

# Captive Afterlives in the Age of Mass Conviction


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Captivity's rhizomes  
extend well beyond  
prison walls.

**Four and a half  
million people** in the  
United States are not in prison  
or jail, but are  
**under direct  
correctional**  
supervision through  
systems of parole or probation.  
**Tens of millions  
more** have  
criminal records  
that show up on a  
routine background check.






These are the lives **held captive**.

There had been a dispute with a domestic partner, and although no one had been harmed, **Linda** had been charged with Assault on a Person with a Firearm and sentenced to five years in state prison. The judge acknowledged this was a **relatively stiff sentence**, but justified it by emphasizing that 'someone could have gotten hurt' and insisting on the importance of using the case to **'send a message'**.






A record of who  
has been **policed,**  
**surveilled** and  
**prosecuted.**

**What is a criminal record?**





Discrimination on  
the basis of  
criminal records  
intersects  
inescapably with  
**racism**

Though her light skin,  
**racial ambiguity**,  
and small frame likely  
worked in her favor, she  
was nonetheless a  
**woman of color**  
convicted of a felony  
classified as **violent**.





Who is 'risky'?  
Who is vulnerable?

When the background report came in the mail, she realized she was not simply a dispatcher looking for a new position, but rather a **post-carceral subject** whose presumed **riskiness** warranted careful consideration by all those with whom she came in contact.



The feeling of being held captive resonates not only with the imprisoned, but also with those who have been released.

Though she was no longer **held in a cage**, Linda continued to be **tracked, managed, and contained** by a mysterious set of arbiters, some of whom had **never even met her**.



'A criminal record is not a  
**bar to employment**',  
he had said reassuringly, with  
a wide company smile.

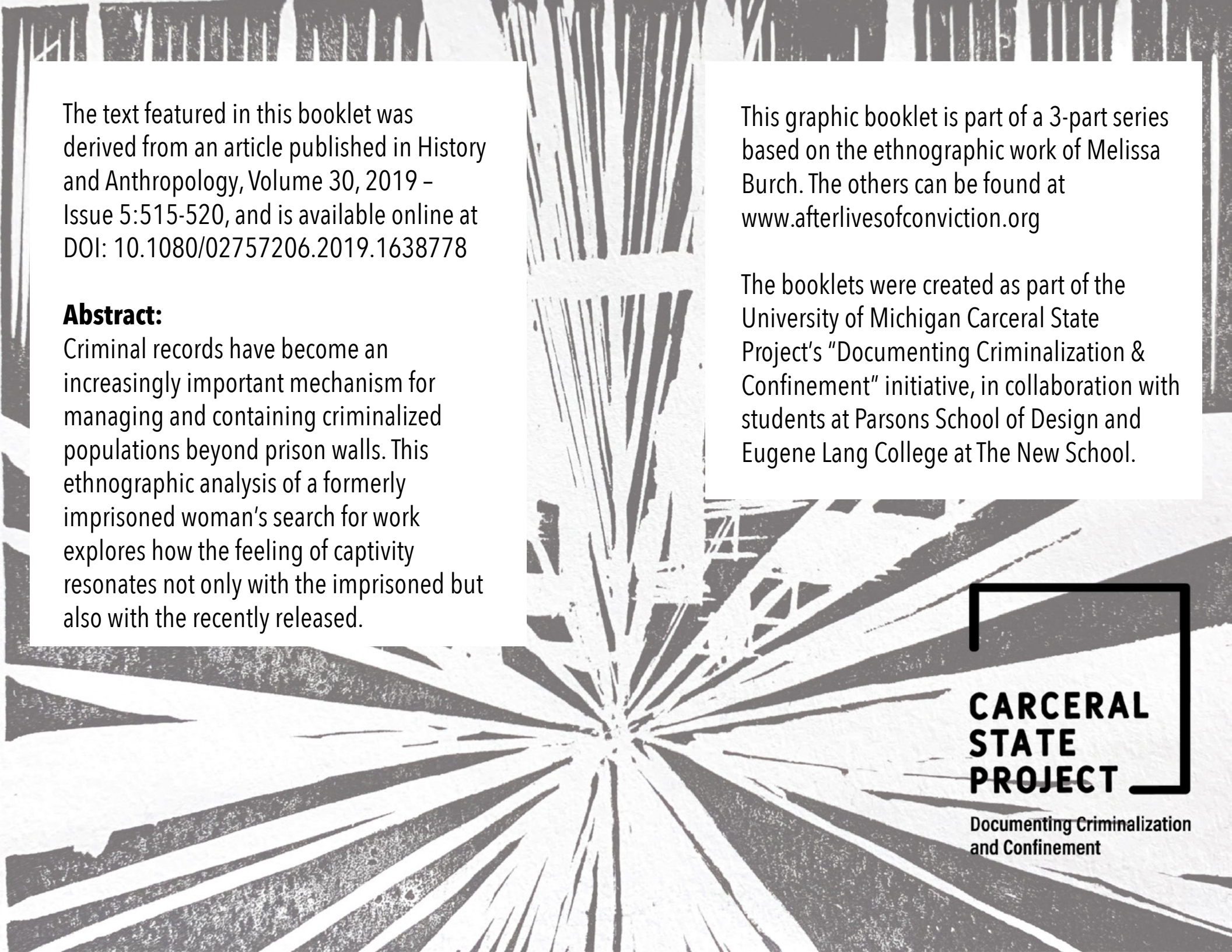
Fair procedure.  
Fair outcomes?



Those of us invested in the success and well-being of people who are coming home from prison tend to focus on outcomes.

You see, it wasn't just the disappointment of not getting hired. It was the way the company had **raised her hopes** and then scuttled them and the frustration in the certainty that she would have been a great fit for the job.





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**Abstract:**

Criminal records have become an increasingly important mechanism for managing and containing criminalized populations beyond prison walls. This ethnographic analysis of a formerly imprisoned woman's search for work explores how the feeling of captivity resonates not only with the imprisoned but also with the recently released.

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](http://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



