

## **ABSTRACT**

Title of dissertation: FROM THE INSIDE OUT: WOMEN WRITERS BEHIND  
PRISON WALLS

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This dissertation considers what women in prison, or women who have been in prison, have to tell us, in oral testimony or in their writing, about the American “prison experience.” This study shows how the interpretation of first person prison narratives provides important insights into patterns in the lives of women in their pre-prison, in prison, and post-prison experiences. It also explores the importance that creating narratives has for women prisoners’ lives.

This dissertation examines three kinds of prison narratives. The first involves texts produced and written by female prisoners and prison activists in a radical feminist underground prison newsletter published in Seattle, WA between 1976 and 1987. Secondly, oral narratives by two former prisoners involved in the production of that newsletter are presented. Finally, I discuss and interpret the prison poetry, memoir, and other narratives produced in a creative writing workshop series at the District of Columbia Detention Center between 1995 and 1996. Women writers in prison provide insights into situations, such as poverty and abuse, that brought them to prison, they discuss survival strategies in prison, and they offer recommendations

for prison policy reform as it relates to their pre-prison, prison, and post-prison experiences.

The central questions to which I seek answers are how can we learn from exploring the autobiographical representations of women writers in prison, and what can we learn from the prison experience that assists us in understanding the needs of women in prison today? In addition to examining the characteristics and dynamics of the prison experience out of which the women are writing, this work both interprets what women prisoners have to say and seeks to assess the various meanings narration has for them.

The dissertation borrows theories and techniques from feminist theory, social justice theory, critical race theory, and oral history while offering an analysis of the current conditions of women's incarceration in the United States. It employs the methods of ethnography, including participant observation, key informant interviews, oral history, and reflexivity to enter and describe the communities examined in this research. Life stories from prison writers and activists offer a continuity of themes and theories of development as prisoners attempt to re-enter the free world.

In particular, this work seeks to increase our understanding of women's prison experiences as a means to a deeper understanding of how female prisoners make meaning out of the prison experience through writing and as a springboard for considering prison policy change.

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WOMEN WRITERS BEHIND PRISON WALLS

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland at College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2004

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My continuing passion is to part a curtain,  
That invisible shadow that falls between people,  
The veil of indifference to each other's presence,  
Each other's wonder, each other's human plight.  
Eudora Welty

“There's nothing to writing,” the columnist Red Smith once commented. “All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.”

For those of you who have come along on my journey, you are, I hope, nodding in agreement. The commitment to writing is enormous for those of us who undertake it. Writing can be a journey out or writing can be a tomb. The one thing all writers have in common, no matter where they write, is that we know about blood letting. And we know about healing.

I express my gratitude to the many who believed in this project and joined me on this journey.<sup>1</sup> I am sincerely grateful to members of my dissertation committee who challenged me to continue my scholarship and make room for women's voices. I thank my chair John Caughey and committee members: Bonnie Thornton Dill, Seung-kyung Kim, Deborah Rosenfelt, and Mary Corbin Sies, who made the most extraordinary sacrifices on my behalf.

For the vision to tell the stories in the first place and the encouragement to collaborate and to listen, I thank Jacqueline Smith. Her courage and strength has, over these years, kept me on the path. Her tremendous fortitude was a model for me

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<sup>1</sup> The research was facilitated in the early stages by financial support from a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, Institute on Violence, Culture, and Survival, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, Charlottesville, VA.

in my darkest hour, for I could never know how hard it was for her to be “still maintaining under the circumstances.” For taking the time to recollect their prison experiences and for their commitment to other women prisoners across the country, I thank Jane Potter and Shelly Baker. Thanks too to those associated in the past or present with women in prison who helped advance this research: Fr. Michael Bryant, Chaplain of the District of Columbia Detention Center and his assistants, Rev. Manson and Sr. Alma.

For encouraging me to pursue this degree and having faith that I would complete it, I will be eternally grateful to my dear friends Barbara Shaw-Perry, Psyche Williams, Nina Roberts, Ariella Zeller, Bruni Hernández, Mary Dowcett, Sandi Gray-Terry, and Laura Nichols. For helping me move through the process with strength and clarity, I am forever grateful to Sudi Berg, who never questioned my ability to finish. For her assistance with editing and voice, I thank Melissa Capers.

To my mother Patricia A. Jones Rowe, yes I am finally a doctor! To my father, in spite of all the obstacles placed in my way, I did succeed in my own way and on my own terms. A little education does indeed go a long way. I am also thankful for my brother Bill Rowe and his partner Denise Koczczik who praised me when I needed it the most. Only you know what we struggled against to survive.

To Rick Gaynor, I say thank you for making me laugh and for being my lifelong friend; to his wife and my best friend Sophie, I am ever grateful for your love and sense of hope. I am so glad you were both there for me. Tom and Jami, thank you for sharing your home, your hearts, and your music with us. To Tiki, John, and

the girls, thank you for bearing witness to the journey and encouraging me. To my co-workers at the House of Ruth in Washington, DC, I appreciate your flexibility and professionalism during my work. Your support has meant a great deal to me. To my clients, your courage will always be an inspiration. To my friends and colleagues in Washington, D.C., you helped me find myself and for that I am eternally grateful. Diste su corazón y lo tengo siempre conmigo. Es uno regalo por me alma, gracias.

For teaching me patience and showing me how to move forward toward a goal, I thank my mother-in-law Mary Elizabeth Foster Jackson and my father-in-law Warren Schneller Jackson, who literally made it possible for me to finish this project.

Finally, I especially wish to thank my son, Noah Nathaniel Jackson who has until now, never known a day when Mom wasn't working on the dissertation. His love and energy has been unfailing. To my husband Tom Jackson, words cannot express what I feel in my heart for you as you walk along beside me. Without you, so many things in my life would not have been possible.

Never have I had such life altering experiences. Never have I been so thoroughly consumed by a subject, or by the people who have shared their lives with me. And looking back, I would not change one minute of this wonderful journey.

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## **Introduction: Positioning Prison Narratives in the Context of Women's Incarceration**

“Never surrendering mentally to controversy, frustrations, or harsh conditions. I'll maneuver magnificently, having the courage to face enemies, Opposing trials, and tribulations. Only the strong will survive.” Jacqueline Smith, 1996, Former Prisoner at the District of Columbia Detention Center

When I called the Chaplain's office at the District of Columbia's Detention Center in 1995 to ask if it would be interested in sponsoring me to conduct research on women's prison writing by offering a writing workshop series to female prisoners, Father Bryant listened quietly to me and then asked, “Why do you want to teach creative writing to women at the jail?” His seemingly simple question was a multi-layered inquiry into intentions and authenticity. He needed to protect his community from mal-intended outsiders; he is also wary of those who so readily want to volunteer.

In the years since then I have come to expect this type of question as I worked on this dissertation. The female writers I taught asked me to define my intentions, other research participants questioned me in order to protect themselves from exposure, and my friends and family have quizzed me time and again about what I was doing and why.

I wanted to teach creative writing in the DC jail in order to share voice with a population, women in prison that is expanding at unprecedented rates and yet remains largely invisible and unheard in our country. I wanted to teach creative writing in order to provide these women the additional tools to articulate their experience in ways that express truth and communicate meaningfully to themselves, their families, and communities. I wanted to create an avenue for women writers in prison to

represent themselves in the literary arena as well. I wanted to teach creative writing to women in jail in order to add women's voices to the canon of prison writing. I wanted to teach and research women writers to learn what they had to say about their experiences. Having been involved in research through the early 1990's with women who had murdered abusive partners, I had begun to learn more about trauma and storytelling. I wanted to continue my research into women's prison experiences to find a way to study this community further and to do something positive with a greater understanding of the problems they encountered.

One of my former creative writing students has just been released from a federal prison camp in Connecticut after being incarcerated for ten years. We corresponded regularly through those years, and she has been a great source of information for this project. In the process we have become good friends. Jackie challenged me to answer these questions, "How could one million women be locked up in the United States?" "Do they even know who we are?" "Do they listen to what we say?" "Do they read what we write?" Why does she want us to listen? As we will see, her questions fall into two categories, "do they know us?" and "do they listen?" This dissertation will explore these queries by seeking answers not from outsiders but directly from the women writers themselves.

As a researcher, I pose these questions: What do female prisoners have to tell us about the prison experience? How do female prisoners make sense out of their prison experiences through writing and other forms of narration? From the perspective of discourse, what are the implications of "listening to the prisoner?" What can we learn from exploring and expanding the autobiographical

representations of women writers in prison? Simultaneously, what can we learn from the prison experience that assists us in understanding the publicly generated representations of women writers in prison? My study investigates these questions to increase our understanding of women's prison experiences, as a means to a deeper understanding of how female prisoners make meaning out of the prison experience through writing, and as a springboard for considering prison policy change.

### **Overview of The Growth of the Female Inmate Population**

In just the last two decades the number of women being held in the nation's prisons has increased eightfold. Each year 3.2 million women are arrested by the police, charged with a crime, removed from their communities, and taken to jail to await a trial or other disposition of their case. Even though most women who are arrested are released within a short time period, approximately 156,000 women are held prior to trial or as sentenced prisoners, representing more than a tripling of the female inmate population since 1985. Understanding the rationale and impact of mass incarceration requires that we look and consider the profile and the voices of women detained by the criminal justice system and the community conditions that they face. As a usually silenced group, they have much to say regarding the circumstances that led them to prison, what prison has been like, and their hopes for the future

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the women's prison population numbered between five to ten thousands (Calahan, 1986). By 1980, there were just over 12,000 women in U.S. state and federal prisons. By 1999, the number had reached 90,668. As for the larger picture, in 2004, there are approximately 1 million women under

criminal justice supervision. The rate of women's imprisonment is also at an historic high, increasing from a low of 6 sentenced female inmates per 100,000 women in the United States in 1925 to 66 per 100,000 in 2000. In 2001, Texas led the nation with 12,714 women in prison, followed by California (11,432), Florida (4,019), and New York (3,423) (Beck & Karberg, 2001 5).<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that the increase in women's imprisonment is not simply a mirror image of what is happening to the numbers in male corrections. First, women's share of total imprisonment has actually increased – more than doubling in the past three decades. At the turn of the twentieth century, women made up 4% of those imprisoned; by 1970, this had dropped to 3%. Women still accounted for only 3.9% of those in prison in 1980, but by 1999, women accounted for 6.7% of those in prison (Beck & Karberg, 2001, 5).

The “rate” of growth of women's imprisonment has also outpaced that of men. Since 1990, the annual rate of growth of female prisoners has averaged 8.1%, higher than the 6.2% average increase in male prisoners. As a result, in the last decade (1990-2000), the number of women in prison increased by 110%, compared to a 77% increase in the male prison population (Beck & Karberg, 2001 5). Similar patterns are seen in adult jails; women constituted 7% of the jail population in the mid-1980s, but today they account for 11.4%. Likewise, the rate of female

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<sup>2</sup> Although the United States leads the world in women's incarceration, we are not alone in our push to imprison. Women's cell space in Canada has tripled since 1992 (Faith, 1991 11); in Great Britain, the number of women in prison jumped 19% between 1996 and 1997 (Carlen, 1999 22); and in New Zealand, the same two-year period showed a 20% increase (Morris & Kingi, 1999 141). Essentially, it appears that around the world, there is an increased willingness to incarcerate women.

incarceration increase since 1990 has been 6.6% for women compared to 4% for men (Calahan 1986; Beck & Karberg, 2001, 5).

Although the American prison was designed with a largely male image of the “criminal” in mind, the growth of imprisonment in the U.S. has taken a heavy toll on women. Throughout most of our nation’s history, women in prison have been correctional afterthoughts. A relatively small subset of the prison population, female inmates tended not to riot, not to protest, not to become violent as a group, making it even easier for institutions to overlook their unique needs. Perhaps as a consequence, when the reformatory system fell into disuse shortly before World War II, the United States never developed a correctional system for women to replace it. In fact, by the mid-1970s, only about half the states and territories had separate prisons for women, and many jurisdictions housed women inmates in male facilities or transferred them to women’s facilities in other states (Singer 1973).

The correctional establishment was not prepared when the numbers of women sentenced to prison began to expand in the 1980s. Initially, women inmates were housed just about anywhere (remodeled hospitals, abandoned training schools, and converted motels) as jurisdictions struggled to cope with the dramatic increase in women’s imprisonment (Chesney-Lind 1998).

More recently, states have turned to opening new units and facilities to respond to the soaring numbers of women inmates. Between 1930 and 1950, the United States opened only about two to three women’s facilities each decade, but over 34 such facilities were opened in the 1980s alone (Rafter 1990). By 1990, the nation had 71 female-only facilities; five years later, that number had jumped to

104—an increase of 46.5% (Chesney-Lind 1998). Again, this building boom should not be seen simply as a reflection of what was happening in male incarceration; in many states there was simply no system at all for women when the numbers started going up.

Since the decision in *Holt v. Sarver* (1970) in which the court declared an entire prison to be in violation of the Eighth Amendment and imposed detailed remedial plans, the courts have taken an active role in the administration of correctional facilities. Some of the most recent cases challenge the inequity of treatment between male and female prisoners. Ostensibly, the needs of male and female prisoners would appear to be the same. They are not. Although some inmate interests are similar, others are separate and distinct. In many institutions, criteria developed for men are applied automatically to women, with no consideration for gender differences. Research shows that female inmates experience more medical and health problems than do male inmates. Classification officials note that female offenders need help in parenting skills, child welfare, pregnancy and prenatal care, home stability, and in understanding the circumstances of their crime. But typically, assignments to programs and treatment resources in correctional facilities have been based more on what is available than on what should be available.

There are indications that significant differences have existed at all levels of men's and women's services in relation to living conditions, medical and health services, vocational and educational programs, religious practices, psychological counseling, work-release programs, legal and recreational services, post-release programs, drug and alcohol counseling, and the actual management of the



correctional facilities. In the absence of any coherent or well-considered national system for women prisoners, states and localities have invented, reinvented, and resurrected an often confused and disparate array of facilities, systems, and approaches.

The distinctions between jails and prisons are important to note. A jail is generally defined as a facility “which detains persons for more than forty-eight hours, [and is] used both as a detention center for persons facing criminal charges and as a correctional facility for persons convicted of misdemeanor and felony crime” (American Correctional Association, 1985 xvii). A jail holds both persons detained pending adjudication of their cases and those sentenced to one year or less of incarceration. A prison is defined as a facility housing those sentenced to one year or more. Prisons tend to have more programs than jails, due to the lengthier prison sentences. The first penal institution for women opened in Indiana in 1873. By the beginning of the twentieth century, women’s correctional facilities had opened in Framingham, MA, in Bedford Hills, NY, and in Clinton, NJ. The Federal Institution for Women in Alderson, WV, opened in 1927, and the House of Detention for Women (the first separate jail for women) opened in New York City in 1931. These institutions all shared one thing in common, “traditional values, theories and practices concerning a woman’s role and place in society...The staffs, architectural design and programs reflected the culturally valued norms for women’s behavior” (Feinman 1986 38).

As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 1, there is a distinct general profile of the typical woman prisoner and her background. As we shall see, the typical woman

prisoner is poor, is often a woman of color, has dependent children, usually has a history of abuse, and usually has difficulties with drugs or alcohol.

### **Review of Current Research on Women Prisoners**

Beginning with Clemmer (1940) and his analysis of the shared convict perspective within the prison community, a strong social science tradition has concerned itself with the ways in which men organize and "do their time."<sup>3</sup> Clemmer showed that behind the prison walls there existed a prisoner culture played out through primary group affiliation and informal institutional relationships. Later, Cressy (1961) and Goffman (1961, 1964) refashioned this analysis of "total institutions" arguing for the determinant role of institutional structures and organizational process in the creation and maintenance of institutional culture and the "inmate" that inhabits it (Gaucher 18). Thus, the picture of the prison in the minds of the public and in the pages of the literature has been decidedly male-oriented.

For the most part, male prison culture has been described as violent and predatory (Irwin 1980), with men affiliating with particular groups. Current discussions suggest that men band together in these organizations to act out this violence and to gain protection from others. Much of the writing on men's prisons also examines the impact of racial divisiveness on this culture (Carroll 1996). McCorkle (1993) further suggests that male prison culture is marked by individual accommodation to violent behavior.

Although the bulk of sociological attention to the prison has been directed toward the male world, a few classic studies of women's prisons do exist. The milieu

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<sup>3</sup> Studies in this tradition include descriptions of the nature of the inmate social system (Sykes, 1958; Sykes & Messinger, 1960), the inmate code (Sykes, 1958; Irwin & Cressey, 1962), race relations (Carroll, 1974; Davidson, 1974), and the history of these forms of social interaction (Irwin, 1980).

of female incarceration is markedly different from that of male incarceration. Still, until recently, the study of women's prison lives has received only minor, and not broadly developed, attention in the sociological literature. Three important sociological and anthropological studies provided an early understanding of the world of the women's prison. Ward and Kasselbaum (1965), Giallombardo (1966), and Heffernan (1972) conducted in-depth investigations of three prisons during the 1960s. These studies had similar results; the world of women's prisons was shown to be quite different from that of the male prison culture; prison culture among women was tied to gender role expectations of sexuality and family; and prison identities were at least partially based on outside identities and experiences.

These studies uniformly suggest that women create lives in prison that reflect elements of traditional family roles and street life. This social structure revolves around their gender and attendant social roles, mirroring their relations with family structures on the outside. Descriptions of inmates as mothers (Baunach, 1985; Datesman & Cales, 1983; Koban, 1983; Henriques, 1982) reveal that a key problem area for many female inmates is their strained relationship with their children (Owen, 1998).

More broadly, several studies have been conducted on the impact of the women's movement on criminality (Adler, 1975; Hoffman-Bustamonte, 1973; Klein, 1973; Smart, 1976; Steffenmeiser, 1980). Introducing the theme of "partial justice," histories of women's prisons have been conducted suggesting that women prisoners traditionally have been accorded lower priority and unequal treatment in a system of male and female inmates (Dobash, Dobash & Gutteridge, 1986; Freedman, 1981;

Rafter, 1990). These studies also introduced the concept of the female prisoner as the "double" deviant, implying female prisoners break both gender roles and the criminal law. Recent life history studies of women's prison culture have emerged that have shifted the emphasis from institutional statistics and patterns of incarceration to the individual prisoner, while other sources have concentrated on how women "do their time."

It is important to acknowledge these studies for both their methodology and the scope of the research. One of the first sociological studies of women in prison to actually record women prisoners' perceptions and construct a cultural context for their prison experiences was Evelyn Sommers, Voices From Within, (1995). Sommers work describes what female prisoners feel led to their being imprisoned. Her work is informed by her feminist comprehension of the ways in which oppression in the form of sexism, and often, of racism, and classism has made her interviewees feel powerless, isolated, and embedded in emotional isolation.

The earliest life history work, Kathryn Watterson's Women in Prison: Inside the Concrete Womb (1996) revised from work written in 1973, brought national attention to the reality of prison for many who had given little thought to the women who were there. Based on lengthy interviews with female inmates and those who work with inmates, her research shows the day-to-day reality of incarceration for women.

Following this, Carol Owen's research, In the Mix, (1998), makes the argument that the world of the women's prison is shaped by pre-prison experiences, the role of women in contemporary society, and the ways women rely on personalized

relationships to survive their prison terms. Women's prison culture, she argued, is decidedly personal, a network of meanings and relationships that create and reproduce the way women serve their sentences, or "do their time." She worked with both Black and white women but did not attend to differences among them racially.

During this period, journalist Andi Rierden published her research on life inside the Connecticut Correctional Institution. The Farm: Life Inside a Woman's Prison, (1997) is rich with interviews of both Black and white inmates and stories on a wide range of issues, including the effects of drug laws and sentences on the rise of violence among inmates. Rierden's work is part sociological, part hard-hitting journalism, giving the field of prison studies new information about not only the daily ins and outs of prison life, but also the particular culture of women in prison.

In 1999, Lori B. Girshick's work, No Safe Haven explored the lives of forty women in a minimum-security prison in Western North Carolina. Her work is a look at the gendered nature of women's lives, their options, their crimes, and their time in prison. Of particular relevance is the detailed discussion of social conditions within the prison walls and how the culture of women's prisons influence women's emotional development.

Paula Johnson's research, Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison (2003) poignantly conveys this message from African American female prisoners and former prisoners.

All of us who are featured in the pages of this book have had our lives transformed because of our incarceration, our removal from society. We were taken from our families, friends, and communities and placed in environments that were strained and artificial. But, as the stories contained in *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison* illustrate, we remain your daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts, and nieces. We have been separated, but

we are not gone. We may be distant, but we are a part of you. We may be absent, but we are very much present.

These individually based approaches have helped to inform and orient this research and have opened up a new set of policy questions regarding pre-prison experience, prison rehabilitation, and re-entry, which will be explored in the conclusion of this study. Important to this study is an understanding of how and why women are in prison. Some studies (Arnold, 1990; Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez, 1983; Robinson, 1994; and Widom, 1989) have examined women's pathways into crime from early and repeated experiences of victimization. Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez describe the existence of a systematic process of criminalization unique to women that magnifies the relationship between ongoing societal victimization and eventual entrapment in the criminal justice system. Widom (1989) found that both black and white women who were adjudicated abused or neglected as children had higher arrest rates as adults than women who had not suffered maltreatment as children. Robinson (1994) reported that girls' experience of sexual abuse and early sexualization produced increasing isolation and alienation from normative juvenile experiences and, hence, contributed to later criminal activities (O'Brien 2001).

Structural sources of inequity play an even greater role in black than white women's crime. Chapman's research (1980) demonstrated that drug crimes are directly associated with economic need and, therefore, economic crime. Phillips and Votey (1984) also suggest that some crime is a consequence of disincentives created when former welfare recipients receive less than a fair wage for their work and lose medical benefits (O'Brien 2001). Hill and Crawford (1990) found that a cluster of variables they term structural (i.e., unemployment rate and the gap between

educational aspiration and achievement) more directly affected black women's lawbreaking, whereas, for white women, variables reflecting social – psychological processes (i.e., self-esteem and sex-specific goal attainment) were more influential. Dressel (1994), drawing from her work with mostly black incarcerated mothers in Georgia, described a kind of economic hopelessness in which the avenues for legitimate income-producing activities are becoming less accessible due to the interplay of racism, classism, and sexism (O'Brien, 2001 11).

Arnold (1994) suggests that this trajectory for young black girls from lower socioeconomic classes starts with pre-criminal behavior that in many cases represents resistance to victimization. Common to the girls' experience is a structural dislocation from the family, education, and legitimate and sufficient occupations. Arnold observes that once this process of criminalization is set in motion, "sustained criminal involvement becomes the norm as well as a rational coping strategy" (153). From interviews that Arnold conducted with fifty black women in jail, she concluded, "When not in prison, these women can be counted among the hard-core unemployed, the homeless, the drug addicted, and the sexually abused" (163).

### **Prisoner's Writing**

During the past thirty or more years, women's writing has gained a deeper respect and exposure as literature, but that respect has not reached the writings of women prisoners. The prison writing of men is often acknowledged for its strong imagery, political influence, and social commentary, but works by women prisoners remain more obscure. The writings are difficult to find, often unknown and tucked away in prison libraries or local women's center bookshelves, and, consequently, as

Judith Scheffler observes, “a female prison author and her audience remain widely separated. She is doubly marginal: as a prisoner and as a female writer (1986 xxii).” Contemporary feminist scholarship should find the “double marginality” of women’s prison literature significant and revealing in its direct access to a widening group of women silenced and outcast.

The need to consider race and class as well as gender in revising the literary canon has been an ongoing concern among feminist literary critics, whose call for a reexamination of aesthetic and social assumptions behind our response to works has made significant revisions to the literary canon. Feminist criminologists share these concerns about the dynamics of class, race, and gender in the criminal justice system. Women’s prison literature lies at the heart of this issue, since its authors are the female dispossessed – in society, in the canon, and, until recently, even in feminist scholarship. Considerations of class, race, and gender are central to an understanding of these texts, which demonstrate that opening the canon to writing about women is not enough; authors who have been excluded by reason of race or low socioeconomic class must also share in the reconstruction of our concept of ‘great literature’ (Scheffler xxii).

There has been a serious neglect of women’s prison literature, and to illustrate this one need only to consult its status in the 1998 publication The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society. Although there are chapters on women’s imprisonment, political prisoners, and the literature of confinement, there is minimal reference to writings by women. Another example is Writers in Prison (1990) in which Ioan Davies gives little attention to women prison writings. He generalizes about prison literature, “Prison writing is centrally about violence,” and thus, speaks primarily about male prison writings, where violence is a central theme. In so doing, Davies excludes an entire segment of prison writing, as violence is not a central theme in women’s texts. Finally, in James McGrath Morris’s Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars (1998) the author explores



prison newsletters and journalism from the mid-eighteenth century through the 1990s. The author claims that “the lack of women prison journalists is more understandable, as women’s incarceration rate has been minuscule in comparison to men’s...it has been frustrating to seek information about minority and female prison journalists.” He goes on to claim “there were...several publications produced in segregated prisons, such as the Industrial Home for Negro Girls in Missouri and the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, but apparently there are no copies extant (1998 2).” My findings conclude otherwise, as the reader will see in Chapter Three of this study. Through the Looking Glass was just one of several women’s prison newsletters that flourished during the 1970s and 1980s.

There is a surprisingly large body of prison writing available and some scholars have been focused on this genre of writing for years. However the work of women’s prison writing has not made its way into the mainstream literary or cultural studies arenas. A noteworthy collection of prison narratives that focuses on the literature and literary quality of prison writing is Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing, (1999), edited by Bell Gale Chevigny. This collection is a showcase of the final quarter of the twentieth century prison writing submitted to the PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, Editors, and Novelists) and is dedicated to consolidating world peace through a global association of writers. This contest is sponsored for American writers behind bars nationwide. From a literary perspective, Doing Time represents the best work of the winners. One of the strengths of this literary anthology is its attention to the shift in American attitudes toward prisoners based on an embrace of prison literature and narrative within the literary community.

Highlighting works by mostly male and some female inmates, this collection raises the reader's awareness of the civil rights and student movements, opposition to the Vietnam War, minority groups, women and gays voices in their developing self-awareness, and political consciousness and need for recognition. Reflections of the prisoners' movement, social upheaval, drug use and drug crimes, poverty, prison policy, and prison overcrowding are themes in this largely male-authored anthology. The writings by women detail the public contempt for female prisoners of color, sexual violence and harassment by corrections officers, and the heartbreak of mothers in prison.

Chevigny observed that in academia, scholars are searching for ways to integrate social justice theory and prison issues into American Studies. "Academics are prizing prison writing as one of the most important expressions of 'America's underclass' as well as an important field of American literature with its own complex culture and belief systems." She observes, "Public reception of prison writing over the past twenty-five years parallels the plunging and rearing trajectory of attitudes toward prisoners we have seen: enthusiasm and broad-based support in the seventies, doubt growing in the eighties, cynicism dominating the nineties, and beginning to give way at century's end."<sup>4</sup>

Few scholars have attempted to develop an analysis of the female prisoner's authentic voice through the genre of narrative and poetic memoir. Beginning with Elissa Gelfand's work, Imagination in Confinement: Women's Writings from French Prisons, (1983) the author assesses the works of five French women writers, all of

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whom wrote while in prison. Gelfand examines the social and historical milieu of these women and discusses the various societal pressures to which they were subjected – as individuals, as criminals, and as female writers. One writer, Madame Roland, was imprisoned in the late eighteenth century, Marie Cappelle-Lafarge in the nineteenth century, and Marguerite Stenhéil, Anne Huré, and Albertine Sarrazin imprisoned in the twentieth century. Gelfand’s analysis requires us to see the writers as having been censured more for their gender than their crimes. These prisoners were made to answer to society’s contradictory views of women; this is a theme that follows the female prisoner into the twenty-first century as well.

Wall Tappings: An Anthology of Writings by Women Prisoners, edited by Judith Scheffler, (1986) was the first broad collection of writings by women prisoners to thoroughly explore the quality of women’s lives in prison as well as the thoughts and feelings of these women, through their writing. In this anthology, the reader is introduced to female inmates and their ideas beginning with Madame Roland’s prison memoirs written in Abbey and St. Pelagie prisons, Paris, in 1793. This international collection of well-known and lesser-known female inmates ranges from selections from the seventeenth century to the present and provides the reader with a sampling of the strength and energy of prison literature over time. Scheffler’s approach seeks to deconstruct the literary canon by revealing women’s experience as inmate, and political prisoner, providing a forum for women’s voices to be heard individually. The scope of the anthology is broad, including all “genres used by women prison writers: autobiography, memoirs, letters, diary, essay, journalism, character sketches, fiction, and poetry (xii).” Selections include works from the United States, England,

and South Africa and English translations of works from France, Germany, Russia, and Chile.”

H. Bruce Franklin’s book, Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America (1998), is one of the only texts that offers a representative sample of modern American prison writings, arguing that they constitute a coherent body of literature with a unique historical significance and cultural influence. Franklin organizes the collection with a focus on a vision of America from the bottom, an anatomy of the American prison, and an exploration of the meanings of imprisonment. Franklin’s work identifies the collective consciousness of African-Americans that frames and gives meaning and significance to their past and current penal experiences. Franklin’s work, however, includes just a few women writers, though they represent a range of cultures and ethnicities.

What has not been considered in the current research and literature is an examination of the passages a women prisoner marks through her writing and the meanings narration has for her. My research builds on all of these collections and fills a gap in the literature. By listening to women’s accounts of their prison experiences, my work intends to present and interpret what women in prison or women who have been in prison, have to tell us, in oral testimony or in their writing, about the “prison experience,” that is, the situations they were in prior to prison, that led to their incarceration, the nature of their experience in prison, and their reentry into society and life after prison. I want to look for patterns in their narratives in these three phases of their experience. I also want to consider what narrating these experiences mean to women. Finally, I want to consider how their narratives fit with

other existing information about women and prison. I will consider the kinds of successes they report, the kinds of problems they identify, and the possibilities for reform and change that their stories suggest.

### **Theories of Interpretation**

In Writing as Resistance, (2002), Bob Gaucher argues that “we must locate these [prison] texts within their age; the political, social/cultural and intellectual context of their production, and within the confining culture that frames their production and against and through which they are written.” In her work on political prisoners’ resistance writing, Barbara Harlow (1987) urges us to consider prison writing as part of larger political movements. In Harlow’s summation, the prison memoirs of political detainees differ from conventional autobiography “inasmuch as [they] are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise” (120). Written not “for the sake of a ‘book of one’s own,’” these accounts are “collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle” (120). The writings Harlow discusses articulate a collective notion of self, a sense of one’s story as part of a larger narrative. The text itself becomes a site of discursive intervention where the literary strategies summoned by the author correspond to the political struggle surrounding the writing.

Additionally, prison literature is heterogeneous, inflected by historical, political, and cultural circumstances that give rise to the account. In Writers in Prison, (1990) Ioan Davies notes, “Most prison writing is autobiographical, and yet, like all autobiographies, it is inserted into other situations, other dialogues. The account can never stand by itself, however it is written” (120). To read these

inscriptions apart from their historical and cultural frameworks is to produce incomplete accounts undernourished by the function such writing performs for its various interpretive communities. There is however, difficulty in knowing the historical and cultural framework given the repressive and hierarchical structure of prison life itself. But the work of many prison writers comes to the public like messages in a bottle, washed ashore on a rising tide. The opportunity to situate this writing in its historical and cultural framework, amplifies the force of the message.

