During my work with Justice Now, I was a part of two major projects. The Reentry Project was born out of a need to document the obstacles that are common for people that are reentering into the outside world. By documenting these narratives, Justice Now seeks to shed light on the realities that affect the lives of people leaving the California prison system. The goal of the project is to center the voices and experiences of those reentering, while also creating a document that will help those seeking reentry to better prepare themselves. One way to accomplish this documentation is through interviews that are transcribed and coded into a spreadsheet listing common themes people experience. I sat in on one interview and transcribed three interviews. I also translated a chapter concerning employment into Spanish.

The other major project I worked on was Communities Without Policing. This is a chapter of the Legal Advocacy and Wellness Project (LAW Project) Justice Now is constantly developing, which is a book that contains information on various topics, such as how to apply for compassionate release to finding employment with a criminal record. Communities Without Policing was in its very early stages of development when I picked it up, and my biggest task was framing the project in a way that made sense to people inside. Prior to my work with the project, the title was actually Safety Without Policing, but that was changed when I conducted interviews with people inside and learned that many incarcerated people do not associate positive things with the word “safety.” I learned that the way folks stay safe is through community building, and most people view policing as a negative thing that harms them. Thus, I began re-framing the project by creating sample questions for folks inside to edit and help write. I also did
background research and found similar examples of this work from the Oakland Power Projects, which published several reports on how people from Oakland can build community power without relying on the police.

On top of my two projects, I also responded to letters written to Justice Now from people inside. Justice Now is a legal clinic and therefore gets an immense amount of letters from folks asking for an array of different resources and services. Justice Now does not offer direct services, except in the area of emergent medical crises or compassionate release. Thus, most letters end up being referrals or limited legal research and further resources. Each intern is expected to respond to three letters a week. Due to Justice Now’s limited capacity, sometimes we were replying to letters that were written years ago. The process for responding to letters is complicated. First, we read the letter and look up the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Center’s number on the inmate locator website to see if the person who wrote the letter is still inside a California prison. If they are, we then look through our files to see if they already have a file with Justice Now. If they do, we read their file to get more context and respond to the letter adequately. If they don’t, we create one for them. Once prison visits come into the picture, the work begins to pile up, and it’s understood that three letters per week is beyond one person’s capacity. Prison visit prep and follow up takes priority over other work.

The week before prison visits was very intense. On the first visit we got paired with another intern, and were given a list of the people we would visit. Margaret, the Legal Advocacy Coordinator, checked in with everyone individually to explain what the goals of the visit should be and to outline what preparation was necessary. Each intern had to create a prison visit outline for every person they were visiting that contained the questions we planned to ask them, any background information such as Justice Now’s relationship to the person being visited, and the
goal of the visit. We also brought our prison outfits to the office the day before so that they could get approved, since the prison visit dress code is extremely strict and wearing the wrong thing can result in being denied the right to visit. Once we were actually inside of the prison, the work became direct, personal, and very real, in a way that was vastly different from the more relaxed office culture. That said, prison visits were one of the most transformative experiences of my work with Justice Now. I learned so much about people inside, their thoughts on abolition, the immense concentration of creativity, artistic expression, community, resistance, and organization that is produced by folks inside. I also learned in a very raw and serious way how blatantly violent and harmful prisons are to folks inside. After our first prison visit, the office had a healing circle, which I found to be incredibly restorative and necessary. Almost everyone was grappling with the profoundness and shock of being able to leave the prison, while working with folks who were trapped inside those man-made cages. We processed a lot of anger and different emotions that we all put aside while directly working with folks inside. That’s another part of the Justice Now training that is really important: when we were inside the prison, our emotions have to be put aside. Even if we heard something traumatic, if the person we were talking to started crying and having a breakdown, it doesn’t matter how any of us felt. Our emotions were not the focus, and we had to be able to center the person inside and their needs. Prior to the visit, I was really concerned about this, as were other interns, since most of us have a personal connection to the prison-industrial complex, and were worried about being triggered. Fortunately, the first prison visit and all the training that went into it demonstrated to me that it is very possible to center the person and put our feelings aside. The healing circle was a space to process those emotions with folks holding space for each other, and displaying worker solidarity in the realest sense of the word. That was really powerful for me, and writing about it I feel so motivated and
driven because that’s exactly what the healing circle provided for us — it was reenergizing, it was honest, it was what we needed to continue fighting, and it provided me with a sense of clarity that helped drive the rest of my work.

