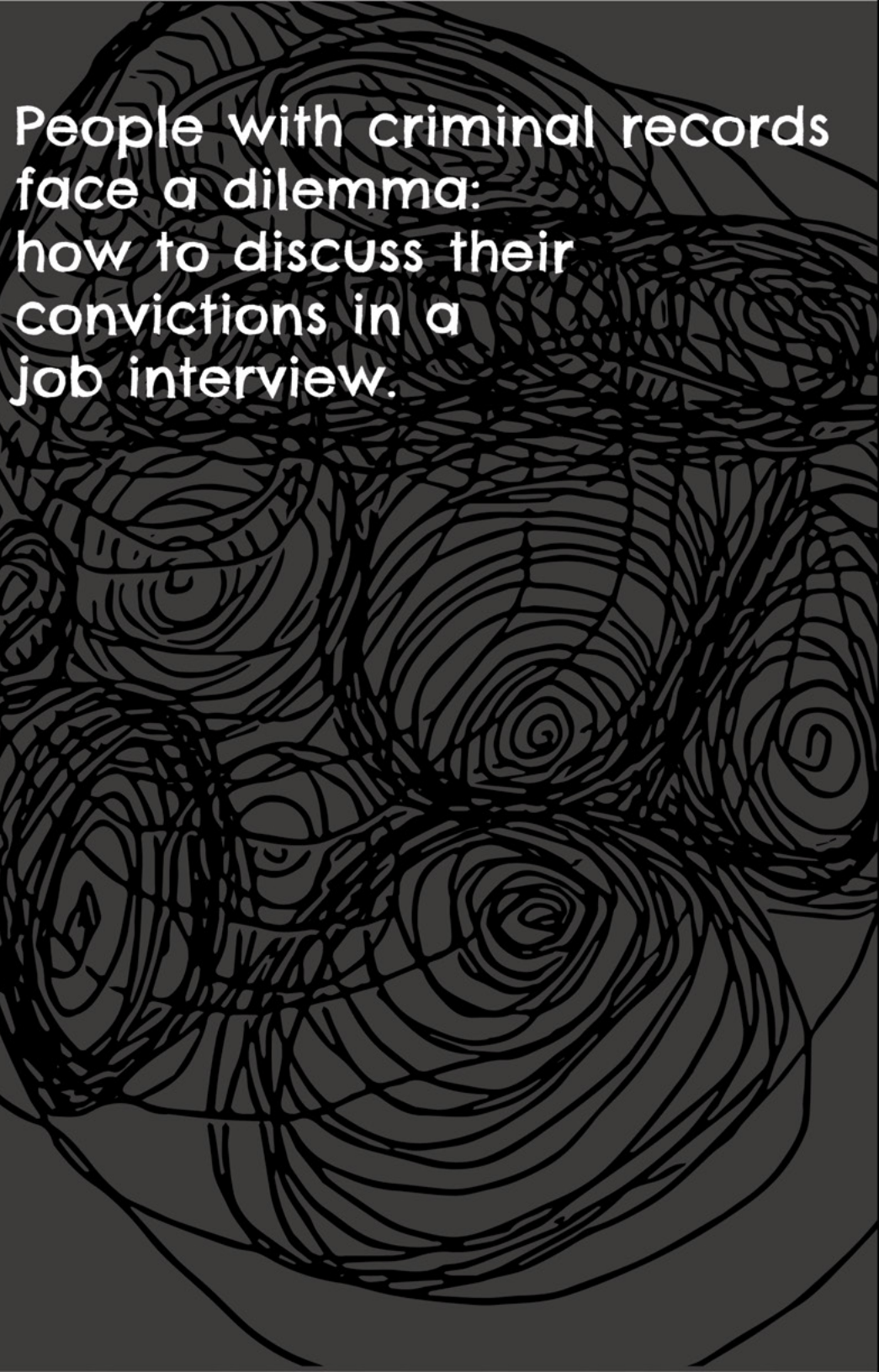


Scripting the Conviction: Power and Resistance in the Management of Criminal Stigma

