


(Re)entry From the Bottom Up:

Case Study of a Critical
Approach to Assisting
Women Coming Home
From Prison

By Melissa Burch



Design by Ana Holschuh



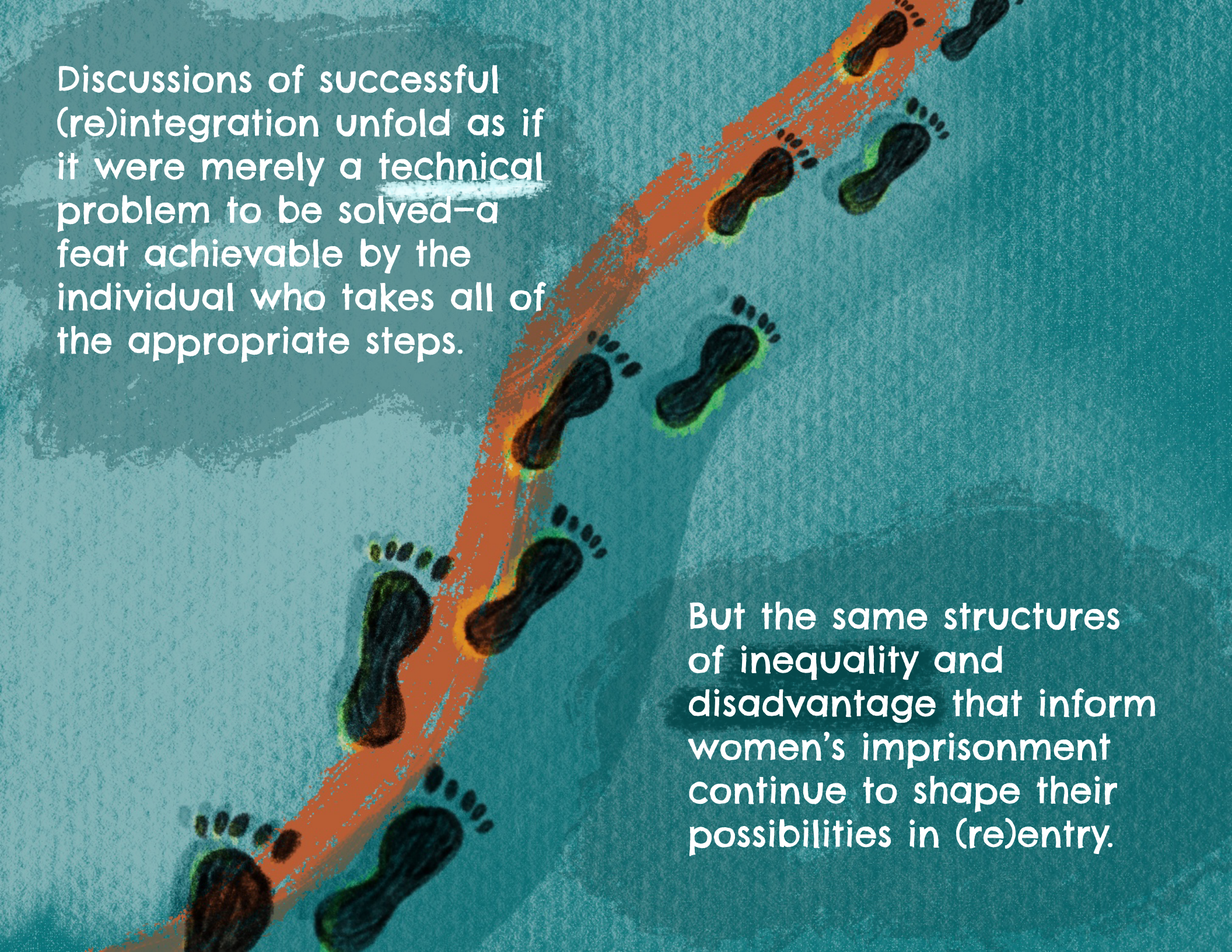
Many returning prisoners were not fully integrated members of society prior to their imprisonment.

“

You see, my life was already **chaos** before I started my prison journeys.

