 1982 the text was printed under the title “La difusión de las ideas socialistas en las carceles gomecistas.” (Fuenmayor, 1982). At that time, the author was a leading figure in national politics, who countered the social democratic current and instead represented the more Marxist wing of politics (Coronil, 1997, p. 91).

For those who survived the brutality of Gomez's torturous prisons, only some were able to document their stories. The political prisoner testimonio was so prevalent during this period that records of “common prisoners” are largely told through the perspectives of students and
dissidents who came into contact with them inside of prison. The students of Generation 28\textsuperscript{12}, along with the intellectuals who had been imprisoned “became after Gomez's death the founders of the nation's major political parties and were the leading figures in national politics until the 1970's” (Coronil, 1997, p. 91). Many of them would take part in drafting future penal policies in Venezuela.

The Birth of the Penitentiary and the Petro-Democracy in Venezuela (1937-1979)

In the same period as the birth of the penitentiary in Venezuela (1937-1958) heavy-handed vagrancy laws that criminalize the poor were instituted and the development of the science of punishment (penology) gained legitimacy through the creation of the Instituto de Ciencias Penales at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. This period spans across dictatorships and a brief moment of democracy, referred to as the trieno (1945-1948). Dr. Tulio Chiossone Villamizar emerged as the leading scholar on prisons, in 1936 he wrote “No tenemos cárceles, solo hay horrorosos sitios de expiación” and the following year Venezuela passed La ley de régimen penitenciario which he authored (p. 9-10). Chissone envisioned a modern penitentiary system for the “new Venezuela” and he called for humanizing those within the system. While the birth of the penitentiary in Latin America tended to be linked to a modernization process that attempted to adopt European and USian models of prisons, Chissone claimed to reject the foreign models of prisons (Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996; Espinoza, 2012; Chissone, 1936, p. 20). Through these reforms the position of Inspector General of prisons was created, a new status of “political prisoners” was created and aislamiento militar (solitary confinement) was limited to three months (Espinoza, 2012).

\textsuperscript{12}In 1928 there was a boom in student activism. This movement came to be known as “Generation 28.”
Four new prisons were built to embody the vision of a new penitentiary: La carcel nacional de Trujillo y San Cristobál, la carcel modelo de Caracas, and the Prison Colony of El Dorado. Each had capacity for 300 inmates. Unlike prisons of the past, these new modern penitentiaries included schools, workshops, recreation spaces and infirmaries. As a part of the “Chiossone Reforms” of the 1930's and 1940's, La nueva penitenciaria General de Venezuela was opened in 1947, which boasted a professionalization of prison personnel, modern architecture, improved amenities, legal oversight, an emphasis on rehabilitation and reeducation and served as a proclamation of Venezuela's entrance into modernity.

The creation of the modern penitentiary in Venezuela, and its ambitions for humanization and rehabilitation was also accompanied by a new wave of criminalization of the poor and social control enforced through la ley de vagos y maleantes. This new pool of “delinquents” were perfect subjects for both study and re-socialization by the newly trained experts of prisons in Venezuela in this era. The law also reinforced heterosexism by criminalizing homosexuality and other forms of sexual behavior that was vilified by the catholic church (Tosca Hernandez, 1977).

Venezuela adopted la ley de vagos y maleantes, which was based on Spanish law and was a key mechanism of social control (Heredia, 2009, p.109). Analyzing the role of the law in Spain, Heredia (2009) states:

...La Ley de Vagos y Maleantes nació con la pretensión de localizar y clasificar a los agentes “peligrosos” de la sociedad, así como para establecer diversas medidas de control, seguridad y prevención dirigidas contra aquellos sectores sociales marginales que practicaban actividades ilegales o moralmente reprobables y las cuales, en un principio, no estaban tipificadas como delitos (p.110)

This law, which was first adopted in 1939 and then reformed in 1943 and again in 1956, created a category of “delinquency” that included many forms of behavior that, prior to the law had not been criminalized such as begging, “habitual vagrancy”, giving alcohol to minors (under the age of 14), pimping, and possession of false documents. The law also criminalized “drunks and drug
addicts” (Heredia, 2009, p.110).

While the “work” of the prison was being constructed to reform delinquents and vagrants, a new wave of political prisoners redirected the prison’s purpose. Under the rule of Perez Jimenez, who came to power through a 1948 military coup, members of political party Acción Democratica (AD), the Communist Party and other dissidents were rounded up by the secret police, charged with terrorism and transported on buses and boats to the distant Guasina island prison, situated on the Orinoco river in Bolívar state, where they were tortured and forced to work in grueling conditions. The island—as it is described in the testimony of some of the hundreds inmates incarcerated there—had no services at all; no running water, no sanitation, no beds or hammocks, no medical treatment. Throughout the testimonies, former prisoners spoke of the infestation of (disease-carrying and potentially fatal) insects and snakes and the unforgiving heat. (Rother, 2001; Nichols and Morse, 2010, p. 56).

prisoners were slashed with razors, burned with cigarettes, forced to sit for hours on blocks of ice. Some prisoners were force-fed harsh laxatives and then, in a chamber of horrors awash with blood, excrement and vomit, they were forced to walk naked around a razor sharp wheel rim. (Michael McCaughan, 2011, p.52).

Instead of torturing dissidents in the iconic structures in the center of each large city, the detention of political prisoners was absconded by the regime so that the country could focus on its modernizing efforts. With the increasing population of political prisoners, the testimonio resurfaced. Jose Vicente Abreau, political prisoner and author of one of the most widely known testimonials called Se llamaba SN (1981) wrote a poetic manifesto about his internment on Guasina island.

Yo vengo del sureste, hermanos
de Guasina,
de un campo de Concentración
de una isla con un vientre de alambres
y unos intestinos
de estacadas...

Yo quiero hablar con todos,
In 1952, just a year after political prisoners were sent there, the *Isla Guasina* concentration camp was closed, many of the formerly imprisoned dissidents went underground and other continued to agitate from exile. On January 23, 1958 a popular uprising successfully overthrew Perez Jimenez and begun Venezuela's period of petro-democracy. This era is symbolized by the *puntofijo pact* in which the political parties of the social democrats (*AD*), many of whom had been political prisoners and the christian conservative party (*COPEI*) agreed to share power through peaceful transitions following elections and that they would work for the exclusion of the far-left political parties.

Following the 1958 overthrow of Perez Jimenez, in an era reminiscent of the post-Gomez period, many former political prisoners became government officials and from their posts, they advanced penal policy that emphasized rehabilitation and reform within the prison system. At the beginning of this period, Venezuelan prisons were already overcrowded and operating with a higher prison population than what the buildings were originally designed for (Linares, 1980). The 1961 Penitentiary law which replaced the Chissone 1937 law, was inspired by the ideals of the *1955 Geneva Conventions on Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Prisoners*, and became the basis of Venezuelan penal policy until the Bolivarian Revolution.

Once again, in an era reminiscent of the post-Gomez period, prison reform was a key agenda item for the new political class which was returning from prison, exile and being underground. At the beginning of this period, Venezuelan prisons were already overcrowded and operating with a higher prison population than what the buildings were originally designed for (Linares, 1980).
In analyzing the discourse of the 1961 Law, Sanchez Rodriguez (1999) argues that the law was guided by the “positivist criminological doctrine” which she describes; “se centró en el hombre delincuente, proponiendo el estudio de su personalidad como el método idóneo para conocerlos y, luego, reeducarlo” (p. 66). This criminological positivism, also present in the United Nations 1955 Geneva Conventions on Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Prisoners was an example of what Sanchez Rodrigues called “condicionantes extranjeros” in the 1961 law (p. 77). She argues that the 1961 law, and penal reform to follow, was built upon an assumption that making a law could create “penitenciarios dignos” however; the debates themselves, advanced by legislators and relying on the expertise of domestic and foreign positivist criminologists, were divorced from the social and psychological realities in the prisons themselves. The 1961 Law also failed to make a plan for implementation, and its application was extremely “inconsistent” throughout Venezuela (Sanchez Rodrigues, 1999, p. 59).

The new legislation mandated that those serving a sentence should be held separately from those who have been charged (but not convicted) of crimes (Rosales, 2001, p. 699). It mandated that inmates should have access to medical services, social, and educational needs; it created an entirely centralized penitentiary system; it acknowledged issues regarding “the treatment of prisoners” without going so far as establishing “rights of inmates;” the legislation used rehabilitation as the core framework, and it established the right of the state to make inmates do obligatory work, for which they can receive pay far below the minimum wage (Morais de Guerrero, 2011). Many new prisons were constructed, and filled, and a boom in research on prisons during this period was fueled by the growth of the fields of penology and criminology.

Members of the Communist Party, who had originally attempted to join in the pact made
by AD and COPEI responded to their exclusion from the political process by forming a guerilla movement in Venezuela's mountains and many of them fell into the hands of the government and were imprisoned in the San Carlos Military barracks. In 1967, three guerilla leaders and members of the communist party escaped through an underground tunnel that was dug by their associates, originating in a nearby grocery store. Their escape made headlines in Venezuela and internationally, since it was the height of the Cold War and the freedom of these guerilla leaders was seen to be a communist threat in the anti-communist regime in Venezuela. In 1975, another 23 political prisoners escaped in a different tunnel from the San Carlos Military Barracks (Martinez, Fox, Farrell, 2010, pp. 52-57). Garcia Guillermo Ponce (1991) recorded a day-by-day record of his time in prison from 1963 till his escape in 1967. Describing the San Carlos Military Barracks, which was just blocks from where he grew up and was the place where he played baseball as a child, he wrote: “Es sucio, insaluble, hermético, deprimente, sórdido, infectado de alimañas. Sin embargo cubre el objetivo esencial de los carceleros. Puede considerarse como un lugar seguro para el depósito de presos” (p.14). Among those who were deposited in the prisons in this period of “democratic rule” were military officials accused of military rebellion, and former diputados as well as members of the Communist party. Bentancourt (who had at one point been a member of the Communist Party) became a stringent anti-communist and utilized the prisons as a depository for his political opposition.

Today, the San Carlos Military barracks have been transformed by a civic association of former members of the guerilla struggle and former political prisoners who occupied the building to preserve its history and to stand as a reminder to demand justice. I toured the crumbling building which sits in La Pastora, heading north from Caracas' historic center towards the

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13See La Fuga del Cuartel San Carlos by Guillermos Garcia Ponce for a thrilling, step-by-step first person narration of the three years in prison, building towards their escape which they achieved on February 6, 1963.
mountains. Enrique Velasquez, known to his comrades as “Negro Miguel” showed me around and took me into the rooms that served as cells. The walls were full of photos of some of the young people who had been held, tortured and disappeared within those ancient walls. Enrique pointed to the face of a young man, “he died of old age,” and then the next photo, “he was killed here,” “this person still lives in the neighborhood, “he said as he pointed to the last black and white photo in a long row. At that point in the tour, Enrique had not spoken of his own experience, but his connection to the many people who had been political prisoners led me to believe that Enrique had also been imprisoned there.

Delicately, I asked “Were you incarcerated here, too?” His voice shifted and he responded yes, quickly extending his arms to show me the cigarette burns that he had endured over the 10 years which he had been imprisoned, the vast majority of which were at San Carlos. He said that while he had spent time in other prisons and with general populations in other prisons, that he was mostly interned alongside other political prisoners which he described as having “a condition that is moral and ethical.” Velasquez asserted that the other people in prison (who weren’t 'political' prisoners) had a lot of respect for him and his comrades and he said that there were not problems between those categorized as political and those who were not but the state authorities often tried to keep the groups separate.

This is one of the reasons that the island concentration camps were utilized again for political prisoners. In this period, *Isla del Burro* became known as the “Concentration Camp Rafael Caldera,” named after the president that ruled Venezuela from 1964-1974 (and again 1994-1999). Clodosbaldo Russián Uzcátegui (2011), who later became the *Controlor General* of Venezuela (2000-2011) recalls when a hunger strike broke out within the prison population on the *Isla del Burro in* August of 1964, at the beginning of his four years incarcerated, Russián
(2011) noted that due to “la composicion de la poblacion penal,” he did not anticipate broader support for the hunger strike. The divide between “political prisoners” and “common prisoners” continued to mark prison life and how the institution was understood (p. 187).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s prisons were utilized for their dual function; the incarceration of members of the criminalized poor to be re-socialized as workers in the newly modernizing Venezuela, and the repression of rebels that threatened the stability valued by foreign investors. Like earlier periods when there were large numbers of political prisoners, there was a proliferation of testimonials and narratives based on the direct experiences of those who were incarcerated (Grillet Reyes, 1977).

In 1969, the prison population in Venezuela had reached 13,000 and it was spread throughout 22 prison-like facilities. Of the 13,000 inmates 9.1% of the imprisoned population was there as a result of la Ley de Vagos y Maleantes (Morais de Guerrero, 2011, p.276). Pedro Andrade Roa (1991) was sent to prison at age 18, after he had already escaped from youth reformatories twice. In his play “Prision Violencia y Muerte,” he draws a brutal picture of life in La Planta prison in the 1970s. Unlike the testimonies of the political prisoners, Andrade Roa writes with the goal of exposing other young men who come from the “barriadas” of Caracas to “their possible destiny” in prison which he describes as “todo un sistema que nos quiere humiliar, pisotear, están arriba y los esbirros hacen el trabajo de verdaderos inhábiles, manejados por el poder” (Andrade Roa, 1991, p. 9).

Carrera (1979), who was imprisoned at La Pica for five months in 1978 before being transferred to the San Carlos Military Barracks created a book of oral histories of prison life and torture that he collected during his incarceration. Through these narratives, he documents the carceral world of the late 1970s in Venezuela.

La cárcel es un mundo aparte, pequeño, dentro del mundo grande y distante que queda más allá de sus
muros...En la carcel se pierden muchas cosas y se ganan otras...Se pierde el sentido del tiempo, de la privacidad en su acepción común, de la individualidad incluso, que se diluye en una colectividad donde todo el mundo tiene iguales derechos y deberes (Carrera, 1979, p. 101).

The 1970's saw a boom in research on prisons, some of which focused on the Regimen abierto model which was implemented in an annex of the Centro Penitenciario Nacional in Valencia in 1974, and then expanded to the Centro Penitenciario de Oriente (El Dorado) y Penitenciaria General de Venezuela in 1976. This model was comprised of a number of work-release programs, provisional freedom, and more intensive rehabilitative efforts (Morais,1985). Criminological and penological studies of this era tended to focus on individuals as opposed to systemic factors liked to incarceration. Calletano Franco (1976) was in prison when he wrote El Cárcel Modelo: Máxima Seguridad which is written in the format of a 40-day long journal. In addition to recounting the daily routines of his life in prison, he is critical of the approach the so called experts;

Con el surgimiento de una nueva ideología, cimentada en una Sociedad verdaderamente justa y humana, la Penalogía y la Criminología se convertirán en fósiles de escaparte. Suprimiendo las causas, sepultando los motivantes, estas seudo-ciencias serán trastos inservibles que pasarán al desván de la Historia...es inconcebible que nuestras leyes tengan su inspiración en códigos arcaicos que perdieron su vigencia hace tiempo, y que conciben el delito como una malacriana que sólo merece un castigo (p. 67).

Despite the ideological focus on rehabilitation present in Venezuela's 1961 Law and the policies and practices that stem from it, not only does Franco note its failures, he questions the philosophy of rehabilitation and the focus on the individual. The incarcerated playwright, Andrade Roa (1991), responded to the focus on rehabilitation and this growth of theoreticians talking and writing about prisons.

Los teóricos hablan y hablan sobre la prisión. Investigan y escriben libros sobre cárcel, participan en conferencias y en foros donde sus criterios empíricos se dejan sentir; sin embargo, algunos conocen nuestros problemas, del origen y las circunstancias que nos han empujado a este cementario de hombres autómatas donde tenemos que soportar a los obtusos celadores que sólo se dedican a hacernos la vida imposible, no soy teórico, vivo dentro de la prisión desde la edad de 18 años y actualmente tengo 25 y estoy en la cárcel de la Planta (p. 9).
Andrade Roa and Calletano both came from poor communities and therefore unlike the writings and perspectives of the political prisoners, they had antagonistic relationships with the police from an early age and seemed to resent how the expert's gaze tended to fail at understanding the circumstances that they faced as poor people. Instead, theoreticians presented conclusions of crime and deviance based on *malacrienza* and culture instead of examining more structural factors such as marginalization (Andrade Roa, 1991, 8).

Despite falling prison rates in 1974 and 1976-1978, more prisons were built and then, promptly filled. The prison population in 1979 was more than 150% larger than it had been in 1958 and even the newly built facilities were overfilled past capacity. (Morais de Guerrero, 2011). With growing overcrowding in prisons in Venezuela, there was a notable increase in violence and the spread of disease. As problems within the prisons became amplified as a result of overcrowding, the stated focus shifted away from rehabilitation efforts and refocused on the efficient management of confined bodies in a period where rates of incarceration increased dramatically.

**Introducing Neoliberal Penality (1980-1997)**

Falling standards of living and increased poverty lead to a growth in the prison population in the 1980s. For the poor and working classes in Venezuela, the late 80's were also marked by economic turmoil, neoliberal restructuring, popular mobilization and state repression. Venezuela's oil boom of the 1970's had led to economic growth, rapid urbanization, growth of a service economy, an influx of new immigrants from Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, and a continued reliance on the oil sector, which resulted in cheap imported consumer goods. By the mid 1980's, the bubble had burst, and the highly populated urban areas
began facing heightened rates of unemployment and increased crime. While working class Venezuela
“had grown accustomed to rising living standards,” many now realized that they were slipping down and that they “no longer felt they shared a common space under the umbrella of the state” (Coronil and Skurski, 1991, p. 314).

In 1984, the same year that Nancy Reagan initiated her “just say no” to drugs campaign in the United States, the first drug laws that criminalized personal consumption of drugs were passed in Venezuela. This is also when crack-cocaine hit the streets in urban Venezuela. Prior to the 1984 Law on Narcotic and Psychotropic Substances, personal use of drugs was classified in 1964 as a “crime against health” that did not come with criminal penalties. After 1984 drug use became a criminal offense. While the law specified penalties for trafficking, distributing or producing drugs and laid out punishments for such acts (with more harsh punishments for military personnel engaged in trafficking,) possession alone was also outlined as a punishable offense (OAS, 2007). Prior to the 1984 Law, the issue of “improper” and “immoral behavior” linked to drug use or alcohol was included in the ley de vagos y maleantes, and was enforced at the discretion of arresting officers, lawyers and judges. While roughly, 10% of the prison population was incarcerated due to drug-related crimes in 1984, with the passage of this legislation and changing police tactics that were part of the “war on drugs,” just five years later, 18% of people in prison were incarcerated due to drug-related crimes and by 1992, it had risen to over 20% (Morais de Guerrero, 2011, p.246.; Del Olmo, 1995, p.134). The war on drugs in Venezuela has led to a high number of Colombians in Venezuela's prisons as well as a substantial increase in the female prison population (Del Olmo, 1995).

With extreme overcrowding contributing to worsening health conditions and increased violence, the 1980 Statute for Trial Committal and Conditional Suspension of Punishment
established a parole/probation process so that people accused of certain crimes would not be incarcerated while they awaited trials. By 1983, the fourth and final autonomous open regime facility was built in the state of Táchira marking the end of the decade-long experiment with open regimes in Venezuela. Despite the existence of these more resourced prisons, many people sentenced were not able to take advantage of these day-release programs because due to provisions in the law, few people accused of crimes were actually eligible for bail, provisional freedom or access to the more resourced open-regime prisons (Morais, 1985). Despite official policies to reduce prison population, the criminalization of drugs in Venezuela as well as the increased rates of unemployment led to a stark rise in the prison population in the 1980's. In 1989 the prison population had reached 29,000 of which, only 38 percent had been sentenced, the remaining population was awaiting trials or sentencing (Morais de Guerrero, 2011, p. 235).

As Andres Perez prepared to sign “el paquete,” an International Monetary Fund Loan package that came with a full-scale neoliberal restructuring of the economy, Venezuelan shopkeepers and business owners hoarded consumer goods in anticipation of continued inflation and price increases. This created food shortages of basic goods, which on top of increased unemployment and rising prices, sparked outrage among Venezuela's barrio residents. Protests quickly spread to the Capital, and for three days, beginning on February 27, 1989, a popular rebellion, known as the Caracazo, ensued in which massive looting and property destruction were the direct actions of those protesting neoliberal restructuring. Since the elite were notorious for corruption and looting the national coffers, el saqueo popular “was the turn for the rest of the population to obtain things without working” (Coronil and Skurski, 1991, p. 316).

On the third day of the popular rebellion, the National Guard was sent to repress the people. Hundreds, possibly thousands of people were estimated to have been killed, and most of
the repression targeted the housing projects and poor barrios in the hills surrounding Caracas.

Coronil and Skurski (1991) describe how the repression of barrio residents lead to a general “fear of uncontrolled popular criminality” (p. 320).

Government repression brought to an end the expansive phase of disturbances marked by the popular occupation of the street. Pockets of gunfire directed at government forces by so-called anti-socials in certain barrios and housing projects became the focus of government attention. They were presented as revealing the true face of the disturbances: the anarchic and criminal effort to subvert democracy through violence. In the context of deep collective fear, the idea hardened that despite broad social participation in the looting the disturbances emanated from the feared cerros (hillside barrios) ringing Caracas. According to dominant notions, the very poor and the criminal, living in sub-human conditions in shanties and housing projects, lead a basically lawless existence in these zones. The cerros are regarded as the haven for various categories of antisociales: malandros (thugs), drug dealers, dark-skinned foreigners, and remnants of urban guerrilla groups. They allow the reproduction of those who occupy the margins of civilized life: the criminal, the subversive, and the alien...At this moment of crisis, otherness was projected onto the city's barrios, as if the residents of these socially diverse areas in their entirety constituted a threat to civilized order (pp. 322-323).

In the two years following the Caracazo, the prison population increased by nearly 2,000 people and in 1991, Venezuela's total prison population reached its all-time high, at that point, of 31,086 people (a 416.29% increase from 1958) (Morais de Guerrero, 2011, p. 276).

In 1992, the Statute of Freedom under Bail (Libertad provisional bajo fianza) was instituted. From 1980 to 1995, 120,148 people utilized sometimiento a jucio (probation) and 19,980 received suspensión condicional de la pena (parole) (Del Olmo, 1998, p. 133). While these were designed to reduce overcrowding, they were largely underutilized due to a “complicated procedure required” and the fact that those accused of drug-related crimes were ineligible, despite being the largest growing sector of the prison population (Del Olmo, 1998 p.133). In 1995 the Statute for the Funding of Penitentiary Buildings was created to fund further prison expansion, which largely took place in the form of added “annexes” onto existing prisons, and repair of existing prison buildings. In 1997 additional annexes were constructed at Yare and El Rodeo, while at the same time, some institutions were closed due to crumbling infrastructure, it is not clear that the total prison capacity increased over this time period (Rosales, 2001).
Nonetheless, constructing more prisons remained one strategy, although ineffective, in attempting to reduce overcrowding.

On March 19, 1990 hunger strike commenced in prisons across the nations. For four days, people in prisons throughout Venezuela protested the terrible living conditions, the poor treatment of incarcerated people and their visitors, and the extremely slow pace at which people were processed, tried, and released (Morrais de Guerrero, 2011, p. 290). In acts of protests, prisoners began sewing their mouths closed and going on a sugar-only hunger strike while others inflicted injuries onto themselves, known as “blood strikes” to demand medical treatment or to be transferred so that they could be closer to their families. These acts of protest successfully attracted media attention and as a result, violence in Venezuelan prisons were examined through Human Rights reports, PROVEA, and a national Venezuelan Human Rights Organization. Prior to this period, most of the records on prison violence and protest came from sensationalized media coverage. While violence is a theme in all of the memoirs, narratives, and literature on prisons in Venezuela, few studies have investigated the topic or, more deeply explored the political motivations behind some of the incidents but the investigation by Linares(1981) concluded that violence is “nacida de la frustración, de la reclusión, injustamente prolongada, de las vejaciones diarias, de la violación impune de sus derechos humanos” (Morrais de Guerrero, p. 284).

In 1995, the prison crisis became a focus of some members of civil society and religious and Non-governmental organizations attended a government-sponsored Penitentiary Summit to address de-clogging the prison system. While religious institutions have played their own role in the prison system, including running prisons in the Colonial era, and offering religious counsel

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14See “La violencia en la cárcel Venezolana”by T. Hernandez et al for a more in depth study.
and services, their roles as members of civil society was reinforced through the summit. Fledgling non-governmental organizations, at this point, largely made up of associations of family members of incarcerated people and human rights groups joined in the conversation about reducing the prison population. While scholars participated from their academic or government posts, the “experts” on criminology and penology had failed to present a policy to address the prison crisis and so, religious groups, family associations and NGOs emerged as new actors in the ongoing struggle to address the failing prisons in Venezuela.

The Summit led to some important changes, most notably, attention towards the spread of HIV and other contagious infections in prison. In 1995, screenings for HIV and other infections and diseases were implemented in prisons throughout the county although in November 1995, only 31 inmates were known to be HIV positive, which suggests that screening was scarce (Human Rights Watch, 1997, p.73). Human Rights Watch's report on Venezuelan Prisons noted that lack of medical attention, clean water, low doctor to inmate ratios, in access to pharmaceuticals, and poorly resourced infirmaries accounted for some of the main problems that inmates have in accessing medical services. They also noted that “conditions for mentally ill prisoners...were appalling, resembling nineteenth century insane asylums (1997, p. 76). In 1996 Injuries that resulted from guards or other inmates were “prisoners' most serious health problems” (Human Rights Watch, 1991, p. 71).

In 1996, Venezuela had the fewest prisons of any country in the Andean region of Latin America, and the second highest prison population (Del Olmo, 1998). With overcrowding, came heightened violence in Venezuelan prisons, and in comparison to their Andean neighbors, Venezuela had the highest levels of “prison violence, riots, and the greatest known numbers of prisoners killed daily” (Del Olmo, 1998, p.135). In the years following a 1992 Prison massacre at
the infamous Catia Prison, the facility was finally closed (Human Rights Watch, 1997). In 1994, a prison massacre left over 100 inmates dead when the National Guard failed to respond to a fire at La Sabaneta Prison (Weschler, 1994).

The violence inside of Venezuela's prisons has been described as “strange” and “unusual” by a 1993 Report by International Observatory of Prisons (Del Olmo, 1998, p.132). In the early 1990's the Venezuelan government militarized Venezuelan Prisons, placing National Guards members not only on the exterior of facilities, but giving them access to “occupy” prisons. Their presence, which was in violation of Venezuela's national as well as International Law, was marked by serious abuse and mistreatment of the prison population (Human Rights Watch, 1997). During this period, violence also increased, suggesting a connection between the militarization of prisons and the increase of weapons and violence in prisons (Ungar, 1996). The International Observatory on prisons concluded that the conditions in Venezuelan prisons create “a state of permanent revolt” (Del Olmo, 1998, p. 132).

The attention of scholars, human rights organizations, the media, the government and a growing network of members from within civil society, generated some important data on Venezuelan prisons in the 1990s without which it would be extremely difficult to examine changes in the prison system in the following periods. In 1997, the Organic Code of Criminal Procedure (replacing the 1961 Law) created an accusatory and oral system for criminal cases. This new means of presenting cases and arguments was envisioned as a means of expediting criminal proceedings and therefore reducing the unsentenced prison population in Venezuela, and thus responding to one of the three key demands on the 1990 nationwide prisoner hunger strike. The law also extended opportunities for early release through parole/probation.

After watching the elite aid in the robbing of the nation through neoliberal restructuring,
and the subsequent repression targeting and criminalizing barrio residents, *Vagos y Maleantes* was replaced by a structural and institutional profiling of the poor that no longer needed the backing of a formal law. A projection of criminality and inferiority towards the racialized barrio residents had been thoroughly adopted by the police, the courts, the prison system, the media and elite attitudes towards the poor. Many poor barrio residents rejected the racialized and spatial construction of criminality which they were subjected to and was reinforced following the 1989 *Caracazo* uprisings and, instead, they constructed a different concept of criminality; one that pointed fingers at the ruling political elite, the corrupt two-party system, and neoliberal financial institutions. A man in Catia prison stated “the worst criminal is the one who starves this country's children to death” (Salas, 2002, p. 221). Fernandes (2006) asserts that hiphop artists began reclaiming the idea of *vagos and maleantes* as a way of redefining their lifestyles (p. 982). This re-framing of criminality also aided in the election of Hugo Chavez Frias who was elected four years after he had completed a two year prison sentence due to his leadership in a failed coup on February 4, 1992. In 1997, the Supreme Court overturned the *ley de vagos and maleantes* which lead to immediate release of 150 people who were being held on account of the law. Nonetheless the spirit of the law continued and became a symbol of the practice of the criminalization of the poor in Venezuela.

**Prisons in the Bolivarian Republic (1998-2014)**

The election of President Chavez in 1998 and the re-writing of the Constitution, marked the formal beginning of the Bolivarian Revolution, a process that sought to redistribute Venezuela's oil wealth to the poor while creating mechanisms to broaden participation in the political process. With roots that extended back into the popular movements' rejection of neoliberalism and political corruption in the 1980's, *el proceso* garnered support from the poor,
many of whom resided in the marginalized urban barrios (Cicariello-Maher, 2013. In the first decade of the Bolivarian Revolution, many legal and constitutional changes were made which established the rights of all Venezuelans, explicitly including the poor.

Article 272 of the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution acknowledges the State's responsibility to “ensure the rehabilitation of inmates and respect for their human rights” but also proclaims that the prison system should be decentralized and can be privatized. Currently, the Venezuelan prison system operates as a centralized system, all 34-52 prisons are national prisons that are controlled by the central government. The famous Venezuelan penologist, Elio Gomez Grillo has long called for the decentralization of the Venezuelan prison system, which he argues would better facilitate visitation access for family members of incarcerated people who are often unable to travel to prisons in distant states. Despite the constitutional precedence for both decentralization and privatization, past attempts to decentralize the prison system have all failed because states and governors do not want to take on the costs associated with running prisons nor be liable for what happens there. Venezuelan officials also assert that they do not intend to go the route of Chile, Brazil or the United States by allowing corporations to administer prisons or prison services for a profit (Interview Yorval Estevez, October 3, 2014).

The 1998 adoption of the Código Orgánico Proceso Penal (COPP) created an accusatory and oral system for criminal cases, shifting from a Spanish-style inquisitive process towards a US-style adversarial trial in which the “innocent till proven guilty” assumption was supposed to be inherent in the new system. (Roth, 2006). The aim of the law was to speed up sentencing and reduce the backlog of people waiting for trial and it also extended opportunities for early release through parole/probation. Despite these small administrative changes, in September, 1999 the National Constituent Assembly declared the prison system in a “state of emergency.” Proposed
solutions included, mediation and conflict resolution as alternatives, an attempt to suspend judges accused of corruption, and the assignment of 2% of the national budget to the penal system (Roth, 2006). In 2001, through another partial reform of the COPP, mandatory maximums were set to not exceed three years and, judges and prosecutors were instructed to seek alternatives to incarceration.

In 2000, La Ley de Reforma Parcial de la Ley de Regimen Penitenciario established a goal to prepare people in prison for “social reinsertion” instead of “rehabilitation,” changing the discourse of the liberal state but keeping similar sentiments albeit emphasizing people in prison rejoining their communities. This partial reform also mandated the immediate release of anyone who had been incarcerated for more than two years who had not been sentenced, which resulted in a drastic reduction in the prison population which plunged from 22,914 in 1999 to 14,196 in 2000 (Morais de Guerrero, 2011, p. 276). Nonetheless, in the same year, the Venezuelan government received an Inter-American bank loan to build more prisons. The Coro Community Penitentiary and the Tocuyito Judicial Incarceration Facility were built in the following years (Dammert and Zúñiga, 2008, 53).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s military-issued firearms began showing up inside of Venezuelan prisons. All evidence points towards the National Guards members and prison officials as the sources for these arms. Most theories about the proliferation of arms in Venezuelan prisons stem from the close relationship between the National Guard and inmates. In 1994, the National Guard was sent to police seven prisons in the country, despite a recognition describing the “military's inherent unfitness for prison duties” in Venezuelan law and reserving their involvement for circumstances that are “exceptional” (Human Rights Watch, 1998, p.4) While their official occupation only lasted for a few months, National Guards members have
maintained some level of military control over prisons, even if it is simply to police the perimeter (Human Rights Watch, 1996, p. 4). While knives, blades, and homemade weapons like *el chuzo* or *el chopo* have long been present in Venezuela prisons, the proliferation of an arsenal of assault rifles, revolvers, c4s, explosives and grenades in the hands of incarcerated people clearly points to the armed forces as the source for these weapons. Following violence in Tocorón Prison which left seven people dead and which eight grenades were confiscated, well-known critic and former political prisoner Teodoro Petkoff contributed the following commentary in an article that he penned for *Tal Cual*, the newspaper that he owns:

*The Big Question is this: how did eight grenades get into a prison...Did relatives and friends bring them in? Or might it have been, Mr. President, the prison staff, the military personnel in particular? And why grenades, or the UZI that they confiscated in another prison? The only source for such weapons are the military’s own arsenal (January 22nd, 2008)*

As these arsenals were amassed inside of prisons, the internal dynamics within the carceral world and the relationship with the guards and the government shifted quickly.

Criminologist and UCV Professor Neelie Perez explained,

...la presencia de las armas de fuego dentro de las cárcel venezolanas marca un hito, este cambian lo que se venia manejando dentro de las cárcel quienes tienen las armas tienen el poder y es ahí donde hablamos de una organización jerárquica. Los que tienen el poder son los que someten al resto pero a través del uso de la violencia se someten a partir del uso de la violencia. (Interview with Neelie Perez November 20, 2014.)

The proliferation of firearms in Venezuelan prisons contributed to increases in violence and loss of life in Venezuelan prisons. While the number of deaths in Venezuelan prisons decreased from 1999-2002, they began to increase steadily again in 2003. In 2003-2004 is when photographs of military issued weapons in the prison began to surface. (Interview, Neelie Perez, 2014.) Between 2004 and 2008, over 400 people were killed a year in prisons in Venezuela, which is an

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extremely high rate considering that the prison population was roughly 20,000 people in 2004 and roughly 24,000 in 2008. (Dammert and Zúñiga, 2008, p. 105, OVP, 2014, p.6, Morrais de Guerrero, 2011, p. 276) In 2007, 3,825 arms of various types were confiscated from people in prison, this includes “bladed weapons, pistols, grenades, sub-machine guns, revolvers, and teargas bombs” (Dammert and Zúñiga, 1998, p. 107)

As a result of increased violence among National Guards members and armed inmates or between warring factions within the prison, the authors of a comparative study of prisons in Latin America described the violence in Venezuela's prison system as “alarming” and they warned that in such circumstances “the death penalty is administered by proxy.” (Dammert and Zúniga, 2008, 104). After failed attempts to disarm the prison population through force, in 2004 the former Minister of Interior of Justice, Tarick El Assimi agreed to sit down with a representative of the prison population in hopes that a truce could be negotiated to reduce the violence in prisons. In many ways, this was a progressive response to the unreasonably high incidents of death and injury, especially considering that past regimes had sent government forces into massacre prisoners such as the infamous incident in Catia prison in 1992, and the 1994 massacre at Sabaneta prison in Maracaibo in which “officials nonchalantly told the press that they hand no accurate body count because they could not identify all the body parts” (Ungar, 1996).

Minister El Assimi met with a leader from Tocuyito prison in a very public negotiation process. Wilmer Brizuela suggested that violence in the prison would decrease if men in prison had access to more regular visits, especially conjugal visits where they could release the pent-up energy that he argued was channeled towards violence. In a televised press conference, Brizuela appeared with the Minister El Assimi as if he were a union leader. Criminologist Neelie Perez
described this moment to me in an interview:

*El ministro dijo bueno me mantienes las cárcel pacificadas pero yo a cambio te voy a dar la visita se puede quedar a dormir los fines de semana o entran el jueves a la visita y se van a el domingo y así fueron entregando el régimen penitenciario a los internos y esto les dio por supuesto muchísimo más poder hasta que llegara lo que ha llegado, cárceles enteras en manos de la población penitenciaria donde el director obedece ordenes de la población penitenciaria (November 20, 2014).*

Perez argues that this negotiation marked the symbolic and then, real transfer of power from the state to the prison organizations which had always existed but in this particular moment they had begun to acquire military issued weapons by which to maintain their power and exert their authority. Wilmer Brizulea (aka Wilmito), is probably the most famous *Pran* or *Principal*, the name used for prison bosses in Venezuela. His presence was particularly felt when I visited a prison under his control in Ciudad Bolivar, which I write about in detail in Chapter Four. The *pernocta*—a Saturday night sleepover visit with little restrictions—was granted, and still remains in the open-regime prisons today. The *pernocta* itself changed prison culture, making three out of the seven days in a week visiting days therefore redefining the internal cycle of prison life, and the regular relatively flow of goods and people into and out of prison. In turn, while this created more opportunities for family contact, it also increased expectations on visitors to come to the prison (and bring food, etc.) more regularly. Nonetheless, this was a substantial concrete gain for the prison population and Wilmer's status as a leader sky-rocketed; in what context does a prisoner get to negotiate with a Minister?

While the armed prison organizations, called *el carro* or *el trén* may have had power to shape the internal management of the prisons, they did not have control on the factors outside of the prison which were contributing to increasing rates of incarceration and therefore overcrowding of the prisons.

The growth in the prison population put an increased burden on the on the prison system and by
2008, just before the prison population swelled in Venezuela, overpopulation was already at 38%. Some particular facilities like “La Cuarta” housed 600 people in prison although its official capacity was only 150 and when I visited that prison in 2015, there were 1,800 people imprisoned there (Dammert and Zúñiga, 2008, 53).

The overpopulation in the prisons also shaped the internal management of the prisons. In order to maintain peace amidst scarce resources and space, the carro's instituted a strict code of conduct known as la rutina and all inmates were required to pay a weekly tax (la causa) to the prison organization. The money supposedly goes towards cleaning products and infrastructure investment, as the prison leader assumes responsibility for all aspects of management of the prison, including negotiating for services, food, etc.. and he is also a central bank of sorts for the bustling internal economy in food, clothes, materials, services, drugs, weapons, sex—all of which are necessary to enable incarcerated people to generate incomes to pay la causa on a weekly basis. Through this somewhat feudal arrangement, a small prison leadership comprised of el pran and his luceros have been able to amass considerable resources, which in turn has increased their general power and authority both on the inside and when negotiating the power structures on the outside.

Despite the presence of luxury items for a few, poor conditions in Venezuelan prisons is commonplace. Lack of decent food, access to healthcare, basic sanitation, clean drinking water and consistent visits are common demands of people in prison. In just the first semester of 2008, the Venezuelan Prison Observatory reported 44 hunger strikes, largely in protest of the poor conditions. And in the first semester of 2007, a shocking 160 people sewed their mouths shut as an act of protest to the conditions in the prisons or in demanding to be transferred to other prisons (Dammert and Zuniga, 2008, p.105). A number of memoirs were also published by
internationals who served time in Venezuelan prisons after they were caught attempting to traffic cocaine out of the country (See: Macneil (2006); Keany (2012); Welsh (2009); Kane (2011).) Macneil's story, among others were also featured on National Geographic's TV series, Locked up Abroad.

Most of the social programs that existed outside of the prisons in Venezuela at this time did not arrive into the all of the prisons but the educational missions were available in some. In 2007, the Venezuelan government reported that 8,000 people in prison had completed mission Robinson (the literacy program) and Mission Sucre (comparable to an Associate's degree). In that same year, the much availed El Sistema classical music programs were initiated in prisons in Mérida, Táchira and Los Teques, and by 2011, it had expanded to 7 facilities, including the newly constructed prison in Coro (Sarah Grainger, 2011; Romero, 2008).

In June of 2011, Venezuela's National Guard was sent in to El Rodeo Prison to confiscate drugs and weapons from inmates and it sparked an outburst which led to a 29 day siege that ended in bloodshed. Family members surrounded the prison to support their relatives’ demands to end overcrowding, lack of food, and other abuses and with the hopes that their presence could prevent a massacre. Official reports note that the death toll at El Rodeo (I & II) prison was 22 but various witnesses estimate that it was ten times higher. Director of El Rodeo II, Luis Rafael Aranguren, and Vice-director of El Rodeo I Rubén José González Heredia, were taken into custody for the “facilitating” the trafficking of arms and drugs into the prisons, and the two Pranes, “El Yofre” and “El Oriente,” both part of the “Corte Negro,” a prison gang with its roots in the Afro-Venezuelan region or Barlovento were very publicly displaced and transferred to other prisons (Phillips, Tom. June 28, 2011). El Rodeo prison was temporarily emptied, fueling a diaspora in other prisons throughout the country. While this was not the National Guard's first
attempt to take a prison, the *motín* at El Rodeo culminated in a month-long battle scene in a residential neighborhood in the Caracas suburb of Guatire, which attracted both national and international media coverage.

Following the government takeover of the prison, President Chavéz created the Ministry of Popular Power for Penitentiary Services (MSP) and appointed long-time militant *chavista* Iris Varela as the *Ministra* to lead the contradictory charge of retaking control of the prisons and also “humanizing” them. The new MSP was created as an autonomous institution that could focus solely on the prisons throughout the country but jails or other forms of short-term detention are notable beyond the jurisdiction of the Ministry. Additionally, the MSP unlike its predecessor, the Ministry of Justice and the Interior, has no authority over the courts or the police, both institutions closely linked to the overpopulation in the prisons. The stated goal of the MSP is to take control of the prisons in Venezuela and institute what they call the “New Regime” which is also referred to as a “closed regime.” In Chapter Five, I further investigate this “New Regime” by presenting ethnographic research that I conducted during a prison visit to a closed regime prison combined with government data and interviews with representatives from the Ministry of Penitentiary Services. In taking over these prisons, the government’s primary objective is the reduction of the number of deaths that take place in prisons, control of the prison population and the elimination of arms and drugs among the prison population.

While 2013 and 2014 saw a decrease in the number of fatalities of people in prisons, the number spiked in 2012 to an all-time high of 591 inmates, a 24% increase since 2010 (Sanchez, 2013). Some of these deaths are also attributed to conflicts with the National Guard who has launched military operations to disarm prisoners and take control of various prisons (such as Uribana prison in January, 2012). But the MSP has also negotiated the peaceful takeover of
other prisons such as Yare II, which took place in April, 2015. While the MSP officially claims that in 2015, they control 80% of the prisons in Venezuela, the three most populous prisons, Tocorón, San Juan de los Morros and PGV (which represent around one third of the total prison population) are still internally run by prison organizations of incarcerated people (Interview with Yorval Estevez, October 3, 2014; Interview, Marianela Sanchez, September 9, 2014). The dual prison system that existed during my fieldwork and as I write is the expression of moment of transition, an example of “multitemporal heterogeneity,” the MSP expresses this as they refer to the open-regime prisons as “facilities in transition.”

**Conclusions & Continuities**

Throughout Venezuela's history, the prison has maintained certain historical continuities while adapting to changing political economies, elite fears and desires for the poor, and external pressures on the peripheral nation. The main continuities which continue to shape the role of the prison in Venezuela today are the divide between common prisoners and political prisoners, the lack of resources to implement policies and enforcement mechanisms, the transfer of the economic burden of incarceration from the jailer to the family members of the incarcerated, the trajectory of former political prisoners spearheading prison reforms that were rarely or at least not universally implemented, the use of the prison to create a racialized division of punishment, and the external and foreign pressures imposed on Venezuela to utilize its prison system to maintain an stability for foreign interests.

Since the colonial era, political prisoners and their supporters have often demanded their release by asserting “we are not criminals (we are revolutionaries).” This claim serves to depoliticize the incarceration of the racialized poor and therefore naturalize the internment and
criminalization of non-whites especially Afro-descendants. While this “othering” between political prisoners and common prisoners is an extremely apparent divide throughout Venezuela's prison history, it is also true that the state played a role in enforcing this division by isolating “political prisoners” from the broader prison population. This divide takes on even more significance since it is largely the voice and perspective of political prisoners that has shaped Venezuelan literature and popular knowledge of the prison. Prison reform throughout Venezuela's history was also drafted by the political class who had formerly been political prisoners. In utopian attempts to build a new nation, the political prisoners turned reformers drafted the major penal policy reforms in 1937, 1961 and to some extent in the post-neoliberal Bolivarian era.

Every penologist who has studied the Venezuelan prison system has asserted a lack of funding and investment into prison infrastructure, while big prison expansion projects have been announced numerous times, those projects were largely delayed due to lack of resources. The lack of economic resource has also come hand in hand with a lack of state or institutional capacity for enforcement and prison personnel. The lack of human, economic and material resources throughout the history of prisons in Venezuela has created an undue burden on incarcerated people and the family members that support them. Since the colonial period, it has been a common practice for family members to provide meals and launder clothes for their incarcerated relatives. Today, when waiting in line to get into the open regime prisons, family members (mostly women) lug heavy bags full of food, soda, and clean clothes for their loved ones.

The “work” of the prison, since the colonial period, has been to reinforce a racial division of punishment thus associating blackness with criminality and asserting social differentiation
through the act of punishment. This means that, during the colonial period, if a person were sent to the Casa de Correción, this would indicate and prescribe their blackness. Today, being sent to prison carry racial signifiers and in a country where race is constructed in extremely classed terms, the prison “works” to create social differentiation and racialization by associating incarcerated people with blackness.

Throughout Venezuelan history, the prison has been called on to do the “work” of managing the surplus and organized labor. As an exporting country, dependent on foreign investment the prison was utilized to incapacitate leaders of agrarian revolts, thus maintaining a docile labor force and a racialized division of labor and “rehabilitate” vagrants who had not been incorporated into the wage economy. When the state reoriented to negotiate with foreign investors as an oil-exporting nation, the “work” of the prison included incapacitating and torturing Communists, warehousing the rural poor who were no longer needed in the failing agricultural sector now that oil become 95% of Venezuela's GDP, and controlling the swelling urban population who had swarmed the cities during the oil boom and the establishment of the petro-democracy.

These continuities are all reflected in the current prison system but there are additional economic and political factors that shape today’s dual prison system and influence how the prison “works” in the (re)production of power relations. In the next chapter I will examine the political economy of crime, social spending and prisons to explore the relationship between those factors in post neoliberal Venezuela and I will analyze the geopolitics of Venezuela’s “prison crisis,” how political and financial interests shape the debate.
Chapter Three: Post-Neoliberal Penality and the Political Economy of Prisons in Venezuela

“The study of incarceration is not a technical section in the criminological catalogue but a key chapter in the sociology of the state and social inequality in the bloom of neoliberalism”-Loic Wacquant (219)

Introduction: The Retreat of Anti-neoliberal Thinking on Criminality

At the beginning of the 21st century, government attitudes about crime and incarceration were unique in Venezuela. While tough on crime, neoliberal policing tactics accompanied measures for economic liberalization, austerity and privatization throughout Latin America, the pro-poor approach in Venezuela initially produced radically different sentiments on the issues of crime and incarceration. In 1999, President Chavez rhetorically asked the President of the Supreme Court if she would steal to feed her family, advancing the idea that criminals are “victims of the capitalist system” 16 This rhetoric got exploited by the right wing opposition and news media who portrayed Chávez’s comments as condoning crime. In an interview with the BBC, Alfredo Romero, the Director of Foro Penal Venezolano referred to this as "La doctrina del 'Si yo fuera pobre, yo robaría.' But within the first year of his first term in office, the prison rate plummeted to nearly half and while this shift was actually due to reform of the criminal proceedings (COPP) passed before his tenure, it was a symbolic change that reflected an ideal of moving away from the criminal punishment system as a means of dealing with poverty.

Compared to other countries in the region, Venezuela resisted the prison expansion bandwagon in the beginning of the 21st Century. Venezuela was the only country in Latin America with negative growth of the prison population while other countries in Latin America

16 See http://criminologiaucab.blogspot.com/
(with Chile, leading this race) were moving towards rapid increases in the rates of incarceration (Carranza 2010, p. 76, p. 277; Muller, 2012). While the rates of incarceration consistently climbed following the mass exodus in 2000, they remained comparatively low. As many other Latin American countries invested in building new prisons to house the bodies that would soon be incarcerated, Venezuela actually closed prisons and only constructed one new prison in the first 10 years of the post neoliberal era. The relatively, few physical prisons in Venezuela (between 30-35 in the 2000s) as compared Brazil (over 900) and all of its Andean neighbors, demonstrate that Venezuela has not followed other Latin American countries, like Colombia, in a prison-building spree. Nonetheless, the relatively fewer prisons in Venezuela have been extremely overcrowded, exacerbating related problems such as violence and the spread of disease (Dammert and Zuniga, 2009). While article 272 of the Bolivarian Constitution explicitly creates the possibility for the privatization of Venezuelan prisons, they have rejected privatization in practice. In 2009, a decade after the first private prison was opened in Brazil, 1.5% of Brazil’s prison population was incarcerated in partially privatized facilities (The Sentencing Project, 2013). The first fully private prison in South America was opened in Chile in 2013 and Mexico, Peru and Colombia have all taken bids from private companies for managing their prisons (Carranza, 2010, p. 277; The Sentencing Project, 2013). Until 2009, Venezuela was an outlier in Latin America but since then, the Bolivarian Republic has followed the trend of growing rates of incarceration, despite reductions in inequality and poverty.

In this chapter I examine how the politics and the economy shape rising rates of incarceration and the political and financial interests in Venezuela’s “prison crisis.” First, I explore the central premise of “neoliberal penalty”—that rising rates of incarceration are a direct result of social insecurity, stemming from neoliberal cuts in social programs and not from rising
crime rates—which fails to explain why prison rates have gone up in Venezuela in the context of social investment and decreasing poverty. While the formula for neoliberal penalty may not describe the material conditions in Venezuela, I argue that “neoliberal penal common sense” has replaced anti-neoliberal rationalities on criminality since the economy began its decline in 2009, which is precisely when prison rates began to increase at rapid rates. Then, I examine the political economy of crime, social investment and prison rates to empirically explore the relationships between them. Lastly, I analyze the geopolitics of Venezuela’s prison crisis, and how political and financial interests shape the debate, thus influencing prison politics in Venezuela.

**Post-Neoliberal Penalty**

Following the 2000 mass exodus from prison, there was a slow and steady increase of the prison population until 2009, when the total population started reaching and then surpassed the highest levels of incarceration of the late eighties and early nineties. By 2014, the prison population was between 50,000-60,000, meaning that the prison population quadrupled from its 2000 low of 14,196 and was nearly double of the previous all-time high of 31,086 in 1991, following on the heels of heightened rates of poverty and neo-liberal restructuring (Morrais de Guerrero, 2011, p. 276; Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones, 2014 (Informe Semestral)). While government policies and attitudes represented antineoliberal rationalities that saw crime as a response to inequality and insecurity created by capitalism, neoliberal penal thinking, which blamed individuals for making poor choices, dominated many Latin American nations during the first part of the 2000s. But once stagnation and uncertainty set in following the 2008 global recession, the Venezuelan government began to adopt a tough on crime approach and prison rates began to climb to unprecedented levels.
Criminality was no longer perceived as a result of victimization of the capitalist system. Instead, criminals were portrayed as agents of the capitalist system; they represented greed, individualism and consumerism and they were to be treated as a threat to the honest socialist worker, the citizenry and nation. Social psychologist and activist-scholar Andrés Antillano notes that this form of “punitive populism” mimics Marxist portrayals of the “lumpen.” But this shift towards “punitive populism” in Venezuela is, in part, due to demands for a comprehensive security policy in the face of soaring rates of violence and crime that is largely concentrated in the north central urban centers.

The investment in government social programs contributed to a 66 percent decrease in extreme poverty during the first eleven years of the Bolivarian Revolution 1998-2009) (Wilpert, 2011). The assumption was that decreasing extreme poverty would automatically reduce crime rates and therefore take the pressure off of the prison system, but that is not how it played out. Many functionalist social scientists who have made the clear case, based on a wide array of data sets, that crime is correlated to inequality have been paralyzed in the face of increased crime rates alongside decreasing inequality in Venezuela. The policies that aimed at social inclusion, and created concrete results of reduced poverty inequality did not simply reduce crime rates or violence in Venezuela, in fact it appears that crime and violence have increased in the last decade. (See Table 2. Crime Rates 1995-2012 by Varied Sources)

After nearly a decade of investing in social inclusion policies, and three years of attempted widespread police reform, the Venezuelan state adopted a mano dura approach to crime that was touted as a socialist response to the problem. But Antillano (2015) explains how this new policy created a paradox because “the iron fist has always been under the flag brandished by the opposition, and now Chavismo has gone and converted this into its own
political offering.” During the period which I conducted field work, this “punitive populism” became even more exaggerated. The economic crisis, which was dubbed “the economic war,” created the conditions for a further criminalization of the poor. As shortages, hoarding, extreme inflation, long lines, and the smuggling of goods persisted, poor people engaged in illegally buying and selling basic goods were transformed into the new enemies of the Revolution and their attempts to provide for their families or earn money through the trafficking of food items and basic commodities was criminalized. Antillano explains this phenomena:

There is a double meaning of the poor man; there’s the “good poor person” who goes to the [social] missions and “the bad poor person” who is a delinquent, a bachaquero, a criminal who bears the brunt of unmeasured violence, a criminalizing rhetoric. This is causing fractures and alienation within the social bases of Chavismo (Antillano and Bujunda, August 27, 2015).

This discourse reinforces concepts of the “deserving” and “undeserving “poor. Antillano posits that through the ‘focalized’ social policies that have dramatically reduced poverty and had an impact on the lives of many poor people- there are also those who are marginalized and excluded from these policies. These exclusions cut through the popular sector as a certain type of inequality grows within poor communities; those who have accessed the benefits of the missions and those who have not. Antillano suggests that these inequalities among poor communities, and the exclusion of certain sectors—particularly young racialized men, are factors in increased crime rates, violence and a general social breakdown. Some of the language and accusations towards the most excluded sectors seems to reflect conservative narratives built on moralism which blame the “culture” of the poor or single mothers for crime. It is not surprising that this discourse persists, but it is worrisome that it has been adopted by the Left as a means to explain the persistence of crime and violence. But, this “castigatory shift of public discourses on urban disorder” is, according to Loic Wacquant (2009b) increasingly “pronounced among socialist and social-democratic officials” (p.4). So, despite the avowedly socialist politics, Venezuela appears
to be on the path to adopting “a new neoliberal penal common sense.”

But the premise of this formulation—which is based on the examination of the rise of mass incarceration in the United States during a period of stagnant or declining crime rates—is that "governments are surrendering to the temptation to rely on the police, the courts and the prison to stem the disorders generated by mass unemployment, the generalization of precarious wage labor, and the shrinking social protection” (Wacquant, 2009b, p.1). These realities in urban centers are a direct result of neoliberal restructuring despite traditional neo-classical economic theories that proclaim the retreat of the state, “the glorification of the penal state” is “the exception to the religion of ‘small government!’” in the neoliberal age, ie. “the centaur state.” (Wacquant 2010; Wacquant, 2009b, p.69) The neoliberal penal state is called on to play a disciplinary role to manage, control and warehouse the poor people for whom legal means of survival are no longer options due to rising inequality and social insecurity.

In spite of a recent move towards adopting the “neoliberal penal common sense” prevalent throughout the region and world, the climbing rates of incarceration in Venezuela have been accompanied by increasing rates of crime (and violence), and within the context to ongoing social spending that has successfully reduced inequality. There are elements of the penal state that are extremely relevant when examining the rise in incarceration rates within hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela. It is through the lens of the neoliberal penal state that Wacquant describes and the hybrid post-neoliberal state that I elaborated on above, that I steer my investigation of Venezuela’s prison system. I will now examine the political economy of crime and social spending—with a focus on poverty and inequality during the Bolivarian era and I will connect them to the question of incarceration. I emphasize 2009-present, when prison rates began to climb and anti-neoliberal penal sense was abandoned by top government officials and
spokespeople of *chavismo* in favor of “neoliberal penal common sense.” It is through examining those three factors, crime rates, social spending/inclusion, and prison rates, that Waquant’s central thesis can be tested.

**Crime in Venezuela**

One of the reasons why it is so challenging to fully understand the scope of the problem of crime and insecurity in Venezuela is because it is nearly impossible to get trustworthy statistics on the topic. In Robert Samet's article “Caracas: The most dangerous city in Latin America - or is it?” he explores the inaccuracies inherent in crime statistics in Venezuela. While the government has not released official statistics since 2003, Samet argues that the government agency CICPC (the investigative body) is the best source for homicide rates but due to an error on their part (a miscalculation of Caracas' population) the crime statistics, prior to correction in 2011, were unreasonably inflated. So the 2010 figure, incorrectly claimed that Venezuela had 109 homicides per 100,000, but when adjusted to take into account an accurate population figure, the rate goes down to 71 per 100,000. These rates also do not include those who were killed by police or security forces. While excluding these figures from the statistics is a consistent practice in the region it obviously absconds key dynamics at play. For example, in 2010 this number was 3,482 and an additional 4,508 death were categorized as “under investigation” and therefore neither category were included in official statistics.