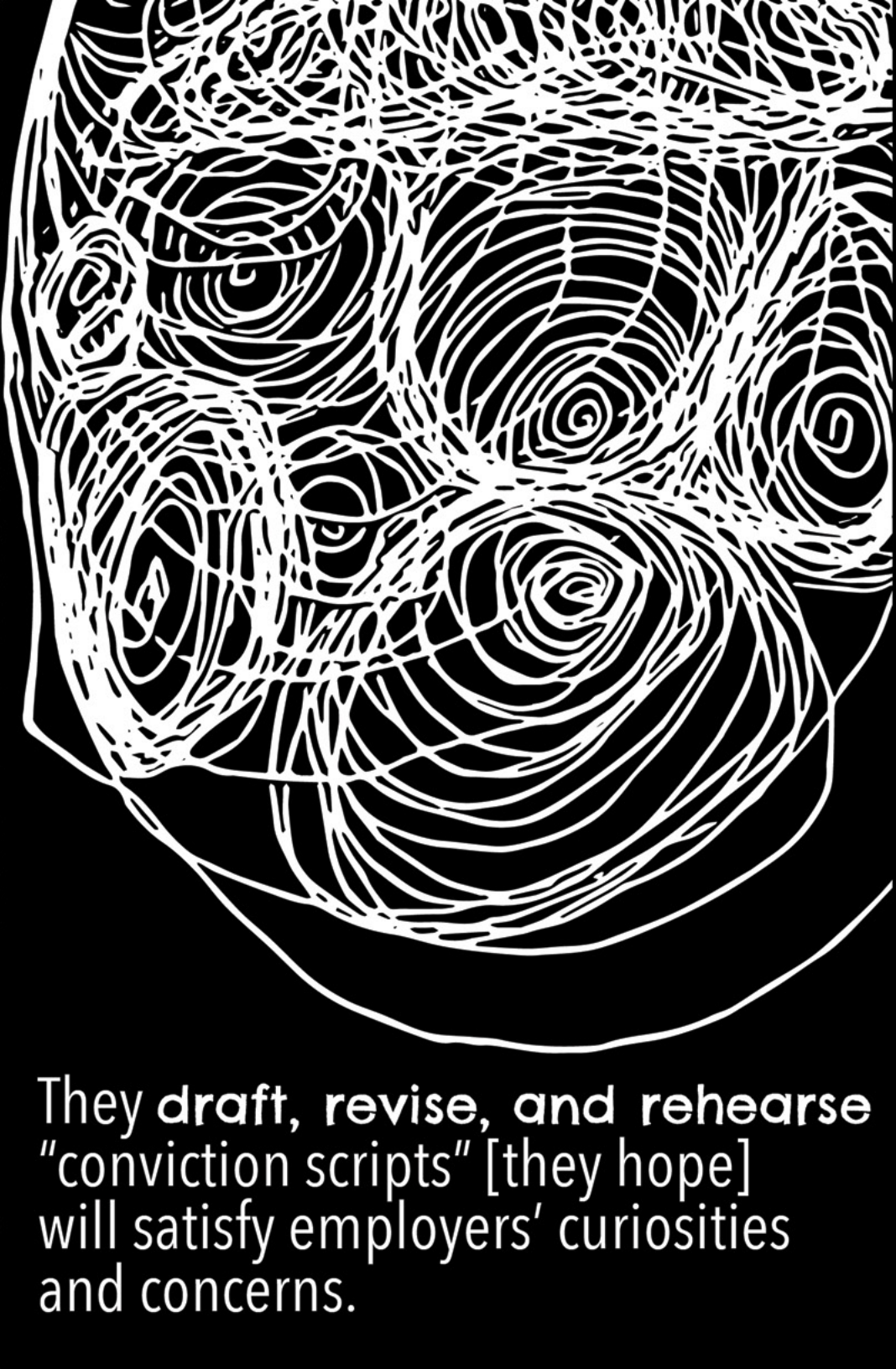
By Melissa Burch

Design by Ana Holschuh





People with criminal records face a dilemma: how to discuss their convictions in a job interview.



They draft, revise, and rehearse "conviction scripts" [they hope] will satisfy employers' curiosities and concerns.

Job seekers are encouraged to develop **narratives** that **reinforce dominant frameworks of personal responsibility, remorse, and rehabilitation.**



“I am fully committed to building a healthier and more productive future for myself and my children.”



And to portray themselves as different from other criminalized people; to dissociate from—rather than challenge—criminal stigma.