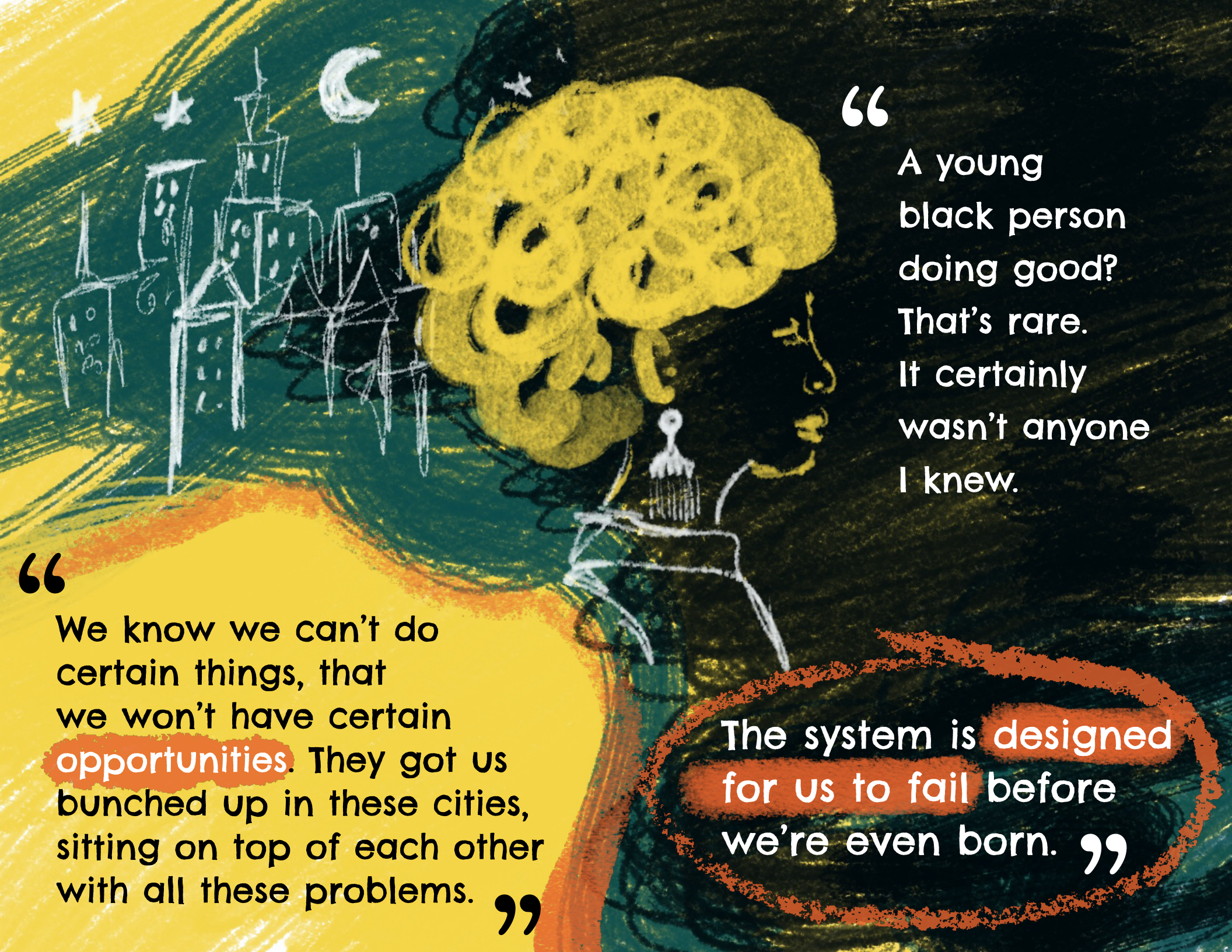
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The background is a textured teal color. A thick, diagonal orange brushstroke runs from the bottom left towards the top right. Along this stroke, there are several black footprints, suggesting a path or journey. The footprints are arranged in a line, with some appearing to be on the orange stroke and others slightly off to the side.

Discussions of successful (re)integration unfold as if it were merely a technical problem to be solved—a feat achievable by the individual who takes all of the appropriate steps.

But the same structures of inequality and disadvantage that inform women's imprisonment continue to shape their possibilities in (re)entry.



“

A young black person doing good? That's rare. It certainly wasn't anyone I knew.

