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## “It Was Basically College to Us”: Poverty, Prison, and Emerging Adulthood

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### Abstract

With the tremendous rise in the United States’ incarceration rates over the last four decades, historically high numbers of young African Americans are spending their “emerging adulthood” (as theorized by Arnett) in close contact with the penitentiary. In contrast to the exploration of future possibilities facilitated by academic, military, and professional institutions geared toward people in this life stage, imprisonment typically restricts one’s social, occupational, and civic opportunities during and after confinement. In this article, I draw on in-depth interviews with young men who had recently exited state prison and their intimate partners to probe the meanings of incarceration for emerging adults in the neoliberal era. This investigation invokes Merton and Barber’s concept of sociological ambivalence, Blankenship’s discussion of sociological thriving, and Bourdieu’s notion of *amor fati* to analyze the paradoxically positive accounts offered by young people when describing their early experiences with the prison. I argue that these narratives must be interpreted in the broader context of diminished social welfare and intensified socioeconomic disadvantage that force poor people to turn to a punitive institution as a “resource” for the social goods distributed through valorized channels to their more privileged peers. This analysis invites further research by highlighting the necessity of developing a thorough understanding of the dominant role of the prison as a shaping institution at a critical juncture in the lives of those born into poverty.

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The period from 18 to 25 years of age has been theorized as a distinct life stage of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000) during which people explore social roles, occupational directions, and behavioral choices that set the foundation for their adult lives. In the United States, certain key events often characterize this liminal phase, such as moving out of one’s childhood home, entering full-time employment, or pursuing higher education. Yet for sizeable numbers of young men of color from impoverished backgrounds, this time of exploration and experimentation is dominated by a less ebullient event: incarceration. Within the last four decades, historically high numbers of people have been swept into U.S. jails and prisons, an “incarceration binge” that has had particularly severe consequences for residents of destitute, predominantly black neighborhoods. (Bobo and Thompson 2010; see also: Sampson and Loeffler 2010; Wacquant 2010). Indeed, Western (2006) has demonstrated that going to prison has become more common in the lives of African-American men than enrolling in college or enlisting in the military, and the likelihood of being sent behind bars is highest before age 30 (Steffensmeier, Kramer et al. 1995; Bonczar and Beck 1997; Bushway, Tsao et al. 2011).

Emerging adulthood is conceived of as a time when “many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any

other period of the life course” (Arnett 2000). Imprisonment is starkly antithetical to this conception, and certainly for the majority of young men, the aftereffects of an early stay in the penitentiary serve to restrict life’s possibilities and determine much about the future in ways that are harmful to their health, employment prospects, family life, and civic participation (Western, Lopoo et al. 2004; Uggen and Manza 2005; Pager 2007; Massoglia 2008; Western and Pettit 2010).

Within this context, it is striking to encounter young men who retrospectively describe a prison sentence as having played a positive role in their emergence into adulthood. Such narratives give pause, and invite dismissal as shaky attempts to rationalize a stigmatizing experience or as applying to too rare a minority to justify scholarly attention. However, as we broaden our investigations to examine the full scope of incarceration’s impact on historically high numbers of people born into poverty, a close analysis of these stories is instructive and necessary for three intertwined reasons. First, it raises our awareness of the range of youth being drawn into the penal net under the nation’s continued aggressive punishment policies, such that men who might have formerly aged out of crime in their late twenties having nothing more to show than a few misdemeanor charges now have several years of “hard time” under their belts. Second, it pushes us to consider more deeply what is “gained” through imprisonment, and in particular whether what is delivered to the poor in the tainted guise of “rehabilitation” is provided to their more privileged peers through valorized and supportive social institutions. And third, it expands our understanding of the “rhetoric of redemption” (Maruna 2001) by focusing on those who offer narratives of desistance from criminalized behavior relatively early in the life cycle, before they have become seasoned in imprisonment and recidivism.