Davies (1990) argues that the prison has served as an important symbol and metaphor throughout the recorded history of Western thought, and its material realities have formed the immediate context and crucible for an influential and celebrated group of intellectuals and writers. Davies directs us to go beyond the mere recognition and classification of the literary and intellectual significance of writing that owes something to imprisonment. He directs us toward theoretical issues that help us to understand “the forms that prison writing takes, its context and how the prison experience might be read. I argue that the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality structures in the United States must be explored as an explanatory framework for understanding why particularly Latina, African-American and Native American women are in prison by the hundreds of thousands. We must delve deeper into women’s prison writing to investigate a perspective that is unique to female prisoners as individuals. Only then can we know what listening to the prisoner writer implies for us as a culture.

Under the aegis of rehabilitation, prison writing is frequently seen by researchers as individual transcendence, an author’s attempt to defy physical

incarceration by finding freedom in the creative act. For others, the condition of imprisonment is the life force that drives their written words from silence to voice.

I will argue that prison writing signals a willingness to engage in various kinds of problem-solving; writing that is self-selected for sharing or publication often contains important, perhaps life altering information about the writer, her life, and her circumstances that are essential to creating successful relationships between her past, her present and her future. As we will see, prison writing is an individual effort at meaning making as well as an effort to connect, an invitation to society at large to engage with the many social problems that surround female incarceration.

Within cultural locations, prisoners define themselves in relationship to others within and outside the prison walls; the environment establishes boundaries and meanings, and the politicians, judicial system, staff, and administration also constrain and constrict the meanings of prison politics through an ongoing process of policy-making. Simply put, the development and publication by prisoners of written autobiographical material is a subversive act.

What exactly does the prison author represent in terms of the lived experience of women? As we shall see, an examination of what female prisoners have to say about their lives prior to prison and what they have to say about their lives in prison offers important insights into patterns in the pre-prison and in prison experiences. It also offers ground in which to imagine and develop more effective rehabilitation and re-entry programs for women. Hence American women's prison writing can represent a key to unlocking the door to positive personal transformation and to new opportunities for the realization of potential.

## **The Context of this Research: The Production of Truth in Narrative**

The concept of developing a creative writing workshop series for female prisoners took root when I encountered a book entitled, The Writer as an Artist: A New Approach to Writing Alone and with Others by Pat Schneider (1993). This book inspired me during my teaching days in the Women's Studies Department at the University of Maryland College Park. Schneider's teaching and writing method is documented in a short video called Tell Me Something I Can't Forget. The video profiled a writing workshop that was held weekly for women and children living in low-income housing projects of Western Massachusetts. Soon I was developing a workshop method of my own based on her example for women in prison.

There were many things about the women in the video's life experiences that were similar, in fact, identical to mine. They overcame obstacles in their lives such as poverty, abuse, education, lovelessness, and the generational effects of drug and alcohol abuse to become positive, successful students, mothers, and partners. The twenty minute video had a powerful effect on me because it was about women from an area of the Northeast where I was raised, and because it was about women struggling to find their voices and their strength to be "seen" by society; they defined themselves through their writing – they did not let society define them. I saw my heritage and cultural history in their faces, in their words, and in their experiences.

Pat Schneider's book became a "touchstone text"<sup>5</sup> for me and inspired me to locate a site for a workshop for women prisoners. I had worked with domestic

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<sup>5</sup> Touchstone text: By this I mean the text served as a measure for my own writing skills, inspiring me to continue to work on the quality of my writing, to use personal writing to fuel my understanding of where feminist theory comes from, and to judge the struggle for authenticity in one's ethnographic and activist work by maintaining a centered self whenever confronted with multiple oppressions.



violence victims as an advocate for years; I felt women in jail could benefit from a supportive weekly writing group. The venue for that workshop was unstable for a few years. However, the inspiration for bringing the workshops to women in prison came directly from Pat Schneider. As she puts it, “Everyone is a writer. You are a writer. All over the world, in every culture, human beings have carved into stone, written on parchment, birch bark, or scraps of paper, and sealed into letters their *words*. A writer is someone who writes.”

Charlotte Linde’s (1993) book Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence guides the interpretation of prison narratives in this study. For Linde, life stories are the way in which we make sense of the past and our relation to it. In order to exist in particular social worlds, individuals struggle to maintain a positive sense of self to others. This self shifts within contexts and in content depending on a person’s value system and beliefs. Linde asserts, “an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story.” She defines a life story as:

A temporally discontinuous unit told over many occasions and altered to fit the specific occasions of speaking, as well as specific addressees, and to reflect changes in the speaker’s long-term situation, values, understanding, and (consequently) discursive practices (51).

Her method, based on the assumption that “all we can ever work with is texts of one sort or another “(14) considers the structure and function of discourse as the locus of meaning. It is this function of discourse that lies at the center of my research. She analyzes a cross section of life stories to reveal the ways in which the speakers handle equivalent problems in constructing similar types of narratives and in creating coherence for similarly problematic chains of events (52).” One need not conduct exhaustive interviews covering an entire life, for “obtaining part of the life story is

sufficient to indicate the nature of this open unit and the principles of its construction (51).”

As Linde argues “narrative is among the most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity (98).” Women’s prison narratives are significant resources for creating an internal, private sense of self and are a major resource for conveying that self to and negotiating that self with others. In this sense, the “truth” of the interview or the poetry in the prison narrative is found in the construction of coherence; how interviewees and subjects chronicled their time in prison. Creating an internal and private sense of self that is viable and acceptable to the individual herself is a coping mechanism for the writer because society has condemned her to a very isolated and negative existence. How do female prison writers maintain this positive sense of self when it is such a struggle, as the self is under constant attack? Can we find evidence that writing helps to maintain optimism and allows for selectivity and positive representations for the writer?

Borrowing from Linde’s idea of coherence, as well as insights from other sources, I will examine prison writing for what it helps us to understand about women’s representations of their days before prison, their prison world, and their post-prison expectations and realities.

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

The organization and structure of the dissertation follows the way in which the material and participants revealed themselves to me during the course of the research. Thus far, the Introduction has offered a review of the pertinent studies regarding women in prison in the United States, a brief look at the rapidly rising rate of

incarceration for women, and a discussion of literature by prisoners. The remainder of the chapter outlines the dissertation structure. Borrowing from ethnography, social justice studies, cultural studies, critical race theory, and feminist studies, my study explores three forms of narrative by women prisoners.

Chapter One, “Topology of the Women’s ‘Prison Nation’,” provides statistical background on the culture of women in prison, the basic social context of women’s prison writing. Based on data from the National Institute of Corrections and research from a variety of sources operating from a gender-based analysis of issues in criminal justice, this chapter offers a brief discussion of the “prison-industrial complex,” as well as defining trends in women’s incarceration, and a profile of the typical woman prisoner.

Chapter Two, “Through the Looking Glass: An Examination of A Women’s Prison Newsletter,” examines the production and motivation behind the twelve-year publishing run of a Seattle, WA--based underground women’s prison newsletter. This chapter will explore the political philosophy and intent behind the newsletter; examine some of the struggles and failures of the groups that produced it, and most importantly, take a careful look at the poetry and personal narratives that were printed in it. I will also examine the intent of the advocates who produced the newsletters, exploring their dedication to the political and social cause of prisoner’s rights.

Chapter Three, “Inside Out: ‘It’s A Matter of Your Own Survival,’” examines the prison experiences of two women from Seattle, WA. One is a repeat offender and an example of the failure of the criminal justice system. The other escaped the criminal justice system to make a life for herself as a mechanical engineer. Their

story telling is central to this research, not only for its uniqueness and perspective, but because as a case study, the coherence of their narratives shows us the unique lives of women in prison and offers fertile ground in which to inquire into the nature of imprisonment for women today.

Chapter Four, “Only the Strong Survive: The Production of Prison Narratives at the D.C. Detention Center,” examines one of the research vehicles itself, the natural experiment of the prison writing workshop. This chapter explores the writing created by female prisoners in these workshops and offers an analysis of the prison narrative as a resource in understanding the cultural context of the pre-prison experience. Showcased in this chapter, the research interrogates the pre-prison social location of the female prisoner through memoir and poetry.

Chapter Five, “Conclusions and Future Directions for this Research,” offers a summary and analysis of the basic rationales for incarceration and what these women’s narratives say about the policies based on them. This chapter looks at the value of prison narratives, reviews other recurring themes that emerged throughout this research, and offers an assessment of the personal and institutional lessons that may be drawn from my study. I also offer suggestions for the reintegration of women to the free world that is to the world outside of the prison facility, after they have completed their terms of incarceration.

### **Methodological Tools and Context of the Scholarship**

Of central importance to this study is the complex intersection of issues relating to race, class, gender, and sexuality as it concerns female prisoners. In an era of rapidly increasing U.S. female prison populations, the criminal justice policies that

have created this dramatic rise in incarceration are currently fraught with controversy. This study seeks to explore the ways in which female prisoners have described their struggles within the prison system during this prison population build-up. The emphasis is in their voices, their understandings, and their stories – including the value they see in giving voice to these stories. This study employs an ethnographic perspective to unravel the lived meanings of both the culture of the female prison writer and the consequences of the prison environment on her experience. This dissertation is a type of interpretive anthropology, a viewing of culture as assemblages of texts, loosely and sometimes contradictorily united (Clifford, 41) to represent a singular cultural moment and to re-member past moments in the lives of women in prison. My approach to this research as collaborative dialog, artifact collection, observation, and narrative interpretation of ethnographic data allowed me to create a multi-layered image that portrays how the events in female prisoner’s lives are connected and that I hope can reveal something about the effects of incarceration and narration on women and on their attempts at survival.

I write this ethnography as a “vulnerable observer entering into a community of women who had much to protect. As ethnographer Ruth Behar puts it:

to write vulnerably is to open a Pandora’s box. Who can say what will come flying out? When I began, nine years ago, to make my emotions part of my ethnography, I had no idea where this work would take me or whether it would be accepted within anthropology or the academy...I chose the essay as a genre through which to attempt (the original meaning of *essai*, or essay) the dialectic between connection and otherness that is at the center of all forms of historical and cultural representation. The essay has been described as an act of personal witness. The essay is at once the *inscription* of a self and a *description* of an object (Behar 19-20).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the lucid discussion of representation in Michael S. Roth, *The Ironist’s Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Making one's emotions part of the ethnography, essay, or life history is to insert oneself and to draw deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study.

It does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied (Behar 13).

The filters I use in this methodology are those I learned to handle as I become more and more familiar with women who had been affected by physical and psychological trauma, namely domestic violence, sexual assault, and the traumas of war and combat. I acquired the experience, the knowledge and the skills to work with these women because I had experienced deep traumas such as these in my life as well. Although never having been in wartime combat, I spent all of my formative years living in the shadow of the military, which infiltrated my family life and shaped my view of the world. My personal experiences with domestic violence and sexual assault gave a sense of urgency and poignancy to my interpretations of the complex issues female prisoners seek to overcome as they do their time and then begin to create a future for themselves.

My approach is also influenced by Nancy Hartsock's understanding of feminist standpoint theory, focusing on "situated knowledges" – knowledges located in a particular time and space. These are knowledges that are therefore partial, the knowledges of specific cultures and peoples. The shape of these knowledges can be attended to by the features of the social location occupied by dominated groups (women in prison). Because of these features, these knowledges express a multiple and contradictory reality; they are not rendered static by change, and they recognize

that they change with the changing shape of the historical conjuncture and the balance of forces. They are both critical of and vulnerable to the dominant culture, both separated from and opposed to it and yet contained within it. Such field research immersion can provide important insights into the experiences of female prisoners, which can lead to reframing the nature of current discourse about women's reintegration into community and family once they are released. As we shall see, women's prison writing represents a series of ongoing attempts to keep from being made invisible, to keep from being destroyed by the dominant culture (Hartsock 244).

### **Personal Lens**

My understandings of incarcerated women's experiences, as well as those of women in transition from prison, were developed through a lens constructed out of a variety of anthropological, feminist, critical race, and legal theory methods, as well as lived experiences. My field work in jails and prisons, in domestic violence shelters and courts, and my professional career working with women of many class, racial, and ethnic cultural backgrounds who were struggling with substance abuse, sexual and physical violence, mental health issues, and parenting concerns have influenced my dedication to this project and the interpretation of all the events and data of the project. What I intended to do while conducting this research was to reach out to women in prison, to listen, and to learn. My previous experiences helped me develop relationships with the women I interviewed and aided me in trying to understand their worlds and their words.

The ethnographer's goal of "knowing another's reality" requires a sphere of shared meanings and a means of communicating about them. Throughout the

research encounter, writer and narrator share a common material and social world that is the frame and context for their exchange. The reality itself is negotiated as long as our relationship exists. One might say that this reality is a social emergent; it is neither the reality of the writer nor that of the narrator. This reality comes into being because of our relationships and belongs to the relationship. This intersubjective reality is also the ground in which the text develops.

The centrality of intersubjectivity in this research project is evident in my position regarding the representations writers make in their work. I will make the assumption that the texts written by writers in prison are an accurate account of what happened to them, and are accounts of what the writers were feeling at the time. I will as thoroughly as I can explore the context in which the texts were written, but I cannot know all there is to know about the source. In my research I attempted to go to other sources, such as survey data on women prisoners, to help test the general accuracy of the stories. I believe that the national profile has validity, but from my experience, I know that there are variations in that profile, as one can see within my research.

This dissertation is a collaboration of my academic experiences, shaped by the political, the personal, and the emotional experiences with women behind bars. This research personalizes and reveals the detailed lived experiences behind the abstract profile of women prisoners. While there are elements of the story that remain silent and invisible, what follows is part of what black feminist theorist bell hooks calls our “talking back;” this dissertation is an exploration of the power of those acts.



### **Entrances and Exits: Where Exactly Is Out of Bounds?**

As a white researcher, working in a primarily black women's culture, I have my own stories about being on the inside and being on the outside, physically and metaphorically. The first time I went into Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) in 1994, what really struck me was once I got through all the cages and all the doors, and all the guards was that inside the facility the place appeared quite pleasant. Female prisoners, black and white, were outside working and raking, sweeping the sidewalks and weeding the flowerbeds. I came into the screening building and then needed to cross the yard to the recreation hall. I was told to stay on the sidewalk. "Follow the sidewalk, don't get off the sidewalk," and two things happened. One, I was walking along and I started to think, "Well, I'm going to have to walk past that young black woman walking towards me." Now is it okay for me to say, "Hi" to her? And is it okay for her to talk to me? We passed each other, made eye contact and said, "Hello." Two, no one corrected us, no one even saw us to my knowledge, but that exchange has stayed with me for years. It was like entering another country and not knowing the language or customs. I believe that I began to integrate my values and my ideas of humanity and justice in that exchange my first day inside. Each and every time thereafter that I went "inside," I had to learn the rules imposed by the corrections officers, by those inmates who clearly didn't want to interact with me, and by those who did, I had to learn how to integrate myself into the culture of prison. I had to continuously look for the signposts and guidelines.

At MCIW, I entered another world. The flowers were gorgeous and the sidewalks were all swept and clean. I followed my directions to the letter and arrived

at the recreation center quickly. As I waited for the Black corrections officer to buzz the door open for me, I noticed a small sign in the middle of the beautiful patch of green grass that said “Out of Bounds.” The words struck me as quite odd. It didn’t say, “Keep off the grass,” or “Restricted Area,” it said, “Out of Bounds.” I thought, it is just grass, how could stepping on or feeling grass be so wrong? No one would want to pick grass, as one would pick flowers in bloom. That juxtaposition of insider versus outsider thinking has stayed with me for years. The significance of space that is out of bounds for some and not for others has caused me to question the social justice of our prison system today in the context of women’s lives. That little hand-lettered sign has compelled me to search for answers. Why are some things allowed in prison and not others? How do female prisoners maintain their sense of self in a world full of signifiers that symbolize restriction and limitation?

There are very basic functions and needs in life that are “out of bounds” in prison. The sign was a warning to all not to even think about stepping on the grass. The message to inmates was, “this does not belong to you while you are here and you will never have access to it --ever--while you are here.” The sign was a very quiet, in your face, no-questions-asked directive to inmates. The words implied that there was a space for inmates and then other space for all the rest of those who came through that courtyard. That was a powerful moment for me, and was perhaps the beginning of my search to understand the prison system and how it might be revised to bridge the gap between “us” and “them.”

## **Chapter 1: Topology of the Women’s “Prison Nation”**

“Prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.”  
Angela Y. Davis

In order to understand women’s prison writing we need to examine the nature of female incarceration and the proliferation of prisons in the United States. Here I will pull together social analysis of prisons, including the lenses of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and I will analyze the rise in female incarceration. Then later in this dissertation when we meet the prisoner as a person and listen to her stories as she speaks or writes about her life and her experiences in prison, we will have a sense of the context out of which the narrative emerges. This chapter seeks to lead the reader to a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of social, cultural, economic, and political forces that continue to shape the nature of the contemporary prison and the debate surrounding the criminal justice system in American culture.

Scholar and anti-prison activist Angela Y. Davis observes that in California, almost two-thirds of existing prisons were opened during the eighties and nineties. Davis details the “prisonization” of the California landscape – a process that can be seen in many other states in the country. Davis points to findings that suggest that prisons tend to make people on the outside think that their own rights and liberties are more secure than they would be if prisons did not exist.

Geographer Ruth Gilmore describes the expansion of prisons in California as a “geographical solution to socio-economic problems.” Her analysis of the prison-industrial complex in California describes these developments as a response to capital, land, labor, and state capacity:

California's new prisons are sited on devalued rural land, most in fact on formerly irrigated agricultural acres...The State bought land sold by big landowners. And the State assured the small, depressed towns now shadowed by prisons that the new, recession-proof, non-polluting industry would jump-start local redevelopment (Gilmore 184).

This phenomenon has occurred across the country in some other states such as Ohio, New York and Texas. However, neither the jobs nor the economic revitalization promised by prisons has occurred. In rural towns in Upstate New York, communities placed their hopes in prison development, however, the privatization of the labor force that runs the facilities has all but shut out potential local employees, thus excluding the locals from benefiting from this so-called stimulated economic development. Many writers have observed this intersection of profit and joblessness as a force toward prison building (Hallinan, 1996; Shircor, 1995; Burton-Rose, Pens, and Wright, 1998; Parenti, 1999; George, 1999; and Immarigeon and Chesney-Lind, 1992).<sup>7</sup>

In many communities of color across this nation, particularly poor black and Latino communities, as well as some Native American and certain Asian-American communities, there are those members for whom prison is an inevitability a rite of

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<sup>7</sup> See Joseph T. Hallinan, Going Up the River on the growth of private prisons in the United States since 1983 and on prison overcrowding. See the essays in Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis, ed. Elihu Rosenblatt (Boston: South End Press, 1996), on the growth of supermax prisons and the prison-industrial complex. David Shircor, in Punishment for Profit, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 218-19, summarizes findings of a federal study of three women's prisons, including a privately run institution. Daniel Burton-Rose, Dan Pens, and Paul Wright, in The Ceiling of America: An Inside Look at the U.S. Prison Industry, (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998) edit a collection of articles discussing current conditions in American prisons. Christian Parenti, in Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis (London: Verso, 1999), discusses the prison-industrial complex and the need for control over prisoners by such means as "therapy" with television. Amanda George describes the use of private prisons for women in Australia in "The New Prison Culture: Making Millions from Misery," 189-210, in Harsh Punishment: International Experiences of Women's Imprisonment, ed. Sandy Cook and Susanne Davies (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999). Russ Immarigeon and Meda Chesney-Lind discuss the unnecessary growth of women's prisons and suggest ways to use community resources as alternatives to incarceration in Women's Prisons: Overcrowded and Overused (San Francisco: National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1992).

passage to move through going from childhood to adulthood. On the other hand, many people take prisons for granted in a different way. Many of us who are privileged on the outside are glad to know prisons are there and find it comforting not to have to deal with that side of life. There is a hesitation to know too much about prisons, Davis claims, there is “a reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives.” We take prisons for granted but are often afraid to face the realities they produce. Davis comments, “After all, no one wants to go to prison...we tend to think of the prison as disconnected from our own lives.”

### **The Impact of the Prison-Industrial Complex**

In discussing the economic and social factors that have contributed to the rise of the “prison-industrial complex”<sup>8</sup> it is instructive to consider Angela Y. Davis’ Marxist analysis of the current situation:

The American prison system functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the really difficult issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism (Davis 2003 16).

What exactly are these “problems” in our society that Davis speaks of? If we address the larger economic issues, we need look no further than to the lack of jobs, stagnant wages, and cutbacks in benefits to find links to economic disenfranchisement. We know that corporations have migrated outside of the United States to offshore

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the economic underpinnings of the prison industrial complex, see Eric Schlosser, “The Prison-Industrial Complex” in The Atlantic Monthly, Dec. 1998, pp 51-77.

sites in search of cheap labor pools comprised primarily of poor people of color. This corporate migration leaves entire communities economically paralyzed. Because the economic base of these communities is destroyed, education and other surviving social services are profoundly affected. This process turns the men, women, and children who live in these damaged communities into perfect candidates for prison.

While political leaders and their constituents might be convinced that building prisons in their backyards will be profitable and create new jobs, the advantage for the prison corporations is that once established, there is a disincentive against rehabilitation and reducing crime. The private prison corporations associated with the punishment industry reap profits from the system that manages prisoners and they acquire a clear stake in the continued growth of prison populations.

There are very real and often quite complicated connections between the deindustrialization of the economy--a process that reached its peak during the 1980s--and the rise of mass imprisonment, which also began to spiral during the Reagan-Bush era. However, the demand for more prisons was represented to the public in simplistic terms. More prisons were needed because there was more crime. Yet many scholars have demonstrated that by the time the prison construction boom began, official crime statistics were already falling. Moreover, draconian drug laws were being enacted, and "three-strikes" provisions were on the agendas of many states (Davis 2003 16).

An industry that profits from joblessness and hopelessness cannot be trusted to bring economic development anywhere.

Cultural critic Gina Dent argues that for some, our sense of ease with the prison comes from representations of jails, prisons, and detention facilities in film and other visual media. Given the enormous growth in the number of prisons in California, Ohio, New York, and elsewhere, a look at the way in which we consume media images of the prison is instructive. If we approach the rise of the prison-

industrial complex from a popular culture perspective, we might better understand the reason we so easily take prisons for granted.

### **Media Representations of Women's Prisons and Prisoners**

The history of visibility linked to the prison is a main reinforcement of the institution of the prison as a naturalized part of our social landscape. For many Americans, the visual representations of prisons are their only source of “knowledge”; prison is not something many Americans - especially middle class Americans – know first hand. The general public is very dependent on media portrayals for its knowledge of prison conditions and inmate subcultures. Hollywood has had little success in updating its outdated stereotypes of prisons and jails, and news media accounts of prison life have been hampered by the inability of reporters to access prisons and by institutional efforts to censor inmate communication with the media.

The history of film has always been wedded to the masculinist representation of incarceration. Thomas Edison's first films included footage of the darkest recesses of the prison. Thus, the prison is wedded to our experience of visibility, creating a sense of its permanence as an institution, dating back to the 1901 reenactment presented as a newsreel, “Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison.” Prisons have not been a popular topic for Hollywood film; more crime dramas, police stories, and court-centered films than prison dramas have been made. However, once Hollywood did begin to make a few prison films in the 1930s, a stereotyped image of prison life emerged that would reappear over and over again for the next 50 years. The industry created a stereotype of prison life in an all male prison. While this

stereotype may have in some way approximated the real prisons of the 1930s, Hollywood stuck with this type of portrayal long after the American prison system had undergone dramatic changes in the 1960s. The film that first created the model for later prison dramas was The Big House (1930). Others that followed included, The Criminal Code (1930), I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932), Angels with Dirty Faces (1938), and Each Dawn I Die (1939).

Well-known contemporary prison films such as Escape from Alcatraz, Dead Man Walking, The Green Mile, Hurricane, Shawshank Redemption, Cool Hand Luke, and The Silence of the Lambs are just a few of the more recent additions to the Hollywood stereotype of the American prison system. In addition, television programming has recently delivered images of prisons to its viewer, such as the A&E series “The Big House,” and the long-running HBO program “Oz,” which have attempted to convince viewers “that they know exactly what goes on behind the walls of male maximum-security prisons (Davis 2003 16).”

The depiction of women in prison, however, has created some surprising images over the years. When it comes to women’s prison films, Hollywood was remarkably silent until the 1950s, when several films were made: Caged and I Want to Live, based on the true story about the first woman executed in California. The 1980s and 1990s women’s prison films have been largely exploitation films. Almost all contain the word “heat,” a term borrowed from the porno genre. Examples include Chained Heat (1983), Caged Heat (1974), Caged Heat 2 (1994), Caged Heat 3000 (1995), and Red Heat (1985). One exception would be Love Child (1982), which was based on a true story of a Florida Department of Corrections inmate who became



pregnant as a result of a liaison with a corrections officer, and fought to be allowed to keep her newborn with her in prison. These films feature both black and white women, scantily clad, and the characters are caught in dominance and submission themes. They do not teach us much about the real lives of women behind bars.

For groups where there is more contact with the prison world, particularly for inner city families where crime rates are high, and where family members may be involved in the criminal justice system, the negative and simplistic stereotypes of prison are negotiated images. Black Americans, male and female, have had to overcome the stereotypes of the career criminal, the “welfare queen,” the gangster drug dealer, and the vicious shooter in their everyday lives because of these stereotypes. The cultural negotiation necessary to overcome these stereotypes might involve denial, or even acceptance of these stereotypes as “a badge of honor” some teenagers wear, equating prison time during their juvenile years to completing a “right of passage” in the community. For the purposes of this dissertation, which emphasizes the voices of women who have been incarcerated, these stereotypes are important, but not central to my research.<sup>9</sup> What I consider most important is the relationship a prisoner has to her narrative; this research listens to the voices of female prisoners, to what they have to say about their prison experiences.

### **Contemporary Information About Prisons**

In the past five years, there have been profound changes that have occurred in the way public conversations about prison are conducted. Davis argues:

Ten years ago, even as the drive to expand the prison system reached its zenith, there were very few critiques of this process available to the public. In

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<sup>9</sup> Media images are important if they influence women’s experience, self-perceptions, understandings, and consequently their narratives.

fact, most people had no idea about the immensity of this expansion. This was the period during which internal changes-in part through the application of new technologies-led the U.S. prison system in a much more repressive direction. Whereas previous prisoner classifications had been confined to low, medium, and maximum security, a new category was invented- that of the super-maximum security prison, or the supermax (Davis 2003 19).

Davis contends that this turn toward increased repression caused some journalists, public intellectuals, and progressive agencies to oppose the growing reliance on prisons to solve social problems amplified by mass incarceration.

In 1990, the Washington-based Sentencing Project published a study of U.S. populations in prison and jail and on parole and probation, which concluded that one in four black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine were among these numbers (Mauer 1990). Five years later, a second study revealed that this percentage had soared to almost one in three (32.2 percent). Moreover, more than one in ten Latino men in this same age range were in jail or prison, or on probation or parole. The second study also revealed that the group experiencing the greatest increase was black women, whose imprisonment increased by seventy-eight percent in five years (Mauer 1990).

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, African-Americans now represent the majority of state and federal prisoners, with a total of 803,400 black inmates—118,600 more than the total number of white inmates (Beck et al, 2002). The issues of race, class, gender and sexuality have entered into our discussions of the prison-industrial complex, in magazines, in academia, and in our political debates. Even Colin Powell raised the question of the rising number of black men in prison when he spoke at the 2000 Republican National Convention, which declared George W. Bush its presidential candidate (Davis 2003 138).

However in terms of gender, an incarcerated African American woman is among the most invisible members of American society. African American women's voices are rarely heard in crucial debates about social policy, criminality, and the administration of the criminal justice system in the United States. Instead, these women are often absent from academic and social policy discussions relating to their lives. Such omission results from the general exclusion of incarcerated women's voices and from the tendency to equate "women's experience" with white women's experience.

As researchers Sharon McQuaide and John Ehrenreich wrote, "This lack of knowledge presents both a problem and an opportunity. There are few media images or academic studies to guide or misguide researchers. The task of deconstructing popular or academic images is barely an issue."(Johnson 3)

Johnson goes on to note that feminist theorist bell hooks has written:

I found that when "women" were talked about, the experience of white women was universalized to stand for all female experience and then when "black people" were talked about, the experience of black men was the point of reference...it was clear that these biases had created a circumstance where there was little or no information about the distinct experiences of black women"(hooks, p.120-121).

### **Gender and the Structure of the Prison System: "Do They Know Who We Are?"**

Incarcerated women have a history of unmet social, educational, health and economic need in addition to a history of victimization. Typically, prior to being arrested they live in neighborhoods where they experience many of the difficulties that have come to be associated with contemporary urban poverty. Not surprisingly, these low-income neighborhoods are often communities of color. Consequently, the racial/ethnic profile of women in jails and prisons represents one of the most vivid

examples of racial disparity in our society; by far, the majority of women who are incarcerated in this country are women of color. Nearly two-thirds of those confined in jails or in state and federal prisons are black, Hispanic, or of other (non-white) ethnic groups (Davis 2003 138).

If we take a very close look at female prisoners in the United States, we will see that they share many characteristics restricting their economic and social mobility. They are disproportionately women of color in their early to mid-30s; they have been convicted of a drug-related offense; they come from fragmented families that include other family members involved in the criminal justice system; and they tend to be survivors of physical and/or sexual abuse as children and adults. Typically, female prisoners in the United States are individuals with significant substance abuse problems; individuals with multiple physical and mental health problems; individuals with a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED) but limited vocational training and sporadic work histories. Typically they are also the unmarried mothers of minor children (Davis 2003 138).

One of every six offenders (17%) now under criminal justice supervision in the United States is female. The vast majority (88%) of these women are under community supervision, typically probation. However, even though they make up a minority portion of women under criminal justice supervision, the number of women in prison is vastly higher than it has ever been. Female offenders represent a growing percentage of correctional populations nationwide.

The significant increase in the number of women under correctional supervision has called attention to the status of women in the criminal justice system

and to the particular circumstance they encounter. The increasing numbers have also made evident the lack of appropriate policies and procedures for women offenders and the need for gender-responsive policy and practice in correctional planning. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) states that the first step in developing gender-responsive criminal justice policy and practice is to understand gender-based characteristics. In addition to offense and demographic characteristics, the specific life factors that shape women's patterns of offending should be included in gender-responsive planning. We also need to hear much more from the women themselves.

Recent research has established that women offenders differ from their male counterparts regarding personal histories and pathways to crime. For example, a female offender is more likely to have been the primary caretaker of young children at the time of arrest, more likely to have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, and more likely to have distinctive physical and mental health needs. Additionally, women are far less likely to be convicted of violent offenses, and they pose less danger to the community.<sup>10</sup>

A look at the offenses for which women are incarcerated further puts to rest the notion of hyper-violent, nontraditional women criminals, "Nearly half of all women in prison are currently serving a sentence for a nonviolent offense and have been convicted in the past of only nonviolent offenses" (Beck, 2000 10). By 1998, about half of all women in the nation's prisons were serving time either for drug or property offenses (Beck, 2000 10).