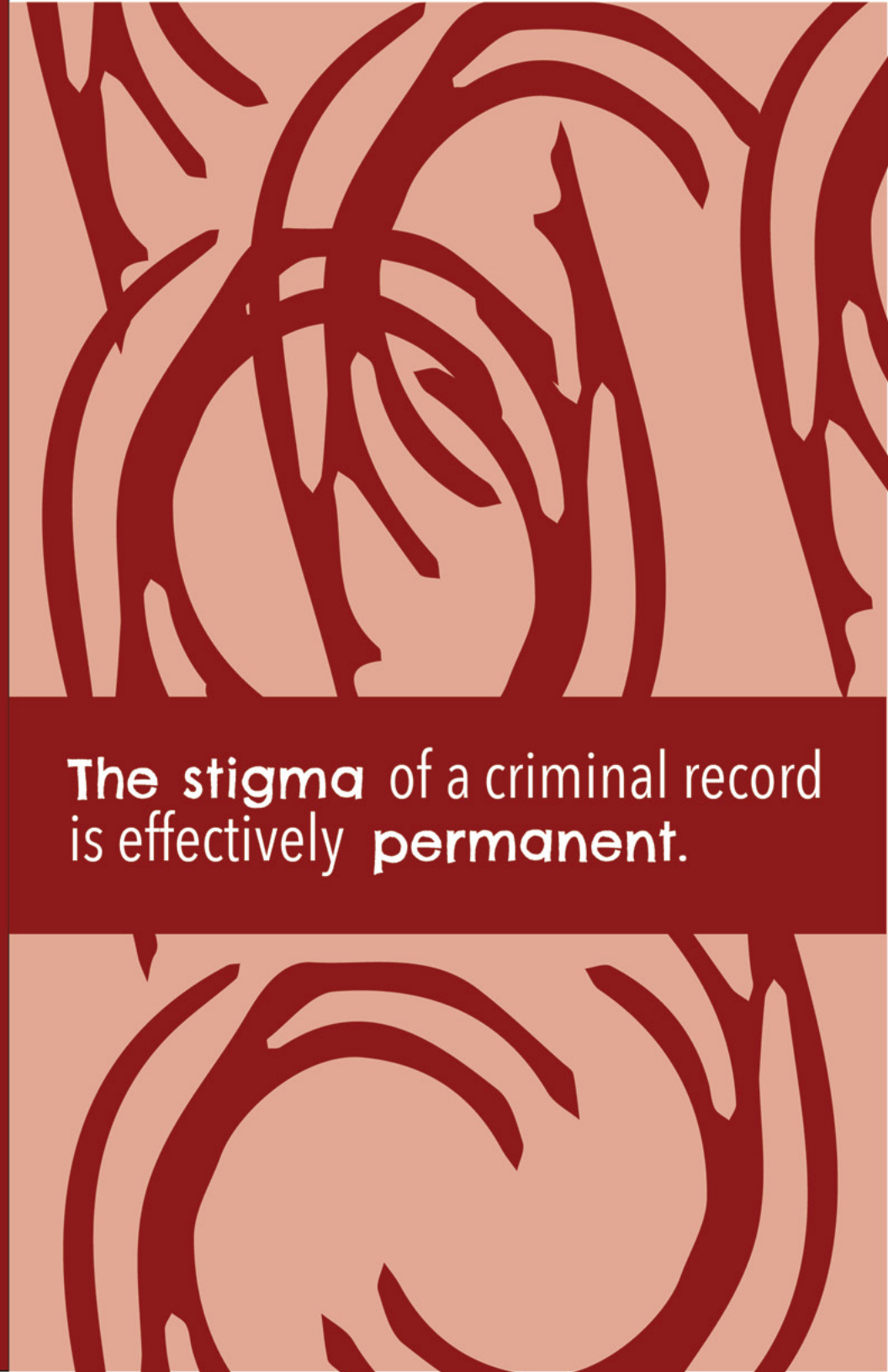
“I am a loyal, punctual and reliable worker.”

