# PARALLELING SYSTEMS OF CONTROL:

#### Jim Crow and Mass Incarceration

### By Leah Bacon '18

This paper discusses the systematic biases that follow ex-felons after their release from imprisonment and then parallels this disenfranchisement with the mistreatment of free blacks during the Jim Crow era. It begins by outlining the political, economic and social fabrics ex-felons face through biased housing policies, employment discrimination, lack of public services and educational support, and exemption from politics. Similarly, during Jim Crow free blacks were disregarded in the political and economic realm and socially targeted through fear inducing tactics, such as lynching, due to their perceived threat to the hegemonic powers. Bacon argues, ex-felons and free blacks had their rights revoked and were removed from being active participants in society, ultimately leading to a negative sense of self and the acceptance of their "lower caste" position.

There are currently 2.3 million people confined by the American criminal justice system, 820,000 people on parole, and 3.8 million people on probation. In the 2010 United States census, the black population made up 13% of the total population, but 40% of the prison population.<sup>1</sup> Racial ideologies and bigotry have created a system designed to limit the black population in every aspect of lifesocial, political, and economic. The injustices within the system are corrupt, but even as ex-felons leave the system they are unfairly targeted. Ex-felons are denied housing, face employment discrimination, are limited in access to non-existent public benefits, have a reduced political voice, and are unable to participate in equal educational growth. These crises uncannily parallel the disenfranchisement of free blacks during Jim Crow who were deprived their right to safety, political roles, and economic growth because of their believed threat to the hegemonic forces. I argue these two systems of control are similar based on their lack of opportunity for the black community, the dominating role of the white community, and the black community's internalization of their "other" role.

An individual who leaves prison must find a place to stay, but with a lack of income and unfair housing policies, meeting this basic human right becomes a daunting task for the formerly incarcerated. President Ronald Reagan, a proponent of the War on Drugs, initiated the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1988 for stricter leases on public housing and eviction of tenants engaged in criminal activity.<sup>2</sup> This legislation targeted the types of families who lived in public housing. The American Community Survey noted that black households are 12%

of all households, but make up 26% of Extremely Low Income (ELI) renters. Blacks and Hispanics living in public housing are "four times more likely than white public housing residents to live in high poverty neighborhoods."<sup>3</sup> This policy led to Bill Clinton passing the 'One Strike and You're Out' legislation in 1996. The rules for eviction became more stern and "strongly urged that drug offenders be automatically excluded from public housing based on their criminal records."4 The Prison Policy Initiative notes that 1 in 5 incarcerated people are locked up due to drug offenses; that means that 20% of the released prison-population are automatically barred from public housing.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 also excluded those who had been convicted of and those who were believed to be, abusing alcohol or illegal drugs.<sup>6</sup> The policy also extended to people living or visiting the tenant.

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This was known as the "no fault clause" and in the Supreme Court case Rucker v. Davis the U.S. Supreme Court deemed it unconstitutional, yet four years later in 2002 the Court reversed their decision. The Court stated, "housing tenants can be evicted regardless of whether they had knowledge in or participated in alleged criminal activity."<sup>7</sup> This policy is not only hurting the ex-convict, (who has already served their time) but hurts the livelihood of the family unit. In some cases the families were evicted and had nowhere else to go, thus adding to the homeless population. For example, in California it is estimated that 30 to 50 percent of individuals under parole in San Francisco and Los Angeles are homeless. Michelle Alexander exclaims, "decent stable, and affordable housing is a basic human right, and it also increases substantially the likelihood a person with a past criminal record will obtain and retain employment and remain drug and crime free."8 People who have served their time in prison deserve a fair chance to live and improve their life. By unfairly discriminating against convicted individuals (and families) from public housing the system forces them to seek other measures in order to thrive.