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, July 2003. Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders.

Even when women do commit violent offenses, gender plays an important role. Research indicates that of women convicted of murder or manslaughter, many had killed husbands or boyfriends who repeatedly and violently abused them. In New York, for example, of the women committed to the state's prisons for homicide in 1986, 49% had been the victims of abuse at some point in their lives and 59% of the women who killed someone close to them were being abused at the time of the offense. For half of the women committed for homicide, it was their first and only offense (Huling 1991).

Approximately 70 percent of all women under correctional supervision have at least one child younger than age 18. Two-thirds of incarcerated women have minor children; about two-thirds of women in state prisons and half of women in federal prisons had lived with their young children before entering prison. It is estimated that 1.3 million minor children have a mother who is under correctional supervision and more than 250,000 minor children have mothers in jail or prison. More than half of the children of women prisoners never visit their mothers during the period of incarceration. The lack of visits is due primarily to the remote location of prisons, a lack of transportation, restricted visiting hours, and the inability of caregivers to arrange visitation. Women under criminal justice supervision are more likely than the general population never to have been married. In 1998, nearly half of the women in jail and prison reported that they had never been married. About 31 percent of women in prison reported that they were either separated or divorced.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bloom, B., & Steinhart, D. (1993). Why punish the children? A reappraisal of the children of incarcerated mothers in America. San Francisco, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999b.

But what of less dramatic and far more common offenses among women?

Kim English (1993) approached the issue of women's crime by analyzing detailed self-report surveys she administered to a sample of 128 female and 872 male inmates in Colorado. Her research provides clear information on the way in which women's place in male society colors and shapes their crimes. She found, for example, that women were far more likely than men to be involved in forgery (it was the most common crime for women and fifth out of eight for men). Follow-up research on a sub-sample of "high crime" rate female respondents revealed that many had worked in retail establishments and therefore "knew how much time they had" between stealing the checks or credit cards and having the theft reported. The women said that they would target strip malls, where credit cards and bank checks could easily be stolen and used in nearby retail establishments. English concludes that "women's overrepresentation in low-paying, low status jobs" increases their involvement in these property crimes (1993 370).

English's findings about two other offenses, where gender differences were not apparent in participation rates, are worth exploring here. She found no difference in the participation rates of women and men in drug sales and assault. However, when examining the frequency data, English found that women in prison reported significantly more drug sales than men, but not because they were engaged in big-time drug selling. Instead, the high number of women's drug sales can be attributed to the fact that they "concentrated in the small trades (i.e. transactions of less than \$10)." Because they made so little money, English found that 20% of the active women dealers reported twenty or more drug deals in a day (1993 372).

A recent study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that growth in the number of violent offenders was the major factor for male prison growth, but for the female population “drug offenders were the largest source of growth” (Beck, 2000 10). As Susan Sharp opines, “the war on drugs has become a largely unannounced war on women (8). A decade and a half ago (1979), 1 in 10 women in U.S. prisons was doing time for drugs. In 1998, it was 1 in 3 (33.9%) (Beck, 2000 10). An analysis by Human Rights Watch of women incarcerated under New York’s draconian Rockefeller drug laws revealed that nearly half (44%) had never been in prison before and 17% had never been arrested before (Fellner, 1997 13).

In sum, English found that both women’s and men’s crime reflect the role that “economic disadvantage” plays in their criminal careers. Beyond this, gender has a profound influence in shaping women and men’s response to poverty. Specifically, women’s criminal careers reflect, “gender difference in legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures, in personal networks, and in family obligations” (1993, 3 & 74).

### **Profiles of Women in the Criminal Justice System**

Women offenders are disproportionately low-income women of color who are undereducated and unskilled, with sporadic employment histories. They are less likely than men to have committed violent offenses and more likely to have been convicted of crimes involving drugs or property. Often, their property offenses are economically driven, motivated by poverty and by the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Women face life circumstances that tend to be specific to their gender, such as



sexual abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, and the responsibility of being the primary caregiver for dependent children.

Children of female prisoners are the additional victims of this growth of female prisoners. Approximately 1.3 million minor children have a mother who is under criminal justice supervision, and approximately 65 percent of women in state prisons and 59 percent of women in federal prisons have an average of two minor children. Women involved in the criminal justice system and their children thus represent a large population marginalized by race, class, and gender (Bloom 1996).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) estimates that 11 of every 1,000 women will be incarcerated at the federal or state level at some point in their lives. This probability is mediated by racial and ethnic membership. Approximately 5 of every 1,000 white women, 15 of every 1,000 Hispanic women, and 36 of every 1,000 African American women will be incarcerated at some point during their lifetime. (BJS 1999b).

The number of women incarcerated in state and federal prisons has increased dramatically in recent decades, rising nearly eightfold between 1980 and 2000, from 12,000 to more than 90,000 (representing 6.7 percent of the U.S. prison population). The increase in women's rate of imprisonment has outpaced the increase for men each year since the mid-1980s (BJS 2001c). The average incarceration rate for women in the United States in 2000 was 59 per 100,000 female residents (BJS 2001c).

As a point of contrast to long-term incarceration, in 2000, 70,414 women were in local jails. This represents 11 percent of the jail population incarcerated for shorter

periods of time and awaiting trial or sentencing. A study of women incarcerated in jails exclusively for women showed that race and ethnic composition of jail populations differed by region. In major urban settings, minority women make up the bulk of the jail population. Women in jail typically lack educational and vocational training, the majority is single or divorced, and more than two-thirds were unemployed at the time of arrest. Of those who were employed, their earnings placed many women in the lowest economic strata of their communities (Stohr & Mays 1993).

Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data indicates that violent offenses are the major factor in the growth of the male prison population; however, this is not the case for women (BJS 1999b). In 2000, women accounted for only 17 percent of all arrests for violent crime (BJS 1999b). For women, drug offenses represent the largest source of growth. The majority of offenses committed by women in prisons and jails are nonviolent drug and property crimes. About 71 percent of all arrests of women were for larceny/theft or drug-related offenses. However, the data on arrests demonstrate that the number of women under criminal justice supervision has risen disproportionately compared with women's arrest rates. For example, the total number of arrests of adult women increased by 38.2 percent between 1989 and 1998, while the number of women under correctional supervision increased by 71.8 percent. Overall, women do not appear to have become more violent as a group.

### **Gender-related Cultural Contexts**

In examining the abuse backgrounds of male and female probationers, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) found a dramatic gender difference: More than 40

percent of the women (compared with 9 percent of the men) reported having been abused at some time in their lives (BJS 1999c). BJS reported that about half (48 percent) of women in jail (but only 13 percent of men) and half (48 percent) of women in state and federal prisons (but only 12 percent of men) had been physically or sexually abused before incarceration (BJS 1999c). Women in prison are three times more likely to have a history of abuse than men in prison. Approximately 37 percent of women in state prison, 23 percent of women in federal prison, 37 percent of women in jail, and 28 percent of women on probation reported physical or sexual abuse before the age of 18 (BJS 1999c). Therefore, most women who were abused experienced the abuse as children, prior to their incarceration.

The link between female criminality and drug use is very strong. Research consistently indicates that women are more likely to be involved in crime if they are drug users (Merlo & Pollack 1995). Substance abuse is also linked to issues of trauma and mental health. Approximately 80 percent of women in state prisons have substance abuse problems.<sup>12</sup> About half of women offenders in state prisons were or had been using alcohol, drugs, or both at the time of their offense. Nearly one in three women serving time in state prisons reported committing the offense to obtain money to support a drug habit. About half described themselves as daily users (BJS 1999b).

It is important to put these statistics into perspective by comparing them to statistics on substance abuse among women in the general population. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reports that 2.1

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<sup>12</sup> Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. (1997). Substance abuse treatment for incarcerated offenders: Guide to promising practices. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

percent of females in the United States age 12 and older had engaged in heavy alcohol use in the 30 days preceding the survey, 4.1 percent had used an illicit drug, and 1.2 percent had used a psychotherapeutic drug for non-medical purposes.<sup>13</sup> BJS and the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (NCASA) data both suggest that nearly half of women offenders were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of their first offense.

On every measure of drug use, women offenders in state prisons reported higher usage than did their male counterparts—40 percent of women offenders and 32 percent of male offenders had been under the influence of drugs when the crime occurred. By contrast, less than a third (32%) of men were under the influence of drugs when the crime occurred (BJS 1999c).

Covington and Surrey's work on women's psychological development as it relates to substance abusers presents a model that is extremely useful in conceptualizing the contexts and meanings of substance abuse in women's lives and is particularly helpful in suggesting new treatment models. Given that the majority of women in state and federal prisons are incarcerated for drug related offenses, this connection to their psychological development can prove quite useful to a deeper understanding of the ways in which female prisoners attempt to create empathic relationships beyond the prison walls.

Research shows us that women frequently begin to use substances in ways that initially seem to be in the service of making or maintaining connections, and to try to feel connected, energized, loved, or loving when that is not the whole truth of

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<sup>13</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1993). National household survey on drug abuse: Population estimates 1992. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

their experience (Surrey 1985). Women often use substances to deal with hurt and pain in their relationships and also to try to provide for others (especially children) a safe and loving relational context. Women also turn to drugs in the context of relationships with drug-abusing partners – to feel joined or connected through the use of drugs. Women may actually use mind-altering substances to try to stay psychologically connected with someone who is using drugs.

Further, women may begin to use substances to maintain relationships, often to try to alter themselves to fit the relationships available. Miller (1990) has described this basic relational paradox- when a woman cannot move a relationship towards mutuality; she begins to change herself to maintain the relationship. We see too children of “dysfunctional” families frequently turn to substances to alter themselves to adapt to the disconnections within the family, thus giving the illusion of being in relationship when one is not or is only partially in relationship.

When such relational development is constricted, there develops a vicious circle of increased isolation that in turn leads to further use of substances. Therefore, we can see one explanation for women’s involvement in drug abuse, but can this relational model be also used to elevate our understanding of why female prisoners write narratives about their circumstances and their lives? Can a poem or a prison newsletter be utilized as an outlet for creating a healthier relationship that depends on mutuality to progress?

### **Health Related Considerations**

It is estimated that 20 to 35 percent of women go to prison sick call daily compared with 7 to 10 percent of men. Women frequently enter jails and prisons in

poor health, and they experience more serious health problems than do their male counterparts. This poor health is often due to poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, and substance abuse. The types of illnesses associated with female prisoners are often life-threatening and serious, as well as expensive and complex health concerns that require substantial attention and care.

For example, approximately 3.5 percent of women in prison are HIV positive. Women prisoners are 50 percent more likely than male prisoners to be HIV positive. The number of women infected with HIV has increased 69 percent since 1991, while the number of infected male offenders decreased by 22 percent.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, women offenders are also at greater risk of breast, lung, and cervical cancers, all illnesses requiring long-term care and attention. At this time, few prison facilities are capable of handling such complex health concerns, thus women in prison usually do not receive adequate care of these diseases.

### **Mental Health**

Many women who enter the criminal justice system have had prior contact with the mental health system. Women in prison have a higher incidence of mental disorders than women in the community. One-quarter of women in state prisons have been identified as having a mental illness. The major diagnoses of mental illness are depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse. Women offenders have histories of abuse that are associated with psychological trauma.

PTSD is a psychiatric condition often seen in women who have experienced sexual

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<sup>14</sup> Acoca, L. (1998). "Defusing the time bomb: Understanding and meeting the growing health care needs of incarcerated women in America." *Crime & Delinquency*, 44(1), 49-70; Young D.S. (1996). "Contributing factors to poor health among incarcerated women: A conceptual model." *Affilia*, 11(4), 440-461.

abuse and other trauma. Symptoms of PTSD include depression, low self-esteem, insomnia, panic, nightmares, and flashbacks. Approximately 75 percent of women who have serious mental illness also have co-occurring substance abuse disorders: about one in four (23 percent) of all women in state prisons are receiving medication for psychological disorders. A total of 22.3 percent of women in jail have been diagnosed with PTSD, 13.7 percent have been diagnosed with a current episode of depression, and about 17 percent are receiving medication for psychological disorders. Approximately 18.5 percent of female admitted to a large urban jail had serious diagnosable mental illnesses.<sup>15</sup>

### **Education and Employment Levels**

In 1998, an estimated 55 percent of women in local jails, 56 percent of women in state prisons, and 73 percent of women in federal prisons had a high school diploma. However, only 40 percent of the women in the state prison reported they were employed full time at the time of their arrest. This compares with almost 60 percent of males. About 37 percent of women and 28 percent of men had incomes of less than \$600 per month prior to arrest. Most of the jobs held by women were low-skill, entry-level jobs with low pay. Two-thirds of the women reported they had never held a job that paid more than \$6.50 per hour (BJS 1999b).

### **Why The Rise in Female Incarceration Rates**

Women in general, and women of color from impoverished communities in particular, occupy a set of uniquely vulnerable positions when we consider the social

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<sup>15</sup> Teplin, L.A., Abram, K.M., & McClelland, G.M. (1996). Prevalence of psychiatric disorders among incarcerated women. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 53(6), 505-512; Veysey, B.M. (1997). *Specific needs of women diagnosed with mental illnesses in U.S. jails*. Delmar, NY: National GAINS Center, Policy Research Inc.; Singer, M., Bussey, J., Song, L., & Lunghofer, L. (1995). The psychosocial issues of women serving time in jail. *Social Work*, 40(1), 103-113.

impact of increased incarceration in the United States. Such vulnerability can be seen to mirror that of social settings in American culture - including traditional nuclear families, conservative community and cultural groups, occupational hierarchies, and other hegemonic social institutions - in which gender arrangements serve to marginalize some women by limiting access to social resources and undermining women's participation and power. In the case of incarceration, these issues are further complicated by a racialized justice system designed almost exclusively by and for men. The nature of interaction within this system leaves women directly vulnerable to harsh criminal justice practices that have caused skyrocketing incarceration rates and sets in place a tightly organized system of injustice, disenfranchisement, and social stigmas that leave women the direct victims of some of the most pernicious effects of the prison industrial complex (Richie 2002).

In summary, women arrive at prison with a complex set of concerns that need to be addressed and usually are not. They are the primary caregivers of their children, the majority of women in prison have a serious substance abuse addiction, they generally are not married, and though many have at least a high school diploma or GED, they have a very low level of employment, if they are employed at all. One in four women in prison has a diagnosable mental illness with three quarters of these women also having co-existing drug or alcohol addiction.

### **Women's Psychological Development as a Pathway to Understanding Narrative**

In psychological development theory, Chodorow (1974) and others have claimed that women's psychological development differs in fundamental ways from the traditional model of development derived from men's experience. This difference



can offer valuable insight into the ways in which women prisoners experience their pre-prison experience, their incarceration, and their rehabilitation. In particular, the relationship of psychological development to narrative contributes to a female prisoner's self-understanding. Over the past two decades, new conceptualizations of women's psychological development have been evolving which emphasize the importance and centrality of relationships in women's lives (Miller, 1976; Belenky et al., 1986; Jordan et al., 1991). This relational perspective has sought to describe development from women's perspective, using language and concepts derived from women's experience. Since women in this culture have been the "carriers" of certain aspects of the total human experience, specifically carrying responsibility for the care and maintenance of relationships, this model attempts to articulate the strengths as well as the problems arising for women from this relational orientation.

More than men, women form their understanding of the self much more as being based on relations with others. Gilligan (1982) uses this argument that the understanding of the self and its relation to others differs for men and women to discuss the development of moral understanding in children and adolescents; she argues that moral value lies in sensitivity to others' needs and others' points of view. This means that women must define themselves relationally rather than individually or oppositionally.

When a relationship moves from disconnection to mutual connection, each person feels a greater sense of personal authenticity as well as a sense of "knowing" or "seeing" the other. This experience of mutual empathy requires that each person have the capacity for empathic connecting. Empathy is a complex, highly developed

ability to join with another at a cognitive and affective level without losing connection with one's own experience. Openness to growth through empathic joining within the relationship process is fundamental to mutual relationships. Finally, a self that we can recognize as a functioning social self should have the property of reflexivity. That is, it should function as one self among many similar selves, so that it can be reflected on, or related to as an other (Gilligan 105).

Carole Gilligan's feminist critique of the influential development theory of moral reasoning by Lawrence Kohlberg, was ground breaking when published in the late 1970s. Critics of Gilligan's research, especially her book In a Different Voice, took aim at her all-white research subjects and called for an expansion of this theory to include women of color and their experiences of difference. Attempts to explore racial identity as it relates to women's psychological development generally end with authors calling for an emphasis on the importance (and difficulty) for women in the United States of trying to forge links across differences of privilege, culture, class, race and sexuality, and the necessity of their having both voices and relationships.

Scholars of women's criminality (O'Brien 2001; Johnson 2003; Sharp 2003; and Chesney-Lind, 1996) have applied a sharp focus on the prevalence of women of color in the criminal justice system. The use here of Chodorow and Gilligan's theories of relationality by no means excludes women of color; on the contrary, their foundational work can be used to illustrate the current limitations on social policies for incarcerated women. Because until very recently, all female prisoners were treated in a "color-blind" manner, Chodorow and Gilligan's can be used as the springboard

for policy reform in the prison system. In spite of the whiteness of their research samples, their assumptions, I believe do have relevance across racial lines.

Feminist scholarship in the early 1990s began to address the exclusion of women of color from feminist scholarship and the misinterpretation of the experiences of women of color. This scholarship included work which revealed that “women’s lives are shaped as much by relations of dominance based on race and class as those based on gender” (Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill, xi). Unfortunately, criminal justice policy has used race as a negative and limiting factor when considering women’s prison policy. Gender has been the defining factor in rehabilitation and incarceration programming, rather than infusing this programming with a well-informed approach to racial identity among female prisoners.

By excluding female prisoners’ voices or narratives in the development and administration of rehabilitation and incarceration programming, we deny women any voice. However, I would argue that women who “speak,” especially women who are or were incarcerated, must do so within a restricted language that offers a limited and highly problematic range of positions from which to speak, none of which are “free.” These positions must be navigated and negotiated each and every time a story is told, as the story-teller considers the audience, her own position, including her race, class, and ethnic location, and the life of the story beyond the immediate telling.

The nature of the process of narration whether in oral testimony or in writing, contributes to the creation of reflexivity, because one can never immediately speak of the present in the present. This necessarily creates a distinction between the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative, and interposes a distance between them.

Consequently, the narrator can observe, reflect, adjust the amount of distance, and correct the self that is being created. The very act of narrating creates the occasion for self-regard and editing (Gilligan 105).

Other questions in play here are what does the act of testimony, of “bearing witness,” mean to an individual survivor, a prisoner, or to a community of survivors? How are prisoner’s stories adapted to fit and then contained within the dominant structure of social, cultural, and political discourse (Tal 1996)? Consider Audre Lorde’s explanation for why she writes: “I write,” explains Lorde, “for myself and my children and for as many people as possible who can read me, who need to hear what I have to say – who need to use what I know...I write for these women. “For women a voice has not yet existed, or whose voices have been silent. I don’t have the only voice or all of their voices, but they are a part of my voice, and I am a part of theirs (Tate 1983 104).”

There are a myriad of reasons to “tell a story.” But in the telling, for most writers there must be readers. Theorists agree that interpersonal connections are a key variable in women’s development. However, these connections vary among communities of color, class, and sexualities. Gilligan (1982), Baker Miller (1978, 1988), Dinnerstein (1976), Chodorow (1978), Belenky, et al. (1986), Jordan (1986), and others noticed that a fundamental orientation toward relationship critically defines women’s experience. Dinnerstein (1976) and Chodorow (1978) discuss the sociological roots of women’s relational orientation. They argue that since women are the primary caretakers of young children, boys and girls have different developmental experiences. At the early stages of identity formation, boys must

make a cognitive/psychological split from the earliest (female) other in order to develop a sense of male identity. This separation “prepares men for their less affective later family role” (Chodorow 7) and creates a strong internal paradigm of a separated, individual self. Girls, however, come to recognize their gendered identity at this critical stage as continuous with the mother; thus “girls come to experience themselves as less separate than boys, as having more permeable ego boundaries...and define themselves more in relation to others” (Chodorow 93).

When we consider relationality among women, we must not universalize this issue. Patricia Hill Collins’ groundbreaking work, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment has taught us that “a self-defined, articulated Black feminist standpoint exists,” and it has been the source of Black women’s ability to resist the controlling images of the dominant society, including those images of female prisoners. Grounding a study of women writers in prison in women’s differences can reveal relations that remain obscure. Taking Carol Stack’s framework, which examines moral reasoning in a context that combines gender, race, class, and culture, and applying it to this research, we look at social context along the way. Even though the methodology used in this research did not explicitly use writing texts in my research that were oriented to race, class, or sexuality, the material written by prisoners in both my classroom setting and in the newsletters address these issues, evidence that these are important to the development of women’s self-image.

Besides gender, certain political and economic factors have complicated the female criminal’s situation with regard to autobiographical writing. Often, her prison

writing gets set aside, put away, a painful memory to be forgotten. Or her work is looked upon as "low brow" literature, not worthy of publication or scholarly discussion. Other prison writing simply is confiscated or destroyed, much as the illegal, past life of the criminal is erased, reconstructed and rehabilitated, tossed aside like a former skin, never to again be examined. Prison writing preserves the personal, illuminates and validates the human being behind the bars. With the enormous rise in the number of poor women of color in America's jails and prisons, the voyage out for these stories and memoirs has been stymied by public policy, aimed at shutting down any intellectual or personal connections for women from behind the stone walls to the outside world.

I suggest that women's writing that does find its way to the public sphere is often manipulated and co-opted in order to construct or maintain an image of the female criminal as a violent and un-rehabilitatable hard-core criminal. The discursively produced classist and racist notions of female criminals contribute to the impoverishment of women struggling with the social problems of mental illness, economic collapse, and drug dependency. The new "American criminal" is poor, usually a woman of color, and almost always a mother. My work is an attempt to trace the circulation of these narratives, to locate "conversations" about public policy, to identify the developing feminist theory around women's prison reform, and to construct an analysis based on experiences of female prisoners (see hooks, 1984 & 1994; King, 1994; Morrison, et al, 1992).

. Women of color consistently are stereotyped and treated as hyper sexualized females, excessively reproductive welfare recipients, and/or crack addicts (see

Collins, 1991; Morrison, et al, 1992). As a consequence, they are targeted for surveillance and monitoring by state systems, including the police and child protective services. They are disproportionately arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for prostitution, petty theft and embezzlement, and drug possession and sales. The prevailing political investments in "tough on crime" measures result in longer, harsher sentences than ever before. The result of the huge numbers of incarcerated people of color is that the prison itself becomes a racialized space; this increasing racialization of criminality affects women in unique ways (see Daly, 1994; Price & Sokoloff, 1995).

A prisoner represents the lowly and despicable citizen of the nation, in large part because a majority of them are people of color. For women of color this explosion compounds a pre-existing invisibility. Not only are these women absent in discourses about race, gender, and prison, their very bodies are hidden by the state, thus rendering them doubly invisible. This invisibility of women of color is exacerbated by prison walls, within which their very humanity may be lost.

Penal institutions, as is their function, constitute the state's coercive apparatus of physical detention and ideological containment, and provide the critical space within which, indeed from out of which, alternative social and political practices of counter hegemonic resistance movements are schooled. Critical to such practices, simultaneously cultural and political, are not only the narrative means whereby prison is re-presented in literature, but also the multiple contestatory roles played by literature in the prison itself. Often, writing is forbidden and the detainee is forced to

re-member or write under severely restricted conditions, limiting and also hypersensitizing the text.

There has been a rekindled interest in women's writings from confinement in the last several years since Barbara Harlow's pioneering text on women, writing, and political detention was published. On a global scale, the attention to human rights violations in an era of global conflict has encouraged other incarcerated women to tell their stories, and enabled feminist scholars to collect them. The general burst of women's studies scholarship in the late 1980s has fostered self-expression by imprisoned women as well.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship concerning and authored by women of diverse national identities. Women's Studies scholars are expanding empirical knowledge about the specific circumstances of women's lives in other countries, and are developing a better theoretical understanding of gender, seeing it less as a "unitary cultural category" than as a process dependent on the intersection of power structures in changing societies, and on "the dialectical relationship between meaning and practice, in a historically specific, power-laden context (Ong, 1989)." Greater attention is being accorded to the voices and interpretations of women of other cultures as they speak for themselves in a variety of forms, mediums, disciplines, and genres (see Mohanty, et al, 1991). This third decade of women's studies, then, is one of synthesis, in which both commonalities and differences among women are acknowledged and explored, with greater self-consciousness about the dangers of ethnocentrism and more fully developed



methodologies for avoiding it (see Behar, 1995; Gluck and Patai, 1991; Stacey, 1985; and Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

A deeper understanding of the effects of incarceration on women, their children, and their families can be additionally enhanced through an investigation of specific cultures of women within the field of American studies.

Ex-prisoner and prison writer Patricia McConnel describes the blank, dead-eyed look she calls “jailface.” She observes that it:

ain't necessarily a bad thing to have, 'cause the minute a screw knows you're scared or weak she's got the upper hand, and she jumps on you with both feet and don't let up 'til she's had her satisfaction, which in most cases is to see your spirit dead. But if you're walking around with jail face, she can't tell if something is still stirring in there or not. Most likely she thinks by your look that you're already dead...(Sing Soft, Sing Loud p xx).

This gripping assessment of those behind bars will remind us as we investigate women prison writers that behind the jail face there are wives, mothers, and sisters struggling to make it to the end of their sentences.

## **Chapter 2: Through the Looking Glass: Cultural Locations of an Underground Prison Newsletter**

“There is a reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives.” - Angela Y. Davis

What is the experience of American prison like for women inmates? What do they have to tell us about this experience? What are the problems they encounter and how do they struggle against them? This chapter is an attempt to answer these questions through an exploration of narrative accounts in a women prisoners’ newsletter, Through the Looking Glass, published in Seattle Washington from 1976 to 1987.

This chapter is a study of representations by women prisoners of their lives. Newsletters, life stories in the form of letters, memoir, and poems will be explored in this chapter. Since the prison newsletter is the medium for the delivery of this writing, an important aspect of understanding these texts will be to understand the philosophy and intent behind Through the Looking Glass and to examine some of the struggles and failures of the group that produced it. Finally, a careful look at the letters, memoirs and poetry that were printed in it will reveal patterns in the narratives and commonalities and differences among prisoners over the years. By examining this work, we see links between female prisoners’ writings and the often painful struggles these writers experienced behind bars. The poetry published in the newsletter provides an illuminating perspective on the thoughts, feelings, concerns, and culture of women prisoners incarcerated at the Purdy Correctional Treatment Center, just outside of Seattle between the years 1976 and 1987. This chapter is not a literary

analysis of the material published in the newsletter; the purpose of exploring this type of narrative is to listen to the voices of women writing from prison.

I first heard about prison newsletters in the early stages of my research in 1994. I made many efforts to locate newsletters, but my investigations always turned up nothing. I tried to locate issues of women's newsletters, finding newsletters published by male prisoners instead. Then one day, someone from a local battered women's shelter offered me a grocery bag of old papers. "Would you like these? We were going to throw this stuff out, but thought you might be interested in them." The brown bag full of prison newsletters was handed to me. There were many of them, piled inside a dark paper bag, flattened by time, hidden from sunlight. In my hands, they were artifacts, saved in order to keep a record of a time in America when some women's voices mattered less than others. They were the remnants of a fight for social justice behind bars. They were a pile of yellowed and torn mimeographed pages before me. No marching in the streets, no 5 o'clock news coverage about overcrowding in prison, shock treatments, neighborhood sweeps, and arrests of gays and lesbians just because of who they were. No leniency for the women who sold their bodies, shot heroin, or stole red meat from the grocery store to feed their starving kids. But the newsletters that had been saved from the dumpster offered another version of American culture behind bars.

Reading the newsletters one by one, I felt as if I were eavesdropping on a conversation. I saw women sitting in a group, talking fast and furiously to all who would listen. This noise, this blending of lives, these words, this straining to be heard, forced me to see the connections. Here were the written records of thousands

of conversations among women prisoners and women writers who, hunched over picnic tables in prison day rooms, discussed their own world with others. They discussed the world outside of the prison walls as women saw it; they discussed local, state, and national politics. They cursed laws and lawmakers, they damned those who were prejudiced, condemned those who were homophobic. They told women from the community who came to visit them what was going on behind the razor wire that surrounded Purdy Treatment Center for Women. While they were discussing, arguing, and fighting for their rights, mourning their losses, longing for an end to their punishments, they developed theories of the oppressed. These women writers made theory happen. They developed a language of the silenced; they devised a dialectic of the exiled that would serve to frame their stories.

Through the Looking Glass was an underground radical prison reform newsletter produced and distributed by women in the lesbian-feminist community of Seattle WA. This title referred to Lewis Carroll's famous story.

What sort of things do you remember best?" Alice ventured to ask. Oh, things that happened the week after next, " the Queen replied in a careless tone. "For instance, now," she went on, sticking a large piece of plaster on her finger as she spoke, "there's the King's Messenger. He's in prison now, being punished: and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all."

"Suppose he never commits the crime?" said Alice.

"That would be all the better, wouldn't it?" the Queen said, as she bound the plaster round her finger with a bit of ribbon (Carroll 1977).

At first, Through the Looking Glass may seem an odd name for an underground newsletter dedicated to "women and children in prison." But the pieces of dialogue from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found

There scattered throughout many issues of the newsletter come to seem extremely apt. In its thirteen-year publishing run, Through the Looking Glass was dedicated to deliberately bridging the intellectual canyon that stood between women in prison and the “outside” world. This literary metaphor is an example of the diligent and often subversive attempts of the newsletter staff and writers to move between two worlds, situated in opposition to each other, literally and figuratively and also to point out what the women felt to be the absurdity of women’s prison policy and its effect on their daily life.

When informants for this study were queried, no one seemed to remember exactly who came up with the title and my informants couldn’t remember who brought these snippets of dialog to paste-up meetings each month. But one thing is clear, both in Alice’s journey through Wonderland and in each female prisoner’s travels through the criminal justice system, those journeying were essentially left to fend for themselves inside “the looking glass.” Alice in Wonderland met puzzling obstacles and doors that led to nowhere; female prisoners often spoke of dead ends, and absurd and arbitrary rules made up on the spot to manage situations for the staff members’ benefit.

In Lewis Carroll’s storybook, Alice crawls through the “Looking Glass” and explores the room inside the glass. She looks about and says (in a whisper, for fear of frightening kings and queens), “I don’t think they can hear me.” She puts her head closer down, “and I’m nearly sure they can’t see me. I feel somehow as if I were invisible” (15). This is an appropriate analogy for the reality of women in prison.

The prison newsletters reflect an invisibleness and isolation for the female prisoner and provided a venue for writers to struggle against this and to articulate their experiences and craft of writing. Metaphors aside, these newsletters illuminate the culture of women in prison in a variety of ways. First, they provide a unique record of women prisoners' representation of their experience. Their content enhances our understanding of the issues and concerns of women in prison. Their stories clarify "real" issues and deliver concrete calls for action around policy concerns. Newsletter materials also enhance our understanding of the influence of grassroots feminist activism prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s on prison policy reform during this period and beyond.