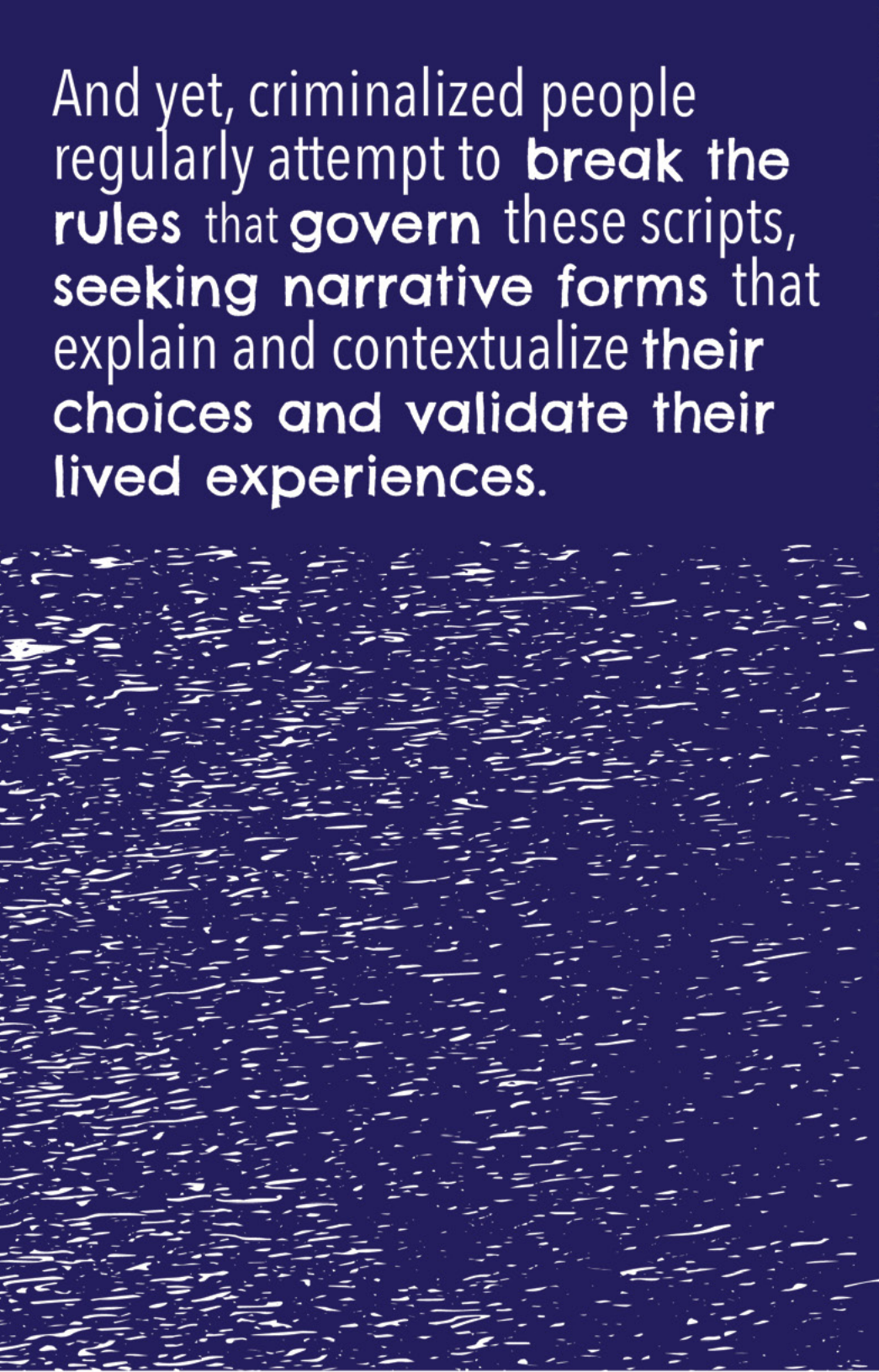


The modern problem of criminal records stigma is not simply that more people have convictions than ever before; it is also that criminal records have become significantly more accessible.



The stigma of a criminal record is effectively permanent.