Since the government has been withholding crime statistics, “arguing they could be used in the media to increase a feeling of insecurity,” Non-Government Organizations have been collecting their own data on crime and homicide rates in Venezuela ever since 2003, when the government stopped releasing official statistics (“2014 Crime Rates Drop in Venezuela” TeleSur,
September 8, 2014). Seguridad, Justicia y Paz, a Mexican based NGO came to the conclusion that the 2010 homicide rate was 118.6 per 100,000 inhabitants by estimating that 70% of the bodies that went through the city morgue and were reported on in the newspaper were a result of homicide. The Venezuelan Violence Observatory released a report in December of 2013 in which they “conservatively” estimated the crime rates at 79 per 100,000 by plotting out the rates of homicides as reported by newspapers and government agencies over the year and then applied a statistical analysis of the data to create an average. To give a sense of just how high these numbers are, this rate would reflect a daily average of more than ten people killed on the streets of Caracas (International Crisis Group, August 2011).

While conducting my fieldwork in Venezuela, I sat in on a lunch of some of Venezuela’s leading criminologists and penologists at the Central University of Venezuela, many of whom were the very authors of the reports mentioned above. They were all swapping strategies on how they get their statistics and acknowledging the limitations of each method that they have. It was clear that some data was better than others, but in the end none of them felt confident that their methods captured the complete or accurate story of crime rates in Venezuela.

Despite challenges to draw a statistically accurate picture of crime rates in the country, Venezuelans consistently name insecurity as the most important political priority. The fear for personal safety is rampant and whether the threat is as great as it is perceived to be, according to a 2013 (check this) Gallup Poll 74% of Venezuelans “feel unsafe and fearful to be in the street at night,” the highest rate in all of Latin America (PROVEA Informe 2013,). While there is contention over the methods used to analyze crime rates, the most common being the use of homicide rates, because as one Venezuelan researcher said, “it’s harder to hide a body,” there is a general sense among citizens, the government, scholars and journalists that the crime rates in
Venezuela are high, and that they are a problem. In May, 2014 Edgardo Lander, a well-known intellectual and sociology professor at the Central University of Venezuela discussed the issue of crime on the Real News Network's program *Reality Asserts Itself*. He cited 5 components that he believes account for the high crime rates in Venezuela; 1) a corrupt and repressive police force, 2) a prison system that breeds crime, 3) deficiencies in the courts which has led to a severe backlog, 4) the easy availability of weapons, and 5) the impact of increased drug trafficking as Venezuela becomes the main route for transporting cocaine from Colombia to US and European Markets.

The police force in Venezuela, like in many countries, is notoriously corrupt but Venezuelans distrust for police is even higher than most Latin American countries. In a 2008 Latinobarometer survey on Venezuela, 61.4% of those surveyed said that there is “quite a high” or, “very high probability that a police officer can be bribed.” According to a 2010 Latinobarometer survey, 41.6% of Venezuelans had “little” confidence in the police and 27.3% had “none.”

Despite the 2011 dismantling of the notoriously corrupt Metropolitan Police in Caracas and the formation of the National Bolivarian Police (PNB) incidents of corruption, police involvement in crime, and police brutality and impunity continue in Venezuela. In 2009 then Justice Minister Tarek El Aissami estimated that the police were involved in 15-20% of criminal activity in Venezuela. And, a 2009 article in *The Guardian*, noted that the results of one poll showed that 70% said that "police and criminals are practically the same." In that very article, Human Rights groups had estimated police involvement in an average of 900 killings a year. And a 2010 US State Department report noted that before the MP were dismantled, of the nearly 9,000 officers, 1,800 were under investigation for criminal activity such as “arbitrary arrests,
torture, and unlawful detention” (Carroll, 2009)

Many scholars and analysts point to the fractured structure of the Venezuelan police forces as a contributing factor to high levels of corruption. In 2009, Kiraz Janicke wrote that there are “126 different police agencies in Venezuela under the control of various municipal, state and national governments, all with varying entry criteria and guidelines.” This means that some police forces work directly under the jurisdiction of mayors or governors, who have been accused of utilizing them as private armies for their own political or financial interests. In a study of the relationship between perceptions of police corruption as correlated with broader political corruption, Marek (2013) concludes that “the sheer ratio of police to citizens, the fragmented, decentralized law enforcement system, and the actual incidences of police brutality have augmented Venezuelans’ belief that the police are corruption.”

The creation of the National Bolivarian Police in 2009, which grew from the police reform project initiated in 2006, was intended to create a different model of policing that was community-based, free from corruption and respected Human rights. While the original vision was to eventually replace all of the other police forces, the fact that the PNB has struggled to meet their basic recruitment goals demonstrates real improbability that that will happen. The National Experimental University of Security (UNES) was established as the training institute for new cadre of human-rights respecting officers in 2009; 2014 they had trained 245 police officers. Originally, members of the human rights community were actively involved in building the curriculum for the police. This curriculum included a class-based analysis that was critical of how police serve the interests of the ruling class and criminalize the poor, it also explored the impact of the war on drugs, and gave thorough training on the police's responsibility

17 Official UNES website: http://www.unes.edu.ve
to guarantee the human rights of the citizenry. In 2012, they hosted an international conference called “Security from a Leftist Perspective,” where governments from throughout Latin America and beyond joined in a discussion of progressive strategies to combat crime in the “post-neoliberal” era.

Despite these advances, it is extremely hard to measure the impact that UNES and the PNB has had. The 2013 announcement of the Secure Homeland Plan (Plan Patria Segura), stations national guards members on the streets with the goal of aiding the police in combating crime. Despite survey results that show that Venezuelan (4:1) trust the national guard more than the police, Rebecca Hanson (2013) argued that “continuing to rely upon militarized initiatives to control crime seems to contradict the steps forward that police reform has made in recent years.” Hanson also notes that unlike the police, the National Guard are not subject to “internal and external supervisory boards.”

Internal affairs minister Miguel Rodriguez Torres told El Universal Newspaper that Crime rates were anticipated to fall in Venezuela in 2014. While he projected the figure at somewhere between 32-35 per 100,000 inhabitants, human rights organizations like PROVEA and NGO Venezuelan Violence Observatory have claimed that the government's estimates are low. Rodriguez Torres also suggested that because 74% of those homicides took place in direct confrontation with the police force, it was his opinion that they should not factor into “citizen security,” an idea that can only suggest that those who find themselves in confrontation with the police are not to be considered part of the citizenry. The supposed decrease in the still very high crime rates could be a result of police reforms, but there are way too many factors to be able to prove that correlation.

The group of 10 guys that I spent a Sunday visiting day with in the El rodeo prison felt
somewhat justified in their own criminal actions because they perceived the police and national guards, (and all politicians) as the real criminals. Most of them had directly experienced violence and extortion from the police and National Guard and the fact that they were locked up, while the police and national Guards members were free only served to prove that the whole system is corrupt, and that they were getting the short end of the stick.

Many of the young people that I spoke with in Venezuelan prisons were just small children when Chávez came to power and they have little memories of the period that preceded him. Despite opportunities for free education and social supports through the missions, and subsidized food markets, many people that I spoke with in the prison were well aware of their lack of employment opportunities and they were all clear that whatever they did, they wanted to get paid well. All but one person who I spoke with in El Rodeo asserted that crime was the best option, and that selling drugs was the most expedient way to make good money fast. Even all of the opportunities created by the Bolivarian Revolution did not create ready options for work for barrio youth that could provide an income anywhere close to what selling drugs or committing crimes could.

The very years that youth would spend in a 4-year college, they are spending roughly that time in prisons. Instead of professors, they are subjected to the strict routine of either the self-run prisons, where respect and a certain type of macho-cool need to be practiced in hopes of self-preservation. In people's spare time they share stories, real and invented, about their accomplishments. This is not because people in prison are monsters or take pleasure in hurting others, but as one participant in a Thug Forum stated “this was the only thing that I was ever good at” (Juventudes Otras, 2010).

We all like being good at something. With the lack of decent formal education, and
environments conducive to personal growth and training, the skills that young folks from the barrio develop, such as being a good business person, a clever thief, a good organizer and leader, or a skilled fighter and marksman, are sources of pride. People who have these skills and are recognized for them can then pass along that knowledge to others. These are not the only skills learned in prison (people learn crafts, metal-work, cooking, or dedicate time to the study of the bible) but, clearly the metaphor of prison as a “school for crime” makes sense when college-aged kids are locked up and they teach each other the things that they feel competent in.

Not only does the prison function as what many call “a university of crime,” by reinforcing norms rooted in criminal activity and the opportunity to gain skills, knowledge, and networks that could serve useful for further criminal activity, the strict internal organizations of the open-regime prisons in Venezuela are creating veritable networks of organized crime that in some cases, such as in the state of Bolívar, these groups have a powerful reach beyond the prison walls.

The deficiencies in the courts, and the backlog in criminal proceedings that result from them combined with impunity for corrupt public officials demonstrates a serious institutional failure of the state. While youth accused of smoking marijuana might be detained and then thrown into prison for 2 years without a hearing due to consecutive deferrals in their trials, numerous murders go unsolved. It is a commonly held belief in Venezuela- especially among the prison population- that the simplest way to resolve legal charges is to pay lawyers and judges large sums of money and to avoid the situation altogether, pay the police off. For people from humble backgrounds and limited means, this is not an option. For those who can afford to pay off government officials, there is little disincentive for engaging in criminal activity. These dual issues; the business of the criminal punishment system, and the slow criminal proceedings are
recurring themes that I address in more detail in the following ethnographic section of my dissertation.

The availability of weapons is clearly another factor that contributes to high crime rates in Venezuela. Some success was achieved in Brazil through a broad disarmament plan that included disarming portions of the Brazilian police force. A 2009 survey by Venezuela’s National Statistics Institute concluded that 79 percent of homicides and kidnappings and 74 percent of robberies are committed with guns (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2010). Attempts at disarmament have been unclear. A 2014 news report on TeleSUR English noted that a 2013 law promoted disarmament “but the results are uncertain.” According to official in the year following the disarmament law only 12,603 illegal weapons had been forcefully seized and 84,158 destroyed, which would only represent about seven percent of the 1.2 million guns recorded by the Presidential Commission of Disarmament, and far less than 1% of the 6 million guns that the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (OVV) claims exist within the country.

Venezuela’s proximity to Colombia is often used to explain the growing influence of organized crime, paramilitaries and drug-trafficking in Venezuela. While it is estimated that just under half of cocaine departing from Colombia passes through Venezuela in route to US, European and West African markets, Antillano cautions against narratives based on a “xenophobic thesis,” noting that “Colombia ends up being the scapegoat for all of our ills, and the thesis is not empirically verifiable either.” While the problem of drug trafficking cannot simply be blamed on Colombia (as it often is within Venezuela’s national borders), various studies confirm that Venezuela is a hotspot for cocaine trafficking. According to a 2010 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 41 percent of all cocaine shipments to Europe passed through Venezuela and that it is ranked fourth globally for cocaine seizures. In
2005, the Venezuelan government ceased its collaboration with the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) due to suspicions of “infiltrations.” The Interior of Justice at that time, Jesse Chacón stated “if the DEA wants to work with the Venezuelan government, it should do so under defined parameters or at least on the basis of a bilateral agreement that respects the principle of reciprocity” (Wilpert, August 8, 2015). Collaboration with the DEA became an issue of sovereignty in Venezuela and based on the long and brutal consequences of the US-led Drug Wars in Latin America, the decision was viewed by supporters as a firm rejection of US Imperial interventions.

The Venezuelan government has failed to release official crime statistics since 2003, and furthermore, they have claimed that a “manipulation of figures by opposition agents” has led to inflated statistics that portray Venezuela as being far more dangerous and violent than it is. I will briefly touch on these allegations and the politics of NGOs in the following section. Despite untrustworthy data, much evidence supports the fact that crime (including drug trafficking, homicides and kidnappings) have increased significantly, throughout Chávez’s presidency but that they have accelerated substantially since around 2008. In a 2011 Report by the International Crisis Group, the authors conclude that:

In 1999, President Chávez assumed power with the promise to root out corruption and tackle violence, which had both increased under previous administrations. Twelve years later, criminal violence is out of control, fueled by soaring impunity, massive, uncontrolled circulation of weapons, police corruption and brutality and the presence of multiple armed groups in collusion with elements of the security forces. While many of these problems precede the current government, it cannot wash its hands of them (p. 30).

Although there is debate as to exactly the scale of the problem, government officials concede to a worrisome increase in crime in Venezuela. Wacquant argues that Neoliberal Penality is marked by increased rates of incarceration in spite of decreasing or stagnant rates of crime (2009b). In Venezuela, the imperfect data points to an upward trend in crime rates during the post-neoliberal era rendering a central premise of Wacquant’s theory immaterial for the post-neoliberal era.
**Social Spending, Poverty and Inequality**

While austerity measures have gripped the planet since the beginning of the 21st Century, the state, fueled by oil rent income, has expanded and increased spending in Venezuela as a part of its “Bolivarian Revolution.” The redistribution of oil rents towards social programs and anti-poverty measures has resulted in a dramatic decrease in poverty and inequality as well as a significant improvement in the United Nations Human Development Index, which tracks combined factors of income, education and life expectancy.18 During the Neoliberal era throughout Latin America, where poverty rates were largely growing, Venezuela experienced a marked decline in poverty.

From 2003-2008, hundreds of social programs were initiated that sought to address housing, education, hunger and nutrition, water, land titles, support for the formation of cooperatives and incorporation into the political process. Arguably, the most successful of these programs were the educational Missions (Robinson, Ribas and Sucre) and the Barrio Adentro healthcare programs. In addition to widespread participation in these programs, the results have paid off. In Gregory Wilpert’s 2011 “Assessment of the Bolivarian Revolution,” he noted that

The results of the Chavez government’s economic policies have been a 50% drop in the poverty rate, from 49% of the households in early 1998 to 24% in late 2009. Similarly, the extreme poverty rate dropped more than two-thirds, from 21% of households in 1998 to 6% in late 2009...in the area of education the government has almost tripled the rate of university attendance, from 28 per 1,000 inhabitants in 1999 to 78 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2007 (from 657,000 university students in 1999 to 2.1 million in 2007); it achieved a 50% increase in the enrollment rate in primary education from 40.6% in 1999 to 60.6% in 2008; and increased by 30% the percentage of GDP dedicated to education, from 4.87% of GDP in 1999 to 6.34% in 2008....In the area of health the advances include: universal health coverage, via the Barrio Adentro Mission (community doctors in most neighborhoods); a drop in the infant mortality rate from 19.0 per 1,000 live births in 1999 to 13.9 per 1,000 in 2008; a 1.5 year increase in Venezuelans’ life expectancy, from 72.4 years in 2000 to 73.9 in 2009.

There are numerous reports that demonstrate the statistical outcomes of increased social

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18 Venezuela’s improvement from 2000-2010 was .93, as compared with .50 the previous decade and .08 from 1980-1990. Venezuela is now classified as a -2 country, the same category that the United States is in although the US has seen a decrease in its human development index over the last 3 decades.
spending. A UN report by the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) noted a decrease in poverty from 37.1% of the population in 2005 to 32.1% in 2013 and extreme poverty (indigence) decreased even more so from 15.9 to 9.8 % in the same time period. The World Bank statistics estimate the percentage of the population in poverty in Venezuela at 25.4% in 2012, a fall from the rate hovering between 31-32% from 2008-2011 (See World Bank). The World Bank statistics are based on the proportion of people living below the national poverty line whereas the CEPAL study examine “multi-dimensional” factors like living standards to define poverty.

These outcomes are a reflection of increased Government social spending, which more than tripled from 1998-2013. Before the economic crisis dramatically deepened in 2013, the Venezuelan National Budget for that year had assigned just under 37.7% of the budget to social spending, with 11.7% going towards education, 9.9% assigned to social security, and 8% assigned to healthcare. Government statistics that compare social spending and percentage of the national budget derived from taxes in 1986-1998 and 1999-2011, demonstrate a six-fold increase in government social spending along with an increase in the proportion of the budget derived from taxes from 36.2 to 60.7 percent. See Table 3. Percentage of People and households with incomes below the national poverty line in the Appendix.

The reduction in poverty as a result of increased social investment also led to a general decrease in inequality from 2002-2008, a trend that was consistent in Latin America over that period. While inequality continued to decrease in Venezuela from 2008-2013, it fell far less quickly than in the prior period which was marked by the social missions, redistribution and economic transformation. In 2008, the price for oil on the global market fell from $140 to $40

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per barrel as a result of the global economic crisis. Since 95% of Venezuela’s GDP is based on oil, this sent Venezuela into a mini-recession. With programs to protect the poor in place, they did not, like other countries in the region experience an immediate increase in inequality and poverty but the progress that had been achieved in the first decade of the Bolivarian Revolution slowed down significantly following the global recession. With the exception of 2002-2003, when the opposition protests led to a halt of the oil sector, false shortages and negative growth in the economy, poverty and inequality decreased substantially in the first decade of the Bolivarian Revolution.\textsuperscript{20} In the same Center for Economic Policy report that evaluates Venezuela 10 years after Chávez was elected, the authors demonstrate that unemployment decreased from 2005-2013.

In the first decade of the post-neoliberal period, all indicators demonstrate a movement away from austerity, towards increased social spending, a dramatic reduction in poverty and decreasing levels of inequality. But following the 2008 global recession and drop in oil prices, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela entered a period of stagnation and uncertainty and in 2013—fueled by soaring inflation, shortages of basic goods and severe currency devaluation in the informal exchange rate system—the country entered into an economic crisis. Statistics for the period of stagnation (2009-2013) demonstrate progress towards decreasing poverty and inequality but at a much slower speed than the previous decade. While the government has consistently increased social spending during this period, the 2015 budget deficit reached 16.9 percent of GDP, a number that journalist Z.C. Dutka, notes as “higher even than that of countries like Greece and Spain during the 2012 eurozone crisis” but still lower than the 1999 budget deficit (October 22, 2014, Venezuelanalysis.com). It has been difficult to recover statistics on

\textsuperscript{20} This is also demonstrated by the decrease in the GINI Coefficient from 48.65 in the first quarter of 1998 to 40.99 in 2008. See Weisbrot, Ray and Sandoval (February 2009).
social spending, poverty, and inequality from 2013-2015 but the experience on the ground points towards the real potential increases in poverty and inequality over this period. See Table 4 in Appendix.

Following the mini-recession in Venezuela which, brought on by falling oil prices in 2008, is precisely when prison populations started increasing in the country (more dramatically in 2009). So, during the initial rise in prison population, inequality and poverty were still decreasing, albeit more slowly than in the previous 10 year period. Again, a core premise to Wacquant’s thesis of neoliberal penalty rests on increased social insecurity as a result of poverty and inequality shaped by austerity and a withdrawal of state spending. This basis does not reflect the situation in Venezuela from 1998-2013 and while it is possible that poverty and inequality grew or remained stagnant during the period of crisis (2013-2015) when I conducted my fieldwork, this would not be due to austerity-like decreases in spending but other macro-economic factors such as increasing unemployment, falling value of wages due to an inflation rate of 64%. And, in the face of these hardships, the social safety net of healthcare, free education, and subsidized food (even with distribution and shortages taken into account) have remained.

So, while the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is not the poster-child for Neoliberal Penalty, because crime has increased and inequality has decreased, the prison population is has increased rapidly from 23,299 to 55,007 in 2014. There was a decline to 49,664 in 2015. (Morais de Guerrero, 2011; OVP Annual Reports). Despite the deviation from Wacquant’s neat formula for neoliberal penalty, many of the themes that he addresses are extremely relevant to Venezuela, such as: descriptions of advanced marginality, spatial segregation, the racialization of criminality, the warehousing of the poor when the legal means of survival diminish (or in the
case of Venezuela cannot compete with illicit activity), the (always racially charged) propagandistic frenzy around crime, the unprecedented increase in prison populations, and the increased tendency of socialist and left-leaning politicians to embrace a security policy platform and rhetoric that reflects traditionally conservative “tough-on crime” approaches that embrace “neoliberal penal common sense.”

These points of divergence and confluence illustrate how the competing rationalities on crime and punishment but also specifically policy towards the poor are employed in Venezuela’s hybrid post neoliberal state formation. So, while the macro-indicators in poverty, inequality and social spending through 2013 point towards a veritable revolution of the state; that is, if through neoliberal restructuring there was a “devolution” of the state as guarantor of social welfare, through the Bolivarian Revolution, the state has not only reclaimed its primacy in meeting the needs of the populace but the policies and programs implemented concretely improved the standard of living of the majority in the post-neoliberal period, with the most rapid progress taking place between 1998 and 2008. Nonetheless, Venezuela remains an unequal society internally, even if its relative inequality has been reduced in the past decade and a half. Additionally, all indicators point to growing inequality and rising unemployment (especially for youth) beginning with the onset of the crisis in late 2013. So, despite a revolution at the state level, which aimed to reinvigorate the power of the state as benefactor, akin to the more prosperous years of the liberal democratic era, the social programs themselves were only able to achieve a reduction in the poverty and inequality produced through the neoliberal period and to subsidize free primary healthcare and higher education. As I showed above, through these policies, Venezuela has arrived to being about as unequal as the United States-marking a dramatic reduction in inequality from the neoliberal period.
I present this data, along with some initial analysis by Andrés Antillano because in order to understand crime and prison in Venezuela; it is essential to grasp poverty, inequality and marginality. While the clean functional relationship of decreased poverty did not produce a clear correlation to decreased crime in Venezuela, this does not actually imply that they are not related. Poverty (and specifically marginality) needs to be explored more dialectically in relation to crime rates, not simply functionally. Through my field work in the following chapters, I make this attempt. But without a more robust explanation of marginality and crime in post-neoliberal Venezuela, the lurking explanation of the social scientist and the Right is the age old argument that there is a “culture of crime;;” nested in the assumption that it originates from a “culture of poverty” (Patterson, 2001). This line of thinking has already been adopted popularly and by state officials and institutions as a part of the neoliberal penal common sense that guides the creation of the disciplinary new regimes and the expansion of prisons that is gradually taking place.

Due to the hybrid nature of Venezuelan statecraft in the post-neoliberal period, the embraced “neoliberal penal common sense” is not fully hegemonic, even among various facets of the state. There are competing rationalities, such as through some of the programs through the Ministry of Penitentiary Services that revert to a liberal model of rehabilitation with an emphasis on individual rights. Among Venezuelans and social movements, there are competing forms of common sense that envision social inclusion beyond its liberal tenets, like ending capitalism, class inequality and exploitation. For example, when I interviewed Juan Manuel Mendoza at the Philosophical Summit of the Poor in Caracas, he surprised me when he insisted the Venezuela does have “political prisoners;;” “we have 55,000 of them” he insisted. In other words, all prisoners are political prisoners.  

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21 Mendoza’s stipulated that to use his interview in any format, I must reiterate that these are not his ideas alone; that everything that he says comes from years of discussing and thinking with others. For more excerpts from my
The topic of “political prisoners” in Venezuela is generally a charged and polarizing one. Throughout my fieldwork opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez was jailed with a stalled trial and despite international pressure from his wife Lilian Tintori, along with former heads of other Latin American states and supporters. In September of 2015 he was found guilty of inciting violence that led to the death of 43 people during the Guarimba (street barricades) in February, 2014; he was sentenced to 14 years in prison. Lopez’s case pushed imprisonment in Venezuela back into the international spotlight, and the topic of prison conditions became fodder for the right-wing opposition to bolster their claims that the Venezuelan government is guilty of widespread human rights violations. In a statement released in response to the verdict US-based NGO Human Rights Watch said “the baseless conviction... exposes the extreme deterioration of the rule of law in Venezuela.”22 I will now examine the shifting political interests embedded in the conflict surrounding prisons in Venezuela as a way of framing correlation of forces at play.

The International Politics of Venezuela’s Prison Crisis

The problems in Venezuela’s prisons creates a certain vulnerability for the Venezuelan state, and there is copious documented evidence that the internal opposition, aided by the US government has a vested interest in exploiting these weaknesses. In a secret document from the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) of USAID dated November, 2006, the author’s layout the “5 point strategy to guide embassy activities for the period of 2004-2006.” The strategy is stated as follows: “1) Strengthen Democratic Institutions, 2) Penetrating Chavez’s Political Base, 3) Dividing Chavismo, 4) Protecting Vital US Businesses, and 5) Isolating Chavez internationally.” The document goes on to highlight USAID/OTI activities that fit within this broader strategy in

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that time period, specifically it mentions financial support that is upward of $15 million USD to
different organizations of which it mentions that many formed “as a direct result of OTI
programs and funding.” The document goes on to mention that in addition to the $1.1 million
USD awarded to the Freedom House (FH) “Right to Defend Human Rights” that 22 additional
grants were provided to human rights organizations, the sum of which was $726,000 USD.

The document then celebrates the successes of the Venezuelan Prison Observatory
(OVP), the main prison-focused NGO in Venezuela. It says:

Since beginning work with the OTI, OVP has taken 1 case successfully through the inter-American system,
achieving a ruling requiring BRV [The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela] special protective measures for
the prison “La Pica.”...OVP receives technical support from FH, as well as monetary support from the Pan
American Development Foundation (PADF).

This classified document, which was stolen and released through WikiLeaks verifies what many
government officials have been suspicious of for a long time.

In a 2009 brief from US political counselor Robin D. Meyer to the National Security Council and
US Secretary of State (among others), he notes that “Venezuelan prisons are notoriously
dangerous,” and points towards an increased use in pretrial detention of opposition leaders. This
memo was written just as prison rates across the country were on the rise, in part due to longer
pre-trial detentions primarily of marginalized youth. In a section labeled “Venezuelan prisons
are your worst fear,” he cites data from the OVP to demonstrate the high levels of violence and
unsanitary conditions in the prison. While these descriptions of poor and dangerous conditions
in Venezuelan prisons are objectively true, there is evidence to suggest that this information is
being gathered and utilized as one tentacle in a broad and ongoing strategy to destabilize the
Venezuelan government.

In the polarized context of Venezuela, NGOs receiving direct funding from the United
States government are understood to share a common interest of overthrowing the current regime
and thus sidestepping the electoral will of the people as well as Venezuelan sovereignty. In my various interviews with cultural workers and leftists who do work in the prisons, the OVP was described to me as “suspect” and “suspicious” but in news stories, studies and reports, their spokesman Humberto Prado and the report that he releases annually through calling a press conference is understood by journalists, International human rights organizations and researchers to be the authoritative voice on prisons in Venezuela. Government officials, including the current Minister of Penitentiary Services (MSP), Iris Varela has accused the OVP of working with the CIA, and it is commonly understood by other workers in the MSP that the NGO are clearly “opposition.”

This form of polarization is common within the context of Venezuela and through these WikiLeaks cables, it appears that there is ample evidence that the US government has chosen to exploit Venezuela’s failing prison system as proof of a broader state failure. There has been significant media coverage of Venezuela’s prison crisis since before the 2011 Rodeo I conflict and the coverage increased significantly since then, including stories on Venezuelan prisons in the Economist, Time Magazine, and NPR. All of the statistics used in these reports come from the Venezuelan Prison Observatory and occasionally Ventana a la Libertad, a smaller but similar NGO.

The thesis that the Venezuelan Prison Observatory is serving US Imperialist interests could also be supported by examining their work and strategy. While I did not speak to one person inside of prison who had interacted with a Human Rights worker in the past 5 years (the Pran in San Felipe prison said that roughly 10 years ago, he remembered some human rights people in the prisons), I did observe the mother of an incarcerated woman seeking help in the OVPs’ Caracas office when I went to hand the leading lawyer, Marianela Sánchez, a copy of the
interview that I had conducted with her. The OVP is very critical of the government’s approach to prison reform and echoing the policy of the late Venezuelan penologist, Dr. Elio Gomez Grillo, they support a decentralization of the national penitentiary system in Venezuela. This call for decentralization is what some critics of neoliberalism understand as a “devolution of the state,” and according to their own literature decentralization is the first step in moving towards privatization of the prisons (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones, 2008, p.4). The argument for privatization of the Venezuelan prison system rests on asserting the state’s incapacity to run prisons and therefore suggesting that the private sector could run prisons “more efficiently.” In an interview that I conducted with Marienela Sanchez, a lawyer who has worked with OVP since a few months after its founding in 2002, explained that they had taken a total of 11 cases against the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the International Human Rights Court, and they had gotten the court to acknowledge threats on her life and the life of the Director, Humberto Prado. Their office had numerous security cameras in it and they had a small staff and office space in central Caracas.

The international pressure placed on Venezuela has created a cautious atmosphere within the Ministry of Prisons. Before the Ministry was created in 2011, there was far more access to Venezuelan prisons. In the last 4 years many organizations, collectives, NGOs, church groups, researchers and journalists have experienced more stringent rules and less formal access to the prisons, especially the new regime prisons. While the OVP claims that this is part of state authoritarianism, it is clear from speaking to government officials that they feel that there is a disproportionately bright spotlight on the prisons and for that reason they are cautious about who gains access and what stories they tell. The problems within the Venezuelan prisons are very real, as the following chapters will attest to, but there are also powerful political interests that have a
stake in the prison crisis beyond defending the rights of incarcerated people and their family members. If this were to bring more resources and more attention to prisons and the people locked inside of them, or if this were to create an outlet for incarcerated people to amplify their voices, this attention could be positive. But, unfortunately, it appears that the politicization of the prison crisis only serves to mask the real issues impacting people in prisons and create distractions and barriers to evaluating the realities and potential solutions. To this point, a guest blogger published a 2011 article in the Christian Science Monitor titled “Prison crisis in Venezuela becomes political football” (Stone, 2011).

While exploiting Venezuela’s prison crisis may serve the opposition’s attempt to delegitimize the Venezuelan government, there is a broader trend towards exportation of a US model of mass incarceration to Latin America (See: “Prisons: America’s most vile Export?” by Baz Dreisinger). The Alliance for Global Justice (AFGJ) released an article in 2012 confirming that pushing for the creation of (private) prison facilities are integral parts of US-backed Security plans such as Plan Mérida and the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which is a phenomenon that they are calling “Prison Empire.” (Jordan, 2014). In the introduction to an article on this subject Jordan of AFGJ writes:
US involvement in international prison systems is carried out by several government agencies including the Bureau of Prisons, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Pentagon, and the US State Department’s Bureaus of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), Democracy, Human Rights and Law Enforcement (DRL) and Consular Affairs, as well as state penal systems (Jordan, 2014).

The article exposes how the US has provided technical training and support to aid in the construction of new prison facilities in neighboring Colombia. Despite unsanitary and inhumane conditions in the new Colombia prison of La Tramacua, it is being dubbed as a “Five star hotel” because of its supposed modern infrastructure. Jordan explains this new strategy in Latin America:

Led in large part by William R. Brownfield, the Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the US is aiding Latin American countries to build “a new penitentiary culture”; a complete package to becoming more completely “American”, involving new prisons, new imprisonment style, and new community policing strategies.

Brownfield, who was Ambassador to Venezuela from 2004-2007, has been personally linked to the push for exporting a US-style of mass incarceration to Latin America just as former NY Police Chief William Bratton is the mascot for “zero-tolerance” policing (Bratton and Dennis, 1998).

The irony of course is that the United States incarcerates more people, both in sheer numbers and per capita than any other country on the planet (The Sentencing Project, January 2014). And it is for this very reason that the international spotlight on Venezuela’s prisons demonstrates a harsh double-standard that reflects the geopolitics of power. For example, Dr. Alice Greene, executive director of the Center for Law and Justice has spearheaded a campaign to hold a Truth & Reconciliation Commission examining the impact of the War on Drugs and Mass incarceration on New Yorkers and the disproportionate impact on people of color. By 2015, they had collected over 10,000 signatures which they delivered to New York Governor
Andrew Cuomo but they have yet to garner sufficient support from government officials for a commission. The United State imprisons over 2.3 million people, roughly 1% of its population and in Venezuela, despite climbing levels of incarceration to a total of 60,000 people, representing less than 0.003 percent of its population and New York State alone had an incarceration rate of 78,468 in September, 2015 (New York State Commission on Corrections). So while Venezuela incarcerated 178 people per 100,000, the US incarcerates 716 per 100,000 people (The Sentencing Project, 2014; International Centre for Prison Studies, 2015). This comparison does not undermine the severity of a growing reliance on prisons in Venezuela but it does place accusations from US officials and US backed organizations of human rights violations in perspective.

Despite the proven links between the Venezuelan Prison Observatory and USAID, I continue to utilize statistics from their reports throughout my dissertation. While the OVP staff may have vested political interests in regime change (and potentially a genuine concern for the plight of incarcerated peoples,) the numbers that they present on prison population, prison violence, prison protests and facilities is both useful and generally consistent with other data that I have seen and collected. The discrepancies between their numbers and those of the government generally reflect differing methodologies that create results to highlight their respective interests. Nonetheless, I utilize the data from the OVP with the caveat that powerful interests have a stake in the debate around Venezuela’s prison crisis and there is proof that the OVP receives direct funding from these parties. Prison is an emblematic institution of state power and Venezuela’s position as a foe of the US government and a historically peripheral nation makes them vulnerable to US-led international pressure—mostly fought through NGOs—to change and “modernize” their prisons; the United States does not face the same forces despite the fact that
they are the world’s leading jailer and US based grassroots movements continue to fight to end the New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration (Alexander, 2010).

**Conclusions**

I have explored neoliberal penalty in two forms: one as the functional premise that incarceration rates rise as a result of increased social insecurity (growing poverty, inequality, joblessness and marginality) not as a result of growing crime rates; and as “neoliberal penal common sense,” which is the logic behind tough-on-crime approaches as a justified response to social insecurity I demonstrated that while poverty and inequality have decreased—most dramatically so in the first decade of Chávez’s presidency—that crime and prison rates have steadily increased over the post-neoliberal period, beginning to do so more rapidly in late 2008 & 2009. While this means that Venezuela does not reflect the text-book “neoliberal turn,” I suggest that social insecurity, crime and prison rates should be examined dialectically as opposed to purely functionally which implies examining subjectivities as well as structures.

Despite various problems with getting accurate crime statistics, it is clear that crime is a serious problem in Venezuela. The popular desire to be tough on crime has morphed into what Antiallano calls “punitive populism,” which implies electoral support for policies that embrace “neoliberal penal common sense” which results in an increased criminalization of the poor which can be seen in changing attitudes towards criminality. This shifting logic, combined with potential increases in inequality and lack of decent paying formal employment due to the current economic crisis will most likely contribute to increased rates of imprisonment and the expansion of prisons throughout the country.

While the Venezuelan prison system has genuine problems, they are being exploited by
their foes as a means of discrediting the government which is part of a larger project aimed at regime change. The United State is actively involved in trying to make “a new penitentiary culture” around the world, and leaked documents prove that USAID funding has gone to Venezuela’s leading prison-focused NGO: The Venezuelan Prison Observatory (OVP). The international spotlight on Venezuelan prisons plays a role in how the government approaches the “penitentiary revolution,” as described in more detail in Chapter 5, and therefore is essential context for grasping the conjuncture surrounding Venezuela’s “prison crisis.”

While “neoliberal penal common sense” what Antillano calls “punitive populism,” influences thinking on prisons; everyday Venezuelans must reconcile their experiences of how policing in the barrios and revitalized urban centers continue to use race, class, age, and gender as pretexts for incarcerating young people and yet the Bolivarian project continues to be rooted in antineoliberal and pro-poor discourse. (Fernandes, 2006, p.982). In the hybrid post-neoliberal state “it is often the disjuncture between anti-neoliberal rhetoric and market-based rationalities that opens up a space for critique…” (Fernandes, 2010, p.24) In the case of prisons, it is the people interned or those formerly incarcerated and their family members, who most experience these tensions of the hybrid state in their daily lives. In the following section, I turn to their stories as I examine the open-regime and new regime prisons in the post-neoliberal era; the impact of incarceration on families; and, how poor, working class Venezuelans navigate, interpret and survive the prison system in their daily lives.
Chapter Four:  
Yendo a Cana: Entering the Open-Regime Prisons

...la cárcel es un negocio, un negocio de qué? De que el poder de la cárcel no lo manejan ni el gobierno ni la guardia ni los custodios ni la Ministra, eso es mentira, primero...con eso no digo que no soy revolucionario porque si lo soy pero bueno, las cosas buenas hay que verlas y las cosas malas también hay que saber, saber las cosas.  
-Fernando, ex-privado de libertad

Introduction

“The inmates are armed? Like, with guns?” A prison worker in New York state asked in disbelief as I began to explain Venezuela's Open Regime prisons. I went to Greene Correctional Facility in Coxsackie, New York on June 8, 2015 to present my research on Open-regime prisons to a group of incarcerated people who had signed up to attend the lecture through the library services at the medium security facility just south of Albany. Outside of Venezuela, the presence of an arsenal of firearms wielded by prisoners tends to be shocking. For Venezuelans, this shock has worn off slightly since it has been over a decade that media reports and photos have depicted the existence of firearms; pistols, revolvers, semi-automatic and automatic weapons under the control of prison gangs in numerous prisons throughout the country. Prisons are simply defined as a horrendous netherworld; “el infierno,” somewhere that many hope that they will never learn more about.

Venezuelan prisons have many commonalities with other prisons in Latin America; they tend to be underfunded, understaffed, are overcrowded with insufficient infrastructure, have a poor record of human rights abuses, lack of access to medical attention and they incarcerate high rates of pre-trial detainees. (Human Rights Watch, 1998; Dammert and Zuñiga, 2008; Carranza et al, 2010) The prisons tend to be run by a hierarchical internal organized body (sometimes

23 Ir a cana, means getting locked up or going to prison but it literally means, going to grey hair.
referred to as “gangs”) which holds power over internal governance of the prison. In the absence of resources from the state (such as food, cleaning supplies, educational programs, and staffing) the internal organization displaces the state as the main governing body and authority in the prison and they are responsible for almost all aspects of the internal administration of the prison (Antillano et al., 2014). Since the ruling organization receives no or little direct funding from the state, the inmate population is taxed in order to cover the costs associated with governing. It is an obligation to pay this tax, and to follow the other rules established by the governing organization and if one deviates from these rules they face a very real threat of violence, humiliation, torture or death. Another option is to live in exile form the prison mundo, in terrible conditions on the far margins where one cannot benefit from the protection or resources that come with joining the ordered population.

What makes Venezuela distinct from almost every other country in Latin America, (with the exception of Brazil) is that the internal organizations in Venezuela have amassed arsenals of military issued weapons that are not commonly found in prisons in Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, the Andes or the Southern cone. While knives, blades and the occasional handgun are in prisons throughout the region, Venezuelan “governments” have a veritable armed forces that maintain a “monopoly on violence” inside the prison and can defend themselves from the armed forces of the state. In part due to the number of firearms and incendiary devices in the hands of the incarcerated governing leadership, Venezuela's prisons are by all definitions, the most violent in the Western hemisphere. On average, more than one death a day has taken place in Venezuelan prisons for the last 10 years, making the death rate in Venezuela much higher, in real terms and in relation to the prison population to all of its Latin American neighbors. (OVP, Informe Semestral, 2014; Dammert and Zuñiga, 2008, p. 104)
But most investigations of Venezuela's prisons ends there; at the statistics on violence, the presence of guns and the notoriously poor conditions. Few scholars engage with the factors that led to the “self-rule” in Venezuelan prisons or how incarcerated people experience and describe prison life or how they reflect on the prison as an institution (Antillano, 2014). As I outlined in Chapter 2, the rise of the prison population in the neoliberal era combined with a lack of state funding and investment led to extremely overcrowded and understaffed prisons throughout the 1990’s. With certain particularities at play in each prison the general trend is as follows: informal hierarchies, that had long played a role in managing internal prison life evolved into formalized structures of organization. As the organization expanded its capacities to police, resolve conflict, punish, administer, feed and manage densely populated encaged territories; this work required resource and it would be the prison population itself (and their families), not the state, that would provide this resource. While Venezuelan prisons have not been officially privatized by the Venezuelan state, there has been a “de facto privatization” in which these *carros* are extracting surplus through their control over and administration of prisons (Antillano et al., 2014). This is not to say that the state plays no role; the growth of “self-rule” in Venezuelan prisons was fueled though a delicate dance between internal (incarcerated) and external (state administrative) authorities. One way to think about the “self-rule” of the prisons is that the state opted for “insourcing” the management of the prison to the interned population as opposed to “outsourcing” it to a private corporation.

But this means that instead of profit being generated through state prison contracts, surplus is directly extracted from the incarcerated population itself, which is why Fernando, a formerly incarcerated person, said “la cárcel es un negocio.” Neelie Perez, a Venezuelan criminologist demonstrates one aspect of this business.

*Hay una explotación también de tipo se puede decir material económico, ‘si no puedo pagar con dinero el*
The internal “economization” of prison life, where one has to pay for food, a place to sleep, a room to have a conjugal visit, and a tax—called la causa—just for the privilege of being incarcerated in a de-facto privatized regime demonstrates the persistence of neoliberal rationalities and practices in state institutions and everyday lives in the post-neoliberal era (Brown, 2015). Because while these structures may be internally run by private organizations, it is the state that sends people to these facilities (even before most have gone to trial) and it is primarily the state that determines when people leave them. So, while outside of prison post-neoliberal Venezuela is marked by highly subsidized electricity, water, gas, housing, telecommunications, transportation, food, and gasoline; inside of open-regime prisons comparable goods and services are sold to the highest bidder.

In this chapter, I seek to answer my two core research questions through the ethnographic research that I conducted while inside of open-regime prisons in Venezuela: What is the “work” of the prison in the (re)production of power relations in contemporary Venezuela? How do neoliberal and anti-neoliberal rationalities and policies shape the prison, reflect the nature of the Venezuelan state, and impact the everyday lives of Venezuelans who come into contact with the penal system? And specifically, how could the perspective from the inside (my own and others’) help me to better explore these questions? I pull from my experiences entering three open-regime prisons as a regular visitor. By going inside as a visitor, on visiting day; I had one particular view of the prison: that of the moment when the inside and outside world came together. It enabled me to connect with family members of incarcerated people, many of whom I spent hours chatting with in long lines as we waited to get inside. I also observed how incarceration impacts family members—not just those serving time—and how the prison is a part
of the everyday lives of tens of thousands of women, despite the fact that only four percent of Venezuela’s prison population is female (OVP, Informe Semestral, 2014). The following is not, therefore, an ethnography of everyday prison life and my attempt to decode and decipher prison symbols and vocabulary were not the focus of my study, but at times it was necessary to do so to better understand what I was observing or hearing. Instead, this chapter is a testament focused on the everyday interactions with the prison, for incarcerated people and their family members and how they observe, negotiate, reconcile, experience and survive this particular institution of the hybrid post-neoliberal statecraft.

I visited El Rodeo I prison, in Guatire, on the outskirts of Caracas on three separate occasions in 2014 and 2015. I entered Vista Hermosa prison in Ciudad Bolívar on a Sunday in October, 2014 and I spent a Saturday in February of 2015 in San Felipe's prison, also known as “La cuarta,” located in the state of Yaracuy. To bring in some helpful perspectives from incarcerated people, I also draw from one interview that I conducted with Fernando, a formerly incarcerated person who spent 2 of his 3 years in prison at El Rodeo I and I also supplement with some of the dialogue and narratives from the book ‘A ese infierno no vulevo’, a journalists' exposé of Venezuela's prisons in 2008. The work produced by Andres Antillano, Iván Pojomovsky, Verónica Zubillaga, Chelina Sepúlveda, Venezuelan scholars who spent over three years conducting ethnographic research in the open-regime prison Yare I provides invaluable analytical tools, conceptual groundwork, and useful data for this dissertation and especially for this chapter. While my work through the Escuela de comunicación popular penitenciara as a facilitator of audio-editing workshops inside of Yare I prison also informed my overall perceptions of the open-regime prisons; I do not include those experiences below because I entered in a more formal capacity.
EL RODEO I: Internado Judicial Capital

I had visited the main headquarters of Ministry of Penitentiary Services three times in the month before I visited El Rodeo prison. I wanted to see if I could get official permission to enter the prison as a researcher. Since I had no firm contacts within the Ministry, I got shuffled over to a young social worker who largely worked with family services for relatives of incarcerated people. He assured me that I must make a written request and so, I asked for paper and a pen and scrawled out a formal request to visit the prisons. In the letter I mentioned that I was a researcher from the US but that I was a Leftist with a long history of solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution and that I could assure them that I did not work for la CIA. I wrote my passport number on the letter and paper-clipped my academic business card. I called Yorval for days, asking the status of my request. “These things take time” he said. I showed up in person the following week and demanded to speak to his superior. In addition to entering the prisons, I wanted an interview with someone from the Ministry, ideally La Ministra, Iris Varela, herself. That afternoon, Yorval texted me and invited me to come interview him the following morning at 9am. Finally, a foot in the door.

During the interview (which I talk about in depth in the next chapter), I said that if they did not grant me permission to enter the prison, that I planned to enter anyways. That I would just go and get in line on visiting day and enter. While I could tell that he thought that my plan might just work, he discouraged me from entering the prisons warning me that I would be putting my life in danger. He told me that the prisoners would rape or kill me if I were to enter.

I never heard back from my official request that I submitted the week earlier and I was beginning to get frustrated. I had been in Venezuela for over a month and had not yet entered a prison. I decided that I was going to show up for visiting day, Sunday, and that I would try to
just get in that way. I wasn't sure what to bring and what not to bring. I knew, from one of the
interviews that I had done, that visitors had to wear white shirts and blue jeans so I put on a light-
weight collared white shirt over a navy blue tank top, a pair of jeans and my closed toed shoes. I
didn't wear an under-wire bra, based on my experience in a women's prison in Philadelphia, but I
doubted that there would be restrictions on push-up bras in Venezuela, the world capital of breast
implants.

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I was out the door by 6am and arrived to La California metro by 6:30, I took the metro
one stop towards the West and got off in Petare, the largest barrio in all of Latin America. Even
though it was early on a Sunday, buhoneros (informal street vendors) were already setting up
their stands. I asked where to find the bus to El Rodeo, and then I walked into the general
direction until I found a row of buses just outside of the busy market-like feeling metro stop. I
boarded, there were a few others dressed in white shirts and blue pants and so I felt like I was on
the right track. Will it be obvious? I wondered. How will I know when to get off? There was a
dressed-up church group making sandwiches on baguette style- pan campesino with sliced ham.
I asked one of the members where to get off and he told me that he would let me know. We
passed the sprawling barrio of Petare with ranchos upon ranchos climbing up the steep hillside
and then, on our left were green lush mountains and I imagined the turquoise Caribbean sea just
on the other side, then we exited the highway and began to move through a sleepy-seeming
residential neighborhood. “Here” the church-goer said and pointed to a big cement wall. I got
off the bus along with some other women in the middle of what appeared to be a sleepy
residential bedroom community, in Guatire. I decided to follow the other women up a long and
desolate road. To our right, there were women dressed with the white shirts and blue jeans,
eating the typical Venezuelan breakfast, fried empanadas and fresh juice.

I started to walk alongside Nataly. It was also her first time visiting. Her ex-boyfriend had gotten locked up 15 days earlier and she was bringing him food and clothes. We both entered the metal barriers put in place to manage long lines and walked right up to where the guards were sitting. Nataly brought her id and asked about entering. They said that there were no visiting hours for El Rodeo II that day and that El Rodeo III only had conjugal visits, for people who had papers to prove that they were married. Nataly asked if she could leave the bag of food and clothes for her ex but the guards said no. As we turned to walk away, they told Nataly that she was not dressed appropriately, the blue vest that was attached to her white long-sleeve shirt did not fit the clothing requirements and if she were to visit again, she should dress to meet the regulations. Nathaly picked up her heavy bag, sighed, and started walking. I took out my camera to snap a few shots of the prison but they told me that I was not allowed to do that so, Nataly and I headed back the way that we had come in, and once I was out of sight, I snapped a few more shots on my camera and headed back to where the bus had dropped me. I saw lots of women grouping up at the other corner of the big wall so, I headed over to what I would soon discover was the entrance to El Rodeo I, the open-regime prison that, indeed had visiting hours that day. Not only were there visiting hours, but it was visita de los cachorros (children's visiting day), for the first time in roughly 3 months. It was just about 9am, and the multiple lines were already extremely long.

I stepped over trash strewn about on a grassy spot to get to the entrance of the line. I turned to the woman behind me, a young Afro-Venezuelan women with bright blue mascara on, and asked her if I was in the right line. She said that it was. She asked if this was my first visit. I said yes and then proceeded to tell her that I was a journalist and researcher, that I was
investigating prisons in Venezuela and that after a month of trying to get official permission from
the Ministry to enter, I had decided to come and get in line for visiting day. She assured me that I
would be able to get in, explaining that I didn't, at any point, even need to say who I was visiting.
Lucky for me, Maritza, immediately took me under her wing and showed me the ropes, which I
was unbelievably naïve to.

First off, I would have to ditch my undershirt. You can only wear one layer, she
explained. Second, I had to leave my bag, keys, money, sunglasses, cell phone, recording
equipment and camera at one of the kiosks that also sold toilet paper, toiletries, and if you
brought your own Tupperware, a tasty-smelling soup. They would watch my bag for a fee of 10
bolivares. Maritza organized other women to form a human wall to block me while I took off
my undershirt. Maritza, and another women each helped to get my arms back in the sleeves of
my button up shirt. And I put my tank top, along with my other contraband in my fanny-pack.
Maritza saved my spot in line and I handed all of my valuables over and in turn received a
laminated piece of cardboard with the number that corresponded with my bag. I didn't have to
remove my belt, my big hoop earrings, or my necklace. I re-assumed my place in line and
watched as more and more women were arriving; on buses and in taxis, hauling huge, heavy-
looking bags.

I started to doubt my decision not to bring food. I had decided prior to going that I didn't
want to manipulate people with food; I didn't want to share food with people and then make them
feel an obligation to talk to me. But, as I watched people hauling bags full of Tupperware of
home-cooked favorites and bags of bread and deli meat, I started to doubt my choice. It would
be so easy for me buy something and bring it in, how could I not? Well, it was too late. I was in
line and I had no money on me, little did I know that I would be in that line for over 4 hours. If I
would have known, I might have kept some money out to buy water and food while I waited. It
turned out that I was the only one wearing the white shirt, blue jean uniform; and that this was
not required for visiting El Rodeo 1.

The multiple lines, one up the hill, one across the street (which seemed to be for elders),
and the one that I was in were full of women and children dressed in their Sunday's best. Little
girls wore dresses with ruffles and lace, as if it were their birthdays, and little boys had tucked in
T shirts, and gelled, combed and parted hair. I thought that I had gotten up early to get there but
it was easy to see that many women had to prepare their children and the food and supplies that
they were bringing. An hour passed and our line did not move at all. I spoke to Maritza a bit,
her husband had been in prison at El Rodeo for a year and a half and she came every single
Sunday to visit him from Barlovento, a coastal region that is the heart of Afro-Venezuelan culture
and organizing. She said that I could interview her after the visit, as long as I changed her name,
“most people where we live don't know that my husband is in prison, and I don't want them to
know,” she said. And, she had never brought her son to visit his father. She looked at all of the
women trying to occupy their children in the long line and said to me “it's just too much to bring
him.”

Another hour passed and the line had barely moved. Women were getting impatient and
some started making noise as they were banging on the chain-linked fence that contained us as
we baked in the tropical sun. While some women hollered and shouted, others clearly thought
that making noise was counter-productive and they gently discouraged the rebels in the crowd
from trying to stir things up. Then, out of nowhere, a rumor began circulating; according to the
grapevine a visitor had planted drugs on her little girl and she got caught and this was why,
according to this story, the line was moving so slowly. The energy of the crowd shifted
immediately. Instead of making a raucous, the women begun discussing the (rumored) issue at hand. “Who would do that?” some women said. “La pobrecita, la niña,” others exclaimed. “First they lose their father and now their mother”(to prison), others said. And pretty consistently, all of the vocal women agreed that if you do something like that (planting drugs on your child) you deserve to be put into prison. As I listened to the conversations, I wondered if the story was even true or not, I observed that it was effective for getting the women to stop demanding that the line move more quickly.

The conversations in line continued as women shared their personal experiences with the indignities and humiliation of visiting a loved one in prison. They also shared stories of someone that they knew, had met, or had heard about. One woman said that a viejita, was refused a visit after she peed on the floor when she was instructed to push, during the mandatory strip search before entering the prison. Another women talked about being touched and prodded by the women searching her. Someone mentioned having chocolate confiscated from them, and then a number chimed in about having things confiscated which they assumed the National Guards-members (GNB) kept or sold back to the inside population. One woman mentioned bringing food to drop off for her son but the GNB said that it was too late in the day. For a fee of 200 VB, he could see to it that her son received the package. She decided to pay but she lamented that 2 other women who could not afford it had to turn around and could not make their deliveries that day.

The small-talk in line turned into a place where women were able to vent about the indignities that they faced. Interestingly, many women talked about feeling empathy for others who had had it worse, but the whole process whether people were speaking about themselves or for others became a way to voice some of the humiliation and indignation that they had faced
through the process of visiting their loved ones in prison; something that many kept a secret in their daily lives. The banter in line became a chance to share these humiliating and frustrating experiences and to build solidarity with others who also lived through similar situations. The women in line also shared their knowledge of the prison system. Many of their relatives had been transferred to other prisons and so it was common to hear something like, “In Tocuyito, you can bring your cellphone in.” Or, “I heard in Uribana that they don't even really search bags.” This information-swapping was extremely useful because, as far as I could tell there was nowhere else to get any information about the policies, procedures, and particularities about each prison and as I would learn later, everyone has their own set of rules.

I continued to help women carry bags, especially because, after 3 plus hours of waiting, many had small children that also needed to be carried. The heat had broken after a rain-shower poured down for about 20 minutes. I was grateful that I had made it under the roof by then, but many women and children just stood in the rain, determined to keep their place in line, some covered their heads with newspapers or plastic bags. As I approached the front of the line, I watched what other women were doing so that I would know what to do when it was my turn. I was worried about getting busted, that is being questioned about what I was doing; I wasn't sure if posing as a visitor was classified as some kind of crime or, but I did know that, if questioned, my actions would seem like suspicious behavior for a foreigner.

I saw women extending their arms so that a man dressed in navy military fatigues would scribble a number on their arms and stamp them. Just when I extended my arm to get my number on it, an unfriendly official said that only women with children would get in. He let the women with children through. 9 other women and I waited because we were told that we had been in the wrong line. So, we kept waiting. A GNB member came over to make sure that no
one else entered the line, and the remaining women talked about how ridiculous and time-consuming all of the searching was. One woman said, “if I was going to traffic drugs, I would take them to the United States or Europe, where you can get real money for them, they don't even pay well in the prison.” The same woman talked about how degrading being searched was. The GNB member was surprised that the female custodias actually touched the visitors. The same outspoken woman in line responded by accusing the custodias of being lesbians and of therefore liking to touch the bodies and look at the genitals of other women. This made the National Guards members and virtually all of the other women laugh and then, suddenly, the gate opened and it was my turn to enter.

I extended my arm and they wrote my number on it, 850, and then I followed the other women though the first gate. I nervously handed over my passport and a member of the GNB handed me a card that corresponded with the location where they filed my passport. I noticed a few other Colombian passports, but otherwise the slots were designed for the Venezuelan national ID cards, the Cedulas. As Maritza promised, no one asked who I was coming to visit and while my US Passport caused a brief moment of pause, I made it through, no questions asked.

More lines. Women with food had to get their items checked by GNB members. And then those of us who were not carrying in goods were divided. Women with children to the left, women without children to the right. I was directed to enter a small room, with seven other women. In the room female correctional officers, dressed in navy blue fatigues were wearing face masks that covered their mouths and noses, they sat in plastic chairs while all 8 of us were instructed to remove one pants leg, to squat and push. One custodia pointed to me and told me to lean back, I was squatting and leaned back slightly but it wasn't enough. The woman next to
me, also squatting with one pants leg removed, gently put her hand on my shoulder and guided me back so that both of my shoulders leaned against the wall.