Little is known about women's prison newsletters during this time period. There were other feminist and lesbian newsletters published during this period, and at least one other newsletter, No More Cages, dedicated to women in prison that began publishing as late as 1980. However, my research has not brought to light any other women's prison newsletters published in the 1960's or 1970's. Through the Looking Glass is unique in its specific focus. No other women's prison newsletter that was published on the outside of prison walls with a consistent and strong collaboration of activists and ex-prisoners during the 20<sup>th</sup> century had such mass impact on the feminist movement and the national community of female prisoners simultaneously.<sup>16</sup> However, Through the Looking Glass was unique because women writers and activists shared information about the political debates between rehabilitative prison

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<sup>16</sup> There were, of course, other women's newsletters throughout that period of time and beyond: Prisoner Yellow Pages, Prison Journal, Bulldozer, Sisters of the Wind, Strike, La Bayou: La Rose, Northwest Indian Women's Circle, Sinister Wisdom, Out and About, The Advocate, The Clarion, Lesbian Connection, and many others that were free to women "on the inside."

philosophies and repressive detention. Two distinct types of narratives in the newsletter offer fertile ground in which to view and better understand life for female prisoners. Female prisoners wrote the prose of the newsletter including reprints from other publications and the majority of the prison poetry.

The editorial staff of the newsletter apparently had a clear directive to follow in their work. They operated as a multiracial group intent on bringing women prisoners' voices into the public light. The following is a statement from the editorial staff of the newsletter, printed in Volume 1, Number 1:

Through the Looking Glass is a monthly newsletter that focuses on women and children incarcerated in the Pacific Northwest and throughout the world.

Our purposes are:

To remind people that women and children are locked up; to tell about the conditions they live under; how they are selected for the different forms of incarceration, and about the consequences of imprisonment for the prisoners, their families and friends, and all of us.

To encourage analysis of different kinds of incarceration such as prison, jails, juvenile centers, foster homes, mental prisons, nursing homes, halfway houses, poverty, destructive families, and exploitative, dangerous and confining jobs.

To communicate across the barriers that has been put up to keep us in, or out.

To break the isolation of women and children in prisons by providing a place where they can communicate to each other.

We welcome input and work from anyone who agrees with our purposes. We hold regular meetings in Seattle.

We need women writers, editors, and artists from inside the joints.

Through the Looking Glass had a thirteen-year publishing run, often financially in the red, with a very small volunteer staff to write, paste up, copy, fold, and address the many newsletters that were sent out. At the height of its publishing, 1500 copies of the monthly newsletter were distributed across the country to women in prison,

bookstores, schools and universities, libraries, shelters, drug rehabilitation centers, community women's centers, and feminist and lesbian activists.

The 43 newsletters I was able to obtain begin with the first issue, January 1976 and end in February 1987. I believe that I have over one third of all the newsletters published. As shown in Figure 1, the early newsletter is one of the homegrown, grassroots newsletters of the times. The cover page usually included a hand drawn graphic with the woman's symbol behind and outside of "prison bars." The handwritten table of contents describes articles and updates to be found inside, such as "Prison Then and Now," "Health Care at King Co. Jail," and "Racism," or "Battered Women." Figure 2 shows the evolution of the cover with an example from the Vol. 6, No. 4, 1981 issue that is focused on Psychiatric Prisons.

The newsletter keyed on a variety of issues important to women prisoners. Some involved critiques of the pre-prison experience including unfair arrest and trial proceedings. There was also some attention to the problems ex-prisoners face on returning to society. The majority of attention was focused on criticism of prison practices and conditions. These included abuse by prison staff, punitive treatments, abuse of medical treatments, unsanitary conditions, prison uprisings and organizing, informational articles for prisoners, i.e. "Pat Frisks and Strip Frisks" guidelines from the Department of Corrections, and letters from inmates across the country. The basis for most of these types of articles was statements from prison rights groups concerned with maintaining lawful treatment of prisoners through education. Additionally, a focus on abuse by staff and mistreatment of prisoners exposed the prison world to



advocacy groups such as feminist health activists, public justice legal advocates, civil rights activists, and gay and lesbian activists.

### **Philosophy and Intent of the Newsletter Staff**

The composition of the production group was varied. Most of the people who worked on the newsletter were both Black and white lesbians and feminists from the Seattle area. During the early 1970s, Seattle had a very strong women's liberation movement with some women belonging to local NOW chapters and other women belonging to radical feminist groups working on a variety of causes, such as the battered women's movement, abortion rights, native American rights, labor issues for women, and lesbian and gay rights. This group of women were in their early to mid-thirties, and would identify themselves as politically active. All the women in the group were employed, had their own cars, were single without children, and could be described as lower or working middle class women. In terms of their education, most women had finished high school and had completed some college or held a B.A. Their prime motivation for working on this newsletter was that they saw working class women being jailed for minor offenses in their community, and they also saw their lesbian friends and acquaintances being arrested for being gay in Seattle. This brought some of the newsletter staff into the Purdy Correctional Facility, where they met other inmates and became familiar with the issues these inmates dealt with on a daily basis. This familiarity spawned a desire to create prison reform on a small scale.

The newsletter staff was particularly concerned with exposing the treatment women in prison were receiving, beginning with the Purdy prison facility. This op-ed

piece, written by women on the editorial board describes what was the beginning of severe overcrowding in this particular prison:

Washington state's model prison, Purdy, seems to be straying further and further from being the "rehabilitative facility" that it never was in the first place. In short, a prison is a prison, and this one is definitely getting worse. In the past several weeks particularly, Purdy has been getting more repressive. The state does not provide clothes for women when they are in Purdy. Because many women have only one set of clothes when they get there, other women share their clothes until new women can get some clothes of their own. The administration has recently decided that the women have too many clothes, and the number they can have will be restricted, and they cannot be shared.

Spot check urinalyses are common in Purdy as they are in most prisons. The purpose is to check if women are taking illegal drugs or drinking alcohol. Women on work release at Campion Towers in Seattle are getting sent back to Purdy on the basis of their urinalyses, when they have not been taking anything illegal. One woman at Purdy was recently told that her urine showed traces of heroin. She had not taken any heroin, but she was punished with a 10-day sanction in her room, which means that she is confined to her room for 10 days.

The usual punishment for that type of infraction is 4-5 weeks in maximum security, but maximum and administrative segregation are both full beyond capacity, for the first time. General population is also overcrowded. The single rooms are being made into doubles, and the doubles are getting bunk beds put in them." Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1976.

Other accounts of inhumane treatment of women prisoners at other facilities were published in early issues of the newsletters as well:

Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, located in Westchester, New York, has been and continues to be one of the most racist, sexist and openly dangerous prisons in which to "do time." The latest crisis started when some of the younger, more politically aware women were put in segregation, where they remained for more two months (usual time in isolation is 8 days to a month). Segregation means deprivation of all rights. The food is injected with drugs to keep the prisoners pacified; there is nothing for them to do, and practically no room in which to move around.

Recently, a woman who had been in "seg" and as a result was severely depressed tried to commit suicide. She was thrown in a bare cell with only a mattress, given a cigarette, and "jokingly" told not to set herself on fire.

However it happened, her tiny cell was soon filled with smoke from the smoldering mattress. When the fire department arrived they were refused entry. In the confusion, others in “seg” got out and started fighting their way to Maria’s smoking cell. They finally got her outside to the yard where she lay unconscious for three hours.

This incident set off a chain of retaliatory actions by the officers and reactions by the inmates, resulting finally in ten women being mysteriously and very suddenly moved to Mattewan, an institution for criminally insane men. Nowhere is there a place for women at Mattewan. The ten women have no privacy from the male inmates or guards. They have been forcefully given 200 mg+ of Elavil and other drugs. If they refuse the pills, they are threatened with injections, and the food undoubtedly is loaded with drugs.

These women need to be returned to Bedford Hills. When that happens we can put pressure on the officials to force them to improve conditions. These women need our help now.

Please write in protest of these incredibly cruel conditions to: Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Bedford Hills, Westchester, New York 10507. – Information from Off Our Backs, Reprinted in Through the Looking Glass, Vol. 1, No. 5, 1976.

In an issue of Through the Looking Glass from the same year, the Tacoma City Jail, Washington was highlighted with the headline “Tacoma City Jail – 2<sup>nd</sup> Worst in the State.” Here is an excerpt of a long two-page article written by a prisoner detailing what life is like in that particular jail:

Among women who have done time in Washington jails, Tacoma is almost unanimously considered the second worst jail in the state (Yakima rates first). While women who have been in Tacoma Jail always agree that it’s a pit, it gets more difficult to pin down just why – the outrages against health and sanity are so numerous it’s hard to know where to start.

Isolation from the outside world: Visiting is restricted to blood relatives only. Occasional exceptions are allowed at the whim of the jail sergeant. No matter how far relatives travel to visit, they are allowed only twenty minutes. Visitors and prisoners are separated by glass and must shout through a grille to talk. The noise, echoes and smell of filth, even in the visiting area, often make visitors physically ill with nausea and headaches.

Prisoners are allowed one telephone call a week, at discretion of the matron. The matron keeps records of who prisoners call, when, and their phone

numbers; she also usually stands nearby and listens to the conversation. Calls to a lawyer are also allowed or denied by the matrons – who can and do decide that every three days is more than enough for a prisoner to call her lawyer, even if she/he is in another city and/or has requested that the prisoner call. Lawyers cannot call in. Lawyer calls are also listened to.

Environment: Tanks are approximately 20' x 30' and contain 16 bunks, two tables, two toilets, two sinks, a shower and (in some cases) a TV. There are generally 5-8 women in a tank. The bunks are so arranged that there is no more than a foot between people as they sleep.

Matrons admit that the heat is turned on only in December and January, and is extremely insufficient even then. Each prisoner is issued two (thin) blankets. A doctor's order is required to get a third blanket. (At any given time, 25% of the women are ill with colds, bronchitis, etc.) Mentally ill prisoners are often placed in a regular tank with other prisoners, without any real special attention.

The jail is monitored by an intercom system, which the matrons often utilize to listen in on personal conversations (occasionally cutting in unexpectedly with their own comments – or threats).

Food: The food is the ultimate in institutional food; heavy on the starches and everything is either canned or dehydrated, it seems. Once a week (Tuesday breakfast) each prisoner receives one orange. No other fresh fruit is ever served.

Medical Care: A doctor visits the jail once a week, on Wednesday. Prisoners are examined and speak to the doctor only in the presence of a matron. When prisoners recently discovered that the jail was infested with lice – and hence so were they – matrons responded by trying to convince them that it was “all in their minds.” The lice are apparently permanent resident of the jail – not surprisingly, since in this recent instance, prisoners had to fight for every “concession” such as Kwell shampoo, clean bedding (it never was really sterilized, so the lice will be back) – and their mothers had to conduct a phone call barrage on the Health Department before the jail was fumigated.

The matrons dispense all prescribed medication, as well as deciding who is ill enough to go to the hospital. They have no medical training; in fact, women with sores that appeared to be ringworm, were at one point given athlete's foot medicine. It wasn't ringworm, but it wasn't athlete's foot of the breast, either.

Staff: Most of the matrons have apparently long since learned to suppress any tendencies to compassion. With prisoners locked up 24 hours a day, it becomes very easy for the matrons to view them as bodies, animals, anything but people; and most matrons show no inclination to try and see them in any

different light, since it's much easier to deal with 20 dogs in a cage than 20 women. There are no social workers or other staff persons to whom a prisoner can generally turn for counseling or emotional support.

These dry, hard facts are one thing. It takes a stay in the jail to realize the full impact of how they all interrelate: little things, like how hard it is just to keep your body clean when you have to hassle an irritable matron for shampoo, take your shower and step back out into the icy air and onto the cold cement – when you already have a cold – then dry off and get back into the uniform you've worn for five days now. Or the depression of being incommunicado from everyone you love; you know they're thinking of you – at least you think you know ... but the doubts start to gnaw. Or the psychological effects of no privacy – ever. Or the worry you feel when you realize that you've stared at the wall for an hour now and aren't even sure what you've been thinking of, because your mind seems to be going soft and you feel so low and lethargic it's like being drugged.

Perhaps part of the problem is that while a woman is in Tacoma Jail she is isolated from any outside contact and support, any materials (e.g. law books) she could use to challenge the situation. And once she gets out, the urge to just forget such a nightmarish episode of one's life is over whelming. It's like being raped: when it's all over you feel sick to your stomach and really want a very long, hot bath, a warm hug, and a chance to feel just for a minute that you're really safe. TTLG, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1976.

The contents of the 43 newsletters I surveyed included the following materials: 157 reprints from other newsletters and magazines, 109 op-ed pieces written by newsletter staff, 15 articles on international news, 160 articles on legal news and specific legal cases of women prisoners, 53 letters to the editor, and 86 poems by women prisoners.

The reprints from the national press usually presented information about criminal justice policy, its problems, and reforms. For example, the Vol.3 No. 5, June 1977 issue has a long article from Off Our Backs about the link between the Nestle Company and the radical decline in breast-feeding in the Third World

In recent years, growing numbers of women in developing countries, particularly in urban areas, have abandoned breast-feeding despite the fact that human milk is both economically and nutritionally the ideal food for most

infants. Factors contributing to the radical decline in breast feeding in the Third World, include a growing trend for women to work outside the home where there are no provisions for nursing, the desire to be 'modern' and imitate women in the local upper class and in industrialized societies, the availability of powdered milk from health agencies, and, most importantly, the vigorous and irresponsible promotion of formula by the multinational corporations who manufacture these human milk substitutes. TTLG, Vol. 3, No.5, June 1977.

Op-ed pieces comprised a large category of material in the newsletter. In the March 1979 issue, an article entitled "POWS" discusses the editors' perspectives on the disposition of prisoners of war in the United States:

(From the adopted Articles on Prisoners of War, Geneva Convention of August 1949: Prisoners of War are broadly defined to fit under any one of several categories. These include a few which are particularly applicable to the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) fighters: That they be members of armed forces "who profess allegiance to a government or authority not recognized by the Detaining Power;" or that they be "members of militias or volunteer corps, including those of organized resistance movements...operating in or outside their own territory, even if their territory is occupied..."The Geneva Convention dictates that prisoners of war be guaranteed humane treatment and certain legal rights not currently given to any prisoners within the U.S. prison system. – TTLG.)

The Black Liberation movement has developed and continued its struggle against the U.S. government since the sixties and the days of Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. Today we are familiar with Black Liberation Army struggles and the names of Assata Shakur and Sundiata Acoli stand out as names of prisoners of war in the armed struggle of Black people to achieve their freedom...Increasingly, international pressure is being exerted to force the State to release political prisoners in jail now because of their active resistance to this government.

In an escalation of the debate over political prisoners in the United States, the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) released October 12, the names of 16 men and one woman in U.S. state and federal prisons who the RNA says are not just political prisoners but "prisoners of war" within the meaning of the Geneva Convention."

The article goes on to detail the connections between prisoners of war in the U.S. and the struggle of RNA officials to prove that the United States is in violation

of a number of UN resolutions relating to the treatment of freedom fighters and the rights of oppressed people to independence.

Another powerful op-ed article focused on psychiatric prisons. In the Vol. 6 No. 4, 1981 issue, the editors wrote a “collective statement” to readers:

“Mental hospitals” (or psychiatric prisons) are an important tool that the U.S. uses to try to keep people in line, cooperating with the system that oppresses us. Four times as many people are locked up in psychiatric institutions as “corrections institutions. Shrinkers, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, therapists, and counselors have an enormous amount of power over many people’s lives.

The way that psychiatric institutions are used is sexist – twice as many women as men are locked up for being “crazy.” While men are most often committed to psychiatric prisons for drug or alcohol related reasons, women are usually committed for their behavior that is seen as “crazy.” Women are often locked up for acting on our anger since women’s rage is dangerous to this society. Women are also locked up for being unfeminine, rebellious, “different,” lesbian, politically radical, or simply because a husband, father, or brother wants her out of the way. According to popular sexist ideas, women are emotional (too emotional), irrational, and unable to take care of ourselves. It is usually straight, white, upper class men who are in positions where they decide if a woman is “mentally ill” and decide what “treatment” will supposedly “help” her. These men don’t understand or respect women. Their treatments are designed to keep women confused and powerless.

Some groups of people are abused by the “mental health” system in special ways. For instance, women of color are often stuck in low-paying, dead-end jobs (if not unemployment/welfare lines) and face subtle or direct racist attacks every day. When they express their righteous anger, they may be seen as “sick” and have a run-in with the psychiatric world against their will. They are kept down in very direct physical ways (drugs, prisons, long hours working hard, etc.). When they do encounter psychiatric institutions they are usually run by the state because most of these women are poor.

Lesbians are another group that the “doctors” love to experiment on. Lesbians often break all the rules. They don’t depend on men, don’t dress “right”, don’t try to be traditionally “feminine.” Because they are women, they are economically oppressed. Since sexist white men dominate the psychiatric industry (as well as prisons) lesbians are offered surgery (“Don’t you want to be a man, honey? Tell the truth.”), or “therapy” to change their sexual preference. More experimental guinea pigs.

The article details other connections between gender discrimination and psychiatric institutions. In conclusion, the article offers some “options”:

We all have the right to determine our lives and decide if we want any kind of help and what kind we need. We need to expose what’s happening inside psych prisons and educate people outside. We can work towards changing our own and other people’s attitudes about “mental illness.”

International news held a small place in the pages of the newsletter, but regardless of the frequency of the news articles, each was hard hitting and political:

South Africa is a country ruled by white people, although they make up only 18% of the population. All other people are under their direct control: 70% are African (Black), 9% are Colored, and 3% are Asians. (These are the official racial classifications – “colored” refers to people of mixed race. Japanese are considered white because of their high volume of trade in South Africa). This control by the whites is maintained by the racist system of apartheid, functions since the coming of Europeans to South Africa and formalized in 1948 with the election of the Nationalist Government by all whites. Apartheid provides for geographical separation of blacks from whites by setting up nine distinct African “nation.” All Black workers in white areas are considered migrants with absolutely no rights, while everyone else, considered “non-productive”, is forced into the “homelands.” These “homelands”, or reserves, make up only 13% of the country’s land. There are no cities, industry, seaports, or mineral deposits in the reserves, and most of the land is eroded and over-farmed. No land is set aside for Colored or Asian people – they must live in ghettos called “group areas.”

In the reserves, women are denied the right to land and job opportunities. None of the reserves has enough land to support its normal population. Land hunger has been made even worse by the massive resettlement of Africans from the white cities and farm areas. This has been partially dealt with by refusing to allocate land to women. Only a widow with children has any chance of getting an allotment, and even then if she remarries, or leaves for work in the city, she will lose it. This puts her in an incredible bind since it is next to impossible to support a family on the land. She must also leave her children behind if she goes to the city to work in order to support them.

The African woman faces not only the horrors of apartheid because she is Black, but also the lower status of woman imposed upon her by the relationship of women and men in a male dominated society. She is virtually a prisoner in her own country. TTLG, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1976.



Letters to the editor focused on a wide range of issues from unhealthy food preparation in prison kitchens to discussions about traumatizing prison policies. In the following letter to the editor, “concerned inmates of Arizona Center for Women in Phoenix, AZ” feel that “a certain problem which exists in this facility should be brought to the attention of any person who knows and realizes that incarcerated people are not sub-human”:

It is a well-known fact that institutional food is ...well...institutional food. However, it has reached a point here where it can no longer be ignored. It is affecting the women’s health, not to mention violating any and all Federal guidelines concerning nutritional standards. The following are just examples of what goes on: hot dogs (turkey hot dogs, not less), that were cold, moldy and green, were put into the outside trustees lunches because [the warden] “did not want to throw them away”; the use of commodity meat rather than fresh meat, to cut expenses”; there is no fresh fruit or vegetables at all being served on the line, unless of course, wilted lettuce is considered “fresh’; there are cases of fresh tomatoes in the kitchen that were never put on the line because [the warden] decided they were costing too much to use – the tomatoes rotted and then were uses in such delicacies as chili, soup, etc; the cake mixes have weevils in them, but are mixed, baked and served anyway; one of the paid employees (free world) in the kitchen has been seen mixing batter with his arm, rather than with utensils (gloves are rarely, if ever, used); another paid free world employee has been seen scratching his genital area and proceeding to put his hands in the food; a pan of link sausages was accidentally dropped on the floor and was subsequently put on the line, the Kool-aid which is served at two meals daily, has been seen mixed in the same buckets used to hold cleaning water, which (we assume?) contain such ingredients as Lysol, Pinesol, and other cleaning agents; and on one particular day, there was an unidentifiable kind of soup on the line. When someone inquired as to what kind of soup it was, the answer was “grilled cheese soup,” and that’s just what it was – soup made out of cut up grilled cheese sandwiches.

Other letters to the editor offer compliments and encouragement to the editors:

Dear TTLG,

I just received the first issue of your newspaper and was happy to receive it as it was very informative. Thanks you for staying mad and pushing long and hard for these past ten years. I hope that one day all of the oppression is lifted and we can live in a world as one, human beings free and liberated. But I doubt that the day will come in my lifetime. I can only hope

all the struggles do more than scratch the surface. Take care and may the best days of your past be the worst days of your future.

Fonda Holmes

Another letter describes more humiliation for female prisoners of the Purdy

Correctional Facility and a call for help:

Dear Family and Friends:

Again, I need your assistance in writing letters on behalf of the women incarcerated in Purdy Correctional Facility.

We have been informed by the Superintendent (Sue Clark), that cameras are ordered and will be installed in the clinic for video taping the women during strip searches, cavity searches, and random urinalysis testing. The taping will be done after each visit, when going for a urinalysis, or if suspicious actions deem it necessary.

A large percentage of the women have at sometime in their life experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse and I fear this type of taping will trigger additional trauma.

This will also cut down on the visiting between inmate and the community, and I want to stress it has in the past been a big issue that the inmate remains tight in ties with family and friends. This will possibly end many relationships and cause problems, not only with the person incarcerated, but the bond within the community.

If you would take a few minutes to write a couple of letters and express your aversion regarding this matter, it would be greatly appreciated. Please remember letters from the community weigh heavily with those who make decisions. Send your letters to your local newspaper, TV station, and your state legislative representative.

Thanking you in advance,  
Marilyn J. Brodie-Meyers

These letters, news articles, op-ed pieces and essays written by editorial staff are basic examples of the collaboration and collective activism of women in prison and women on the outside. Women in prison were not only concerned about their own lives, they were fully engaged through the newsletter with the politics of the times, the well-being of other women in prison and the way prison policy affects family and friends of prisoners.

The newsletters served to link women's communities across the barriers of bars and miles by inviting anyone to contribute her work. Because the newsletters were sent to prisoners serving time, and they were distributed for sale at local bookstores, as well as at leftist bookstores all over the country, the newsletter's readership was broad. During this period, small presses, newsletters, and lesbian journals borrowed widely from each other to spread the word about political issues. For example, Through the Looking Glass used materials from Off Our Backs and Sinister Wisdom on a regular basis. These two publications borrowed similarly in order to keep up with the feminist legal and political news across the country.

In the next section, I review the newsletter philosophy by supplementing the material above with interviews of two women who were part of the editorial and writing staff. I begin this critique by examining an interview with with Jane Potter,<sup>17</sup> one of the newsletter's founding members and supporters. Jane, a white, fifty-four year old lesbian ex-prisoner, describes the newsletter production process as follows:

It was one of those nights passing around another one, you know. Getting really high. Someone said, "Let's come up with a name, and Through the Looking Glass was chosen. Yeah, it's kind of eclectic. I mean all the people were dealing with a lot of political issues. Bring it up, lay it down. It was hard, because you had to be verbal, you had to—fight for your stuff to get into the newsletter. Everyone would come in with a quote from Alice in Wonderland. We'd throw it up in the air or pick one out of a hat.

Jane's involvement with the newsletter spanned eleven years. The staff of the newsletter were prison reformers, some of whom had been previously incarcerated, and were radically oriented to improving prison conditions, promoting women's status, advocating gay rights, and working to bring gender inequality under the law to

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Potter and Shelly Baker are pseudonyms. Names have been changed to protect the identities of informants.

light. Jane is a very unassuming and quiet woman; from my experience, she is a good listener and has a wonderfully ironic sense of humor. Here she describes some of the ups and downs of newsletter production:

Generally there would be between four and fifteen people working on each issue. We were always struggling as a group with our politics and our stances. It was like trying to understand—I felt that, if you really talk about this stuff, put your money where your mouth is, share some of that. But everybody was trying to deal. It was pretty good. I think it'd be amazing to try to meet with fifteen people to come up with a newsletter today.

According to Jane, advocates and staff on the newsletter had a variety of motivations for volunteering to publish the newsletter every month. Members had differing political orientations that influenced their approaches to newsletter material. Some members were radical lesbians who had concerns about homophobia in the prison community. The newsletter's publishing history runs across the Presidencies of Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan. Some members of the group were militant members of Seattle's political movements, determined to press their ideas of subversive organizing to overthrow, what was in their eyes, a series of repressive administrations. The group had its editorial struggles also. The range of topics in the newsletter was enormous, spanning healthy eating to how to respond to an FBI agent if they came to your door asking questions. Jane describes some of it this way:

There was all this judgment about what somebody's written. Or if they've written well enough. I always struggled within the group. I had just learned to read back then. I started on this newsletter before I could read it. So there were always issues around that. And I'd say, "well, I can read it, it must be all right! What's the matter with it?" And they'd say, well blah blah blah blah, and I'd say, "Who cares? She's saying something here - listen up! I don't care if she doesn't have her periods or her capitals where they're supposed to be. That's not the issue here." I made decisions about it every month; that it was okay to have things we did not agree with. Everything that was

said in there was what was goin' down. Or was happening at least to some of them.

Clearly there were class issues, education issues, and concerns about the radical political content of the newsletters. Some women on the editorial staff were concerned about exposing prisoners to further persecution by guards and parole boards by printing their letters to the editor and commentaries about prison life. However it seems that there was a more flexible treatment of the poetry that was printed.

I was in the production. I would listen to people read stuff. I was just at the beginning to learn how to read and write. I think I learned to read at Purdy because I wanted to do this work with Through the Looking Glass. People were reading these stories, you know. Somebody's finally saying something that I can hear, and see, and read. They'd always say, nah, that's too deep Jane! I'd say, I think you felt it wrong. Some of them were educated, but I always knew what it was like.

Throughout the newsletter's history, many newsletters never reached their destinations to women in prison as the newsletter acknowledged.

As people have no doubt noticed already, and we're sure most of you are pleased, Through the Looking Glass is part of a larger umbrella organization called Gay Community Social Services, which return address appeared on the outside of the newsletter. (We'll get our mail sooner if it is sent to our own P.O. Box, which has a new number as of this month).

Prison officials have also noticed the word gay. Marion Prison (a federal behavior mod torture prison for men) in Illinois will no longer accept our newsletter and they dare to say it's because "the publication will tend to isolate the inmate from his peers!" In fact most of our readers at Marion do live in isolation, put there by prison officials.

And recently, a King County Jailer (Seattle) returned a newsletter to us marked "NO LONGER HERE" and the hated word gay crossed out, in the same red ink, and replaced by "QUEER."

Gay is not just a word that happened to be on our return address by some accident. Gay represents to us love and unity among women, the strength that enables us to reach across prison walls to each other. We will not deny who we are and what we work for, even though it would make prison officials a little more comfortable, more likely to decide that we are harmless and helpless enough for “their” prisoners to read. There are other ways to reach a prisoner than to be escorted to her cell by an approving warden. (We will need help – that’s what an outside support groups are for. Please contact us if you have, or would like to have, supportive contact with women in prison). TTLG, Vol. 2, No. 4.

This letter to readers was published in an early issue, addressing some of the harassment and sabotages the staff and prisoners faced in order to get the newsletters delivered. According to my two sources, Jane and Shelly, and according to inmate’s letters to the editor, newsletters were routinely confiscated, defaced, or destroyed. The reasons for this were complex. Sometimes the newsletters were seized because of their very existence as unsanctioned publications in the correctional facility, but newsletter staff members argued that more often they were undelivered because of the contents. Through the Looking Glass highlighted homophobia within the criminal justice system as well as in society. Additionally, many of the inmates who were featured in the newsletters were battered women who fought back against their abusers and were appealing their cases. Newsletter topics were always controversial, exposing misogynist treatment of female prisoners across the country. Prison officials appeared to try to prevent any communication that was anti-establishment.

Jane explained some of the ways in which the newsletter staff tried to circumvent this type of censorship:

We’d send them out to Purdy and they’d come back to us. Then we started putting them in envelopes and then we brought them into discussion groups. It was the only way we could get them inside; they could not be mailed in. It was painful to learn that that could happen.

Not everybody was lesbian, but it didn't matter to the staff at Purdy. Prisoners receiving newsletters were guilty by association.

Prison officials across the country seemed dedicated to the old style of rehabilitation for women. True to current analysis of corrections philosophy in the 1970s, corrections supervisors were dedicated to "rehabilitating" the female prisoner to fit a heterosexual, mother and homemaker stereotype. In a 1976 excerpt from TTLG, we can see this stereotype affecting prison policy:

Ken Neagle, the new warden at the Federal Prison for Women in Alderson, West Virginia says he will use his authority over 515 female inmates to make them more aware of their femininity. Says Neagle, "I'd like to help women improve their self-image. I'd like to make them more aware of their womanness. I'd like to see more emphasis on the arts, more time devoted to music, painting, and pottery-making and less time to softball and shooting pool.

Currently, there are no women wardens working in the federal prison system. TTLG, Vol. 3, No. 9

Staff of the newsletter felt that the newsletter could be used as an activist tool.

For example, some of the outcomes of prisoner's cases were affected by the publicity that was received through the newsletter. According to Jane, one of the original staffers on the newsletter:

Oh, definitely, we had an impact. I think there were a couple cases that were changed. Alice Key, do you remember Alice Key? That was 1970; she was somebody who was locked up at Purdy who had killed her abusive husband. Gloria was another one. When I was in Purdy, we were all on one row. Yvonne Wanrow—we really pushed her case, too. We worked in coalition with a lot of other girls. We were basically running around trying to get money together and lawyers to defend folks. A lot of times we were trying to recruit attorneys to go into Purdy and do stuff. We were trying to bring everything up and get everybody out at the same time. You know - be supportive for women inside besides putting out money.

Jane pointed out the Wanrow case because it was widely publicized. This trial involved an incident in which a small 5' woman killed a large child-molesting assailant in self-defense. Yvonne's prison sentence was suspended after she entered a plea of guilty to reduced charges of manslaughter and second-degree assault. As a Native American and member of a sovereign Indian nation, Wanrow suffered the traumatic psychological and cultural effects of the history of genocide against her people. The unresponsiveness of the police to the requests for protection from the child molester Wesler was typical of their response to Indian people, as was the court's persistent prosecution of the case. Many supporters clearly saw the need to protest this racist treatment and the newsletters were used for this purpose.

The seven-year battle of Yvonne Wanrow culminated in victory on April 26, 1979. Since 1972, Yvonne has faced charges of second-degree murder and first-degree assault for fatally shooting William Wesler, a child molester, and wounding his companion, David Kelly. On April 26, Judge Harold Clark of Spokane WA suspended the prison sentence against her after she entered a plea of guilty to reduced charges of manslaughter and second-degree assault. This means that Yvonne will not have to face re-trial or imprisonment.