If one is unable to live in public housing, they must be able to receive a living wage that allows them private housing, but employer discrimination prevents them from doing so. Currently, the job opportunities are bleak because approximately 70% of prisoners are high school dropouts and 50% are illiterate.9 Ex-offenders are typically restricted to jobs within the construction and manufacturing sector. As ex-felons leave prison, 40 out of 51 jurisdictions expect them to find a job quickly and maintain this job or else face additional more prison time.<sup>10</sup> How is this a realistic expectation when the formerly incarcerated face active discrimination from employers before they even receive an interview? In 1987 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) stated that discrimination against people with criminal histories is permissible only if employers "consider" the nature of the offenses.<sup>11</sup> In theory this law is supposed to protect ex-felons from bias, but in practice

#### **40/50** states can deny jobs to people who were arrested—not convicted—of a crime

employers are able to disregard it, either intentionally or unintentionally. Additionally, employers in 40 of the 50 states can deny jobs to people who were simply arrested for of a crime, even if there was no conviction.12 An individual does not have to spend time behind bars to become a permanent symbol of criminalization. Some employers who may follow the EEOC have to "see beyond" the conviction and judge the applicant without knowledge of their past history. Some agencies go as far to remove the "convicted box" on applications, vet "proxies for criminality—such as race, receipt of public assistance, low educational attainment, and gaps in work history—could be used by employers when no box is available on the application form."13 An employer could have internal biases that push them to classify certain groups of people, such as black males, as being "ex-offenders." They might not inten*tionally* dismiss a person based on their prior convictions, but these stereotypes and prejudices are components engraved within the system. An ex-felon's inability to find a job discourages that person from establishing "a positive role in the community, develop a healthy self-image, and keep a distance from negative influences and opportunities for illegal behavior."<sup>14</sup> Without a job, ex-felons have no income to maintain a home, support a family, or meet their own needs. This lack of adequate livelihood forces the previously incarcerated to turn to other forms of assistance, both legal and illegal, to get them out of their dire state.

After a person has been convicted of a crime they are unable to receive public assistance. The welfare system is fueled with racial undertones. The Clinton Administration in 1996 pushed for the passage of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Family Program (TANF), which creates a five-year lifetime limit on benefits. It also requires those receiving federal finances to prove employment to receive benefits.<sup>15</sup> The program does not provide substantial payments, but it can help meet a family's basic needs. Unfortunately, the law "requires that states permanently bar individuals with drug-related felony convictions from receiving federally funded public assistance."16 This means those convicted of drug-related felonies, nonviolent offenses, are forever banned from receiving government aid. Without a home, employment options, or social assistance to support themselves, ex-felons are pushed to the bottom of society. Also, newly released prisoners are expected to pay back their debts and fees to probation de-

70%of prisoners<br/>are high school<br/>dropouts50%of prisoners<br/>are illiterate

partments, courts, and child-support offices.<sup>17</sup> This puts individuals struggling to provide food for themselves in the role of providing for others. Yet, when they are unable to meet this requirement they are forced to pay "poverty penalties," additional fees imposed for too many late fees and interest overload.<sup>18</sup> It feels like a hopeless and inevitable cycle produced *by* the government. But what if they could enact change by voicing their problems and concerns to those with political power?

When an individual is convicted of a crime their political voice is muted and their ability to be involved in the political system is greatly diminished. From the beginning of the trial "judges are not required to inform criminal defendants of some of the most important rights they are forfeiting when they plead guilty to a felony."19 In some cases the judges are not even aware of the rights taken away from convicted individuals. So from the beginning felons are disenfranchised by not knowing their rights. Furthermore, when one is found guilty of a felony they are excluded from jury duty for the rest of their lives.<sup>20</sup> The establishment of the United States and the Founding Father's hope was for a participatory democracy by giving citizens the responsibility to ensure justice within the legal system. It is interesting that those who have gone *through* the experience are funneled as ineligible or inadequate to share their opinions on what is "just." Additionally, the District of Columbia and 48 states do not allow incarcerated inmates to vote in prison. Only Vermont and Maine, states with a 95% white population, do allow inmates to vote while in prison (2016).<sup>21</sup> In 2002, 14 states prevented the previously incarcerated from voting. Some of these states include

Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, and Mississippi.<sup>22</sup> Even once ex-felons are able to regain their voting privileges, they still are required to pay any remaining fines before exercising the right. The political voice of a formerly and currently incarcerated is not being heard and this dramatically influences elections. It is estimated that if the "600,000 former felons who had completed their sentence in Florida been allowed to vote. Al Gore would have been elected president of the United States rather than George W. Bush."23 The ability to change political outcomes is of much importance, especially in present day elections. Since the American party system has historical racial and class implications it seems peculiar that a large black voice is being dismissed.