One of the female guards said to me “with all that hair, I can't see anything.” “Next time, you need to get rid of all that hair, so that I can see better” As I looked around, slightly embarrassed but more indignant than embarrassed, I realized that the other Venezuelan women, including the grandmas had entirely shaved their pubic region. I wasn't sure if this was purely Venezuelan beauty standards, or a demand placed on women who visit prisons or perhaps a combination of the two. As I was getting dressed, the same guard said that my pants were too dark and that I also couldn't wear a collared shirt, and that next time I would not be able to enter. This was consistent with my following prison visits. I was always told that something that I was wearing (or even something about my body, such as having pubic hair), did not meet their regulations but I was never actually turned away, only bullied. Then, after being searched, I went through a metal detector; my large belt buckle didn't set it off and then, I walked in. I had left my house at 6am, gotten into line at 9am, and I finally made it inside of the prison at 1:30pm.

During the uprising in 2011, there were 2,000 people incarcerated and when I visited the population was closer to 1,000, maybe even more like 800. It was a huge complex, and for someone who is not stuck in there, it seemed like a lot of space. Once I was inside, I realized that I didn't have much of a plan. I was so nervous of being “discovered” and being held in custody by the GNB or being turned away that I wasn't sure of exactly what I should do now that I was inside. I just started walking, like I knew where I was going, I moved through maze-like hallways, and then entered a long narrow corridor that was set up like a country fair, with vendors on all sides selling ice cream, hot dogs, empanadas, arepas, and cachapas, I had regretted not bringing money inside.
I kept walking and had decided that I would not try to talk to anyone that had visitors. People got very little time with their loved ones, and I was not trying to disrupt those special moments. I walked through what the insiders call Plaza Venezuela, with stadium style concrete seating where people were visiting with relatives; embracing one another, laughing and dancing. I passed a blow-up bouncy house, a large temporary swimming pool where children were playing and then, I got to the end of the road. Propped up along the fence, and tucked away from where most of the action was, was a make-shift shelter with a bed and there were two guys sitting inside. I approached and asked if I could come in. They welcomed me and offered me a broken plastic chair. I sat down and told them that I was a journalist doing research on the prison system in Venezuela and I asked if they would be willing to talk to me, I stated clearly that they had the option not to talk to me, if they didn't want to. “Tranquilo” they both said, “sure, we'll talk to you.” Edgar, 24 and Abraham, 26 both looked like they were ready for dates. They were both dressed in pristine clean and ironed clothes. Edgar had a cellphone and throughout my stay there, one person after another came by to make a phone call or to use the coveted electrical outlet in the tent, Abraham came and went along with other guys, but Edgar was the host and for this visit, and the following two that I would make later. Edgar had been in prison for 4 years and he and Abraham were both present during the motín in 2011. They talked about running out of food, drinking water from the rain and they said that the death counts reported in the press were low. They estimated that at least 100 people had been killed. Others who I spoke to estimated that it was more like 200. The official reports in the press said 22 people had been killed.

Kelvin joined us in the tent a little later. He carried a bible with him and sat on the cot across from me. He was 21 and he had just turned 18 when he got picked up by the police. I asked if he was Christian, he said no, that he likes to read and that the bible was the only book
that he had. I realized later that the “cristiano” had a particular meaning in the prison and that while many people believed in Jesus Crist and came from practicing catholic households, the “cristianos” played a very specific social role within the prison and had their own code of conduct, dress code and rules. Kelvin, like all of the guys that I talked to in El Rodeo I were not cristinos or evangelicos (also sometimes referred to as ovejas,) they were malandros, and therefore part of el mundo; the carceral world, the populace, the people. Kelvin, who could have passed for 16 years old, explained to me how, following the 2011 motin, his family thought that he was dead. After the month-long stand-off and shoot-out, a list was posted outside of the prison, with the cedulas of people that had survived, and that had been transferred to other prisons as a part of the Rodeo diaspora. Although he had survived, his number was missing from the list (which he did not know.) When he finally got in touch with his parents a few months after the shoot-out, his parents were in a gleeeful shock. They thought that he was dead, and they had held a small funeral service for him. He still hasn't seen them since then.

Kelvin, like many, said that he wouldn't want his family members to visit him there. Edgar said that his mom is diabetic and older and that it would be difficult for her to make the journey to visit him. He also said that he would die before she was subjected to the violating searches that visitors had to endure to be able to enter the prison. Edgar has 2 kids, neither of which he has seen for the 4 years that he had been in prison, and one of whom he has never even met because they were born shortly after he was locked up. I wondered if they truly felt that way, or if it was simply how they rationalized their own acceptance of not having visitors. Despite the fact that no one that I was with had a visitor, the influx of visiting day goods trickled down and around. One guy who joined us only briefly, brought over a homemade cachapa, a sweet corn pancake with butter and cheese. I was offered the biggest piece, and I accepted,
breaking off chunks to share with others who were there. It was the best cachapa that I have ever eaten.

Visiting days which are on Saturday, Sunday, and then again (officially conjugal visits, or an opportunity to drop off packages) were on Wednesdays. People ate better on these days. The food provided by prison administration (some combination of internal and external authorities) was awful, and this was the main complaint that I heard. Many people grumbled about the lentils with rice (with no salt) that had been the only items served for over 2 months. The less food provided, the greater the burden on family members who compensate for the limited food provided by the state by bringing food on visiting days or sending food with friends. Whatever food does come in, people share, so despite the cut-throat pay to play economy inside the prison, there is an accompanying barter and solidarity economy that distributes food and others goods and services through social networks as opposed to market-relations.

Complaints about the food provided were consistent with everyone that I spoke with at El Rodeo I, but the primary concern was about how visitors are treated. Edgar said to me,

Imagine that you are in here and your girlfriend is coming to see you, and you are excited...and then, when she gets in, she is in a bad mood because she already got touched and mistreated and it is because she came to see you, and you can't even do anything about it.

Edgar described the situation in relation to his own powerlessness to demonstrate his ability to protect his girlfriend, and how that impotency functioned to degrade him. Beyond the dissatisfaction in the treatment of visitors, all of the guys agreed that the GNB were not physically abusive. In the El Rodeo prison, the GNB enters the prison in violation of the United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners which states that “personnel shall be appointed on a full-time basis as professional prison officers and have civil service status” and that “except in special circumstances, staff performing duties which bring them into direct contact with prisoners should not be armed.” Nonetheless, the armed National Guard
conducts two headcounts a day in El Rodeo and otherwise police the perimeter and therefore have no “formalized” roles in managing the prisons.

There was a watchtower where the guardia were perched, but underneath the shelter we were just out of their sight, another benefit of the makeshift roof that otherwise blocked the strong equatorial sun. After a cool breeze sept through the tent, Abraham mentioned that he was participating in Mission Robinson, the literacy mission launched in 2003 by President Chavez. In 1995 the Ley de Rendención de la Pena por el Trabajo y el Estudio was instituted to enable people to reduce two years off of their sentence for one year of education or work; it was commonly called the dos por uno law (Human Rights Watch, 1998, p. 87; Roth, 2006). In general, the guys said that while some educational programs existed they were “chimbo,” of poor quality.

The clouds moved and the hot sun almost instantly evaporated the remaining puddles left behind by that morning’s brief shower, Daniel decided to get a refresco for me, and a few minutes later he returned with an artificial cherry soda that he carefully filled my empty water bottle with. I thanked him and choked down the soda as I thought about how to respond to the question that I had just been asked. What are prisons like there? Kelvin inquired. I noted that there are many different kinds of prisons and it depends on many things but that this model of open-regime prisons didn't exist in the US, that visits and visiting hours are far more controlled and that people, in general, spent a lot more time in cells. One guy who hadn't said anything yet, asked if it was like in the movies, when there is glass between the prisoner and the visitor and they have to talk on the phone. I said that there were some prisons where that exists. Another person chimed in to ask if I had seen the show Prison Break. I had only made it through Season 1 but, indeed I had. For 20 minutes, we talked about the program and people wanted my
validation that it was an accurate reflection of prison life in the US. I emphasized that it was entertainment programming and asked them whether the media shows an accurate image of prisons in Venezuela which made them all chuckle and sigh— as if to say “of course not!” Edgar asked if I had seen Carcel o Infierno, a violent internet released animation and drama produced by a talented animator and formerly incarcerated person who had been shot and killed two weeks before I had arrived to Venezuela. I had watched the program, and so far it did not line up with my experience in El Rodeo but they all insisted that it showed “la realidad” in prison.

A little boy, that I guessed was about four years old, was brought over to give pounds and handshakes to all of the occupants of the tent. He was soaking wet and he had emerged from the kiddie-pool in his underwear; still shivering, when his father brought him over to make the rounds. While I hung out for over 2 hours, the mood was formal. People were very careful not to touch me, and I was treated with the utmost respect. While some rapport was built between us, there was a lot that I was not told and there was also a lot that I didn't directly ask. When I asked how drugs, weapons, and other contraband got in the prison, people smiled and looked down; they were not going to answer the question. Also, I asked about a Pran, a leader in the prison, Edgar was quick to say that it didn't exist and that everyone was an equal. I could tell by the body language of the others that this was a convenient cover-up but I was not going to push. I didn't understand what kind of risks people were taking by talking to me and so I respected the boundaries that were presented. I figured that talking in a group probably made it more comfortable, there would not be suspicion about what someone had revealed in private, there were always other witnesses to the conversation.

At about 3pm, it seemed that nap-time was upon us. Abraham had dozed off in his chair and a number of the other guys had begun to close their eyes. At one point a dog climbed
through a hole in the fence and disappeared. I exchanged numbers with Edgar and thanked the
guys for their time. I began to wander through the prison and while no one made a catcall or
whistled, very uncharacteristic, of walking by so many Venezuelan men, I could feel a lot of eyes
on me. Finally after arriving to a field where a little boy was flying a homemade kite, patched
together with plastic bags that it appeared that his father had made, I turned back around and
headed into a covered patio area near one of the towers.

I introduced myself to a group of 5 guys who said, that they would talk to me but then promptly asked what I wanted to know. Most of the guys were pretty young and they all came from the popular sectors and barrios of Caracas. Only one had been sentenced, the rest were all waiting for their trials. A young guy in a red, black, green and gold hat told me that he had been charged with murder but that he was innocent. He said that he had absolutely nothing to do with the incident that he was accused of being involved with but that he mouthed off to police who were detaining him and so they charged him with a murder that took place over an hour from his house on a day that plenty of witnesses saw him at home. He has been in prison for over 2 years and every time that he showed up for a hearing, the appropriate officials were not present, sometimes the judge, other times the lawyers, or someone from the fiscalia was not present and therefore his case is continuously deferred.

A talkative and energetic man in an ironed white shirt and blue jeans launched into his story. He had worked at the Ministry of Education for 10 years and then, boom, the police planted drugs on him and his brother and he has been in prison ever since, for over 3 years. He had not yet been sentenced. He explained that in addition to Police Officers using their power to extort money from people that they detain or harass, that they also get financial bonuses based on the sheer number of people that they bring in. He claimed that this incentive has led to a lot of
false arrests and to an epidemic of planting drugs so that they can financially benefit.

No one that I spoke to was over the age of 31, most were in their early 20's, less than half had been sentenced for a crime and they had all been imprisoned in the last few years, following the sharp rise in incarceration rates in 2009. So, they had all pretty much been in prison between 2 and 5 years, and while a good number were in on drug charges, many were also charged with murder, robbery and assault. Everyone that I talked to insisted that things were tranquilo, perhaps relative to how things had been when 4 times the amount of people were locked up there, when “it had been harder to find space,” many people had repeated. In addition to the food and the treatment of visitors, many of the guys expressed that life was just boring, that they spent a lot of their time not doing much and being bored.

Visiting hours were coming to a close and it was time to leave. On cue, everyone stood up at once and ushered their visitors to the main gate. I would learn later that this also indicated the time of the week to pay la causa, and that after visitors left 300 VB would be collected from each person in an organized and meticulous process. Near the exit, far from where el mundo is, two men sat, one in a plastic chair and the other on the concrete, their mouths were sewn shut. I had read about and even seem pictures of these forms of hunger strikes-in which the demand is often to be transferred to a different prison- but it was shocking to see it up close. I had considered stopping to talk to them but I was already in view of the GNB, and I wasn’t sure if they would be able to speak or, I would be able to understand them and it seemed like there was a rush to exit, so I went with the flow. A wave of young women in with studded earings, tight jeans and t-shirts carrying children and mothers and grandmothers in more conservative tailored polyester skirts and blouses carried small children towards the exit.

By the end of the visit the sugar and the stimulation was wearing off and everyone looked
exhausted. Children were screaming for their fathers and crying as their mothers and grandparents pulled them from out of their father’s arms. I saw a little girl whose white and pink ruffled dress had been stained with a red Popsicle or red soda and by this hour, her perfectly styled hair, which I noticed at 9am when I first got into line was a mess. I saw a few men wipe their own tears discreetly, so as not to be seen crying, as they said goodbye to their children. It would be at least 3 months before they saw them again, if they saw them again and for 12 year old's this could be their last visit until they turn 18. The children visits only apply to children between the ages of 2 and 12 years old, and while they are supposed to be every three months, they do not always happen when they are scheduled and there can be extremely short notice about when the visiting day will be.

I headed towards the exit, eager to recover my belongings and make some field notes and I only found more lines. After passing through the beige door that stood as the divider between the inside and outside world, I followed other women into another line, this time to recover our Identification cards. I saw Maritza and waved, she came over to me. “Todo bien?” She asked, did it all work out? I told her that it was interesting and that I got to speak with a lot of people and I asked her how her husband was doing, “good” she said, simply “good.. We recovered our Ids and then headed out the main gate. Tons of women and children sat exhausted on the curb or at a table at the adjacent food stand.

I returned to the little tent where I had left my fanny-pack with my cell phone, my audio recording equipment, my money and my sunglasses. I handed one of the women in the tent my laminated cardboard cutout, which corresponded to my bag. She fumbled through various barrels and couldn't find it. I got nervous. I had no money on me. How would I get back? I started to get agitated. “Here it is!” the woman said with a victorious smile and after checking to
verify that all my things were there, I paid her the 10 bolivares charge for the service. Maritza and I crossed the street and stood under an awning of a closed store. It was after 4pm on a Sunday and in most places in Caracas, everything was closed but here, there were a number of stands, restaurants and bakeries that remained open for the Sunday afternoon exodus. Local vendors in prison towns are basing their livelihoods on catering to the stream of visitors who must purchase specific brands of items to meet the externally imposed regulations- and who need a variety of services as they wait in long lines and must store their personal belongings before entering the prison.

I pulled out my audio recorder and interviewed Maritza. She has been coming to El Rodeo I every Sunday since her husband got locked up on drug charges two years earlier. Her daughter, who is now six, has not seen her father since he went to prison. Maritza's husband had not yet gone to trial and so, for the last two years her life has been marked by the rhythm of the weekly Sunday visit and the travel, time and preparation that it requires.

While El Rodeo I was the only prison that Martiza had ever visited, she noted that in spite of it all, there are worse prisons out there and that at least they have, “regimen;” rules. It was clear that this is not the future that she envisioned with her husband but that she made the sacrifices necessary to support him, even though it is a considerable commitment of time, energy and resources. After I put my recorder away, we chatted a little longer, exchanged contact information and hugged goodbye. She directed me
to the buses leaving for Petare and then, she got on one going in the opposite direction, towards Barlovento.

I went to the very back of the bus, and within minutes it filled up with people headed to Petare. I was already so drained from a long day in line and the intensity in the prison but I gathered courage, and energy and introduced myself to the three women in the back of the bus, each one with an exhausted child crashed out on their lap. When I pulled out my recorder, the three women began speaking, all at once, as if each one had been waiting for someone to ask them how they were feeling after the experience. The woman closest to me asserted, “esta puta cola fue una mierda” and similar complaints emanated throughout the whole back of the bus. Then Anabel, a young woman with dyed blonde hair and blood shot eyes began to speak in a raspy voice and the other women began making shushing noises until Anabel was the only one who was speaking.

Anabel had arrived the night before and she slept on the concrete with her two children so that they would get the maximum time with their father. While she was one of the very first to get a number, at 7am, when she squatted during the search, there was one small drop of blood in her underwear. The guards told her that she could not enter the prison because she had her period. Menstruating women are not allowed to visit. She left, completely demoralized, and went to buy new underwear and a panty-liner, all with her two small children, both under the age of 6, in tow. She washed the number off of her arm, and at 8am she was back in the same line that she had slept in all night long. This time, when she went to pass through, the lines had been so long that the procedure had changed, women with children no longer had to be searched and she sailed right in.

Anabel didn't have a lot of notice that this weekend would be a visiting day for children
and she had somehow missed the last one. Luckily, she had been visiting on Wednesday and saw a sign posted that the upcoming Sunday would be a visiting day for children. She spoke with a fierce indignation:

*Para mi, eso no es nada buena. Tu llegas aqui con mucha emoción porque viene los niños a ver a su padre...y sales de aquí desmoralizada, humillada, cansada, ostinada, llena de odio. Para mi, no es nada bueno.*

Similar to Maritza and consistent with all of the women that I talked to, Anabel insisted that the strip search was, by far the worst part about going into the prison. Anabel describes how the *custodias* normally talk to her as she is required to remove her clothing and squat in front of them.

*Agaóchate, puja, abre las piernas, tocáte con los dedos, puja bien.*'A veces te hace hacer peppee. Te tiran pedos y para ellos tu no estas pujando. Te discriminan, pues. Te gritan, te insultan, y te asaltaron contigo y tu no puedes decir nada porque te suspende la visita...¿Como pasan los drogas? Los drogas, el alcohol que está adentro? Entonces, a nosotros nos humillan ¿Y ellos?...

The invasive searches are particularly demoralizing because the prison is actually filled with contraband. The fact that women are subjected to such an invasive and humiliating search when guns, drugs, alcohol, and cell phones are routinely passed into the prison makes the searches much harder to justify. When I met Anabel, her husband had been in prison for 1 year and seven months, he was not even a fifth of the way through a ten year sentence. Anabel, who has two children with her husband said, “*Es dificil, por lo menos yo contaba con el....Ahora tengo que trabajar por los tres. Para mi esposo, para mis hijos, para mi.*” In addition to the costs associated with bringing food and supplies to her husband and traveling to visit him, Anabel had depended on his financial contribution to their household. Without him, not only has she lost his income-earning power but she is responsible for supporting him financially as well.

As Anabel spoke about the challenges and indignation of visiting her children’s father in
prison, the other women shook their heads in agreement. Then Anabel asked me to reflect on my own experience, “how were you treated on the outside and how were you treated on the inside?” I thought about it and sure enough, my experience with the guards and staff was very degrading and disrespectful and my experience with the guys on the inside was super respectful. I know that it is more complicated than that, but for the women on that bus I think we all had that shared experience. I exchanged phone numbers with a few of the women, and I stayed in touch with Anabel throughout the rest of my time in Venezuela. I waved to three of them, and their disoriented children who had just been woken up, as they got off the bus on a corner a few blocks before everyone disembarked at the Petare Metro. I began my 45-minute journey home with a lot on my mind. I wished that there would be a cachapa, like the one that I had eaten earlier that day, waiting for me when I arrived.

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Nearly two months after I first visited El Rodeo I, I returned. I had planned on going prior to the second visit but when I texted with Anabel to confirm that there was a visiting day, she told me that it had been canceled that Sunday. Anabel and I had stayed in pretty regular touch and we planned to meet in line for my second visit but she overslept and since we had to stash our cell phones for the day, we didn’t manage to meet up. Instead, I spent the hour waiting in line with women who, again, shared their own stories of the humiliation and mistreatment that they experienced as visitors. At one point, I woman with long dark black hair grabbed me, hurling me into the fence as she ducked down. Startled, I asked her what was going on. She pointed to a white pickup truck that had just driven by. She said that her uncle was in that vehicle and that he would kill her if he saw her in line.

A different woman in front of me was visiting for the first time in 3 months, since her
visitation rights were suspended for trying to smuggle in 300 VBF. Another woman complained that due to her birth control method she is always spotting; she doesn't get her period but she often is bleeding a small amount and because visitors are not allowed to enter with their periods, the guards have tried to send her away multiple times. “Luckily, my husband is a lucero” she said so, “that often resolves things.” While in line, a tiny woman in a pink t-shirt asked me “Do you come every week? Wednesdays too?” I shook my head no and then asked ¿Y Ud.? “Not me” she said, “I have to work. I only come on Sundays.”

A woman named Marybel explained that she comes every Saturday and Sunday but that since she works, her mother-in-law brings food and visits on Wednesdays. That way, she explained, his mother brings provisions for Wednesday-Friday. She brings her husband his clean clothes on Saturday and on Sunday, she bring food for Sunday-Tuesday- this covers the whole week. While at first she insisted that she never missed a visiting day, she gently loosened up and explained that sometimes she simply can't make it. “No vengo cuando tengo mi periodo...a veces no vengo porque yo tambien tengo derecho a sacar los niños a pasear, tengo que dedicar tiempo, pues...y mis cosas en la casa tambien.” Another woman even mentioned that she looks forward to her period so that she can have a break from visiting the prison and she also joked that she has lied to her husband and said that she was menstruating when she really wasn't to avoid having to visit. The expectation to provide sustenance and to show up seemed like considerable pressure. Again, we entered the external perimeter of the prison, got strip searched, and then headed straight into the prison.

When I first walked through the gates I noticed the huge piles of trash baking in the hot Caribbean sun; it smelled awful. Sitting next to the pile of foul-smelling waste were three men who had their mouths sewed shut as an act of protest. They were demanding to be transferred to
other prisons and they were located on the periphery of the prison, a territory considered to be the margins, outside of where *el mundo* is. I walked past them and as I headed towards Edgar's little shelter I noticed how many guns the *carro* was in possession of. Unlike my first visit, during the children's visiting day when I had not seen 1 weapon, there was now a gun, mostly pistols and machine guns, visible from every vantage point. Every hallway that I walked down, corridor that I passed, and “corner” that crossed was being guarded by an armed member of the *carro*. The guns were visible and ever-present, few places existed on the ground floor where they were completely out of site.

Luckily, Edgar's isolated shack was one of those places. As I headed that way, I saw guys that I recognized from my first visit. We acknowledged each other and I asked one of them how his family in Caricuao was doing. They live in the building right next to where I stayed for my first two months in Caracas. “Todo fino” he said with a big smile. I found Edgar in his little shack and I sat down with him and some of the guys that I had met on my first visit. It was a hot day and I had worn a T-shirt which meant that part of my tattoo was exposed. This attracted the resident tattoo artist to our group. *Demonio artista* had been in prison for over 3 years and he gives tattoos as a way of earning money to pay *la causa* in El Rodeo. His energy seemed creative but also a bit chaotic and intense. While I seldom asked people outright what they were in for (and waited for people to volunteer that information), *Demonio artista* was quick to let me know that he was locked up because, as he said, “I killed a foreigner.”

When his girlfriend found out that she was pregnant with their first child, he felt an enormous pressure to be able to provide for his family. He had literally just learned that they would be having a baby when he decided to go rob someone. The guy resisted and *Demonio artista* shot and killed him and in turn was caught shortly thereafter. “It's ok” he said, “my kids
still call me papi on the phone” which lead others to chime in and say, “well, that's good.”

Of the ten or so guys sitting around; most of them had questions for me. They wanted to know what I was writing about, what I was going to say about them, they were interested to understand what I planned on doing with my research and what my ultimate professional goals were. They especially wanted to know if I would make money off of what I was doing. I shared openly, noting things that I wasn't sure about, but I reflected back a lot of the stories that they had told me. I said that I noticed that largely young men from the popular classes were in prison; that most of them felt like a legal means of survival would not ultimately pay for the things that they needed and desired; that many people had been profiled for looking like they are from the hood, had got locked up and still wait for a trial; that the justice system is a cruel joke, and that the national guard and police are extremely corrupt. They all nodded their heads in approval of my terse summary and then I asked them, “and what will you say about me?”

People giggled and Yovani, who has a scar on his face and had been curious about Qadafi and the recent geopolitics in the middle east, smiled. He said that it was better that I hadn't come in with the Ministry and that they were glad that I wasn't scared of them. After I had told them about my career ambitions, I turned the question back on to Edgar, Yovani and Thelonius (the young guy in the pink Thelonious Monk T-shirt). Edgar said that he wanted to be a Judge so that he could send corrupt police and GNB members to prison. Yovani said that he wanted to be a crimonologist...which made everyone hoot and laugh and then one guy chimed in and said “we already are...All of us malandros are criminologists.” Thelonius wanted to be a graphic designer. Demonio artista had already found his calling as a tattoo artist. All of our laughing attracted some attention and a member of the carro came over to see what we were doing. A young guy in a white T-shirt and jean shorts walked over, with a pistol in his hand and stood over us, just
demonstrating his presence.

We continued chatting and at one point I was introduced to him, we shook hands and then, eventually he left. Groups of people laughing and talking can easily be perceived as a threat. There is a constant fear of an internal coup d'etat and this lucero was doing his job to find out who was there and what they were talking about. A young man, Roberto, sat extremely pensive in the corner throughout the whole conversation. I finally turned to him and asked, “if you weren't here, and you had options, what work would you want to be doing?” He wasn't sure and then he said that at 21 years old, this was the first time that anyone had ever asked him that question. It was the first time that he had paused to think about it and while he wasn't sure what the answer was, he insisted multiple times that it was a very good question.

Yovani asked if I had been to other countries besides Venezuela. I said that outside of the US I had not done research on prisons in any other country but that I had traveled to other places. He wanted a complete list of where. I shyly began listing the dozen or so countries that I have traveled to, feeling a little uncomfortable with just sitting in my own privilege in front of people who would most likely never have the chance to travel the ways that I have. “Wow” Thelonius said, “I have only been to Mérida and Maracaibo” (two cities in Venezuela). I quickly jumped in to ask about Maracaibo, since I have never been there and I was curious what his take was. Thelonius shook his head, “actually, I have never really been to Maracaibo before either” he said. Thelonius had been in Caracas his whole life. While he had gone on some beach trips to the coast- the only time that he had really traveled to another state was when he got transferred to Uribana prison in Lara, during the motín at el rodeo in 2011.

While I had never directly talked to anyone about the pran or la causa, it was hard to ignore what was going on in the tent. Edgar and the others were all calling family members and
friends- and trying to figure out how they would come up with \textit{la causa} which at that point in November, 2014 was 450 VB or more accurately, it was 2 payments; 300 VB and one of 150 VB, on a monthly basis this equated to roughly 35\% of the legal minimum wage. I saw Edgar making multiple phone calls, pacing a little and looking nervous. He assured me that he would find a way to come up with the money.

\textit{Demonio artista} asked if I was baptized and I said no. All of them, except Yovani, wanted to know if I believed in Jesus Christ and what my views on religion were. I was nervous that my answers would be alienating or offensive but I felt like it was only fair to answer their questions honestly, since I was asking the same of them. I said that my family was Jewish and that I appreciated the traditions and rituals but that my spiritual beliefs were grounded in the interconnectedness of all, beginning with the earth itself. \textit{Demonio artista} insisted that they all pray to Jesus Christ so I asked if they were Christians and he responded, “no we aren't Christians, we are \textit{malandros}. Christ says not to kill and do drugs and we do those things.” In the midst of our conversation Daniel brought over a big bowl of pork soup in a re-used plastic margarine tub. We passed the soup around, taking a few bites and then passing it on. Everyone present shared the soup.

I began thinking about the women that I had met in line. The ways in which they carried the burden and responsibility of providing and I was curious what the expectations around family support were on the inside. “Are relatives expected to visit three times a week?” I asked. Edgar perked up at this question “that is between the couple,” he added “and it is based on trust.” He continued, “Sometimes she can't visit because she has things to do, she needs to work or take care of the kids, and we understand that.” But, “we are locked up in here.” He explained how, understandably everyone wants their family and girlfriends to visit. “The most important thing is
trust,” he insisted. He explained to me that while there is understanding of people's life circumstances and other responsibilities, he expressed concern about how there are cases where people's wives stop visiting and then their kids start calling somebody else “papi” and so “you could understand why that would make someone angry” he explained. “My woman hasn't come in a long time, and I understand. She has things to do. But, my kids still call me papi” Edgar mentioned. While all of the men had children or claimed that they had kids, many had young children who were born while they were in prison or were babies or small toddlers when they got locked up. For Edgar, *Demonio artista* and a few others, they made it very clear that while they might not actively be in their children's lives, it is very important to them that their children call them papi.

Roberto volunteered to escort me to the prison gate. We walked through the main corridor where people were selling hot dogs, coffee and *refrescos*. It felt so much bleaker than it did during the kid's visiting day and in general, the prison seemed to be less populated. Besides transfers from other prisons, no newly detained people had been sent into El Rodeo I since 2013. The prison population has been slowly dwindling and whomever is running El Rodeo I does not seem to be dedicating a lot of resources into infrastructure improvement. This could be a part of the well-known *malandro*-position which asks a very reasonable question: Why strengthen walls that are meant to imprison us? Through numerous interviews many currently and formerly incarcerated people talked about the physical decay of the actual prison buildings. Fernando, who was imprisoned in El Rodeo for the greater part of 2011-2013 talked about how not cleaning and not doing repairs was a part of protest. One formerly incarcerated person who I interviewed told me that he and others used to actively destroy the buildings because they ultimately wanted the place to crumble. El Rodeo I looked like that. It looked like the buildings had been
neglected for decades everything was grey, crumbling, dusty and dirty.

Once we had passed the main corridor and the towers, Roberto stopped me before heading to the margins of the prison, where the hunger strikers sat amidst trash. “I’m going to keep thinking about your question,” Roberto said. He repeated that he thought it was a good question and that prior to today, he had never stopped to wonder what he might do with his life. He said, he always just thought that he would end up in prison or dead but that now that he was in prison, he thought that the question was worth some consideration. We said our goodbyes in front of three luceros who were armed and seemingly curious about who I was. I held my breath as I passed the garbage and then I waited with another woman at the exit. We banged on the door but no one opened it. For a brief moment, I felt a sense of panic. One more woman joined us and she said that the guards open the exit door every ten minutes, “or when they feel like it.” Eventually, the door swung open, we stepped through and headed towards the main exit.

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When I boarded the bus at the Nuevo Circo terminal in central Caracas- to head to El Rodeo for the final time, there was a man selling newspapers on the bus saying that there is an incident at El Rodeo III. He was holding up a picture on the bottom of the front page of a newspaper. I purchased a copy and headed to my seat. When I arrived at El Rodeo, I saw family members concentrated on a corner, a few blocks from the actual entrance of the prison. Gunshots could be heard. Perhaps because of the conflict at El Rodeo III, a New Regimen prison, less people had come for visiting day or, maybe since it was Easter people were at church or with their families

In line I noticed three young women, barely 18, painting their nails a deep, dark purple. I helped one woman get her cell phone out of her bag, since her nails were wet, and she carefully
typed a text message response to her boyfriend inside. She typed carefully, making sure not to ruin her newly applied coat of nail polish. Zuleibis had just turned 18 years old and her boyfriend had been locked up for a few months. This was to be her third visit to El Rodeo (just like me) and due to her boyfriend's encouragement and the encouragement of his friends, she had brought her two cousins with her, both presumably to meet boyfriends. Unlike other prisons that I visited where it was clear that women were entering to participate in the informal internal prison economy as sex workers, these young ladies seemed like they were looking for romance, adventure and boyfriends. Zuleibis explained to her cousins the rules of visiting day, what you could and couldn't bring into the prison, how they were going to get searched and she gave a quick review of relevant prison vocabulary. While I had been in 5 prisons in Venezuela at that point, I still appreciated the run-down too, especially because it does not seem like there is any other official place to get this information. I asked the young women why they were going into the prison to find boyfriends. Zuleibis jumped in to explain how the guys treat you so well on the inside, how there is respect, how visitors are treated like princesses, how it is different than on the street. Her cousins nodded their heads in nervous agreement and then one shrugged and said, and “that's where the guys are.” All three of them are from Barlovento, and this comment speaks to reality of high rates of incarceration among youth in Barlovento, a rural Afro-Venezuelan region just 2 hours from the capital.

The line moved fast and there were less visitors. I was visitor #279 whereas I had been visitor #850 on my first visit to El Rodeo I. When I walked through the first gate, two people yelled my name “Cory! Cory!” I went over to say hello and they said that they would let Edgar know that I had arrived. I made my way back to Edgar's shelter, greeting the many people who I had met on previous visits. A group of 8 guys formed, some of whom I had spoken to on
previous visits and some of whom I was meeting for the first time but all of whom fit the profile: young and from poor families or neighborhoods associated with poverty. Of the crew present, three were in for homicide, one was there on drug charges and the other four were in on charges of robbery, robbery & assault, or kidnapping. Thelonius, for example had been locked up for three years on charges of kidnapping and murder. In those three years, he had only been brought in front of a judge on one occasion but since his lawyer did not show up, the hearing was postponed. He has never met his lawyer and he is not even sure that he has one. For a moment we both acknowledged the irony of his kidnapping charges and the fact that now, he had essentially been kidnapped by the state and was being held for ransom at a price that neither he nor his family would be able to pay.

I asked if anyone there or anyone that I had chatted with on past visits had any changes or progress on their trials since I had first visited, over 5 months earlier. While the definitive answer to this question was “no,” they said that through Plan Cayapa, judges, lawyers and representatives of the Ministry had recently organized a day to process everyone being held on charges of 20 grams of drugs or less, and a number had been released that very day.

Edgar took the moment to formally introduce me to the guys who had just walked over to the shack. “This is Cory, the gringa researcher, she was here on our last kid's visiting day.” And with that introduction, everyone's face lit up and they all wanted to know whether I enjoyed myself on the kid's visiting day and what I thought of it. As if we were talking about a wedding, people recounted the food, the entertainment, the swimming pool, how people seemed to really be enjoying each other. I confirmed that it was a very lovely visit- and taking a moment to look around at the bleak gray concrete and canals of dirty water moving through the area I realized how the prison had actually been transformed for the kids visiting day but since it was my very
first prison visit, I hadn't fully understood that until then. I could tell that people had pride in the event that they were able to pull off - from prison and I also realized that while children's visiting days are supposed to be every 3 months that the one that I had attended was more than six months earlier, and there had not been one since. Since everyone contributed to la causa, and the kid's events were funded it was through the money, people expressed a sense of collective ownership over the day. And, memories from that day had to last for months or even years since it was unclear when the next one would be.

Suddenly, we heard gunshots that seemed awfully close... “echando plomo,” someone said, referring to the gunfire taking place at El Rodeo III. Roger, a large man, who was missing all of his front teeth said that the situation in El Rodeo III was happening because they have no pran “there is no one to negotiate and protect the other inmates” he explained. I asked him if he thought that leadership could be assumed collectively or whether he believed that it must be only one person in charge. He argued that it could not be five people because it would take them too long to reach an agreement, and they all agreed that the responsibility should be assumed by one person so that it is clear who is in charge. As I migrated towards sensitive terrain, I tried to read body language, I was nervous about putting someone on the spot or creating a scenario where someone had to face el carro for sharing sensitive information but I also trusted that in a highly routinized existence people had practice in being careful about what they said.

I asked whether they saw la causa as a form of economic exploitation. They all insisted that they too were benefiting from the collection of la causa. Roger insisted that the process of collecting la causa and allocating funds was very transparent. For example, he explained how leading up to the kids' visiting day there had been an assembly in which el carro explained the line-items in the budget and how every bolívar was being spent. He said that there was even
space to raise questions and concerns about the budgeting choices but that most people were satisfied with the decisions to spend money on certain things. Roger explained that there are some opportunities to give feedback but everyone under Edgar's tent insisted that it must be “constructive criticism.”

A sincere smaller guy that appeared to be younger than eighteen, dressed all in white, joined in the group and pretty quickly he and I were deep in conversation about crime, prisons, and politics. I called him Maestro, because he had the energy and patience of the kind of high school teachers that make a difference in their students' lives. Maestro was a dedicated chavista who had participated in the social programs, his community council, and the higher education program *Mision Sucre* when he was on the outside. He spoke frankly, saying that while the revolution had really changed many things for poor Venezuelans he thought that it had not succeeded in changing “the mentality” of the people. In many way, he was referring to the ongoing neoliberal rationalities based on individualistic, market-based and consumeristic logics; a continuous thread in the post-neoliberal era and a foe much more complex to challenge than the neoliberal policies themselves.

The subsidized food is not enough, he explained, “people want *motos*, nice shoes, fashionable clothes; imported things.” These consumer desires were not just a part of neoliberal restructuring but they reflect the “Venezuelan Dream” of the liberal rentier petro-state when Venezuelan’s consumer power grew as cheap imports flooded domestic consumer markets. He kept coming back to the fact that a lot had changed through the revolution and he explained, not from his own memory since he was only 20 years old (four when Chávez came to power) but from the stories of his older relatives how it was “*antes de El Loco y después.*” This common perception of the Bolivarian Revolution as a breaking with the past, like the Quechua concept of
Pachakuti used to describe the process underway in Bolivia, stands in conflict with Canclini’s proposal that hybridity embodies a “multitemporal heterogeneity” (Canclini, 1995). Nonetheless, the exercise of asking: were we better off before or after Chávez came into power? Proves to be a clarifying point of reflection for many poor and working class people, even if their sense of “before” is constructed through the stories and memories of their relatives or the way that the past is constructed in the media and popular culture.

I asked Maestro if he could help me understand this situation. I explained that nearly everyone that I spoke to in the prisons in Venezuela said that they were committing crimes to be able to access material goods that would otherwise be out of reach (many people were simply innocent of the crimes that they were charged with.) I explained that I was trying to reconcile this experience with the fact that the Venezuelan government provides ample subsidies for food, transportation, medical care, housing and education and I asked him to help explain why this is the case. Even after living in Venezuela for many months, receiving a salary in bolívares, living alongside many Venezuelan families in the popular sector and studying and reporting on the Venezuelan economy, I still felt unsure about how it all added up. Wages seem particularly low—especially in the public sector— but so much of daily living is subsidized, so I was curious how he thought about the paradox.

Maestro took in a deep breath, perhaps knowing that what was coming next might be a bit controversial. “It is possible,” he said. “I know people who live up in the hills, who work at their low-paying jobs, who fish to feed their families, who have holes in their shoes, who don't have fancy clothes or a car, and they are happy with their house and their family.” He repeated, “it is possible.” “But, most of us want more than that.” Gun shots went off again. Thelonius insisted that it was like Robin Hood, robbing from the rich to give to the poor, but when I pushed
him and others to give examples of redistribution that extended beyond a few generous gifts given to friends and family members from their spoils- and no one offered a counter-example.

For another hour, we just talked about Hugo Chávez; *El Loco*.

Taking the lead of Maestro, everyone referred to Chávez affectionately as “el loco.”

While there was no enthusiasm for Maduro or, the government, in general, Chávez was a hero to all. “He went to prison, you know?” I was reminded multiple times throughout the conversation. Most people shared stories that make up popular legend in Venezuela- of Chávez's near omniscient power, his ability to recall names and stories from Venezuela's past as if he were at each important moment in Venezuela's history. People agreed that he was the best story-teller and that they loved his humor and wit, and how he didn't talk like a politician. All of the guys present were under the age of 25 which means no one there was older than ten when Chávez was elected in 1998 and everyone there had been arrested and incarcerated in the last 5 years; almost all had been locked up when Chávez died and none had been out on the streets during the worst of the economic war although it is not to say that it has not been felt inside the prison as well. Maestro insisted that Chávez was very important for the world, that he led the movement of Latin American leaders standing up to the United States and that he organized oil-producing nations to keep prices high and to share the wealth.

In the midst of paying homage to Chávez a young black man with a gold chain walked over. Edgar introduced Williams, telling me that he was from Haiti. I greeted him and asked if he was really from Haiti. He explained that he was from Barlovento but throughout our conversation I learned that while his parents and extended family were from Barlovento- an afro-region of Venezuela- he had lived most of his life in Caracas. He had spent a few years in Sweden and through his time abroad, he had learned to speak English. We began to chat and
then, again, a young Venezuelan with dark skin and black hair joined the group. This time, Edgar introduced the guy as African. Again, I asked if he was really from Africa, and like Willians, he was from Caracas with some family ties to Barlovento. Both of these experiences created fertile terrain for us to talk about race in Venezuela, a very taboo topic.

I brought it up when Edgar asked if I was satisfied with my research. Since I would be leaving soon, he wanted to know if all of my questions had been answered. I told him that I still felt like I didn't get deep enough into the question of race in Venezuela and race in prisons. He explained to me that this was because it was not a problem in Venezuela and that it wasn't like prisons in the United States. Others chimed in to reference movies and TV shows that they had seen about prisons and they all agreed that Venezuelans all got along and there were not the harsh racially divided gangs that they have seen represented in movies about US prisons. Willians spoke up. He insisted that there is racism in Venezuela and he said that he has been turned away from clubs and parties because he has darker skin. The two other guys with the darkest color skin in the group agreed while others visibly expressed their doubts for these claims. Everyone agreed that if you dress like a malandro, the police are more likely to stop you; what people didn't agree about is whether this is because the malandro identity approximates blackness.

A series of more gunshots went off and I decided that meant that it was time for me to go. I said goodbyes, giving hugs and kisses and handshakes; it seemed that some of the formality of my first visit had melted away and people seemed more relaxed to talk or make any contact between us. As I headed to the exit, I wove in and out of the prison, hoping that I might get to say a few more goodbyes before taking off. Just as I approached the exit, I saw Roberto. I told him that this would be my last visit and I asked him if he had been thinking about the question: What he wants to do if he weren't in prison. He was honored that I remembered him but, how
could I not? His response to that question had kept me thinking for months. He told me that while he hadn't figured it out yet, he thinks about it every day. Every day, he thinks about what he might be doing if he weren't in prison.

**VISTA HERMOSA: Internado Judicial de Ciudad Bolivar**

Two weeks after my first visit to El Rodeo I, I went to Vista Hermosa prison, located in the balmy city of Ciudad Bolívar in the far Southwestern state of Bolívar. The city itself has an old colonial center on top of a hill above the river banks of the Orinoco River. It is so hot and humid that the streets are virtually empty midday so when I took off for Vista Hermosa, I left the center of town early on Sunday, before the heat became unbearable. I made my way to a busy corner and waited until Ruta 2 pulled up and I along with others hopped on and I told the driver that I wanted to get off at Vista Hermosa. Just about 15 minutes outside the city's center, I got off the bus and asked the man on the corner how to get to the prison. Two younger women overheard me and volunteered to show me the way, they were also going to visit people inside the prison.

I told them that I was a journalist and researcher and that I didn't have anyone in particular that I was visiting and they both began to give me advice and show me the ropes. They told me that, unlike El Rodeo I, I would need to give the name of the person that I planned to visit. The woman in the red tank top with tight jeans and matching red sandals instructed me to say that I was visiting Josue Corona, say that you are his tía. Without asking why, I went with it. They brought me over to a stand where a family was selling vegetables and also had a bag storage system. At this point, I felt more comfortable with the routine. I left all of my possessions, but as the women suggested, kept my money with me, and I received a ticket for my bag, which I carried in the same pocket as my passport. Despite carrying a US passport and never purporting to be from anywhere else, the two women referred to me as la brasileña.
Bolivar state borders Brazil, and a good amount of the foreigners in that area are from Brazil. I didn't correct them and I just followed their lead to the entrance of the prison. There was virtually no line. Within 5 minutes, I handed my passport to a National Guards-member who was meticulously noting the names of visitors in a large ledger. As instructed, I said that I was visiting Josue Corona and that I was his aunt. I was a little nervous to be outright lying. The Guardia sent me along to the next table where I handed in my passport and received a corresponding card that would enable me to retrieve it upon my exit.

I stepped into a small room, along with my guides, for the required search before entering the prison. We were instructed to take our pants off completely and do a few jumps squatting, to make sure that nothing fell out of our vaginas. After passing the test, we all lifted our shirts to show under and over our bras and then we were waved along. No one searched my pockets, no one looked in my shoes, no one touched me. If I had wanted to bring in contraband, small amounts at least, I could have done it. The search only focused on one place and for me that made it all the more infuriating. It was not as if the pants-less squatting and jumping was a part of a thorough revision of each of us, it seemed to be so much more about power and humiliation. This feeling only grew stronger when we entered the prison, and I saw what was already on the inside.

At the entrance there were smiling young men wearing orange and white striped shirts that looked like soccer jerseys. One of them came over to me with a dolly and asked if I knew where I was going and if I needed help, he would be happy to direct me. I declined his offer but watched as other women happily handed their heavy bags to these strapping young men, who appeared to be the visiting day bellboys. I noticed how clean everything looked, and the bright coats of fresh paint on most of the buildings. I also noticed the huge semi-automatic weapons,
rifles and pistols that were displayed by people guarding the entrances to each corridor. I thought that I would be more scared but perhaps the transition from men with weapons on the outside (Guardia) to men with weapons on the inside (wearing normal clothes as opposed to army green military fatigues) was less dramatic than I might have thought.

I walked down a pathway and headed right into a little yellow building that served as one of the 4 churches in Vista Hermosa. Everyone inside was wearing a tie and many people had on long-sleeved button-up shirts, despite the heat. I walked in and explained that I was a researcher and that I had just come in as a visitor and I wondered if anyone would be interested in talking to me. They all gave me a warm welcome and asked if I had permission to be there, I began explaining my ordeal with the Ministry and how I had submitted a written request. One guy smiled and said, “no, not that kind of permission.” Everyone agreed that before I spoke to anyone else I needed to find Sin Camisa, a fellow inmate, the guy in charge of the prison, and get his permission to be there.

Two men assumed the responsibility of escorting me to find him. After we walked through one corridor, they bumped into a friend of their; a guy who grew up in the barrios with many of them and had spent the last 8 years working with youth and church groups in the prison. Yehison had been incarcerated for a short stint a number of years back but now he volunteered in Vista Hermosa on a regular basis and they nominated him to be my new escort to find the boss. As we wove through different corridors, passing armed guards, called luceros. Yehison asked each person for Sin Camisa's whereabouts, as he slapped hands and gave pounds to the people that that we passed. He seemed to know everyone. Based on the suggestion from one of the luceros, we headed towards Sin Camisa's spot within the prison. Yehison held the door open for me and I stepped into a bizarre other-world. The cool air-conditioned hallway was painted bright
turquoise and framed fine art hung from the walls. Three quarters of the way down the corridor, we knocked on a propped open door. The wooden door swung open and inside was what could only be described as a normal home for an upper-middle class family in Venezuela. A huge extended family of nearly a dozen people sat around a big wooden table in a fully furnished, decorated and spacious room that did not look like a prison. They had just sat down to lunch and the steaming plate full of baked chicken smelled and looked delicious. We were told that Sin Camisa had recently left and so we said “buen provecho” as we turned to retrace our steps and leave his family to their feast.

We continued to search for Sin Camisa and when we entered a different open-air corridor, where we waited while two guys said that they would find him. Within minutes, a stout guy, wearing a shirt, walked by us. He was flanked by 6 men carrying pistols; everywhere he moved, they moved. This must be him, I thought. Sin Camisa gave the nod to a young and nimble looking guy wearing bright white pants jumped up, as if high-jumping or fleeing for his life, and climbed over a 2 meter wall to unlock the door from the other side. For a moment, I wondered if escaping was that simple but then I quickly realized that, as we followed Sin Camisa and his luceros through the door, we were still in the prison. An empty swimming pool stood in front of us, an empty bar was to our right and straight ahead was a wall with four faces painted on it; one was Sin Camisa’s. In that moment, Sin Camisa turns to me and Yehison. I introduced myself and explained that I am a researcher we shook hands. He said that it was fine to be there and that I can ask anyone any questions that I wanted but that I was forbidden to take pictures. I agreed and said thank you. As we were walking away, Sin Camisa instructed Yehison to bring me to Chichi, one of his confidants, I assumed.

Yehison dutifully walked me to a different corridor and knocked on Chichi’s door. A
young guy answered and Yehison said that Sin Camisa had sent us to do an interview. Chichi gave the young guy permission to open the door and we walked into the cool air-conditioned and barren room. The cool air was a welcome relief and we sat down at the table and chairs and I began to ask Chichi questions. Chichi had been in prison for 10 years and in that time he had been in 7 prisons in Venezuela.

In 2010, Chichi was imprisoned at Vista Hermosa where he went on a hunger strike to demand better food and medical care and the government responded by transferring all of the hunger strikers. He got sent to Tocorón prison and he spent over a year trying to get back to Vista Hermosa which he described as “the best prison” in Venezuela. He also briefly spent a period at the Coro Penitentiary, a New Regime prison which he was appalled by. He said that the guards were abusive towards the inmates and that he was most frustrated by the regulations that didn't allow privados de libertad to have many personal possessions. Chichi, a man in his forties who has spent over a decade in Venezuelan prisons and who will spend at least another decade there, insisted that if he could pay for a guitar, he should be able to have one in prison. While it was clear that Chichi held some rank within the carro, I wasn't exactly sure of his role and he never volunteered that information. Instead he spent most of his time explaining how the prison is like one big family, how everyone's needs are met and how everyone is treated equally.

His narrative was laced with a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of thinking which was interesting to hear from his two-room air conditioned suite, not the conditions that everyone in the prison lived in. He pointed to his guitar, leaning against the wall, and said that other people have personal belongings but that no one steals from each other in prison, that there is respect. He didn't mention how this code of conduct; not stealing, a culture of formality and hierarchy (what some people refer to as respect) is all supported by the threat of violence, by the
fact that if someone violates la rutina, they could pay with their life. It seemed that while his early days of hunger striking were focused on the demands that the state tend to food and healthcare needs, the right that he was defending to me was the right to personal private property; one of the cornerstones of la rutina in the open-regime prison. These ways of thinking demonstrated the hybrid state in action; where the liberal concepts of individual rights of a welfare state were combined with the neoliberal rationality of the right to personal private property, the right to compete and the right to profit; the latter of which could not be granted by the state’s presence as much as by its absence to play a regulatory role in market-relations.

Chichi did insist that violence was decreasing in the prison and that is when I heard a phrase that I would hear repeated over and over again during my visit of Vista Hermosa, “violence had decreased, gracias a Wilmer.” Thanks to Wilmer. While Sin Camisa was the on-site authority at Vista Hermosa, the guy who really ran the show was Wilmer Brizuela, whose face was also painted on the wall above the swimming pool.

Wilmer had also been transferred to Tocorón prison but I was assured by nearly everyone that I talked to that he would be returning shortly. This was not the first time that Wilmer, widely known as Wilmito, had been transferred to another prison despite his role as a Pran at Vista Hermosa. Clarembaux (2009) writes about how in 2008, the Ministry of Justice and the Interior attempted to transfer the beloved Wilmito after he had orchestrated a consensual kidnapping in which visitors agreed to be taken hostage to further the demands of their loved ones in prison. At first, armed luceros loyal to Wilmito refused to release their leader even though the prison administrators had threatened a bloodbath if he did not peacefully leave. Some gunfire was exchanged, resulting in the death of a prison official in which case the prison authorities threatened to cut off visitation rights for the whole prison population for three months if Wilmer
did not surrender to a transfer. Wilmer described his own logic for eventually turning himself
over to them.

No puedo exponer a toda la poblacion a ese castigo. Si lo que querian era trasladarme, que lo hicieran. ¿Tú
me imaginas tres meses sin visitas? Se desesperan. Así que accedí y sali caminando, como un caballero.
(Clarembaux, 2009, p. 133)

Six of his luceros voluntarily accompanied him as he was transferred to the Community
Penitentiary in Coro, where they remained for only two months before returning to Vista
Hermosa where the prison population had mounted protests for his return. Wilmer may have
gotten national notoriety for his 2004 negotiation with the then Minister Tareck El Assimi but he
had gained respect and loyalty in Vista Hermosa for the concrete improvement projects that he
spearheaded in the prison. Many people that I spoke to in Vista Hermosa pointed to the fresh
coats of paint, the clean and new-looking tile work and the bountiful food as benefits, “gracias a
Wilmer.” But a few people also told me about Wilmer helping them and their families out
personally. One guy said that his child was sick and Wilmer gave him money for medicine,
another said that he paid for their mother's operation.

A week after my visit to Vista Hermosa I met a guy waiting in line at a bus station in
Santa Elena who used to live in Ciudad Bolívar and he had his dealings with Wilmer. This
young engineering student, son of Brazilian immigrants, had his car stolen and so as he told the
story, he went to speak to malandros on the corner and told them that he would pay a ransom to
get his car back. The malandros called Wilmer in Vista Hermosa who, presumably made some
phone calls. In 30 minutes, the car was returned for a generous ransom, a portion of which went
to Wilmer. Nearly every person that I met in Ciudad Bolivar knew of Wilmer or had some
dealing with him or his representatives. While some people shuttered at his name, most saw him
as a godfather type character and everyone was aware of his reputation as a stern but generous
benefactor. Rumors even circulated that he purchased a bicycle and high quality “imported” toys for every child that visited Vista Hermosa prison close to Christmas.

Chichi explained that the government had threatened to take over Vista Hermosa and that there had been some recent changes to minimize violence in the prison so that the government would not have an excuse to come and take over the lucrative prison. There has also been an adoption of the language of the Ministry of prisons and a common phrase that many people in Vista Hermosa used was the “humanization of the prisons,” the banner of the MSP. “Just because we are prisoners, doesn't mean that we have to live like animals” Chichi said as he was explaining the meaning behind the phrase. He also mentioned that Vista Hermosa had incorporated some of the sports programs that were initiated by the MSP and that people in Vista Hermosa had participated in softball and soccer competitions with other prisons, which he thought was a positive change.

The causa was at 120 Bolivares/week and there were roughly 1,800 people in the prison (but just a few weeks earlier there were 2,000). That means that through la causa alone el carro brought in roughly 216,000-240,000 VB on a weekly basis, and 864,000-960,000 VB, between 172 and 192 times the monthly minimum wage. Some of this money is then invested in infrastructure improvement projects and it was clear from talking to people in Vista Hermosa (which had new coats of paint and various repairs done recently) that most everyone was satisfied with Wilmer's governing.

Wilmer has been a pioneer of sorts and while the Ministry of Penitentiary Services does not say that they have taken lessons from Brizuela on “humanizing” the prisons, Vista Hermosa, under Wilmito's leadership initiated various sports programs and competitions, craft workshops and various personal growth activities. Wilmer describes how all of these accomplishments have
been organized with complete autonomy from the Ministry of Justice.

Wilmito has assumed his position of Pran and used it to advocate on behalf of prisoners in Vista Hermosa. In addition to organizing programing in Vista Hermosa prison, he also organized a 5-day hunger strike “por la paz” in 2009 to bring attention to violence inside and outside of prisons. Wilmer, although quite unique in his charisma, his track record of deliverables, and his loyal following, he sets the example of the Pranes who prefer to be called and viewed as “líderes positivos.” Those who see their leadership as creating a broad benefit for those incarcerated in the prisons where they rule.

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In order to pay la causa, people in prison have to work and so to start their own business, most people need to get permission, raw materials, equipment and a loan from Wilmer. Chichi described this process as simple and straightforward, if someone wants to sell coffee or make artesania or sell arepas, they just make a proposal and if the leadership thinks it is a good idea, a loan is granted. The leadership, of course, has a vested interest in income-generating activities that enable incarcerated-workers to more easily pay la causa, as long as those business do not threaten the very profitable trade in drugs. When incarcerated people cannot generate the income to pay la causa, another method of collection is to orchestrate “kidnappings,” confiscate the cellular phone of the person held and call their family members and contacts demanding that a ransom is paid to ensure that person's safety. In that case, family members figure out how to pay in cash or, another common means of making a non-cash transaction to pay la causa is to
purchase minutes for phone calls through one of the telecommunications company. These calling cards have secret codes that can be passed along via text message which can serve as currency in the carceral world. Some prison residents who cannot pay the *causa* retreat to the church for protection.

In Vista Hermosa there were 4 evangelical churches, each with their own pastor. After finishing up my conversation with Chichi, I headed to the church on the second floor and was greeted by a tall and jovial Pastor Ricardo. Ricardo offered me a seat in a nook just outside the main chapel. Yehison said that he had other business to tend to and said his goodbyes; Ricardo began to enthusiastically talk about Venezuela, the prison and the Church. Ricardo was an avid *chavista*. He didn't use *oficialista* rhetoric, he laid out the political context very cleanly. “I remember what it was like before, and it was hard, people were poor, it was miserable and it is better now.” He admitted that things were complicated, largely in the economy but he insisted that Venezuelans were better off after the Bolivarian Revolution than during the neoliberal era of the late 80's and 90's.