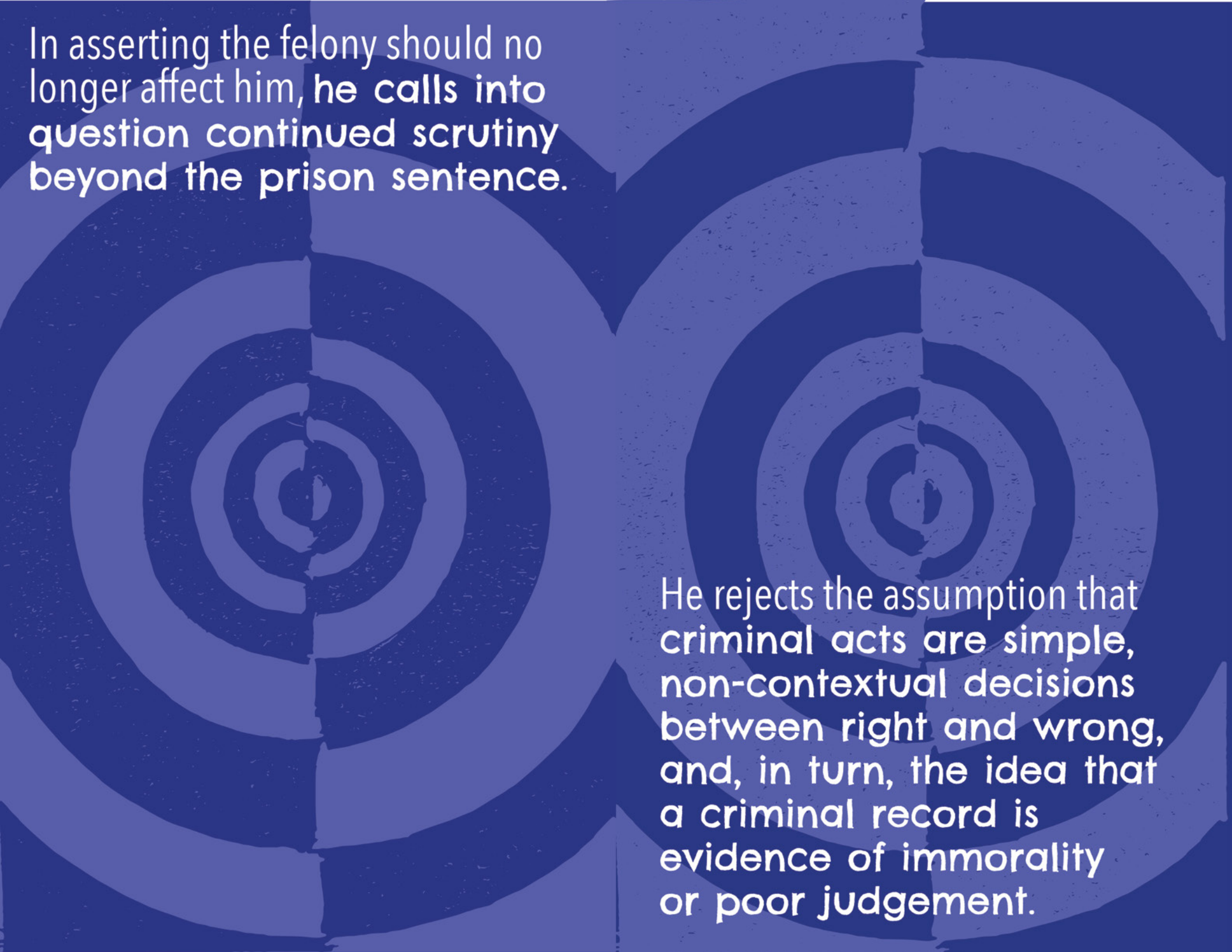




And yet, criminalized people regularly attempt to **break the rules** that **govern** these scripts, **seeking narrative forms** that explain and contextualize **their choices and validate their lived experiences.**