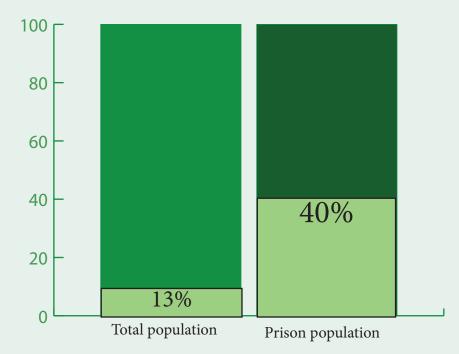
Lastly, a possible last resort for an ex-felon would be to go back to school and receive an education. If convicted of a drug offense during their time in school, while receiving federal aid, a convicted person becomes *ineligible* to receive financial aid once released.<sup>24</sup> There are some grants ex-felons can apply to and receive basic job training. Unfortunately, the financial burden of going to school rather than working makes many ex-felons unable to consider returning to school. Also, using the previously stated illiteracy rates, schooling may have been a difficult aspect of their lives. It is estimated that 70% of juveniles in prison have a learning disability and 33% have a 4<sup>th</sup> grade

## 48 states do not allow incarcerated inmates to vote

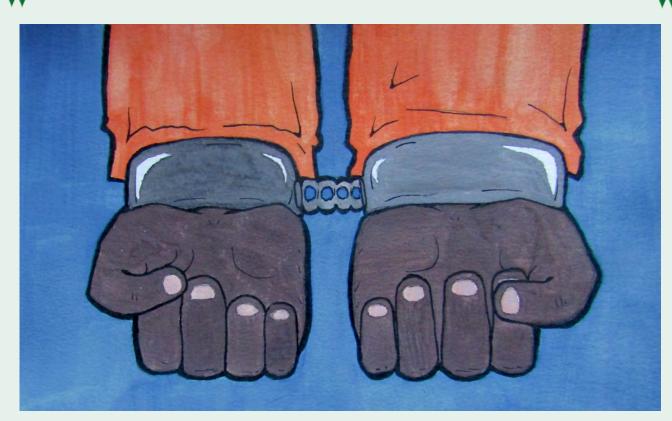
reading level.<sup>25</sup> The school system unfairly targets students who are not succeeding academically, often punishing them with suspension or expulsion from school. This then adds to a population of uneducated, at-risk individuals who find themselves in and out of the criminal justice system. Education is valuable, but that can only be seen if other basic needs are met and society encourages *all* students to learn instead of labeling *some* as troublemakers.

January 1, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln declared the Emancipation Proclamation that stated, "all persons had as slaves are, and henceforward shall be free."26 Two years later the 13th Amendment officially outlawed slavery and made all black slaves *legally* free from bondage. Unfortunately, the lives of newly freed blacks were seen, by white society, as necessary for extermination. In the South from 1889-1918 an estimated 2,409 black individuals were lynched.<sup>27</sup> Lynchings in the South were a predominant concern, but as Ida B. Wells notes, the "lynching mania has spread throughout the North and Middle West."<sup>28</sup> The entire United States participated in ending black lives and treated the deaths as spectacles for the enjoyment of white citizens. The lynchings that took place in the North and West are crucial to note because of the lack of black citizens spread throughout these territories.

Freed blacks were most "likely to be lynched in any given year in the Western states of Wyoming, New Mexico, and Oregon."<sup>29</sup> Blacks could not escape the violent prejudice pulsing through the veins of their white counterparts. The North also participated in anti-black violence through gangs and riots. Specifically in New York in 1900, white citizens *and* police forces enacted a riot against freed blacks.<sup>30</sup> After the brutalities, blacks tried to guarantee their safety and pushed for political action exercising the rights given to them by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1868, which "granted" slaves citizenship to the country they helped build. Freed blacks were given limited political access and denied their rights connected to citizenship through internal and external discrimination. There were written laws for equality put in place, but this legislation was never followed *de facto*. Blacks were unfairly targeted for punishment for petty crimes such as spitting, swearing and trespassing, which were deemed "improper demeanor."<sup>31</sup> These subjective practices were put in place to create opportunities to punish the black citizens. The Black Codes were enacted by the Johnsonian legislatures after the Civil War in 1865 and 1866. The purpose of these laws "was to keep the Negro exactly what he was: a property-less rural laborer under strict controls, without political rights, and with inferior legal rights."<sup>32</sup> Black citizens were expected to hire themselves out at the beginning of each year and those who failed to do so were prosecuted as "vagrants" and then forced to work on local plantations.<sup>33</sup> Although freedom from slavery had been guaranteed through the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, freed blacks were constantly at odds with the depraved white forces.