Ricardo had been in the prison for 8 months, and he had already become a Pastor. He was a bit older than the average person in Vista Hermosa, in his mid-forties, and for him being a Pastor in the church created an opportunity to mentor young Venezuelan men. He used his position to talk to youth about violence, especially alternatives to violence, and about class. The bible was the main teaching tool for these lessons but it was also clear that the model of leading by example was another method. The Christian theme of redemption was at the core of his teaching. He preached the need to forgive people for their sins and how the Christian path gave people that second chance as well as an opportunity to have self-respect. He wore a tie and a button up shirt and carried a bible with him, as did the other Christians in the prison. Christians
also play a key role in conflict resolution and they work as peacekeepers, sometimes literally placing their bodies on the line and acting as martyrs in armed conflicts within the prisons. Pastor Ricardo insisted that lately “gracias a Wilmer” and “gracias a Dios” things had been peaceful in the prison.

   Just as Pastor Ricardo was pointing to all of the positive changes that had come about in the prison, repeating “gracias a Wilmer” as if it were his own personal mantra, a young man walked by selling cups of Jell-O. Ricardo stopped mid-sentence and jumped up to treat me to a Jell-O. I tried to politely decline but he insisted that he would be rewarded by god so that really by allowing him to buy me the Jell-O, I was doing him a favor. I thanked him for his generosity and was grateful that even though I detested every bite of the red Jell-O, it easily slid down my throat and I was able to finish the whole cup in pace with Ricardo. Ricardo said a prayer for me and for my research and instructed one of his congregants to escort me to another church, to meet a different pastor. On our walk through the prison, we passed a man in a suit with an “abogado” id badge that identified him as a lawyer. That was the first and only time that I know of that I saw a lawyer inside of a Prison in Venezuela.

   My quiet escort handed me off to Pastor Gerardo, a young man who had just turned twenty-four, but who had dark circles under his eyes as if he hadn't slept for weeks. He wore a long maroon button-up shirt and a brown tie. Gerardo's first baby had been born just before he turned eighteen and without economic means to support the child, Gerardo stole and robbed to provide for his child. He got caught and sent to prison. The Pastor said that he had been Catholic on the outside but that when he entered prison, he converted to become an Evangelical. He saw his work as multifaceted, he explained that it was essential for him to be a role-model by taking responsibility for his actions but he also felt that it was important to talk about the
underlying structural inequalities that pushed him to rob in the first place.

Gerardo acknowledged the complexity of this model of taking responsibility for one's actions, considering that far over half of Vista Hermosa's prison population had yet to be tried or convicted of a crime. Since 200 people had been transferred to other prisons in the month prior to my visit, the population at Vista Hermosa was at 1,800, of which only roughly 500 people had been sentenced. So of the remaining 1,300 people who awaited their hearings, a good number of them were innocent of the crimes that they have been charged with so Gerardo recognized that taking responsibility in one's life was more general and couldn't only apply to the specific charges that people were fighting, especially because so many people were innocent.

Gerardo spoke with a gentle whisper and he was really easy to talk to and easy to trust, I could see how this young man had become a Pastor. He also had lots of questions for me. He wanted to know about the US, about getting a Visa and about what the prisons were like there.

As I told him about how the US is the leading jailer in the world with 5% of the world's population but one quarter of the planet's prison population, I saw a door open out of the corner of my eye. I glimpsed in and saw hundreds of piled up bed rolls and mattresses stacked on top of each other. I realized that the sparse chapel room that we sat in would, at night become transformed into a sleeping space, tightly packed with mattresses on the floor. I thought about Chichi's 2-room suite and his insistence in the equality of all and Sin Camisa's spacious apartment down the air-conditioned corridor. The deep conversation between Gerardo and I got interrupted numerous times by young men who wanted to introduce their mothers to el Pastor. With profound sincerity, he always paused to stand, make eye contact and greet people with warmth and then he assumed his place on the small plastic stool and we continued our conversation. While the world of _los cristianos_ is culturally distinct from the world of
malandros, it still reflects the hierarchical forms of organization within the prison.

I asked Gerardo what he thought about the Ministry of Penitentiary Services and he said that there was a lot of distrust of them. He explained that early after forming, they had made lots of promises about changes that were going to happen and they didn't fulfill those promises so most people did not trust them. He also said that Plan Cayapo would be coming to Vista Hermosa later that month, which is something that the leadership had been negotiating with the MSP for many months. Gerardo was also critical of the uniforms, the rules and the restrictions of the New Regime prison and he said that he preferred Vista Hermosa under its current leadership.

This is also a reflection of what is largely seen as good management of Vista Hermosa by Wilmer. No one complained of issues with food, people talked about the educational opportunities through the missions, the access to materials to produce artesania, and the fact that many of the people incarcerated in Vista Hermosa feel like Wilmer is a powerful leader who represents their general interests. People also mentioned that that voting machines were brought into the prison for past elections and that people were able to cast votes directly from Vista Hermosa. All of these things reflected the principle of “humanizing the prisons” but it seemed that progress was more efficiently being made by the leadership of Wilmer and his associates than by the Ministry of Penitentiary Services. No one said “gracias al Ministerio de Servicios Penitenciarios,” the phrase of the day was “gracias a Wilmer.”

Gerardo's visitors had arrived and I wanted to leave him time with his loved ones so I thanked him for his time, his insights and his work and briefly greeted his family members. Vladimir had volunteered to bring me to the Pastor of the first church that I had entered when I arrived to the prison. Vladimir carried his hard-cover bible and led me through an outside
corridor of the prison that I hadn't walked through yet. It was already 3pm, and when Vladimir smiled his gold tooth sparkled in the hot sun. We walked past a group of artesanos and metal workers. An older man had a bag of Bolivar coins that, with the 64% inflation in the country, were essentially worthless in monetary value. He was using the metal to fashion beautiful leaf shaped rings. I admired his work and Vladimir offered to buy me a ring. I thanked him and said that I could purchase it because I had actually brought money with me that time. The artesano said “let him buy it for you, he has lots of money” so, I agreed. We sat for a moment as the old man carefully sized the ring to fit me perfectly and a I thanked Vladimir as we headed on to our next stop.

Vladimir had been standing around during the 2 hours that I talked with Gerardo and once we had a moment he told me that when he was younger, he had visited the US. He said that he had relatives in New Jersey, Michigan, and Tennessee and to prove it, he showed me a programmed phone number of an aunt in New Jersey in his cell phone. He explained to me that the third Pastor that I would visit was a former enemy of his, that both of them had been in prison together in Barcelona, in Anzoátegui state. He explained that before either of them were Christians, this pastor had stabbed him and so in response Vladimir shot him but clearly, he survived.

We knocked on a door in the corner of a different empty space called the church, and a round man with a mustache opened the door. Pastor El Gordo, as some of his friends affectionately called him, had a young man, also in a shirt and tie, and his wife visiting and they were all sitting on his bed watching TV. After reminiscing about the old days, when Vladimir and Pastor El Gordo had fought, I realized that it was a good opportunities to ask questions about how the prisons had changed over time. The vast majority of the prison population had arrived
in the last 5 years, these two, now in their late 40's had been in and out of prison for decades and their perspectives could shed light on continuities and discontinuities in the prison system during the Bolivarian Revolution.

I asked them when the guns arrived in the prisons. They both agreed that it was the late 1990's, In 1997 or 1998, they said. They also talked about how prior to 2004, when Wilmer very publicly negotiated for *la pernocta*, the sleepover visiting hours and conjugal visits, visits were restricted to two hours per week. They said that men were masturbating a lot and that there was also homosexual activity and they also associated the violence in the prison with unsatisfied sexual energy. I believe that this was a similar claim that Wilmer made when he successfully negotiated for the *penocta*, promising its correlation with a decrease in violence. In reality, the opposite actually happened but beyond statistics, it seemed as though Vladimir and Pastor El Gordo were pointing towards a change in attitude, more than anything.

While the Ministry of Penitentiary Services insists that their new regimen bring discipline to the prisons, it was clear in talking to people incarcerated at Vista Hermosa that there was already disciplinary regime in place but it was not imposed from outside of the prison, it was imposed from the leadership above the general population. This discipline is based on enforcing the maintenance of the *rutina* by punishing those in violation. Vladimir explained to me that the violence and killing had been minimized in the prison recently and he gave me the following example to support his claim. A week before I visited Vista Hermosa, a young inmate was sitting naked in his own room when his roommate entered with a female visitor. When women are present, men are not to be seen with their shirts off; being naked in the presence of a female visitor (despite the incident being an apparent accident) is in violation of *la rutina*. The young violator had his five toes cut off on one foot, “before they would have killed him” Vladimir said.
This is what peace looks like in the prison.

Vladimir and Pastor insisted that discipline was not the problem in the prison, citing another example, that if one robs, they got a hole shot through their hands. It was clear that the lines between malandros and cristianos was more porous than I had originally thought. These two guys had lived a lot of their lives as malandros, both inside and outside of prison, and whether it was motivated by a spiritual awakening or just simply aging out of the malandro world and looking for something different, the ties and bibles couldn't hide some of their gangster style. Vladimir was curious about the other prisons that I had visited, what I had observed and what I was going to do with my research. I said that it seemed that there was more food at Vista Hermosa than at El Rodeo, and El Gordo asked if I was calling them fat, which made everyone laugh.

I talked about writing a dissertation with my research, they wanted to know if I would publish a book. I said that I didn't know. A knock on the door, and someone poked their head in with chocolate. El Gordo accepted and split the bar in half, handing a piece to his wife and the other piece to me. We each took a small bite and then shared it with the others. For a moment, I forgot that we were in prison. Then, another knock on the door, it was time to pay the causa. I was asked if I wanted to stay or go. I decided that I would leave and as I made my way to the door, I saw one courtyard fill up with visitors who would be waiting for 45 minutes or so, while causa was collected from all of the inmates in a separate part of the prison. During the collection of causa, no one comes in or leaves the prison, after it is paid, the visit resumes for another hour. Unlike in El Rodeo, the collection of the causa takes place during visiting hours and visitors are permitted to bring money inside. It is clear that the influx of money through visiting is a part of what enables the causa to be paid and the internal prison economy to grow.
Vladimir walked me to the door, where I was surprised to see other people who were incarcerated standing casually in the doorway, with one foot outside the gate, and one foot inside of the prison. There were men with guns on both sides of the doorway, outside the national guard with automatic and semiautomatic rifles and inside luceros with assault rifles and pistols. I thanked Vladimir for his time and we exchanged numbers. As I was leaving, I thought about how the people that I talked to all had pride that this was one of the better prisons and that they kept it clean and in good condition. I waved to the two ladies that helped me get in, they were sitting in the courtyard and going to stay for the collection of la causa, they waved back and smiled. I retrieved my passport and exited the prison, thinking about how easy it was for me to walk out those doors and how difficult it is for most of the guys inside.

I found my way back to the fruit stand where I had left my bag with my phone and recorder and since I hadn't actually spent any money in the prison, I decided I wouldn't wait for the slow Sunday evening bus and instead, I took a Taxi directly back to where I was staying. The taxi driver asked what I was doing in Venezuela and I told him about my research and that I had just visited Vista Hermosa. He told me that Wilmer wasn't there right now but that he was still in charge. “He is a very powerful man, you know?” I nodded. “But, he has done a lot of good to. The prison is in much better shape, gracias a Wilmer.” I smiled, amazed at the reach and reputation of the prison benefactor who was no longer even in the state and whom, I often needed to remind myself, is imprisoned.

Later that evening I got a phone call from Vladimir. After my visit, he said that he had been thinking about how he wants to write a book about prisons in Venezuela and he was curious what I thought of the idea. I said that I thought it would be a great idea and that I'd be happy to look at anything that he wrote. I thanked him again for his time and after I hung up, I texted him
my email address in case he wanted to send me his writings but, I never heard from him again.

SAN FELIPE/LA CUARTA: Internado Judicial de Yaracuy

I woke up early on Saturday, February 21, 2015 so I could get a good spot in line to visit San Felipe prison. I was going to San Felipe because I wanted to interview the people involved in a newspaper called “La voz de la cárcel.” When I had stayed with friends in Barquisimeto, Willy who grew up with one of the guys on the inside involved in the project, had handed me a copy of the newspaper. It was their first edition, and it had come out in August of 2014. I hailed down a taxi and asked to be taken directly to the prison. The value of the bolívar in relation to the dollar had fallen dramatically from when I arrived 7 months earlier to Venezuela and while the 300 Bolívar ride would have been costly for the average Venezuela, it was under $2 USD, when calculating by the informal exchange rate.

By this time, I had become familiar with the routine, although each place had its particularities. I decided that I would buy some sweet bread, one loaf plain, and the other stuffed with guava jelly, to bring into the prison. I bought the bread, stored my bag, and got into line. There were metal dividers placed so that we would file in an orderly fashion, like a check-in line at an airport. Just as I was wondering what name I should put, I overheard the two young women in front of me asking a similar question. “What name are you going to put?” they asked each other and then they giggled as they invented funny names. I felt relief that I wasn't the only one fudging my way in. The line moved incredibly slowly and the women who I waited with began to commiserate about their obligations to visit their loved ones in prison. One woman said that she had not planned on coming this week but that he (her unidentified loved one in prison) called her begging her to come. “It's hard to have a social life” she said. A woman in an orange
shirt behind me agreed. She said that she wanted to go to the beach or do something fun instead of going to prison and then she added “it's not like they have a pool in there!” I smiled as I thought about the swimming pool in Vista Hermosa.

It began to drizzle, and while we all huddled under the shelter of the tent, I imagined that the rain would be good for Johnny and Yajaira's garden. As I approached the front of the line, a second line, of elders formed to my left. At all government institutions, seniors, pregnant women, and people with disabilities had a prioritized space in line. Since pregnant women were not allowed to visit prisons, this line was almost exclusively seniors who were coming to visit their sons and grandsons. The GNB member who took my id paid special attention to my US passport. He looked at the stamps, he tried to pronounce my name and he attempted to make small talk, insisting that we had met before. I smiled and told him that I was visiting Josue Corona (it worked before) and that he was my neighbor. The GNB member turned to the other women and mocked me, “his neighbor,” he said, trying to imply that I was this fictitious persons' girlfriend, I think. The other women smiled, as they all put on a very courteous and somewhat flirtatious act so that he would not put up any unnecessary barriers for them to enter.

After he waved me along, I darted through the rain to the next line under a covered roof. I was with grandmas and mothers, many of whom carried heavy bags. One woman in front of me was wearing the emblematic Chavez shirt, the post-mortem image of his eyes peeking out of a rectangle, as if to say that Chavez is always watching. The bright red shirt said “Ahora más que nunca.” Now more than ever. And again, I wondered how she reconciled her support for the government and the incarceration of her son, how people navigated their relationships to the left and right side of the state. From the casual banter that I overheard during all of my prison visits, many of the family members that were visiting their loved ones identified as Chavistas. This is
not to say that people had love for the prisons, the courts or the jails; I observed some people simply separate Chávez from all other aspects of the government and others associated the police and prison with the corruption that characterized the Fourth Republic and the old regime- as if these parts of the hybrid state were the lasting remnants of the liberal and neoliberal eras and they were stuck between the new state built through the Bolivarian Revolution and the old state that failed to disappear.

The rain started to pick up and there was a sudden halt in the revision process while the National Guards members adjusted the tables and the flow of the line so that instead of them getting wet, they would be under cover while visitors got rained on. The women standing to my side were horrified and insulted and a series of sighs and moans of disapproval surged from them. One woman turned and said, “They are humans, and what are we?” she continued, “animals?”

What was so dramatic about this moment is that in any other circumstance, if there were a national disaster, if these women needed help crossing the street, or in whatever other conceivable scenario the national guards members would have likely played up their chivalry but because they were visiting the prison, it was different, they did not warrant respect. While the rage had boiled to the surface, these women had their hearts set on getting inside so people followed directions, stood in the rain, and appeared calm and patient as guards members opened all of their sodas and waters to smell for alcohol, unfolded every item of neatly cleaned, ironed and folded clothing, and stuck a knife through the food that they had spent time preparing.

Just before it was my turn, the national guards member that had checked my passport decided that he wanted to change posts, seemingly so he could have another visit with me. He called me over to his table, even though there were two women in front of me. I pointed to the
women to go first and he pointed to me. They rolled their eyes and encouraged me to go on. I placed my two sweetbreads down on the table and he smashed them, feeling for contraband, or just exercising his power and then he waved me on. I walked into the building and placed my bags down. I followed the other women into a small room and removed my pants, squatted, and parted my vaginal lips for 3 women sitting in chairs. Afterward, we had to lift up our shirts, I was told that my shoes did not meet the requirements for sanctioned footwear and then they waved me through.

When I walked through the gates, I wasn't sure which way to go so I headed to the right towards a less exposed part of the prison, I asked if anyone knew who was involved with the newspaper, *La voz de la cárcel* and they pointed me towards the men sitting in front of the stacked 5 gallon water jugs. I approached the table where two men were sitting and immediately noticed two pistols sitting on the plastic table. I introduced myself and said that I had gotten a copy of the newspaper and that I wanted to meet people involved with the project. The big guy motioned for someone to get me a chair and they invited me to sit down.

The larger guy in front of me was Mateo, the Pran of the prison. To my left was Pichulu, one of his *luceros* and also an active member of the group who stated the newspaper. I recognized Pichulu from the twitter page of his hiphop group Combo Completo, which had also been mentioned in the newspaper. Mateo and Pichulu were thrilled about the reach that the newspaper had had and they smiled and laughed at the thought that someone from New York had come to interview them about it. To elevate the importance of our interview, Mateo instructed someone to get me pen and paper so that I could write things down. I was grateful, since I had never been able to get those in for previous prison visits and it meant that I could also take more accurate notes during our conversation.
Next to their pistols, Pichulu and Mateo each had three cell phones sitting on the table in front of them, and throughout the next hour that I would spend with them, they were attending to phone calls and text messages. Mateo self identified as a líder positivo, and explained that being in his position was “una responsabilidad grandota.” Mateo had served ten years of a twenty year term but, since he had worked for all of the time that he had been in prison, he thought that he might qualify for early release as soon as in April, just 2 months from then. He said that, if he gets out, he will need to decide who he will leave the prison to. He said that it is a big responsibility and not just anyone could do it. He told me that he watches all of his luceros and that some just want excitement and action but that this was not his style, that he liked peace.

The way that he spoke of his responsibility, as if he were the father of 1,300 quarrelsome children whose conflicts he had to resolve and whose needs he had to tend to Mateo spoke about his role not in terms of the wealth and glory often associated with it but the responsibility of the position, and the risk to his own life for being such a visible target. Later when I read the words of Jesús Gregorio (pseudonym), a former Pran of various prisons in Venezuela; I was struck by how similarly he spoke of his role to how Mateo presented it to me in San Felipe.

Ser pran no es nada fácil. Todo el mundo está esperando que te equivoques en cualquiera de las decisiones para liquidarte. Es una cosa natural. Todo el mundo quiere tu cabeza y espera por ella.”(Clarenbaux, 2009, p.40).

Jesús Gregoro and Mateo both talked about how conflicts are brought to their door and how they must make decisions about how to resolve conflicts or enforce rules, some of these decisions are matters of life and death- and therefore leaders recognized the importance of being a good judge of character and of distinguishing rumors, of which there are plenty, from facts.

I asked Mateo about their relationship with the Ministry of Penitentiary Services and they said that they are in a constant negotiation but that they have not given the MPS any reason to come in and try to take over the prison because things were “tranquilo.” Mateo said that they
didn't want to be taken over because they didn't like the New Regimén because “*hay maltrato.*” there is abuse. He didn't mention giving up his economic power. The causa in San Felipe, also called La Cuarta, is 100 VB a week and the average person in *el mundo* can earn between 500-1000 Bolivares/week through working. When I asked Mateo what happened to the money that they collected from la causa, he said that it was used as loans for businesses, invested back into the prison for cleaning supplies and infrastructure improvement and that a portion also went towards the children's visiting days which were every 15 days, the most frequent of any other prison in Venezuela, Mateo boasted.

Mateo had a big smile at it exposed his brown stained teeth and the *chimó*, chewing tobacco that he had in his gums. He talked about his position in running the prison as stressful, and asserted his responsibility for the over 1,700 people incarcerated there. While he acknowledged that this responsibility included disciplining people who stepped out of line, he spoke about it as if he were just a stern father, showing his children tough love so that they could ultimately succeed in a difficult world.

I asked Mateo what he would change, if he could. And he said that he would change the discrimination against people in prison, “they act like we are monsters,” he said as he spit brown saliva into a plastic cup. He also talked about the backlog of cases and the slow pace at which people move through the judicial process. He described the court system as a “*desastre*”(disaster). And said that many people in prison are innocent and worse, many are there because the police planted drugs or weapons on them. “If the Ministry were to have done anything good, it would be Plan Cayapo” he noted.

“It is a constant negotiation.” he added, talking about the Ministry and the prison administration and he explained that they used to treat the visitors much worse and that things
had improved. I added that they way in which they search women is degrading, humiliating and abusive. He asked me “did they touch you?” as he reached his right hand for his gun. In that moment, I was reminded that I was speaking to the boss and that I needed to be very careful about what I said. “No, they didn't touch me” I answered. Mateo went on to explain why he had a vested interested in the careful searches. “Do you know what a golpe de estado is?” He asked. I nodded. Well he said, we don't want a golpe to happen in here. “Right, voltear el carro.” I said. They smiled and perhaps noted that this was not my first time in the carceral world and that I understood some of the basic dynamics. What I had not understood until this moment was how the carro had a vested interest in controlling the monopoly of smuggled goods and therefore in the invasive searches of visitors. “Right now, I know where every bullet in the prison in” Mateo explained, we wouldn't want a visitor to sneak in a bullet.

In addition to having the monopoly on contraband and controlling what comes into the prison, Mateo wanted to maintain the monopoly on force and this meant working along with the authorities on the outside to prevent weapons or bullets from entering the prison through visitors. These very same officials are the ones who condone and most likely profit from trafficking weapons, drugs, and a myriad of other items into the prison and therefore the internal and external leadership are dependent on one another for maintaining the status quo and for protecting the power of the carro. Prison officials could place their bet on a new leader, and help them smuggle in weapons to challenge the current Pran. In practice, these coups are fairly common, and they are often led by one of the luceros, someone who is in a position to amass weapons, negotiate with administrators or have some earned loyalties from within el mundo.

Pichulo sat attentively by Mateo's side throughout the whole conversation, and I wondered if he was second in command or poised to take Mateo's spot if he actually gets out
soon. The other emcees's from the hiphop crew Combo Completo had been transferred to other prisons, so he was the only remaining member in San Felipe. With financing from Mateo, they had started a record label called Cuarta Records, and they released one album under the label. The logo of the label, a fist holding a microphone in front of a 4 is tattooed onto his left shoulder. When I asked Pichulo about why he choose hip hop to communicate he said that it gave them an opportunity to “do good things with bad experiences.” He said that remaining positive and having a vision to put your passion and talent into isn't easy in prison and that producing hip-hop was also a reflection of “consciousness raising.” Pichulo's large tattooed arms became animated as he talked about traveling to Sabaneta prison in Maracaibo and San Juan de los Morros in Guárico to perform for the prison population. While he said that this was one of the good things that the Ministra had done, he added that she also “made promise that she never fulfilled.”

Pichulo offered to take me to find the other two guys who worked on the newspaper but Mateo insisted that he stay with him. Mateo said he needed to shower and shave and that his family would be there soon but he invited me to have a meal with them later. Mateo sent one of his guys to find the other two people involved in La Voz de la Cárcel. Within minutes two men were brought to the table where I had sat with Mateo and Pichulo and Mateo wanted to know where they would take me. I stood up, and grabbed the sweet bread that I had brought in and we were off. As we walked through the main corridor in the prison, there were stalls set up where people were selling all sorts of items. Someone was selling laundry soap, and the person next to them were selling toilet paper, two goods that I had not been able to find in months in Venezuela. I hadn't thought about brining money in to do my shopping but I noticed that some other women were buying corn flour, another scarce item in Venezuela. On the other side, there was a plastic table with marijuana, cocaine and crack displayed; some in small baggies, some sitting in
heaping piles.

The two men were an odd duo. Roberto was a serious guy; smart, a little rough around the edges and suspicious of me, at first. Poeta was a viejito, for the prison world, an optimistic stoner in his sixties with dark skin and a gray beard. His eyes were glazed over and he seemed stoned but he had a gentle way about him and when he was not seriously contemplating something, he always wore a smile. Poeta wanted to take to me to the place where it all began, where he sits and does his writing so I followed them through a building and out a back entrance. Skinny looking guys were hunched over the dregs of food in Tupperware and they were shoving food into their mouths with their hands. We stepped by them and arrived to a quiet corner with a solitary wooden school desk attached to a chair. Poeta had a seat, “this is it, this is where I do my writing.”

“So tell us a little bit about yourself” Roberto said. I began to tell them about the radio program that I had produced in the US for the three years, similarly called the Prison Voices Project and how I was interested in media representation in prisons as a part of my dissertation research. They loved the idea of a radio program about prisons and Roberto began to warm up to me as he launched into the history and objective of La voz de la cárcel.

“No hay nadie que se enfoque en una respuesta de los que están en las cárceles,” Roberto said. We wanted to produce something that came from the “penitentiary mass on a national level.” Roberto is a self-identified Socialist and he was unapologetic and fearless about his critique of the prison system and the government. First, he explained his own story. Roberto is from Barquisimeto and while he said that he did his fair share of robberies to help cover living costs of his family, he had never actually gotten caught for any of those incidents. Roberto said that there was one police officer that used to always stop him in an attempt to get a bribe.
Roberto paid the first time, the second time and the third time. The fourth time, he was so infuriated that he refused to pay. The cop planted a weapon on him and sent him away to prison for 10 years. At first, Roberto was sent to Uribana prison in Barquisimeto but in January of 2013, the National Guard entered the prison and a shoot-out occurred. While the official death toll was just upwards of fifty people Roberto, as well as other people that I talked to in San Felipe, estimated it to be in the hundreds, somewhere between 300-500 people. Roberto, as well as a number of the other people in prison in San Felipe had been transferred to the neighboring state and remained there ever since. There was an opportunity to return to Barquisimeto and go to a New Regimen prison, either Fênix penitentiary or the former Uribana, now called Sargent David Villoria, but Roberto chose to stay in San Felipe.

His experience of witnessing what could fairly be called a massacre in Uribana changed his perspective of the government and he felt like underneath the rhetoric of socialism, they maintained a policy that didn't value the lives of the poor. Whereas Roberto had associated the government with the left hand of the state, the social programs, the food subsidies, the social workers, as he dodged bullets in the exposed cement prison, he came into contact with the right hand of the state and it forced him to reevaluate things. He was angry and unlike many people who critique the government from below or from the left, he wasn't the least bit worried about stating his complaints carefully. “What are they going to do to me?” he asked, “put me in prison?” He insisted that he wasn't afraid. He asserted that the increase in prison population in Venezuela and the judicial apparatus that has grown around has been converted into a profitable punishment system. “Nosotros, para ellos, somos un gran negocio.” He went on to ask where the cultural programming was, where the food was and where the money went. It wasn't until later that day that I understood that there are no meals provided for people in prison at San
Felipe. All food must be purchased or brought in by loved ones.

El poeta interrupted Roberto's rant and said “I like this system, I like socialism, but there are things that have to change and the ultimate objective is to change hearts and minds of people as a way of changing prison policies.” Roberto jumped in “this is a cancer, there is no cure.” El poeta disagreed, “there is a cure, when there are not vices or poverty there will not be delinquency.”

“No, this is a business, there are too many interests invested, there is no cure.” Roberto concluded and before El poeta could respond, Roberto dismissed him, calling him a pothead. Roberto turned to me and asked what I thought about marijuana, I said that I thought that it should be decriminalized, which was already happening in some states in the US. El poeta agreed and then shared that he had been in prison for over 5 years for possession of marijuana. Roberto asked me if I did drugs, I said that I used to smoke marijuana but that I didn't any longer. He said that he had tried every drug that there is but that he got clean in prison and that he didn't respect people who used drugs. I could tell that El poeta was put off so I tried to change the subject.

I asked what they thought about the idea of humanizing the prisons and Roberto quickly responded that it did no good to prepare someone in prison for work in la calle, when “la sociedad nunca quería nada de ellos y nos rechaza.” El poeta, on the other hand, applauded that positive efforts and shared his vision for a “circulo de electores penitenciarios,” an organization of voters in prison, and the creation of a prison library. They said that some of these ideas would come out in the second edition of la voz de la cárcel but that the guy that was helping to print the paper on the outside had not been able to track down any newsprint which is what has delayed the release of their second edition.
In the first edition, Under the heading of the newspaper it says, “Organized we will speak [to you] together.” To the left there is a sketch of a man, his hat turned backwards, clinging to the prison bars and yelling “tend to us already!” The large image on the front page is of hands clinging to prison bars over a small window in a brick building with cockroaches climbing the wall. This is the first image that any reader of the prison newspaper would see.

The three authors speak from various positions throughout the newspaper and in doing so claim a number of notable identities. First off, they have generally embraced the new language utilized by the government to describe incarcerated people—primados de libertad—“those deprived of liberty.” As is clear with the name of the newspaper, the (singular) voice of the prison, the authors do not claim to represent the (plural) voices of people in prison or to foster a space of dialogue and debate, in fact they claim to speak on behalf of “la masa penitenciaria.” This statement, along with others in which they claim that their comments are in the name of the prison population, demonstrate their desire to form a collective identity. The authors of La voz de la cárcel have created a polemic, in which they are calling for unity among “the organized penal population” as a means of forming a collective identity capable of collective action.

Roberto also creates his identity by stating what he is not. He begins one of his articles by writing “I am not a journalist, I am not a writer.” Of course, as the author of that article he most certainly is a writer, but the identity that he is assuming is as a humble seeker of knowledge and understanding based on his life circumstances and not of someone from the outside and gazing in to make meaning based on someone else’s life. Through this distinction, he shows his wariness of journalists and writers and establishes that the goals inherent in La voz de la cárcel are distinct from the private media’s and gazes inward from the outside.

In a drawing on the center-fold, there is a man sleeping on a mattress on the floor. While
he has a small pillow, he rests his head on his right arm, which is adorned by a watch-representing the passage of time. He is dreaming, which is depicted by a thought-bubble, and he is hugging his son. His son is saying “I love you a lot,” and he responds “me too, son.” The thought bubble covers some but not all of the bars behind him.

El poeta also asserts that “poor people make up the prison population.” While this statement may not surprise Venezuelans who undoubtedly associate prison with barrio residents, racialized youth and the poor; the dominant media narrative focusses on “criminals,” creating strong divides within the social bases from where chavismo gains its strength (in poor communities.) The rhetoric around fear and insecurity is so strong in the Venezuelan media landscape and popular psyche that the pro-poor agenda and transformations in thinking about class in Venezuela have not yet transcended the prison walls.

Throughout the articles and the drawings in La Voz de la Cárcel, the authors utilize citations of historical figures to employ the symbolism of those characters infuse deeper meaning in their articles, some of which are focused on a particular issue and others of which are weaving a long-form narrative web. For example, the cite Fidel Castro’s famous “History Will absolve me” speech:

The fact is, when men carry the same ideals in their hearts, nothing can isolate them - neither prison walls nor the sod of cemeteries. For a single memory, a single spirit, a single idea, a single conscience, a single dignity will sustain them all.

They also quote Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the late President Hugo Chávez and the authors also utilize quotes of Jesus Christ instructing others not to judge and that those “who have a hunger and thirst for justice” will be “satiated.”

Utilizing the very figures employed by the Leftist self-proclaimed Socialist government (the same one that is interning the authors of the newspaper) demonstrates a strategy to both connect with the Left, especially those from the popular classes, and infuse new meaning into the
political project of the leaders that they admire. The choice of excerpts to include function to connect incarceration with poverty and injustice as opposed to punishment and justice. Utilizing these figures-and their symbolic meaning within the contemporary and political landscape in Venezuela—is a subversive attempt to criticize the leftist government by pointing to their own hypocrisy. In essence the authors are asking what would Fidel, Chávez, “Che” and Jesus say about the injustice that we face?

Socialism is also a concept utilized throughout the newspaper. They are attempting to speak to the chavista base, as well as those marginalized from the political process by creating a new meaning of the word socialism. In an article entitled “The Socialist Future,” the authors utilize the principles laid out in the Bolivarian Revolution and various reforms to demand the right to education for people in prison; asserting that this is socialism. The authors also represent the growing prison population as a reflection as the “follies” of the system, not as a response to growing crime, which is how mainstream media explains it. The emphasis on the backlog of incarcerated people dramatically shifts the debate about prisons because it is impossible to employ the “do the crime, serve the time” mentality when readers are reminded that over half of the prison population has not gone to trial and has simply been charged with a crime. While the blame of incarceration is often portrayed by mainstream media to be the fault of the person incarcerated, the result of an error that they committed or a law that they broke, *La voz de la cárcel* demonstrates how the slow legal proceedings and “the system” is to blame, not the individual. In fact, the emphasis on the criminal case backlog, the years that people spend in pre-trial detention shifts the meaning of incarceration itself. They construct incarceration as a failing of the system, not of the individual.

In another drawing, four men are sitting in a dingy corner with a barred window and
cement blocks behind them and they appear to be playing cards or dominos. One of them, or all of them, is/are saying “The Minister Iris Varela says that she has put an end to idleness but look where they have us.” This picture communicates a very important message: that while life in prison is often portrayed by the private media as violent, dangerous, hellish, exciting and in constant conflict, these portrayals, which can be accurate in certain instances, fail to represent the extreme boredom that many people in prison experience. The cartoon also clearly calls out the Minister of Penitentiary Services by name, pointing to a disjuncture in government rhetoric and policies, and directing that blame onto Iris Varela (who symbolizes the government).

In response to the stigmatization of people in prison in Venezuela, and the negative representations by private media of incarcerated people as lazy, violent, hot-headed, uneducated, dark-skinned and naturally inferior, the authors of La Voz de la Cárcel resist this stigmatization by highlighting a demand for dignity as well as equality, without discrimination. Through these demands, the authors are representing incarcerated people as agents in the political process who are entitled not only to the most basic of material necessities but also to dignity, to respect. Many of the ideas presented in La voz de la cárcel demonstrate the anti-neoliberal rationalities at work in Venezuela; the demands are not only that a state benefactor care for all of its children but that the collectivity of marginalized people be respected as human beings, in every way.

After discussing the newspaper for a while, we wandered back inside the building of the prison and sat down in a small room where some cooking projects were going on. Roberto offered me a freshly cooked pavita, a homemade doughnut-like sphere stuffed with a sugary-creamy filling and we continued to talk about prisons and politics in Venezuela and the United States. I glanced over to see the woman wearing the red chavista shirt that I had seen in line and her son or grandson was nuzzling his face into her bosom, as if he were a toddler. She just sat,
reading the paper as he cuddled into her arms. “Ahora más que nunca.” her shirt read, with the late President Chávez's eyes peering out at us.

Pichulo found me in the room, he had showered and was in his visiting day's best. We walked and looked for Mateo but he was still getting ready and I was planning to leave the prison so that I could go back to Johnny and Yajaira's and help finish up planting the garden. Pichulo instructed Roberto to invite me to lunch at the restaurant and we ordered some stuffed chicken dish that came with tajadas (sweet fried plantains), french fries, and slaw. As I sat with Roberto, I realized that this was a rare one-on-one moment and so I asked a few more questions. This is when I actually understood that no meals are provided by the prison administration, none. That everyone is responsible for figuring out how to get fed, either by earning money and paying, or by family members bringing food, and there is a system of barter, reciprocity and looking out for one another which also provides for some of these needs. We were sitting at one of the many restaurants in Vista Hermosa, and our meal cost 600 VB, the cost of a plate of seafood at a tourist restaurant, pricey.

As I looked at the table across from us, I realized that two young women who had been joking about what name they would put were on, what looked like a date, with two different guys than I had seen them with earlier. Roberto noticed where my attention was and he said, “Some women come in every weekend to work.” He paused, “and they make good money.” It did seem like a potentially lucrative clientele, to do sex work in prison, especially with the pernocta. Women can spend 32 continuous hours in the prison, and with the code of conduct in la rutina, they are offered a certain level of protection from violence or other forms of mistreatment. I looked around and wondered about the lives and the relationships of the people that I saw around me.
In the far corner of the restaurant dozens of young guys were crowded around a flat screen TV and by their enthusiasm, it seemed fair to assume that people had bet money on the horse races that they were watching on the screen. Some cheered and others seemed disappointed with the results. Roberto confirmed that some people gamble to make money to pay la causa and then he repeated, almost as if under his breath, “one big business.” And what if people just simply can't pay la causa, I asked. “They find a way to pay.” “But, what if they really can't?” I insisted. He leaned in, paused and then looked at me, waiting for me to reciprocate that same focused eye contact. With a heaviness to his words, he repeated, “They find a way to pay.”

We finished the last French fries and then walked towards the entrance of the prison. Roberto and I said goodbye, exchanged phone numbers, and wished each other luck with our respective projects. As I exited the prison and entered the peripheral area where the prison guards had searched me on the way in, I bumped into Mateo. At first, I did not recognize him. Since our earlier meal, he had showered, shaved and put on clean stylish clothes, a black and turquoise hat and jewelry. He looked ready to go out. For a moment, I thought it was odd that he had crossed the border from the incarcerated world into the grey area periphery where the guards were but then again, he ran the prison, and this seemed to be one of the many privileges he possessed.

Mateo greeted me like an old friend and invited me to stay to eat with him and his family but the sun was going down and I had to find transportation back to the barrio where I was staying. He asked me what I thought about the prison and what I learned by talking to people, and he seemed genuinely interested in my answer. In a low voice, I said that I thought the newspaper was a really important project and that it was a great way to directly address problems
in the prison system, communicate with the outside and create possibilities of communicating
with people in other prisons. He asked me if everyone had treated me well, with respect and
wanted to make sure that there were no problems. I confirmed that everyone had been respectful
and that I had had no problems. He told me that I was welcome in San Felipe, whenever I
wanted to return and wished me well on my travels back to New York, repeating the words “New
York” several times. We shook hands, and within 30 seconds, I was out of cage, on the other
side of the wall.

I kept in touch with Roberto over the next few months. He wanted to know when I might
visit again and he texted just to say hello fairly often. As I was preparing to leave Venezuela, I
called him to thank him for his work and for sharing his stories and his world with me. After we
said our goodbyes, he thanked me on behalf of the “masas penitenciarias” and asserted that “la
lucha sigue,” the struggle continues.

**LA RUTINA**

While the three open-regime prisons that I visited have some similarities in
organizational structure, each prison was very different. This makes it challenging to make
broad generalizations about open-regime prisons. In part, the aspect that they each share in
common is that the governing structure that exists internally in the prison is not the state but a
hierarchical organization comprised of prisoners (working in collaboration with state authorities).
As a result, the carro that governs one prison may have a completely different leadership style or
operating principles than the carro in another. Any attempt to fully decode la rutina in depth
would require long-term ethnography in one prison, and the results could not be simply
juxtaposed onto others.

The code of conduct established by la rutina, while filled with asinine rules (like you can
have a hole shot through your hand if you merely touch something that is not yours or, you can be killed or beaten if you are seen without a shirt on in front of a female visitor that is not your lover, or you can be tortured and raped if you are perceived to be a homosexual or sex offender) also provide structure and serve to minimizes petty conflicts from growing into massive outbursts of violence. Many prisoners that I talked to appreciate what they see as “respect” and a number of people asserted that there is far more “respect” in the prison than there is in *la calle*.

Outside of the rules imposed through *la rutina*, many activities that are theoretically prohibited in the open-regime prisons are in practice condoned by the *carro*. Incarcerated people can wear their own clothes, no uniforms are required or even exist, and people can wear their hair as they choose, wear jewelry, belts, accessories that add to people's style, self-presentation and therefore their sense of dignity. This also overlaps with the right to personal private property, an established “right” of those incarcerated in open regime prisons. The consumption of drugs or alcohol and gambling are all permitted; and because the state does not have authority over internal prison life, these things are done out in the open. *El Carro* permits individuals to carry blades for self-defense, although no one outside of *el carro* is permitted to have firearms, explosives or bullets. Individuals can have their own cell phones and just about any other possession that they can afford to get smuggled in. Some people have cell phones or computers that give them internet access and therefore they can get on the internet, Facebook, twitter, YouTube or wherever else they please to go virtually. This access to technology such as computers, camera phones and YouTube have meant that the *testimonio* of the political prisoner has been replaced by the genre of testimonial videos from inside open-regime prisons throughout Venezuela that depict, daily prison life, music—especially hip hop, protest videos, documentation of human rights abuses, evangelical sermons, internal violence—like scenes of
rape and torture, and gangster style videos that show off the weapons, drugs, money and women in the prisons.

El Rodeo I, Vista Hermosa and San Felipe all had 3 visiting days per week; Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday, and visitors have the option of sleeping over on Saturday night. Although visitors are searched and often harassed or abused on their way into the prison, once they enter there are no external restrictions imposed. Because space is limited, private rooms are often available-for a price for conjugal visits but also for full-family sleepovers. Sex workers can and do enter the prison freely and I know of at least one example of young women going to find boyfriends. Besides San Felipe which has a children's visiting day every 15 days, most prisons are open for the visitation of accompanied children between ages 2-12 roughly 4 times a year. During these days, weapons are put away and the prison is transformed into a playground for kids. The visit is “sagrada,” and in all open-regime prisons there are many rules to regulate conduct on visiting day and to protect visitors from incidents that might in turn risk visiting day for all.

The GNB are largely relegated to patrolling the perimeter of the prison and doing a headcount, which varies in frequency, depending on the prison. In El Rodeo I, for example the headcount takes place twice a day. In Vista Hermosa, the headcount takes place only twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. *La cuenta* can be tense and it is largely an exercise of performance. Everyone must wake up and exit all of the buildings 30 minutes prior to the headcount. At El Rodeo I, this can be as early as 4am. Then, the *luceros* and the *pran* stash all of the weapons in secret hiding spots throughout the prison. Some of the stashes are said to be wired to explosives that will detonate if someone who did not know how to disarm the bombs tried to get them. After weapons are stashed, *Luceros* and the *Pran* join the masses outside. The
National Guard enters and either counts the prisoners or asks to be given the number by someone from the carro; afterwards the buildings are searched. If drugs, alcohol, cell phones, and other contraband are not properly hidden there is a risk that they will be “confiscated” by the National Guard.

After la cuenta/el número ends, the luceros and the pran enter the buildings alone, retrieve their weapons and then everyone retrieves their own hidden personal belongings and then they can get on with their day. This daily or weekly ritual, along with la visita, and el Wendy (meals) are key markers of la rutina inside of the open-regime prisons in Venezuela. El carro, under the leadership of the pran brings order, discipline, and structure to the internal carceral world. In return, loyalty, obedience and financial contribution are expected of the broader population. Participation in this community requires a payment to the central governing power. Fernando describes the internal social differentiations in the carceral world and how revenue is generated through managing the prison.

There is considerable pressure for people who are incarcerated in the open-regime prisons in Venezuela to pay la casua. This requirement ultimately spurs a boisterous internal prison economy based on the buying and selling of commodities, crafts and services.

Since el carro is dependent on generating this tax from the inmate population, businesses are not only permitted but they are encouraged. El carro provides loans to people who want to start a business and el carro can negotiate with prison authorities about purchasing tools,
supplies, and materials needed for a business. This internal economy is essential for the daily survival of incarcerated people, so the internal economy provides basic services that people in prison require (haircuts, laundry, renting cell phones, food, etc…) but it also provides livelihoods for those who sell those services or are small producers of other sorts. In order for the economy to grow, it is dependent on influxes of money from external sources beyond the prison walls, especially considering that every week a significant portion of the internal currency is concentrated upwards into the hands of el carro. Visitors, family members, and others who enter the prison to buy goods and services play an important role in fueling the prison economy. Some family members will come in and contribute their labor to an income-generating scheme that their loved one can utilize. For example, in San Felipe the mother, wife and sister of one imprisoned man were diligently working with him to make hundreds of pavitas—a deep-fried, cream stuffed, sugar-coated donut-like dessert—which presumably he could sell throughout the week.

In addition to the direct weekly payment, the rules of la rutina also exist to protect income-generating activities and property. For example, Fernando provided insights into why there are such strict rules about escaping or attempting to escape from prison. While the exterior of the prison is heavily guarded and patrolled by military personnel which is itself a considerable deterrent, most people are shocked to learn that escaping or attempting to do so is in violation of la rutina. On the one hand, this marks a contract between external and internal administrators; in the years in which internal management was seeded to the carro, it is reasonable to assume that power transfers were conditional on a basic agreement to keep the prison population interned. Additionally, the carro makes money per head. Each person that escapes represent one less causa being contributed. Another reason why fleeing from prison is strictly prohibited is
because an escape can provoke an unannounced search which could result in the loss of weapons, drugs, cash or supplies—all of which would have serious financial repercussions on el carro. Fernando explains

Así como que no te puedes fugar, personas que los condenaron veinte años, o sea sabes que tú tienes veinte años y te van a condenar veinte años. Son veinte años perdidos de tu vida, y buscar saltar la perla y te vas a ir entonces no te pudiste ir y te devuelves pa' adentro y te matan los mismos presos. Pero eso pasa por el negocio...porque si yo salto pa' afuera y cuando regreso hacia acá dentro otra vez entonces al entrar, ¿quién era que se quería fugar?, eso promueve una requisa, entonces en esa requisa se pueden perder las pistolas que tienen ellos, se pueden perder los teléfonos, todo, se pierde todo pues, porque cuando entra la guardia se lleva todo.

The arrangements made between internal and external authorities are delicate at best. Any behavior that falls outside of the normal routine of relations has the potential of sparking tensions that can lead to a significant loss of accumulated property or even bloodshed. Despite the performance that happens every day or a few days with the orchestration of la cuenta, in which weapons are temporarily stashed and national guards members “search” the prison, there is always a possibility that an unannounced search could take place at any time and the pran will most certainly attempt to cultivate a network of informants among the GNB members and prison administrators to ensure that they are prepared; either by stashing weapons and contraband or by bringing their arsenal to the front entrance of the prison and refusing the admission of the GNB, the second of which could create an altercation and risk the lives of members of all parties involved in the conflict.

La rutina also models a specific form of hyper-masculinity while no one has explicitly told me that crying would be a violation of la rutina, there are expectations placed on the general population to conform to behavior considered to be manly or macho. There is pressure to perform a masculinity that is equated with violence, domination, homophobia, patriarchy, and misogyny. In part, this is to compensate for the domestic duties required of many men while
they are in prison, such as cooking, cleaning, washing and caring for others. These roles are traditionally played by Venezuelan women on the outside and while men who are locked up still depend on women to play these roles and meet these needs, they themselves also need to assume some of the responsibility of domestic labor.

Each prison is managed differently, in Vista Hermosa Wilmer plays the role of the líder positivo, advocating for the rights of incarcerated people with a self-help philosophy accompanied by tangible changes in the infrastructure and programming within the prison. He is more of the patriarch or the benefactor and his leadership style promotes cleaning up the prison instead of allowing or contributing to its deterioration. In El Rodeo I whatever money is being pulled together by el carro is not making a visible impact on sweeping improvements in the prison. An in San Felipe, despite adherence to paying la causa, there is not even one meal a day provided by either the internal or external governments.

CONCLUSIONS:

The open-regime prisons “work” to contain a surplus pool of labor however; as opposed to incapacitating people in prison from market-relations, the prison population becomes a part of the expanding informal market in Venezuela. Through the contribution of money, goods, services, and labor of family members and a boisterous internal economy comprised of all of the goods and services one might find en la calle the open-regime prisons function as mini-cities but unlike the unregulated informal economy flourishing outside of the prison walls, el carro taxes each transaction by facilitating the passage of goods needed for production, by offering loans with interest, and by demanding a cut of any income generated through la causa, a weekly tax paid by all. El carro uses the threat of violence and the promise of protection to extract money
and labor from the prison population; through these social relations *el pran* or the whole *carro*, as well as collaborating prison administrators and members of the GNB profit off of these exploitative social relations. It is because of this extraction of surplus that Antiallano et al (2014) argue that there is a *de-facto* privatization of the open-regime prisons.

*El carro* and corroborating state officials also generate income through the sale of drugs, of which they have a monopoly on in the prison. The control of the prison territories by the *carros* in essence creates semi-autonomous zones controlled by organized crime. While visitors are searched entering the prisons, they are not searched leaving. Feasibly, one could enter the prison to purchase drugs for consumption or for resale but during the economic war drugs are not the only or even primary source of illicit contraband. Basic goods such as corn flour, laundry detergent, toilet paper, sugar and flour were all things that one could obtain in prisons in moments when they were scarce in stores on the outside.

One of the more obvious ways in which the prison “works” is in the separation of families. Venezuela has the highest rates of female-headed households in all of Latin America, and as the prison population grows, it will only contribute to severing of parental-child relations, among other familial bonds. While the relatively liberal visiting policies create an opportunity for connection, physical contact and continued relations; the deprivation inside of the prisons places a serious burden on family members who assume responsibility for the care of a loved one on the inside. Many women feel stuck between their obligations to provide food, clothes, sex, care, and the connection with their children to their babydads, husbands, sons and brothers and their responsibilities to provide incomes and do reproductive labor and caring work for their families on the outside. But the expectation that women will always subsidize the shortfalls created through austerity has limits. As Sylvia Chant notes:

> While the mobilization of household, family, and community solidarity served as vital resources in the past,
there is a limit to how many favors people can call on from one another and how effective these exchanges are in the face of huge structural impediments to well-being. In particular, there are worries that the disproportionate burdens that have fallen on women have stretched their personal reserves to capacity and there is no further ‘slack’ to be taken up (cited in Davis, 2007 p.184.)

Many of the young men that I spoke with on visiting day did not have people that regularly cared for them, and so the expectation that women will always step in to pick up the ‘slack’ is not always true. Nonetheless, thousands of women spend close to every weekend traveling to prisons, waiting in line and doing reproductive and sexual labor for their loved ones in prison. The prison “works” to reproduce these sexist gender roles by stigmatizing men for doing reproductive labor inside of the prison and therefore policing masculinity to conform to patriarchal, heteronormative, misogynist norms all the while depending on the reproductive labor of women to subsidize the very functioning of prison life.

The prison also works to reproduce power relations based on race. This is a complex topic in Venezuela and I was struck by how the things that I observed radically contradicted what I was told by people in interviews on the topic of race. So, while many argued that policing, prisons, and criminality are extremely classed in which race plays little or no role, many narrators also conceded that class in Venezuela is racialized as a result of the colonial division of labor. In a context where racial categorizations carry more fluidity than in the United States the process of race-making draws from various markers—beyond skin color and phenotype—these include how someone talks, dresses, dances, wears their hair, or the region or neighborhood that they hail from. I observed Venezuelans with darker-skin and African features be labeled as foreigners (Haitians or Africans) or sometimes as barloventeños (originating from the Caribbean Afro-Venezuelan region in Miranda state), reinforcing the precept of mestizaje as the race of the Venezuelan nation. The same black Venezuelans who had been labeled as foreigners insisted that racial discrimination exists in Venezuela, despite the fact that those who had labeled them as
such protested these allegations. Nonetheless, while racial categorizations may be fluid and linked to class, the police seem to have no trouble profiling Afro-Venezuelan youth from the barrios. I propose that the prison in Venezuela “works” to make and solidify racial categorizations that associate criminality with blackness which is then geographically connected to the barrios. This is especially true in the north central region of the country which include the urban centers of Caracas, Maracay and Valencia; this is also the region where the majority of the population of Venezuela resides and where the majority of prisons exist.

The open-regime prisons reflect the hybridity of the state in the post-neoliberal era. While the “self-rule” was formulated in the face of state-abandon in the neoliberal era; the means by which the *carros* gained and consolidated their authority (through obtaining weapons and through negotiating with the government) were largely accomplished in the post-neoliberal period and therefore in the midst of the Bolivarian Revolution. With the emphasis on government funding going towards prevention of crime and imprisonment through vast funding of social welfare programs on the outside and due to the anti-neoliberal thinking that viewed multinational corporations as enemies of sovereignty, the government tacitly supported the “insourcing” of prison administration as ideologically preferable to the “outsourcing” of prison administration and services to private corporations. In doing so, the internal prison economy and the various interests that were supported through it- *carros*, GNB officers, prison administrators, etc…became, like the Venezuelan petro-state, a source of unimaginable wealth but unlike the wealth originating from the extraction of Brent crude, the wealth came from the extraction of wealth and labor from those on the far margins of the revolutionary process underway.

This figure of the Venezuelan pran/patriarch is intimately linked to corruption because men gain personal power and social prestige based on the amount of people that they can
successfully patron. This extends beyond nuclear families and can encompass extended families as well as supporting a mistress or multiple mistresses and their families, and also the families of employees, neighbors, and street children. Because these networks can extend infinitely, the growth of patriarchal power requires ever-expanding resource. Some of the guys in prison referred to this dynamic in relation to Robin Hood, stealing from the rich to give to the poor (different from the politics that they are familiar with like stealing from the poor to give to the rich). I see this expression of providing for others not only as related to class but also connected to Venezuelan concepts of the patriarch which the figure of the pran embodies; this was especially the case for Wilmer Brizuela at Vista Hermosa prison.

In many ways el carro and the figure of el pran mimics the liberal rentier governments of the past. Built on the premise that political leadership must operate as a paternal benefactor, the hierarchical rule of the pran reflects the caudillos that ushered in modernization projects and like Blanco’s plan for “Order and Moral Regeneration;” the prison governments today justify their own governance by saying that they created “ordén, regímen y respeto,” thus ending the period of anarchy and “modernizing” prison infrastructure. Mateo, the pran at San Felipe spoke of his responsibility to provide for the population and the personal risks associated with being in such a visible role as a leader. His life was always under threat; the possibilities of regime change lurked and all of this was on top of the relatively precarious daily existence for everyone inside of the prison. Other liberal rationalities at play include the redundant claims that despite the existence of a clear structural hierarchy and vast inequalities in access to resources, that there is “equality” among the prison population. The fact that the elite are indeed still incarcerated and therefore marginalized from Venezuelan society helps to mask their relative power in the closed system because despite the respect they warrant and the resources that they control internally, for
the most part, they still cannot leave. But, regime changes are not uncommon and while access to social, cultural and financial capital undoubtedly play a role in the correlation of forces and struggles for power inside of Venezuelan prisons, these are nonetheless distinct from the inherited privileges of the ruling elite in a liberal democracy.

The payoffs, corruption and collaboration with government officials (some of whom sold arsenals of military weaponry to people in prison) reflects business as-usual in the liberal rentier state, where money and vast wealth made things that seemed unfathomable, possible (like guns in prisons). Perhaps as other facets of the government, like the military and ministries, were being restructured in first decade of the Bolivarian process, the prisons, jails and courts became a stronghold for the deeply embedded patterns served to fuel pre-existing dynamics of corruption. These illegal exchanges that spurred such an established “self-rule” in the open-regime prisons were motivated because there was money to be made. Thus, the internal economies of the open-regime prisons are strongly influenced by neoliberal rationalities such as market-relations of supply and demand, the “right” to private property, and by a logic of individualism that is strengthened because poor people from barrios witness people like them amassing wealth and power through having social networks or skills in business, organization, conflict resolution, combat, negotiation and management. Despite the social investment in education and the widespread subsidies of basic and consumer goods created by the Bolivarian Revolution- there is still a lack of employment opportunities in the formal market for barrio youth. And so, working in the informal sector (both inside and outside of prison) is the likely path for many criminalized youth, especially in the context of widespread economic turmoil and crisis.

The authors of *La voz de la cárcel* employ anti-neoliberal rationalities that demand collective rights for incarcerated people and force readers to reconcile the anti-exploitation
underpinnings of socialist thinking with the internment of criminalized poor people thus pointing out contradictions in the government’s rhetoric and policies. The class-conscious writing, far from identifying with *the opposition*, critiques the state by drawing heavily from the philosophies and symbols that comprise *bolivarianism* in Venezuela; Fidel Castro, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Hugo Chávez and Jesus Christ. To challenge the neoliberal penal common sense that has infused a government-supported “punitive populism” the authors highlight the themes of exploitation and oppression in prison and ask readers to resolve the contradictions between their experiences, government policies and the increasingly popular “punitive” solutions to “errors,” lack of economic opportunities and government corruption—all of which they see as the root causes of crime. They also call for a transformation of the prisons into “Centers of Hope” challenging the liberal thinking that prisons are for the rehabilitation of individuals and the neoliberal thinking that prisons are the warehouse for the economically non-useful instead their loosely sketched proposal calls to change the very nature of the “work” that the prison does. They propose that a new institution be constructed for creating hope among those most marginalized by the current order.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how neoliberal, anti-neoliberal and liberal rationalities shape the prison and impact the everyday lives of Venezuelans who come into contact with the penal system. Even in spite of the violence and the economic burden of paying *la causa*, most people that I met in prison preferred to be in the internally run prisons over being locked up in a prison run by government authorities. Either way, men with guns and power hold control over their movements and behavior. Either way, something has to be given up; cash to pay *la causa* versus access to phone calls and visiting days. And, either way, it is still prison. But the factors that led to “self-rule” and the structures of *el carro* reflect the liberal thinking of
government as benefactor, and the economy of corruption present in the petro-democracy, where pools of wealth are generated through extraction and the “magical” becomes real. The internal prison economy and the prevalence of the “rights” to personal and capitalist private property reflect and reproduce neoliberal common sense. The authors of *La voz de la cárcel* criticize the government by highlighting the disjuncture between the (socialist) anti-neoliberal government rhetoric and the tough on crime policies that reflect neoliberal penal common sense.