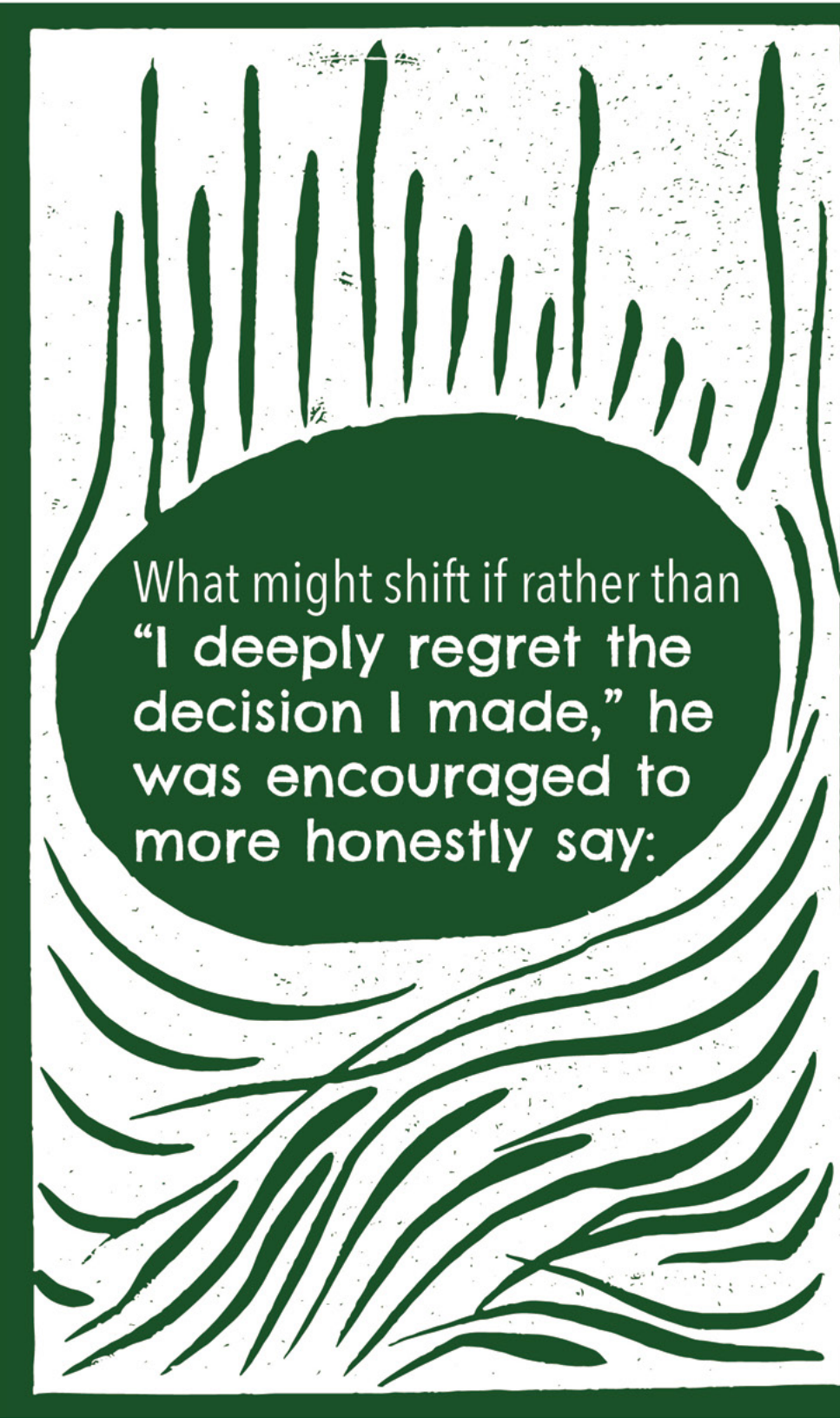


“Can I say I made a mistake and everybody makes mistakes?”