Wanrow and her attorneys struggled for seven years in trials and appeals. By the time her second trial was drawing near, messages of support were coming from all over the world, from countries such as Japan, Sweden, Germany, Russia, and Norway in a show of international solidarity for Yvonne as a Native American woman. In an op-ed article dated June 1979, the editors summarized her case in this way:

Yvonne's freedom is directly related to the support she has received over the years through the newsletter, Through the Looking Glass and from other legal support groups. Her case was recognized as an



example of women being denied the right to defend themselves and their children. This is, unfortunately, not uncommon in this country; male violence against women occurs daily, reflected in increasing numbers of rapes and battered women. Yvonne and many other women, forced to fight back, are then subjected to the further violence of prosecution by the legal system. Yvonne and her supporters have been very conscious that victory for Yvonne Swan Wanrow is a victory for other women.

Yvonne spoke out not only about her own case, but in support of others in similar positions. As a result people responded throughout her long struggle. By the time her second trial was drawing near, messages of support were coming from all over the world, from countries such as Japan, Sweden, Germany, Russia, and Norway in a show of international solidarity for Yvonne as a Native American woman.

In the legal world, all people will refer to the “Wanrow Instruction,”<sup>18</sup> a January 7, 1977 document with now compels cross-country courts to consider a woman’s perception of the situation when she is defending herself in court with self-defense as her defense. This victory alone has moved the country forward in the equal rights struggle.

The “Wanrow Instruction” is a landmark legal precedent that has already been successfully used by many other women in self-defense cases. It came out of one of Yvonne’s appeals to the Washington State Supreme Court, noting that the jury should have been instructed to consider Yvonne’s position at the time of the event, including how she felt as a woman. It was incorrect to assume that a 5’4” woman with a cast on her leg and using a crutch must, under the law, somehow repel an assault by a 6’2” intoxicated man without employing weapons in her defense.

Twenty-five years later, in our interview, Jane was of the opinion that the newsletter had a powerful impact on prisoners:

We changed that case because we got people interested. That’s the thing. If people don’t know about your case, you don’t stand a chance-you’re gonna rot in jail. Unless somebody raises money, you’re gonna rot in jail.

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<sup>18</sup> State v. Wanrow, No. 43949, SUPREME COURT OF WASHINGTON, 88 Wn.2d 221:559 P.2d 548; 1977 Wash. LEXIS 750, January 7, 1977, Petition for Rehearing Denied April 5, 1977.

Jane spoke of the activist work she and her group did, and pointed out that the group stuck to their original philosophy until the end.

I think the most important thing were the women inside, and giving them an open forum through the newsletter. A lot of people had their political agenda, and I was glad everybody could say, “That’s my political agenda, let’s see what yours is.” The newsletters allowed that to happen. I was pretty satisfied that they continued to do that.

I used to go out to Purdy in the beginning of the newsletter to visit and talk. Let the women know we cared about them. Well, I got blacklisted from going out there after Bo [Brown] got arrested, after the George Jackson Brigade. I couldn’t go out there anymore. So I was on the blacklist.

Asking Jane to look back over the years, I wanted to know if there were any disappointments about the newsletter. This was her reply:

Oh, there are lots. There’s a long list. Shelly was one. She broke my heart all the time. I know it’s not my fault because you can’t make anybody do anything. But I sure wish we could have helped her out of the cycle of going in and out because of drugs.

### **The Poetry of Women Prisoners Published in Through the Looking Glass**

“That’s three faults, Kitty, and you’ve not been punished for any of them yet. You know I’m saving up all your punishments for Wednesday week – ‘Suppose they had saved up all my punishments!’ She went on, talking more to herself than the kitten. ‘What would they do at the end of a year? I should be sent to prison, I suppose, when the day came— TTLG, Vol. 2, No. 4, from Alice in Wonderland

Besides contributing to the newsletter through updates about prison conditions, and letters to the editor, women prisoners had all made the effort from inside a prison to send their messages to the outside world during a time in our history when society’s focus was on the end of the Vietnam War, Nixon, Watergate, and ridding the country of “welfare queens” and “dope fiends.” Who was even thinking about women in prison? In some circles and communities, gay liberation was

coalescing, feminism was moving from the streets to the halls of academia, and race relations came inside out of the rain through affirmative action policies. But what were the women in prison saying about their incarcerations?

In order to explore these conversations, we must first look at social relations in prison as a context for knowing the prison writer. Sociologist Erving Goffman coined the underlife concept in his study of total institutions, Asylums (1961). Goffman's work focused on mental institutions. The concept of underlife was later resurrected in 1987 by author and writing teacher Robert Brooke in the essay "Underlife and Writing Instruction" to demonstrate how students in the writing classroom create and perform identities which undercut those prescribed by the educational system. Using Goffman's thesis that it is not the individual's behaviors that form him/her as inmate or patient, but the pressures and tectonics of the institution itself, Brooke writes that Goffman's definition of underlife fits three assumptions about social interaction: First, a person's identity is assumed to be a function of social interaction. Second, social interaction is assumed to be a system of information games. Third, social organizations are assumed to provide roles for individuals that imply certain kinds of identities. (Brooke 96).

Forms of underlife may include positive ways in which prisoners demonstrate autonomy and individuality. Within prison, the decision to be a writer, or at least letting anyone else know that you are writing or in a writing class, is in itself a form of underlife. Not only is the prisoner author on the periphery of society by residence in prison, he is also on the periphery of prison society by being identified as a writer.

The institution's expectations are for the inmate to perform the role of inmate, not the role of writer, unless in prison-sanctioned programs.

If we follow Goffman's and Brooke's theories of social interactions, we see that all of the prison writing in this study placed the writer at the outer edges of prison culture. The willingness to complicate their own lives, to suffer the scrutiny of their captors and peers, is evidence of how powerful the urge to create meaning actually was. In this collection of prison narratives and poetry from Through the Looking Glass, the theme of women's relationships and social interactions with the institution of prison itself, friends, and relatives and other inmates make up the largest number of writings in the collection.

### **Medusa**

Listen, I'm telling you, it's  
Every bit as ugly as you think it is.  
I've seen it, I've stared at it, it  
Tears your stomach out of you.  
Scream, you claw the air, the pain  
Holds on, listen,  
You're not imagining too much; you're  
Not imagining anything, believe me, it  
Burns your face off with its smile.  
You scream, believe me, you  
Scream. You run, you cry.  
But the legends are wrong.  
It is those who do not look  
Who turn to stone.

- Karen Lindsay TTLG, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1977.

In "Medusa," Lindsay speaks to another inmate about the deadening effects of prison, using the Medusa metaphor to convey the lasting impact of incarceration. Lindsay speaks to another through the poem, gives advice, but also acknowledges reality in

prison. Lindsay denies the Medusa myth by blaming those who do not look at women in prison. These will be the citizens immobilized for eternity.

In Lisabeth Anaskan's next two poems, her observations are listed:

### **P-R-I-S-O-N IS**

Prison is a wall of ignorance and hatred in the steel bars of confinement.  
Prison is a long or short divorce from liquor, drugs and illegal enterprises.  
Prison is not something you buy in the store, but Prison is a package of time.  
Prison is a locked cage of darkness.  
Prison is a mist of hostility.  
Prison is solitude and broken dreams.  
Prison is wet tears of loneliness.  
Prison is no bottle of wine and roses.  
Prison is not what God created.  
Prison is finding no key to freedom 'til the end of your time.  
Prison is learning the art of criminality.  
Prison is not rehabilitation unless you want to be rehabilitated.  
Prison is no mail from your friend, and  
Prison is where you find out who your friends are.  
Prison is here today and will be here tomorrow, maybe forever...

She defines some of what prison is and some of what prison isn't for the reader, drawing heavily on negative popular impressions of incarceration: steel bars, darkness, hostility, a package of time, and rehabilitation.

### **S-E-G-R-E-G-A-T-I-O-N IS**

Segregation is golden rays of resentment.  
Segregation is locked doors and peaceful, cold quietness.  
Segregation is a throne of dying feelings.  
Segregation is lonely music with a tune of sadness.  
Segregation is raving madness.  
Segregation is long nights and dreams of no dream.  
Segregation is twelve hours of restless boredom and  
Segregation is another twelve hours of sleepless sleep.  
Segregation is being alone together.  
Segregation is not a friend of mine.

Lisabeth Anaskan, TTLG, Vol. 2, No. 9, 1977.

Here, Anaskan describes with pointed emphasis just how isolating and uncomfortable the punishment of segregation can be.

**#Numbers#**

I am a number  
nothing more  
page #389  
in your text on “crime  
and punishment”  
case #24  
of your course  
in abnormal Psychology  
and chapter #11  
in your books on  
Sexual Behavior.

I am a number  
Thousands strong  
Initiative 13  
On your petitions to Congress  
#473-70-7202  
according to your offices  
of Social Security  
and file #5 on the judges court docket

I cross out numbers  
As days while  
Waiting to become #246805  
In your penitentiary  
For the second time  
Since ‘75

The number of my year –  
the eternity plus 23  
the number of my dream-  
infinity plus freedom-

I am a number  
nothing  
thousands strong...even so  
I am a number called womyn  
and one you can count on  
to stand proud  
despite your dehumanizing

numberings  
for millenniums to come.

Anonymous, TTLG, Vol. 3, No. 8, 1978.

Female prisoners' poetry often explores the dialectic of insider/outsider within the life of a prisoner. In #Numbers#, this writer juxtaposes the insiders' understanding of numbers with the outsiders' *use* of numbers to control and coerce the prisoner. This positioning serves to highlight the prisoner's need to use the "master's tools"<sup>19</sup> to try to gain some power over an omnipotent system.

Poetry sometimes serves to clarify the writer's feelings. It often focuses thoughts when nothing else can. Conversations can ramble, letters can enable writers to be vague, but the sheer form of poetry allows a writer to hone in, and narrow down a piece of writing to bare bones. A poem can be a powerful distillation of feelings and experiences.

### **Damned**

When you brought me here to die,  
I damned your soul  
Until I discovered that you had none.  
As you ripped out my heart, day after day,  
I cursed you in my sleep  
And cried without crying-  
Out—what I wished to.  
And when my mother died &  
You would not even let me go to see her.  
And when my lover wrote no more  
But you would not let me call -  
And when my child was hurt  
And I could not comfort her  
I said to myself,  
Bitch, you are stronger than they are.  
You will survive.

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<sup>19</sup> from Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in Sister Outsider.

- Suzan Stuart, TTLG, Vol. 2, No. 7, 1977.

For writer Suzan Stuart, the emotional oppression she feels turns to sheer fury, fueling an inner strength to survive.

### **Anger**

Anger is the stuff that stiffens my spine  
Raises my head, and brings forth  
All my defiant determination.  
It brings on needling words  
To probe at wounds  
That I have made.  
Anger brings on all my cunning  
And breeds a discomfoting stare.  
Anger can diminish to  
A screaming, weeping wretch,  
Despising all who look at me.  
This is the anger bred of teasing.  
Anger can lift my chin  
And straighten my back  
And make my mind work  
As it has never before worked,  
And this is the anger bred from pride.

Melissa A. Dergel, TTLG, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1981.

Emotions run high in prison. The lack of recreational outlets, the dearth of programs to deal with anxiety, anger, sadness, loss, or loneliness creates an excess of subjects for personal writing for those who choose to write.

Dergel's poem "Anger," gives the reader a glimpse into the world of a woman fighting to maintain her pride.

### **Time**

I ache for my freedom  
My nostrils flare and I sense the vileness  
That twist these cell bars  
I tune in...I tune out.  
Time gets no easier  
Time heals no historical events



Old larcenies  
Old lies  
Old mistakes...are all magnified  
Festering over like the open-unkempt sores that they are  
Nothing is forgotten  
Nothing is forgiven  
Nothing is gained  
...except time...

- Yasmeen Jamal, TTLG, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1985.

Jamal's "Time" takes up an old topic in prison narratives, "doing time," however the writer delivers the poem with a new freshness.

Nothing ever changes in a prison  
The convicts are as old as time  
Their agelessness is offset only  
By the embalmed air of the keepers.

- Norma Stafford, TTLG, Vol. 2, No. 7, 1977.

Norma Stafford is a federal prisoner who has written poetry during her long incarceration. Through the Looking Glass poetry and prison narratives were always directly related to issues that female prisoners experienced. The words of encouragement and the nakedness of the poetry kept many prisoners around the country from feeling alone in their thoughts and experiences. Prisoners from all over the country contributed to the newsletter, discussing their situations, their need for better medical or mental health services, and simply making their attempts to reach out to others for acknowledgment and friendship. Sharing experiences through the newsletter format substituted for more formal relationships or friendships, but were no less meaningful. The following essay, "Notes from a Lifer" was one writer's advice to others across the country. "Notes from a Lifer" was reprinted in Through

the Looking Glass from a book of poetry published by women incarcerated at Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. A lifer is a prisoner who is serving a life sentence, with no hope of parole.

I was in my early twenties when I received my life sentence. Now I'm in my thirties and I seldom see my children and family. I miss the warmth and love we shared. It's so hard to find that kind of sincere warmth in prison. I wonder about my mother – how she is, what she's doing – how I can't be with her when she's not feeling well.

I live from day to day now, hoping something will break for me. But I'm not an up-beat person, like some of the other women with life sentences, because I know that politics is a hard nut to crack these days. Even though I pray, I'm still doubtful. It really is hard for me; I am jealous and envious of those who leave the facility. Still I'm displeased when someone returns.

Freedom is important to me; seeing a movie is important; dressing up is important to me. I feel religion is essential; I just sit back sometimes and wonder what I would be doing today if I were free. I wonder, too, will I die in prison? Will my family ever forgive me?

TTLG, Vol. 7. No. 5, 1982.

Given the location of Purdy Correctional Institution, in the Northwest area of the United States, the number of American Indians in prison during the newsletter's publishing run was noteworthy. Luana Ross's study of Native American women incarcerated in the Women's Correctional Center in Montana argues "prisons, as employed by the Euro-American system, operate to keep Native Americans in a colonial situation." She points out that the native people are vastly over represented in the country's federal and state prisons. In Montana, where she did her research, they constituted 6 percent of the general population, but 17.3 percent of the imprisoned population. Native women are even more disproportionately present in Montana's prison system. They constitute 25 percent of all women imprisoned by the

state.<sup>20</sup> Writings by Native American women provide additional insights into the cultural concerns of women of color in prison.

### **Untitled**

They jail us for keeping our secrets  
They think  
They are wrong  
We refuse to tell them  
We have no secrets  
Listen to the wind  
In the poplar trees.  
Watch the moon  
Chart her waxing and waning.  
Ask the moon anything you want  
Watch from cover  
Sprouts pushing through snow  
Against all odds  
You will know  
All there is to know about our goals,  
Tactics  
Strategy  
And power supply.  
It is they who have secrets, who perform unnatural acts in darkness –  
Not the darkness of night, our friend  
Or of death, our teacher  
The darkness of nothing.  
The darkness that puts out light  
If we let it.  
It is they who are afraid of shadows  
Because to make a shadow  
You must be touched by light.

- June Blue Spruce, TTLG, Vol. 1, No. 7, 1976.

Poetry written by American Indian prisoners infuses the native traditions of reverence and respect for nature with the realities of prison culture. June Blue Spruce described the power available to women who are prisoners to stand tall in the face of the darkness of prison, where identities are easily ignored or erased.

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<sup>20</sup> See Ross, Luana, Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998.

## **Women in Prison: “All my defiant determination”**

Much of prison life is simplified and without embellishments. Walls are painted a standard, industrial egg-shell white. Floors are gray or burgundy to disguise dirt and grime. Uniforms are standard issue; they come in light blue, orange, or navy blue, blending a variety of body sizes into one splash of color. Prisoners try not to be unique; standing out in the crowd invites trouble, from both other inmates and staff. Prison life is life in the depths of extremes. The room is either very brightly lit or pitch black. The food is either good or bad. One is either sick or well; good or bad. A room, a corridor, an office is either in bounds or out of bounds for passage.

### **I Feel**

Being with you I am something;  
Without you I am nothing.  
Seeing you gives me sight-  
Without sight I am blind.  
Smiling towards you expresses happiness and love-  
Without smiling I express sadness and hatred.  
Happiness makes me feel high-  
Without highness I am depressed, and feel low.  
When I am depressed I feel small-  
And hate the world around me.  
When I am happy I feel big-  
And love the world around me.  
With the expressions I have  
expressed on this paper-  
See how this can change your  
Feeling of life?

- Dorothy Day TTLG, Vol. 4, No. 6, 1979.

“I Feel” by Dorothy Day, uses simple language to discuss emotions of relationships, but her words have a deeper meaning. They reflect the dichotomies of incarceration, the highs and lows that each prisoner must manage every day of her life

inside. This poem's simplicity amplifies the complexity of being locked up. In prison, solitude and loneliness often take a great toll on women who would otherwise be involved in other activities. Poetry often plays an important role in containing this loneliness or of defining it so that it can be tamed.

### **Untitled**

Through bloodshot eyes from sleepless nights,  
I sit and stare at big square lights  
The clanging doors mean a new one is here,  
Up goes my hope that turns to fear.  
I don't quite know what it is I fear  
My feet hit cement, down falls a tear  
I wonder why mother should cross my mind,  
Oh, god, how I wish my thoughts would unwind.  
As I feel myself slowly falling asleep,  
In my mind my children I keep.  
I start to cry and my heart starts to ache,  
Before I feel sleep once again I'm awake.

- Doris Mace TTLG, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1980.

Mace's poem charts the way in which activities on a prison tier or hallway can become triggers for memories.

### **Day By Day**

Another day but not a dollar gained  
Just sitting around playing the systems game.  
Card playing, crocheting and reading books  
On visiting days we put on our best looks.  
The radio, T.V., and record player helps  
But the telephone and mail calls sure makes you melt  
Some faces wear smiles and some wear frowns  
You should see some of these chicks really get down.  
Now the police here, they ain't so bad  
But some of them know how to get a bitch mad  
This I know, do go both ways  
Cause some of these chicks, man, the things being said  
We all get in a bag from time to time  
There's always someone to work with your mind  
Take the meds for instance, they'll drop you a pile

It'll calm you down slowly and you think only of thrills  
So you see, the systems really got the best hand, we're only  
Sitting in on their big time game.

- Amanda, TTLG, Vol. 5, No 5, 1980.

For many female prisoners, the monotonous rhythm of each day can reveal a cleverly disguised plan of power. The game-playing for Amanda appears to be a two-way street, with each prisoner and each guard drumming out a rhythm of power and control.

Prison writing can also enable a woman to explain to the reader "the why" of her circumstances.

### **Women in Need**

Hey judge why do you think I stole  
That bread and cheese  
Don't you know that food stamps and welfare aren't enough  
I have two hungry children to feed  
Hey judge what do you know about women in need  
Are you afraid of my anger  
Are you afraid of my rage  
Instead of dealing with my needs and emotions  
You want to lock me in a cage.  
Hey sister, why do you think I knock you upside your head  
You ignored my pain for too long  
I know I was wrong  
But hey you ain't right to  
Call the police isn't there any other way  
To stop a fight?

- Zaum, TTLG, Vol. 7, No.1, 1982.

"Women in Need," published in 1982, delivers a direct message to the writer's judge, perhaps saying things that could not have been said in court. This poem and others like it raise critical issues about the role of women as caregivers in society and when poverty is seen as the crime. The writer sends a message about her feelings. By doing

so, she moves the issue of punishment for being female and poor to a more public level for consideration.

### **Woman in Chains**

Taken away...caged  
Woman in pain  
They laugh ... who cares  
Right this way  
Woman in pairs  
With steel bracelets  
Don't they look pretty?  
Locked together  
Woman insane  
For fighting the right  
To survive in peace  
To live outside  
Woman with pity  
Who hurt themselves  
With slashes of blood  
Crying for help  
Woman with pride  
Who fight this shit  
Woman that love  
Hang on tight  
Woman gone crazy  
Walls so close  
They suffocate  
Women torn in two  
Half in here...  
Half with you  
Woman with hope  
All in veins  
Collapsed  
From shooting dope  
Woman with dreams  
Forget the pain  
Live in peace  
And women with all  
You hear  
Remember we are here  
In prisons of gray  
And we will never  
Never ... stop the fight

- Audrey Feliks, TTLG, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1984.

“Women in Chains,” describes women with emotion in prison. However, Feliks’ poem is more than a list, it serves to show the reader some of the motivation behind why women commit crimes. Within the pace and structure of the poem, the reader can hear the shuffling and marching of women chained and captive. Drawing the reader into the scene, Feliks writes: “Half in here...Half with you” (26-27). She thus involves the reader directly in the situation by pointing out the split worlds prisoners must exist in. The technique has a riveting effect, forcing the reader to acknowledge their “outsider” status in freedom.

Women prisoners reach out beyond the bars to communicate to the outside world. Through poetry, they describe, define, explain, acknowledge, and introduce themselves to the free world. Sometimes they ask for forgiveness, sometimes they defend themselves and their actions, sometimes they ask for the reader’s help.

### **Asking for Ruthie**

You know her hustle  
You know her white legs  
flicker among headlights  
And her eyes pick up the wind  
while the fast hassle of living  
ticks off her days  
you know her ways

you know her hustle  
you know her lonely pockets  
lined with tricks  
turned and forgotten  
the men like mice hide  
under her mind  
lumpy, bigeyed  
you know her pride



you know her blonde arms cut  
by broken nickels in  
hotel rooms and by razors of  
summer lightning on the road  
but you know the wizard  
highway, no resisting so  
she moves, she is forever missing

get her a stopping place  
before the night slides dirty  
fingers under her eyelids and  
the weight of much bad kissing  
breaks that ricepaper face

sun cover her, earth  
make love to Ruthie  
stake her to hot lunches in the wheat fields  
make bundles of purple ravens  
fly out in formation, over her eyes  
and let her newest lovers  
be gentle as women  
and longer lasting

In some poetry, women write about others so they don't have to write about themselves. "Asking for Ruthie" is a powerful poem about a female prostitute, an addict on the streets. Written "on the outside" by lesbian poet Judy Grahn between 1964 and 1970, the poem was reprinted in TTLG in 1976. More than a poem, this piece can be read as a prayer for Ruthie and for all inmates.

### **Poetry Reveals Social Structures Inside Prison**

Social structure may take the form of various support systems consistent with relationships women knew on the outside. Women bond with other women, forming friendships, lesbian alliances, or "same-sex relationships," to use ethnographer Barbara Owen's term for prisoners' intimate bonding that may or not be sexual. Generally, homosexual contact in male institutions tends to be coercive and power-

oriented, whereas women's alliances often have complex origins, including the need for affection and support.<sup>21</sup> These qualities are reflected in prison poetry.

Yvonne Wanrow fought for years to obtain a fair sentence and throughout those trying times, she looked to her Native American heritage to sustain her in her journey.

### **For My People's Sake**

Send me a dream  
Filled with wisdom  
For my people's sake;  
Let me sip from the gourd of courage  
To face the challenges  
For my people's sake;  
Let me find youth in spirit  
To gather roots  
For my people's sake;  
Let me witness the birth  
Of freedom  
For my people's sake;  
And for my sake,  
Let me live  
And grow  
And learn  
Alone in peace yet together  
With my family,  
My way.

- Yvonne Wanrow, TTLG, Vol.4, No. 2, 1979.

Wanrow's words, in a prayer-like rhythm, ask for simple and peaceful solitude.

### **Untitled**

My body  
A prison cell. I was taught to be  
My own guard, to keep myself

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<sup>21</sup> See Bowker, "Gender Differences in Prisoner Subcultures," p. 414, in Woman and Crime in America, ed. Lee H. Bowker (New York: Macmillan, 1981); and Giallombardo, p. 141 for early discussion of lesbian relationships in prison. See Dominik Morgan, "Restricted Love," in Breaking the Rules: Women in Prison and Feminist Therapy, 75-84, for a more recent discussion by a prisoner of the complexity of "prison homosexuality as seen from the inside."

In isolation,  
Alone and afraid,  
Powerless.  
The prison is not of my making.  
Those who lock me up  
Would have thought I choose to be here-  
Voluntarily committed.  
They have made my body into a cage,  
My home an exercise yard,  
My life, a maze to run like a rat for food.

I have weapons.  
I can see, I can think,  
I love women, love myself,  
Join with others to unlock, to make  
revolution. I survive, I am learning  
to build and to destroy  
All are crimes  
To my keepers.

Those of us still on this side of their walls,  
Free to come and go they say,  
They lock us in our bodies,  
Our jobs, our fears and hates.

Cell by cell, we unlock.

They can't imprison  
Our power. Slowly, one by one,  
We lock ourselves  
Together.

They never will have  
The key to us.

- Anon, TTLG, Vol. 2, No. 6, 1977.

This poem evokes an eloquent movement between and through walls that confine women, both inside the prison walls and outside. Using the body as the vehicle, the writer travels into the self and then out into the world, to view the restrictions she feels in society.

The following poem was written by Judy Grahn and reprinted in the newsletter. Her message speaks to women in prison from the political perspective of one on the outside.

**The woman in three pieces – one**

By Judy Grahn

She said she was unhappy and they said they would take care of her. She said she needed love and so they raped her and then she wanted to be alone. They locked her into a tiny cell with one tiny window and took away her clothes, turning off all the lights as they left. After a long while they came back and she said, "It's so dark," so they shined a very bright light into her face and she said, "I don't like that." "What's the matter," they said and she said, "There is nothing to eat, couldn't you please give me some water" so they brought a hose and sprayed her hard with water. "Are you happy now?" they said and she answered, "Please I'm so very cold, my bones ache and I shiver all the time." So they brought huge piles of sticks and newspaper and built a very large fire in her cell. She squeezed her body out of the window and she fell a great distance and was killed. "The trouble with people like her," they said later "is that no matter how hard you try to please them, they are never satisfied."<sup>22</sup>

My aim in this chapter has been to examine the multiple voices found in the writing in the TTLG newsletters. Inside the pages of the newsletter, prisoners reveal themselves to the readers, define their struggles, face their fears, and begin a healing process through writing. These poems lend themselves to reflection on an overall more specific effort of self-definition as women writers in prison. What individual writers felt comfortable saying, what view of a community they could present through their writing, how much pain should be revealed in a poem, were all entwined in the production of the newsletter itself.

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<sup>22</sup> See Grahn, Judy. The Work of a Common Woman. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1978.

### Chapter 3 Inside Out: ‘It’s A Matter of Your Own Survival’

My soul careens off cell walls  
Wails till pain tires  
And the pale moon of memory  
Appears to call me home. Marilyn Buck, July 1990<sup>23</sup>

In this chapter we will shift our focus from prison newsletters to the life history of a woman prisoner who wrote for Through the Looking Glass. We will consider her life history narrative as she told it to me and a friend, her interview responses, and some of her prison writing. As we shall see, her powerful story takes us deeply into the prison experience and the importance of narrative.

This chapter evolved through my efforts to locate members from the political space in which the newsletter Through the Looking Glass emerged. In order to contextualize the written material published in that newsletter, it is important to frame the material within the lives of the women writers themselves. The writings in this newsletter suggest an active collaboration through writing among prisoners, ex-prisoners, activists and feminists on the outside. Developing out of this complex cultural dynamic, I discovered a remarkable milieu of collective artistry and advocacy. In this chapter, connections and similarities between the orientations of these political and personal spaces will surface to guide our understanding of the key social locations of women prisoners and free writers in my research study.

In my search for members of the production team of Through the Looking Glass, I began wondering if it might be possible to meet a former prison writer, someone who had contributed to the newsletter. One phone call led to another, and

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<sup>23</sup> From Buck, Marilyn, “Moon Bereft” from Rescue the Word, Friends of Marilyn Buck c/o LSPC: San Francisco, CA, 2001.

connections were made. I was grateful for answers to my questions. I collected data through a common research strategy known as the snowball technique, in which one person refers me to another person and so on. I also placed classified ads in the radical feminist news journal Off Our Backs, The Lesbian Review of Books, The Women's Review of Books, The Washington Blade, Sapphire Ink, Gay Community News in Boston, Seattle Gay News, and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Other probes were sent out to a wide variety of email listservs: AmSTUDY, WMST, Prison Legal News, The Lesbian Resource Center, the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York and my messages in turn were cross-posted- a way of forwarding a message to other related lists.

During one of my Internet searches, someone suggested that I post my query on the website "Out of Control: Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners." So I did. My notice looked like this:

For doctoral research on women's prison narratives in the U.S. during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I am trying to locate any women who have ever been affiliated with the women and children's newsletter "Through the Looking Glass." It appears to have been published from 1976 to 1985 in the Seattle, WA area. The core group of editors was connected with the Gay and Lesbian community there. I'm interested in both activist women on the "outside" and women who made contributions to the newsletter from the "inside. If you were in any way affiliated with the newsletter, please get in touch.

A few weeks later, a woman named "Bo" called me and said she was responding to my email. I was happily surprised and started asking questions about the newsletter. We talked again a few days later. It turned out that Bo Brown is a white lesbian activist, an ex-prisoner, and a convicted felon. Her given name is Rita D. Brown. She served eight years in federal prison after being convicted for a

politically motivated bank robbery in 1978 as part of the George Jackson Brigade (GJB). The Brigade is named after black revolutionary prisoner (and author of Soledad Brother) George Jackson. Prison guards killed Jackson in an alleged escape attempt from San Quentin Prison.

The Brigade consisted of mostly ex-convicts and working class people who banded together in Seattle in the early 1970s to support the massive movement for social change that had developed over the previous decade around the civil rights and anti-war movements. True to the climate of the times, the Brigade took extreme actions that they believed would hasten the revolution many thought was just around the corner. Their activities put Brown and others on the FBI's "most wanted" list and rocked the streets of Seattle. I learned all of this after a few phone conversations with Bo who is still, after twenty-five years, very enthusiastic about prisoner's rights. Her arrest and court case was followed in the newsletter and she posted several letters from prison to readers there. She passed on the names and phone numbers of several key members of TTLG and I started making phone calls.

In this way, I began a correspondence with Jane Potter, a key figure in the newsletter and the political group that extended support to incarcerated women twenty-five years ago at the Purdy Treatment Center for Women, outside of Seattle WA. Jane, as noted in the previous chapter, is now a 54 year-old white lesbian who makes her living as electrical engineer. Her dirty blond hair is cut short and stands straight up in a crew cut fashion. Jane laughs easily and has a gentle personality. In November 1999, I was in Seattle, WA at the National American Studies Association Annual Conference giving a paper on "Women in Prison." The trip enabled me to set

up an interview with Jane to discuss the prison activist culture in Seattle, WA during the days when TTLG was being published and distributed to both insiders and outsiders interested in women's prison reform. After several phone calls, we decided to meet at the Seattle Sheraton Hotel one evening. Jane agreed to try and bring some other "old timers" involved in the project. I prepared for the interview with fresh batteries, AC adapters, notes, questions and a lot of excitement. As usual, it was a rainy night in Seattle when we met in the lobby. Jane brought along just one other woman. Much to my surprise, it was Shelly Baker, a frequent writer for TTLG, and I was grateful that she could contribute to the interview.

In this chapter, I present Shelly's oral narrative with a focus on her prison experiences. She takes us with her from early childhood to mid-life, always revolving around the prison facility as central to her as a "home place." In this chapter I will present and interpret Shelly's oral life history as a case study of a woman prison writer. Shelly's race, class, sexuality and previous experiences with trauma make the characteristics of her life in the criminal justice system typical of those found among many women prisoners. Using a life history approach, this chapter will trace her narrative through three major social locations asking who was this writer, what was the social context of her world, and what does she see for herself now?