Family members of incarcerated people must also navigate their interactions with the hybrid state in the post-neoliberal era by contributing emotional, reproductive and sexual labor in addition to material goods and cash to maintain their loved ones. While the Bolivarian Revolution has widely expanded government supports, caring for people in open-regime prisons has largely fallen on private (and female) shoulders. The tens of thousands of families that incorporate caring for a relative in prison into the routines of their everyday lives demonstrate that the state does not provide for the most basic needs of all of the poor in post-neoliberal Venezuela. It would have been impossible to reach these conclusions without going inside of the prisons and learning from the perspectives of people who live in or interact with the prison in their daily lives.

Even at the conclusion of my field work there were fewer open-regime prisons in operation than when I began this investigation. The Ministry of Penitentiary Services (MSP) officially calls these “self-ruled” institutions “prisons in transition,” which underlines their explicit goal to shut down all of the open regime prisons and turn them into *New Regime* facilities under complete government control. The existence of the dual prison system (open regime and new regime) highlights the hybridity—or the “multitemporal heterogeneity”—present in the post-neoliberal state formation. Therefore the dual prison exemplifies how
Venezuela is “caught between traditions that have not yet gone” reflected in the open-regime prisons and “a modernity that has not yet arrived” (new regime prisons.) (Rosaldo, 1989, xi.) The uneasy coexistence of these many temporalities typify hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela. If the open-regimes represent the corruption and exploitation of the past; it is the new regime prisons, which I will now turn to, that represent the proposed future yet to come.
Chapter Five: 'La Revolución Penitenciaria en Marcha': Venezuela's New Regime Prisons

“Humanización, Ordén, Respeto y Disciplina.”
-slogan chanted by prisoners at Sargent David Viloria prison

Introduction

Yorval Estevez's hair was slicked back and he had the bureaucrat-sheik look down. As he leaned over his laptop in a collared shirt with the letters MSP embroidered into them, stylish jeans, and fresh looking kicks, he explained that he was about to show me a video depicting “la revolución penitenciaria.” He played a video that was posted on the website of the Ministry of Penitentiary Services (MSP) and although I had already watched it, I tried to maintain my enthusiasm and see if I noticed anything new the second time around. The video features camera scans of old deteriorating prison buildings which then melt away into painted, newly repaired and clean buildings; a makeover of the prison infrastructure in various facilities. Of more interest were the prisoners; men with shaved heads, dressed all in yellow, marching in military formation and then standing at attention in neat columns. Yorval had a proud smile but before he could play another piece of propaganda that I had already seen, I dove into questions in hope that the interview with this entry-level bureaucrat at the newly formed Ministry of Penitentiary Services (MSP) would provide useful insights into how the MSP understood the New Prison Regime in Venezuela and their work within the context of the Bolivarian Revolution. I wanted to understand how neoliberal rationalities and anti-neoliberal logics shaped the government’s thinking and policies on prisons and how the hybridity was reflected in this state institution.

At first, Yorval just gave me a basic overview of the history and current projects of the MSP. Following the violent confrontation between inmates and GNBs when prison personnel and family members were held hostage at El Rodeo prison in June of 2011, President Chávez
created the Ministry of Popular Power of Penitentiary Services via Decree No. 8,266 (Gaceta Oficial No. 39,721). Chávez appointed long-time militant Iris Varela—pulling her from a third term in the National Assembly—to spearhead the new Ministry of Penitentiary Services. Varela was a trained criminal lawyer who focused on criminal proceedings and she was well-known for her loyalty to Chávez and dedication to the Bolivarian Revolution. As a teenager, she helped form the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200 (MBR200) which was the military-civilian alliance and social movement that Hugo Chávez began as a soldier in the armed forces. Varela was elected to the Constitutional Assembly, the body that helped to craft the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution. She is referred to as “Fosforito,” because she is known as fiercely debating politics within and outside of the Left political circles. As the Ministra, Varela's task would not be easy: take over the prisons from inmate-control and construct a prison regime that is envisioned in Article 272 of the Bolivarian Constitution and to coordinate with other relevant institutions in order to guarantee the constitutional rights through the use of “efficient, humanist, socialist, and scientific policies.”

I attempted to interview Varela multiple times, and after I had visited the MSP's shiny headquarters in the elite neighborhood of El Rosal, between Chacao and Chacaito, I was finally granted an interview; but instead of meeting the Minister, I met with a low-level bureaucrat who worked in the Family Services department of the Ministry. I was not given permission to record our interview, so I scribbled down as much information as I could and later, to fill in the details, I did extensive follow up research on the official website of the Ministry and I also pulled from the official publications and materials that I was given that day. Just days before I left Venezuela, I was able to do a recorded interview with a Vice Minister of the MSP, which I also pull from

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24Official vision statement of the MSP
throughout this chapter. At the time of my interview with Yorval the MSP had constructed two brand new prisons and had taken over eight through interventions. In the prisons that they took over, they implemented a model called the new regime, which is what is portrayed in the video that I had just watched; yellow uniforms, shaved head, military-style discipline. Yorval conceded that they were “militaristic” but he said that this is because, as he put it “when you ask a Venezuelan what discipline is...”, then he placed his hand at his forehead in a gesture of salute as if hinting to what his response would be, “they will say, the military.” The military is the model of discipline that Venezuelans know, he argued. Yorval wasn't sure if it was really the best model and he knows that it isn't the only way to do it but throughout our interview and conversation he insisted that this was a reflection of Venezuelan association with discipline and the military and for that reason it works for their context.

He explained how in the new regime prisons everyone must work or study and he proudly presented the wide range of cultural and sports programs that exist in the prison. There had recently been the first penitentiary singing competitions, there are musical competitions, theater programs, dance, baseball, basketball, soccer, volleyball...for a brief moment I thought that we were talking about summer camps because he seemed so enthusiastic about all of the activities. He also explained the 4 main programs launched by the MSP in the 3 plus years since it was created; Plan Cayapa, Llegó Maita, Plan Cambote and Llegó Panita.

Plan Cayapa brings tribunals complete with teams of judges, lawyers, psychologists, and social workers into the prison and reviews the files of people incarcerated. According to the official government statistics, as of April 2015, the MSP had attended to 35,699 prisoners which is well over half of the prison population. While the Plan Cayapa team is to evaluate the status of each prisoner's legal situation and criminal cases, the meeting is also used to do a broader
evaluation to integrate inmates into cultural, educational or athletic programs or some of the other projects advanced by the MSP. One of the reasons why Plan Cayapa is so well known and supported among prisoners and their families is that these tribunals have resulted in early-releases, shortening of sentences, and speedier trials for some.

While the government does not provide more detailed statistics, outlining exactly how many people have actually been released through Plan Cayapa (they simply say the number of people “atendido” as well as the number of “atenciones integrales” which includes the broader evaluation of each case, they note that inmates can have multiple “atenciones integrales” making it difficult to determine what percentage of the prison population has actually benefited from Plan Cayapa.) The anecdotal evidence that I have collected verifies that Plan Cayapa is in effect though. When I visited El Rodeo I prison in early 2015, the guys inside confirmed that Plan Cayapa had come to El Rodeo I and that as a result around 200 people who had been charged with possession of under 20 grams of drugs had been released that very day. Also, when I waited in line outside of San Antonio prison in Nueva Esparta in November 2014, I was told, along with the other dozen women waiting outside, that visiting day was suspended because Plan Cayapa had arrived. Since the MSP does not actually have jurisdiction over the courts system which falls under the Ministry of Justice and the Interior, the former body responsible for prisons, Plan Cayapa is a way for the MSP to address the source of over-crowding in the prisons; the slow criminal proceedings in Venezuela.

Llegó Maía takes mothers of incarcerated people on three day retreats where they are housed in 5-star hotels that have been taken over by the state, the program is described in official MSP documents as a “pacification plan,” since the mothers are brought in to ultimately assist the state in re-taking control of the Prisons. During the retreat, the women take self-esteem
workshops, get training and support on drug addiction issues, meet with a social worker, and often get a spa treatment and some time at the beach. One government official described the mothers as “nuestra aliada,” and she explained that the mothers become the most important ties between the Ministry and the prisoners because most incarcerated people “se reconoce la autoridad de la madre antes de la del estado y nosotros.”25 According to a MSP brief, they had organized 16 gatherings which included the participation of 1,265 mothers of incarcerated people by mid-2015.

*Plan Cambote* which means something like 'all-hands on deck' conjures images of an Amish community barn-raising, where everyone pitches in to do something that would be impossible to do without many people participating at once. This program, in which incarcerated people repair and construct prisons, is celebrated as a way to create work opportunities for incarcerated people while improving the prisons infrastructure. The MSP argues that this project is addressing overcrowding by amplifying the capacity of prison facilities and creating work opportunities for incarcerated people. The MSP claims that through *Plan Cambote*, the capacity in prisons have grown from 21,000 in 2011 to 40,177 in 2015 but these number conflict with the claims of the Venezuelan Prison Observatory, who state that the total prison capacity in Venezuela was 19,000 in 2014 (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones (2015a). There is conflicting information as to whether interned laborers are receiving an income or other benefits for participating in the program, which raises questions about the terms and conditions of prison labor in the New Regime.

*Plan Cambote*, along with Plan “Llegó el Panita” and “Llegó la Chamba” are all attempts to address questions of employment post-incarceration and during imprisonment. “Llegó la

25 Interview with Vice- Minister Mariely Valdez, April 15, 2015.
Chamba” creates paid training and work opportunities for incarcerated people. During my interview, I was handed a brochure of all of the different types of production that are utilizing prison labor in Venezuela. The categories include raising chickens for meat and the production of eggs; many of which products are directed to the state subsidized Mercal food distribution system. Prison labor is also employed for the construction of furniture and textiles; most of which will be purchased directly by state institutions. According to the MSP 7,924 incarcerated people participate in the program; roughly 24% of whom received specialized job training in prison. There is also overlap between “Llegó la Chamba” and the Instituto Autónomo Caja de Trabajo Penitenciario (IACTP) which is like the bank for creating “socio-productive” projects in the prisons.

“Llegó el Panita” is a post-penitentiary re-entry program that focuses on educating communities about the challenges faced by incarcerated people as they return from prison. In addition to providing communal institutions with a general overview on issues of stigmatization of formerly incarcerated peoples, the program attempts to guarantee spaces for formerly incarcerated people in some of the productive and paid positions in the community. The only example of this project that I know of is in the militant and well-organized barrio of el 23 de enero.

After Yorval had given me an overview of the basic programming of the MSP our conversation became much more informal. It struck me how Yorval explained the work of the Ministry by placing prisons within the broader context of socialism and capitalism. For example, he comfortably asserted that ideally prisons would not be needed but sadly, prisons were necessary in Venezuela. He, like many chavistas in the government, attributed the crime and insecurity to the social inequality generated through capitalism in the 4th republic. There was an
acknowledgement that remnants of the liberal and neoliberal period, such as inequality, corruption, and crime, played a role in the post-neoliberal era, as opposed to envisioning the Bolivarian Revolution as marking a great break from the past, Yorval and so many others, were conscious of the hybrid nature of the state; or at least of the problems that it faced.

Like most whom I spoke with, Yorval denied that racism or racial profiling was a problem in Venezuela, assuring me that this was only a problem in my country. When I asked him to respond to the statement made by President Chavez in which he declared that 80% of the people in prisons are Afro-descendants, Yorval calmly gave a well-articulated explanation. He explained how Venezuela had inherited a racialized division of labor and class structure that resulted from colonization and so inequities that may be perceived as racial in nature are actually a question of class.

After we had spent over an hour in the first floor conference room, building a rapport, I wanted to see if this new contact could help me get into the prisons, which at that point, I had still not entered. When I told him that I planned to go on visiting day, if I could not get official permission to enter with the MSP, he said that I was crazy and that I was putting my life into my own hands. He warned me that I could get raped or killed. At the time of the interview, the MSP claimed to have roughly 80% of prisons under their control; however that statistic fails to represent reality. While the MSP may have 80% of the facilities under their control, over half of the prison population in Venezuela is distributed among three Open-regime prisons; Tocorón, PGV and San Juan de Los Moros. So, less than half of the inmates in Venezuela are actually in a New Regime prison.

With an air of informality, we began discussing the open-regime prisons and he asked me if I had surveyed youtube, explaining that anything that I wanted (or didn't want) to see about
prisons in Venezuela could be found there. He told me wild stories about how the woman's bathroom in Tocorón prison would rival that of the international terminal in JFK's airport and together we shared stories of things that we had heard or seen on the internet about the peculiarities of life inside of open-regime prisons, specifically the examples of ostentatious wealth or rumors of things that invoked a sense of magical realism. There was something both fascinating and revolting about the combination of human misery, violence and flashy demonstrations of wealth and power but it captivated both of our attentions long enough to chat for over an hour.

Then I asked what is stopping the MSP from taking over all of the open regime prisons now. “Militarily speaking,” he explained, “we can obviously take them over.” Yorval went on to lay out the dilemma; while there are stockpiles of weapons and ammunition inside of the prison, the prisoners are both surrounded and contained. In a military confrontation, their water could be cut off, electricity could be cut off, and eventually, they will run out of food and ammunition maybe not even before the unarmed inmates withdraw their loyalty from the leadership and advocate for a cease-fire. “But,” and here is an important “but;” as his eyes got bigger Yorval explained that an intervention could not happen without a bloodbath resulting in the loss of many lives and this, he explained, is not something that they can afford politically, especially considering the international scrutiny that Venezuela is currently under.

So, when I interviewed Yorval in October of 2014, just over half of Venezuela's prison population was still in internally controlled open-regime prisons and just under half of the population was in New Regime prisons, controlled by the government. When I went in to El Rodeo prison just a week after my interview with Yorval, I asked Edgar what he thought of the new regime prisons and his answer was “those prisons are like PRISONS” and then he continued
to describe the strict rules, the lack of family contact and being forced to shave your head and wear a uniform. He and all of the guys that sat with us under his little tarp shelter agreed that they wouldn't want to go to the New Regime prisons. It wouldn't be until 4 months later that I would see the inside of a New Regime prison for myself.

**Uribana**

I had planned on going to Fenix Community Penitentiary, the brand-new state-of-the-art prison that was built on the outskirts of Barquisimeto, Venezuela's fifth largest city. The last time that I had been to the MSP headquarters in Caracas, I spoke to a Director of Planning and shared a little bit about my research, explaining that I had visited open-regime prisons as a visitor since I had not been granted official permission to enter as a researcher by the Ministry (although I had put in a formal request many months earlier). With a picture of President Chávez sitting alongside Fidel Castro on the office wall behind her, she took a suspicious look at me and then asserted that it would be a shame if I left Venezuela with only the terrible images of the open-regime prisons, she too thought that it would be important for me to visit one of the new regime facilities. When I arrived to Barquisimeto, I called her and she put me in touch with Luna, the Regional Director of prisons in the area and we made plans to visit Fenix Community Penitentiary. A few hours before I showed up, he texted to say that there was programming taking place at Fenix and that we would visit “Sargent David Viloria” prison, the new name for the infamous Uribana prison. The prison had been renamed after a young National Guards member that lost his life during a military intervention and armed conflict in the prison on January 27, 2013.

From the bus terminal in Barquisimeto I took one local bus, a station wagon ride and a
rapido, each time asking how to get to Uribana prison and each time being instructed to wait on a new corner and ask the next driver. But after three separate rides and no prison in sight, I hailed down a taxi to transport me the final ten minutes of the journey. As we headed towards this secluded part of the city, I thought about the hardship that many families must go through to visit their loved ones in prison, hauling bags of supplies and taking public transit for over an hour; even for those who live in Barquisimeto. The driver pointed out the huge shiny Fenix prison to me, just around the corner was the smaller and older Uribana prison. The taxi driver explained that he would drop me a few feet from the entrance because he didn't want problems. When I got out of the car I saw women with bags of provisions sitting under in the shade of the tree in a parking lot across from the prison. I went to the guards at the entrance and said that I was there to see the prison. I caught them on their lunch hour and they were not interested in attending to me but soon after one of them called the office, their attitudes changed completely.

With a level of formality, the MSP worker, dressed in their customary navy blue fatigues, said that the Director would be coming to the entrance to meet me and they asked if I wanted a chair or water while I waited. Within a few minutes, the Director Ender José Avila, a tall man in a button-down shirt and jeans extended his hand. After we shook hands, my back pack was loosely searched and then I headed into his office.

Ender was quiet and perhaps confused as to who exactly I was but he was perfectly pleasant and he invited me to eat lunch with him. I went into his very sparse office and ate chicken with cabbage salad, rice and tajadas. It was delicious. The meal was prepared by prisoners. Various administrative workers came in and out of the office where we ate and they made jokes about the food being poisoned. Ender and I chatted a little bit about his work but his quick paced Oriente-accent was tricky for me to understand. He had only been working as the
Director of the prison for 2 months but he had worked in 'security' before. In fact, all of the
higher-up personnel that I would meet at Uribana that day had been there even less time than
him. As a part of the attempts to work against corruption in the prisons, it is common that staff
and directors will be moved and rotated on a regular basis; this is an attempt to prevent power
from becoming entrenched and then breeding corruption in the prisons. One impact of this
practice, however, is that most staff that I met were still figuring out the ropes and no one seemed
to feel personally responsible for problems in the prisons because, most of them had recently
arrived and the problems were inherited. With other officials that I met that day, this meant that
they were a little bit more open about the problems there. Ender, however; was quiet and
withdrawn. While he showed me around the prison and tersely answered my questions, at no
point did he chat with me.

After eating in his office and handing my passport off, he told me to wait while he made
preparations. I sat in his empty office. There was a trophy on a shelf and three photos of
Chavez. Otherwise the office was sparse. I waited in the office for a while and various staff
members floated in. One woman that I would guess was in her fifty’s stopped in to chat. She
told me that during the intervention in January 2013, she was locked in that very office for over
12 hours as bullets flew in both directions. She said that it was terrifying. It was that
confrontation that resulted in the state taking control of Uribana prison, following which they
emptied the prison, remolded it and then brought inmates back in to the prison under the New
Regime. Ender finally got me and we headed from the administrative section of the prison,
where some prisoners are, those who have 'good conduct,' he explained. Prisoners in yellow
uniforms were shuffling papers in an office that we passed where I stopped to use the restroom.
Men wearing oil-stained yellow uniforms were working as mechanics in the parking lot, we
stopped to eat bread and drink coffee in the bakery where inmates in yellow uniforms manned hot ovens in the already startling heat. We walked by a mural that I snapped a shot of, featuring Simón Bolívar, Che Guevara, Hugo Chávez, President Nicolás Maduro and the current Ministra, Iris Varela (See Photo). Next to there was a Chavéz quote painted on the wall, it said:

Un revolucionarion no puede refugiarce en excusas para no cumplir con sus tareas hay que ser un verdadero soldado ….Funcionarion que sea negligente tiene que ir pa'fuera.

The mural stood as a threat to corrupt officials that they would have to answer to the moral leader, el comandante supremo, Hugo Chávez for their sins.

We headed to the main security check point where we met up with 3 other men who worked for the Ministry. Each of them was dressed in a button-down shirt or embroidered polo shirt, jeans and professional-looking leather shoes. The new subdirector of the prison joined us, he would be entering for the first time since he had recently been transferred from working in the prison in Barinas. And, two other men that had a military feel to them also joined. They both had a muscular build, short, gelled hair, and noticeably upright postures. Under a small green tent at the perimeter of the main gate to the prison (inside the prison) were a man and a woman who were collecting passports and conducting pat-down searches. I was gently patted down by the woman and then I handed over my passport, took my shoes off and showed that I was entering with 2 phones; one was my Venezuelan cell phone and the other was my iPhone from the US, which I used as a camera. I also carried my audio recorder with me. She recorded the amount of cell phones that each person brought in, searched everyone and looked into their shoes. To the left of the main entrance, a small mural was painted which said “Aqui se recibe al hombre no al delito” and then “hombres por la patria, por la vida, por la paz, por la libertad, por la revolucion,” The Director and his cadre narrated the experience to me, explaining how
everyone, even the director gets searched. The large prison doors opened, and as if it were a movie, a marching drum corps headed in our direction and then came to a halt in front of us and saluted us. With the Venezuelan flag waving and certain individuals carrying fake swords and machetes, they offered a call and response salute which we would repeatedly hear throughout the visit in the prison. The chant greeted all “authorities present” and then continued a call and response that included the prisoners loudly chanting about “discipline and order” and about “making the new man.” The chant ended with the inmates stating “patria o muerte” which prompted the present authorities to chime in “venceremos.”

Afterwards, the new sub-director yelled “attention” and all of the men in yellow uniforms, standing in formation stood at attention, as if it were the military. I was introduced as a “funcionaria” from the United States, which made me cringe, but I went with it. It was about 1pm and we were all sweating on the hot concrete patio where we stood so, after instructing the inmates to be at ease, we headed into one of the pavilion areas. The prison is organized into modules within the larger unit of pavilions. Each pavilion is like a unit, complete with its own basketball court and a few corridors of cells. As a part of security measures, only so many pavilions can have inmates outside of cells so the schedule is organized so that while one pavilion has free movement, another will all be locked in their cells. I noticed an armed guard at the first gate that we entered. There was an attempt to distinguish between those who were procesados, in pre-trial detention, and those who are penados, sentenced; procesados were to wear yellow and penados blue. In my experience, this color coordination was not enforced as it seemed that the practical issues of having clean clothes took precedent, I saw plenty of people in yellow pants and a blue shirt or vice-versa. The pavilions and cells were organized by classifications of crimes; a cornerstone of the liberal prison reform project.
We visited a few pavilions and the Director mostly chatted with some of the guys in a somewhat informal way which still just felt formal. They showed me where a few sad plants were growing as a part of the agriculture project in the prison. Based on their wilted-looking state, it was clear that water was not abundant at the facility. On my rushed tour with the director and new subdirector, who was visiting the prison for the first time as well that day, I was able to have a few short conversations with some of the guys behind bars. The director prompted the guys to tell me about the new regime prisons and in a performance that felt painfully awkward, prisoners standing at attention were seemingly trying to recite all of the positive things about the new regime that had been drilled into them. The director wasn’t exactly prompting the people locked up on what to say but, as we stood on the other side of the metal bars, it was clear that the circumstances were complicated. I felt uncomfortable about participating in a process that felt like the guys locked up were somewhat coerced into giving me testimonials based on their relative positions. A number of the guys who stepped forward to speak gave a practiced and performed speech from behind the bars, most likely in hopes of making an impression on the Director. Many were similar to the following, in which I interviewed Lisander, with the Director of the prison standing over us. Ender had prompted Lisander by asking him to compare this prison with others.

**Lisander:** Yo he estado en otros penales, y en esta misma cuando era penal abierto.
**Me:** ¿Y como ha cambiado?
**Lisander:** Sí, ha cambiado un poco
**Me:** ¿Como, en que sentido?
**Lisander:** De diferente formas en muchas, porque antes cuando era penal abierto, nosotros corriamos riesgo en nuestra vida, por la rutina de los mismos privados de libertad pero ahora no corremos riesgo en eso, por lo menos tenemos más un seguro de vida...entre...como estamos ahora, eso es lo que puedo decir...es lo más que porque quiero estar en este penal. Como estoy ahora que como era anterior.
**Me:** ¿Que es la rutina aqui? ¿Como cuanto tiempo pasas aqui adentro, cuanto tiempo afuera?
**Lisander:** En esta rutina ahora, dependiendo, algunas tenemos de clase, vemos clases, este...hay muchas cosas de cultura que antes no se veian...Antes por lo menos era cuidarnos de cualquier equis circunstancia porque nos podían dar; este, un tiro, como se puede decir, ahorita, no.
**Me:** Entonces, cuentame, ¿A que hora despierten? ¿Que es la vida cotidiana aqui?
**Lisander:** Despues de numero...¿el numero esta a que hora?
Lisander was 24 years old when I interviewed him, he shared a cell with a 19-year-old, a 21-year-old and two people who were 25; they were all in for robbery. One cell mate was serving a 14 year, 6 month sentence and everyone else in the cell was still awaiting trial, for which they had been locked up, at that point for between 8 months and three years. No one in the cell was actually from Lara, the state where the prison was located. Lisander and two other were from Caracas, one person was from the state of Trujillo and the other was a Colombian national. They explained to me that while visiting can be challenging for family members, especially for the guy whose family is in Colombia, they explained that they share all of the resources that their families provide and that “No le hace falta nada entre nosotros mismos.” When I asked Lisander what he would change about the prison, “No en cambio que hacer, solo esta bueno como está. Ni una. Todo esta bien como va.”

At this comment, the Director gave a big smile, as if to say, “see we are doing it right here” but I felt mistrust that Lisander and his peers were in a position to share their true perspectives. How could they? What would be the repercussion for speaking out and being critical? When I asked about the slow criminal proceedings, Lisander asserted that while it was true that the courts were painfully slow, he affirmed that this “no es culpa del penal sino es por los tribunales.” It is interesting how the new Ministry of Penitentiary Services is able to reject any responsibility for criminal proceedings because it falls outside of their jurisdiction. I also
asked Lisander what he thought of the classifications, which are one of the prized accomplishments of the new regime- and have been the recommendation of human rights organizations and the ambition of every prison reform measures for the last 80 years in Venezuela. Lisander responded,

*Antés estabamos por los menos de drogas con los de robo. Y ahorrita por lo menos hay un ordén. Hay un ordén, por los menos los de robo, aquí están los de robo. Hay una lista, cuanto están en la celda. Es mejor para nosotros.*

After an hour or so, the director and the new sub-director, who entered the prison for the first time with me that day, left for a “*junta de seguridad.*” I continued on with the assistant of the regional director and two others, both of whom had been working in prisons throughout Venezuela for a long time. I continued interviewing people from their cells but this time without the director at my side, the mood relaxed and the three authorities that accompanied me began chatting with other staff members leaving me to conduct the interviews on my own, creating a little more space for conversation and critique. There were between four and twelve men in each of the cells that we passed and outside of the cells, hand-written notes were posted listing the names, charges and *cédulas* identification numbers of the people inside.

While my escorts were busy chatting with the armed guard at the entrance to the unit where we stood, I wandered to a cell in the middle section of the row and began to speak with the guys inside. All of them were in for drug charges, specifically possession of amounts ranging from 19-160 grams, none had been sentenced yet. While most were charged with possession of cocaine (which they call *perico*) or crack, one guy was in for possession of marijuana. I asked about access to addiction counseling in the prison and they said that there was a psychologist present but beyond that none of them were aware of particular programs in the prison that addressed addiction. One guy mentioned the church as an option. I spent a while speaking with
the guys in that cell because they often had conflicting views, which led to far more interesting conversations. There was also a Canadian national locked up in this cell who was eager to speak to me in English and provide his insights, readily comparing the prison in Venezuela to prisons in the United States and Canada.

When I asked what the difference was between the open-regime prisons and the new regime prisons, a young man who had a defiant look to him said, “Aquí no hay libertad.” Others disagreed. One guy said, “Es mas tranquilo aqui. No tiene que pagar causa, No hay consumo de drogas, nada de eso,” another guy in the back of the cell chimed in saying “aqui es puro comer y dormir.” He was then quickly interrupted as others added, “y trabajar y estudiar.” I asked them what they were studying and everyone but one person was studying a high-school equivalent. The Canadian who was locked in the cell jumped in to give me the overview. He spoke in a Quebecois-influenced Spanish so that his cell mates could understand his response:

La regimento aquí es dos sistemas de penal en Venezuela. Uno es lo cerrado y otros es el abierto. El cerrado es un sueño, es un deseo del gobierno chavista con un sistema que es una replica, queiren una replica de una sistema que esta en los Estados Unidos. La abierto es un sistema con malandros. El preso tiene el control adentro de la prision. Es todo otro cosa.[sic.]

This is a controversial analysis but one shared by others who I spoke to inside and outside of prisons in Venezuela. The brand new, state-of-the-art, maximum security prison Fenix, which sat directly next to Uribana was described to me as a “gringo” prison. There is a clear sense, that this new model of discipline, lock-down and control mimics the models of prisons in the US, or at least the perception that people in Venezuela have of US prisons based on movies and television shows. This parallel seemed obvious to me too. Despite the murals of Simón Bolívar, Che Guevara and others, and the discourse of the state workers and MSP leadership, Sargent David Viloria prison felt like a prison, as I thought of prisons in the United States. Armed Guards
patrolled, regulated, and punished incarcerated people who were subject to a strict disciplinary regime, limited and controlled contact with their family members, subpar programming. This was worlds apart from the open-regime prisons that I had visited in Venezuela, which felt more like a dystopic barrio, than a prison. This comparison between the New Regime prisons and the US prison system, while obvious to me and many Venezuelans that I spoke with, the political relationship between the Venezuelan and the US governments means that Venezuelan officials are quick to criticize the US prison system and claim that the New Regime is its own endogenous model, specific to Venezuela and part of the “Penitentiary Revolution.” As the movement against mass incarceration in the US grows, coupled with the Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice and against police brutality, Venezuelan officials have a growing awareness of the human right abuses, and racial injustice present in the US criminal punishment system but, ironically, they seem to be reproducing a similar model albeit with very different discourse around prisons. While the antineoliberal rationalities present within the post-neoliberal formation produce a critique of US militarism, imperialism, and corporate-power, the expression of the hybrid state is more complex. The geopolitics of US-Venezuelan relations in the post-neoliberal era do not fully undermine the ongoing neoliberal and liberal rationalities that link the United States and modernity.

I asked the guys, charged with drug crimes, what things needed to change, the defiant young man who insisted that there was not freedom said that many things needed to change. He said, “La libertad, el modo de estar aqui, ver la familia mas cercita, verla cada rato, tener mas llamadas con la familia, ahora hay solo una llamada mensual.” They said that visits with family members were once a month and that sometimes they also got an additional monthly conjugal visit. Phone calls, which were also monthly were really just for alerting family members of the
scheduled visiting day which otherwise, they would not know when it was taking place.

This concern about communication was echoed by a number of the incarcerated people that I spoke to. For example, David, a young quick-talking Guaro\textsuperscript{26} who found extremely clever ways of planting critiques of the New Regime system, also talked about the issue of phones and communication. He said that he had already spoken to the new director about getting the appropriate equipment installed so that they could have more regular access to phone calls. He said that “\textit{el director nos iba a ayudar pero el ministerio no le ha mandado el equipo necesario}.”

He explained that there could be an “\textit{emergencia familiar},” or that someone could die or that simply people just wanted to communicate with their family members, with their children on a weekly basis. And later in the conversation, he brought up the issue of phone contact again.

\textit{Lo de las llamadas tambien es eso…Yo soy de acá. Pero hay otros compañeros que son de Caracas. Por lo menos a veces la familia no tiene la capacidad economica de solventar un dia pa’ otra pa’ decir “si, mañana….” Entonces la anticipacion de la llamada es bueno por eso, para que la familia le de tiempo por lo menos cuadrar la cuestion para cuadrar el dia que es.}

Currently inmates get one phone call a month, the day before visiting day and this is simply not enough time to give notice to family members, especially those who have to travel, about visiting day. Furthermore, people just desire contact with their family members and compared to the open regime prisons when there are multiple visits a week, and money is the main limiting factor to one’s ability to make phone calls, the new regime prisons have far more restrictions on staying connected with family members. These harsh rules stem, in part from a narrative repeated by mainstream media and the MSP, in which they argue that incarcerated people in criminal organizations orchestrate kidnappings from prison via contact through cellular phones. So, in addition to the lack of actual equipment, the New Regime is intentionally trying to reduce and

\textsuperscript{26} Guaro/a is the name for people from Barquisimeto, and it is sometimes used more broadly for people from the state of Lara. It comes from the use of the phrase na’ guará, which is an expression of surprise but can be used all of the time.
control communication between prisoners and the outside world. This is a part of the strategy to take power away from the prison mafias but the impact on all of the people incarcerated in the new regime is quite significant. David noted that the concerns had been brought to the Director many times and whether he believed it or he thought it was the most strategic approach, he consistently placed the blame and responsibility with the MSP itself, which he referred to simply by saying Caracas, the Capitol and headquarters of the Ministry. He said that the MSP needs to put “un poco enfasís en la comunicacion.”

I spent about an hour with David because I was fascinated with how he presented the specific demands of the inmate population, their relationship with the Director and his perspective on the overall regime shift in the prisons. He had a number of positive things to say but he thoughtfully and carefully used the opportunity to highlight problems and assert demands. Here is how David explained the New Regime prisons,

While David insisted that things were good, even “perfect,” he found ways to insert important information that highlighted many of the shortcomings. He noted that they are not getting conjugal nor kids visits. He mentioned that there is sometimes not enough food, and later in the interview he also asserted that scarcity of water was one of the largest problems saying that “a veces nos llega poca agua y todo esta sucia.” But, he also asserted how not having to pay the
weekly *causa* has removed some economic pressure, considering that most people come from “humble families.”

David spoke quickly, weaving in key information about the prison but couched in strategic praise. He used the opportunity to assert specific demands, one of which is access to clippers.

My escorts started to catch on to David’s routine and they quickly interrupted to announce that as of today, the director had said that clippers would be allowed to pass through starting today. In a calm and casual way, David responded by saying that they hadn't been told of the change and then he continued to talk about the problem accessing clean water. Again, the escorts interrupted to assert that “vamos a solucionar todo eso ahorita.” Again, in a graceful way, David said, “Ah, ok” and although I assumed that he didn't believe them his response was still convincing.

Despite the constant interruptions to challenge his assertions, he just kept speaking with no sign that he was frustrated, he appeared calm, strategic and purposeful. It is not every day that a foreigner with an audio recorder happens upon your prison cell and asks you to talk about what you would like to see change. David took full advantage. He said that while he had already made the following request to the Ministra on her last visit to the prison, nothing had changed.

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*Lo que nos gustaría. Lo hemos planteado por el director, él nos decía que lo va a tomar en cuenta, el ingreso de prestabarbas, que lo habían pausado por ciertas cosas que han pasado también. Sabes que por ciertas cosas, agarramos todos las consecuencias. Él dijo que va a tomar en cuenta eso, pues*

*Por lo menos, para nostortos nos gustaría saber conchále, en la calle, las noticias porque no nos den ingresar ni un periodico. Una cuestión para uno tal tanto que sucede en la calle también, tiene la economía del país, todo esas cosas. Bueno, a mí particularmente, me gusta mucho leer. Yo empecé una carrera universitaria y no lo culminé pues, y broma pero a mí me gusta leer todo lo que sucede en mi país pues....Un periodico, una cosa que, me gusta tanto saber lo que sucede en el país pues, porque si se prende una broma en el país, una Guerra civil, uno que está aquí no sabe nada, ¿me entiende? Sería Bueno eso. Pero el resto, Bueno, todo bien.*
When I asked David if he would change anything else, his first response was, “no, todo perfecto.” But then, he decided to make a comment about the criminal proceedings and the enormous backlog. He, himself, has been waiting on some paper work for months, without which his trial cannot proceed and he talked about the many people in similar situations.

David, who is from the state of Lara, about 6 hours from the Capital was clear to point to the enemy, he explained that “Caracas nos jodío esa gente.” David and others refer to “Caracas” in ubiquitous ways to signal it as the seat of wealth and power in the country. This is largely a legacy of the process of colonization and coloniality in Venezuela and it mirrors development patterns in many countries in Latin America where the Capitol city lays close to the coast, an inheritance of export-oriented economies, and power is heavily centralized. When visiting prisons and places outside of Caracas, I found that people referred to it as if it were “the Capitol” from the hunger games or, the meaning that I juxtaposed it with was like “the mother ship.” Many bottlenecks throughout the country, whether in prisons or not, were blamed on or conversely their solution relied on “Caracas;” some government institution that was located in the seat of power.

David would have continued for another hour but my escorts were getting slightly irritated as they began to catch on to the clever way in which he was communicating the multitude of problems in the prisons. But before we ended the interview he asserted that their needs to be “un poco más enfasis en la educacion.” I thought that this was important because access to education, productive labor, cultural programming and discipline were the most
celebrated accomplishm ent of the prison administrators and while everyone must study and work in the prisons, there are still looming questions as to the quality of the educational programming in the prisons. With political zeal and enthusiasm, David insisted that there must be more activities and less time just sitting locked in the cell “para que la mente se mantenga entretenido....para la sociedad y para la familia, pues... todo para mejor, pues.” After I turned my audio equipment off, I reached my hand through the metal prison bars so that I could shake his hand. David extended his hand and we shook hands, which made my escorts nervous. Afterwards, they instructed me that there would be no more touching.

We headed to another pavilion and on our way, we walked by basketball courts where guys were shooting hoops. Our presence attracted attention and perhaps created a prime opportunity to bring up some grievances. As we walked by the basketball court, there was a momentary break of the game as a young man, dressed in blue and carrying the basketball under his arm approached us. He stood on the other side of the makeshift fence and began to list his grievances. Not everyone in his cell had a mattress, and they had been there for many months sleeping on concrete. He wanted to know why he and others hadn't been let out of their cell last week to go to their education or job trainings. He jokingly but not jokingly said that the food could use some improvement. He wanted to know who I was and whether I was there “to help” or not. Before I had a chance to respond, the three guys that escorted me stated in a very professional tone, that the mattress would be resolved immediately and that they would take the other concerns into account. They asked him what cell he was in and acted as if they would remember and follow up, but none of the officials wrote anything down and I doubted that there would be follow up.

When we arrived in the final pavilion that we would visit, in the men's prison, I wandered
to the very last cell at the end of the corridor, while the three of them stayed chatting with the
armed guard at the entrance. A young guy named José Leonel explained life in David Viloria in
the following way, he is comparing it to the open-regime prisons where he had also been
incarcerated:

José Leonel made a good point and one that spoke to the experiences of those around him,
considering that he and everyone in his cell had been locked up for over a year (many for over
two years) and none had been sentenced. He adapted or adopted the language of the MSP to
focus on the possibility of rehabilitation, regeneration and rebirth in a context that is slightly set
apart from the “paying for your crime” ideology that marks dominant thinking internationally on
prison sentences. Since the majority of people incarcerated in Venezuela (both in the open and
closed regimes) have not gone through the criminal proceedings and not been sentenced, the
prison ostensibly does not just exist to punish those found guilty but to reform all who enter its
gates- regardless of whether they actually committed the crime that they were accused of. This
affirms some of the basic premises of carceral coloniality, that the prison exists as an institution that's function is far beyond discipline & punishment. José Leonel had been locked up at Coro Community Penitentiary, the first newly built prison of the New Regime and he asserted that it was “lo mismo,” the same.

One of the quieter guys had been meticulously folding paper in the back of the cell throughout my conversation with José Leonel. I asked what he was doing and he jumped up to show me his artwork. He held in his hand a swan which was formed by folding and weaving together small pieces of paper; ingenuity and creativity with minimal resources, the common mark of prison art. This got the attention of my escorts and they came to see the swan. We all admired it. José Leonel casually slipped me a piece of paper through the bars and I put it in my pocket, thinking that it would be a testimonial of human rights abuses. As we exited the pavilion, my escorts began to comment on the lack of mattresses in the cells that we passed. In a deep and authoritative voice, the prison worker in his chavista red polo shirt barked orders at the armed guard, insisting he get mattresses for the cells that didn't have them. By the looks of the faces on the guards and the prisoners alike, no one really believed that this order would amount to anything and most likely this was a performance and I was the main audience.

I mentioned that I was interested in interviewing incarcerated people in the pavilion for “homosexuals,” but my escorts said they didn’t have clearance for that and instead suggested that we visit the women's annex. So, we walked past basketball courts and huge, empty blue water tanks, till we arrived at the entrance to the prison. Again, men in uniforms, carrying flags, and pho-swords and machetes were practicing marching in military formation in the hot sun. We headed for the large gate, which was opened from the outside when we arrived and just like that we walked out. On the other side, we demonstrated to the same officials that we each had our
cell phones with us (that none of us had sold one or left one behind on the other side.) As we exited the main gate, there was a group of male and female prisoners huddling around some instruments and I learned, through interviewing the main singer for the group, that this band, called *Revolución Gaita Show* had won first place in the Penitentiary musical competition that year. They had multiple guitarists, a bass player, a keyboardist, two drummers, all of whom were male and the main singer plus two backup singers were female. The large band had traveled to another prison to perform and they were very proud of having won first place. I recorded them playing music and before they began, the drummer announced “para Nueva York” before counting off.

It was interesting to see that there are some gender-integrated activities and after they performed, I spoke to the main singer of the group. Her attitude was positive and nonchalant. She told me that this was the first time that she had ever been in a musical group but that when she gets out, she wants to pursue signing professionally. Prior to being transferred to Uribana, she had been in Sabaneta prison, an open-regime facility in Maracaibo that the MSP had recently taken over and closed. She had a fairly pragmatic and optimistic outlook on the changes in the new regime. She said that the Ministry has a big project on its plate and that changing the prisons will not just happen overnight and she saw a need for “adaption” of the inmate population to the new regime. She added that sometimes there is enough food, sometimes there was not but she said that she thought the direction was overall positive.

From the yard where the group was practicing, we headed into the Women's annex, which is located outside of the main prison gates, in a small building in the administrative outer ring of the prison, where I had eaten lunch when I first arrived. The building is popularly referred to as *Rodeito* because after the 2011 El Rodeo Uprising, 500 prisoners from the Rodeo Diaspora were
transferred to Uribana prison and they were all housed in the small building. The day that I visited, 230 women were incarcerated there and while that seemed tight, I was told that until recently 300 women had been locked up there.

When we arrived to the entrance, the female MSP worker took my passport and started to ask me questions about what I was doing visiting prisons in Venezuela. She was curious if they were different than prisons in the US. We spent a bit of time waiting at the entrance, making small talk and in that time 2 national guards’ members entered the buildings, with guns in hand. They headed into an administrative office on the first floor. I inquired about whether male staff worked in the women’s annex and I was reaffirmed that only female MSP workers can enter the building and work as security. “What about the National Guard?” I asked. As if, the two GNB who has just walked in were invisible, I was reassured that they “never” enter the women’s annex. My three male escorts and the female MSP worker at the door were surprised to learn that there are male prison guards in women’s prisons in the US and that the incidents of sexual violence that result from that are extremely high.

Two female *custodias* arrived to the entrance where we waited and they explained that they would show us the annex. I spoke with Angelina, who had a surprising softness to her. She smiled a lot, was soft-spoken and the first thing that she said to me was that all of the women incarcerated there were very respectful. She was also unarmed, unlike the male *custodias*. We walked through the kitchen, where women dressed in blinding princess hot-pink sweatpants and t-shirts were cleaning up. Our arrival prompted the women to abandon their current tasks and instead stand at attention and salute us. Their chant slightly varied from that of the men but it had the same spirit and similar words. It emphasized, order & discipline. Once the women were instructed by Angelina to return to their tasks, they went back to wiping down the stove,
scrubbing pots, drying dished and mopping the floor. We carefully walked on the part of the floor that had not been mopped yet and headed to a stairwell. At the top of the stairs, Angelina reached for her full key ring and found the key that corresponded to the door that we stood in front of. Inside was the library for the women. There were a couple of chairs, limited natural light, and only a few shelves of books. The space looked grim but I smiled and nodded as she explained that women can check books out or simply read in that space. The room was small and I couldn’t imagine that more than 5 people would comfortably fit inside.

We exited, Angelina locked the door and then we went into the first dorm room which had over 40 bunk beds in it and a splattering of hot pink figures inside. Women were jumping off of top bunks, rushing to put a hot-pink shirt over their hot-pink bras and standing by their beds at attention. Angelina, still smiling and relaxed, raised her voice to introduce me to the 60 women in the narrow- one room “dormitory” where they all resided. She asked if anyone would be willing to give me testimony and a short woman standing by the door stepped forward. Her praise for the prison system solicited eye-rolls, and mumbling from the other women as she went on to explain how great the prison was. She also explained how all of the services, the meals and basic resources in the New Regime prison took pressure off of their families.

Nuestros familiares...creo que están un poco mejor...están tranquilos porque verdaderamente contamos con que si tenemos un pedacito de jabón, lo tenemos gracias a dios. Si tenemos desayuno, almuerzo y cena, tranquilos...Los familiares no estan todos los dias 'que tengo que llevarle comida a mi hijo, que le tengo que llevar shorts, no...

Despite the fact that she was incarcerated, she relied on gendered assumptions about male incarceration. In the hypothetical that she communicated, she envisioned a family relieved because they didn’t need to provide goods for their “son,” she didn’t give an example about providing resources for a daughter or mother, despite the fact that she was in a room filled with
incarcerated daughters and mothers. She continued to say that for her, being in prison was a good thing; she said “me siento verdadamente bien porque la calle es muy difícil.” In that particular moment of economic difficulty and the scarcity of basic commodities, trying to secure basic goods and food was a challenge—let alone finding a way to provide for a loved one in prison.

This difference, between the New Regime and the Open Regime prisons was a real, tangible and significant difference that felt like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, family members of incarcerated people were not as essential for providing basic goods but on the other hand and partially as a result, contact and visiting was much more limited and restricted. She went on to say, “gracias a la Ministra que eso ha cambiado un poco...” The MSP authorities seemed pleased but the other women in the dormitory began to laugh; it was clear that they thought that she was a kiss up and while that might be the case, I recognized some sincerity from her as well.

Another woman stepped forward to speak. She was an older Black woman who introduced herself as a Dutch national and she unapologetically offered a different perspective. She described the prison as “todo es más privado, todo es más cerrado. Más orden...” and she talked about her experience in the open-regime prison of Sabaneta by saying that “allá está una libre, puedes tener tu televisor, tu radio, tu silla...” She also said that one could go to see the nurse when you wanted. This statement varied from the men, most of whom noted that there was almost no medical attention whatsoever in the open-regime prisons and that this is a difference with the new regime prisons. With no qualms, and without adding much emotion to her statement she simply said, in the open-regime prisons there is more freedom and in the closed regime prisons, there is more order.
Some of the demands were large, and focused on changing aspects of the system but there was one very basic request that came from a woman whose testimonies provoked a fair amount of laughter. The short woman with long grey hair and a raspy voice perhaps from decades of smoking cigarettes, declared the following:

_Tengo 54 años de edad. Yo estoy aquí para homicidio por matar el hombre mío. Y los custodias aquí son buena gente. Si dicen que son mala gente eso es mentira, conmigo no se meten. Yo les respeto a ellos. El único que les pido es medicina que quita el dolor, cualquier cosa que lo saquen. Y que saquen un poco más aire, que nos manden una ventiladora y listo._

The women dressed in pink and the authorities alike broke into laughter and despite the comic aspect of her testimony, I could tell she was serious. It was hot in there and because it is a prison, there were few windows, just slats high up on the ceiling; otherwise it was a concrete hot box. A seemingly shy women about 10 beds down raised her hand and quietly said, “yo, sí tengo algo que decir.” I walked down the narrow path in between the two columns of bunk beds and I made my way to the edge of her bed. Julieta stood up tall but her eyes darted around the room as she spoke and she never made eye contact with me.

_Se han olvidado totalmente de los privados de libertad. El goberino mala, mala en la forma con los privados de libertad. Y tambien la falta de comunicacion, en verdad….5 minutos es muy poco para poderse comunicar con los hijos, con la madre. Por lo menos, yo que tengo, mi hijo lo tengo en un lado, el otro en otro lado, no puedo comunicarme con ellos semenal. Aparte que la comunicacion aqui es muy mala y eso es otra cosa que deberian tomar en cuenta aquí._

Unlike the men, women had 5 minutes per week for phone calls but they all agreed that this was not enough time. Julieta explained that when she got locked up 2 years ago on drug charges, she had 5 children and that they were all separated. One of her children is with her mother, one is with their paternal grandmother; two are with her two sisters and one is with their father. She said that every week, she is faced with the painful decision of which child to call and that she finds it impossible to maintain a relationship with them. Furthermore, she explained, none of them can visit her. At the women’s annex of “Sargent David Viloria” minors, that is anyone
under the age of 18 cannot visit inmates. This means that the women locked up there simply cannot see their young children. In the men’s open-regime prisons, children between the ages 2-12 can visit specifically on children’s visiting days which take place anywhere from two times a month to 3-4 times a year.

As Angelica led us to the next dorm room, I stopped her by the stairs and asked her to confirm that children can never visit their mothers in prison. She nodded her head in disgrace, “es verdad,” she explained that there is not enough space in the annex to accommodate children’s visitation and that furthermore, it is just the rule. “Es muy triste, muy triste” she said shaking her head. Indeed, I thought. This policy is not true for all prisons. At INOF, for example, the National Women’s prison (the only institution designed for women that is not simply an annex of a men’s prison) women can have visits from their children and there is also a nursery program where children can stay with their mothers, in the prison until the children are three years old. I could not confirm if the lack of visitation for children was the case for all of the Women’s annexes in the New Regime but it is certainly true for the women imprisoned in at Uribana.

We entered the final dormitory of the annex and once I was introduced, a young woman jumped at the opportunity to make some demands of the authorities present and her demands rested on better educational programming. She said that things were over all good; that there was “cerro maltrato” but that “hay ciertas fallas.” She specifically pointed to education and using the rhetoric of the new regime, a discourse that all of the present authorities could identify with, she gave a strategic and thoughtful plea for more education so that, “…vamos a salir humanizada a la calle, que vamos a salir con una mentalidad renovada, que vamos a salir con una mentalidad nueva…que es lo que se quieren este regimen.” A smaller woman with short hair, named Rita
who appeared to deviate from the norms of feminine gender presentation in Venezuela explained how the lack of access to work opportunities had a direct impact on the time that they would serve. Because the 1995 “dos por uno” law allowed incarcerated people to reduce their prison sentences through work or education, the lack of work opportunities for women made it more difficult to work off their sentences. While the women did do work in the prison to maintain it, clean, cook, etc…these jobs did not count for the reduction of their sentences. Other women made crafts with recycled materials in the prison and they gave them to their family members to sell on the outside as a means of generating some income to support their children but again, in the eyes of the state this work was not recognized either. In the open regime prisons, el carro tracks working hours but it was difficult to determine what counts considering that most people must work to pay la causa. In the closed regime prisons, there are particular trades that are established in the prison and it is only one’s participation in that sanctified and recognized form of labor that counts towards sentence reduction.

Many women echoed Rita’s concerns and explained that while there should be options like day release programs, probation, and house arrest that judges always deny these options. The women asserted that these would be very important for maintaining their families and being able to be in connection with their children. Rita continued to say that for the slow criminal proceedings and the backlog, its simply time to let people out of prison. For those who have waited 4-5 years for a trial, it’s time to just say, “ya basta,” five years is long enough, and she argued that they should be released. These themes were repeated over and over again and, many of the women placed the responsibility on the judiciary, judges, lawyers, police and anyone else who slows down the criminal proceeding or rejects alternatives to incarceration. Now that these women were in prison, they wanted to take advantage of the programs that exist to reduce their
sentences and they feel that the options are insufficient and the record-keeping to ensure that appropriate sentence reductions will take place are unreliable.

Before I left the dorm, an older woman asserted that she wanted to speak. She began by stating that she agreed with the statements made and that she supported her “compañeras” but she said that her time in prison had changed her because she used to think that because she went to prison, she was worthless. She explained that her prior experiences of re-entry were marked by stigmatization in which the society at large “nos senalaziban y nos decian cosas feas y escorias” but she explained that her perspective has changed and she hopes that society will also change because “si servimos...” she affirmed. She credited this change in perspective to courses that she had taken while in prison and she asserted that she will not accept being discriminated against when she is released. This seemed like a powerful statement and one that was clearly influenced by some of the work that the MSP has launched to combat stigmatization of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. The ideological underpinnings of some of the self-help and educational programs seemed to carry with it a sense of personal value that deeply impacted a number of people’s sense of self-worth. I do not know if the programming supports the neoliberal doctrine of self-help or an anti-capitalist attempt to place value on people, beyond their productive capacities but the fact is, this woman, as well as other incarcerated people that I spoke with, were conscious of the discrimination and stigma against them and articulated a sense of self-worth and respect in the face of belittling and dehumanizing attitudes and treatment that they may face.

After speaking with the women, I also noticed the difference between what the men and the women said and emphasized. For example, the women stated repeatedly that they were not mistreated by the guards. No man mentioned that. The women stated that the food was very
good, which they noted was a recent change because it used to not be, they explained. The men did not say that the food was good and instead, some said that it was insufficient in quantity.
And, the greatest concern from the incarcerated women was maintaining connection with their children, speaking to them, visiting them. While some men talked about “their families” and some specifically mentioned speaking with their children and despite no children’s visitation on the men’s side no one specifically brought that up as a main concern. This highlights some of the differences of how maternity and paternity are understood and embodied in Venezuela.
Women had less access to the skill-training than men did and the activities that women could participate in were extremely marked by gender. The lack of access to these manualidades had a direct impact on people’s abilities to reduce their sentences so in addition to building skills and occupying one selves, the job opportunities literally opened the door for early release from prison so there is a significant incentive to participate in them. Whereas each pavilion for men had a basketball court, I was not shown (nor did I see) any area in the women’s annex that looked like it was dedicated to sports or exercise. None of the women mentioned any sports but that was a key area of interest for many of the men that I spoke to.

There were people who preferred to be in the New Regime prisons over the open-regime although it is fair to assume that most would rather be free. The main reason was that people were not forced to pay causa, there was a greater sense of personal safety- that a gunfight wouldn't pop off at any moment, or that they wouldn't starve because food was provided A handful of people who struggled with addiction mentioned that without the presence of drugs and alcohol, they were able to stay clean, something that is a real challenge in the open-regime prisons. And, the meals and services provided by the government in the New Regime prison took some of the burden off of family members who, in the open-regime prison must provide
multiple meals a week to their loved ones in prison.

In general, the interviews were short, contradictory and done under sub ideal conditions. The people who were brave enough to be interviewed had a lot of considerations that they were forced to make very quickly. They most likely considered what to say in front of their peers, what would be wise or strategic to say in front of the authorities, and what they thought that I might want to hear. And, let us not forget that all of the men that I interviewed were locked in cells, and I interviewed them from outside of those cells with metal bars in between us. The women that I interviewed, on the other hand choose to speak in front of 6 prison officials and their full dorms of over 40 people, which is quite an audience for giving testimony about a private and delicate topic. This is not to say that I question the authenticity of these interviews, in fact, I would argue the opposite, and that the complexity of the situation brought the many contradictions to the surface quickly. I heard some genuine praise for the new system but some of it felt like an inauthentic performance for which people hoped to be rewarded. I thought that the many critiques that the men and women presented were often cleverly situated and delicately stated but nonetheless full of useful information.

By the time that we returned to the administrative section of the prison, where I had left my backpack, my three escorts and I were exhausted. I was brought an ultra-sweet limeade and I took a refreshing sip and passed it on, to share with the guys that I had spent the day with. We sat and watched the sun set over the monstrous Fenix prison in the west and since we were out of the belly of the prison, where the inmates are held the three men who seemed very serious and official all day began to let down their guards a little. They all had wild stories to tell me about things found in prisons (including an arms manufacturing plant, rare animals, entire families, etc…), about the corruption of officials who run the prisons and to a certain degree about the
many creative ideas that they had for improving conditions in prisons but also the challenges they foresaw to implementing them. I pushed them to see if they really believed in the rehabilitation in the prisons; one sincerely did and the other two had serious doubts about whether it was possible. Each one spoke of the challenges in a way that deeply resonated with the hybrid state that Fernandes describes. They spoke about their socialist ambitions, experiments and ideas and struggled to reconcile them with what they saw as a cultural value of consumerism, greed and individualism and the violent structural legacies of capitalism. There was a sense that while the government has attempted to create a socialist/antineoliberal ideology, that neoliberal thinking has permeated Venezuelan society and that this, not government missteps, were the root of the disparities between the socialist vision of Venezuela and the lived experience. This was one way that state-workers explained the hybrid rationalities and the inherent contradictions that they engendered in the state and in people’s everyday lives.