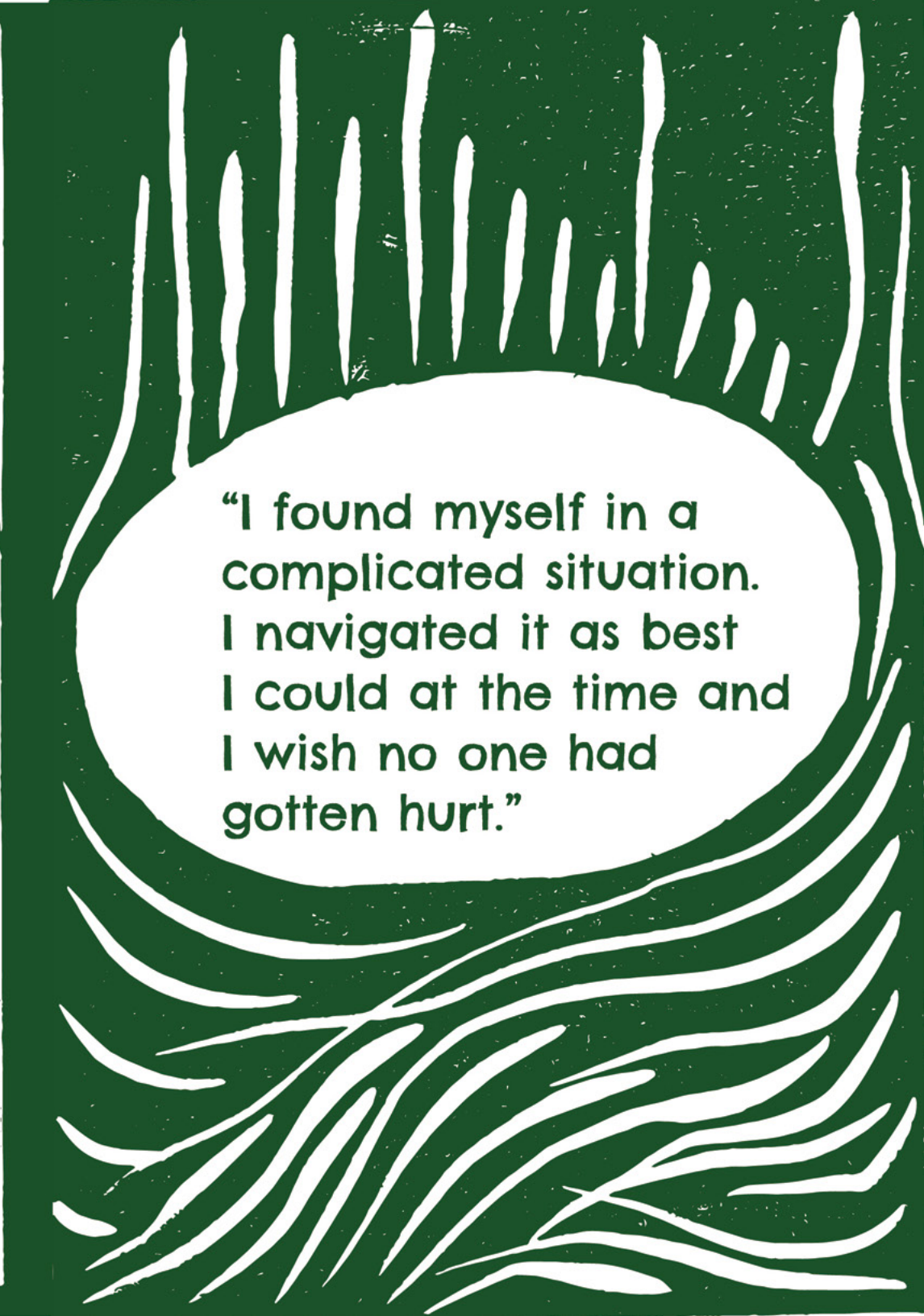


In asserting the felony should no longer affect him, he calls into question continued scrutiny beyond the prison sentence.

He rejects the assumption that criminal acts are simple, non-contextual decisions between right and wrong, and, in turn, the idea that a criminal record is evidence of immorality or poor judgement.



What might shift if rather than
“I deeply regret the
decision I made,” he
was encouraged to
more honestly say:



“I found myself in a
complicated situation.
I navigated it as best
I could at the time and
I wish no one had
gotten hurt.”

Approximately 70 million US adults has a record detailing prior convictions, arrests, dismissed charges, or charges-pending that will appear on a routine criminal background check.

Ultimately, the leeway a person has in a job interview to tell their story in a way that rings true, feels fair and shifts common sense will depend on the strength and visibility of collective forms of organized resistance.



Abstract:

People with criminal records seeking employment face a dilemma: how to discuss their conviction(s) in a job interview. Convicted job seekers are encouraged to draft, revise, and rehearse their "conviction scripts" and to approach their delivery as a Goffmanian performance. Drawing from participant observation within a nonprofit employment program in Southern California, this article analyzes job seekers' attempts to craft narratives that will satisfy employers' curiosities and concerns, with the assistance of professional coaches. I find that rather than challenge criminalizing practices or stigma itself, job seekers are encouraged to dissociate from criminal stigma and develop narratives that reinforce dominant frameworks of personal responsibility, remorse, and rehabilitation. They also regularly veer, however, from these conventions, in search of narratives that more accurately explain and contextualize their decisions. I argue that the act of scripting convictions is thus a political process in motion, a negotiation of power, with real life consequences. While at present, conviction scripting tends to reproduce the inequalities that underlie the criminal punishment system, the article concludes by exploring how criminalized people could craft scripts that contribute to their liberation.

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.

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