“

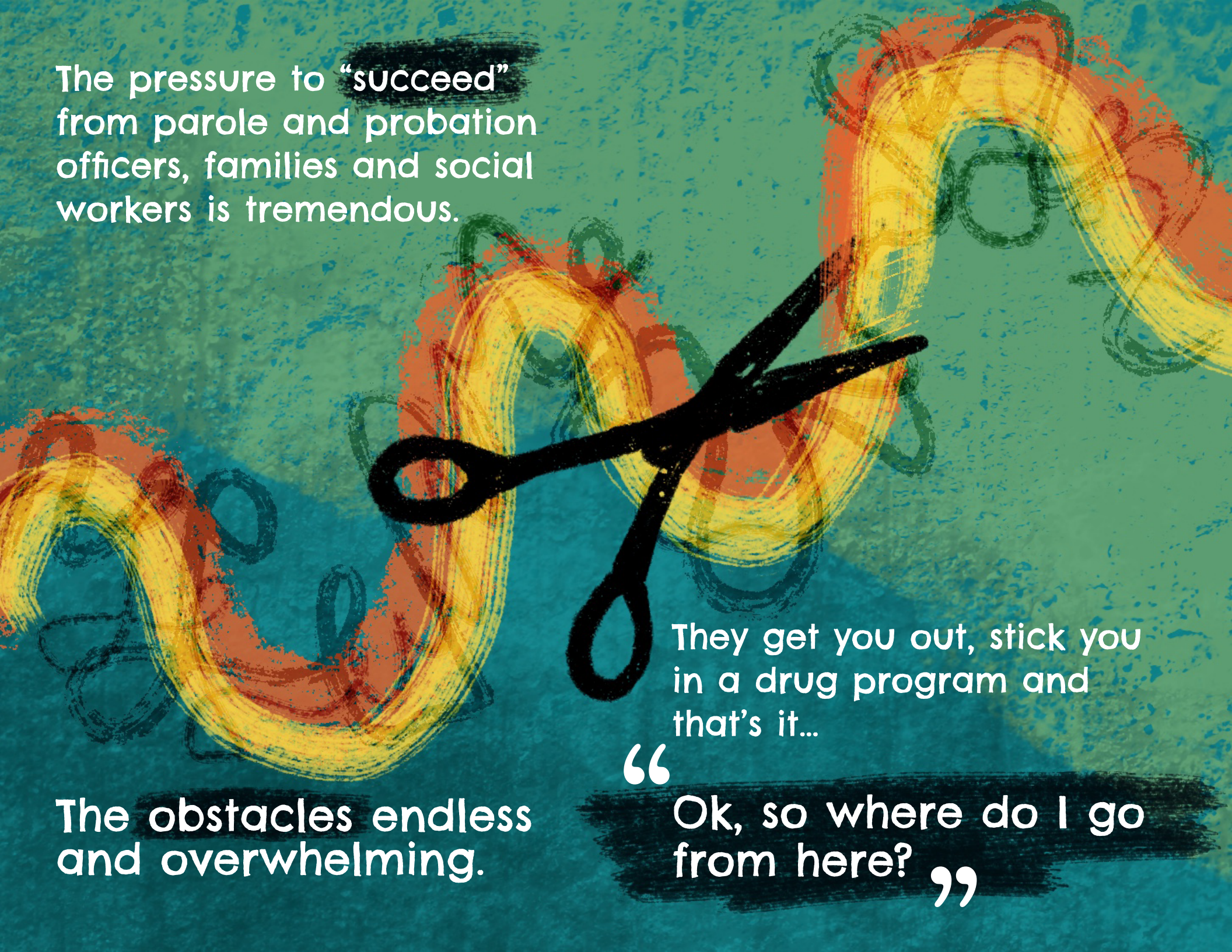
We know we can't do certain things, that we won't have certain opportunities. They got us bunched up in these cities, sitting on top of each other with all these problems.

”

The system is designed for us to fail before we're even born. ”

The pressure to “succeed”
from parole and probation
officers, families and social
workers is tremendous.

The obstacles endless
and overwhelming.