This article provides a starting point for such an analysis and argues for the need for further research by drawing on qualitative data from a multi-method study of men who had been recently released from a California state prison and their female partners. Study recruitment focused primarily on Oakland, a city of 400,000 residents which lies east of San Francisco and has 19% of its population living below the federal poverty line, is 28% African American and 25% Latino, and during the time of the fieldwork received 3,000 parolees from California state prisons annually (City of Oakland 2003; Urban Strategies Council 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Potential participants were recruited using street outreach, venue-based presentations, and flyers advertising the study, with a total of 172 couples (344 individuals) completing a cross-sectional survey interview. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a subsample of participants: ten couples were interviewed prior to the start of quantitative data collection as a pilot study for the feasibility of interview procedures (2005–2006), and eleven couples, one woman whose partner had been reincarcerated, and one man whose partner had left the country were interviewed after participating in the quantitative survey (2009–2012). Couples came together to a scheduled appointment at community-based organizations in the recruitment neighborhoods, where they were interviewed separately and simultaneously in private rooms. For the qualitative interviews, I interviewed the women and a male colleague interviewed the men.

In order to be eligible for study participation, both parties had to be 18 years of age or older and consider that they were in a relationship with each other during the male partner’s most recent incarceration as well as at the time of eligibility screening. Men in the qualitative sample ranged from 1–15 months since they were released from prison. Four couples had been in a relationship for eleven to fifteen years, twelve had been together for between three and eight years and seven for one to two years. Two men had most recently served sentences of seven years, three had been behind bars for between four and six years, seven had served one to three years, and ten had been confined for between two and seven months.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-three participants self-identified as African American, seven as Latino and four as other

ethnicities, with ages ranging from nineteen to fifty-eight years (the average participant age was thirty-five years).

The primary focus of the multi-method study was sexual health and HIV risk among recently released men and their female partners, and the qualitative interview guide concentrated on exploring couples' interactions and relationship dynamics during the post-incarceration period. Within this broader framework, the meaning of imprisonment in one's personal trajectory emerged as a theme warranting analytical attention. While men of diverse ages claimed to some degree that "prison saved my life" – not an unusual utterance in the redemption narratives of those trying to move forward and "make good" (Maruna 2001; see also McCall 1994; Veysey, Christian et al. 2009) – young men constructed this experience differently, placing less emphasis on a need for a punitive "wake-up call" to disrupt a long history of crime and deviance (which, as youthful convicts, they did not have), and more on the benefits of having time to reflect on "various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions" (Arnett 2000) compatible with non-incarcerated people of a similar age. Indeed, the girlfriends and wives of these young men tended to offer hopeful narratives that resonated with those of their partners, in contrast to those of more weathered and hence more skeptical women. Scholars have argued that impoverished youth of color are denied many of the graces customarily granted to children and adolescents to experiment, rebel, and misbehave, and instead have their behaviors construed as foreshadowing more serious criminality and thus requiring repression (for example, see Ferguson 2001; Jones 2009; Rios 2011). By reinterpreting the years spent in the grip of the penitentiary in a manner that rejects the need for punishment and asserts desires for the protective period of emerging adulthood, young men and women signal the importance of this developmental stage and highlight the necessity of understanding the dominant role of the prison as a shaping institution at this critical juncture in the lives of those born into poverty.

### **"I got to really understand myself": Meanings of imprisonment for emerging adults**

A first prison sentence often marks a point of "upping the game" from misdemeanor charges, juvenile detention, and jail stays, and frequently places people on the slippery slope of parole violations, recidivism, and in-facility infractions that can result in decades of correctional involvement. Yet on the heels of having gone to prison for the first time, young men do not necessarily see themselves as being on this bleak path, particularly if they have not already had extensive contact with the criminal justice system. At the time of his interview, 23-year old Calvin<sup>2</sup> had been in correctional custody twice in his lifetime: once for one day in jail in his mid-teens, and once for two and a half years in prison. Prior to his imprisonment at age 19, Calvin had surrounded himself with various trappings that typically signify an adult status: two children (one of whose mother he married while behind bars) and "my money, my cars, my wardrobe, you know, everything materialistic" acquired through an early career in the illegal economy. Nevertheless, during his interview he repeatedly describes having contemplated the next phase of his life from within the prison walls with a sense of youthful openness to unknown possibilities:

I just knew I wanted stuff to go good when I got out, everything to fall into place. But I didn't know exactly what it was gonna be. I had goals: I had wanted to get in school [community college], wanted to get a job. Wanted to be with my kids, wanted to have a good girlfriend. But I never got in-depth of what exactly what I

<sup>1</sup>Data missing for 1 participant.