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Blacks had to live with these unfair politics and being tried for petty crimes or even crimes they did *not* commit. Black men were seen as a threat to the social order (read: white women) and society (read: white masculinity) needed to stop any relations. This is why black men were "disproportionately tried, and convicted, of interracial murder."<sup>34</sup> The inability to pay or be represented with a *fair* trial meant that blacks were forced to plead guilty and face brutal prison conditions. For example, in the South black felons were starved, chained to one another, lived in inhumane conditions, overworked-even while sickand, to parallel slavery, whipped. <sup>35</sup> Black felons were used as a cheap labor force that provided economic benefits to the controllers and kept white society content through the depletion of the black community. Black citizens did not even bring issues to light because of the costs they would have to pay for only minuscule changes by government.<sup>36</sup> Even within the government, black individuals did not want to be involved. North Carolina's black congressmen George White left Congress in 1901, and the office would not have another black individual for over thirty years.<sup>37</sup> The environment of politics was inherently racist and not a place free blacks benefited.

Voting should have provided blacks the means to articulate their feelings regarding discrimination and their civil societies. Freed black men secured the right to vote with the establishment of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1870. At the end of the Civil War black men in both the North and the South were only allowed to



vote in five states on the same terms as white men.<sup>38</sup> The South had more black voting success due to the enlistment of federal troops to protect black voters. Per usual, white conservatives were frustrated at the acceptance of blacks and formed groups called the White Line or Red Shirts in which they planned attacks on Republican meetings.<sup>39</sup> They not only violently intimidated blacks, but also encouraged white employers to fire their black employees who became involved in politics. This unfair treatment forced blacks to silent themselves from publicizing the atrocities they were facing. Even in the North and West blacks were "decisively marginalized at the polls, were routinely barred from much of the labour market, suffered mob violence and were often segregated."40 They were pushed away from being active members of society. Their voices and opinions did not matter, and the government wanted to *ensure* that blacks knew that. The Lodge Force Bill of 1890 was put in place to secure more voting rights for black men, but it was opposed. The Republican Party tried to place a small effort on black voting, but after the failure of the Lodge Bill and the loss of support from white voters they gave up. Voting equality became a concern for *blacks* to deal with, but with no government representation it eventually lost its importance.

As slavery came to an end, freed blacks had to economically establish themselves in an economy dominated by whites. Most blacks were forced into labor and agricultural work. Sharecropping became a major employment for blacks in the South, where

"freedmen were forced to work on [fields] for extremely low wages or payment in form of food, shelter, and clothing."41This does not allow blacks to create stabilized financial means: instead it forces them to work a job analogous to their previous one of bondage. If they did not perform "adequate" work they could be physically assaulted or whipped with zero concern to gender.<sup>42</sup> The mentality of white conservatives was that blacks were ineligible for other types of work. This racist mentality fueled white society's' concerns for blacks having other jobs. In South Carolina, freed blacks had to receive permission and special licenses for non-agricultural work. In Mississippi freed blacks were unable to rent land or obtain travel passes.43 Blacks were restricted from any prosperity in the country. There was no chance for them to grow, buy a home, or move upward in their societal roles.