Shelly is a white lesbian, poor, childless, ex-prisoner now in her mid-forties who has taken some college coursework. Her family background generally fits the Bureau of Justice Statistics profile for a woman who enters the criminal justice system at a young age. As we shall see, Shelly enters the juvenile justice system at



the age of fourteen. While incarcerated for nearly 18 years, her life story in many ways illustrates the world of the “typical” female inmate. In other ways, Shelly, like each woman prisoner is a unique individual with her own human story. In the end, once released from prison, Shelly experiences a culture crisis similar to the experiences of many other re-entry women.

### **Establishing Our Relationships to the Community of Prison Activists**

I met Shelly and Jane at the Seattle Sheraton that rainy night; we exchanged introductions, and decided to go up to my hotel room to talk. The lounge area was too crowded, and as I learned later, it was not exactly the spot my subjects had in mind for reminiscing about their days “on the inside.” Once inside the room, Jane and Shelly sat around a small table, pulled out a 2-liter bottle of Coca Cola and a fifth of Bacardi Rum. Shelly took the ice bucket, went down the hall to the ice machine and returned to fill their glasses. There was goodhearted kidding about the rum Cokes, but this ritual gave me a clue as to the sensitive nature of the discussion we were entering into. It was clear that in order to remember and re-tell their incarceration stories, they designed the social bonding that “having a drink” can create among friends. Quickly we became acquainted and, in true “Alice in Wonderland” fashion, we traveled back in time, “Through the Looking Glass.”

At first, the two wanted to know more about me; why I was doing this project, and why I wanted to talk with them in particular. Most of my interactions with both prisoners and ex-prisoners have started with these questions and I know that these are important questions not only for the basic answers I supply, but because I must be checked out, my trustworthiness and intentions needed to be evaluated. If any

woman who has been in the prison system feels at all used, disrespected, endangered, or taken advantage of, she would immediately stop the interview and have nothing more to say to me. However, given my experience, I was quite comfortable explaining myself. I said:

For years I've concentrated my work on battered women who were imprisoned for assaulting or killing their batterers. During my research, I interviewed women who had been recently released from prison in Maryland. There were twelve women in Maryland that got out with "time served," and I started learning and reading more about women in prison. I really felt I needed to expand the discussion about women in prison because there aren't many people who are talking about it. And there certainly aren't very many people in academia who are writing or teaching about it. The criminal justice people talk a lot about men who are in prison, but nobody pays any attention to what's going on for women.

I went on to explain my philosophy about conducting a research project on such personal and private issues for women:

I am particularly interested in issues surrounding women's voice and the way the stories about what happens in prison, how being incarcerated affects your family, your life, your sense of who you are. I also knew that a lot of women who are in prisons and jails are abused and battered. There are a lot of social issues, there are a lot of economic issues, and there are a lot of pressures. People get involved in all kinds of things and make mistakes and then end up being incarcerated. So I called the chaplain's office at the District of Columbia's Detention Center. So for a year and a half, every Wednesday I went to the D.C. jail and I would go to the cellblock to recruit women for my creative writing class.

After our introductions and my interviewees had a drink or two, Shelly said to me, "So what kind of stuff would you like to know because I'm ready to talk." Her approach from start to finish was straightforward and to the point. One of the most important questions that I wanted Shelly to address was what it meant to write in

prison. But first, I wanted to understand the context of this by having her tell me her life story.

### **Pre-prison Experiences: A Profile**

As we will see, Shelly's life history resembles that of many female prisoners in that she learned from a young age that she was not loved. She also experienced both physical and sexual abuse as a child and teenager. Our conversation took its start when I asked her about her childhood and painful memories came to the surface. She feels she has done wrong in her life; she also knows she has been severely wronged:

I have paid my dues. Really and truly. I have exceeded the payment on my dues for my wrongdoings. And I did wrong. The rest of my life I am gonna have to repair the careless, needless, physical acts of violence—verbal acts of violence. Just like the spiritual, emotional acts of violence against me by the people who were supposed to be in charge of me. I grew up, they took me out of my home for the things that my stepfather did to me, and they did those things to me, the very same things to me, throughout the whole period of my incarceration.

Shelly's thoughts focused on her childhood, where she experienced a great deal of pain, confusion, and trauma:

I came from Kansas you know. We transferred up here from Boeing, when I was in fifth grade. I grew up in a neighborhood—I grew up in an exclusively—well I grew up in prison but before I went to prison from my first years to about 12 years old, I grew up in a middle class all white [community]—in fact, I had never seen a person of color until I went to the Alabama Department of Corrections. And my mother and stepfather were well respected; they kept up with the Joneses outwardly. Nice home in a nice neighborhood. But behind closed doors, once you got inside that house, all the outside trappings were really great. They had respect in the neighborhood and all, but inside that house, it was like two different worlds. They were really not what they appeared to be outwardly. They were highly functioning people, but extremely dysfunctional emotionally. My mother was just out- and out - nuts. She did a stint in a mental hospital. I didn't know that back then, but—and you know my stepfather was the most

masochistic thing, and no one knew anything. We had a large family. There was never any food in the cupboards, it was all [an] outward [good appearance] for the neighbors. The lawn was kept up and the house was nice. In fact, my stepfather was a master at fixing, or building anything. But he was a son of a bitch as a human being. I don't think he *was* a human being. But they had respect [in our community]. She was an Eastern Star mother and he was a Mason.

This description of her family reveals what the community saw:

My stepfather worked for Boeing; they manufacture airplanes. He was my mother's third, no, her fourth husband. So he came in and there were all these kids from different husbands and he took all that on. Then he moved us all out here, and that was the best thing he could have done. I think I would have died if I had to stay in Kansas. But when we moved out here it was a different culture and things were a little bit not as hidden for them. I got the courage to start running away because back then in Kansas it was real strict. It was a real teeny town and it was mostly wheat fields. One church - a Methodist church - everyone was Methodist. They were like the solid rocks in this community. People would say, "You know, look at the kids, look at what they've got to put up with."

The family eventually moved to the Seattle area and with this move, Shelly's life changed.

No one talked about nothing and so that's what happened when we moved out here. Something clicked in me and all of a sudden I realized I could run from this motherf---r. Not when he was standing there because he could always catch me, but when he went somewhere, I could go. I started doing that, but they kept returning me to my home. The police would drop me off at the end of the driveway, and that was the longest walk, man. I would get to that door, and they were standing right inside waiting for me. But there came a time when they picked me up and they thought they were gonna scare me. They put me in the Auburn jail for adults. I remember there was this long corridor there and they put me in behind this barred door. They shut out all the lights and you know what I thought, I want to live here! When my stepfather came to get me, I had a little bit of an attitude—it was my first time standing up to him. I had a big pin in my back pocket; I pulled it out and I backed up to the back of the cell. He said, "come on, get out of there." He said, "I'm gonna come in there and get you, you know what that means." And I stood up to him—well I mean I had little rebellions—but then I thought, I'm gonna die for this, standing up. He came in, and he got me down and I wrestled him and

everything and the cop gave him his handcuffs and he handcuffed me behind the back and took me home. He handcuffed me to the bed on the floor.

As she was telling us this story, and I was imagining what happened, I recalled some of the horrific abuse stories I heard while I was a domestic violence counselor for an agency in Washington, D.C. Some parents' capacity to inflict violence and evil on defenseless children is nearly incomprehensible.

The next day was the first day of seventh grade and my brothers and sisters went to school and I didn't. That's after he beat me. I started my period that night and our Mom had never told us nothing, you know about sexual stuff or anything with your body. So I thought that he had injured me down there. I mean, it was a real f---ed up time. And I was so trained back then. Then the next day, midday, I'm laying in blood and shit and the bleeding won't stop and I thought I was dying—I mean cause I wasn't bleeding in other places—and he comes in midday, unlocks one of my cuffs and leaves it on my hand, but unlocks it from the railing of the bed down there. He says, "Come on." So I follow behind him into the kitchen. They sat me down and they gave me a piece of toast and a bowl of oatmeal and told me to eat, so I was eating. Then he says, "Now, you go in there and chain yourself back up to that bed, bitch." Like that, and he's loading up his tobacco pipe. I hate pipes to this day and I turned around and I walked to my bedroom. Normally I would have just, you know, done it, cause I'd been in this situation before. I don't know what happened, but I got up to my bed and my knees felt like butter and I *couldn't* lean down to chain myself back up again. All of a sudden I knew that I could never come back there again. No matter what, I was never going back—I knew. I opened up my bedroom window and I could see through these three big windows right into the kitchen; I could see the back of his head smoking his pipe. I was just petrified, because I knew if he caught me, he'd kill me. I really believed that.

This portion of Shelly's life story is nearly identical to stories from battered women who reach a breaking point with their abusers. Shelly said, "I knew if he caught me, he'd kill me." In the trauma and survival literature, the victim is always the expert when it comes to evaluating the lethality of the abuser. It is highly probable that

Shelly's father would have killed her. She is the one who knew his violence best, being the recipient on a regular basis.

So I jumped out of the window, and ran to the woods. It's like three miles to my school—the first day of a new school—and I burst into this counselor's office and I had these handcuffs on. I had stuffed them underneath my sweatshirt—and I didn't know what I was doing. I burst into this lady's office and I didn't know her, and I had my hand back here too cause I was paranoid, and she kept saying, "What's wrong?" Because I was just breathing, you know. My hair wasn't combed and I was bloody. And she kept saying, "What's going on, what's behind your back?" And finally I pulled out my arm, and she said, "My God, what's going on?" At that point, I could not talk to her, and she kept trying to reassure me. She kept me in her office for like an hour, and I was just like so wild that I didn't know what to do. I had no place to run to.

At twelve years old, in a new city, with no support systems, Shelly found herself at the mercy of strangers. Thus began her initiation into the juvenile justice system:

I used to sit on the street curbs till about two or three a.m. till they noticed me. I grew up real innocent in a way. I never was on the streets. I was totally controlled in this little house. I didn't know how other families functioned, the whole nine yards. I didn't know anything about drugs, smoking cigarettes, nothing. So, when she finally convinced me to talk, she couldn't believe it. By her reaction, I thought, wow, she's reacting in horror. Maybe I can tell her. Then she said, "I have a really good friend who's a state patrolman." I just flipped out. I tried to run out because all those times the police had taken me home! But she caught me, and she kept holding my arms, and I'm struggling, and she kept telling me, "He's a friend and he'll never take you back there." I remember she kept saying that. "You will never have to go back." That was what clinched the deal for me. I didn't know to tell all the stuff. For a long time I didn't know it was abuse. Because you don't have any frame of reference for what's abuse and what's not.

If we refer back to the data collected by Meda Chesney-Lind on delinquent teen girls, the evidence suggests a link between child sexual abuse and girls' delinquency – particularly runaways from home (see Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998). Studies of

adult women in prison clearly indicate the role that girlhood victimization has played in their lives, suggesting that society's failure to adequately address girls' serious problems—and worse, even criminalizing girls' survival strategies, such as running away from home - is inextricably linked not only to girls' delinquency but also to later criminal behavior in adult women (Chesney-Lind, 2002).

For Shelly, getting away from her family was the beginning of understanding the world around her outside of her family life. This process of learning has taken all of her adult life:

I remember the investigator saying, “He beat you with a hot coffee pot?” I was thinking what the hell is wrong with them? Am I not talking clear enough? Do I have marbles in my mouth? You know, that was an every day thing. But it took me a number of years to get to the point of knowing—even to this day, some of the punishments he had were evil. I'm in therapy now and I see the horror on my therapist's face before I realize, okay, taking two kids heads and holding them by the hair and [MAKES BANGING NOISE] when you get mad at them is not a really nice thing to do. But I didn't know that until a couple years ago. I mean I'm 41 years old!

### **Sports Heroes and New Identities**

Eventually Shelly went into the juvenile detention system. Her relationship with her family stopped then. She described the non-existent relationship she had to her siblings:

I had thirteen brothers and sisters. They all left as soon as they could. My brother got adopted out, lucky asshole. All of us were so jealous, we wanted to kill him, because he got out of there, you know? Well, none of us stuck together. We fought and we put each other in the hospital. My stepfather even had games like that. If you got mad at each other, he'd put us in a boxing ring. Mark it off on the garage floor. Until you actually couldn't get up, that's when the fight stopped. We were pitted against each other like that and to this day we still are.

Everyone left when they could and everyone has their own life. I haven't seen my brothers; I've seen one sister, but I haven't seen the rest of them or their families. They got kids that are graduating and stuff that I've never met. I have a brother that lived about four miles from me. I haven't seen my brothers since I was 13, most of them. And most of them I don't want see because a lot of them didn't grow out of that shit. They're pretty destructive people.

As we have seen early on in this research, Shelly's family background mirrors the national profile of a woman prisoner. We have learned that almost 17 percent of women offenders lived in foster care or in a group home at some point during childhood. The following portrayal of Shelly's life in a juvenile center raises many questions about how she survived and who she was to become as an adult:

Well, you know, when I was in the youth center, my name I was born with was LaShelle. But then when I went to the youth center, it was fun—'cause I used to sneak out of my house and play softball and baseball with boys all the time. I'd get caught all the time but I'd keep doing it. I was real good; I was real athletic with most sports. So when I got to the youth center, they had recreation period every day, during the times I wasn't in the hole. I used to hit home runs all the time. Then when I was 16, I changed the spelling of my name. Then it just went on from there. I got it legally changed while I was still in Purdy. A friend of mine, Sue H., who was the power of attorney for me, she helped me get my name legally changed for me. Actually, I changed my last name also from my father's name. I never knew him. I actually changed my name to Vicki's mother's maiden name. For a number of years we considered ourselves married.

As we have discovered previously, prisoners create family for themselves as a form of support. Shelly's success in softball and baseball enabled her to find satisfaction with a group of peers, sharing their athletic connections. Interesting, it is during this time that Shelly decided to change her name, a choice with significance for a young woman feeling abandoned by her family. One can only assume that this decision created some sense of agency and self-definition for Shelly, particularly



given the fact that she also changed her last name to that of her lover's mother's maiden name. Name changing was quite common among radical feminists and lesbians in the seventies and eighties. Some women changed their names legally; others used (and still do use) their special feminist names in women-only spaces. Some names were intentionally comic; still others poetic and beautiful. Shelly's name change appears to have been a symbolic disconnection from her family, a self affirmation around something she felt good about, and an intentional alignment with important women in her life.

### **Prison Locations: "Getting Sent Up"<sup>24</sup> Was A Badge of Honor, Badge of Courage**

As a teenager, Shelly spent time in Maple Lane Juvenile Reformatory in Washington State. When asked how this experience shaped her life, she responded in this way:

I escaped from Maple Lane Girls School. They shipped me to every place there was to make an example of me. When you were in the youth center, the worst thing in the Department of Corrections was to be sent up. People would talk and they'd say, "She got sent up" you know. That was the big threat. Of course they wanted to make an example of me because I said, "f--- you I'm not gonna mop your f---ing floors." 'Cause I all of a sudden knew I could get rebellious and talk back. I knew they could not kill me because—or so I thought—there was a public record of me being in there. Now back at home, I knew my stepfather could kill me and no one would ever know. When I got to the youth center, I thought it was vacation time. Hollywood all the way!

Any time people would just look at me wrong, it was something to argue about. Due to my behavior in there, they changed my classification from a dependent petition to an incorrigible. In those years "incorrigible" meant you could be sent up. Later the classification was switched to "delinquent." So while I was in the youth center, I went from dependent to incorrigible and so they were able to send me to DOC [Department of Corrections]. I don't think I ever really got a fair running start because they locked me in the older

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<sup>24</sup> Getting sent up means being sent away to a state or federal corrections facility for a period of time.

wards in the youth center. I didn't get to be around kids my age or near my age. I was 14 or so and I got to be around 17, 18 year olds. And I learned a lot of shit that I didn't need to learn.

Hill and Crawford's findings of adult female prisoners observe that social-psychological variables, such as self-esteem and sex-specific goal attainment play a key role in women's criminality in adult life.<sup>25</sup> Here we find that Shelly's early family structure, the physical and psychological abuse she suffered, and her institutional treatment, leads to behavior that brings a pattern of repeated incarcerations throughout her adult life.<sup>26</sup> As soon as Shelly entered the Purdy Correctional Treatment Facility for Women, in Gig Harbor, Washington, she spent five long years in what is commonly known as Intensive Management or segregation, or "seg." During the early 1980s, segregation was an extremely punitive punishment for a female prisoner. Shelly went on to explain why she felt she was put there:

Well, I could tell you stories. When I first went to Purdy, they first had initial meetings to decide what custom level I should be placed in. The classification officer said, "I see here that you're a homosexual." And I just looked at her, and said, "Yeah." And she said, "You know, we don't allow this type of behavior around here." I said "What type of behavior are you talking about?" But she said, "You know exactly what we're talking about." And I said, "No, I really don't know." She turned to her co-worker and she said, "Maximum security." And down I went, man. They started putting people down there with women who had over 40 years to do. I had a ten-year sentence, maximum ten years. With good time, maybe three or four years.

Good time is a common phrase in prison culture meaning that if a prisoner follows the rules, gets no tickets, has no adjustment problems with staff or other inmates, good time is given to be counted against her sentence. Days, weeks, or months are taken off of her sentence, which can allow her to be released sooner.

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<sup>25</sup> Hill, G.D. and E.M. Crawford. 1990. Women, race and crime. *Criminology* 28(4): 601-626.

I used to live on that thing, that idea that my time would be shortened. But it never came true because of my behavior and attitude, and who I was. That was a big part of it, too. The officer who did classification of paroles told the chairman of the board, “She will not rescind on her idea that she’s a lesbian. And until she does, she’s not rehabilitated enough to [release].”

For Shelly, her lesbian identity became a divining rod for persecution. Her outrage at the deliberate singling out of lesbians was obvious in our conversation. Shunned by society and stigmatized by those in control of sentencing at the prison at Purdy, she felt she was in a lose/lose situation:

There’s a hierarchy, just like everywhere else. Lesbians are at the bottom. ‘Cause there are a lot of lesbians that I found incarcerated. There are tons of women that are having sex with other women or pseudo-relationships, and most of those are based on a stereotypical male-female negative relationship. You’re the bitch for her canteen,<sup>27</sup> you know that really ugly stuff. So you see a lot of that, and people think that is lesbianism, but they’re not identified as lesbians. They have their pimps and boyfriends that visit them. I think a lot of it is more just standby because they don’t have the support system, so they invent one inside. The hierarchy works for prisoners too.

There is a hierarchy in prison that is a double-edged sword. Being a lesbian in the eyes of the guards is seen as a deviant personality trait. However, within the hierarchy of prisoners, identifying as lesbian has its benefits. One of the ways in which women develop a support system on the inside is by forming friendships or “families” among other inmates. Some women form love relationships with other women, and some women form social relationships with other inmates that resemble a family system, including sisters, mother, and aunts.

Being gay for Shelly was not a choice. Shelly spoke directly about her sexual orientation:

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<sup>27</sup> Canteen: Prison store where toiletries, snacks, food items, cigarettes, stationary and stamps, and sometimes clothing are sold to inmates.

I came out when I was 20. If I had known better it probably would have been before then. That was the one and only thing in my entire life that made sense to me. So yeah, of course I was. I'm really glad that I didn't know I was a lesbian when I was in Arkansas. It was, it was very difficult time, but I'm alive, you know.

For others, the "family" ensures both the physical safety and the emotional well-being of the prisoner, careful to do favors and help in special ways, acknowledging birthdays, assisting with laundry, supplying cigarettes, lotion, doing hair, and keeping company with the members of the extended family. Family members advocate for each other among the general population, care for one another when sick, and keep each other's spirits up. They also defend their family, sometimes using coercion and even violence to protect their "family."

In her view, she was respected by other inmates, and often was seen as an intimidating presence because of her sexual orientation as well as her overt defiance toward the prison administration. She believed she was singled out for punishments because of her sexuality. Shelly was an outspoken advocate for reform in psychiatric prisons as well as for women's rights and she was punished because of these political affiliations both inside and outside prison.

Her connection to TTLG newsletter created supportive connections for Shelly, but also contributed to her turbulent years at Purdy. Associating with TTLG and becoming a writer was a way to enlarge her "family" to enhance her support systems. She received the TTLG newsletter in the mail and because of that she had to deal with more homophobia and discrimination from guards as well as inmates:

[They targeted] lesbians - just because of the lesbianism of some members of Through The Looking Glass. Not everybody was lesbian, but it didn't matter. You were guilty by association.

The newsletter had a steady focus on lesbians who had been targeted by police and the FBI for what the editors claimed were their sexual preferences in a time of political oppression against gays and lesbians and social conservatism in the United States. Because Shelly was openly lesbian in prison, being connected to TTLG newsletter, and writing for it gave her an identity outside the prison walls. This identity was a powerful and valuable connection to other lesbians across the country for her. Shelly offered the following example of another inmate who tried to cash in on the power that she perceived lesbians had within Purdy:

Some people were from TTLG and they ended up kind of supporting her—financially as well as emotionally. They didn't know who she was. She claimed she was a lesbian, I mean she presented herself like that. She was just like a pervert. She was just a pervert, that's all there was to it. She wasn't gay, straight, or anything else; she was a pervert. But she was out there and this male guard had come down and opened her food tray door, and she says, "Jay Jay"—Jay Jay she called him—she says, "Jay Jay" [In a different voice]. "I got a package from a lesbian." I'm two cells down from her now and these are *TTLG* people she's talking about. My people. And she was going on and on calling like that. And he was going, "Oh, what do you think they want from you?" "Oh, you know" [in a mocking voice]. Well, that was really traumatic for me because I was in a vulnerable position, man, I did write and stuff. It was really hard to hear that echoing down the hallway. It was like being attacked in an area you cannot tolerate.

According to Shelly, the guards and staff used information they gained about a prisoner's personality, politics, or peers to keep all prisoners off balance and vulnerable.

You know how—well, when their own people can't do it, and their own facility can't do it, then they got their snitches and they got their people that they say, "It sure would be nice if you could find time to jump on such and such. And what did you say you want, what do you need? You need an extra blanket?" I mean that's how cheap things are there. People's trust...God, the people that used to anger me the most in my own circle, and I'm not talking about the guards, was doing time with people who were in for \$500 bucks - drove down from

California and shot some bitch because some man wanted her dead. That exemplified people's loyalties in that place. It was that cheap. Everything was so cheap. For a blanket, I mean that's how far down you were stripped. For a f-----g, a f-----g extra blanket. You're gonna jump on your peer, who you're gonna live with for the next 10 or 15 years, or you're gonna tell something. Or "sell" somebody out.

The notion of creating "family" in prison is well documented in the criminal justice literature.<sup>28</sup> As journalist Katheryn Watterson explains in her book Women in Prison, "The whole family system is characteristic of adult female institutions. Women don't consciously set out to build families. But soon after they arrive at prison, usually afraid and isolated, they either withdraw into themselves or begin forming relationships" (Watterson, p. 288). Prison families are much like friendships among people anywhere. The difference in prison is that you openly call that friend your "child" or your "mother." They're part of your family - a family that allows a sense of belonging and eases the loneliness of feeling isolated and small. It creates a common bond that alleviates the pressure of doing hard time

Watterson's perspective illustrates a relational bonding that occurs in prison life; a bonding that like writing creates a coherence to a woman's life in prison. This coherence is an important vehicle for studying the authority of narrative. Shelly's reflections on her life in prison enable her to narrate, and to create a self that reflects her perception of her experiences in prison. Furthermore, narrative is an extremely powerful tool for creating, negotiating, and displaying the moral standing of the self. As we will see in the next excerpt, Shelly allows herself to stand apart as narrator and comment on the actions of the protagonist (herself), indicating that the speaker is always moral, in her dealings with others, even if the protagonist of the narrative is

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<sup>28</sup> See Giambrollo and Introduction of this manuscript for early studies.

not. As Linde summarizes, “because of narrative’s inherent property of reflexivity and distancing, confession may be good for the soul, but it is also excellent for the self-image (124).”

### **Prison Signifiers: Identity Markers for Inmates**

Shelly and Jane discussed the ways in which prison culture has adapted signifiers to maintain a hierarchy of power. Jane observed:

Prisoners in some facilities are able to wear their own clothes. It’s as if it’s a playground. I’m just saying—you got new tennis shoes in here, \$100 tennis shoes on people’s feet when the family members don’t have a thing to eat. And all of a sudden style becomes important in prison.

This was an issue that Shelly could speak to:

It was that way at Purdy. Now in Arkansas it wasn’t like that. It was uniforms; it was a yellow pale dress thing. I had never worn a dress until I got [to Arkansas juvenile detention] at 12.

At this point in the conversation, I described another prisoner that I know who used clothing to normalize her world:

I know a woman in the federal prison camp in Danbury who made a statement with her clothes. The first day I met her, you know the uniforms all have collars. She just had a style about her. She had her collar turned in, so that she was different. She marked herself.

Shelly began remembering some of her personal techniques for finding an identity through dress in prison:

Starching your shirt man, if you had a connection in the kitchen that would sneak you out some starch, you know. Then you would stick them underneath your mattress, flattening them all out. There were people that had creases in their pants, that shit was cool! That had things happening; there were a lot of status symbols competing with each other.

Shelly explored this a bit more with additional details from prison culture:

Roll up your uniform, one leg. All that shit came from the joint that you see out here now. That was shit that I grew up with. When you did something like that that meant that no matter who approached you, you was gonna take care of business. That nobody f---ed with you. If you rolled up your pant leg like that and you weren't wearing socks, that was a symbol that said, I'm bad. Don't f--- with me. And if you did, you took that risk. You were displaying yourself. If anyone even looked at you wrong you jumped on them—whether that was in your character or not. I don't think it ever was in my character. I was never meant to behave in some of the ways that I had to behave. I'm not a hard bitter person, and I never was, but I had to be one way on the outside and one way on the inside and it made me f---ing crazy. When I got out, I didn't know what was up or down in me. I didn't know who the f--- I was.

### **Tunneling to Daylight: “A Snitch Among Us”**

Let us consider the following event from Shelly's interview with me in which she describes the dynamics of power and family ties within prison:

So anyway, Debbie was considered as solid as a rock by everyone inside Purdy. Veronica introduced me to this woman. She was a lifer coming down to maximum security, right? So she brought us little stuff. She was asking questions and stuff. I said—we had dug a whole through the bricks, and we had to dig it through where the cement was because the bricks were this weird brick, you'd dig a little bit and there was some kind of plastic rock shit. So we dug through the concrete between them, and we had a nice hole. It was wonderful. Veronica and I used to smoke joints through the hole, so we wouldn't waste smoke. Like she would blow me a nose hit through the hole and then I'd turn around and blow my smoke back into her mouth. We would recycle to make the joint last longer. It really is sensory deprivation in there, so this was great, a new space. I kept telling Vicki, no way, no way, she's solid as a rock. I said to Debbie, "Man we got a hole so big between our cells you could walk through it!" I'm like "damn!" I said, "These are the exact words, Vicki, I swear." She would not believe it. Now come to find out she was a snitch from day one. I told Debbie about the space, and this was written up word for word.

Shelly offers us insight into the allegiance she has for the norms held by other inmates. She describes this incident in order to accomplish two objectives. The first is to describe for the reader how inmates circumvent the rules in order to gain some



control over their situations. Second, Shelly retells this story in order to show the reader how other inmates could never be trusted. Throughout the narrative one of the common themes Shelly conveys in her life story is being unfairly accused of crimes she did not commit. Her perspective on this particular situation was that she and her friend dug out a space that was out of bounds, where they could find space outside the prison structure. For the two of them, even though the space was between their prison cells, not a space out into the free world, they had created a “wonderful” free area, untouchable until they were discovered. This story also conveys a hint of Shelly’s strong attraction to using drugs to escape her difficult situation.

The snitch, Debbie, was an inmate Shelly thought she could trust. But as her story indicates, no one can be trusted in the prison world. Debbie’s status as lifer made deal-making essential for her own survival. Shelly’s storytelling reflects a facet of narrative that Linde calls the “functioning social self that contains the property of reflexivity.” As Shelly tells us the story about the “snitch,” she analyzes and critiques the “snitch’s” motivation as well as her own vulnerability and judgment to share sensitive information with another. Linde argues, “that the self functions as one self among many similar selves, so that it can be reflected on, or related to as an other.”

As a result of this incident, Shelly was given a disciplinary action and was put back into Intensive Management (segregation) for discussing an attempted escape.

See, the snitching was blamed on this woman named Sue, who when I got out, came up to me—and she ran the dog program too<sup>29</sup>—and she said, “Shelly, what they’re saying is not true.” And I just kind of shined her on, and I never talked to her after that. But it was Debbie all along; it just blows me away. I found out about it about two years before I got paroled. Vicki and all of us just kept saying no, but see

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<sup>29</sup> Purdy Correctional Institution for Women ran a dog-training program that allowed inmates to bond with a dog and train that dog to become a “personal assistance dog” or a Guide dog.

that's how it is. We think they are the best of the best, the most solid, and the ones who are looked up to by everyone. The lifers, the people you hang with, the people that know how to do their time. They are the people that have everything going, they're running the kitchen, they're running the black market. That's the deal. That's how they make it. It just got everyone. 75% of the population I feel was probably in that space and there is no excuse for that, as far as I'm concerned. Playing each other against each other. He said, she said, and on and on.

Shelly admits to speaking out about poor conditions at the prison often during her stay at Purdy.

There's more unity in a men's prison than in a women's prison. And yes, I know the reason why it's so divisive and all is because it's set up to be that way, and the rules are set up to play that way. I've always been real disappointed in activism in psych prison, because there were so many times I felt like I was standing up on a hill all by myself. We were all down here saying right on, right on, then I went up here, and they left me up there exposed and vulnerable. I paid the price, and I paid the price a lot when no one else was willing to pay the price. So, I had a lot of disappointment in my peer group for many years in prison.

Curious about her motives for speaking out, I wondered if she felt she was standing up for herself and her issues or for the concerns of others in the community:

A lot of times, I was speaking out for everybody. That's what you stand up and speak out about. The masses, but yeah, really and truly it's because they were so scared of the incriminations. It was like, are you gonna be a person of substance so you can live with yourself for the rest of your life or are you gonna hide for the rest of your life? You gotta stand up and take your whoopin's. But there were a lot of people that couldn't get there. They wanted that early parole.

Jane had been mostly quiet during the evening. At this point she offered another reason, stating that, "people get wore down, she's been wore down." Shelly continued to talk, distancing herself from that world she once knew:

But the thing about it is, I don't excuse that. I did 17 and 1/2 years. I was wore down too, but not paroled. I been so wore down I been out of it. I've retired. I haven't been anywhere near prison or anywhere in

it—just recently I started communicating with someone that I knew back in the 80’s but—well, at first it was different. You know having to hear the background prison noise and stuff and so I had a few moments there. But yeah, it’s a good thing within reason. I’m not gonna get caught up. I had a life that encompasses so many different things. I really needed to get space from it. When I first got out I was doing all that stuff, speaking at these things and all that. I needed something more—‘cause I grew up inside those prisons. I really needed a new life. And it’s still all right; I’m a lot better.