<sup>2</sup>All names are pseudonyms.

was gonna be doing. It was like, 'Dang!' Whatever came. So I was like really undecided.

Previous studies have found that milestones such as parenthood, marriage, or embarking on a career rank low among people in their teens and early twenties as important criteria for the attainment of adulthood, whereas high notes are given to more subjective transitions such as learning to accept responsibility for oneself and undertaking independent decision making (Greene, Wheatley et al. 1992; Scheer, Unger et al. 1994; Arnett 1998; Arnett 2000). Calvin's musings are in harmony with these findings: despite his early paternal and occupational obligations, he articulates the crystallization while he was in prison of a strong desire for emotional growth and maturation:

[Before I went to prison] I didn't know myself as a person, as a human being, like what I wanted in life. Because I didn't have no father figure, no mother figure. They was drug addicts. And I really, you know, never had a idea of what a man was. So when I was incarcerated I was doing a lot of reading and just reflecting on past relationships, like, "Dang. That was wrong. You was wrong for doing that girl like that." So I just went back, all the way, just like reevaluating myself ... I was thinking about how could I be a better person.

Calvin shares many similarities with 31-year old Rasheed, who had been out of prison for fifteen months at the time that he and his 30-year old wife, Fatima, were interviewed. The couple had met thirteen years prior, when Fatima was still in high school: she was standing on the street one day when Rasheed approached her and asked for her phone number. Just eighteen years old, the young man had left school several years earlier, around the time he was first locked up in a juvenile detention facility. The son of a substance-addicted mother and an absent father, he knew how to fend for himself and made a solid living selling illegal drugs. Shortly after they met, Fatima recalls, Rasheed "ended up going to jail... and that's how our relationship kinda built." While her new beau spent sixty days in detention, Fatima wrote him letters and accepted his collect phone calls, opening up a conversation between them about their troubled family lives. As soon as Rasheed was released, she says, "we talked and everything and from there we just started being real close. And then I had some problems at home, and he was having problems at home, which caused us to move in together and we've been together ever since."

Despite the romance and courtship, these two vulnerable young people struggled to make a life together. Fatima already had a daughter to whom she had given birth at age fifteen, which added parenting responsibilities and additional economic demands into the mix. Fatima describes early in her interview how she and Rasheed would argue frequently about his other girlfriends, and how being a young mother with no family support exacerbated her feelings of depression and isolation. When she shifts to talk about the maturation of their relationship and how the young couple struggled to learn how to communicate with each other and establish a monogamous partnership, I ask whether this transformation was simply a matter of the two of them getting older. "No," she replies, "Actually it took for him to be incarcerated for six years."

As both partners tell it, Rasheed had spent time in juvenile facilities as a teenager and had gone to jail a handful of times as an adult, but had never been to state prison. Five years after he met Fatima, however, there was a warrant out for his arrest for a felony charge and he decided to turn himself in to the authorities. Several days before he went to the police, he and Fatima drove to Reno, Nevada and got married. This series of events was a turning point for Fatima:

He coulda played it two ways. He coulda been a man that said, "You know what, I'm not gonna go ahead and deal with this. I'm just gonna run. I don't want to deal

with you no more,” and leave and do what he want to do. But... he committed himself to go and turn himself in and do his six years and get it over with. So when he made that decision I said, “Okay if you’re strong enough to say I’m going to go ahead and turn myself in and do the six years and separate myself from my family, then I’m going to be there with you every step of the way.”

Rasheed was first housed in California’s High Desert State Prison, nearly 200 miles and a three-hour drive away from Oakland, which made it difficult for Fatima to visit regularly. But the newlyweds immediately took to constructing a fresh way of life together, one in which communication and “presence creation,” or the sharing and synchronizing of activities to simulate feelings of togetherness (Comfort 2008), featured prominently. Rasheed remembers:

I got actually so deep that anything that I found out or learned I would turn my wife and daughter onto it instantly. ... I’d pull them in on studying with me and we’d go into it together. ... I would tell [Fatima] about my day and what I was learning. What books she should pick up and start reading and try to catch up. “I’m on chapter this. Hurry up and catch up with me.” And what books I would like her to get for me and get an extra copy for herself so we could read together.