Even Northern blacks did not have equivalent opportunities as white individuals. This is a significant reason why many blacks stayed in the South, because the North lacked jobs for blacks.<sup>44</sup> The jobs that were available were the leftovers from white society. For example in Chicago's livestock market, the company employed over 20,000 workers and by 1890 one was black.<sup>45</sup> In both Chicago and Delaware two thirds of black men and over eighty percent of black women worked as basic laborers or domestic servants<sup>46</sup> This was the North's way of controlling their black population—casting them out of public view by giving them jobs not regarded as appropriate for whites. It was less publicly brutalized than the South, but the discrimination is still evident. Also, in the North blacks were discriminated by trade unions. The 1899 Indiana Afro-American Conference



observed, "the greatest enemy of the Negro is the trade-unionism of the North."47 Blacks were discouraged from joining unions and thus lost the privileges gained from the coalition, such as wage and pension negotiations. For example, Boston white employees did not want their black co-workers to be trained as their equals and in California, the food industry union barred blacks from entry.<sup>48</sup> The distaste from other employees showed the internalized beliefs regarding blacks working in the same field. Unfortunately, the employers did not try to combat the discrimination. As segregation became a major component of daily life, the Civil Service Commission from 1914 to 1940 had all of its applicants place their photo on their application.<sup>49</sup> What are free blacks to do if their own government is against their prosperity and success? This was a tool to stop the hiring of blacks, without making it an outwards "race" partiality.

The similarity between free blacks from the

Jim Crow era and ex-felons during the current age of mass incarceration begins with their lack of societal opportunity. As blacks were freed both in the North and South, they lacked political and economic support. Segregation had been legalized during Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, declaring "separate, but equal" facilities legal.<sup>50</sup> Yet, this enforcement did not allow blacks to operate as equal counterparts with the white community. They were never "free" as Edward Turner describes in his book The Negro in Pennsylvania due to the "increasing racial prejudice." He blamed the wealthy blacks for their economic threat to the white man and the poor blacks for being an inept race.<sup>51</sup> The increasing racial distaste towards free blacks is now parallel to the disenfranchisement of ex-felons. Ex-felons are unable to live in public housing, denied the right to vote, and cannot receive benefits. Even the simple task of driving has become restrictive, so individuals cannot get jobs to earn a wage to survive and stay out of prison.<sup>52</sup> Society treats individuals as permanent criminals, although they have spent the time in prison to rectify their offenses. As a middle-aged, African American man who had spent time behind bars explains, "We [black men] have three strikes against us: 1) because we are black, and 2) because we are a black male, and the final strike is a felony."53 Society has deemed black men a threat to its social order. It has criminalized the black body and have restricted its growth. During slavery and Jim Crow the N-word became a tool of subjugation, a tool to distinguish power. Now, "felony is the new N-word."54 Society needs an establishment of hierarchical order, and since it is considered racist to place blacks on the bottom, they have replaced them with criminals. Both freed blacks and ex-felons have a forced resignation of their political power and role in a society that deems them inherently unworthy.

The restrictions enforced upon free blacks and ex-felons create a negative presence in the social framework, where they are seen as a disturbance, threat, and permanently the "other" in (white) society. Freed blacks were disenfranchised to promote "an economic source of cheap labor and a political means to re-establish white supremacy."55 Free blacks could only be used to provide economic gain for white society. Once their role extended past that they became a threat to the social order and needed to be stopped. They were considered "problem populations."<sup>56</sup> The government did nothing to stop the oppression as the Republican Party "fanned Southern exclusion and gave added legitimacy to mistreatment and racism in the North and West." 57 Similarly, ex-felons are considered a concern to the natural order of society. The treatment parallels a New Jim Crow justified by the "criminalblackman."58 Society has taken actions to prevent ex-felons from making a life outside of prison by making their criminal history a constant source of embarrassment for them, their families, and their communities. Michelle Alexander states, "Criminals today are deemed a characterless and purposeless people, deserving of our collective score and contempt."59 Ex-felons will never escape their past because their criminality becomes their identity and it is nearly impossible to change that status. As ex-felons and freed blacks were constantly a threat to the hegemonic forces, their way of coping with their marginalization was by internalizing and accepting it.