I got a ride home from Abel. As we exited the prison, the car that we were in was searched by the guards at the gate. He was kind enough to drive me all the way to the barrio of Caricuao, where I was staying so I didn't have to figure my way back on the bus alone. He had lived in Barquisimeto for a few years but he had never been to that barrio and so we had to stop and ask directions multiple times. We talked about prisons in Venezuela and I asked him if he thought that the New Regime prisons were approximating a US style of prions. Was this really the model for Bolivarian Venezuela? He answered in a way that felt both honest and careful, explaining the embedded corruption in the open-regime prisons in Venezuela, the high rates of violence and death and the international pressure to address the conditions. ‘What are we to do?’ He asked. These problems in the prisons get at the heart of the contradictions in the country, he explained. “And nobody, nobody, wants the job of the Ministra, I think that it is the most
challenging and difficult job in all of Venezuela” Abel said. I recognized the huge tree on the corner of the block where the Ataroa Commune has their base and instructed Abel to stop the car. He gave me his number and asserted that he’s “a la ordén.” I opened the door to step out, and then he said, “oh- and be careful, it is dangerous here.” I nodded my head and headed towards the community television station where I was to meet my friends.

They were curious about my visit, each of them had done some political work in relation to the prisons but none had entered Uribana since it was taken over by the government in 2013. When I told Katrina how the incarcerated women were unable to visit their children, she asserted that she would bring that issue up with a feminist organization in Barquisimeto and see what they could do to change that. Another friend, joked that he could just imagine some arts collective getting paid to paint the mural of Che, Bolívar, Chávez, Maduro and Varela on the prison wall—through some grant from the Ministry of Culture- and how they might be thinking- ‘¡Que chevere! We painted revolutionary arts in the prison’ without questioning what the deeper meaning would be. We wondered what people in prison would think of Che Guevara, if the first contact that they had with him was his face painted on a wall where they were incarcerated. What would it say about Chávez, Bolívar? The extension of these images have gone far and wide in Venezuela—but something seemed off when they were painted on the prison walls too. This attempt to imbue the carceral state institution with anti-neoliberal and counter-hegemonic symbolism demonstrates that “today's enigma of political action, the cultural logic of neoliberalism, is such that” the attempt “to fabricate cogent subversive knowledge of the world” often results in “diversification that sustains the neo-liberal political apparatus” (Blackman, 2008.) In other words, neoliberal penal common sense in the hybrid post-neoliberal formation can produce a wide diversity of institutions, including prisons that have images of former
revolutionaries on its walls, and where people interned inside are forced to chant “socialism or death.”

**The Prison Dilemma**

The Ministry of Penitentiary Services was born out of crisis and there are complex challenges for being able to evaluate its work and accomplishments thus far. When Iris Varela first assumed her position, she used rhetoric that rested on decarcerating, releasing a considerable proportion of the inmate population and not building more prisons. Her progressive rhetoric faced a harsh and predictable rejection from the right-wing opposition in Venezuela but it was also rejected by the popular classes as well. The high murder rates and feelings of insecurity has created a generally fearful populace, many of whom see crime and insecurity as the very top concerns facing Venezuelans, now alongside the economic crisis. Without an ability to shape the judiciary and policing, the key institutions responsible for heightened rates of incarceration in Venezuela and particularly, the high percentage of pre-trial detention, the Ministry of Penitentiary Service faces a serious dilemma: How do they take and maintain control over the prison system all the while enacting policies that are both consistent with the larger Bolivarian project and at the same time, are popularly supported and represented favorably in the media?

This mission breeds its own sets of contradictions, because the type of policy that may be popular in Venezuela may not be consistent with the values and politics of the Bolivarian project and vice versa. For example, as the MSP attempts to take over all of the open-regime prisons in Venezuela—they currently claim that they have taken control of 86% of them—they are employing two main strategies, military interventions and negotiations with *el carro*. The military interventions have resulted in the loss of many hundreds of lives—although the official numbers are closer to 90 people total—and almost all of the people killed in these conflicts are
people who come from the poorest and most marginalized sectors in Venezuela.

How can these massacres be reconciled with the pro-poor discourse employed by the Venezuelan government to create socialism of the 21st century? The attempt to employ discourse and imagery of socialism onto the criminalized poor in Venezuela through the use of the prison system associates those values with authoritarian rule. The MSP confronts this dilemma by acknowledging the hybrid nature of the state and society in Venezuela. Mariely Valdez, the Vice-Minister of educational formation and social matters for the MSP, laid out the disparity between the vision of the socialist state and the reality that they confront in the prisons.

La vision del estado socialista no es hacer llenar el país de carceles....la rehabilitacion de los seres humanos debe ser la ultima opcion del estado. La opcion del estado debe ser la prevencion. El estado debe establecer condiciones para que la gente no llegue a la cárcel. El estado debe establecer desde controles de natalidad, atencion a la mujer en todos los sentidos, debe atender la educación, debe atender el deporte, debe atender la salud, debe atender la vivienda, debe atender la alimentacion, debe atender la provision de todo para que una persona no deba incurrir en ningun tipo de transgression a la vida. Pero, el capitalismo es el mundo como es...el socialismo es el mundo como debe ser.

After fifteen plus years in power, a reduction in poverty but continued high levels of crime and insecurity, the state has been forced to adapt its discourse to engage with this complex reality. One aspect of this, is pointing to the former political system (the Fourth Republic) and the ongoing legacies of capitalism to explain the current problems of crime, violence and corruption and to use socialism as a rough conglomerate of values to anchor the political project in the post-neoliberal era. But this is not always an easy fit and so while the MSP uses the symbolism of Che Guevara’s “new man,” and of “humanization” of the prisons, in practice their emphasis has been on order and discipline. Contradictions between the critique of capitalist exploitation and the perpetuation of dehumanization through “socialist” institutions creates troubling disjuncture.

While many open-regime prisons were taken over by military intervention,27 others have

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27 The two bloodiest interventions were of El rodeo II which was taken on June 17, 2011; and Uribana on January 27, 2013.
been taken through negotiations with the *pranes*. This process has mostly involved transferring the prison population to other facilities, emptying the prison, searching the premises, repairing the prison infrastructure and re-opening the prison as a New Regime facility. During my fieldwork, Yare II prison was emptied and closed through this type of negotiation. But these processes also bring their own set of contradictions. The state is forced to recognize the authority of the prison leadership which is, in part what helped create the power behind the hierarchies.

Mariely didn't deny that there are arms in the prison, she didn't deny that there are *pranes* but she struggled with the question of how to engage with their power, she posited this problem in somewhat of a riddle. While she recognized the existence of “*líderes negativos*” that have others “submissive to their will” she also noted that “*El pran no existe, para mí,*” saying, “*yo no tengo porque reconcer la autoridad de ningun privado de libertad, los privados de libertad son iguales, absolutamente iguales, todos en los ojos del estado.*” But in one form or another, the State actually cannot ignore the authorities of the *pranes* if they want to take over all of the prisons in Venezuela. Of the open-regime prisons that remain *el carro* in PGV and Tocorón alone could potentially “outgun” a military assault and so to avoid a tragic massacre, negotiation is the only option that the MSP has.

But this creates a serious vulnerability for the Ministry of Penitentiary Services, its leadership and the state. When Varela seeks to negotiate with the prison leadership, her actions are portrayed by the private press as bolstering a criminal mafia. Speaking specifically about Varela and her relationship with the incarcerated population, Mariely explained what she perceived as a misunderstanding of Varela’s actions,

*Ella revisó, habló con cada uno, eso le costó otro imagén internacional, por su puesto cuando ella se siente en la cama con los presos, cuando habla con ellos cuando los*
abrazan de verdad, la foto que sale al mundo es una foto como de solidaridad con el delito no con el hombre que está allí. Ok, ella es amiga del malandro no es amiga del ser humano que esta encerrado y que el estado abandó durante muchos años eso no es lo que dice abajo la foto que sale internacional.

If the MSP is to complete its goal of taking control of the prisons, there are two options. One, military interventions, which actually have received broad support of Venezuelans, will probably result in the loss of lives which looks bad internationally. Negotiation with prison leadership is less popular in Venezuela because it looks like government collusion with criminal organizations and a “soft on crime” approach. This strategy, which could divert an all-out human rights crises, could have the impact of strengthening the prison organizations since presumably, the carro will not give up such a lucrative control of territory without being given something in exchange. So, the political and strategic choices rest between utilizing military force against a vulnerable (albeit armed) population or to negotiate with criminal organizations. Both options are easily exploited and criticized in the international press which is why the MSP has invested considerable energy into running a public relations campaign that uses the rhetoric and imagery of the Bolivarian project as a means of countering the dominant narrative projected by the private media. While family members of incarcerated people and those who identify with being from criminalized classes, as well as small factions of the radical left who have a bottom-up perspective of power are critical of the military interventions, the popular fears of crime and insecurity tends to trump the appeals for “humanization” of the prisons. The Ministry of Penitentiary Services must balance their own mission to recreate the institutions of prisons in a way that reflects the values of the Bolivarian process with the “Punitive populism” that is

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28 UCV Criminologist Neelie Perez said in an interview with me on November 21, 2014, in reference to her investigation on the closure of the prison La Planta, “el estudio también nos señala que la voz del ministerio penitenciario de ir retomando el control también tiene una gran aprobación por parte de las personas,”
pervasive in Venezuela today as well as how to reshape the international image of the “prison crisis” so that there is less scrutiny on their work so that they can experiment with various policies.

In the face of these constraints, and the broader economic problems that have only worsened since the MSP was created in 2011, they have actually made considerable advances towards the goals that they set for themselves. They have taken a considerable number of facilities from inmate control, and most of the interventions did not result in the loss of life. They are addressing overcrowding by increasing prison infrastructure, as opposed to their earlier stated vision to reduce the inmate population. In a fourteen-page document designed to brief the International Press on the accomplishments of the MSP, they claim that since 2011, they have increased the capacity in prisons in Venezuela from 21,000 to 40,177 and they note a goal of increasing the capacity by over 5,000 by the end of 2015. These numbers vary from that which the Venezuelan Prison Observatory (OVP) utilize in which they argue that capacity is at 19,000, marking the prisons population at 51,256 therefore claiming that there is a general overcrowding of 170%. It is important to point out that these statistics do not include the “Calabazos,” the local jails that tend to be located within police stations. The Ministry of Penitentiary Services does not have jurisdiction over these sites of incarceration and never includes data from them in their statistics. The OVP however is inconsistent with regard to methodology. On occasion, they do include statistics from the Calabazos, making a reasonable claim that their inclusion is necessary in understanding the picture of incarceration in Venezuela. While not in this particular case, this difference can account for disparities in statistics between the government and the OVP.

While the OVP questions that the new infrastructure, combined with the closing of
several prisons has created an overall increased capacity in prisons to date, I think that it is undeniable that the MSP is on the path towards building more prisons and expanding the net capacity to intern people in Venezuela. Some of the construction projects have also been slowed down due to scarcity of materials, like concrete, due to the overall economic problems and distribution challenges in the country. The MSP projects that they will have created capacity for 46,443 prisoners by the end of 2015 which is still roughly 10,000 spots short of the current prison population. Whether this is sufficient, or will eventually be, the important point is that the Ministry of Penitentiary Services in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has embraced a policy rooted in building more prisons and in this sense, embracing neoliberal penal common sense.

In the process, some prisons have been closed and they will not re-open. El Paraíso (La Planta), which sat in a residential neighborhood in Caracas was closed in May of 2012, followed by the Internado Judicial de Falcón. Both of which have been adapted for other uses, El Paraíso is now a park, and the former prison in Falcón is a music conservatory called “Jose Maiolino Conte.” At least seven prisons that were functioning as open-regime were taken over by the government and the New Regime model was implemented. These facilities include, El Rodeo II, Centro Penitenciario de La Región Andina (CEPRA), Internado Judicial Máxima de Barinas, Uribana, Internado Judicial Sucre in Cumaná, Centro Penitenciario Agroproductivo de Barcelona and Centro Penitenciario de Occidente (santa Ana). Sabaneta Prison (Maracaibo) and the Internado Judicial de los Tequis have been closed and there is currently construction underway to remodel the facilities and re-open them under the New Regime. These prisons, along with prisons in the states of Guarico, Anzoategui and Lara are being designed as prisons exclusively for pre-trial detainees. New, smaller facilities have opened in 2015 and it appears as though there is a trend towards making smaller prisons in addition to the mammoth prisons like Fenix.
The “Centro de Formacion del Hombre Nuevo Nelson Mandela” was inaugurated in the state of Monagas. This smaller prison only has the capacity for 136 prisoners. And the infamous prison tent village of San Juan de los Morros in Guárico state has now been dubbed “26 de Julio,” paying homage to the Cuban guerilla army that triumphed in the 1959 Revolution. In its new incarnation, the prison is designated specifically for “Type II Procesados,” detainees whose trials are underway but who have yet to be sentenced.

Some of this restructuring has resulted in mass exoduses, comprised of voluntary and involuntary transfers from open-regime prisons into closed regime prisons, with the goal of eventually making the New Regime the universal model for prisons in Venezuela. According to government statistics, on October 4, 2014, 2,024 inmates were transferred from Tocuyito open-regime prison to prisons where the New Regime is instituted. In the beginning of 2015, 320 inmates were transferred out of the Prison in Carupano to other prisons that work within the new regime. In El Rodeo I and Yare I, two open-regime prisons that I visited during my field work, no new detainees had been sent to either prison in years. Everyone there understands that they are “secando” the prisons, trying to dry them up, which deprives el carro of labor and income, therefore limiting their power. I spoke to people incarcerated in Yare I and El Rodeo I who said that there has been an opportunity to voluntarily transfer in to the New Regime system but the people whom I spoke with obviously did not choose that option and they did not think highly of the people who made that choice. On top of the rehabbing of old prisons and building smaller prison-like structures, two new Penitentiaries have been constructed beginning with the community Penitentiary Community Coro which was constructed in 2007 (check this) as well as the Fenix Community Penitentiary and there is another underway in the state of Carabobo.

In addition to building new prisons, the MSP is working to address the issue of
overcrowding in the prisons through “Plan Cayapa Judicial,” referred to in short-hand as Plan Cayapa. While Plan Cayapa is largely described as a program to address the backlog in criminal cases and to therefore speed up criminal proceedings, it is also a part of “El Combinaito 2014” which attempts to incorporate incarcerated people into the social-service complex of the Bolivarian Republic. Through interviews with judges, lawyers, psychologists and social workers, Plan Cayapa offers a chance for incarcerated individuals to meet with a board who can evaluate the status of their case and potentially take steps to speed up the proceedings. But, through this process, people in prison may have the option to sign up for educational missions, health interventions or cultural programs.

In a sense, this illustrates the two hands of the state; the disciplinarian right hand and the nurturing left hand working together. This also offers a different glimpse into the role of prisons in Bolivarian Venezuela; in addition to being utilized to discipline and punish, the state utilizes the institution to connect with people who are marginalized, even from the extensive network of social programs in Venezuela, and to incorporate them into the programs, bringing them under the wing of the state. This creates a complex and contradictory relationship between incarcerated people and the state because the prison becomes the stern disciplining ‘father’ and the nurturing caretaking ‘mother’ in one fell swoop. This shows that the prison can function as an ambidextrous institution, in which the punitive measures taken by the state are complimented by the social services, perhaps this model is more reflective of the liberal state than the neoliberal or post-neoliberal version of prisons, demonstrating how Venezuela’s hybrid state draws on all three aspects. The Vice-Minister, Mariely Valdez made this point, explaining that there are two factors that make the function of the MSP “indedita,” 1) that it is a ministry exclusively for the functioning of the penitentiary system and 2) they see this work as part of the “social cabinet”
which addresses the relationship between prisons, families and communities. She said, “*estas dos cosas nos separan y nos hacen completamente distintos del resto de la vision penitenciaria que tiene el planeta.*”

The MSP has also placed an emphasis on sports and culture. These programs are in line with the vision presented in article 272 of the Bolivarian Constitution, they are popular among the inmate population, which helps to create “buy-in” into the New Regime model and the existence of cultural programming also creates opportunities for good press coverage. When I worked as a journalist, I covered the First Penitentiary Theater Festival which was held in various locations throughout Caracas. I went to a production of the “King of the Dumpster” at the National Theater in Caracas’ historic central district. While I was unable to interview any of the actors in the piece, all of whom were incarcerated at the Community Penitentiary in Coro, I did speak with Rita Villaroel, Director of Culture for the MSP. She saw “theater as an instrument of transformation” and she explained that,

> the only right that incarcerated people don't have is the right to free transit, but the other rights are guaranteed by the Ministry and the Venezuelan state....education, culture, sports, socio-productive work, the right to healthcare, guaranteeing their human rights and decent infrastructure

Venezuela actually has a long history of penitentiary theater and film and the first penitentiary theater festival took place in Venezuela in 1980 (O'Sullivan et al., 1989).

During the performance, one child stood up and started screaming “Papa, papa”, while waving feverishly. All of the actors continued the dialogue and when the piece ended there was a long standing ovation. Family members of the actors were invited to come on the stage and they embraced. After the performance, I spoke with a family who had come to see their relative for the first time in two years. The sister of the incarcerated actors was sobbing on the bench as the bus drove away and he headed back to prison, over 7 hours away.

The Penitentiary Theater Festival is just one of many cultural programs available in the
prisons and while the MSP prides itself on the programming, UCV Crimonologist Neelie Perez argues that because reliable statistics are not readily made available by the government, it is challenging to evaluate the impact of such programming.

Nonetheless Neelie acknowledges that through the creation of the MSP there has been “un cambio sustancial” which she noted is demonstrated through the state’s reassertion of control in many of the prisons throughout Venezuela. Neelie did however; note the decline in the rates of death in prisons in 2013 and 2014 as “signos positivos” of more changes to come.

The Vice- Minister, Mariely Valdez, confirmed that it is the objective of the MSP to take over all of the prisons in Venezuela within 2 years, which is by 2017. And so, the work of the MSP is still focused on the dilemma of how to take the prisons, through force or negotiation and all of the political considerations that accompany that situation. But after the prison is taken over, the MSP has now put itself in the business of running prisons, not simply regaining control over them. Through the administration and managements of 33 youth detention centers\textsuperscript{29}, 52 penitentiaries (counting female annexes independently), and 25 Centros de Formación as of this writing. Mariely acknowledged that the day to day management of the prisons, keeping drugs, money, cell phones and hierarchical power out of the prisons was the greatest challenge.

“Crearlo es fácil, mantenerlo, controlarlo es un trabajo titánico,” Mariely explained. In order to fight the corruption that laid the conditions for the open-regime prisons in the first place, the MSP has continued to take on corrupt officials. According to their own statistics, 250 former government officials were put in prison in 2011 on charges related to drug trafficking, arms

\textsuperscript{29} Unidad Técnica de supervision is the name for youth detention centers in Venezuela.
dealing, and corruption. While Mariely was proud of their accomplishments to date, she saw big challenges ahead.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ministry of Penitentiary Services and their New Regime model was born out of prison crisis and in addition to advancing specific policy agendas, beginning with regaining control of all of the countries penitentiaries, the MSP is also trying to advance policies that will be politically popular and counter the negative portrayal of Venezuelan prisons in national and international press. The MSP has gained control of a significant number of prisons in Venezuela but nearly half of the prison population still remains in inmate-controlled open regime prisons. In the coming years the MSP will be faced with choosing between military intervention and negotiating with internal prison leadership to gain control of the remaining “prisons in transition.”

The creation of an autonomous Ministry, which broke from the Ministry of Justice and the Interior in 2011 has opened up an ability to make policy reforms and implement new practices in the prisons, this reflects the multiple motivations and conflicting work of the “divergent state” which makes up Venezuela’s hybrid post-neoliberal state formation. Therefore the MSP is limited in their reach because they have no jurisdiction over courts, the police, nor police-station jails. Despite an emphasis on social issues related to incarceration, such as the role of mothers and communities and stigmatization of people in prison, the MSP has adopted neoliberal penal common sense which fuels the policy of building more prisons and implementing a harsh disciplinary regime within the prisons under their control.

Unlike the open-regime prisons that many incarcerated people in Venezuela are
accustomed to, the New Regime facilities have stricter rules about cell phones, family visitation, phone conversations, and contact with one’s children. Additionally, they employ a stricter control of movement through a routine that includes time spent in cells on lock-down, and the use of solitary confinement as an official form of punishment. And, while all inmates supposedly participate in mandatory education or job trainings, the testimonies that I collected during my visit at David Viloria prison confirm that the programs are insufficient.

The services, cultural programming, sports, and to a certain degree education and work opportunities are the pride of the New Regime system. While government officials that I interviewed highlighted these programs as their great achievement, most of the prisoners that I talked to felt like the opportunity to participate in the programs were generally positive but their concerns about access to more family contact; access to food and water; a speedy trial, alternatives to incarceration, and the ability to reduce their sentences were their major priorities. Many of the people in prison who I interviewed approved of Plan Cayapa and welcomed the opportunity to have their cases reviewed but no one who I spoke to had participated in Plan Cayapa when I spoke with them in February of 2015. Mostly, the people who I interviewed were relieved not to pay *la causa*, to feel a heightened level of personal security and that unpredictable violence would not break out any second. The prisoners were also glad to not put undue financial and personal burdens on their family members while they were in prison and some people sincerely adopted the language of the New Regime and spoke about becoming new people, others rejected the framework and pointed towards structural and economic reasons to explain their incarceration and they clearly resented all the rhetoric about becoming a new man/woman.

The use of socialist rhetoric and revolutionary imagery in the “penitentiary revolution”
creates some very problematic contradictions. While the MSP talks about “humanization” and rehabilitation, their first priority has actually been to establish control and enforce discipline on prisoners. But the militaristic model that demands that inmates stand at attention and recite chants about the *patria* is humiliating. The attempt to enforce a political perspective or at least the performance of Bolivarian Socialism through coercion will be neither effective in convincing young marginalized youth to align themselves with the government nor will it actually serve to guarantee that the constitutional rights laid out in article 272 of the Bolivarian constitution. Mostly it dramatizes the disjuncture and points of dynamic tension in the hybrid state.

But the discourse about prisons, socialism and capitalism that can be heard at the very highest levels in the Ministry of Penitentiary Services makes this body unique from other Prison Administrators around the world. So despite embracing socialist discourse and a well-formulated critique of capitalism, the MSP workers understand that they are essentially managing prisons in a capitalist society, where the inequality that has resulted from capitalism has generated the conditions for crime, violence, greed and other social ills. This reflects the “multitemporal heterogeneity” present in the hybrid state; the MSP is an institution responsible to govern embodying all of the values of the future that has not arrived and a past whose problems exist in the present. But this is also how the open-regime prisons are understood, as relics of the dysfunction of the previous system. The new regime prisons actually create the trajectory in the prost-neoliberal era.

The disciplinary aspect of their approach embraces a neoliberal common sense that generates policies based on more prisons, more discipline, and more surveillance, less contact with the outside world, limited access to phone calls, no access to the internet or other media and more control. And as a result of these policies, incarcerated people in Venezuela’s New Regime
prisons are also vulnerable to abuse by the armed guards. But in addition to employing prisons
to discipline and punish the criminalized classes, the new regime prisons in Venezuela also
function as entry points for the state to incorporate poor people into the many social programs
funded by petro-dollars. This “humanized” prison embraces the same fundamental premises of
the “rehabilitative” efforts championed by the 1937 and 1961 Prison reforms in Venezuela; all of
which were shape by liberal notions of producing individual citizens to play their role—as
disciplined workers—in the capitalist nation-state. So, while the MSP creates disciplinary policy
rooted in neoliberal rationalities, their emphasis of social reinsertion and humanization revert to
liberal notions of rehabilitation instead of employing anti-neoliberal rationalities.

In addition to the internal contradictions present in this New Regime model, the MSP
faces significant external obstacles to achieving its goals. Perhaps like in centuries past, the
desire to build and expand prisons will be prevented by the economic constraints placed on
Venezuela by the global market (this time the fall in oil prices as opposed to the crash in coffee
or cacao prices). The economic pressures produced by high rates of inflation and scarcity of
goods will only serve to incentivize staff in engaging in illicit behavior. Unlike five years ago,
when having a state job meant living relatively comfortably, the changing economic pressures
mean that, working for the government pays horribly, despite the added benefits that accompany
formal government employment. It will continue to be a challenge to work with staff and fight
off corruption. As Mariely Valdez said, many guards get offered 2 months’ salary to smuggle in
one cell phone. It appears that the systems of incentives that created the open-regime prisons in
Venezuela in the first place still exist within post-neoliberal Venezuela and for this reason MSP
officials justify the restricted family contact for people in the new regime prisons as mechanism
for keeping contraband out of the new regime prison.
This means that the new regime prisons “work” to separate Venezuelan families, restricting contact especially between children under the age of 18 and their incarcerated parents, and creating barriers to maintaining connections through phone calls and visits. The new regime prisons also “work” to play a disciplinary role of the state. But the new regime prisons also “work” to connect poor Venezuelans with the myriad of oil-funded social programs of which many incarcerated people still remained marginalized from on the outside. Through the educational programs, the new regime prisons also create an opportunity for the state to utilize the institution of prisons to “work” in the reproduction of a Venezuelan-style “socialist” ideology but in employing the prison to do the above mentioned “work:, it creates an ambiguous and contradictory message that links Venezuelan revolutionary nationalism with state repression (something that the political opposition has been claiming for over a decade.)

The policies under the New Regime prisons and the MSP are not one thing, they are a hybrid reflecting neoliberal penal common sense, an attempt to create electoral appeal rooted in “punitive populism,” an embodiment of the liberal values of rehabilitation that guided all significant prison reforms in Venezuela in the 20th century, and the MSP itself bound by the geopolitics of power and the particular international attention brought to the prison system. The MSP has attempted an uneasy alliance between liberal thinking on rehabilitation, neoliberal disciplinary common sense, and the anti-neoliberal politics at the heart of Bolivarian socialist thinking. These opposing logics shape the prison, the state, and the everyday experiences of Venezuelans who confront the penal system.

The MSP, as a reflection of the hybrid state, faces deep embedded contradictions in its approach to prisons and it also faces formidable external obstacles that stand in the way of them achieving their stated goals. These will rise to the surface as the MSP attempts to gain control of
the remaining 8 open-regime prisons in Venezuela over the next two years. The strict rules implemented in the New Regime prisons will continue to generate conflicts as people navigate the humiliating militaristic style of the new regime prisons in their everyday lives. For this reason, among others, qualitative research based on narratives and testimonials of currently and formerly incarcerated people in the New Regime prisons is essential for understanding the “work” of the prison and how the opposing rationalities present in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela shape the prison, the state and people’s everyday lives. To get a better sense of this, let us now turn to the story of how one Venezuelan family navigates these contradictions and experiences the prison system.
Chapter Six:
An Oral History “Del Otro Lado:”
The Impact of Incarceration on One Venezuelan Family

Introduction

Much is gained by examining the prison as an institution, looking at the structures that serve as its pillars, but building a comprehensive analysis of the carceral is only possible though examining the perspectives of people who are impacted by this system. In this chapter members of one family tell about their experiences of the prison, from *the other side*, a phrase that Gabriela Peralta uses as she explains what it is like to have a son incarcerated in Venezuela. *The other side* means from the outside, literally from the other side of the prison bars that separate her from her son. But, Gabriela also uses the phrase as metaphor to explain the side where she now understands the prison from lived experience instead of just from here-say and the media, it is the side of having to reconcile the contradictions between what one has been taught to believe and one’s own experiences. She, her husband and her daughter now speak from this *other side*. It is those who live the prison experience, as incarcerated people or their family members, that question the utility of prisons—their stated goals versus how they actually function—and therefore offer some of the best critiques of an institution that is often readily accepted as a necessary part of modern societies. By sharing the narratives of the Peralta family, I also hope to emphasize the deep impact that incarceration has on the people who have crossed to *the other side* and therefore as a social criticism of the dehumanizing institutions of prisons.

I met Olivia on the metro in Caracas during one of the jam-packed commutes headed from Caricuao to downtown Caracas. I had been traveling with an acquaintance who was asking me about my research and like most good *chavistas*, he was explaining to me why it was such a
delicate topic and how no one would want to talk to me about prisons. Just in that moment, Olivia who was pushed up against me on the other side, leaned in and handed me a piece of paper. It said. “I am the relative of a prisoner. I will participate in your research, here is my phone number.” And just like that, the doors opened at Plaza Venezuela and the group shuffle to exit the train carried us in separate directions. I called Olivia the next day and we set up a time to do an interview for the following day.

We met over her lunch hour break at the metro near the pharmacy where she worked. With cars whizzing by us in every direction, we decided to go into a nearby McDonald's to do the interview. We found an empty table in the corner, I set up my audio equipment while Olivia pulled out dozens of folders full of her brother’s legal documents and she placed them neatly on the table. At that point, Oscar, Olivia's brother had just been transferred to Uribana prison after being in police custody for nearly 13 months in the Chacao jail. He hadn't been to trial and for Olivia, the details of what happened the day in which the robbery that he was accused of participating in are still painfully unclear. Olivia was working extra hours to save money for a private lawyer and at 32 years old, she was to be the emotional rock in the family, after Oscar's detention transformed the lives of her family members. Olivia seemed to smoothly navigate both the personal and political polarizations that she faced. She had been a loyal chavista, voting for the party, identifying as coming from a “humble background” and the imprisonment of her brother, on top of the corruption and economic hardships, contributed to her loss of faith in the government and politicians.

Olivia had had one idea about the government; largely as the provider of goods and services (the left hand of the state), and since Oscar got locked up, she has come into contact with the right hand of the state and it has forever altered how she sees power, justice and the
government. She was never exceptionally politically active, it was clear from speaking with her and her parents that she had led a very family-oriented life prior to Oscar's incarceration. At the time of our first interview, things felt desperate, she said that her parents were a mess and that they were still just trying to figure out where exactly Oscar was, how to visit him and how to communicate with him.

A little over two months later, I called Olivia, because I wanted to stop by her work to drop off a full length copy of the interview that we had done back in September, it was then November. “Come now,” she said, “my parents are here and they just got back from visiting Oscar in Uribana, you should interview them.” I grabbed my audio recorder, jumped on the metro and arrived in under an hour. Olivia met me at the metro station with her parents, Orlando and Gabriela. Gabriela had just come from the eye doctor and she wore dark sunglasses to protect her eyes; she was clearly having some difficulty seeing. Orlando held her arm tightly and they both greeted me with forced smiles. I handed the cd of the audio interview that I had done with Olivia to her and then Orlando, Gabriela and I looked for a place to do an interview. We picked a small restaurant on a side street with slightly less traffic noise and we ordered fresh fruit juices. Gabriela ordered melón, Orlando, piña, and I got parchita. We made small talk until the juices arrived.

In this chapter, I will share the two interviews, the first narrated by Olivia in September, 2014 and the second narrated by both Gabriela and Orlando in November, 2014 shortly after they visited their son Oscar in Uribana. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and I have translated them into English and edited them to remove redundancies and to make the narrative flow better. I have chosen to edit out my questions, most of which were (keeping with the oral history tradition) broad open-ended questions that served mostly as prompts. I have also chosen
to annotate the narratives so that I can fill in and provide useful context for both the emotional content and the atmosphere of the interview as well as the broader historical, structural and cultural context for what they say. In this chapter, I approach my research questions about the “work” of the prison and how the Peralta family understands and navigates the competing logics that shape the hybrid post-neoliberal prison in their everyday lives. After their narratives, I will point to some of the key conclusions that I took from their perspectives, I will provide an update on their situation from when I did a follow up visit with Olivia in April, 2015 and I will connect their story to the larger context of prisons in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela.

The Peralta Family

Olivia

As I told you, my close nuclear family is my father and my mother. They have been in a stable marriage for 33 years. I am 32, and my brother who is currently detained, he is 25 years old. He was detained approximately 14 months ago and well, just a little bit ago he was transferred to Uribana. You don't know the conditions of isolation that he is in in the prison, where we don't know what is going on with him, we don't know if he is ok or bad and that's how it goes. He was transferred to Uribana and they had him 13 or 14 months in the police jail of Chaco and since then, over one year we are living in this situation because those who are there are unsentenced and they are already a part of a population of prisoners, deprived of the human rights. When my brother was detained en flagrancia, they detained him in the mall where he worked. There was a robbery and he was part of the security team at the mall. There was a gunshot, and he trailed behind. His compañeros jumped off of something. My brother has strong stature and so when he landed, he broke both of his legs.

The Chacao police, instead of helping him, they detained him and they didn't arrest anyone else. He asked for help since both of his legs were injured, finally an ambulance took him and from there, he was already arrested. He went to the hospital as a detainee, handcuffed. Why would they handcuff him to the hospital bed with two broken legs? He was hospitalized in Perez Carreño, he waited 2-3 months for his operation. They operated on both of his legs which were

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30 Red-handed.
both totally shattered. It's as if they operated on him one day, and the next they took him to jail. When they took him, he had recently been operated on and they didn't allow him to bring medicine, he couldn't bring anything for the wounds. And he had a fever when my mom went to see him and the wounds were infected and with all of that, they kept him detained. They didn't allow him to have pills, nothing, not one pill for the pain was allowed.

We hired a private lawyer but, well I see the system of private lawyers as a little slow. I don't know if it is the private lawyer who is slow or the penitentiary system but he didn't even hand reports to the judge. He didn't let us help him recuperate or let him see a doctor. The few times that he got medical attention were because I put my foot down with the lawyer and said that 'my brother is going to die from an infection' or something. My brother couldn't walk, he depended on there being two people to help him go to the bathroom and they didn't let us pass him a sleeping pad. Up to today, he hasn't slept in a bed since he left the hospital. He has been, and they have had him on the floor in inhumane conditions at the chacao jail in my opinion. In my case, the prosecutor, the human rights people, they didn’t do anything. They took photos to see how he was and we hoped that they would say that they were going to take him to the hospital while they did the investigation but they continued to hold him at the police station. And, I don’t know why he wasn’t allowed to take a wheelchair with him so that he could move, when he was transferred to Uribana. Because, people who their extremities have injuries it is very uncomfortable, he can’t even move or drink water. We had to make a special request to get him a mattress, which was not honored but this week, we were finally able to get him a wheelchair, how he would be walking, I don’t know.

The few times that I spoke to him, my brother told me that “I am moving about like an animal, crawling,” because he can’t walk. You know, this hurts me because I see someone who can’t walk and when they take him to the courts, the police tell him “assume his position at the bench.” “So,” he tells me “so, how am I going to get to the bench?” I, Olivia, I say “I couldn’t walk dragging myself through the narrow long corridor.” He says “it doesn’t hurt that much, but the humiliation that they put me through, crawling through the corridors of the court room.”

Well, today I imagine my brother and I wonder where he is right now, because I don’t know anything about it. I don’t know if he is alive, we don’t know anything, we don’t know, well we didn’t know ,we found out when my father went to bring him food and they told him “no, he is not here” they told him “they took him,” and we didn’t know anything about where he was. “It’s likely that he is on retreat in Uribana.” That is what the police in Chacao told us. They told us that they take them, they isolate them in solitary confinement where no one knows where they are. What they do know is that they aren’t sure what conditions he is in. So, you go to the prison and they don’t give you information, they don’t tell you anything, simply a closed door. We only know that it is called “The valley of Uribana” where he is but we don’t have access to the information of how he is or anything. Knowing about his state of health, considering that he is a guy who cannot fend for himself.

I am not against them doing an investigation, but do it in a prudent way. I am not against punishing someone who does something. I am in favor of punishing those who commit errors, with consciousness. If not that person is going to get out, like many guys, with a destroyed mind and be buried in a corner of the society and the world. And the society is how it is, obviously
they take him to system of recuperation and they harm him because my brother being there, he says to me “they can’t get me any medicine but how do other things get through?” He is referring to narcotics, sleeping pills, but you know it is the same police who get these things through. How can you not pass him antibiotics for an infection? How can you not pass him an analgesic? We couldn’t get any of this to him but how do other drugs get through?

And when the jail was raided, they didn’t find the drugs but the guards took people’s personal items. One guard lets drugs through but confiscates bibles and puts them in the trash, but not the drugs. Sometimes it makes one sick to think about. Moreover, visiting hours were only 20 minutes on Sundays and they were only for his mom, his dad and his wife. I didn’t want to visit because I didn’t want to take my mother’s space. Whatever help could be provided, they had to do in 20 minutes and from there, he wrote us letters. He told us “it’s been one year in a hole in a dungeon that practically 80 people are inside in this dungeon.”

Here I have the records that show that in their inquiries they don’t blame him for anything because the prosecutor found no evidence to charge him directly. I do not blame him but the prosecutor did not want to dismiss the charges even though it’s been just one months since the first hearing. The law says, in theory, that the hearing has to take place within 45 days, they tell you that the law says that if at 45 days you are not guilty and they don’t have the necessary evidence to find you guilty…but those 45 days have become 13 months.

This is something else, you have to be on top of your lawyer and also be paying. Here, you have to pay because it is not that the system is working but that if anything is to happen you have to pay large sums of money. I am not talking about 3,000 or 5,000 bolivares, I am talking about 100,000 Bolivares so that anything happens, so that they push paper around. They do the initial hearing, the prosecutor doesn’t have proof to find a guilty verdict but the judge respects the opinion of the prosecutor and so the trial just runs on. We don’t know if they are going to take him, if he is going to go to a trial where the judge asks for the evidence again because too much time has passed since the evidence was once presented. But through all of this, you know they keep him locked up but we never thought that with the health situation that he is in, we never thought that they would transfer him to a prison. Eight days passed in which we didn’t know if he was really in Uribana, we only knew that the police in Chacao were somehow connected to his case and that they took him to another jail.

The police in Chacao had the idea that he had been transferred to the prison in Falcón, that is what they told us but we didn’t know where he was. In those moments, we waited for news to take off and go to whichever prison he was in, and to try to see him but the possibilities were huge. But in the Chacao police station they said that he was in solitary in Uribana which is a prison that is taken by the government, like a maximum security prison. Uribana prison is not officially a “maximum security prison” but the New Regime prisons are commonly referred to as such.

31 Olivia pointed to her pile of brown folders and started to flip through the many packets of paperwork.
32 At the time that I conducted the interview, 100,000 Venezuelan Bolívares was equivalent to twenty times the minimum monthly wage, which was roughly 5,000 Venezuelan Bolívares. Therefore this was a little under two years’ salary on the minimum wage. See Table 4 in the Appendix for more information.
33 They were most likely talking about the New Regime prison, the Community Penitentiary of Coro.
34 Uribana prison is not officially a “maximum security prison” but the New Regime prisons are commonly referred to as such.
showed up in person outside of the prison and they wouldn’t give us information about what day was visiting day. How are we going to know? How are we going to know when to go to visit? Well, I don’t know. From inside they give a phone call to give family members a heads up for visiting day. The truth is, he is in Uribana and we don’t know in what condition. In this very moment, he is inside of Uribana.

How do we feel? Powerless in the face of a penal system, I don’t know what to call it, a public ministry that we have gone to in search for help and we haven’t found it, where the name for the ‘palace of justice’ is not fitting, it is not a palace of ‘justice.’ And that is another problem, it is terrible, who is right—this is how I am saying it—is the person with the most money in their pocket. You go and you say, ‘I have here 500 for that, do that for me!’ I am from a humble family, I am a worker and I do not have 500,000’s to help him. The little that I have been able to come up with to help him is over 250,000 and still that is too little. And I have given money so that they don’t mess with him, to avoid him being transferred, in order to have him here at the jail. So that he wouldn’t be transferred, one time they asked us for 500 on the spot and so my mother and father are destroyed, torn apart emotionally.35 My mom is super bad, as if all of this year is piled up on top of her. I am, (how should I explain it to you?), a pillar. If the situation hurts me I have to be strong to give strength to them; my brother has a wife and two children.

This whole time, he has not been permitted to see his children. The times that he writes to me he says that he is worried about his children, about their nutrition, about diapers.36 When he writes about these types of things, I think that he calms down a little bit. To have a family in these conditions is tough, it’s something that destabilizes you on the emotional level and so a moment arrives when I don’t believe in anything; enough, this is already in god’s hands because I don’t have money to give to a judge, prosecutors, or lawyer, I just don’t have money, I don’t have any more, and so I don’t know exactly where he is now, no one can communicate with him and then when visiting day comes around, the visit is restricted. I wonder what it would be like to enter the part where they have him there.

So we pray to god that they put good people with him because we are humans and he has to face all of this. The same police from Chacao said that this guy was a part of this mundo.37 And I can tell you that my brother is not a guy from el mundo, not a partier. He married really young and along with his wife, he has to deal with all of this. And this has to be waking up some malice inside because he is accused of a crime with no basis. There you will find people accused with no supporting evidence. It’s something that, when you really look at it, is really ugly. It is tough, it’s sad this powerless and resentment becomes rage.

We were one thousand percent Chavistas. We supported the system of the president, the now fallen President. But today, I stop to think and I wonder what happened. Where did all of this

35 After the interview Olivia told me that their private lawyer had suggested that she offer the judge sexual favors to speed up her brother’s trial. She said that she was outraged at the offer and while she doesn’t think that she could do it, she has considered it when she was feeling particularly desperate.

36 Diapers are one of the commodities that were very scarce in Venezuela at that time. People often waited in long lines to purchase diapers, some would buy them on the informal market for twice or three times the prices and many families were re-using disposable diapers, and potty-training their children much earlier.

37 Mundo means world but this is prison lingo for saying that Oscar is a “malandro” or thug which is also referred to as a “mundano.”
derail? Even though, according to the penitentiary system, this is not so. It doesn’t matter that I have proof, witnesses; money is what matters. ‘Take 500 for you and 500 for me.’ Erase what needs to be erased, and they laugh while they humiliate us, making us bring this and that which is only to slow down the criminal proceedings. And thirteen months passed, and he was lucky to have a hearing at 13 months because there are guys that spend almost two years and after their initial hearings when they tell them that they will not count their two years in which they spent morally and socially deteriorating and then they say that there is so much crime. But look how you are treating people, look how you are treating people who made a mistake for the first time, you are treating them poorly. You don’t expect that a person that is treated poorly will see the wonders of the world when they leave prison. They are going to leave with social resentment, with hatred, injured as if they were sick. If they didn’t have vices before they will leave with vices, if they didn’t consume drugs before they will leave addicted. If he didn’t know how to use a weapon before, they will learn how to use a weapon because in the year that my brother was in the Jail in Chacao, there was not a single activity that he was not offered. What I did was send him books so that he read. They destroyed him and in the moments of boredom they make it so that you develop a bad mentality even if you are trying. They have them like caged animals, without knowing about their family, and their family about them, without caring if someone is in pain because this doesn’t matter because you are a criminal and you need to be punished. But you have to know that they are humans, and that you can’t treat them as less than animals. They have a right to healthcare, a right to see their family and feel their affection. They make them out to be 100 percent criminals which is supposedly why they punish them and egg them on even when you have sufficient proof. That is what we are going through with my brother. They don’t have proof to show that he is guilty but there he is in prison. He is a guy without priors, a record of good conduct which can be verified by the communal council or the municipal government or through his identification which the prosecutor has not taken a moment to review if all of this is true. Just to verify if everything in the record is true so then what they do is just add more tests and supposed evidence to the file which is why the records are 200 pages and without being a lawyer you realize that you are walking in place, and that every effort to prove his innocence and get him on the street through the hearing process, even if it take a year to prove that he is innocent, is actually just extending the investigation. So I told the lawyer to continue the investigation but at least to give him hospital for detention or house arrest so that he can recuperate but the law couldn’t even make that happen. And, in that moment I didn’t have all of the money needed to make that happen, I just had a portion but it didn’t help us at all. Right now, he is in the place where he is and I continue awaiting news from him.

We don’t have a way of communicating with him that’s why I am saying that we don’t know how he is, where exactly he is, in what situation he is in, if he is walking or not walking, how he is doing to fend for himself because we know that in Chacao they didn’t let him have a wheelchair. Shoes, he didn’t have, he went about like a loquito barefoot and without being able to walk in deplorable conditions. They should have guaranteed all of his rights, the prosecutor, the public minister, our same lawyer told me that they took pictures. The photos are really tough, there are people who had operations who had bags and there they all are smashed together, sleeping standing up, or taking turns. And so, they take turns to sleep.

38 A crazy person
39 I believe that she is referring to Colostomies, the external bags used for bodily elimination.
What things my brother has gone through as a result of overcrowding! He got scabies. So I had to talk with the police, you know, why they are in depressing situations and getting skin diseases and more so that he can’t fend for himself or groom himself, it is more complicated for him. The theme of diarrhea even.\textsuperscript{40} When we took him food, we handed in the food and it is not necessarily what arrives inside. He say “they send me water that has been opened” and we say “we sent it in sealed, if it doesn’t arrive to you sealed, don’t drink it.” Sundays my mom tells him the menus. They finally realized that some food that was being sent to him ended up elsewhere. After time though, the police would bring him some stuff and so we would say, “Please give him this juice” and then they would say that they couldn’t but then they made exceptions. Why should anyone have to humiliate themselves just so that water can get through? And there are moments when you think, I am worth way more than a cup of water, until someone is really thirsty.

These guys go through tough times. Here in Chacao food is not guaranteed and there are guys who don’t know why they are in. I don’t understand why they detain them if they can’t guarantee their rights. If they are sick, that they get medical attention so that they recuperate and heal. My brother’s legs were operated on and it was challenging to get permission for him to heal. Even though the judge sent a report to the court and ministry, here no one respects the norms, the only thing that they respect is if you have money, well then they will respect you. If you are following all of the regulations as they are, they won’t respect you. We are very small to be able to make the judicial process function as it should.

Look, I told you that I was a loyal Chavista, that all of the past electoral processes I voted for President Chavez. He was a man who came out of prison, he knew, he knew how the penitentiary system was here. The Minister of the Penitentiary System, Iris Varela, she knows who the pranes are and what the system is like. I don’t know what is taking them so long. Through this process I feel 3000 percent disappointed. There seems to be more contamination than what there was even though there are writings on how the penitentiary process should work. I don’t know if I have anything written about that, no I don’t have anything here.\textsuperscript{41} A man is not going to be regenerated behind bars, they are acting like these men will have a chance to really explore the “I made a mistake.” How sad that everything is the opposite. I am not going to vote for them now. In the Referendum that is coming I will give a negative vote.\textsuperscript{42} And not only for this penitentiary system but also for the situation in the country.

Money is the motive of the same bureaucracy that permits the same public ministry and the palace of justice to be full of corrupt thieves. You go and look up the history of the judges, and then you will realize that they are cut from the same cloth of cronyism that there are people that are in the position and are not qualified and they don’t have academic training and that the system exists to grab people, lock them up and throw them into abandonment. In the moment that they detain someone, why are they locked up prior to being before a public minister or

\textsuperscript{40} According to the Venezuelan Prison Observatory, diseases of the skin are the number one reported health problem in Venezuelan prisons followed by gastrointestinal problems and the third is repertory problems (Informe Semestral, Enero-Junio 2104)

\textsuperscript{41} Olivia started flipping through her files.

\textsuperscript{42} A negative vote does not mean voting for the opposition, it means casting a blank ballot. This action is interpreted as a protest of the candidates and the system.
prosecutor? Why do they punish you when they are not sure of anything? Why do they treat you like a criminal? Why is it that you are locked up from the moment that you are detained? Why, at once do they punish you and send you to prison? Why?

One has to be able to recover, to experience the development of a recovery for incarcerated people, a process of social reinsertion. It happens that way, as I have said what my brother has gone through. I know people who have been through worse, things that should never have happened and so we arrive at a conclusion which is that the system should be put in place to do things well, to do things right.

**Gabriela and Orlando**

**Gabriela:** Well, I live here in Caracas and I have my son. My son is imprisoned in Uribana and well, it hasn’t been very good although my son is not going to tell me everything in only one visit. He has been there for almost three months and I have only seen him one time. The visits are one time a month and my son has already been there three months and I have only had one visit there.

Well, when my son arrived there to Uribana, the first thing that they did was shave his head. Really. After shaving him, they walked up to each person and they asked them a question: Thug or Worker? And the people that answered that they were thugs, the beat them with sticks so my son knew that he couldn’t say “thug” but he told me that he was going to say “thug” but no, he had to say “worker” so that they wouldn’t…well, after that, those who say *malandro,* they punish them, right? Before entering the prison, they are sent to isolation, for a month, they have them there in Uribana, they have them locked up for a month. They say that they put the food on the table and they have to collect the food from the table as if they were animals. They give them black beans without salt, hard black beans, the water that they are given to quench their thirst is salt water, because Uribana still does not have fresh water and they don’t make potable water available to the prisoners.

So, well, my son…afterwards they told me that they are forced to do exercises as punishment. They make them do crunches and my son can’t do crunches because he had the broken legs and so he told the guard “I can’t do crunches” and so they made him do something else. They put him in the sun with his hands up.

**Orlando:** Like Christ

**Gabriela:** Yes, like Christ. They put rocks in his hands with his hands over head and they made him stay that way for over an hour. It was an hour, that’s what he said, right?

**Orlando:** No, as long as he could make it.

**Gabriela:** As long as he could make it. He told me “Mama, an hour with these hands up, they had me like Christ, my legs weren’t going to make it because they never healed properly.” Ever since my son has been there he has not received any medical attention, his legs have not received

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43 *thug*
any treatment, he needs physical therapy and he hasn’t gotten any of this. He said ‘until I
couldn’t any longer and they told me, enough.’ Sweating in the sun with the rocks overhead and
with his broken legs! Today marks one year since he was operated on. It’s been over a year
since he had this problem, he has been in Uribana for three months, but my son has already
served over a year, it has been 13, 14, or more months detained. He has not had his trial, they
haven’t given him a trial. We don’t know how that will go, if he will be found guilty or
innocent, how the tribunal will see it. Because the prosecutor is asking for an extension to build a
case and even though she keeps not finding it she continues to ask for the extension. Our lawyer
explained that she asks for extensions after extension and she still doesn’t find anything points
towards my son. No one has made an accusation against him but my son is there, waiting for the
prosecutor to obtain, I don’t know what. In all of this time looking, she hasn’t found anything,
they haven’t gone to trial and they don’t tell you anything. We don’t know what will happen to
my son because in truth…we don’t know how the government will respond, if they will say that
he is guilty or he is innocent, but they have him there, without trial, like an animal and we don’t
know what will happen to him.

And in Uribana, the treatment is not very good. Because there they treat the Caraqueños poorly, because it is a prison of los Guaros, who are those from there, from Barquisimeto and when Caraqueños arrive, they treat them poorly. The food they give them is bad, they sleep on
the floor, on the floor no matter how cold it is, bad, bad. The prisoners have a rough time and
now well, what happened yesterday, this was in the news, I don’t know if you saw it, but the new
director was treating them poorly. He grabbed them and spanked them with a paddle, those in
module two, he put them in the sun, naked, and this was in the newspaper yesterday. So much
humiliation and as a family member one feels the humiliation.

**Orlando:** They isolate them they lock them up naked, they throw things at them, tear gas canisters, so that they faint completely, because when they are closed in and gassed, this also has had to happen there.

**Gabriela:** In the Chacao police station, the visits are on Sundays, once a week, twenty minutes. Twenty minutes the visits lasted in Chacao, every Sunday there is a visit.

**Orlando:** Every Sunday, we would see him, every Sunday we saw him, there they could receive food.

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44 Throughout the interview, Gabriela and Orlando say different amount of time that Oscar has been incarcerated, it is understandable that it is easy to lose track of time. At the point of our interview, he had been locked up for 16 months. He spent a little over 13 months incarcerated at the Chacao police station and he had been imprisoned in Uribana, which was referred to as “Sargent David Viloria” for nearly 3 months at the time that I interviewed him.

45 People from Caracas, the capital city.

46 People from Barquisimeto. They get the name from the common regional saying ‘na’guara’ which is an expression of surprise.

47 Gabriela is referring to a series of news stories accusing the then newly appointed Director Julio César Pérez of enforcing mandatory strip searches and then beating prisoners. In the following days he was fired from his position but then prisoners and their families launched a hunger strike. There were news reports of a violent confrontations and outside observers claimed that they heard “detonations” which according to prisoners and outside observers were the use of tear gas. The conflict escalated and according to media reports, prisoners claimed a part of the prison that included the infirmary and mixed a toxic cocktail of drugs which resulted in the death of 13 and the non-lethal poisoning of 145 people. This all took place just 3 days after the interview with Gabriela and Orlando.
Gabriela: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner because they don’t give them food.

Orlando: There you could bring breakfast, you could bring lunch, dinner and soda.

Gabriela: And water

Orlando: Yes, water. Soda like Chinotto and Colita are the only sodas that they permit, no others. You can bring water and well their food, their clothes. We would go every 3 days, we would take his clothes, his things, his shampoo, his soap. You can’t take these things in to Uribana. From when he arrived to Uribana he spent two months in which he didn’t see sun or water, sun, nothing because they had him locked up from the moment that he arrived, without bathing or changing his clothes.

This was a form of punishment. They do this to everyone that arrives there, so that they see what will happen to them if they misbehave. That’s how it is to arrive. And it was right when he arrived that they tested him in that way that I said, they put his hands like Christ with rocks in his hands and he had to sustain. From there they put various people in a room until two months had passed, something like that, more or less. That’s what he told us, something like two months; it was in this time, he told us, that he didn’t bathe, he didn’t change his clothes. And the food that they gave him there, like animals, if they gave food at all. Many times, he told me “I didn’t eat because…” and he went hungry. Before, he was a bit stocky, imagine him now, he is skinny. That’s what he told us, I don’t know if he told the truth, if they were giving him food but if they did it was…

Gabriela: Like for a dog

Orlando: Yes, all the time it was very bad. But well he didn’t tell us all that had happened to him there…

Gabriela: Because the fact that my only son is going through this doesn’t mean that they have to humiliate someone. They humiliate one from the moment they are at the entrance until the very end, the guards treat them bad, “get up here,” they have to take off their clothes, they put them on a bench, if one doesn’t push well, they say “pee” and then they watch to make sure that one is peeing well, to see from above how one pees. They watch someone pee to see if they are carrying anything, the searches, the food, the food, they mess up the food that we bring. Well it is a big humiliation that one feels there in that prison of Uribana.

Orlando: To arrive, like everyone, we all arrive lost, asking, and somehow we arrive but it is tough. From here in Caracas to go to Uribana in Barquisimeto, it is tough.48

Gabriela: We have to pay for a hotel

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48 From a bus station in Caracas to the central bus station in Barquisimeto, it is roughly 5 hours but can take longer. In the last chapter, I explained the hour plus journey from the central station in Barquisimeto to Uribana prison. There was no direct public transit and it took over an hour to arrive.
Orlando: And to find lodging there, one has to, also just like how one figures out how to enter, you spend time outside looking for where to stay and in terms of arriving there, well this was also the first time that I went there and I arrive completely lost as well.

Gabriela: We have only gone one time, we stayed in the house of a woman that gives lodging to families who go there. She lent us her kitchen to make food that we were going to take. We cooked, we paid for use of the kitchen and to sleep there and later we got into line. As I said there were also other families; families that you see and say “cónchale!” It can’t be that their son is in there! And also there are families that say, well “my son is imprisoned here and the father is in prison in that part and fulano is imprisoned in that part” as if they had their whole family in prison. And you also hear how some talk about the prison as if the prison were something nice, right? Orlando said that, and even more, they laugh but if you live this experience seeing how I see the people, I say that it is very ugly to be mixed up in…

Orlando: There are people who have gone through this many times, it doesn’t hit them as hard if a family member gets locked up, it doesn’t matter to them, for them it’s like a sport. But for us, it has fucked our son, the only son that we have and we never, we never thought that we would have to go through anything like that and I don’t say this because our son is the best, right? He is a good guy, but sometimes he has a weak mind, or he is weak in the way that he believes whatever anyone tells him. He is mentally weak and can be coaxed into things and this is what happened with him. He was in these thing that maybe he got involved in.

Look, from when I left my house, and I left at 13 or 14 years, I separated from my viejos, from my mother and my father and I lived renting most of the time, I married my wife and until today, I never was involved, never wanted to be involved in groups of people who said to me, “look, Orlando, we are going over there, Orlando, let’s go here, Orlando take this.” I never, I always preferred to be on my own, even till today, I preferred to be on my own. My son sometimes says, “it’s true, papa, you are right in saying this.” Because the place where he was working required meeting with lots of people, he worked in the Centro Commercial La California. Well, he also had connections with many friend there and those things and well I say, perhaps they tried to involve him and when he left, he fled, he jumped where he had to jump and well from there he got locked up. His past life became a tease, he left his two children. He has two children, he has a little girl who is one year old and he has a little boy who is three years old. He has a wife and from that moment till now he hasn’t see his children. His wife, yes but for the four months since he has been there he hasn’t seen his wife. Since the last time that I saw him in Uribana, I haven’t seen him again.