After two years at High Desert, Rasheed was moved to San Quentin State Prison, just 18 miles from Oakland. Fatima and her daughter began to visit him for eight hours each Saturday and Sunday and participate in a three-day “family visit”<sup>3</sup> once a month for which Fatima would take time off from her job as the office manager at a construction company. While behind bars, Rasheed took classes to earn his General Educational Development (GED) credential and worked for the California state Joint Ventures program, which offers minimum-wage employment to a small group of prisoners. About a year before he was released from custody he converted to Islam, and Fatima decided to do so as well.

Like Calvin, when Rasheed looks back on his time behind bars, he evokes a period of self-reflection driven by a yearning for metamorphosis and maturation:

I did so much studying and so much analyzing myself and self-evaluation that it was a trip to actually come to the understanding that I was really in prison. ... Because that was a time to where I got to really understand myself. When I was on the streets I was moving so fast you know. The street life and whatnot it just got you moving so much to where from the time you wake up in the morning you’re moving until the time you go to sleep. So it’s like I’ve never had no solitude time for me to know who I am, to understand myself, to analyze things that took place within that day or whatever. And most importantly to reflect on my family. Before I went to prison I neglected them a lot. ... It’s safe to say that I really didn’t know my wife like I should have. I didn’t know my daughter neither, like I should have known her. And also myself. ... So I dove real deep into that. I started seeing things about myself that I didn’t see out there [on the streets]. So immediately when I started seeing the negative parts of things about myself that I didn’t see when I was out, immediately I started making changes to better myself. But I started seeing things about my wife and daughter that I never really paid attention to that was so beautiful and I couldn’t understand how I didn’t see it the first time. So it really drew us real close.

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<sup>3</sup>California permits 43-hour overnight visits to the parents, children, and legal spouses of prisoners who have not been convicted of domestic violence or sexual crimes and who have a release date (meaning that they are not on Death Row or serving a life sentence). The eligibility criteria for family visits combined with the necessity of having family members who are willing to participate and can afford to take time off of work, travel to the prison, and pay for 3 days worth of food limits the number of prisoners who receive such visits.



Fatima's perspective on the processes that occurred during these six years closely echoes that of her husband:

Most importantly it [incarceration] was some time for him just to sit down and focus on him. Because before that he was like he was ripping and running into this, into that, into this, into that while he was out on the streets. ... Just not slowing down to really do some self evaluation. And that [prison] did it. That gave him the time. Because he couldn't go nowhere. He couldn't escape from himself. He had to sit down and face himself head on of who he was and who he wanted to be and where he wanted to go, and what he came from. And once he started sitting down and figuring out those pieces it's easy. The hardest part is sitting down doing it. ... We both felt like, okay this is like our time to be away from each other. We can grow. I can grow as a woman. I can grow as a mother. He can grow as a man. And when you come out we'll know exactly where we want to go. *And it was basically college to us.* We were separated but wasn't separated. ... it's a bad thing to be separated from your family and everything but I looked at this as a beautiful experience. ... It's like so many blessings have come to us through him being incarcerated. It's just – I feel like God just said, "Look, let me take you over here and let me work with you personally for a few minutes and [help] get you together and then [you'll] come out and maybe you can have changed some people and showed them that this is not the way to go."

These rich passages speak to multiple nuanced and complex aspects of the experiences of young people whose lives are dominated by the penitentiary. First, it is notable that incarceration is seen as an opportunity to think deeply about one's life due to the break it provides from the fast-paced existence young men lead in the outside world. This observation highlights the peculiar trajectory of entrepreneurs like Calvin and Rasheed, whose impoverished backgrounds and family histories of substance use catapult them into a precocious adulthood replete with business duties and action, but void of occasions to ripen into the "grown-ups" they want to be (Sanchez-Jankowski 1992; Bourgois 1995; Venkatesh 2009). The clearly expressed appreciation for having time to develop self-understanding, tune into personal relationships, and contemplate future goals and possibilities strongly relates to the conceptualization of emerging adulthood, and corresponds to the recognition of higher education and military institutions as providing this kind of protected time for self-exploration during this critical life stage (Arnett 2000).