Many free blacks and ex-felons of lower social status internalize the stigmatization and accept their dehumanization and ostracized roles. Free slaves accepted they would constantly be discriminated against because white society wanted them back in bondage. In North Carolina "a person could get three to ten years in prison for stealing a couple of chickens."60 Even for petty crimes, blacks knew the punishment could cost them their livelihood. Free blacks had to work toward not disrupting the social order and if this meant poverty, unfair laws, and blunt racism, so be it. Ex-felons live in a related state of fear from "racial profiling, police brutality, and revocation of parole."61 When trying to secure their voting rights, ex-felons are afraid of entering a courthouse because of the possibility of having to return to prison. This is the exact attitude that the hegemonic forces intended to inflict. They want to take the personhood of free blacks and ex-felons away and force them to lose their voice in society, their roles as active citizens, and eventually become invisible. It becomes a "lifetime of shame, contempt, scorn and exclusion."62 The only way both groups are able to accept their fate is by allowing the character traits enforced by whites to be a reality. Michelle Alexander states that ex-prisoners cope by "embracing one's stigmatized identity."63 This explains why both free blacks and ex-felons turn to street activity and gang culture. They seek a group to collectivize and to feel accepted by members who they can relate to. Unfortunately, a more beneficial role in society is not an option because free blacks and ex-felons have been pushed out. They have accepted their identity as an "other" and the suppressed hopelessness is,

yet, another right stripped away from them.

Ex-felons are disenfranchised through a loss of access to public housing, employment, welfare benefits, political privileges, and education. Similarly, freed blacks during Jim Crow were unable to live a life free of violence, segregation, and bigoted political and economic systems. Both ex-felons and free blacks were stripped of their rights, forced into a society that deemed them as unworthy, and, in a state of defeat, have assumed their lower caste as inevitable and unchangeable. These two groups are pushed into a society that does not want their presence or involvement. The only way to combat discrimination against ex-felons is by "embracing them-not necessarily their behavior, but them-their humanness."64 Race and social class do not *need* to be factors, but accepting the mistreatment of human dignity and livelihood is the first step for the system to change.



#### Endnotes

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- 3 Housing Spotlight, "Who Lives in Federally Assisted Housing." Housing Spotlight 2, no. 2 (Nov. 2012).
- 4 Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,145.
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- 6 Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, 145.
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- 12 Ibid., 149.
- 13 Ibid., 152.
- 14 Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, 149.
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- 22 Angela Behrens, Christopher Uggen, and Jeff Manza, "Ballot Manipulation and the 'Menace of Negro Domination': Racial Threat and Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States 1850-2002," American Journal of Sociology 109, no. 3 (2003): 563.
- 23 Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, 160
- 24 Step Ahead, "Financial Aid Eligibility for People with Felonies."
- 25 Daniel Losen and Johanna Wald, "Out of Sight: The Journey through the School to Prison Pipeline," Invisible Children in Society and its Schools, no. 3 (2007): 33
- 26 Abraham Lincoln, "The Emancipation Proclamation," (Jan. 1863).
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- 29 Ibid., 227.
- 30 Ibid., 231.
- 31 Christopher Adamson, "Punishment After Slavery: Southern Penal State Systems, 1865-1890," Social Problems 30, no. 5 (1983): 560.

- 32 Adamson, "Punishment After Slavery: Southern Penal State Systems, 1865-1890," 559
- 33 Ibid., 559
- 34 King and Tuck, "Decentering the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order After Reconstruction," 231
- 35 Adamson, "Punishment After Slavery: Southern Penal State Systems, 1865-1890," 561
- 36 King and Tuck, "Decentering the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order After Reconstruction," 235
- 37 Ibid., 242
- 38 King and Tuck, "Decentering the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order After Reconstruction," 220
- 39 Adamson, "Punishment After Slavery: Southern Penal State Systems, 1865-1890," 563
- 40 King and Tuck, "Decentering the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order After Reconstruction," 219
- 41 Adamson, "Punishment After Slavery: Southern Penal State Systems, 1865-1890," 559
- 42 Ibid., 560
- 43 Ibid., 559
- 44 King and Tuck, "Decentering the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order After Reconstruction," 219
- 45 Ibid. 224
- 46 Ibid., 225.
- 47 King and Tuck, "Decentering the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order After Reconstruction," 225.
- 48 Ibid., 225.
- 49 Ibid., 247.
- 50 Ibid., 238
- 51 Ibid., 220
- 52 Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, 156
- 53 Ibid., 163
- 54 Ibid., 164
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- 64 Ibid., 176.

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