I don’t know how to tell you how we arrived. We were lost but we arrived and well, we stayed close in a house close to the prison and the following day it was what we did again. We arrived there, asking what we needed, what we were allowed to take in, what we could enter with and others explained to us the food, two to-go containers per person and we were going to be three people, because my son had noted that we were his father, his mother and his wife but they

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49 Jeez
50 A generic name to mean so-and-so or the equivalent of “John Smith.” They use this name throughout the interview.
51 I have changed the name of the Mall where he worked as a measure to protect his identity
didn’t let his wife enter. They didn’t let her enter because only two people could enter. So, his wife could not see him and so far she has not been able to see him because she hasn’t. The treatment, the same as what they do for the women to enter, they do that to the men, the exact same. What they did to her, they did the same to me. She brought in food, and I brought in food, they moved around the food, the searched everything. It’s ok to search the food and to make sure that someone doesn’t hide anything there, they also do the same thing. They strip us naked, they take everything, everything so that you are butt naked, just to see you there naked and then they search you.

**Gabriela:** They throw your clothes on the floor.

**Orlando:** They don’t hand you your clothes, they just throw them and someone tosses them to someone else who picks them up and shakes them out as if they were somebody else’s. Too much humiliation. As if one were so bad because they were there or as if we had done something to them, something. Well, what more can I tell you? Inside, well we could meet with them and see everything that is happening inside. The good, the bad because there is a part that is what some might say, is good because some of them seem happy when you see them and the bad thing is how they are treated inside. They treat them poorly, well afterwards also my son told me that they hadn’t treated him poorly but he doesn’t want to tell us that they have treated him bad. But if they treat him poorly, because there is no preferential treatment of anyone, what they do to one, they do to all. This is a lie. He had told me “Papa, they haven’t done anything to me.” But one can see that they have treated him poorly and that there has been abuse. But he is like that, he is very closed too, he doesn’t tell us things like that so that we don’t feel bad but well, the good thing is that it made us very happy to see each other for a little bit. We saw each other for a while, we were there with him from around 9 or 10 until 3 in the afternoon. We enjoyed those moments, when the three of us were together, the only bad part came when we had to leave him alone there once again.

And now, we wait to see if they will give him a trial or not. He doesn’t know because he is there, he doesn’t know anyone because he is there simply because they arrested him where they arrested him, with broken legs, because he broke both legs fleeing what was happening. And well, in that moment they captured him because he couldn’t do anything else and that’s how they arrested and from that point forward the nothingness began. From there, it has been fourteen, or fifteen months, more or less…

**Gabriela:** There is a big backlog in criminal proceedings, a large backlog here. They don’t have

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52 While walking to the restaurant where we conducted the interview Gabriela and Orlando had wanted to know about my research. I told them about my experience visiting the open regime prisons of El Rodeo and Vista Hermosa and Gabriela immediately asked me if I had to go through the same search process as other visitors. I nodded yes and she shared her experience of taking off all of her clothes, spreading her legs and pushing in front of female guards.

53 It is hard to write succinctly what this searching of food process is like but many families delicately pack to-go plastic containers with food for their loved ones. They often have nicely arranged items like meat on top of rice with an arepa (corn pancake) and fried plantains. The guards often stir the food up with a sharp knife, poking around to see if there is contraband hidden in the food so, by the time the dish arrives to the person in prison it is an unrecognizable pile of mush. This is especially hard when (mostly) mothers, wives, and sisters spend time wanting to show their love by making a meal and then they have to deliver an unpleasant looking dish.
trials, they take people just like that without a trial, without anything, “go over there!” Imagine that, without knowing when you will get a trial. Time passes and my son is in there and we don’t know. So much time lost because they don’t take them to trials. The lawyer tells us that the papers are moving along that the charges are set and that the process is happening but we don’t know what is happening and nor does our lawyer. He always says that he is waiting for a response, waiting for a response from the courts, the courts don’t respond to anything they don’t tell you when there will be a trial, they just have him there because they want to.

What did we think about prisons before and now that we are living this experience what do we think? I ask myself the same thing from time to time. Look, before when I would see a mother saying that “well my son shouldn’t be with your son. My son is a student and your son is a criminal” I agreed. I saw the mothers that said that their son shouldn’t be with criminals because he is a student and she would explain that they arrested a student while the others in prison are criminals but not all who are in prison are criminals. So at the beginning, I wanted to see myself as separate from others, but now I am a part of the prison band, I have been to the other side. At first I said, she is right, her son is a student, and he doesn’t need to be where the criminals are. That was my opinion before, now when I hear a mother saying that I feel so bad because my son is truly not a criminal and I am his mother. And I have seen the other guys and they are not criminals, they are under investigation and they are together. Of course, there are good ones and bad ones, so now when I hear the mothers saying “my son doesn’t need to be with the criminals” I say, “no one knows who is more of a criminal, a student or those who are inside.” Now, I think differently because I am living this experience of the other side and every now and then I say to Orlando, “Look, before I used to agree with what these mothers of prisoners were saying. No, before I said “he who commits the crime, well…”

Orlando: They have to pay.

Gabriela: But you never know who is innocent and who is guilty. Now I say “things are not as I thought.” “Things need to be investigated, you have to figure out who is good, who is bad,” I have said to Orlando “Cónchale, the police just arrest, the police just grab someone without knowing if they are good or bad, they grab them, they take them, they abuse them, they grab them, they throw them away, they do with them what they want.” And well they say that this person could be a serious criminal or not, like my son. They think that my son is a terrorist, well that he is bad and he isn’t. But they don’t know that my son is not what they think. They are investigating, they are looking but he isn’t. When they had my son in the hospital, in custody, when they arrested him, they left him in Pérez Carreño in custody and I said that they were holding him as if he were going to escape but no…

Orlando: They had him there like a terrorist.

Gabriela: They had him handcuffed, with his broken legs, he had casts and they had him handcuffed to the stretcher. Even the doctors said “What did they think? That his is Superman? That he is going to escape from here when he can’t even move?” But, you have to remember that they don’t know, they don’t know the person and for this reason they treat them this way. I see that side too, we have talked about that before, like why they search people, right?
Sometime before the last visit, they found an older woman who had a weapon in her vagina, a revolver. This woman was upwards of seventy years old and so she probably thought that because of her age, they weren’t going to search her but they searched her. She put that thing up there, and in another woman, they found drugs.54

I heard that, I heard it, I did not see it. We were told by the woman where we stayed. And there are mothers that rent out their services for these things, to bring their children guns, drugs, and these things and for that reason I say that seeing it from this side, that everybody shouldn’t be able to take whatever they want in. For that reason, looking from this side I agree that there should be searches.55 But when one feels that, when one lives that experience in the flesh, it is the most humiliating experience, what more can I tell you…?

These are the things that one experiences from this side.56 In Venezuela there are so many prisoners, but of all of these prisoners in the prisons, in this statistic, there is my son, right? What a shame that when they are talking about the prisons we are now on this side, even though now I am not in agreement with what those who are on the outside say, that “Fulano did something and now they have to pay.” I say that they don’t know if they are guilty or innocent, that person who is locked inside. When I go inside and I speak with the guys that are there, yes, some are guilty and they tell stories about it, yes some are. There are people who are imprisoned that are truly bad, but there are guys that haven’t even gotten a trial, like my son, that are good. And there are many like my son, there are many innocents in the prisons but there are also bad people. Now that I am on that side, I don’t know if I say that they deserve punishment, I truthfully don’t know what to tell you.

We have taken a look back, too many times. We are holed up in the house, we don’t leave to go anywhere. My husband goes to his work. I want to be in my house, to not go out so that no one looks at me. When I arrive to where I live, I want the earth to swallow me. I don’t want anyone to look at me. I think that everywhere I pass, everyone is pointing a finger at me, and everyone is saying “look, her son is in prison, her son is in there.” Truthfully this has taken us for a ride, before we were a family, like I said, my sisters, everyone wanted to have a family like mine. My daughter, my son were well behaved, everyone good, we went everywhere together. We were truly an example and now we have been taken for this ride, no one wants to have a son, have a son that has been to prison. Now, none of my sister want a family like mine.

**Orlando:** Everyone wanted to be like us, the whole family. They wanted to be relaxed and

54 During my fieldwork, I heard this story, or a similar one multiple times and I often followed up by asking if the person telling me this actually witnessed this type of smuggling or if they heard about it. Virtually everyone that I spoke to had heard stories like these but in over 50 interviews and many more informal conversations I did not speak to anyone who personally witnessed this form of trafficking. Even the government officials who told me about it admitted that they did not personally see these busts.

55 The side that she is referring to here is the side where order must be maintained, where regulations and policies must be in place to prevent the entrance of contraband but Gabriela, while she understands this logic well and essentially agrees with it, she makes a powerful point that these policies take on different meanings when one is actually subjected to them.

56 Now she is talking about being on “the side” of those who live the prison experience, who understand what it feels like to pass through the gates, to be searched, to be inside.
content like the four of us were before, my daughter, my son and us two until this happened. Truthfully, from that point, people, the family changes, now they have an image of us, and a distance as a result.57

Gabriela: We were the example, like a pillar of the family. For example, of my sisters the only one to stay married was me, right? One went this way, that way and Orlando and I and the children we set the example for my children and the children of my sisters and brothers. My friends would say “How beautiful!” And I would say “My family is so beautiful, right?” “How lovely, your children are always with you, your son and daughter are so attentive and good.” And then this happened and now no one wants to have a family like mine.

Orlando: Everything changed overnight.

Gabriela: That 31st of July, I will never forget, it was four in the morning when I got the news. I wanted the earth to swallow me because I did not want this to happen. I wanted to go far away where no one knew me. In truth, this is a very very big punishment that one feels to go through this. And more so when one has never been through this before, which is why we had thought that we were the best, the best children in the area where we lived, the best at getting along with everyone, everything. Everybody wanted to know how we raised our children “How did you raise your daughter? How did you get her to study in the University? Shit, she is an excellent girl,” just like my guy, “he is excellent, he doesn’t have problems with anyone, he is this, and he is that.” It was always “good day” “good afternoon” and as you will see one day, everything was an immense tranquility.

They didn’t go to parties, they didn’t party at all. My son did not drink, he wasn’t a partier or anything. I always kept an eye out. I searched his pockets to see if he had cigarettes or something out and I was watchful of stuff when I found it. If he smoked, I didn’t see it, if I found a lighter or cigarettes I took them, I would say “look, what I find in my house, you cannot smoke.” He did not smoke in my house and I was always watchful about taking cigarettes away from him.

Orlando: And I also said to my wife, I used to drink but I have totally quit and I have told my son this so that he doesn’t drink either. Because I don’t want my son to say “I am drinking, or I became an alcoholic because of my father, because my father never gave me anything, because my father was a drunk.” and I said “I quit drinking and I don’t want to see you drinking. I don’t want to see you in parties, or carousing around, not with one cigarette, nothing because I don’t have any vices and you have to be the same so that you can be an example, an example to give to your children too.” And just like that, at that scale, that was how we arrived at being so happy, really we were happy until, until that day.

Gabriela: We are no longer the same because our son is in prison, right? Everything has

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57 After the interview Orlando and Gabriela told me that they had not gone to visit Orlando’s family in the state of Aragua since Oscar had been arrested. They said that they didn’t feel welcome, that they didn’t want to have to face their family and tell them that Oscar was in prison and they assumed that Orlando’s family wouldn’t want them there now. They spent Christmas alone and they added that it was, perhaps, for the best since they could divert any money they would have spent on travel to the private lawyer that they had hired.
changed and what they say about the families where criminals come from, it is a lie, criminals are not made because their parents abandon them, that these bad guys are in prison because they didn’t have a father or because of their mother, that is a lie.

**Orlando:** There our son is and he didn’t want for anything. We always said to him, the only thing that you didn’t have was an itch to scratch, an itch to scratch and look where he is now. With his chill and happy life that he had and look where he is now. This changed all of us. And if he did it or didn’t do it, in truth, I don’t know.

Well, in truth when it comes to changing the prisons, they [the Ministry of Penitentiary Services] have not done anything, they never do anything. They say that they improved something, that they put this there or that they are focusing on this or that got rid of that, they go in circles but we were there and well, this is a lie. The prisons are prisons, each day they are worse they haven’t really tried to make anything better.

**Gabriela:** The infrastructure of the prisons is bad, really bad. Even though they are incarcerated, they are human beings and they have rights. And, if the government want improvements with the youth they shouldn’t treat them this way because they are making it so that the youth leave from the prison with hatred and with more hatred until they become mentally ill. They make people mentally ill because of the punishment that they give, the way they have them living, how they feed them. There isn’t even water, they don’t even have good drinking water to quench their thirst; they [the MSP] are not doing anything. What is it called when they want to make a person better? Well, what they are doing, instead of making someone better is throwing them away.

Yes, because they aren’t and won’t improve the Venezuelan youth so that there is less crime. No the young people only feel more hatred, more hatred, when they go to prison. And when they leave there, the small-timer becomes more criminal for everything that has happened, for everything that they went through there.

**Orlando:** They just want to say that prisoners are treated better in the prison but they never made them better even though they might say that the Administration met with *Fulano* at such and such prison but it is a lie… They go there and they look at the prison, this is not better treatment though. If they look well, at best they would try to improve things by beginning with the inmate who is inside, try to treat them decently, try to give them food, give them water, also provide for their personal grooming, not just have them there hanging outside, give them a chance to fix themselves up as best as they can, they need to start there, try to improve the guy who is incarcerated and from there they can improve the prison but they are just going to arrive and look at them and say that everything is fine. They just take pictures to show the outside world and they say look at this prison and that’s it.58 They say this is good, but inside things are bad and in truth there is abuse. Things are not getting better and they never do, the only thing they don’t have is weapons, they don’t have weapons inside but they treat them the same as they

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58 The MSP has launched a significant media campaign to challenge the negative coverage that the prisons have gotten in mainstream and international press. The MSP maintains a web news blog which it updates regularly. The blog often has photos of Administrators visiting prisons. Most photos look similar, Administrators in their bureaucratic uniform of jeans, vests and embroidered polo shirts are overseeing a ceremony or activity in which the uniformed prisoners are participating. These media stories often make it into the state newspapers as well.
do in all prisons, they beat them however they want, as if they didn’t even have families. When the guards abuse the prisoners, they beat them, they hit them with sticks. I know this because they told me, my son told me when we went there. If the guards ask them questions, they want to answer carefully because the guards hit them and beat them. The guards ask them lots of questions and they have to determine if they will answer how they want or not but either way they will beat them, the guards make them squat, put their heads down and they give them a chop or smack on their necks.

Gabriela: They have a system where if someone is going to serve time, without knowing whether they are guilty or innocent they are going to pay for it. It could be years and years and they don’t know how long they are going to be there. Why? Because of the backlog in criminal proceedings that exists in Venezuela, there is too much. Why? For example a judge for whatever reasons is deferred, the jury is deferred, the trial is deferred, they don’t give a date for the trial, the preliminary hearings are every now and then, this is deferred, that is deferred, you are deferred, deferred, deferred. After it is postponed, the prosecutor will tell you that the hearing took place and that they said that he will wait for his trial in prison, detained because I have to look for new evidence. “I don’t know where but I have to find evidence and it is going to take 30 days,” and I don’t even know where she is going to find this evidence but she says that she needs 30 days and then 30 days go by. And the witnesses don’t arrive, I don’t know this is the reason for the backlog in criminal proceedings. The prosecutor, the prosecutors they don’t do anything. The judge has to govern as the prosecutor says, even if the judge thinks he can wait for his trial out of prison the prosecutor says no. But they haven’t even given a date for the trial, they just have him there, waiting for his trial in prison, no they just have him there until they, or mostly god, because there is a God up there and he is the only one who knows things, but us people on the earth, we do not know what date they will give my son for his trial or whether they will say that he is innocent or guilty. It is them who will decide and then after, God.

Orlando: This is the only experience that I have had in prison, this is it. Now my son is there, I was never interested in prisons and truthfully, I never thought that I would go through all of this. But as they say, there is a first time for everything. No one is perfect and well, there we go, experiencing all of this with my son.

Conclusions:

Olivia, Gabriela and Orlando never thought that they would learn so much about the prison and the criminal justice system but because Oscar got arrested and accused of collaborating in a robbery, their lives have been changed and as Gabriela said, they have gone to the other side. I find the emotions, content, perspectives- and even contradictions- so illuminating in the narratives of the Peralta Family. First off, they demonstrate just how broken the criminal punishment system is and how the torturous wait inherent in wading through the
bureaucracy and constant postponements creates a serious burden for those with legal entanglements. Second, they demonstrated the role that money plays in the legal process and therefore how those with fewer resources are more likely to stay in prison through the trial, not be able to afford private lawyers, or the numerous bribes that are often required to move legal proceedings forward; Olivia emphasizes these points the most and many of these costs have been coming from her pay check. Third, the work of caring for a loved one in prison becomes all-consuming and the anxiety that Gabriela, Orlando and Olivia expressed about Oscar’s well-being, more-so when he was transferred to Uribana, takes a toll on the family, not only in terms of financial and economic but also emotional and psychological. Fourth, the stigmatization of incarceration is significant in Venezuela. The sense of isolation, primarily expressed by Gabriela, which the Peralta family experienced dramatically changed how they related to the people around them in their everyday lives. While Oscar had not gone to trial and had not been convicted of any crime, his mere presence in prison defines him and by extension, his family as belonging to a “criminal” class. This type of stigmatization makes organizing for rights difficult, especially in the face of “punitive populism” in Venezuela. Fifth, the Peralta’s experience has shifted their political allegiances, their up-close and personal experience of the broken and corrupt criminal punishment system and the violations of human rights and basic codes of respect have changed how they view the state and the governing regime. Sixth, through their story, it is simple to see that the judiciary and policing are institutions inextricably linked to the prison system and that- from a personal perspective- one won’t experience the prison system without also having to confront the other related institutions. While I made it clear at the beginning of my dissertation that I would focus on prisons and not the other two institutions, personal narratives continue to remind us that on a practical level, it is impossible to cleanly
Lastly, each member of the Peralta family experienced a personal change, mostly in perspective, as a result of coming face to face with the prison system. Gabriela spoke about this most through her narrative, ripe with contradictions and existential questions, she battled with the beliefs that she inherited such as the beliefs that, people ought to pay for their crimes, visitors must be searched when entering prisons, and students are in a separate, superior, category than *malandros*. She recognized that these beliefs had been challenged but she still understood how someone, who has not lived the prison experience, could still adopt this form of neoliberal penal common sense and “punitive populism.” She argued, however; that from where she stands on the other side, her view on these things have changed. She now even questions if prisons are a good response for people who actually do commit crimes that cause harm to others because she now sees the institution as inherently dehumanizing.

In Venezuela, as prison rates continue to climb and the percentage of the prison population in pre-trial detention rises up past two-thirds of the total prison population, many families like the Peraltas, who had experienced the left hand of the state in their daily lives, through government subsidized goods, educations programs, micro-credit loans and other forms of assistance, are now coming in to contact with the right hand of the state, and therefore are forced to engage with the prison system in their daily lives. This is challenging the *chavista* political base who have, in the post-neoliberal era generally identified their class interests to be in line with the *Chavista* government. This support could wane as “humble families” interact with the police, the national guard, the prison guards, the prosecutors and the judges in their daily lives as opposed to the social missions, the gas subsidies, the free college and countless other supports that have expanded over the last decade in Venezuela.
Gabriela and Orlando never went to visit Oscar in Uribana again because in the week following our interview, and as a result of disturbances and instability in the prison, he was one of the 400 people who voluntarily got transferred to Tocorón prison, the largest open regime prison in Venezuela. I had read about the transfers and wondered why the MSP would hand over so many bodies to the carros of Tocorón, where the inmate population is at an astounding 9,000-10,000 (between one sixth and one seventh of the entire prison population in the country.) It seemed like it was a part of some deeper negotiations between the Ministry and the power structures in the open-regime prisons or, perhaps they truly needed to reduce the Uribana population rapidly and let steam out to prevent an even more deadly confrontation. Just a few days after the transfer, thirteen people died of an overdose and 145 people were poisoned when, according to the MSP, inmates gained control of the infirmary and made a lethal cocktail of various substances. There is no alternative story on what led to the deaths of the prisoners in Uribana but of the people that I spoke to who were incarcerated in Yare I, El Rodeo I and San Felipe prisons, no one believed the government’s version of the story. After the news hit, I wondered where Oscar was and whether he was ok. I thought about his family, and how they must have been so worried.

In April, 2015, nearly five months after I interviewed Gabriela and Orlando, I met with Olivia at the metro stop near her house. I arrived first and waited on a bench outside the metro, I watched as Olivia approached. She looked different; perhaps because it was the first time that I had seen her in a casual bright blue t-shirt, jeans and sneakers instead of her fitted suit she wears to work. But no, it was more than that. “He is safe now” she told me as she approached, before reaching out to give me a hug. “He’s out?” I asked. “No,” she said, he got transferred to Tocorón. We walked to a nearby corner and ordered fresh-squeezed orange juice and then sat on
a bench together under the shade of a tree.

Olivia’s eyes got big as she proceeded to tell me about her experience visiting Tocorón prison with her daughter, her parents and her nephew. She pulled out her cell phone and began scrolling through pictures that she showed me as she explained what the prison was like. She came to a picture of Oscar, and for the first time I could see the face of the person that I had heard so much about. He looked good. He didn’t look unhealthily thin, he was standing, his hair had grown in from when he had his head shaved and instead of the unflattering yellow uniforms; he looked dressed for a date in a turquoise polo shirt and jeans. She continued to show me photos and for a minute I forgot that these were taken in a prison; it looked like they were at the park. “Look at this one,” Olivia exclaimed as she showed me the pictures of the leopard in the zoo inside of Tocorón prison. I smiled and thought about an article that I had read when I was researching Venezuelan prisons, before I had headed out on my field work. The *Guardian* article reported that, in addition to confiscating weapons and drugs, during a raid of Sabaneta prison a “menagerie of rare animals” had been found inside (Lopez, 2013). At the time, I couldn’t really understand why they would have rare animals in a prison but as Oliva explained, her daughter kept asking to go back and see the leopard again. And so, what seemed absurdly bizarre from a distance all made sense to me in that moment. If you can control the inside of the prison, why not make it that your family and children want to come to visit? Especially considering all of the work and hardship that they go through to prepare food, bring supplies and the humiliation they face in trying to enter, it makes sense to try to make the place special. Olivia was full of energy, she was conflicted; “I kind of liked being there” she said with an air of disbelief in her voice. “Well, I mean, I liked it and I didn’t like it. It was fascinating” she concluded. Olivia said that she had been waiting to see me again to explain what Tocorón was like and that she felt like a
researcher when she was inside, that she couldn’t help but be completely mesmerized by this self-managed carceral world that she had entered.

“For a moment, we thought my brother was going to have a problem with the Pran.” She explained how some money went missing and Oscar was one of the only people around when it happened but, that he met with the carro, he explained that he had nothing to do with it, and because he has paid his causa on time every week and he is in good standing, they believed him. “So now, everything is fine,” she said. Olivia explained that thy can speak on the phone often, that they can visit him and that she feels like he is safe. She reiterated that she keeps telling her mother not to worry, “that now he is safe.” This was a truly fascinating assertion considering the fact that Venezuelan prisons continue to be the most violent in the hemisphere and daily life is still precarious at best.

Despite the knowledge bolstered by liberal and neoliberal notions of crime, which are currently embraced in Venezuela through a “punitive populism,” incarcerated peoples and their families continue to experience dehumanizing treatment in prisons. The lived experience of feeling powerless to a system changes the way in which people who confront the institution conceive of the government and thus they are forced to confront the contradictions of the hybrid state. Far from producing anti-neoliberal subjects that see themselves as engaged in the process of state-making, like what is taking place in communes, cooperatives, community media projects, and social movements the prison “works” to produce criminalized subjects who are marginalized from the transformative process of state-making and instead are molded by the prison into neoliberal subjects in post-neoliberal Venezuela. (Valencia, 2015). While the hybrid state has created opportunities for the production of new subjectivities that challenge neoliberal thinking, the prison produces neoliberal subjects for whom problems must be resolved in the
market—through paying the police, paying la causa, paying a lawyer, paying a judge, paying for a larger space in the prison.

In the seven months since I first interviewed Olivia there had not been a single change in Oscar’s legal situation. Oscar had not had any more hearings, the prosecutor had failed to introduce new evidence and a trial date had still not be set. In four months from out last meeting, Oscar would hit the two year mark, most likely still without a trial. According to the Venezuelan Prison Observatory, 64% of Venezuela’s prison population has is still unsentenced (some of those people may have gone to trial and been found guilty but not yet been sentenced, but many simply have not been to trial.) That means that over half of the families that have a loved one in prison are dealing with the legal process and the feeling that their lives are in limbo all the while supporting their relatives in prison. For some, the stigmatization, disappointment and pain is too great and when a family member gets locked up, that’s it, that person is cut off. For others, the financial and physical burden is unsustainable and they simply cannot continue to carry heavy bags of food, clothes and supplies, wait in long lines, endure the humiliation and the searches and continue visiting. For Oscar, despite all that he has gone through, he remains in a privileged position over many because his family continues to provide support through his imprisonment.

I gave Olivia the copy of her parent’s interview along with a radio documentary that I had produced about the prison system in Venezuela called “más alla de las rejas.” I explained that while I didn’t include either of their interviews in the documentary, that their stories were fundamental for my research and I thanked her, again for being willing to be interviewed. She thanked me and wished me well on my research and we hugged goodbye and I headed for the turnstiles and then down the escalator. As I waited for my train to arrive I continued to struggle with the reality that despite all of the attempts to “humanize the prison system,” Oscar and his
family, as well as many others preferred to be out of the grasp of the heavy-handed disciplinary regime of the government even if the alternative had its own set of risks, costs, and challenges. Is it possible that the despotic rule of the *carros* is actually more “humane” than that of the government or is the premise that prisons could be “humane” simply a preposterous to begin with? My train pulled in and I squeezed my way towards the pole. I had met Olivia during my commute on a packed train and now many months later, as a result of following their family’s journey through Oscar’s imprisonment, the Peralta family expanded my understanding of the impact of incarceration on families, and what it is to think from *the other side* and how that shift in perspective has the power and potential to transform thinking about prisons.

In the next chapter, I explore this change in thinking, from the other side, through the lens of what Mignolo (2000) calls border-thinking and I propose the concept of *carceral coloniality* as a framework for examining how prisons “work” to reproduce power relations in Venezuela that extend beyond the dynamics of neoliberal capital and instead examine the carceral in relation to the colonial matrix of power. The narratives of the Peralta family demonstrated not only their stories but their perspectives, why it is that they thought the system worked in the way it did. In this next chapter, I explore those very same questions by drawing on the past chapters of this dissertation and exploring why the system works as it does and how the prison functions—far beyond its stated goals to discipline and punish—but as an institution for the (re)production of power.
Chapter Seven  
**Carceral Coloniality:**  
**Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality and Venezuela's Prisons**

**Introduction**

Recent scholarship on the rise of the Latin American penal state is highly influenced by Wacquant's central thesis; that rising rates of incarceration are not a result of rising crime but a response to heightened “social insecurity” that was spurred from neoliberal restructuring. He argues that a loss of industrial jobs and harsh austerity measures that have eliminated the social safety net further criminalize the poor who no longer have legal means of survival in the neoliberal age (2009a). This framework has been utilized to analyze the rise of mass incarceration in the United States and the export of *mano duro* and *zero tolerance* policies to Europe and Latin America (2009b). However, alone this framework is insufficient for examining prisons in Venezuela; not only because Venezuela is actually a hybrid formation in the post neoliberal era, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation but also because the concept of “neoliberal penality” fails to recognize the historical and geopolitical positioning of Venezuela (and Latin American countries) in relation to the capitalist world-system (thus, the colonial difference) and because the prison bolsters systems of domination beyond neoliberal capitalism. In this chapter I will address these shortcomings by proposing a postulate that I am calling *carceral coloniality* which asserts that Venezuela's penal state is “nested in a matrix of 'the coloniality of power'” (Taylor, 2014, p.126,). By building from these set of assumptions, I am suggesting a different infrastructure—beyond Foucault’s Discipline and Punish and beyond Wacquant’s Neoliberal Penal State—for examining prisons in Latin America.

Research on prisons has overwhelmingly focused on the United States and Europe and
the theories that have been birthed through examining those examples have proved to be insufficient for exploring the role of prisons in Latin America. Even attempts to adapt Wacquant’s theory of the Penal State to Latin America have resulted in conclusions that completely fail to engage with Latin American racial constructs or fall back on simplistic characterizations of Latin America as more “informal” or “corrupt” without examining the colonial legacy in the region (Muller, 2010). An application of US or European constructs of race to Latin America have also been insufficient in analyzing the intersections of race and the carceral in Latin America because they fail to recognize the historical and contemporary differences in the distinct processes of racialization in different times and regions in the Americas.

Latin American philosophers and sociologists, in conversation with de-colonial thinkers from around the world have proposed a framework for understanding the expansion of the world system in the 16th century through the process of colonization and a “parallel construction of its imaginary both from inside and outside the system” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 64). Quijano (2000) refers to this is as “the coloniality of power.” Mignolo (2000) argues that “the connection of the Mediterranean with the Atlantic through a new commercial circuit in the sixteenth century lays the foundation for both modernity and coloniality” (p.51). The systems of power that were initiated through colonization & the creation of the global capitalist economy are still present today however; they are not static. This complex of power relations which manifest in material and epistemological ways are referred to as 'the coloniality of power' or 'the colonial matrix of power;’ I use both interchangeably.

Quijano and Wallerstein (1992) argue that the Americas were not simply incorporated into a capitalist economy because “...there could not have been a capitalist world economy
without the Americas” (p. 549). This framework calls for a re-reading of Latin America's history outside of the bounds of linear development theories, (including a euro-centered Marxist analysis); it creates a tool for understanding how modernity and coloniality are “two sides of the same coin” and; it offers a lens for analyzing how dynamics of race, class, sex, sexuality, authority and subjectivity operate within the context of the colonial difference, the geopolitics of knowledge, and the formation of a capitalist world economy (Mignolo, 2000, p. 91). Although the colonial matrix of power originates in the 16th century with the conquest of the Americas/The European Renaissance, it was transformed through the “derivative historical moments” of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and then again shifting when post WWII, the US replaced European powers as the world hegemony (Mignolo, 2008, p. xiii).

Unlike Wacquant's (2010) construction of the penal state, based largely on the relationship between the growth of prisons and the economic model of Neoliberalism, I argue that global capitalism is not only neoliberal but it is also colonial/modern and Euro-centered and therefore prisons need to be examined on a more complex terrain; what I call carceral coloniality. The coloniality of power is constructed on four intersecting and interconnected “controlling ambits of power;” labor, sex, authority, and subjectivity, all of which are shaped by the enduring creation of the concept of race in the 16th and 17th centuries (Taylor, 2014, p. 123). Each of these categories are “structurally linked and mutually reinforcing,” and they are also controlled through particular systems and institutions (Quijano, 2008, p. 184).

In the control of labor and its resources and products, it is the capitalist enterprise; in the control of sex and its resources and products, the bourgeois family; in the control of authority and its resources and products, the nation-state; in the control of intersubjectivity, Eurocentrism (Quijano, 2008, p. 193).

The carceral sits at the intersection of each of these areas, and therefore the prison is an institution in which the control of labor, sex, authority and intersubjectivity all converge.
Building off of the historical development of Venezuelan prisons, which I included in Chapter 2 and the ethnographic research that I presented throughout this dissertation, I will examine Venezuelan prisons in relation to the coloniality of power. First, I will demonstrate how the penitentiary and prison reform in Venezuela has been part of a project of modernity/coloniality. Second, I will explore how Quijano's "four ambits of controlling power"; labor, sex, authority, and subjectivity intersect with punishment, penal institutions and the carceral world. I will introduce this section by exploring the concept of race, which is the overarching construct that connects all of the other categories, and how race is connected to the question of prisons in Venezuela. I will also utilize Angela Davis'(2003) work which points towards the intersections of punishment, gender, race, capitalism and colonialism in US prisons. Davis' approach which places intersectionality and colonialism as the central starting point for analyzing prisons is extremely useful when analyzing prisons in Venezuela; in many ways she examines coloniality of power in the US and presents her work as a counter-point to the positivist social scientific approach of the US Academy. I will also incorporate the provocative work of Laura Segato(2007) on the question of color and prisons in Latin America and I will continue to borrow from Quijano, Mignolo as well as Lewis Taylor, who examined the four-controlling ambits of power in relation to Mass incarceration in the US. I will conclude by proposing what Mignolo refers to as “border-thinking” as a decolonial framework for exploring prisons in Venezuela with implications for Latin America. This proposal is based on viewing the prison as a border, a concept that has come from incarcerated people (Davis and Gent, 2001, p. 1236).
Prisons and Modernity/Coloniality in Latin America:

Prisons are “central to the understanding of the construction of Latin American modernity” (Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996, p.xviii). Prisons were brought to the Americas from Europe and as I demonstrated in Chapter two they were utilized in the process of colonization. The relationship between modernity and prisons in Latin America is best illustrated through examining the birth of the penitentiary and the subsequent prison reform because as Foucault notes, “prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme” (Foucault, 1979, p. 234). By examining Prison reform in Venezuela, it reveals how coloniality is “the untold and unrecognized historical counterpart of modernity” (Mignolo, 2008, xi).

Prison reform in Latin America—unlike the European and North American experiences—became part of a process of state and nation formation in which rhetoric about modernization and innovation was generally contradicted by the continual—and usually violent—exclusion of the majorities from the exercise of democratic rights and citizenship. (Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996, p. xii).

The liberal ideologies, influenced by Enlightenment thinking which placed a strong emphasis on the individual, influenced prison reformers and the positivist scientific practices of criminologists and penologists alike. Like much of the euro-centered enlightenment thinking of the 19th and 20th Century, Venezuelan reformers and scientists of crime and punishment had a fixed gaze towards the penitentiaries of Europe and the United States, and saw the replica of such models as declarations of the entrance into modernity. Liberal constitutionalism was combined with positivist criminology, both rooted in Enlightenment thinking, as the philosophical underpinnings of the creation of the penitentiary and the subsequent prison reforms in 20th Century Venezuela.

It is not a coincidence, for example that the following three events took place in the same year; the first Penitentiary was opened in Venezuela, Vagrancy Laws were created, and the
Instituto de Ciencias Penales opened at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. The birth of the penitentiary in Venezuela, which took place in 1937 (over fifty years after Latin America's first penitentiary was constructed in Brazil) symbolized Venezuela's arrival to modernity, it meant a break from the archaic colonial dungeons that had served as places of torture. The penitentiary was conceived of as a place for rehabilitation of the individual, of which newly budding experts in the fields of criminology and penology could test and implement their theories on how best to do so. Simultaneously, the building of the new modern nation in Venezuela explicitly required the exclusion of the racialized poor. The Ley de Vagos y Maleantes was the symbolic and legal means by which their exclusion could be justified and the prison served as the institution that could enforce a physical exclusion of the most marginalized from participation in the new modern nation.

Despite the fall of formal colonialism, the self-perpetuating logics birthed out of the brutal process of conquest and colonization continued to project a euro-centered subjectivity that was constructed in opposition to “the other.” These subjectivities, rooted in Christian, euro-centric, and individualistic conceptions created steep hierarchies that served to reinforce the supposed superiority of the Colonizers over those whom they conquered. This process was based on a naturalization of systems of inferiority and superiority based on sex, gender, sexuality, race, religion, class and cosmovisions. The overt policies of a racialized division of punishment in the colonial era was transformed through changing discourse around universal rights and participation in the modern nation. This transformation was bolstered by the creation of the penitentiary and its accompanying prison reforms; laws, policing and judicial practices that created a prominent discourse on the “national, racial and gender characteristics of delinquency;” and the creation of the positivist sciences of crime and punishment in the 20th Century served to
legitimate racist and eurocentric concepts of criminality and the individual through pathologizing racialized “others” (Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996, p.3). The logics of superiority and inferiority were transformed from official racial caste systems (like those in place during the colonial period) into hidden logics embedded in formal institutions and cultural systems of the liberal nation-state. The birth of the penitentiary accompanied this transition so as to systematically exclude the racialized poor from the process of building a democratic modern nation. This contradiction demonstrates the fallacy of universal individual rights in the birth of Latin American modern liberal democracies and therefore how “coloniality is constitutive of modernity.” (Mignolo, 2008, p. xiii.).

The concept of rehabilitation, the core philosophy of the penitentiary and of Venezuelan prison policy since 1937 until the neoliberal era (but with a revival in the contemporary new regime prisons), is rooted on the false premise that individuals in prison have been stripped of rights that they fully embodied before they were in prison and with reeducation on how to be a subservient worker/democratic citizen, individuals can leave prison and then have their rights re-instated. In both its theoretical conception and its practical implementation the philosophy of rehabilitation, widely expressed as the ultimate liberal goal of prisons, is built on a false and patronizing premise that the criminalized poor are fully included in the democratic nation in the first place. The subsequent programs that stem from this philosophy tend to impose values, cultural practices and ways of knowing that are rooted in the colonial/modern conceptions of citizenry; ones that are patriarchal, heterosexist, masculinist, racist, capitalist, euro-centered, and now neoliberal. Rehabilitation-as it is conceived in this colonial/modern way will always fail; not because people in prison do not want to make positive changes in their lives but because the nation-state kidnapping people who are already marginalized and imposing on to them a
program that only seeks to enforce their inferiority; is riddled with irreconcilable contradictions that will not ultimately address the root of prisoners' exclusion from society nor produce the stated desired outcomes to reduce recidivism.

While “modernity” itself is “the name of the historical process in which Europe began its progress towards world hegemony,” both capitalism and modernity/coloniality were transformed after World War II when the US took “imperial leadership.” (Mignolo, 2008 p. xiii,) The push towards “modernity” in Latin America was in turn guided by an attempt to approximate Europe and later the United States; the respective birth places of the prison and the penitentiary. While the gaze towards Europe and the US highly influenced thinking on punishment, crimes and prisons in Latin America, theories generated from European and US prison/penitentiary experiences cannot be universally applied to Latin America. I learned about the importance of this colonial difference when I was in El Rodeo prison. A young guy was telling me that he had been caught by the police smoking a joint and I jumped in to ask if this meant that he was seen as “a criminal.” He exhaled quickly and said, “Criminal? No. Try, narcotrafficante.” This example demonstrates that criminality is constructed differently based on geopolitics and therefore the prison is called upon to serve correspondingly distinct functions. The vast majority of published works on prisons today focus on the United States and Europe and the assumed universality of the European and Usian experience reinforces the coloniality of power and the geopolitics of knowledge. As an alternative, I am presenting the concept of carceral coloniality as framework that is based on the following premises plurg:

1. Systems of power and domination that were instituted through conquest and colonization of the Americas continue to be embedded in institutions, cultural practices and forms of knowledge today, despite the end of formal colonialism and changing historical circumstances.

2. The control of labor, sex & sexuality, authority, and intersubjectivity; which are all interconnected to one another and also united by the structuring of racial classifications that were created in the 16th Century to naturalize systems of domination; are intricately linked to the prison which serves as an
institution to both maintain hierarchical power structures and discipline and punish inferiorized populations through their criminalization and internment.

3. Prison reform in Latin America is highly influenced by enlightenment concepts of the individual and an approximation towards US and European models of punishment and ways of thinking about the prison. Prison reform has been a central part of the project towards modernity, whose darker side is coloniality.

4. The development of prisons in Latin America is shaped by how these peripheral nations were integrated into the global capitalist economy and how prisons could serve the interests of foreign investors as well as the domestic ruling classes of each nation.

5. Existing knowledge on prisons in Latin America is limited and reflects a euro and US-centered concepts of universality with overarching theories generated largely from USian and European case studies and ways of thinking that emphasize the individual or do not engage with the infrastructure challenges specific to Latin America.

6. Where there is coloniality, there are “seeds of decolonial agency.” Just as the structures of controlling power are linked to prisons, the decolonization of prisons is necessary for de-linking from the colonial matrix of power

All of these are intricately connected to one another. Through asking how the prison “works” in the (re)production of power relations in Venezuela, I have found that examining policies and rationalities of the hybrid post-neoliberal state does not fully account for how the prison works nor for the everyday experiences that people face when interacting with the penal system. For this reason, I draw on this concept of carceral coloniality to compliment the examination of the political economy of prisons in post-neoliberal Venezuela and to further address the fundamental questions that I posed throughout my research. Now I will specifically explore how the four controlling amits of power; labor, sex & sexuality, authority and intersubjectivity are reflected in and constitutive of the carceral. Before examining each of those categories, I will explore how the construct of race lays at the foundation of all other categories.

**Carceral Coloniality**

**Race: “The most Effective and Long Lasting Instrument of Universal Social Domination”**59

The fundamental modern concept, created in the sixteenth century, as a mechanism of

59 Quijano, 2000, p.534-535
social classification to distinguish between the conquerors and the conquered and to maintain the system of domination is the creation of the concept of race. Quijano (2000, p. 534) describes this formation in the following way:

From the sixteenth century on, this racial principle has proven to be the most effective and long-lasting instrument of universal social domination...In this way, race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society's structure of power.

As Quijano argues, race replaced the more ancient inter-sexual domination of men as superior to women with a categorization that did not exist prior to colonization. Following which the ongoing domination of conquered peoples was maintained through a classification system based on the idea that conquered populations were naturally inferior to those who dominated them. Prior to colonization, the categories of Indian, black, mestizo, or white did not exist. Previously categorization based on national origin were not fueled by the same racial meaning that was applied to them following colonization. For example, Spanish, Portuguese, and the new construct of European became associated with whiteness and therefore a “natural” superiority over racialized “others”.

The “four controlling ambits of power,” as Lewis Taylor (2014) calls them, or “the elements of structures of power,” as Quijano refers to them, labor, sex & sexuality, authority, and subjectivity all overlap and are connected to the enduring concept of race and the persistent systems of domination based on racial categorization. The concept of race, racism and the continued racial classifications and systems of racialized domination are the cornerstone of the coloniality of power and therefore race is a central theme to all of the other categories that I will explore.

Since “the racial tensions and conflicts are not as violent and explicit as those in South Africa or the southern United States” the concept of “racial democracy” in Venezuela can often
serve to mask “the true discrimination and colonial domination of blacks” (Quijano, 200, p.568). The construction of Venezuelan *mestizaje* projects a concept of racial sameness under the guise of a universally shared mixed heritage, what Wright (1991) refers to as *Café con Leche*. The process of racialization in Venezuela looks different from the rigid “one-drop” rule that shapes racialization in the United States. In Venezuela, some aspects of racial categorizations are more fluid, linked to class which of course is a legacy of the racialized division of labor imposed through colonization and slavery, and overlap with concepts of ethnicity - a sense of cultural belonging to a group. Because of these differences, it can be very challenging to have fixed categories of race, like those often utilized in the US. Simply applying US racial constructs not only imposes a form of race imperialism but they can also fail to accurately reflect the everyday lived experiences of Venezuelans. Critical race theories that have focused on race not as static but racialization as a process shaped by context and other factors is much more useful for examining race and identity in Latin America. For example, Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) examines the concepts of racial democracy and *mestizaje* in Brazil (which are similar to those in Venezuela) and argues that as opposed to excluding blacks (like in the US) in Brazil, blacks are engulfed in the national (mestizo) subject thus difference is always placed in the past (p. 248-249).

Through my research, I found that many Venezuelans defined the process of racialization in spatial terms, based on one's association to place. Like in El Rodeo prison, people with darker skin would be introduced to me as coming from Africa or Haiti (therefore actually presented as ‘foreigners’) or as being from Barlovento—a northern coastal region of Venezuela known for its African roots—and in some cases, they had no actual connection whatsoever to Barlovento. A former prisoner in El Rodeo and resident of La Vega, a neighborhood in Caracas well known as
the urban outpost for people from the more rural Barlovento, described the place-based
categorizations as “lugareño” which he describes as being “like racism but about a place.”
Examples of this include associating the countryside with backwardness and the barrio with
criminality, both of which carry racialized signifiers. Race clearly takes on a socio-spatial
character in Venezuela; unlike the “inner-cities” of the United States poor barrios are described
interchangeably with the concept of the “periphery” (Davis, 2007). The policing of poor
racialized youth in the spaces of the city center and elite suburbs is one of the mechanisms for
enforcing race, which can be partially understood in relation to access and in access to certain
public and private spaces (Harrison-Conwill, 2011). Following a mass arrest of black and
brown youth at an elite shopping mall in Sao Paulo, a black activist and scholar published an
article with the headline: “Black Bodies in the Wrong Place” thus reinforcing the spatial-
character of current racializations in Latin America. This was also expressed to me in El Rodeo
prison, when the two black men argued that as a result of their skin color (one guy was speaking
while pointing to his chocolate-brown arm), they are turned away from dance clubs downtown.
The racial caste system has changed from the colonial period but there is a persistent and
enduring process of racialization which “continue[s] to determine access to the most
recognizable public spaces” (Harrison-Conwill, 2011, p. 169). The current systems of racial
domination relate skin color and other racial signifiers like place of origin, residency, dress,
speech, class, or the way one carries oneself or represents one’s cultural belonging on a

60 Douglas Belchior, professor of history and sociology authored “Shopping Vitoria: Black Bodies in the Wrong
Place” in Carta Capital on December 2, 2013 as a response to the controversy surrounding the “rolezinho” in Sao
Paulo (cited from Pinho, 2014).
61 There are divergent racializations in different contexts, countries and regions in Latin America. Brazil and
Colombia are most similar to Venezuela in that they all embrace a concept of “racial democracy” based on a national
project of a mestizaje constructed on European, African and Indigenous heritage.
62 A Chilean hiphop artist who had been harassed by the police while touring in Venezuela told me that despite
having “light skin” he and his crew drew the attention of authorities because he has “the international style of pull
me over.” (Personal conversation, June 2015).
naturalized hierarchy of superiority and inferiority.

Massive urbanization as a result of neoliberal restructuring and the oil boom led to the creation of enormous barrios in Caracas and other urban centers. And, “because many barrios are built on land to which residents have no legal claim, the illegality of these informal settlements reinforces associations between the urban poor and illegitimacy” (Harrison-Conwill, 2011, p.174) The spatial projections of discrimination on entire barrios and the racialization and criminalization of barrio residents also demonstrates how racism plays out in Venezuela in a way that is not solely rooted in skin color but is constructed on the intersecting axes of place, class, race and ethnicity. I propose that the prison is an institution that contributes to the complex process of racialization in Venezuela because criminality and therefore incarceration is associated with blackness. The prison is a place of confinement for the racialized poor, that is to say that while it is not necessarily for “the indian” or “the african” it is for 'the other' “que tiene la marca del indio o del africano, la huella de su subordinación histórica, que son los que constituyen todavía las grandes masas de población desposeída” (Segato, 2007, p. 156). In the 1993 song “Haiti” by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, the famous Brazilian artists sing about the 1992 prison massacre at Carandiru Penitentiary:

And when you hear São Paulo’s grinning silence
In the face of the slaughter
[of]
111 defenseless prisoners, but prisoners are almost all black
Or almost black, or almost-whites almost black because they’re so poor
And the poor are fucked and everyone knows how blacks are treated

The description of prisoners as “almost black” demonstrates how the prison (re)produces concepts of blackness. Scholars and incarcerated intellectuals have utilized the concept of “the
convict race” to describe this process (Seigel, 2012; Gilmore, 2007; Lynd, 2011). In Venezuela, many people who I spoke with about the 2011 conflict at El Rodeo said that when they watched the national guard take control of the prison and escort prisoners out with their hands on their heads, a number of people described the prison population to me as being “puros negritos.” I have seen this same media coverage and the shirtless bodies that are forced out at gun-point reflected the range of skin color and phenotypes found in the barrios of Venezuela, but based on the context of their incarceration (and subordination by the state) their race was read as black by the Venezuelans that I spoke with. Even so, many Venezuelan interpret this as a reflection of class and the racialized class divides that exist within the country as a result of past forms of discrimination.

But Segato (2007) ties these forms of historical exclusion to contemporary concepts of race, arguing that there is an undeniable relationship between “color” and incarceration in Latin America.

La raza que está en las cárcceles es la del no blanco, la de aquellos en los que leemos una posición, una herencia particular, el paso de una historia, una carga de etnicidad muy fragmentada, con un correlato cultural de clase y de estrato social (151).

She goes on to say that speaking about “color” in prisons in Latin America is to speak of “una guerra a la que nosotros –los autores, los que ponemos nombres–estamos llegando tarde” (p. 145) Talking about race in such terms challenges constructs used by the traditional and academic left in Latin America who may criticize this formulation because it appears to give power to the “mathematics of difference.” Segato (2007) responds the following way:

No me refiero a la idea de raza que domina el mecanicismo clasificatorio norteamericano, sino a la raza como marca de pueblos despojados y ahora en reemergencia; es decir, raza como instrumento de ruptura de un mestizaje políticamente anodino en vías de desconstrucción, como indicio de la persistencia y la memoria de un pasado que podrá guárnos también a la recuperación de viejos saberes, de soluciones olvidadas, en un mundo en que ni la economía ni la justicia son ya viables. (p. 145)
One of the challenges of examining the racialization of prisons in Latin America is that penitentiaries are often presented as US and European inventions that are separate from other systems of confinement and slavery. While research on the convict-leasing system in the United States has closed the conceptual gap, so to speak, between slavery and the prison system (especially the use of private prisons)—as well as the US Constitution's 13th Amendment which states that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

There is an urgent need to close this gap in Latin America and to continue to explore punishment systems and the control of bodies as it relates to slavery, bondage, servitude and other systems of forced labor. Lewis Taylor (2014) argues that “prisons must be seen...in the context of the mix of racism, captivity, [and] practices of bodily control long practiced by colonizing powers” (p. 127). Segato (2007) makes the connection between slavery and prisons in the following way:

_Esa continuidad entre la reducción a la servidumbre y a la esclavitud del pasado y las cárcel..._ (p. 144).

She is arguing that, in part the indifference to suffering that takes place in the prisons is built on a dehumanizing process of racialization that asserts the naturalness of the suffering of people deemed to be ‘others;’ “nonwhites.” This indifference is reflected in the “grinning silence” in the song mentioned above, of the presumably white subjects who represent the universal gaze in the
colonial/modern context, and it is also reflected in the comments posted in response to a youtube video that shows the use of deadly force on incarcerated people inside of El Rodeo II prison; they read “it would make me happy to see them dead” and “Esos maldito presos se quejan cuando los matan,…Como me gustaría poner 500 Kg. de C4 y reventarlos a todos por hijos de puta.[sic.]”63

In practical terms, the collection of data based on racial classification is extremely challenging because of the complexity, mutability and subjectivity of racial categories in Venezuela. Afro-Venezuelan was listed as a racial category for the first time in the 2010 census, but because of how it was implemented, members of the Afro-Venezuelan network were disappointed by what they see as misconstrued results that reflect a lack of explanation and education about the categories as well as internalized racism.64 The state also has an interests in concealing the collection of data focused on racial differences in relation to the judicial and penal systems in Venezuela and throughout Latin America because they will inevitably point towards structural state racism which, in Venezuela would contradict the belief in “racial democracy” (Segato, 2007, p. 145; Hernández, 2013).

The concept that there is a correlation between “color” and prisons in Venezuela is extremely controversial and tends to come up against an immediate rejection from some state officials, scholars, and many incarcerated people. Most people instead link incarceration to issues of class and many people that I spoke with en la cárcel and en la calle in Venezuela reflected that race is “not a problem” in prisons in Venezuela by using movies and TV shows that depict prison life in the US (Prison Break and Shawshank Redemption for example) as foils to argue that

63 See comments below “Video exclusivo de la masacre en la cárcel de El Rodeo II en Miranda, Venezuela” found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhfAI3rzWU4
64 Interview with Freddy Blanco and Hector Suarez, September 20, 2014.
Venezuelan prison life does not reflect the highly racially segregated life like they have seen of the US in popular media. I argue that while there is an overrepresentation of Afro-Venezuelans in prisons and that racial profiling contributes to the policing and criminalization of black and brown youth from the barrios, the prison “works” as an essential institution in the process of race-making in Venezuela. Through one’s very presence in the prison, and in spite of “color” or phenotype, one approximates blackness in Venezuela and this is because the prison was created as an institution to reinforce the association between blackness and criminality. The persistence of the ordering of domination in racialized terms is both reflected and (re)produced by the prison system; I have argued that this is one aspect of the “work” that the prison does. But race also overlaps with the “four controlling ambits of power;” in the systems of punishment and confinement. Keeping attention to the ongoing intersections, I will now explore each of these elements of carceral coloniality.

**Labor**

Since the colonial era the prison has been an instrument for disciplining and controlling the labor force. Furthermore, the racialized division of labor built on racial constructs, created to justify colonization and slavery engendered a racialized division of punishment represented by distinct locales of incarceration based on social status (a signifier of one's relationship to the global capitalist economy.) The prison itself was an institution that bolstered slavery, one of the most violent forms of control of the labor force, and even after slavery's decline, racially coded labor laws sought to criminalize and control Afro-descendent rural workers as a means of labor discipline.

Beyond labor discipline, the prison population became cheap or free labor on public works projects. Infrastructure projects such as highways that were also a part of the project
aimed at modernizing Venezuela were completed by indentured prison laborers who were forced to, literally, pave the long road towards modernity. The meager incomes that were earned through forced labor went to cover cost of living in prison or were paid directly to slave owners (in the case of incarcerated people who were enslaved). Forced labor was construed as educational or job training and was justified as the remedy for a natural inclination towards laziness which was projected onto criminalized groups. The racialization of people of African descent aimed to associate darker skin color with criminality and laziness; this logic was used to justify a natural inferiority of blacks which placed them in the lowest ranks of earning within the capitalist system; this logic justified low or no wages for their work.

As the wage system grew under the capitalist production model, labor became associated with time, just as prison sentences are. Davis (2003) explains how “the computability of state punishment in terms of time-days, months, years-resonates with the role of labor-time as the basis for computing the value of capitalist commodities” (p.44). In order to enforce the incorporation of laborers into the capitalist economy, anti-vagrancy laws served to criminalize the poor, especially those who worked in informal sectors, and those who rejected, or did not have access to wage labor. Through the 1937 Ley de Vagos y Maleantes, those who were not formally incorporated into the wage-economy, or perceived to be “vagrants” could be arrested and incarcerated on those grounds alone. This crack down accompanied the birth of the penitentiary in Venezuela, which oriented its rehabilitative efforts towards job training so that people in prison could assume their role as laborers in the global capitalist economy, either as prison laborers while incarcerated or, as wage laborers upon their release.

For women, this training has tended towards laboring in the domestic sphere, which reproduces the concept that women are naturally domestic and nurturing and it strengthens the
patriarchal logic that women are subservient to men in a masculinist conception of the nuclear family. Furthermore since domestic work is perceived as natural to women, women's labor in the prison is less likely to be seen as work and therefore less likely to receive, even modest compensation (Davis, 2003). For example in Chapter Five, I explained how incarcerated men can bake bread, do mechanical or agricultural work to receive modest compensation at David Villoria (Uribana) prison and meanwhile women are expected to do all of the cooking and cleaning to maintain the annex in which they are incarcerated and they are not remunerated for their work.

Within the prisons under internal self-rule; the Pran controls the labor of the incarcerated population. El carro controls a central bank from which the population is taxed. In order to pay the weekly causa, many people in prison must find a way to make an income. The means by which people can pay this weekly tax are: by receiving support from family members (often whom have to work extra or engage in illicit activities to earn money), or incarcerated people can run businesses inside of the prison; however they are often dependent on prison leadership for negotiating the entrance of tools, machines, or supplies needed for their business (which often means that they start out in debt,) and lastly, sometime people pay their “causa” by working directly for the leadership as a type of indentured servitude. The further segmentation of the prison population according to the internal rutina in the open-regime prisons also creates a class of prisoners who are labeled as brujas or trabajadores, workers. Antillano et al(2014) explain how “economic extraction also operates by appropriating the forced labor of segments of the population,” the trabajadores in addition to members of the church are converted into a “semi-slave work force.”

The premise that the rise of the prison as a response to loss of industrial jobs and a safety
net due to neoliberal restructuring helps to explain one aspect of labor's relationship with the carceral. In the neoliberal period in Venezuela, the prison population increased as a result of rising unemployment even in periods when crime rates were stagnant. This has been the case in the United States since the 1980s and Gilmore (2007) argues that labor surplus, among other forms of surplus, contributed to growing rates of imprisonment in California during the prison boom. The relationship between increased rates of incarceration and unemployment is demonstrated in the neoliberal period in Venezuela and as unemployment increases (especially youth unemployment) during the economic crisis, it appears as if prison rates will continue to grow.