Fatima's declaration that a six-year prison sentence "was basically college to us" pushes us to examine this parallel further. On the one hand, her pronouncement movingly encapsulates the tremendous change, advancement, and maturity that she and her husband accomplished during the long stretch of their twenties. Yet with these words, Fatima also brings into piercing focus the fact that she and Rasheed were not able to access the form of socially valorized passage to adulthood offered by costly centers of higher learning, but rather were consigned to salvage what they could from a degraded institution primarily concerned with confining bodies instead of elevating minds. In doing so, she articulates the subjective counterpart to Western's (2006) statistical analyses of model life experiences, namely that prison has become the college of the poor and the dark-skinned.

It is obvious that the criteria for entering college and entering prison differ. A discussion of building social and educational infrastructure in poor neighborhoods and embarking upon serious efforts to pursue alternatives to incarceration for juveniles in order to avoid their "graduation" to the adult penitentiary and facilitate that from universities is beyond the scope of this article (but see Miller 1996; Ferguson 2001; Perry 2006; Justice Policy Institute 2009; Nurse 2010; Comfort, Nurse et al. 2011). My intent here is to engage the ways that young people who have traversed incarceration retroactively narrate that

experience in order to catalyze social scientists' thinking about the implications of spending one's emerging adulthood years inside of or intimately connected to a punitive social institution, and to remind us that the current breadth of this phenomenon is a product of the neoliberal age. To do so thoroughly, it is vital to extend the analysis to encompass the full spectrum of these narratives, including the indications of "sociological ambivalence" (Merton and Barber 1976) folded within. For example, 25-year old John had left San Quentin just a month prior to coming to his interview appointment, and many of his comments mirror those of Calvin and Rasheed. When asked if his time in prison was a positive, negative, or neutral experience, he responds:

It sounds funny for me to say it because of where I was at, but it was more positive. Because when I first got there, for twenty-three hours in the day I'm locked up in the cell with one guy you know. And so a lot of times I just went into my little inner circle, and thought about the things I was doing and thought about the things I was going through, what led me to get in there. And it just really tripped me out. I thought about things in my past that I never really put into perspective about when I was a little kid and stuff like that. And it just like really woke me up. So I had to come to the conclusion, like I sat down and was thinking, "Why am I here? What did I do?" You know what I'm saying? Not exactly the crime that I did but what led me along this path you know. So I started thinking about what I was doing in my life when I was happy, when I wasn't struggling too much and when I was doing something positive.

Also like Calvin and Rasheed, the fourteen months John spent behind bars constituted the first prison sentence he had served. Talking in a separate moment of the interview about his first weeks in lock up, he expresses a sense of vulnerability and unease:

**John:** [It was] my first time to the penitentiary. And I was scared too. ...

**Interviewer:** And why were you scared?

**John:** Cause I watch movies you know. They be talking about you get stabbed up in there and this, that and the other. When I first got to the penitentiary it got a real big sign at San Quentin in West Block says, "No warning shots will be fired."<sup>4</sup> You know, they walk around with Mini-14s<sup>5</sup>, talking about no warning shots will be fired. Yeah! ... And I'm a little guy, you got these big buff dudes up in here...

**Interviewer:** Different world?

**John:** Yeah, yeah, it shocked me.

Rasheed and Fatima, too, intertwine stories of worry and hardship in their accounts. Fatima provides an evocative detail indicating the weight of "doing time" in tandem with her husband: "I would buy calendars and mark off months and months and I'd be like, 'Okay I got thirty-two months left' and [sighs heavily] it was crazy." For his part, in addition to the strain of navigating his way through the correctional environment, Rasheed was deeply concerned about Fatima's health: "For the whole time I was in prison, my wife, she went through a real stress mode. She even lost a little hair at the time, like a patch of hair fell out behind her stressing. She was thinner than she is [now], so it was like hurting for me to see that."

<sup>4</sup>West Block is a housing unit at San Quentin where newly arrived prisoners are held. The "No warning shots will be fired" sign refers to California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation policy that correctional officers will not give warning if they determine there is a need to intervene with weapons in a violent situation.

<sup>5</sup>A Mini-14 is a type of automatic rifle.