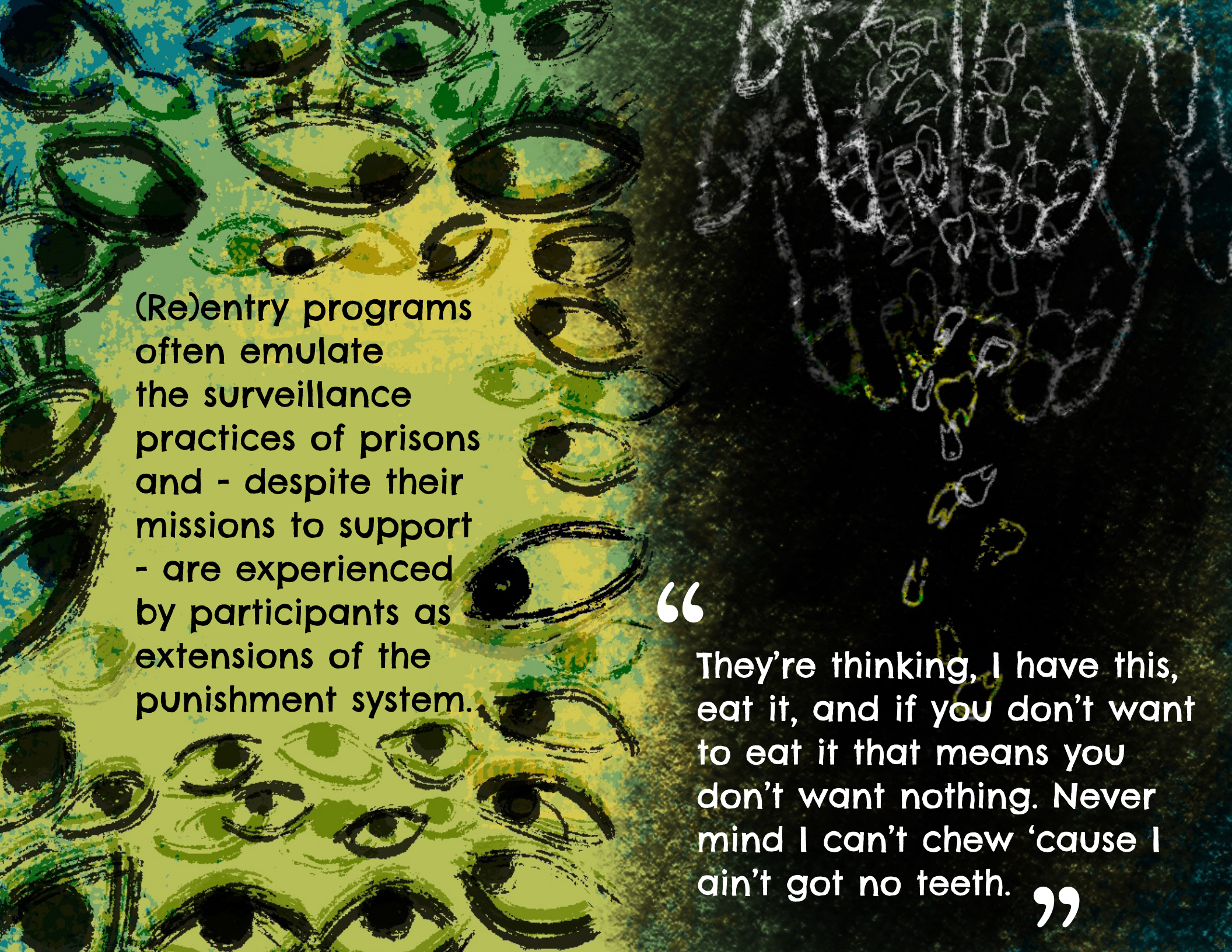


They get you out, stick you
in a drug program and
that's it...

“

Ok, so where do I go
from here?

”



(Re)entry programs often emulate the surveillance practices of prisons and - despite their missions to support - are experienced by participants as extensions of the punishment system.

“

They're thinking, I have this, eat it, and if you don't want to eat it that means you don't want nothing. Never mind I can't chew 'cause I ain't got no teeth.

”

In the focus
on exceptional
individuals,
we can forget:

exceptionality
should not
be **required**
in order to
successfully
(re)enter.



The text featured in this booklet was derived from an article published in *Critical Criminology*, Volume 25, 357-374 (2017), and is available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10612-016-9346-3>

Abstract:

Despite decades of critical reframings, policy and practice on prisoner (re)entry often remains situated within a framework of individual responsibility that fails to acknowledge the structural drivers of criminalization. Attending to individual symptoms rather than root social, political and economic causes, such approaches may ultimately reinforce the inequalities and injustices that fuel imprisonment. This article presents a case study of an alternative approach. It examines [A New Way of Life Reentry Project](#), a nonprofit organization in South Los Angeles, California, that offers housing and support to women coming home from prison through a critical and holistic framework—one that attends simultaneously to the physical, mental and social contexts that shape lived experiences before, during and after prison. Drawing from 7 years of observation and participation, supplemented by ten in-depth interviews, I argue that a critical, holistic approach can have a significant positive impact for people returning home from prison.

This graphic booklet is part of a 3-part series based on the ethnographic work of Melissa Burch. The others can be found at www.afterlivesofconviction.org

The booklets were created as part of the University of Michigan Carceral State Project's "Documenting Criminalization & Confinement" initiative, in collaboration with students at Parsons School of Design and Eugene Lang College at The New School.



**CARCERAL
STATE
PROJECT**

Documenting Criminalization
and Confinement

All original artwork by Ana Holschuh.