In addition to warehousing the “reserve army of labor” in prisons, the penitentiary and preceding punishment regimes were utilized to discipline the labor force since the colonial period but this “work” of the prison accelerated most significantly in the early part of the 20th Century as Venezuela’s transition from an agricultural exporter to oil producer opened up new possibilities for consolidating the nation-state under a liberal modern democracy. The criminalization of vagrancy, the use of prison labor on infrastructure projects, and the transformation of prisons as institutions of punishment into training schools for skills all contributed to pushing the (rural and urban) poor was, into the wage system and capitalist modes of production.

In the contemporary dual prison system in Venezuela, the control, discipline, management and exploitation of labor continues to be a vital aspect of explaining how and why the prisons function in the post-neoliberal era. In the open-regime prisons, the active control of prison labor is extracted from the marginalized sectors within the prison and utilized to maintain the prison, and establish the vertical systems of control based on exploitation and management of labor
power. *La causa* creates an incentive and need for incarcerated people to engage in income generating activities inside the prison or to rely on the labor and income of their loved ones. In the new regime prisons, the same discourse of turning “*malandros*” into “*trabajadores*” is at play and the new regime is being employed to make “a new man” to participate as a laborer in the capitalist economy but who also identifies with the government and embraces the liberal concepts of individual rights. Prison labor is also being mobilized by the MSP to construct new prisons through *Plan Cambote* thus the expansion of the prison complex itself is predicated on the ability to mobilize the labor of current prisoners.

Additional aspects related to labor and prison include; sex work within the prison both among the incarcerated population and with outsiders who enter on visiting days and sell sexual services to the prison population. There is also the labor of caring for loved ones who are incarcerated, which I will address in the next section on sex and sexuality.

**Sex and Sexuality**

Much of the punishment of women, especially those who deviate from the norms of the patriarchal nuclear family continue to be punished in private through physical violence. The courts and the prison system however; are also employed to strengthen the authority of the patriarchal nuclear bourgeois family. In the colonial period, women's lack of public rights determined the types of punishments that they could receive and “since women were largely denied public status as rights-bearing individuals they could not be easily punished by the deprivation of such rights” (Davis, 2003, p. 45). Many of the so-called crimes that women were charged with in the colonial period through the early 20th century in Venezuela were related to sexual behavior; adultery and prostitution (Troconis de Veracoecchea, 1983). The criminalization
of poor women, reinforced a portrayal of *mestiza* and Afro-descendent women as collectively *naturally* sexually deviant whereas elite women accused of similar “crimes” were often portrayed as having mental illness or individual problems. The punishment of women, whose “crimes” were often conflated with sex demonstrate that the “intersection of criminality and sexuality continues to be racialized” (Davis, 2003, p. 68).

The sex segregation of prisoners also marks a difference in the rules and norms of conduct for men and women in prison, which “enables and contributes to the production of masculinity and femininity.” (Pemberton, 2013, p. 166). In Colonial Venezuela, this sex segregation was only practiced with “whites” whereas “non-whites” were not sex segregated, highlighting how sex and gender are inherently racialized as a part of the colonial matrix of power. The sex segregation of prisons in Venezuela today serves to emphasize patriarchal, masculinist and homophobic constructs of masculinity and femininity by reinforcing the gender binary and creating institutions built on the policing of masculinities and femininities.

Women's prisons tend to place emphasis on correcting “womanly behaviors” and the rehabilitative programs that exist aim to train women to do domestic labor. Reflecting on this process in the United States, Davis (2003) notes how the prison produces “skilled domestic servants among black and poor women” (p. 64). Demonstrating the intersection between race, class, gender and labor, the production of a domestic labor underclass is one result of women's prisons in Venezuela. Pemberton (2013) adds that this process “attempts to normalize female prisoners, according to white, middle-class conceptions of acceptable femininity” (p. 166). Even the concept of re-habilitation is rooted in the Latin meaning of *habilis*, of “fit, proper, skillful” Fit for what? Proper according to whom? Skillful at serving what to whom? The example that I mentioned above of women in Uribana prison doing uncompensated domestic work while their
male counterparts were compensated for baking bread highlights how women's prisons not only make women more “fit” for domestic work but also maintain the myth that such labor is inherent to femininity (and therefore ought not be compensated) reinforcing domestic work as compensated or underpaid and undervalued labor (Gilmore, 2007; Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Fortunati, 1975; Federici, 2004).

The role of hegemonic masculinities does not only shape the experience of women in prison, men are equally impacted, albeit in different ways, by the gendering of prisons which violence is often equated with masculinity (Davis and Gent, 2001, p. 1240) Hegemonic masculinity in turn functions to inferiorize subordinated masculinities through threats of violence and through creating an environment that Pemberton (2013) refers to a “toxic masculinity” (p. 168). “Subordinated masculinities,” those who do not conform to a heterosexist, macho and violent embodiment of manliness or those who identify with other genders or are gay, queer, or transgender are placed in an inferior position within the context of hegemonic masculinity. The state participates in this ordering through its long history of the criminalization of homosexuality, queer sexual acts and other forms of sexual 'deviance,' which have historically been defined by the Catholic Church in collaboration with the state in Venezuela. While the Ecclesiastical prisons of the colonial period brutally tortured and punished individuals suspected to be homosexuals, the 1937 Ley de Vagos y Maleantes actually criminalized homosexuality, therefore using state institutions of the punishment system to enforce adherence to hegemonic masculinities and to oppress those who did not conform. Outside of the prison walls, heterosexist norms were imposed through the church, the state and the cultural values imposed on the poor by the elite. In the face of this oppression, homosexual relationships were often carried out clandestinely and queers who were rejected from their families were often forced into
illicit work, including sex work. These circumstances combined with official state policy that criminalized and policed homosexuality, set the stage for disproportionate rates of queers and homosexuals in prisons because hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative sex is heavily policed. While it is difficult to find statistics on the presence of gay or trans people in prison, through my research I perceived that the question of homosexuality in the prison was delicate and people assumed to be gay faced life-threatening violence, rape and sexual harassment.65

In the open-regime prisons in Venezuela today it is common knowledge that rapists and homosexuals are killed by *el carro* upon entrance into the prison. People who are charged with rape, molestation, (homosexual) public sex, and prostitution or are rumored to be gay are often not safe in the general prison population in male prisons. Individuals facing these circumstances might engage in a hunger strike, further dramatized through sewing ones lips together, or never enter *el mundo* of the prison, staying on the margins of the physical structure and pleading to be transferred to a new regime prison for their own safety. In personal conversations with guys incarcerated in El Rodeo, many people confirmed to me that this is not just a rumor or threat. When I asked if anyone had personally witnessed someone being killed because they were alleged to be a homosexual, six out of eight people confirmed that they had seen that type of an execution. *La rutina* also takes a similar stance towards sex offenders, especially people labeled as child molesters, which sends similarly violent but perhaps more interesting messages about the bounds of criminal masculinity. Nonetheless, the misleading association between sexual orientation and committing acts of sexual violence reinforce homophobic ideas that

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65 Most research on LGBT incarceration has been done in the US. Amnesty International released a 2001 study called Crimes of hate, conspiracy of silence: Torture and ill-treatment based on sexual identity” which explores the treatment of LGBT prisons outside of the US but very little data is done on Latin America. Encarnacion (2016) argues that despite the expansion of former rights for LGBT people in Latin America, this increase in rights is being accompanied by increasing state violence towards queer and trans people in Latin America.
homosexuality implies predatory behavior or is otherwise connected to rape and molestation.

When I visited Uribana prison in February of 2015, one of the pavilions that I did not visit was the pavilion for “homosexuals and rapists,” who were placed together “for their own safety” according to the prison worker that gave me a ride home. Each time this very professional and kind man tried to explain to me the circumstances of incarcerated people who are queer he began by saying “los maric...” (as if to start saying the equivalent for “faggot”) and then he quickly corrected himself to say “homosexuales.”

The question of rape and molestation is far more complicated and shows a rupture between internal incarcerated views on criminality and the states' umbrella of criminalization.

According to the malandros that I spoke to in various prisons, they do not see rape as a part of criminality, which they otherwise largely have embraced and reclaimed. One young guy in prison suggested that I look up a youtube video called “La reina del arroz con pollo” and months after watching the disturbing video, I learned that Venezuelan journalist Patricia Clarembaux also wrote about this particularly graphic video and did some follow up investigation. The video was filmed in 2008 in Vista Hermosa prison which I visited during my fieldwork in 2014.

Clarembaux confirmed that the man featured in the video had been charged with raping an eight year old girl. In the video the voice behind the camera instructs this man to insert a stick of deodorant in his anus, instructing him to say “Que rico el Mum bolita.” After inserting the stick of deodorant inside his anal cavity he is featured in the next scene wearing pink underwear and a white bra and he is paraded around the prison to a group of laughing and cheering young men. A gunshot goes off, and then he is instructed to shake his hips and walk “like a female.” In front of the camera and the group of cheering guys, at the command of the voice behind the camera, he removes the stick of deodorant. Then, he is shown sucking the erect penis of an unidentified
man whose head is not in the frame of the camera. All the while he is being instructed to say that
he is enjoying it. Cut to the next scene where he is being penetrated from behind while the voice
behind the camara demands that he make sounds of pleasure “like a woman” and that he
demands that the victim say “lo que quiero es huevo.”

When Clarembaux (2009) did follow up research on this incident she confirmed that the
victim in the video had not been killed. Interestingly the person who she interviewed explained
that before the survivor from the video was humiliated and raped, they verified that there was no
doubt in his case by soliciting evidence from a forensic team (ie. the results of a rape kit). When
she asked someone in leadership at Vista Hermosa in this time period if he approved of this form
of violent retribution, she got the following answer:

No. Uno no lo aprueba, pero cómo haces si ésa es la rutina que está implementada. La violación
no está dentro de ningún parámetro de la delincuencia. Eso no lo vemos nada bien y mucho
menos cuando se trata de una niña. Si es una chama de 18 o 19 años, uno está más consciente
porque hay mujeres que cuando están dolidas dicen que la pareja las violó. (p. 73)

There are three things that I want to point to here. First, *la rutina* established in the open-regime
prisons does not include rape into its definitions of delinquency. While the state may send
someone charged or convicted of rape to prison, the broader prison community and the
established code of conduct enforces this line by punishing the accused (or seemingly guilty, in
this case) person. Second, as the person quoted above makes clear, this firm rejection of rape is
largely for cases of rape and molestation of minors/children. There seems to be much more
leniency for men accused of raping women in part based on an underlying sexist and violent
assumption that women regularly lie about being raped. Third, while the victim in the youtube
video was engaging in coerced sexual acts with other men (most likely at gunpoint), the
unidentified penetrator/perpetrator is, according to *la rutina* and Latin American conceptions of
homosexuality, not a threat to hegemonic masculinity. This is because sexual orientation is more

329
often constructed upon concepts of playing gender roles than on ideas about attraction or desire. That is to say, the victim in the video was made to play the part of the woman, being penetrated, wearing women's under garments, being instructed to make sounds like “women would make,” whereas the man who received coerced oral sex and who anally penetrated him is performing his role as male, as the one who penetrates and is in control; therefore he is not gay because he is still 'a man.'

There is undoubtedly homosexual/queer/lesbian sex (both consensual and coerced) taking place in male and female prisons but it is an extremely taboo topic and a dangerous line of inquiry considering that “outing” someone could have devastating implications for them. This example highlights how the prison is not only a depository for the surplus labor pool, it is also an institution that enforces, reinforces, creates, and recreates hegemonic gender norms, homophobia and transphobia. Social exclusion, alienation, and oppression of “subjugated masculinities or femininities” outside of prison walls is then compounded with state policies and policing of masculinist gender norms, la rutina and the internal gendering in the prisons under both state control and self-rule in Venezuela. Despite significant overlap in prison policies for men and women, the discontinuities demonstrate how prisons are gendered beyond the obvious sex segregation.

For example, despite an increasing number of women in prisons largely as a result of the war on drugs, the fact that women only make up six percent of the prison population in Venezuela, means that there are less facilities that serve as women's prisons (OVP, Informe Semestral 2014). INOF is the only prison specifically for women and it is located in Los Teques, in the northern central capital region of the country. INOF is run by the government, has a variety of programs, and a maternity section where women can stay with their babies in prison
until they are three years old. Every study that I have seen that directly focuses on women's prisons or women and incarceration in Venezuela examines INOF while there are a handful of more remote and less funded women's annexes in prisons throughout Venezuela which have never been the subject of research (Suárez Faillace, 1997). Because there are less prisons specifically for women, female prisoners are more likely to be incarcerated further from family members which would imply a lack of financial, material, or emotional support from family members.

On the other hand the high rates of incarceration of men creates significant work for the women who support them (largely mothers, wives and sisters). Many women with male loved ones in prison cook on a bi-weekly, if not weekly basis and deliver goods to the prison, which because of limited resources, are absolutely necessary for the survival and sustenance of incarcerated people. Whether the prison is nearby or a long-distance trip, this work takes at least a day's worth of labor, not to mention resources to cover the costs of transportation and materials that family members bring to their loved ones. Additionally, women are often left to care for their children, when their male partners are in prison. I met hundreds of women who spend nearly every weekend at the prison caring for their husbands, sons, brothers and grandsons. Some women took this work on as their maternal or feminine duty and other complained about the toll that it paid on them or the other parts of their lives that they neglected to make a visit and bring supplies on a regular basis.

When women are in prison in Venezuela, they often have less support from relatives, especially because of the women incarcerated are mothers; their female relatives are taking care of their children on the outside and therefore cannot provide additional care for the children’s mother in prison. The dynamics of gendered divisions of labor in the family become magnified
when family support is converted into an essential resource for the confined in Venezuela; it implies different access to support and resources for male and female prisoners as well as gendered differences in responsibilities for the family members of incarcerated people. When men have to assume reproductive labor within the prison—work done by women on the outside—this contributes to a de-masculinization that is often compensated for through a hyper-masculinity.

The theme of maternity is not only relevant for mothers in prison. Much of the rhetoric on the causes of crime and violence have pointed fingers towards the “bad” poor single mothers. Antillano et al (2014) argues that

this discourse explains delinquency as the product of the lack of moral values and deficient family education ...which privatizes and assigns blame to the family, particularly the most vulnerable families, single mother households...

Mothers in poor neighborhoods are therefore made to be seen as “responsible” for violence (Antillano et al, 2014, p.9). The Ministry of Penitentiary Services is utilizing this sense of maternal responsibility to enlist mothers in a pacification plan of the prisons. The program (explored in Chapter 5) is called llegó Maíta, using the prison slang for mother in the name of their program for working with the mothers of incarcerated people.

The tough on crime response of the state illustrated through mano dura and zero tolerance policies exemplifies a “(re)-masculinizing” of the state in which “the nexus between state-sanctioned violence and masculinity is being reaffirmed” (Stachowitsch, 2010) Not only does the state represent the paternal figure but Bourdieu refers sees the “right hand” of the state; the punitive side that includes police and prisons as the masculine side of the “bureaucratic field”(Droit and Ferenczi, 2012, pp.3-4). This re-masculinizing of the state is one example among many of how sex, sexuality are related to the carceral on a broader institutional level that
stretches beyond gender or identity.

**Authority**

Quijano (2008) engages with questions of authority as they relate to the building of the nation-state. He argues that a modern nation state is built on the concepts of citizenship and political democracy but only insofar as citizenship can provide “legal, civil and political equality for socially unequal people” (Quijano, p.205). Therefore the nation state which is largely understood as a centralized power that expresses its domination over a given territory through the use of violence and the creation of an “imagined community” only exists in Latin America through the exclusion of the majorities and through the maintenance of the coloniality of power. When examining prisons, the nation state plays a key role as prisons are a concrete manifestation of state authority and control over a territory.

Because the Venezuelan nation was constructed on the shared interest in the territory's valuable subsoil, and the state's management of those resources; power and authority were concentrated in the state apparatus. The state—as negotiator with foreign oil companies, as an institution organized to engage directly with transnational capitalism, and as arbitrator and distributor of oil wealth—has been the significant venue for the exercise of power since the early 20th Century when oil exports quickly outpaced all other exports. But the Venezuelan state is not only organized to manage and dominate its own territories, through Hugo Chávez's work as a member of OPEC, and through the former management of the multinational gas chain CITGO, or through bilateral and regional trade agreements, Venezuela as oil-producer exerted its authority beyond its national boundaries and conversely larger transnational forces, like the price of oil on the world market, have astounding impacts on the national budget, state capacity and
the people of Venezuela.

The construction, expansion and “modernization” of prisons are an integral part of the nation-building process in Venezuela; each process of consolidation of the nation-state since the late 19th Century has included reforming, “modernizing” and expanding the prison system. From the formation of the liberal modern state through “Order and Moral Regeneration,” through the post-Gomez reorganization of the nation-state that coincided with the 1937 Chisonne reforms and adoption of the first penitentiary, to the 1961 reform of penal codes that accompanied with the founding of the modern rentier liberalism; to the creation of the new regime prisons in the postneoliberal era; changes in the prison are integral to changes in the organization of the nation-state. In all of these examples, as rights and citizenship were extended to some, the liberal version of equality was always predicated on the exclusion of the majorities. While the Bolivarian Revolution expanded the umbrella of social and political inclusion, the lack of universality of the social programs, the remaining currents of liberalism within the post-neoliberal order and the persisting economic inequality in the country continues to result in marginalization and exclusion; despite the progress made in the first 10 years of the revolutionary process. While reforming the prison system had not initially been tied into reforming the nation—when the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was recreated through the 1999 Constitution—the “revolucion penitenciaria” was taken up in 2011.

The prison bolsters the exclusion of the majorities because the prison’s “work” is supposedly to punish individual criminals for deviance and transgression when the broader function is to punish, warehouse and control criminalized communities as a mechanism of justifying their exclusion from social, political and economic life. The language of rehabilitation of criminals that is present in the liberal thinking on prison reform present in the 1937, 1961 and
2011 prison reforms continues to face a puzzling paradox: How do people return to rights which they never had in the first place?

Prior to the consolidation of the Venezuelan State the southwestern territory that is today a part of the state of Bolívar had not been completely claimed and defended by the Venezuelan nation. In search of natural resources and gold settlers from British Guyana entered the territory provoking General Domingo Antonio Sifontes to lead a military offensive against the British, officially claiming the land, rich in gold, for Venezuela. And in 1884, Sifontes founded the town of El Dorado, named after the legendary city of gold. Exactly 80 years after the city was founded in the extremely remote and indigenous region of Venezuela, President Isaías Medina Angarita opened the “colonias móviles de el Dorado” a remote penitentiary (“mobile colony”) along the Cuyúni river. The first prisoners were transferred in 1944 and there is some debate as to whether they were political prisoners transferred from the Isla del Burro concentration camp or whether they had been picked up under the law of Vagos and Maleantes. The “colony” was equated with concentration camps by those who were imprisoned there yet it played an important role in creating jobs and services and drawing state infrastructure into the remote town of El Dorado which is only 40 miles to the Guyanese border, 400 miles to Brazil and a thousand miles from the Venezuelan capital of Caracas (Rojas, February 24, 2015).

In 1973, after complaints of human rights violations, El Dorado was turned into an “agricultural penal colony” and 200 prisoners from San Juan de los Morros prison were transferred and enlisted in deforesting over 400 hectares, half of which was used to plant corn. Despite a brief closure under Carlos Andres Perez, El Dorado continues to function as of this

66Romulo Betancourt, former president of Venezuela and former political prisoner claimed that political prisoners had been sent from la isla del burro whereas the following website states that 100 people arrested under the ley de vagos and maleantes were brought in See Fernández’s blog Crónicas Angostureñas. An article on Isla del Burro can be found here: http://cronicasangostureas.blogspot.com/2013/10/la-colonia-penal-de-el-dorado.html
writing. In 1984, 1150 prisoners were said to be incarcerated there and El Dorado is famous, even among other prisons in Venezuela as having the absolute worst conditions and as of being unimaginably far from where the vast majority of Venezuela’s population is located. This penal colony model brought a large confined group of laborers to an economically undeveloped and partially unincorporated part of Venezuela's territory. This simultaneously transferred a pool of laborers to cultivate crops in a remote region of Venezuela but in doing so, it brought the nation-in the form of a prison, its subjects and personnel—to a previously loosely incorporated indigenous and foreign occupied territory. The prison was utilized as a part of the process of consolidation and expansion of the state through the creation of a prison “colony.”

While El Dorado is perhaps the most dramatic example of this, one can look at a map of prisons in Venezuela and recognize them as outposts of the nation-state in what is otherwise a huge and diverse territory. But authority is not solely possessed by the nation-state, it can also be understood in how power and knowledge play out in people's daily lives, what Foucault calls “governmentality.” This can include the prisonification of broader society, like the increasing reliance on gated communities for the rich and the ways in which the ghetto and the prison “meet and mesh,” as well as the proliferation of surveillance (Wacquant, 2001; Mallett-Outtrim, 2013.) The internal rules and norms of prison life also extends beyond the prisons walls; while in a Venezuelan barrio for example, I overheard one guy accusing another of breaking la rutina, an explicit mention of prison culture.

In Venezuela, as is the case for many countries in Latin America, gangs have established their own forms of authority. In the prisons, the state lost complete authority over most of the internal management of the prisons and they have only recently regained partial control. Through military interventions and careful negotiations in which the authority of the ruling carro
must be acknowledged and engaged with, the MSP has reclaimed over half of the prisons in Venezuela, which leaves them in control of just under half of the total prison population. The remaining open-regime prisons have generated their own form of authority which has grown out of their ability to operate as a deadly force and to mobilize the labor and resources of the hundreds or thousands that they hold power over. The state has lost the monopoly of force which previously maintained their domination and now internal organizations, have established their ability to control the territory through the use of force and through the implementation of la rutina. In most debates regarding the loss of state authority over the prisons in Venezuela, it is assumed that the state ought to control the prisons; if the prisons operate under state control, they are widely viewed as necessary institutions of a modern state, when operated under private control of their carros, they are understood as “an important source of insecurity” that “threaten the country’s stability” (Fonseca and Pamela, 2015 p.125) The prison in contemporary Venezuela is a key territory where the state's authority continues to be contested. El carro itself is and mimics a government.

(Inter) Subjectivities

Subjectivities can be defined as “structural practices of Eurocentric white racism,” which stem from the process in which, through colonization of the Americas, Europe was not only the economic world power but it asserted imposed dominance through incorporating the world into its way of structuring power relations, that is from a European perspective (Taylor, 2014, p. 127; Quijano 2008, p.188). This Euro-centered perspective was based on two “founding myths;” a unilinear development model where humans progressed from a state of nature and which this
development rose to a crescendo in Europe and “a view of the differences between Europe and non-Europe as natural (racial) differences and not a consequence of history of power” (Quijano, 2008 p. 190).

In the colonial period, ecclesiastical prisons along with corporal punishment were utilized to enforce Christian beliefs onto those who were “caught” or accused of practicing non-European religions or speaking non-European languages. Today, the police in Venezuela profile people based on the way they walk, talk, and dress. People assumed to be malandros (thugs) are also those who are generally autoctonous\(^67\), but independent of skin color, dressing like a malandro, (which could also be understood as approximation to black cultural signifiers that have been successfully globalized among the poor and then, also sold in a commodified form to the middle class) sufficiently establishes a cultural practice that is deemed as a threat to the eurocentric, Christian worldview. I spoke to a 20 year old who had been in prison for 2 years at El Rodeo and he said that the ways that he dressed and talked were “normal” for him, even though the police perceived them as “bad.” In Venezuela's barrios and prisons there are many followers of the Maria Lionza religious cult, which incorporates the corte malandra, among many other African and indigenous inspired deities (Salas, 2002; Barreto, 1989).

However, the growth of evangelism inside of prisons also marks an intersection of eurocentric values being perpetuated through the penal institution. Not only are there often numerous evangelical churches and pastors inside of Venezuela prisons, entirely run by the incarcerated population but, there are also evangelical church groups that go into the prisons. In many prisons in fact, it is these church groups that are the only organized groups that have regular access to the prisons. I spoke to a number of guys and some women who converted to

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\(^67\) Indigenous and/or African in origin,
evangelical Christianity in prison and who used the themes of the gospel to connect with their own stories of redemption. The penitentiary itself was formulated on the Christian concept of penitence, the solo study of a bible and reflection on past mistakes as a path to salvation.

The prison is a Christian European creation and it has been employed to maintain Eurocentric subjectivities through how it is employed to construct a naturalized racial order that while it may not be defined explicitly on skin color, the prison is used as a depository for those seen as embodying a culture of criminality or simply “the other,” from a euro-centered perspective. The prison then is employed to maintain the “other,” so that the prison walls can also symbolize what Segato (2007) calls “the internal borders” that serve as pillars of coloniality,

Tanto la cooptación occidentalista como la erección de las fronteras internas frente al otro interior – autóctono o afrodescendiente, o ambos mezclados, pero nunca occidental– implican una continuidad de la modernidad racista que orienta y organiza, en nuestros países, los saberes y el ejercicio del poder. Entre ellos se encuentra la justicia estatal, fundamentada por el discurso jurídico-penal, y especialmente su práctica en manos de los agentes del Estado, desde el policía hasta el juez. Es en esa frontera interna y en ese occidentalismo estatal donde debemos buscar la razón del color de las cárceles. (p. 155)

It is not only the state or the right-wing media that feeds into and supports that concept that black and brown youth in poor neighborhoods are naturally bad and therefore should be feared, criminalized and confined. If it were only so, it would be easier to build a different narrative. Instead, that is the hegemonic perspective among Venezuelans across class and racial difference.

Even in prison, it was common to talk to young guys who in one moment said they would not wish prison on their worst enemy and in the next moment they casually assert that so-and-so (malandro in the neighborhood, corrupt politician, greedy capitalist, abusive GNB, etc...) belong in prison. There are multiple ways to understand this, the proximity of the prison, the crime rates in poor communities, etc...but the hegemony of the perspective that prisons ought to be employed to solve problems reflected the intersubjectivities of coloniality of power and the dominance of a euro-centered perspective where the universal I/eye is white and therefore
envisions the prison as an institution for “others.”

The “work” of the prison, while it can be employed in the service of a particular regime, functions more broadly as an institution of domination and dehumanization. This process of domination is naturalized through the prison and adaptable to the shifting requirements of global capitalism. The prison also functions to produce a Euro-centered system of knowledge that justifies the existence of this institution of domination and even purports the necessity of prisons for any modern democracy. It does this through the tireless attempt to paint prisons as institution for the punishment of criminals instead of systems of domination based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion. It is that very perspective, constructed through a Euro-centered christian enlightenment, liberal positivist lens, that distracts us from seeing prisons as multifaceted carceral institutions that reinforce racial regimes of inferiority and superiority, organize and control the labor supply, enforce patriarchal gender norms, and breed subjectivities of the malandro, the criminal, the pran, and the prisoner, all of whom remain on the margins of political life and are understood to be below citizenship. The reproduction of these knowledge systems and these subjectivities as well as the structures of power that determine how domination is constructed and maintained provide extremely useful insights into the true “work” of the prison, and its utility beyond discipline and beyond punishment.

The structural practices of eurocentrism is what Quijano (2008) describes as “a mirror that distorts what it reflects” (p. 204). It is this distortion that makes it impossible to truly understand and therefore address the problems facing Latin America (Quijano, 2008). Quijano is critical of socialist revolutions in Latin America that are rooted in a Euro-centered perspective and distinguishes these with decolonizing projects that look to truly uproot the coloniality of power, and Euro-centered perspective and forms of knowledge. It is for this very reason, that the
anti-neoliberal rationalities present—despite their uneasy coexistence with liberal and neoliberal
governmentalities in the hybrid state—have embodied exciting potential for decolonizing—
because it is social movements that have “rhetorically linked anti-neoliberalism with
decolonization” (Postero and Goodale, 2013).
Conclusions: The Prison as a Border and Border Thinking

We must fully erase the concept that prisons are simply places where criminals—whether for structural or individual reasons—get punished, the prison “works” in much more expansive and diverse ways than simply as a bureaucratic institution focused on legality (Davis, 2003). Carceral coloniality provides a framework that demonstrates how the prison is an integral institution in the structural practices of global capitalism, masculinist heterosexism, authority, euro-centric white racism which implies Eurocentrism “as epistemological perspective” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 87). Carceral coloniality expands on the concept of the neoliberal penal state by examining how neoliberalism fits within a broader historical context and how the colonial difference that sets the Latin American experience apart from Europe and the US impacts the particularities of the prisons. The institutions that maintain the coloniality of power, such as the capitalist economy, the bourgeois family, the nation-state, and euro-centrism all rely on the prison as an institution that not only punishes those who deviate from the norms set by the ruling elites but the prison also reproduces, protects, and plays a complementary role in bolstering the structures of power of coloniality by using racialized concepts of criminality to purport white supremacy, by utilizing masculinist concepts of the family and gender roles to reinforce patriarchy and heteronormativity, and by asserting the consolidated power of the nation state as the arbitrator of justice despite various studies and testimonies that prove discrimination and selectivity in the use of policing and prisons.

Examining the prison through the lens of carceral coloniality also creates an opportunity to “de-link” from the colonial matrix of power because as Tlostanova and Mignolo (2009) note “coloniality carries in it the seeds of decolonial agency.” (p. 145). They describe this process as
“de-linking...from the sanctified belief that there is only one game in town” (p. 144) and Mignolo (2000) proposes what he calls “border-thinking” as a starting point for building what he calls “double-consciousness” (which he borrows from Anzaldúa and Dubois) (p.87). “Border-thinking” becomes even more relevant in relation to Venezuelan prisons because an analysis that has come from incarcerated people is that the “prison is itself a border” (Davis and Gent, 2001). This originates from the fact that many people in prison “name the distinction between the "free world" and the space behind the walls of the prison.” (Davis and Gent, 2001, p. 1236-1237) In Venezuela, this is the border between “la cárcel y la calle.”

It is from this perspective, where people in prison can “think from dichotomous concepts rather than order the world in dichotomies” (Mignolo, p. 85, 2000). This way of thinking has to do with a shift in perspectives, not only in content or terms. It is those who occupy the space of the border between “la cárcel” and “la calle” that have the perspective to think from a place that can de-link with the colonial matrix of power.

Border thinking brings to the foreground the irreducible epistemological difference between perspective from the colonial difference and forms of knowledge that, being critical of modernity, coloniality and capitalism still remain “within” the territory “in custody” of the “abstract Universals.” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 88)

Gabriela Peralta, Oscar’s mother, spoke of this form of consciousness as speaking from the other side. This self-consciousness of her own positioning is a poignant example of border-thinking. She has shifted her perspective to identify as part of “the prison band” and it is from that place that she speaks, questions the utility of the institution and even how her own thinking on prisons has been transformed through confronting the contradictions between the beliefs that she had and the world that she experienced with a son in prison. I find this fascinating because she acknowledges how, from the other side than where she now stands (the one where people have not experienced prisons directly) she could see the familiar logics of punishment (neoliberal
penal common sense) as acceptable; things like searching people entering prisons and punishing them for crimes. Before this ever happened to her, she considered these beliefs to be reasonable and practical and even today, she can understand where they come from and how, someone might see them as reasonable. But she asserts that from where she stands now, from the other side, these once practical beliefs seem absurd, false, “humiliating” and embedded in deeper power-relations and dehumanizing systems of domination. This shift in perspective, in which she thinks from a dichotomous place from her position on the other side is a concrete example of “border-thinking.”

As the concept of carceral coloniality is expanded and critiqued, it will be the perspectives of those who speak from the borderlands, from the place of knowing both worlds that will enrich analyses of prisons and provide concrete examples and experiential insights into how Venezuela's prisons function as institutions of domination. This is why I have chosen to explore and include narratives, testimonies and perspectives of incarcerated people in Venezuela. This is particularly fruitful when exploring topics that scholars have failed to address or understand. For example, the question about race and prisons in Venezuela. Despite the complexity and aforementioned challenges of exploring race, “negar la racialización de las cárcceles sería contradecir la experiencia” (Segato, 2007, p. 153.) In Venezuela, more research also needs to be done on women's prisons, specifically on the underfunded and overlooked female annexes in men's prisons. Almost all of the research that exists on women in Venezuelan prisons is on the one National Women's prison (INOF) which has unique programs and relatively better attention and funding than the Women's annexes throughout the country.

Conceiving the prison as a border opens up the possibility of a new way of thinking about prisons; a new perspective to draw from to inform our understanding, and by examining the
prison as not only a border but also as an institution of modernity/coloniality, there is an inherent promise for decolonial agency in the struggles against the injustice system.

*Descolonizar la justicia exige, entre otras cosas, un nuevo balance de la «impunidad»; esto implica rehacer el cálculo de las deudas –incluyendo la deuda representada por la figura de la responsabilidad penal–, con la consecuente redistribución de posiciones entre deudores y acreedores* (Segato, 2007, p. 160.)

Building further scholarship on *carceral coloniality* will depend on reconstructing and uncovering past narratives of confinement, examining relationships between slavery, race and the prison, exploring the criminalization of the poor and racialized others alongside immigration policies, digging deeper into the intersections of colonialism, imperialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism and discrimination against addicts within the geopolitics of power. This research must rest on ethnographic work in prisons that looks for not only content but perspective, work that explores narratives, testimonies, oral histories and self-representation and that rejects the euro-centric focus on individual behavior/choices as a means of understanding crime. Ultimately, it is incarcerated peoples and their families, those who have the perspective of those on the border between the prison and “the free world,” that can present this new way of thinking.

Prisons are already epicenters of cultural production, of a new language, of codes of conduct, of styles, of ways of being. The open regime, self-ruled prisons in Venezuela, are particularly fertile because the routine is internally imposed by the incarcerated leadership as opposed to externally imposed by the state authority. For that reason and others, it is essential to do ethnography inside of the open-regime prisons before they are all taken over and shut down by the Ministry of Penitentiary Services (in which case they will most likely be sealed off to visitors and researches alike.) The rare accessibility of these prisons, which anyone can enter with a valid passport or Venezuelan Cédula (ID), marks the relative fluidity of this prison border
and is reason enough to build theory in collaboration with those who live in the borderlands and can offer a new way of thinking about prisons.

*Carceral coloniality* incorporates Venezuela's context, history and colonial difference, rejecting the claimed universality of Wacquant's theories but otherwise complementing his central thesis and calling for a decolonization of our concepts of justice by examining the prison system as an institution of domination (not solely punishment) and therefore through a decolonial lens. Carceral border-thinking has the potential to create activism against prison injustice by de-linking from the liberal rationalities embodied in past prison reforms and following the existing anti-neoliberal/decolonizing currents that can be expanded through border-thinking in Venezuela. Incarcerated people, like the authors of *La voz de la cárcel* recognize the prison as an institution of domination and oppression, and therefore see the institution as requiring transformation, not reform. Because every day Venezuelans have experienced the transformation of state institutions and social relations in their everyday lives, it feels more possible to envision a social movement that aims towards decolonization of the prison system and the structures of power that it is dependent on.

**CONCLUSIONS: DE-LINKING FROM CARCERAL COLONIALITY**

Prisons are not simply institutions of punishment; they are institutions of domination. In contemporary Venezuela the dual prison system “works” beyond its stated role to punish, incapacitate or rehabilitate criminals. The very existence of the dual-prison system demonstrates
the “mutli-temporal heterogeneity” of the hybrid state in the post-neoliberal era and how through the Bolivarian Revolution, the state and the Venezuelan people are engaged in an ongoing process of making and re-making their institutions. The open-regime self-ruled prisons and the government-run new regime prisons are both a product of this process and therefore they are both shaped by the hybrid rationalities and policies present in the post-neoliberal period.

Venezuela’s open-regime prisons are molded by a combination of neoliberal and liberal logics that were manifested through “the lack of an institutional presence that provides effective protection for people” (Antillano, 2015). Similar to liberal democracies, social and economic hierarchies that determine one’s unequal position inside the carceral mundo, co-exist with the concept of equal rights for all. The Carro mimics the Venezuela liberal rentier state by collecting rents and redistributing them to the population; but instead of gathering oil rents from multinationals, surplus is mobilized and extracted from the prison population itself and then re-distributed as if the Pran were the benefactor. This structure of de-facto privatization places the work of managing prisons in the hands of a private sector (through “insourcing”), which creates a profit-motive for increasing rates of incarceration. This de facto privatization embody the neoliberal ways of thinking that contend that the private sector is more efficient than the state in the administration of goods and services. In the open-regime prisons, the state does not guarantee the most basic protections; not of life, nor of food, shelter and healthcare let alone education or training. Despite the precarity of life, the strict rutina that must be obeyed and the financial burdens on incarcerated peoples and their family members, the relative freedom to dress/self-present as one chooses and have access to telephones, internet, and family contact embody the logics of the neoliberal era; in which certain personal individual freedoms are permitted in the prison because they are compatible with the (internal prison) market economy.
The open-regime prisons are largely being “dried out” by the Ministry of Penitentiary Services (MSP) as a part of a goal to close these “prisons in transition.” New prisons are being constructed and old prisons are being taken over by the government and remolded; these new regime penitentiaries are the expression of the future model and the ideal of prisons in Venezuela. Unlike the open-regime prisons which largely function to incapacitate people, the stated “work” of the new regime prisons is to create order, discipline, and respect and to “make a new (socialist) man,” “humanize” the prisons, and function as institutions of rehabilitation and social reinsertion. Despite the appeal to the aesthetic and rhetoric of the Latin American revolutionary left, the MSP program utilizes liberal concepts of prison reform—although they call it “a penitentiary revolution”—that mimic the previous 1937 and 1961 prison reforms.

The dual prison system “works” to punish the poor, separate families, bolster an informal economy of illicit goods, to generate a surplus that is concentrated in private hands, and to demonstrate that the government is tough on crime, therefore appealing to “punitive populism” and the “neoliberal penal common sense of the electorate. The prison also “works” to create privatized autonomous zones that exist beyond the government’s immediate control which then generates many forms of unregulated economic activities; inside of prisons, outside of prisons and concentrated in the locales where prisons are sited. The new regime prisons “work” to connect incarcerated people with social services and bring them under the umbrella of state social programs, which can improve people’s lives but are also mechanisms for teaching “socialist” ideology and creating political loyalties. The prison also “works” in the (re)production of power relations based in labor, sex, sexuality, race, authority and subjectivity.

These systems of oppression are an outgrowth of relations of domination imposed through colonization. I argue that the capitalist global economy is not simply neoliberal but it is
also colonial/modern and euro-centered and furthermore that the geopolitics of knowledge have contributed to a dynamic in prison scholarship in which the prison in Latin America is viewed through European and USian theory that do not recognize the role of the colonial difference or the relationship of prisons to other systems of domination such as colonization, slavery. I present *carceral coloniality* as a framework built on a series of premises that situates the study of prisons in Venezuela and could be applied—through its own particular historicity—to other countries in Latin America.

Venezuela’s dual prison system is not only a reflection of the coloniality of power it is also shaped through its hybrid post-neoliberal state formation. The policies and rationalities present in this formation are a hybrid of liberal, neoliberal and anti-neoliberal forms of knowledge/power. I explored how these rationalities shape the prison and the state during the post-neoliberal era/Bolivarian Revolution, with special attention to the period of economic crisis (2014-2015), when I conducted ethnographic field work. While the post-2008 prison boom in Venezuela may not be a functional response to growing social insecurity, it does indicate a greater marginalization of the poor than is reflected by the statistics that demonstrate decreases in poverty and inequality during the Bolivarian Revolution. Leftist critic and scholar Roland Dennis (2015) describes the source of the crisis and how it ties to the contradictions inherent in the hybrid nature of Venezuela’s post-neoliberal state formation.

…having traversed the crossroads of trying out the rentier economy, under the illusion that the State could indefinitely subsidise the material interests of both the poor and the rich, the scheme fell to pieces having reached the limits of the subsidiary income [sic].

The 2014 fall in oil prices is deepening the economic crisis and contributing to growing rates of youth unemployment and a seemingly upward curve of the prison population. As economic inequality grows and the opportunities in the formal economy shrink or become less attractive
due to stagnant wages and growing inflation, many Venezuelans are pushed into the informal economy and the trafficking of illicit goods. Due to the shortages, hoarding, inflation, the illegal export of subsidized goods, currency speculation and the distribution problems in the country, trafficking of illegal goods now includes a wide array of commodities, in addition to drugs. Powdered milk, oil, corn-flour, and toilet paper are all goods that are illegal to buy or sell out of the formal market and trafficking these items on a large scale is now punishable with a twelve year prison sentence.

As more families come into contact with the prison system in their daily lives; they occupy the spaces formed by the uneasy contradictions of Venezuela’s post-neoliberal order. Poor people who have pledged their loyalty to a political project that has dramatically reduced poverty through a state redistribution of oil resources confront the right hand of the state as they navigate the criminal legal process and support their loved ones in prison. Despite a “pro-poor” government rhetoric, policing based on racial profiling (that extends beyond skin color and phenotype) continues to target black and brown barrio male youth, and simply getting arrested leads to an average of two years in prison due to the backlog in criminal proceedings. Many people that I interviewed spoke to the demands to pay a bribe; to the police to avoid arrest, to the prison guards at the jail to avoid being transferred; to the private lawyer to speed up the trial; to the judge to rule in your defense; to the carro to secure one’s life or pay for a space in the prison or to the GNB to smuggle in basic goods to the prison. Surviving the criminal punishment system requires resources, many stemming from the (re)productive labor of women. By transferring wealth from the poorest sectors to the state and to private hands, prison also does the “work” of dispossession of the poor which sharply contrasts with the social programs aimed at redistributing resources to the margins.
Through interviewing people inside prison and those who are on the _other side_—of the physical wall or the metaphysical experience of coming to understand the prison as an institution of exploitation and domination—offer unique perspectives on the questions of crime, prisons, and power in Venezuela. As Gabriela Peralta shared, there are things that make all the sense in the world, until one lives them, and then a new perspective is born which makes it impossible to believe what one had once thought. The prison border-thinking helped to clarify the experience of prison, not as an institution designed to punish or reform criminals, but as an institution that is part of a larger corrupt business of extraction from the most marginalized and as an institution of domination that reinforces hierarchies of inferiority and superiority.

It is the small and large injustices that incarcerated people and their loved ones confront in their daily lives that pushes many to re-evaluate the prison from _the other side_. For Gabriela, it was not being able to get her son medical care when he had two broken legs, an infection in his wounds and scabies. For Olivia, it was handing over her family’s entire life-savings and still being unable to move her brother’s trial forward. For Anabel, it was being sent away from visiting El Rodeo I because she had one drop of blood on her panty-liner, after she had slept on the sidewalk with her young children all night, in hopes that they would see their dad for the first time in months. For Fernando it was dragging dozens of corpses to a freezer in El Rodeo I prison so that the bodies would be preserved for the victim’s family members after the National Guard came in shooting. For David, it was being denied clippers to shave his beard or a newspaper to know what is going on in the world outside. For the women in Uribana, it is being denied the right to see their children. The people who experience these policies first hand struggle to reconcile these experiences with the government’s claim that the prisons are being “humanized.”
This prison border-thinking engages with prisons dialectically. Gabriela, for example acknowledged that before her son ever went to prison she believed that when someone commits a crime, they should pay but that now she questions that assumption because she has decoupled the prison from crime and punishment and nested it into a web of systems, institutions and practices of control, domination, humiliation, exploitation and dehumanization. As her daughter said, “the palace of justice is poorly named.”

This prison-border thinking faces a conjuncture with other powerful forces in Venezuela. Due to high rates of violence, international media coverage, and court rulings in the Inter-American Human Rights course due to the activism of Venezuelan NGOs that are funded through USAID dollars, the Venezuelan government faces considerable external pressure to address the “prison crisis.” The recent instability in Venezuela has been carried out by a right-wing political opposition that is pointing towards economic instability, crime rates, and the prison crisis as indicators of government incompetence and failed policy. Not only are the lives of incarcerated people impacted by government policies but, the current political conflict in Venezuela demonstrates that the situation inside of Venezuelan prisons also influences national politics.

With the September 2015 sentencing of opposition leader Leopold López to 14 years in prison, the internal opposition will also continue to place pressure on the Venezuelan government to address their narrow definitions of “the prison crisis.” It would be easy to discount López and his supporters as representing a small numerical fringe but the historiography of Venezuela demonstrates a long cycle of former-political prisoners coming to power and in doing so, assuming control of the prison system; Hugo Chávez being the most recent example. If the Right comes to power, they will push to expand and “modernize ‘prisons, most likely further
embracing the US “maximum security” prison and solitary confinement and they will likely push for a formal privatization of the prison system by advocating for a decentralization as a necessary precondition. The small number of elite political prisoners in Venezuela would be released and a new demographic of political prisoners, those coming from the popular sectors would likely be arrested and interned; the prison population would swell even further. Whoever controls the state, controls the prisons and while the prison system is bad now, it could also be worse.

The NGOs that advocate for reform are representing obscured political interests and due to their position, they are incapable of speaking from the other side. It is incarcerated people and their family members that can ultimately demonstrate that the prison itself need not be the only game in town. And since mechanisms of constituent power have been constructed at the grassroots throughout the country, there is ample infrastructure in place to support collective action on this front. During the interviews that I conducted and the conversations that I had in prison, I listened to various concepts from the other side, ideas that reflected the “double-consciousness” of prison border-thinking. One person suggested the conuco, an indigenous concept that is often translated as self-sufficiency agricultural plots—although the term has been applied more broadly to include endogenous cultural production—as a means of creating an alternative model of finding solutions to harm, crime and marginalization. Another person suggested the cumbe—a maroon community where African and Afro-descendants fled to after escaping enslavement—thus suggesting an alternative to prisons as a place that people can escape to and not from. La voz de la cárcel suggested “Centers of Hope” instead of prisons. These examples demonstrate that Venezuelans are drawing from the anti-neoliberal and decolonial logics present in the hybrid state formation and utilizing border-thinking to propose alternatives that de-link from the systems of domination that are constitutive of the prison; and
therefore that de-link from carceral coloniality.

The process of de-linking from the past in order to build a different future has been a fundamental ambition of the Bolivarian process. But in aspiring to de-link; the present becomes a hybrid of the past and the future in a “multi-temporal heterogeneity” rife with false starts, unfinished projects, stubborn and embedded practices of corruption, misguided policies, idealism, inherited legacies of domination, unrealized dreams, and transformative innovations. All of these share an uneasy co-existence in hybrid post-neoliberal Venezuela. By examining how these contradictory logics inform policy, institutions, the state and everyday life, I have also engaged with the fundamental quandary of de-linking from the global capitalist economy and from the colonial matrix of power.

While the case of Venezuela has not, and could not, answer this question completely, the Bolivarian Republic and the Venezuelan people offer many lessons in the struggle to build an alternative to neoliberalism. The conclusion to my research is that we will not find our answers in the new regime prisons of the Bolivarian government or in any prisons, for that matter. The state clearly faces great obstacles like the economic war, the foreign-funded efforts of the right to destabilize the prisons, and an armed prison population with considerable economic means and firepower. But as opposed to using the turmoil as an opportunity to de-link, all indications point towards a policy of more prisons and more prisoners built upon neoliberal penal common sense and “punitive populism.” These practices and policies would undoubtedly accelerate if the Right were to assume power but either way, the punitive right hand of the state is gaining force as the economic crisis deepens.

It is my greatest hope that my research contributes to the urgent discussion on how to build alternatives to and delink from the neoliberal capitalist economy; I have demonstrated that
this process, for Venezuela, is characterized by hybrid and contradictory logics that must be examined dialectically. In doing so, it is impossible to see the Bolivarian Revolution as a failure, because it is a process that has generated contradictions necessary for moving beyond the hegemony of neoliberalism and into the post-neoliberal era. I also offer this work as a contribution to abolitionist thought, one that is rooted in an examination of Venezuelan and Latin American particularities, with the conclusion that prisons must be abolished if we are to decolonize and conversely one route to de-linking from the coloniality of power is to close the prisons. We will get there only by thinking from the other side, or by listening to those who already do.
Appendix 1: Tables and Charts


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Prison Population</th>
<th>Procesados</th>
<th>Penados</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>6,021</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>13,089</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>14,661</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>29,364</td>
<td>18,177</td>
<td>11,187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>24,833</td>
<td>15,791</td>
<td>9,042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>22,914</td>
<td>13,074</td>
<td>9,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>14,196</td>
<td>6,338</td>
<td>7,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>16,751</td>
<td>7,058</td>
<td>9,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>19,368</td>
<td>9,348</td>
<td>10,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>19,632</td>
<td>10,295</td>
<td>9,328</td>
</tr>
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<td>2004</td>
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<td>9,632</td>
<td>10,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>19,853</td>
<td>9,633</td>
<td>10,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>19,257</td>
<td>10,651</td>
<td>8,606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>19,700</td>
<td>10,700</td>
<td>7,864</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>23,299</td>
<td>14,044</td>
<td>7,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>32,624</td>
<td>21,825</td>
<td>9,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>34,270</td>
<td>22,838</td>
<td>9,971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>48,602</td>
<td>29,199</td>
<td>16,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>48,262</td>
<td>30,274</td>
<td>14,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>53,566</td>
<td>34,073</td>
<td>16,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>55,007</td>
<td>35,512</td>
<td>17,369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>49,664</td>
<td>31,503</td>
<td>17,374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2. Crime Rates: Comparison of Homicide Rates in Venezuela by Three Sources\textsuperscript{69} (1995-2012)

PROVEA is Programa Venezolana de Educación-Acción e Derechos Humanos. They work with independent researchers, largely criminologists from the Universidad Central de Venezuela, to produce annual reports on Crime. MPPS is the Ministry of Popular Power of Health, they haven’t released a report since 2010. The Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV) utilizes a method of tracking coverage of media of Homicides as well as using CICPC statistics. See Samet (2012, August 21) for a discussion of the problems of crime statistics in Venezuela.

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Table 3. Percentage of People and Households With Income Below National Poverty Line\textsuperscript{70} (1997-2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>HOUSEHOLDS</th>
<th>PEOPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>31.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{70} Venezuela, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, \textit{Pobreza por línea de ingreso, 1er semestre 1997 - 2do semestre 2013}
Table 4. Economic Indicators, Exchange Rates, Minimum Wage, Costs of Living (August 2014-March 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month and Year</th>
<th>Official Exchange Rate CADIVI’</th>
<th>SICAD I’ SICAD II (SICAD II created March 2014, dissolved February 2015)</th>
<th>SIMADI*** (created in February 2015)</th>
<th>Informal market &quot;parallel exchange rate&quot;**** according to website Dolar today</th>
<th>Minimum Monthly Wage’’’</th>
<th>Minimum Monthly Wage with Cesta Ticket &quot;salario integral&quot;****</th>
<th>Canasta alimentaria familiar (CAF)’’’’’’’</th>
<th>Canasta básica familiar (CBF)’’’’’’’</th>
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Table 4. Economic Indicators, Exchange Rates, Minimum Wage, Costs of Living (August 2014-March 2016) Continued

*This is the formal exchange rate in Venezuela, but it is deceiving. Only corporations and importers can apply for the right to buy these extremely cheap dollars to the National Center for Foreign Commerce/Centro Nacional de Comercio Exterior, (CENCOEX) (formerly CADIVI). They must prove that they are using those dollars to import basic necessity goods into Venezuela. The Gavazut report, released in August 2014, provides an overview of the allocation of “preferential dollars” from 2004-2012. The full power point presentation can be found here: http://www.aporrea.org/contraloria/n256778.html The official exchange rate will be combined with the SICAD in April, 2016 under a new exchange category called DIPRO; the price will be set to 10 VBs to the dollar.

**SICAD I- is the rate that some Venezuelans can access through use of credit cards or through applying for funds for international travel and international study, although there is a limit to the amount that each Venezuelan can apply for money under the SICAD I amount. SICAD II, introduced March 2014 and abandoned February 2015, was supposed the first attempt to create a legal means for people to buy dollars at a higher rate and the rate was linked to the market. SICAD I will be combined with the official rate under a new category called the DIPRO in April, 2016.

***SIMADI was created in February 2015, and it will be converted into a new system in April, 2016 (under the name DICOM). The SIMADI was introduced in hopes of undercutting the informal or parallel dollar exchange rate and it was linked to market forces. This is a legal way to exchange Bolívares or US Dollars at official government-run Money exchange places.

****All of the numbers for the exchange rate in the parallel market come from the Miami-based website dolar today. Exchanging dollars on the streets is illicit and illegal but widely practiced and many people involved in money exchange operations consult dolar today or other similar sites to see the daily value. In my own experience, the rate of selling dollars for bolívares was always slightly lower than the price listed on the dolar today website. The rate better reflected the price of buying dollars with Bolívares and the difference between these rates (roughly 10 bolívares from August 2014-April 15) was how money changers made a profit. This small margin, meant that money-changers would need to move substantial quantities of cash to make a living. So, in order to earn roughly double the minimum monthly salary, one would have to exchange roughly $1000 USD a day.

*****The Minimum monthly wage, includes all formal workers in the private and public sector. Many Venezuelans work in the informal sector and therefore do not qualify for the minimum monthly wage. The Minimum monthly wage was raised 3 times in my 6 months of field work but the increases did not keep in pace with inflation and therefore the minimum monthly wage actually lost value. (Source for the Minimum Wage figures in Venezuela: http://hvmlaboral.blogspot.com/p/salario-minimo-historico.html)
All workers who are employed in the private and public sector are entitled to a CESTA ticket, which is a general food subsidy. The CESTA ticket is an ATM card that has a value amount added each month and it can be used anywhere that ATMs are accepted, including on non-food items, prepared food, etc... Private employers can exempt their workers from receiving the CESTA ticket if they can prove that they pay their workers well above minimum wage in the amount that the CESTA ticket would cover. In November, 2015 the “Socialist CESTA ticket” created two universal monthly values, prior to this change, there was a complex equation to determine the value of the CESTA ticket per person based on the “Tributary value unit.” Breakdown of the evolution and method of Calculation of the CESTA ticket can be found here: http://www.venelogia.com/archivos/6312/ The minimum salary plus the CESTA ticket is often referred to as the “salario integral.” Since the calculation of CESTA tickets was varied, the figures in the table above (prior to November, 2015) must be seen as an approximation.

The Canasta Alimentaria Familiar also referred to as the Cesta Alimentaria Familiar (CAF) is a measurement of the combined basic food costs for a family of 3-5 over a given month. All of the figures in this column come from CENDA the Workers' Center for Documentation and Social Analysis; however, since they have not published a report on their website since 2012, the data has been collected from a wide variety of news outlets which have covered the studies that they release. While the government also measures CAF as well, they have not released any figures since August 2014. (Those figures can be found here: http://www.ine.gob.ve/documentos/Economia/CanastaNormativaAlimentaria/html/CANMes.htm ). The government’s figures are substantially lower than CENDAs. Many commentators on the leftist web-forum Aporrea see the studies released by CENDA as more legitimate than the government statistics, and CENDA’s figures are also consistent with my own lived experiences in Venezuela.

The Canasta básica familiar (CBT) is similar to the CAT but it includes other items such as medications, clothing, shoes and other basic goods that one is likely to spend money on in a given month.
APPENDIX 2: PHOTOGRAPHS

Mural at David Villoria Prison (formerly Uribana). The quote from President Hugo Chávez says: “A Revolutionary can not hide behind excuses for not completing their assignments, it is necessary to be a true soldier. (...) Any official that is negligent has got to get kicked out.” PHOTO: Cory Fischer-Hoffman, February 9, 2015.
A mural at the entrance to the internal prison at David Villoria prison (formerly Uribana) in Barquisimeto, Venezuela. The mural says, “Here, the man is received, not the crime…new men for the country, for life, for peace, for freedom and for the revolution.” PHOTO: Cory Fischer-Hoffman, February 9, 2015.
A man incarcerated in David Villoria Prison (formerly Uribana) shows a swan that he made out of paper from behind his cell’s bars. PHOTO: Cory Fischer-Hoffman, February 9, 2015.
My arm, after I was visitor “850” to El Rodeo I prison on October 10, 2014. Most women washed the stamps and markers off of their arms immediately after entering so that they would not be marked as someone who has a loved one in prison. PHOTO: Cory Fischer-Hoffman, October 10, 2014.
A family sells fruits and vegetables, but they also run a bag checking business for people visiting Vista Hermosa prison in Ciudad Bolivar. The woman in the photo is retrieving her bag after entering Vista Hermosa prison in Ciudad Bolivar. PHOTO: Cory Fischer-Hoffman, October 19, 2014.
Yare I prison, from a moving vehicle after entering with the Ministry of Penitentiary Services and the School of Popular Penitentiary Communication. PHOTO: Cory Fischer-Hoffman, January 22, 2015.
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388