### **“A Hungry Crowd Is An Angry Crowd:” The Politics of Being Incarcerated**

Shelly discussed prisoner and corrections officer relations, observing that she felt there was always a power struggle with many different levels of meaning for inmates:

There was nothing nicer than when someone would go off on the guards. It was so f-----g encouraging. And it was one of the things that kept people—I mean as sick as it might sound—it was one of the things that kept a little hope alive. It was entertainment—you know we called it “going Hollywood” —entertainment and hope. I remember looking out my cell door, and the supervisor, John W. —he was as sick as they come too—he was trying to escort another prisoner named Felicia. She used to wash her hair in the toilet. Anyway, she didn’t need to be in there, but he was escorting her back [to her cell]. I don’t know what he said but all of a sudden she turned—and she was a big woman—and she just slugged him. He had glasses and they went flying. I’ll never forget the sound of them hitting the hall and then back down on the floor and the sound of them breaking. His face went from total power and control, to fear. And I’m standing there watching this shit, and I’m like wow, they’re not infallible. They can fall. It was great for community spirit. Another release was kicking your doors and yelling everything you always wanted to yell and getting it all out. The best times I had in those places were the riots. The beatings didn’t mean anything to me. It was the energy generated. It motivated people.

What is actually happening when inmates “go Hollywood”? We see more violence, mental health breakdowns, and more criminal acts; read from the inmate’s perspective, they subvert authority, they resist, they assume a deviant stance

attempting to shift the perceived balance of power. In a system that strives to limit activity, interactions, and emotions, one can just imagine the pent-up energy released during these chaotic times. Going Hollywood for some inmates is a political act of resistance. Shelly's political views on prison come in part from the politics of colonized people and popular culture music icons like Bob Marley:

Well, the system runs off the backs and the sweat, the sacrifice of inmates —there's one thing to incarcerate and to take someone's physical freedoms and liberties away and then it's another to f--- with who they are as a human. I mean do you want us in society, very embittered, angry—like Bob Marley says you know, “a hungry crowd is an angry crowd.” And do you want to starve people on those levels? Then live with them afterwards? I don't think so, because now some of the people I did time with, they're gonna get out. Most of the people are gonna get out some time, some day.

Shelly's implication here is that once back out into society, former prisoners are so wounded and traumatized by the criminal justice system that for some, they can never adjust, never become whole again. This fragmenting of the self creates people who cannot abide by society's rules, belief systems, or values, without any successful rehabilitation.

You put them in a cage and you poke them with a stick and then you want them to take responsibility and be a law-abiding citizen and treat you good? I don't think so. That's just not the way it works. It's just ridiculous that we go around and around with this. They say rehabilitation doesn't work. But you know, it takes at least twenty years for a new process to show any kind of evidence that it's working and they have never kept with the rehabilitation notion long enough. They try it for a year or two and something happens and they go, “oh no, it can't work.” But look how many years we've had this punishment thing going on.

Jane declared, “It hasn't gotten any better. It's gotten worse.” From her vantage point, on the outside working with others who want to create radical change in the rehabilitation of prisoners, who want to ease the emotional journey of women

in prison, she speaks from a place of authority. Both Jane and Shelly spent time in the juvenile corrections system and Shelly commented on the lifetime connection between juvenile crime and incarceration and adult crime and incarceration:

That's job security man. You're training people [prisoners] to go in and out. It's the revolving door syndrome. When I got to Purdy, I knew so many people I grew up with in child places [juvenile detention centers]. They'd say, "Hey, Shelly, what's up?" And it was like, "I'm home!" All these people, and I might not have seen them because I was doing time down in Arkansas but they all ended up there at Purdy. I knew them when they were 11, 12, 13 and some of them I didn't want to do time with because they were screwed up people. Intellectually, I think what a lot of people don't realize is that that's what's going on. So they turned bitter and hard or they become like the system they live in and they f--- with people.

I never used to talk to anyone that hadn't done at least 5 years inside. I would not. Because I didn't think they had anything to say to me. Because your perspective starts changing—you start seeing the bigger picture. These new staff people come in and then they adopt this new vernacular, instead of "prisoners," its "residents" or "inmates." Or instead of "guards" it's "staff." They try to humanize the situation by changing the vernacular. They fall into that image by convincing themselves to use that kind of language.

### **Keeping Some Sense of Self**

Susan Galbraith's research in *So I Began to Listen to Their Stories* (1998), explores the experiences that hurt women physically and emotionally while in the criminal justice system. Many experts confirm that women are often treated in ways that are unnecessarily harmful. . Shelly's early incarcerations illustrate this phenomena:

That's the way my whole incarceration has always been. It's been that kind of road. That was the only way I could keep some sense of self, and it was a pretty rough kind of way. Fighting back. You got a lot of ass whoopins, but it was the only way I knew of that I did not have to lose myself. And I knew I was safe. I thought I was safe. I saw that actually when I went to Arkansas, and that was the wrong attitude. They used to threaten that they were gonna hang me, and cut my arms,

and say it was suicide. They really did do that shit there; it's easier to do there. They do it here too, but it's not quite as easy. They got to cover their tracks a little better. But down there they don't have to worry about nothing. So I went into prison like that thinking I was all this and all that, and I did time as a juvenile all those years and I knew the score. I went into Arkansas—you're talking about a hardcore place. It was a chicken coop—a three-room chicken coop. A hundred women, bunk beds, and I mean they had rules there that were just out of this world. And the female guards did things to you there that they didn't hide from anybody. Their husbands worked a mile away at the men's prison. They came over at midnight on the nights that you had given any kind of problems to their wives, and they kicked your ass with cowboy boots and big buckled belts and a cowboy hat. They kicked your teeth out. They'd say, "So you better never call my wife a bitch!" And it's harder to do up here. The attitude and everything is the same. People's anger towards you for being there and all that is the same, it's just— I always compared the north and south, the north they take you to court, the south they blow your f----g head off. But it's the same thing. They use a shotgun down there and an attorney up here.

### **Isolation and Deprivation**

As we can see from the following discussion, force and how it was used to contain women when they were considered out of control shows how painful and alienating that treatment felt to the inmate.

I was also in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. And actually it was a penitentiary, and you'll find them in the early 70's in law books for all the prisoners they had cut up, and they said they had escaped. And the men's prison, which was within eyesight, was about a quarter mile I should say, and all the men would be out in white uniforms doing their work in unison. Big fat cops just like Bruebaker;<sup>30</sup> that was the penitentiary the movie was based on. That was a really close to life movie. I mean if you even glanced in the direction of the men, you went to the hole. The hole was like three or four cells in this hallway, did not have a light—there was no light, it was totally dark all the time. You never got out—well, you did on their whims. You're supposed to get out three times a week for a shower, and it's dependent on their attitude. I didn't get showers; it could be months. Depending on what their whim was. They had their own island. It was an island with their own laws and you were just scum. The food had worms in it, the fish—the food was just substandard. They were supposed to keep you on for

thirty days, so you know what they did? When your thirty-day limit came up, they went back there and they said, “Hey you bitch,” or they stripped you down they said, “yeah, bitch, this is better than a three ring circus.” They would look you up and down, making you bend all this way and that until you went off. Then you’d get another thirty days.

You were in a solitary confinement cell, not allowed to see anybody. You know after wrestling with the guards, I’d be so exhausted, but they’d get me out away from the cameras, it was dark, no lights—and they’d start choking me and shit. But that’s how they did it. It was all contemplated, sneaky; they knew the areas to f--- with you, where they could really kick you or beat you up. They knew how to do it. In Arkansas, they would beat you just to a certain point—they had these leather sacks and they had sand and metal pellets in them and they’d hit you in the head with one. And you could hear everything going on but you couldn’t move. It reminded me of when I was kid in Kansas we used to take grasshoppers and go Bam! against the sidewalk and the bugs would lay there like this, and then after a little bit they’d get up and walk away. I remember when I’d get hit with one of those sacks. That was the mental picture I’d come up with.

They hit me so that I’d piss blood for three to five days, but they wouldn’t bruise me. They’d hit you right in the back, in the kidneys and stuff. They’d hit you certain ways—they knew what they were doing, those bitches that worked in Arkansas. They had worked since the furniture was put in there. And the furniture had shit hanging on it, so you know they’d been there since the day it opened. There was no reasoning. When the goose squad came before we dressed down, you just tried to knock as many over as you could and fight as long as you could cause that’s the way it was. You tried to injure as many as you could because you knew you weren’t gonna be walking for a while.

For your third meal a day—by law they were supposed to give you three meals—they served gruel. Gruel was all the week’s food shoved into a pan, smashed down, and cooked in the oven, 350 degrees for a couple hours until it became a hard brick. You got that and a glass of water, if you were lucky, but I drank out of the toilet a lot. So I got that intestinal thing, dysentery. I was like 98 pounds—I had it all through Purdy too, but I didn’t know. I always had diarrhea; I couldn’t eat anything. I didn’t have any appetite. It got really bad. I lost a lot of weight and when I got out I spent most of the time on the toilet. I didn’t notice it much in prison cause the toilet’s right there. Then one day someone said to me, “What is going on?” And I’m like, “What man?” All of a sudden I realized that all the time I spent spending in the hole, I had accepted it as a part of life. People around

me knew something was wrong, so finally I went to the doctor. I remember the new life I had when that got treated and it went away. It was like a whole new world for me. I could eat, I could go out to eat and not have to hit the f-----g toilet, and I didn't have cramps. My doctor said, "Yeah, it was from drinking out of them toilets."

### **Looking Back at Lessons Learned and Victories Won**

Our conversation then turned to life on the outside and the adjustments all prisoners have to make when they are released. Shelly observed:

First of all, being in a car, I found myself pressing my foot into the brakes. Everything was moving too fast. Yet having people walking around me made me so f---ing paranoid. I had never been around people that could pass by you. Also, having to choose, to make decisions, about what I wanted to eat was hard, too. Usually I ended up ordering something I didn't even like because I knew I was taking too long deciding. I just had to get that part over with. I had some real adjustments to go through.

Most inmates find it difficult to adjust to the outside world after they have been released.

I got out of Purdy in 1986. I'll never be back in that position again. That was then, and what I knew how to do [is] to stay alive. I didn't have a lot of skills, and knew how to manipulate and work things. I mean unfortunately in the sense that sometimes I feel like I'm not allowed to be who I am on a lot of levels, when I'm dealing with certain people in authority. I miss that sometimes, but I also know I need to take care of me. I don't have the energy anymore to be inside. It was so hard to do time like that.

Shelly's narrative is an extremely effective and vivid account of aspects of her life before, during, and after prison. She not only recounts extreme abuse by her father, the guards, and other authority figures, she does so in a very skillful and vivid way. By doing this effectively she gains some power over her past, affirms her sense of self, and connects relationally with her audience, Jane, me and those she may have imagined as listening later. She pulls us into her story and leads us to empathize and to admire her toughness, strength and



storytelling skill. Thus this narrative shows us about the experience of prison and also tells us of the power of narrating such experience.

These themes are also evident in Shelly's prison letter writing. She was a frequent contributor to Through the Looking Glass from 1974 to 1982. Additionally, her poems are snapshots of her world on the inside. She demonstrates a writer's savvy, as she rhymes her way through her impressions of prison life. Her work ranges from love poems to disturbingly angry shouts from a woman who was incarcerated from the age of 12 to 25 years old and had to fight the negativity of that experience.

**“for carol”**

the sound of freedom soon turns stale  
as this woman cries alone  
amidst the pain she knows too well  
from an empty heart and broken home  
inside the dorm, upon her bunk  
this woman quietly sits  
remembering all the things she's known  
oh will you love a convict  
and its not easy serving time  
while the free world passes by  
it's enough to make the strongest one  
soon break down and cry  
memories fade into the past  
yet remain within the soul  
wondering, with tear-stained heart  
what the future will hold  
then someday I'll see you and my throat will constrict  
my eyes will fill with tears  
oh will you love this convict?

- Shelly Baker TTLG, Vol.1, No. 5

Baker never reveals Carol's identity. Knowing her family background, the reader might imagine this poem being written to a mother or sister. Alternately, knowing

she is a lesbian, we may think it may have been written to a lover or friend Baker met inside one of the many prisons she was in. Or perhaps “Carol” is a childhood friend on the outside. The reader will never know, and the multiple possibilities add to the poem’s power. Shelly’s poem illustrates both the pain of loneliness for a prisoner and the complex issues that will follow her in future relationships.

### **Untitled**

This cold dismal tomb  
Where bodies slowly rot  
Into the cement floors  
And brick walls  
And empty  
Empty  
Nothingness...  
Where minds deteriorate  
And emotions  
Fizzle  
And all hope is  
Broken within  
The depths of one’s  
Soul...  
This cold dismal  
Tomb  
The stink of decayed  
Beings  
Wasted...  
Gone forever  
Never to return  
Oh great white society  
What have you done  
To my people

- Shelly Baker TTLG, Vol.1, No. 5.

In the following poem, Baker speaks directly to the audience, explaining her prison environment.

### **On Being a Convict**

From behind these walls you hear me cry

The tears of pain I'm forced to hide  
Exiled from the human race.  
They attach a label to my face  
Take the time to understand  
I am not less than who I am  
I belong to society too  
I am human just like you.  
They strip me of my dignity  
And someone else I'm made to be  
They put me in this filthy room  
With walls and bars and utter gloom.  
They feed me from a metal tray  
Then slam the doors and walk away  
Silence soon becomes my friend  
As behind these walls I cry again.

- Shelly Baker TTLG, Vol. 8, No, 2.

Baker explores the loss of dignity in prison exile. She writes of the sounds of prison life in the next poem. Her insight and ability to embrace her prison community, and to have empathy for others in her writing is typical of prison narratives. Baker conveys the lonely ways in which other prisoners do their time as she is doing hers.

### **The Living Dead**

I've heard the cries of many  
Trapped behind these walls  
I've seen them live and die  
I've watched them rise and fall  
I've felt their bitterness  
Intermingle with my own  
As the state of Arkansas  
Took away their family and home  
Some lie awake at night  
Remembering their crimes  
Knowing that they've lost it all  
And now are slaves to time  
Other toss and turn  
Cry out into the night  
The sounds of prison life  
Are tinged with pain and fright  
Some just sit and stare

Lost within their fantasy  
Others have no hope  
Of ever being free  
This is the living dead  
A stop before the end  
Where people leave the world behind  
And die without a friend.

Shelly Baker TTLG, Vol. 8, No. 2.

### **Framed**

I never thought it would happen  
But I'm being framed.  
Someone said I planned an escape  
But they haven't been named.  
Staff say I'm an escape risk  
And to administrative segregation I was taken.  
They said that they would keep me there,  
But not for any rule I'm breakin!  
They rail-roded me in their meeting  
And make it all seem right.  
They didn't say that I tried to escape,  
Only that I might.  
They've made their assumptions into law  
And they've twisted reality.  
But they failed to convince my mind  
That this should happen to me.  
I know deep inside my heart  
That what they're doing ain't right  
And until the day they know it too,  
I will continue to fight.

- Shelly Baker TTLG, Vol. 8, No. 2.

In "Framed," Baker reflects on the reasons why she was placed in segregation. The next poem, in addition to describing a common form of punishment within prison, explores a prisoner's effort to affirm her own sense of right and wrong within the blaming culture of prison.

### **Untitled**

My eyes see what my heart refuses to accept

This way of living amongst the living dead  
Are we all just scavengers  
Preying upon the soul of humanity?  
Unable to function beyond the symbiotic  
Co-existence of one another  
We who incessantly struggle to be released from the safety of the womb  
To carry with us the inmate longing to go back again  
Who am I -  
But the blood my mother spilled before me?  
The living link of a past commitment  
Between two others and yet  
Such beauty should turn so sour  
Such noble grandeur should be reduced  
To the piteous struggle of survival as  
People turn their faces down  
In dismay and curse the world around them  
And ride upon the backs of one another  
To glory  
To shame.  
It matters not to them  
For honor is a noun and no longer  
A reality in this land  
This world  
These people of the living dead.

- Shelly Baker TTLG, Vol. 8, No. 2.

“Untitled” showcases Shelly’s philosophical nature as it soars when questions of human savagery and community ideals collide in her poem. She struggles to come to some clarity about the survivalist nature of humans incarcerated.

### **It’s Not the Diagnosis**

Sometimes being uncomfortable  
With overt friendliness  
I do the unexpected  
It’s not the Gemini  
Or the German  
In me  
Nor is it the diagnosis  
Of being an antisocial extrovert  
I have learned to be cautious  
And must implement this caution by

Temporarily disengaging myself  
From the immediacy of friendly contact  
To see what  
If any  
New perspective shall arise...  
From a sterile point of view  
It's extremely draining---  
If humankind had not proved  
Itself so calculating and  
Deceitful  
Perhaps a smile could truly mean  
A smile  
I wonder if it has ever been just that?  
Somehow I  
Think not.

- Shelly Baker TTLG, Vol. 10, No 4.

Baker challenges the reader to see inside her exterior, listing stereotypes and beneath the cautionary façade, to explore the social forces responsible for the exoskeleton a prisoner uses for protection. Writing as a survival mechanism more clearly defines the prisoner's motivations to confront and express the pains of imprisonment.

The following letter was printed in Through the Looking Glass in the fall of 1982. Through the years as a contributor, Shelly developed many friendships and associations with activists and other prisoners involved in the newsletter. She followed the newsletter closely and stated her views to the editors and readers on a regular basis. This letter was intended as an essay on dealing with prison life:

### **Survival**

I will be 25 years old next month. I've spent the last 12 years of my life incarcerated. I've done time in every juvenile institution in the State of Washington. I've done time in the Arkansas State Penitentiary. I am now doing time at Purdy.

How have I survived? I've always believed in change – in fighting to create a change. Thus, my survival basically existed and depended upon my ability to challenge my immediate environment. The price has always been extremely high, but fighting is my style, my salvation – for I am able to maintain my sense of self, my values, my worth as a complete and total human being.

I write poetry and I draw. I often turn inward and lose my self within past thoughts and past life. I dream of a tomorrow that will someday find me physically free. It is during this time that I am able to collect myself, ready myself for the next upcoming challenge. The challenge might only be to...survive. Or it may take a more concrete form such as a prison rule or a violation of someone's right, etc. There is not one day that goes by where you remain unchallenged.

This is how I play the survival game here. I try to wear them out before they wear me out. As long as I'm keeping them busy, they have little time for me.

When I was younger, I used to be a lot more physical. I'd go head to toe with all of the guards. I'm still fighting but it's verbal now. It's subtle. I've learned something in my old age.

Keeping the system off-balance gives me time to center myself. There is a skill to being a survivor. Everyone has her own technique. This is mine.

- Shelly Baker

The notation in the newsletter at the bottom of the letter is as follows:

“Shelly is no longer locked up at Purdy. She escaped sometime in the spring. Shelly sent us this letter from Purdy prior to her escape.”

### **Writing As Psychological Survival**

During our interview, I asked Shelly directly about the importance of writing to her. Shelly discussed writing in prison, and her thoughts and motivations parallel those expressed by the wide variety of women prisoners that I taught. She felt very strongly about writing's effect on her life:

I didn't go to Purdy<sup>31</sup> until '81. I was [incarcerated] in Arkansas before that. Of course, [being published] was an extremely positive experience. Because I think coming from the era that I came from, or culture that I came from, and existed in for many, many years, I felt

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<sup>31</sup> Purdy Treatment Center for Women, in Gig Harbor, WA was a mental health facility that served as a state prison for mentally ill female prisoners.

like I didn't have a voice, or if I had a voice or an opinion about something, that no one else could hear it. So, I was coming from a real powerless position, or feeling powerless. Writing gave me a voice. It helped strengthen my own influence. It really seriously affected my own self worth. There were a few of us doing time in what was called Intensive Management. As far as I'm concerned, I've grown up in institutions and prisons. It was in a pretty sterile, cold environment; 23 hours a day locked in and an hour out for a shower, a phone call, or a cigarette, for 5 years, in Purdy.

Yeah, I can even write about nice and happy things, now. I started writing when I was 11—officially writing. And probably from 11 years of age to 30 years old, I probably never wrote anything that wasn't depressing. But yeah, now I have actually been able to have some positive experiences in my life that I can write about, and it's a little different.

Beginning to write at 11 to shield herself from the psychological and physical trauma she experienced as a child, she carried this coping method with her into prison. Shelly reflected on the role her writing played in her prison life; however she made it clear she doesn't write for the public anymore:

Absolutely not—oh, I share it with friends sometimes. If I'm over for the night in Seattle, or spend the night somewhere, sometimes I'll bring it and we'll read it, and everyone will read something. My interest doesn't lie there anymore—I got published in a lot of straight, non-radical magazines and newsletters and even some books, and that was kind of a thrill. Being in prison, I didn't get a lot of mail anyway, so even when I got rejection slips, it was something. They had to come down to my cell and acknowledge me. But that's not my thing now. I love to write, and I do write a lot, but not for any purpose other than my own health.

Of what importance was writing for prisoners? Can Shelly's experience be considered typical of prison writers?

Oh yeah. I don't think I could have survived as well as I did without that. It was just nice when the newsletter came along and I could send something to some people that might care—you can get really confused because there are so many things happening. And you aren't able to receive mental health services there, even though it was a "treatment" facility.



Here Shelly points to the importance of using writing to reach a fair and sympathetic audience who will “care.” This may include an imagined audience who will seek to change the prison system. It also includes readers who will hear her story, her voice, and listen, empathize and connect. Writing or oral storytelling is a way of establishing caring empathetic relationships. Which is partly what happened in our hotel room interview.

### **Reentry for Women Prisoners: On the Outside Looking In**

Now we walk at the wall very fast  
Holding hands and trying to act as if  
We believe in an opening.  
If we come through the stone  
We come through  
In an unknown place.

From “The Box” by Marge Piercy, 1977, p.45

Several hours had passed since we first met and began the interview. We sat in silence for a few minutes, taking in all that had been said in that hotel room. It was clear that the storytelling was going to come to a close soon. Shelly, with her quick wit and down to earth approach, sensing the weight of all that had been shared in the room that night said:

You know what? You do attempt to add a little creativity. Right before you escape you get the warden and you say, All my life I’ve wanted to be a pole vaulter and when I get out, I’m gonna join the Olympics. So do you think maybe I could practice while I’m here? And then two days later you escape. So you do things like that to lighten the load because you know you gotta survive and you know you gotta not let go of a piece of yourself. So sometimes that means you have learn how to get the f--- outta there.

Jane added, “some people have to do that, and manage to do that and stay out. And it’s a matter of your own survival.”

Curious as to where this line of thinking was going I asked, “did you escape and get caught? Or were you talking metaphorically?”

Jane replied, “No, I know people, but I’m not one of those people.” Then, in a strong voice, Jane said simply, “I just never got caught. Many, many, many years ago, 30 years ago.”

At that moment I felt as if this interview was going into very uncharted waters. In amazement, I said, “No one’s looking for you?”

Jane replied, “Not now. The time has passed. Twenty years is the limit, I think.”

I laughed and said seriously, “My first instinct is to say, are you sure?” “Well, you know, I don’t know. Because I think about that. It would be my third strike.” Jane looked down at the table, picked up her drink and emptied it.

Shelly jumped in and said, “I’m sure. She covered everything anyway, so it doesn’t matter. It’s not even a question of that anymore.”

The next question I asked was, “How did you get yourself in a position where you could get away?”

Shelly looked Jane square in the eyes from across the table and said, “Might as well tell the whole story.”

So the escape story began. Jane said, “I watched for a long time. I was there almost a year and I slowly watched for a way out, and then took one.”

Jane poured herself another rum and Coke and said, “I got in a laundry basket and went out in the laundry truck. When it stopped, I jumped out.” By this time she had a big grin on her face.

Shelly raised her glass for a mock toast and said, “That’s my girl!” I was stunned and really didn’t know what to say except to laugh along with them.

Jane continued, “I rolled out, and then rolled up that turn. With the laundry cart and all.”

I asked, “So someone was pushing the laundry cart and didn’t know you were in it?”

Jane replied, “Mhmm. They had no idea. I was lucky.”

I really wanted to know more about how she stayed out of sight so I asked, “I suppose you called people and talked to people that knew you before you went in. Did you get help?”

Her story continued, “It took me a long time to get back to the city. I was at the Muncie facility and I was from Philadelphia. I didn’t know where the hell I was. And I was in an orange jumpsuit.”

At that point I was reminded of something else about Jane that I had forgotten. “Didn’t you say you didn’t learn to read until well after you were out of prison?” “How did you figure out where to go?” “And you were in a bright orange jumpsuit, so how did you get clothes?”

“I walked a long, long way, and found some clothes. Stole ‘em off a clothesline.”

Jane’s story continued:

“It was pretty obvious! But I had mud all over me; went through the woods. I got out of the city; got help from friends. They gave me money and put me on a bus. That’s why I was so careful when I was working with Through the Looking Glass. Because during that time, any of that time, I could have been snatched away. But I talked it over with some others. They told me, well you just leave town for few months or something. I just kept mindful. But it was a threat to the group. I couldn’t go inside to visit, until I was more established and stuff. I changed my name a few times and even tested the system by running a criminal check on myself. I had my fingerprints removed from the

FBI database. The old me doesn't exist. But I still jump when the lights go on behind me.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, taking in this story. Shelly urged Jane to tell the rest of the story, which included why she was incarcerated in the first place.

Jane explained:

I still tell my friends, I don't know too many 13 year olds who can make \$106,000 in fifteen minutes. I robbed a bank. I did it in drag, so they were looking for a man. I got away with it. I bought a building with the money and friends lived there until I got out. I was in reform school for four years, but they never did get the money. Then when I turned eighteen, I was emancipated. When I got out, I had a home and I had a TV. I had a place to stay. I learned everything from someone who I thought was a hero. It was my girlfriend's uncle. I just kind of modeled myself after him. He robbed banks, so I watched him. I learned how to rob banks by watching him.

At that point in the conversation, Shelly and Jane were supporting each other in the storytelling. It was clear that they had heard each other's stories before. Years of history and friendship had passed between them; they felt very comfortable with each other. Shelly continued the conversation with a description of one of her escapes:

Well, I'd like to get all puffed up with pride and what not, and consider myself quite a cagey young woman, but I think it was a mixture of stupidity on the guards part, mixed with fortune and good timing, you know. I escaped one time from Purdy with another woman, and we just went out to the highway right in front of Purdy and we knew we weren't gonna be missed for a while.

At that time we were allowed to wear jeans. What happened was we were both in maximum security and we dug our way out through this real thick metal screen. They had a door, a big metal heavy wide open. That was at the end of a hallway. We cut through the screen and we stuffed our beds. 9:00 count was when we left. We stood for count and right after count cleared, we slipped out. We were over the fences, and we figured—I mean every time I've escaped I've known it was the right time. I'd done everything correctly somehow, so we got right out onto the highway. They didn't miss us until the 2:30 count.

So anyway, this car stops and picks us up. Pretty much right away, you know. So we get in, oh, we even packed a little bag, too.

My hands were massively bleeding. This guy picks us up. I get in the front seat and Amy gets in the back. We have this plastic bag, and I sat on my hands—I bled all over his seat—I sat on my hands so he wouldn't see them. We wore three pairs of clothes and the outside clothes pretty much got cut up. So our last layer of clothes weren't too bad, but anyway, he was talking. "Was that your white station wagon back there?" We didn't know what he was talking about, so we go, "Yeah." "Having a little car trouble, huh?" Amy said, "Yeah, I don't know what happened, it just died on me." As we're driving along, we had been talking for about 5 minutes, and he says, "Where are you going?" I'm like "I'm going to my grandma's house." So we get across the narrowest bridge and everything and we go into this light, and I see something glint. He has a coat on, too. I see something glint, and at the next light I look down and I see a stripe going down his leg. And I said, "Ohhh." [Sweet voice] "Are you a police officer?" [IN LOW VOICE] "Yes, I am." I said, "ohhh." Then he says, "Matter of fact, I picked you up right in front of the penitentiary." I said, "Really?" I could just feel the back seat shaking. And I said, "Really?" And he said, [IN LOW VOICE] "Yeah, didn't you know that's Purdy Correctional Facility for women? Yeah, them scumbags!" He's going on and on. I said, "It must be quite a stressful job being a police officer." Finally he let us off. Now, you know the next day when they flashed our pictures on the television, that guy wasn't telling anybody! And just think about all that s--t he was saying to us. Here he was giving two "scumbags" a ride into town!

The telling of this story has multiple significances for the narrator and for the audience. In the next part of Shelly's story, the narrator gains status through the telling of the story; she locates herself in the outside environment and defines her role there as one of both resigned to an institutional life and as a woman caught in a bind:

But on my last escape from Purdy, I actually turned myself in. I took a bus back from California and I came back. I'd been out about six months and I was living in this apartment. I was working at this big phone room. The job I had was previewing movies. I'd look at all this stuff I had, and I didn't really believe I could survive on the outside. I thought all this was gonna be taken from me. Something had really changed in my life. I had become extremely institutionalized and

began thinking that was my entire life. Knowing, proving to myself that I could be more than that and sitting there in my living room—I will never forget—realizing that things were really different in my life and I wanted to have a different life. I didn't know that there was one. So I called the warden and I said is there any way... and she started cracking up. And she goes, "Shelly, come on back." I knew it was gonna be really hard, because they had egg all over their face. Some people got fired and it was very difficult but they made a mistake. They took some of my good time but had not run it through the parole board. So I was serving time on good time they had taken. Otherwise I would have been out because they were doing it illegally; they had to release me.

I worked together with this lawyer who worked with Seattle legal services. In fact we did a lot of suits. We did it for other prisoners and one day she said, "What about you?" What's your length of time and all that. I said don't even bother with that. I'm serving time on my time. So about two weeks later, I got a note from her. It said to call her. I called her. She said she had gone through my records piece by piece and she said, "Do you realize that they're holding you illegally?" That blew my world apart, cause I was ready to do 10 years. I was in the mind space, psychologically prepared to do my 10 years.

The prison couldn't do anything about it. They didn't want to release me. They advised the parole board against releasing me. They did everything they could do to stop my release. They charged me with intent to cause harm and maliciousness because they did not agree with the way I thought or expressed the way I thought. It was not a threat per se to them, but it cost them a lot of money. They had to redo the whole sewer system for maximum security. They had to build an outdoor pen [recreation yard] for those of us who were in intensive management.

They had to rebuild the sewer system because every time you flushed your toilet it went up into two toilets. They would flood your room water going under the other people's doors. It would fly up like four feet and splatter all over, and you lived right there so that was a health hazard. I didn't only talk about it, I wrote letters to the governor. I filed suit and I had an attorney that was helping me a lot too. We did a lot of that together.

Shelly looked back on her incarceration and came to some difficult

discoveries in terms of her trauma and her recovery:

You know to this day, when times are a lot more stressful and a lot is going on—what also helped me get along was planning the worst people’s death. I execute it in my mind. I still go through periods where I have this anger. Because I never got any closure—prisoners don’t get any closure for their anger and the way they’ve been treated. And in fact, over the years, I see laws now in effect that would have put people, lots of people that dealt with me behind bars now. And although I was saying it’s not right, and doing what I could do to stop that kind of thing, or to make people aware of it, the society had okayed it. Now it’s not okay. So what I’m saying is, now that it’s not okay, what about all these people that it was okay for, and the damage that it did? Because essentially, I have to expend energy now trying to heal those areas by myself. I don’t get any closure with the people that f---ed me over. Or any compensation for that now that it’s illegal. It happened, that’s it. And so there are times that I still haven’t worked it all out.