Here, then, are indicators of the many ways in which prison is emphatically *not* “like college.” Prison is scary, shocking, and organized around intimidation and threats of violence. Prison holds one captive, whether while waiting to exit or waiting for a loved one to come home. It provokes profound stress and distress, causing weight loss, hair loss, and other health complications. And even for those who manage to use their time within its grasp to reflect, to learn, and to grow, it bestows upon them not the positive credential of a degree acclaiming their transition to a higher status, but instead the “negative credential” of a criminal record proclaiming them unworthy to participate in the social body (Wacquant 2005; see also: Maruna 2011). In sum, as Carlen and Tomb (2006) bluntly state, “a prison is a prison” and the punitive mission at its core fundamentally interferes with any other purpose young adults may attempt to extract from it.

## Conclusion

In her critique of the psychological approach to “thriving,” Blankenship (1998) notes that “it sometimes appears in the thriving literature as if adversity or challenge are the most important factors promoting thriving.” This can lead to a mindset that those at the bottom of the social ladder have the most “opportunity” to thrive because they face the most hardship, which in turn promotes the belief that those who do not overcome adversity either lack the will to do so or need to sink further toward “rock bottom” in order to “stimulate a response on the part of individual [actors] to transform their lives” (Blankenship 1998). As an alternative approach, Blankenship offers a sociological conceptualization of thriving that emphasizes the centrality of position in the social hierarchy as determining both the odds that certain groups of people will encounter adversity *and* the (un)likelihood that those people will have access to the resources they need to overcome adverse experiences. She also advocates replacing the standard consideration of individuals as the unit of analysis in thriving research with an approach that examines social groups as a whole.

Without question, African Americans in impoverished neighborhoods face dramatically high odds of their own or their loved one’s incarceration (Bonczar and Beck 1997; Green, Ensminger et al. 2006; Wildeman 2009). And young adults’ narratives of transforming a prison sentence into a meaningful experience may lead us to think of the carceral environment as fecund ground for thriving, lending credence to arguments for rehabilitation delivered through punishment (see Miller, this issue). But relocating these narratives into Blankenship’s framework and focusing not only on the positive elements people managed to wring out of imprisonment but also the fear, loneliness, despair, and burden that characterized this time in their lives weakens this case. Rather than narratives of thriving, then, we can hear these young people as articulating Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of “*amor fati*, the choice of destiny, but a forced choice, produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary.” In the neoliberal era of collapsing or defunct social services, meager labor markets that look askance at would-be workers without high school diplomas or professional skills, and a correctional ethos that chides those at “rock bottom” to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, redemption through imprisonment resonates as a tale of lemonade squeezed out under duress from the bitter, subpar fruit a deregulated society thrusts upon its most needy denizens. Indeed, in another passage in which he reflects on the meaning of imprisonment in his life, Calvin conveys a longing to substitute the “mere daydream” for the destiny produced by his social circumstances:

I think it [being in prison] was a positive experience all the way around. Because I look at it as a blessing. Because the stuff I was into, it was like I was hanging around the wrong crowd. All my friends now that I was hanging around with are either dead or in prison for a long time, for like murders and stuff. So I think it was



like a blessing from God, or whoever, that I was taken away to learn that lesson. Because I don't think I'd be the person I am right now if it wasn't for that. One, because it gave me time to focus, and just really *you know you* at the bottom then. All this material stuff took away from you now – you're not just a big popular guy for all this stuff. You just you now. It's like – a perfect chance to really find *you*. I don't know, it was refreshing. *Not the sense of being in jail, like if I could go away and not be in jail, like go somewhere on an island or a mountaintop or something and just think, and really be able to just think and not [have] all these... distractions.* It's good [to have time to reflect]. I think people should do that.

Being in a place with uninterrupted time to think about one's life and one's future is a standard practice afforded to youth during their emerging adulthood, some of whom enjoy the liberty of doing this on an island or mountaintop, and many of whom do so in the halls and on the campuses of academe. Were large batches of these high-resourced young people suddenly rerouted to the penitentiary, it is unlikely their ensuing stories would decree the correctional environment well-suited to fostering personal development and growth. That emerging adulthood is construed for the better-off as a time to indulge in privilege and promise while impoverished young adults are expected to learn from and even thrive through suffering can alert us to further layers of inequality and disadvantage that merit exploration. By probing more deeply into the ambivalence and daydreams of those who manage to convert their carceral experiences into positive life lessons, we may come closer to a comprehensive understanding of the conditions needed for all of society to flourish.

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