Justice Now has a collect-call line which is basically a number that allows people inside to directly call the office. There’s a separate phone for this from the regular office phone, and these calls are taken very seriously. Interns are expected to take their fair share of calls, but there’s a running inside joke at Justice Now that answering the phone often becomes similar to a game of hot potato. However, for the most part we all answered a good amount of these calls, which are often really urgent and require fast-paced thinking, taking notes, and checking in with a supervisor prior to ending the call. Because there’s a lot of elements and processes that need to happen before ending a call, it can be a bit stressful. My advice about this is that practice really does help in making it a lot less scary, and that just keeping a script by you when you answer the calls helps to make sure you cover all your bases.

Working with Justice Now was definitely a way to exercise working with an intersectional framework. I was encouraged to constantly think about this work from an anti-oppressive standpoint, which helped me focus and direct my work in a purposeful way. Examples of this include the use of humanizing language in letters, learning how to set my emotions aside, and truly centering my work on the needs of the people inside. It helped me challenge my own pre-conceived assumptions, especially in conversations about communities without policing, where I witnessed people give brilliant critiques of notions of “safety” from an inside perspective. It reminded me of the value and necessity in allowing directly impacted people to lead the prison abolition movement. Furthermore, I cannot think of a day during this internship that I went without writing — this internship involves a lot of writing, editing, and
more writing. Supervisors are really good at providing support when needed, and checking in for accountability. The intern team was comprised of seven people, mostly undergraduates with a couple of graduate students. Since I was sharing a space with several people, knowing how to work with others and communicate effectively was a skill I utilized constantly.

Initially, when I was only working with reentry, I found it difficult to focus all of my energy into one single task for the entire day. The translation and transcriptions take hours to complete. I would use letter writing as a way to give myself multiple tasks, but eventually I was able to plug into Communities Without Policing, and also work on prison visit work, which diversified my workload in a positive sense. Some technical challenges I had involved the translation process, which meant addressing the gendered nature of the Spanish language, and providing Spanish-translated links to all of the links within the chapter that led to English-only websites.

Without a doubt, hearing and going through reentry interviews and also talking to people inside during visits were the most transformative aspects of my internship. Prior to this internship, most of my engagement with the prison-industrial complex was personal and academic. But being presented with different stories and learning about the experiences of people in women’s prisons gave me a different perspective that added to my own knowledge. Something that stands out is that despite the unique nature of people’s stories, the commonalities of oppression and abuse are consistent.

Prior to coming to Justice Now I was still debating whether or not to take a pre-law track, and most of the counseling I received at my college suggested interning at a law office. After spending time with Justice Now, I learned a lot about how legal clinics and law offices work.
Specifically, as legal advocates, all of our work is done under the supervision of the office attorney. While we never met with the office attorney, literally every letter, every prison visit, and some of our most important work, could only be accessed through this attorney privilege. Personally, spending time in the Bay Area also really expanded and informed my politics. While I still haven’t decided if I want to go to law school, I do know that this internship gave me a tangible understanding of why we need more people of color and system-involved folks that are committed to anti-oppressive, abolitionist politics working in the legal system. I know that whether I go into academia, policy work, or become an attorney, the lessons learned at Justice Now will continue guiding my work and giving it purpose.

When it comes to reproductive justice and social justice issues, meeting with people in women’s prisons really illustrates how different systems of oppression intersect and specifically marginalize poor, black and brown, and gender-oppressed people. Learning about these connections and intersections also demonstrates how collective liberation is inherently necessary for anyone’s liberation.

Towards the end of the internship, interns were asked to write some words of advice for future interns. This is what I wrote: Let yourself grow. Constantly challenge your own pre-conceived notions and think with an intersectional lens — allow that lens to guide your work. Trust black women. Trust directly impacted people. Trust your struggle, and be okay with the fact that you might just be continuing work and not creating a finished product and that is okay! Take breaks when you need to, and don’t feel like you need to justify taking care of yourself to anyone because you are more important than your productivity. Ironically, you’re probably going to be more productive when you do take care of yourself. And finally, it goes by quickly, so stay focused, stay driven, and have fun!