I’ve been out since December of ’86 and haven’t been anywhere near healed. But I will all my life have a certain amount of unresolved anger and stress. That’s just the way it is. I lay awake some nights out here in the free world, I wake up in a sweat cause I had dreamed the old dream of killing John W. every which way I could, the most painful, or doing some of the same things he did to me. And I have to spend time doing that to get a release. And I don’t like it; I don’t like what my body and my mind have to go through to do this. I don’t think it’s right that I paid for this like this for the rest of my life, because of someone else’s inhumanity.

Shelly’s perspective on prison is as intellectually sophisticated and complex as she is:

I found that prison is really just—it’s a replica of society, with some of the niceties ripped away from it. It starts with how people’s attitudes of one another are, because prison just personifies the outside world. With all of the ugly things magnified. Prison amplifies those things that are inherent in human nature. Just being the flesh that we are. It’s an exaggerated society, you know, a subculture is all it is. The subculture mirrors exactly the main culture that we live in.

Shelly pondered the future: “I don’t know if I feel very hopeful about people ever coming—enough of a majority of people ever coming to a point of action.”

Jane good-naturedly teased her. “Keep trying to organize that revolution baby!”

Shelly replied in a sincere tone,

I know, hun, but I—I'm just saying how I really see it. I don't think—that's not a reason to not do it. I'm not saying that. I think that the action is in doing it. And the, you know, the reward, the prize and everything is in doing it. It's not what happens because of it. But your virtue is created by action, you know? So, yeah, I think it's pretty safe to be able to say something like that. It feels safe to me. It feels right. It doesn't bother me to believe that. Think if you're connected with the people that are doing it, if you're doing it, it's just almost an obligation or a duty. I was always a part of the whole, you know. But because of a lot of circumstances, and then later as I got older because of poor decision making.

Shelly's profound analysis of activism, "I think that the action is in doing it. And the, you know, the reward, the prize and everything is in doing it. It's not what happens because of it. But your virtue is created by action, you know?" sums up the motivation and energy behind all political actions, large or small, public or private. The power that the individual woman has to change the world and the reward or satisfaction that comes from the action is in the "doing." She stated, "your virtue is created by action." Moral reasoning involves the conformity of one's life and conduct to ethical principles is created by actions. If we reflect back to Carol Gilligan's theory that there is a gendered difference in moral reasoning, then Shelly's analysis is a direct example of how through resistance and relationality (i.e. connecting through narratives and the written word of the newsletter) female prisoners develop an identity that is unique and connected.

I found myself responding to Shelly this way:

There are people underground, there are people at the edges who call themselves revolutionaries, who do resistance work, who care about these issues and know about this problem first hand. But the people who are in the middle who have the money, who have the power, who have the privilege, they don't give two hoots about what anybody in this newsletter has to say. So...



To which Shelly responded:

That's right. You know—I mean I been into some pretty intense shit with that. That's because it doesn't affect them in any way or any level. They're not hurting from it. You know? And that's why you got a lot of people back in the day—Bobby Seale and all of them. They believed that you had to strike out somehow and make people hurt from it. It's an interesting concept.

At that point in the interview, I wondered what she meant by that statement. I think she was talking about revolution. But I also think she was talking about making people hurt through writing.

Five years have passed since I met Shelly and heard her stories. I often wondered if she managed to stay out of prison or if she has followed in the path of so many other women released from prison. In fact my sources have recently told me that she has returned to prison and is again serving time on a drug charge. My response to this news was one of sadness. As we have seen, prisoners move through a myriad of challenges within the system. In Shelly's case, she experienced extreme cruelty as a child, lived institutionally for years as a juvenile, began using drugs and alcohol as a young adult, was sentenced to serve time in several state penitentiaries, and was finally released only to fall prey to drugs again. Certainly, her mental and emotional state during her life affected her choices and consequences of her actions; however as we can now see through her narration, she was ill-prepared for re-entry and was obviously not in full recovery from substance abuse. Jane Potter describes Shelly as a “woman who could never get out of that cycle of substance abuse – and she burned all of her bridges along the way.” “So many of us have tried to help her stay straight, but the drugs just kept calling to her and she can't stay away.”

Shelly's life is a unique version of a common story. Her life history is a fairly typical case study of the female prisoner. Her daring escape over the razor wire to freedom aside, she has most of the characteristics of those many women in prison who speak up, speak loudly, fight back, and are looking for a path out from behind the walls.

I have argued that prison writing signals a willingness to engage in problem-solving; writing that is self-selected for publication contains important, perhaps life altering information about the writer, her life, and her circumstances that are essential to creating successful relationships between her past, her present and her future. Prison writing is an invitation to society at large to engage. Clearly Shelly's writing in Through the Looking Glass, her willingness to participate in this research, and her many attempts to live within the free world and its rules indicate a willingness to try to leave the correctional community behind. Sadly, her attempts have failed her. But Shelly's narrative work, her writing, her interview responses, and the stories she tells, are very successful in giving us a powerful and vivid insider account of women's struggles within and outside the prison walls. Her work also helps us understand the importance of narration in the process of struggling within and against the prison experience.

## **Chapter 4: “Only the Strong Survive”: Prison Narratives at the D.C. Detention Center**

“The American prison system functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the really difficult issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers.” – Angela Y. Davis

In this chapter we will continue our exploration of the personal narratives of women prisoners by looking at the work produced in a 1996 writing class that I taught at the DC jail. First, I will discuss the ways in which this class came about and the difficulties I experienced setting it up and conducting it. This will provide the context for understanding the class and it will also help reveal some of the characteristics and dynamics of the prison context out of which the women are writing. Second I will discuss the writing which women produced, and consider the kinds of issues and struggles their work addresses.

The course was advertised within the jail in the following way:

### **Women’s Creative Expression Class**

No writing experience is necessary. All levels of writing abilities are welcome in this class. We will use videos, music, writing exercises, and conversations to explore your creative writing talents. Students will discuss and then write about topics of importance to women today. As a final project, students will put together a book of their own poetry and short stories. Meets on Wednesdays from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Taught by Donna Rowe from the University of Maryland College Park. See Reverend Manson to register.<sup>32</sup>

The prison narratives in this study focuses on three distinct frames of reference for women writers: the pre-prison experience, the prison reality, and the re-entry experience. In this particular chapter, we explore all three phases. Looking at

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<sup>32</sup> Text from flyer advertising the “Creative Expression” class this writer conducted at the DC Detention Center from 9/95 until 5/96.

their home and family life, their social backgrounds, educational facility, and their dreams deferred, this chapter addresses the question of who these writers were, what the social context of their worlds was, and what they saw for themselves in the present and future.

During my research at the District of Columbia's Detention Center, I taught approximately 120 women who used poetry and memoir narratives to express their histories, concerns, institutional journeys, and personal strategies of coping within the constraints of daily life behind bars. This chapter considers a classroom that flourished in a jail: a space to talk and write about women's lives, a created space to connect with each other, and a space to explore prisoner's creative writing talents. As we will see, the prison narratives in this research focus on the pre-prison relationships and experiences, the current prison reality, and the re-entry experience. The creative writing examined in this chapter includes memoir, poetry, and personal narrative. None of the writing was fictional; all is considered autobiographical for the purposes of this research.

As Charlotte Linde notes "narrative is among the most important social resource for creating and maintaining personal identity." For female prisoners, "narrative is a significant resource for creating our internal, private sense of self and is all the more a major resource for conveying that self to and negotiating that self with others (p. 98)."

The concept of developing a creative writing workshop series for female prisoners took root when I read a book entitled, The Writer as Artist: A New Approach to Writing Alone and with Others by Pat Schneider (1993). This book

inspired me during my teaching days in the Women's Studies Department and Program at the University of Maryland at College Park. Schneider's approach emphasizes the act of creating through writing. Her work particularly appealed to me because she takes a holistic approach to the act of writing. "When we write, we create, and when we offer our creation to one another, we close the wound of loneliness and may participate in healing the broken world (Schneider 2003 xix)."

Schneider's teaching and writing method is also documented in a short video entitled, "Tell Me Something I Can't Forget," which profiled a weekly writing workshop for low-income women living in the housing projects of Western Massachusetts. The video details the creative process of the workshops and the emotional impact writing can have to both writers and the audience, and it offers a look at writers sharing their work with the world outside the group.

In contemporary American prisons, writing workshops organized by outside universities and prison associations or by the prisoners themselves have promoted solidarity among women writers. But the programs tend to come and go and are not available at all facilities. Workshops such as the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project at the California Institution for Women, led by Karlene Faith in the 1970s the Free Space Writing Program, led by Carole Muske and Gail Rosenblum at Riker's Island also in the 1970s, and more recently the Writing Workshop at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, led by Hettie Jones, and the Massachusetts Correctional Institute in Framingham poetry workshop led by Rosanna Warren, have offered much more than avenues to individual creativity and literacy. These programs have

fostered a communal spirit to counter the negativity of the community inside the walls. They, too, provide women the hope of self-definition through writing.

Criminologists and sociologists interested in language have discovered the possibility of writing as a vehicle for women to develop a sense of alternative authority in the presence of the daunting, seemingly overpowering authority that surrounds them. Writing, these researchers speculate, can provide a uniquely sheltered medium of self-expression for women who may for the first time be exploring new avenues to vent frustration and reshape their role identities. Writing could simultaneously free female prisoners from the constraints of their status as criminals, motivate them to reach out to an audience of sympathetic readers, and then, finally, perhaps motivate them into a new social realm of community and communication they may never have experienced before. Feminist theorist bell hooks, in remembered rapture says:

Diary keeping...has most assuredly been a writing act that intimately connects the art of expressing one's feelings on the written page with the construction of self and identity, with the effort to be fully self-actualized. This precious powerful sense of writing as a healing place where our souls can speak and unfold has been crucial to women's development of a counter-hegemonic experience of creativity within patriarchal culture. Significantly, diary writing has not been traditionally seen by literary scholars as subversive autobiography, as a form of authorship that challenges conventional notions about the primacy of confessional writing as mere documentation (for women most often a record of our sorrows). Yet in the many cases where such writing has enhanced our struggle to be self-defining it emerges as a narrative of resistance, as writing that enables us to experience both self-discovery and self-recovery (hooks 1999 5)."

There were many things about these student writers' life experiences that were similar to mine. They overcame obstacles in their lives such as poverty, abuse, lack of education, lovelessness, and the generational effects of drug and alcohol abuse to

become positive, successful students, mothers, and partners. The twenty-minute video had a powerful effect on me because it was about women from an area of the Northeast where I was raised and because it was about women struggling to find their voices and their strength to be “seen” by society; they defined themselves, in part, through their writing – they did not let society define them. I saw my heritage and cultural history – in their faces, in their words, and in their experiences.

Pat Schneider’s book became a “touchstone text” for me. I had been working with ex-prisoners and the book inspired me to locate a site for a workshop for women prisoners. I embraced Schneider’s belief that: “Everyone is a writer. You are a writer. All over the world, in every culture, human beings have carved into strong, written on parchment, birch bark, or scraps of paper, and sealed into letters their Words. A writer is someone who writes (Schneider 2003 xxv).” My understanding of the particular difficulties faced by women prisoners fueled my interest in bringing this belief to an incarcerated population.

Over the last ten years, I have given lectures on avoiding domestic violence at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women in Jessup, Maryland (MCIW). Without fail, at the end of each lecture, I was approached by countless numbers of women looking for advice, help, support, and information. It became clear to me that the prison culture created an atmosphere of denial for its inhabitants: withholding information, books, popular magazines, and newspapers, from my informants. Each woman was seemingly starved for information, wanted to hear more, see more, do more, and know more. I decided to propose a writing class based on Schneider’s model.

## **Institutional Barriers for Outsiders, Then a Warm Welcome**

At the early stages of this research, during 1994 and 1995, I spent 13 months writing course proposals, filling out volunteer course forms, making phone calls, and visiting with the Head Principal of the MCIW facility. Feeling extremely frustrated that no one would return my phone calls; I decided to make one last call. This time I spoke to a middle-aged woman who was the Superintendent's secretary. After I explained myself, she told me:

Well, just who do you think you are, telling us what you'll do for MCIW? We tell you what we want you to do as a volunteer instructor. Don't think that you can just come in here, propose a research project, collect your data, and then disappear. I'm a graduate student; I've had three proposals turned down. You can't just come from nowhere and start teaching! You're nothing special here!

This exchange emphasized that the culture of women in prison is protected; prisoners aren't public property to be made available to any researcher. On the other hand, resistance to providing prisoners with writing classes and other educational opportunities reflects the punitive, restrictive perspective of many prison administrators. Time passed and I continued with my studies and my volunteer work as well. One day, while answering the hotline at My Sister's Place Battered Women's Shelter in Washington, DC, the Director asked me how my research was going. In sharing the story of my difficulties at MCIW with her, she suggested that I call the District of Columbia's Detention Center. She indicated that the Chaplain's office had been receptive in the past to domestic violence education and that perhaps I could offer classes for the women through that office, while conducting field research on women's prison writing. So I called Father Bryant at the D.C. Detention Center in August of 1995.



Fr. Bryant was extremely receptive to my ideas and asked me to develop a short proposal that described my work. Unlike my experience at MCIW, my proposal was approved immediately by the Warden of the facility and I was given a start date. On September 17, 1995, I rushed to meet with Father Bryant at the DC Jail on time. Our one o'clock meeting was set up to discuss my ideas for teaching a creative writing class to female inmates. In hand, were my teaching proposal and several IRB<sup>33</sup> forms, outlining requirements for conducting research on human subjects. Prisoners, children, people with mental illnesses, and pregnant women were considered to be in the high-risk category. I was instructed to start next week and Father Bryant told me to "give them whatever you can."<sup>34</sup>

Father Bryant and I discussed the class content in generalities; however, unlike so many other gate-keepers in the corrections world, Fr. Bryant was enthusiastic about helping the women and when he heard what I wanted to do he left the curriculum up to me entirely, allowing me to interact with the women and develop the curriculum accordingly.

The next step was to drive to Lorton Correctional Facility in Lorton, VA, to obtain a volunteer's identification card. As I drove in bumper-to-bumper traffic for an hour, I began thinking about the volunteer work I was undertaking. The reality of what lay before me started to become clearer. I was driving to Virginia to get my photo taken, my passport into another world. I exited the interstate, onto a long, winding two-lane country road, past cows and cornfields. Abandoned tractors and tillers stood as silent sentries as I passed through to my destination.

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<sup>33</sup> IRB Institutional Review Board approval to work with Human Subjects in a Research project.

<sup>34</sup> Fr. Bryant, personal interview, 9/95.

Not only did I have to obtain my identification card, I was required to attend a training program at the Lorton Training Academy. The Academy serves as the DC Department of Corrections training site for officers, staff and volunteers. After spending two weekends at the Training Academy, I felt as if I had completed boot camp. I longed to begin my work.

The two-weekend training consisted of 32 hours of lecture and test taking. A variety of instructors met with our class and discussed issues of conduct for volunteers in prison. As part of my initiation into the detention center community, I was given an information packet titled “The Office of Religious and Volunteer Services Handbook.” One page of instructions offered keys into the complex emotional and psychological culture of this world. Called the “Nuts and Bolts of Institutional Ministry and Volunteering” it listed many “Don’ts”:

**DON’T:** Bring anything into the institution for an inmate (i.e. food, drinks, clothing, books, magazines, toiletries, cigarettes, matches); carry out anything at an inmate’s request; make phone calls or deliver messages or letters for an inmate; accept gifts or make any business deals with an inmate; engage in physical contact other than a handshake; Give out your home address or telephone number; discuss your personal business with an inmate; discuss one inmate’s problems with another inmate; ask about the inmate’s crime, or allow the inmate to discuss his/her case with you; feed into negative conversation with the inmate; accept rude or disrespectful behavior; make promises you are not sure you can keep, or make unrealistic promises; provide financial resources; be shocked by what you can’t deliver; dress inappropriately (i.e. halter tops, low cuts, mini outfits, tight pants on men or women, etc.); talk jailhouse language or use an inmate’s terminology.

The next page in the booklet warns the volunteer to “be careful about being led into negative discussion about prison conditions or inefficient staff; automatically believing everything an inmate tells you; assuming the prisoner’s values are identical to yours; your body language.”

Finally the last page of instructions is a list of “Dos” and tells the volunteer to, among many things: “stick to your original volunteer purpose and program; provide positive images regarding authority; be yourself; build the inmate’s self-esteem; be a listener; be very clear in your speech and its meaning when communicating with the inmate; know your personal limitations; and accept God’s definition of “results.”<sup>35</sup>

The training constructed a view of male prisoners that is commonly found in the media, prisoners as con artists, dangerous negative thinkers, and always ready to “pounce” on innocent outsiders. One training session was a “show and tell” demonstration where corrections officers passed around homemade weapons prisoners had made from found objects in the facility. There were toothbrushes sharpened into small points, “shanks” or steel batons made out of pipes by inmates, and athletic socks filled with stones, to be used to incapacitate another inmate or officers. The bulk of the discussions in training focused on attending to the fears of volunteers, creating an atmosphere that reinforced the punitive nature of prisons. Not once did the training facilitators discuss working with female inmates. When asked about the gender differences between male and female prisoners, I received, first a quizzical look, then was told, “Females are just as dangerous, if not worse, than male inmates.” Despite this training, I had formed personal relationships with prisoners, and I knew that some at least would likely be open to writing. I didn’t know for sure if it would work but I longed to get started to see what I could do with the class.

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<sup>35</sup> From the Office of Religious and Volunteer Services Handbook, DC Detention Center, Washington, DC.

## **Stepping Behind the Stone Wall: The DC Detention Center**

When I arrived to teach my first class, I parked my car on E Street, SE, settling into a neighborhood of row houses. The jail is bounded on one side by D.C. General Hospital, where the city's poor and indigent went for medical and psychiatric care up until 2001. Generally, patients arrived in taxicabs or ambulances. To the east, Congressional Cemetery, established by a group of private citizens in 1807, flanks the jail. The cemetery has always had a close affiliation with those instrumental in building and operating Washington, DC. The first internment in 1807 was of William Swinton, noted as the finest stonecutter in Philadelphia, who was recruited to work on the Capital Building. In 1816, the cemetery began to be used as the unofficial resting place for Members of Congress. The bodies of Presidents Harrison, John Quincy Adams, and Zachary Taylor, and First Ladies Dolly Madison and Louisa Adams were held there pending removal to their homes. The cemetery has fallen into a state of disrepair, with overgrown grass and grave markers on their backs. Black feminist theorist Bonnie Thornton Dill observed, "It was a de jure segregated cemetery (white) now sitting in disrepair in the midst of a de facto segregated (black) community"(personal correspondence, May, 2004). Today in that neighborhood, it is the Detention Center that has become the well-known landmark for the District's residents.

Beyond the Detention Center about two blocks west is R.F.K. Stadium, built in 1961. Above the Stadium, running behind the hospital and jail, is the lazy Anacostia River. Muddy brown and slow flowing it creates a natural barrier between the "social" services this section of SE Washington holds and the rest of Washington,

D.C. Life, death, entertainment, and incarceration are all centered here, away from Capital Hill, away from Washington's monuments and historical treasures. Here in Southeast Washington, the poor, the homeless, the violent, and the lost all come together.

Prior to 1976, women prisoners were held at the Washington Women's Detention Center, located at 1010 North Capital Street, where the maximum capacity for detention was 150 women. Women who were pre-trial, pre-sentencing, post-conviction pending appeal, or in the process of transfer between institutions were housed there. However, women sentenced in the District for periods up to one year were held there as well, thus the WWDC functioned as more than a detention center; it was also a short-term prison.

The Central Detention Facility opened in 1976. It is the entrance point for all persons who have been arraigned and committed to the Department of Corrections by the Superior Court of the District of Columbia and the U.S. District Court. Its primary function is to hold and sustain residents until they are properly adjudicated. At the Detention Facility, residents are held to assure their appearance in Court for one of the following reasons: they have been given no opportunity for Pre-Trial release; the courts have revoked their Pre-Trial release; or they have been granted bond, but could not afford to pay it. In 1995 it held nearly 1,700 inmates: approximately 1,200 males and 500 females, almost 350 more inmates than it was designed to hold.

Women at the DC Detention Center are held on a variety of offenses, both violent and not violent crimes, including misdemeanors and felonies. A few

educational programs and services are available to female inmates; including Adult Basic Education and General Education Development (GED) programs, and vocational programs including housekeeping and typing. In addition, there is a small law library for inmates in the facility. No other reading materials are available with the exception of religious Christian texts. Crisis intervention counseling, individual and group counseling, as well as religious services are offered as well.

The DC Detention Center, holding over 500 women in mid-1996, is the primary corrections facility for the District of Columbia. This jail houses every type of female prisoner; women arrested in the Metropolitan area, women of all security levels, women awaiting trial, women awaiting sentencing, women serving short terms of incarceration, and women awaiting transport to Federal facilities to serve their time. Although the DC Detention Center is a male and female facility, all women are housed together on a series of tiers, separated by their security level, but not completely cut off from the male jail population. Women prisoners often can hear male inmates and sometimes see men in the halls or visiting rooms as they move about the facility.

### **Where Lockdown and Freedom Blur**

During my work in the DC Detention Center I played several different but related roles. In part I was a writing teacher. Here I brought the classroom experience I had as a college instructor and adapted it to teaching women prisoners. I was also a researcher. Trained in ethnography, I was an observer, a participant observer of what I experienced as an outsider making my way into the jail and through the various social situations I needed to negotiate with the staff and guards.

As I will seek to show, these experiences provide insights into the world inside the prison walls and the contexts within which women prisoners are writing. I was also an observer of my class, a student of my students, trying to understand their situations, concerns, and perspectives. Finally, I was a scholar of the texts these women produced in their writing as I tried to understand what they were expressing and how their concerns connected to their pre-prison and in-prison lives.

In this project, I use ethnography in two realms to explore the culture of prison writing. First, the method of participant observation was employed throughout my visits and teaching at the DC Detention Center. There, the overall prison culture itself offers much insight into the learning environment of the female inmates. Second, I used both participation and observation during the actual class time. I assumed several roles in these writing workshops, including teacher, researcher, and student. In my capacity as teacher, I was interested in listening carefully to the voices of women prisoners as they described themselves and their conditions. So much of the culture of the incarcerated is based on keeping the personal private, rather than embracing the feminist philosophy of the 70's that declared, "the personal is political."<sup>36</sup>

As an ethnographer, I was interested in the group dynamics of the students and in the way in which individuals found community in a group setting. My initial focus was directed to explore how the female prisoners interact with each other's life stories, relate to, and evaluate each other's writing. My goal was to study the way personal narratives connected to the female jail culture and its complex mazes (Clifford 1986). By identifying the "mazes" or pathways of understanding within

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a culture, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of how the culture operated and survived.

My initial entry inside this woman's prison on September 10<sup>th</sup> 1995, profoundly affected me. It is difficult to explain to those who have never been "inside" what it feels like to have heavy, wire-mesh doors close behind you, enclosing you inside a caged holding pen. Once confined, you wait several seconds before the door in front of you opens, ever so slowly. What ran through my mind as I moved through those doors, careful not to touch either side, for fear of electric shock, was a profound sense of boundaries. Coming into jail one is forced to feel this experience of closing off, this clamping down, and the total and ultimate exposure and vulnerability inside. Once you do, it becomes a part of you, a kernel of fear and anxiousness that sits and waits. Upon leaving, one can feel the breath being pumped back into the body.

Thereafter, every Wednesday at noon, I checked in with the guard at the main gate, hung my laminated badge on my shirt for all to see, walked through a metal detector, then into an enclosed space next to the elevator. A steel door seems to open on command; one cannot see who is flipping the switches, so it is an Orwellian entrance. Father Michael Bryant, Ph.D. and mental health counselor, former pastor and now chaplain of the DC Detention Center, arranged for an assistant, Reverend Manson, to meet me at the staff entrance. A slight, African American woman in her 60s with glasses, she escorted me through a maze of dull, yellow cinderblock hallways. As we walked that day, she explained that years ago she had been a high school teacher and felt that she knew at least half of the young men in jail, or knew



their brothers or family members. She admonished the young men we passed in a teasing manner as we walked, and she explained to me how she knew them.

“Damian, I thought you were going home. Did your lawyer come see you yet?” She always asked when their hearing dates were or when they were being released, implying that she supported their freedom but would accompany them in their confinement.

### **Dilemmas in the Fieldwork**

The very controlled jail community posed several logistical and ethical problems for me as a researcher. The first involved the tightly supervised nature of my contact with inmates. My actions and movements were always monitored and controlled by the correctional and administrative staff. My classroom was often observed, and my schedule was not always my own to dictate.

As my jail contact, Rev. Manson explained to me, if my class needed to be canceled because there was an escape, or some of the women in the class needed to be in court at a given time, I might have minimal attendance or no class at all. My schedule and research was at the mercy of the staff and administration. A philosophical issue that I was forced to accept was that I would always be an outsider in this community. The “membership roles” that are possible for me are found at either the peripheral or the active role levels. I will never be a complete member of this culture; I never obtained permission to eat, sleep, and live in the jail. I would never “pass” as an inmate. Because my level of education, my language, my race, my beliefs and values, and my life experiences were different from most other women in this study, I have always remained an identifiable outsider as well to women inmates.

One of the obvious ethical issues that I had to confront was that of unequal power balances between my social location and that of my informants. Many feminist ethnographers have discussed the decentering of ethnographic authority (Behar, Benmayor, Gluck, Gordon, Patai, and Stacey).<sup>37</sup> As Stacey maintains, “fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave” (Stacey, 1988). My involvement with subjects who are struggling, literally, to maintain their identities and to obtain the privilege of freedom, was an experience that influenced my interactions, perceptions, interpretations, and descriptions continually. In its most basic analysis, I was free to come and go in and out of the jail: my subjects were not, and some would never be free again. From the beginning, the goal of this project was to be rigorously self-aware of the partiality of my ethnographic vision, and my capacity to represent self and other.

Reverend Manson excitedly told me “the ladies will be so pleased to hear that someone from the University of Maryland is coming in to teach them about poetry!” It was apparent that I immediately had an identity that was constructed by the staff, and this identity had profound effects on the way I was received each and every time I went to the jail.

Another ethical issue that I grappled with in this work was the problem of the ethnographic setting. I constructed a classroom setting in which I expected to teach and guide students in creative writing exercises. Stacey describes the ethnographic

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<sup>37</sup> For more on feminist ethnographic methods, see Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon, eds. *Women Writing Culture* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995; Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, New York: Routledge, 1991; and Judith Stacey. “Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?” *Women's Studies International Forum*. 11: 1(1988): 21-27.

method as one that “appears to place the researcher and her informants in a collaborative, reciprocal quest for understanding (Stacey 1988).” This feminist ideal would undergo many tests during my research. Will inmates write what they think I want to hear, or will they feel safe and trust the classroom space enough to write and discuss the issues that are important in their lives?

**“From When and Where I Enter”<sup>38</sup>**

Each week I negotiated a complicated series of competing authorities in order to get to a classroom. I was questioned every week by the guard in the watchtower, who would shout, “Legal?” every time I approached the sliding gate to the back entrance of the jail. And each week, I yelled up to him, “Chaplain’s office.” Whipped by wind and sometimes rain and sleet, I would stand at the gate, waiting for the chain link wall topped with curlicues of razor wire to grind its way open so that I could pass to the other side. Then I walked up a short alley between two buildings to the employees’ door, a large and heavy metal door that could only be opened by the officer in the booth inside. I rang the doorbell, peeked through the three-inch wide glass window to show my face, and then waited for the officer to finish his or her business on the phone or with others, before I was buzzed inside. Often when I entered, all conversations stopped and all eyes turned on me. I greeted everyone and signed in at the logbook. This was a large ledger, which had columns for name, purpose of visit, time in, time out, and person visiting. I wrote, “Donna Rowe, Chaplain’s Office, the time, and South 2.”

As part of the ritual of entering this community, I placed all of my bags and my car keys on the counter, waiting until I received appropriate eye contact from the

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<sup>38</sup> From Paula Gunn Allen, The Sacred Hoop.

security officer before I proceeded through the metal detector. Early on, I made the mistake of walking through before receiving proper permission and I had to go back through again and I received a full frisk from the officer in charge. I never made that mistake again and that process was never repeated -- I had learned my lesson.

Generally, all of my materials were taken out of my bags and gone through. There were always questions asked of me; "What's your business here?" "Who are you here to see?" Through it all, I would smile, comment about the weather, or remark how busy the command center there was on that particular day.

The balance of power in this space, the checkpoints I navigated weekly, including the guard tower and the security desk, created a constant zone of surveillance that established who had power, who was in charge, who deserved respect, and who was to take orders. These rituals, unspoken rules, and the way in which each member demonstrated his or her ability to literally move, gained each person entrance to the lifeworks of the jail. Having passed the security check, I set about each week to call the Chaplain's office and request an escort upstairs to the cellblocks. Often, no one answered the phone, so I was forced to wait. With only two chairs in the room, I would stand and try to be as unobtrusive as possible. I stood with an understanding that I was an outsider in this small space, not yet connected to the ebb and flow of the inner workings of the jail until someone could escort me inside. My wait was never more than 10 minutes, but during that short time, I was the focus of everyone's scrutiny.

To some extent, the suspicion of outsiders, like the mistrust of inmates is a characteristic of prison culture. In this case, mistrust was especially high because the

DC Detention Center was under critical scrutiny during this time because of charges of sexual harassment of the female inmates by the corrections officers. A class action lawsuit was eventually filed. The suit was eventually decided in favor of the inmates by the Supreme Court, which also found that the Detention Center was discriminating against the women prisoners in the facility by not offering them equal educational, medical, psychiatric, and vocational opportunities as the male prisoners. This discrimination took years to bring to light and several more years to receive judgment.<sup>39</sup> This shows us, again, some of the problems women prisoners face on “the inside.” Outsiders were all suspect. These experiences of entry give us some inkling of what the experience of prison is like.

### **Recruiting Members and Passing Tests**

Every six weeks, when the workshop series I was teaching ended a set cycle of exercises, I sought to recruit new members. I met potential writers in the “day room,” a darkened space with two metal picnic tables plunked down in the center of a rectangular room with a television blaring above in one corner of the room. The other corner was dominated by the guard’s station, a glass enclosed pod that enables the guards on duty to observe and direct the “traffic” of the women’s tier. I sat in the day room, striking up conversations with inmates, recruiting writers, and fielding questions from prisoners about my presence on the tier. I felt like an ugly duckling there; guards and prisoners alike watched me warily.

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<sup>39</sup> Women Prisoners of the District of Columbia Department of Corrections, et al v. District of Columbia, et al. 96-1280 Supreme Court of the United States, 520 U.S. 1196; 117 S. Ct. 1552; 137 L. Ed. 2d 701; 1997 U.S. LEXIS 2686; 65 U.S.L.W. 3727, April 28, 1997, Decided.

The chaplain's office and the warden had given me permission to go onto Two South, the floor where non-violent female prisoners were kept. I sat at the picnic table as women buzzed around me. I saw them glancing at me, staring at me; sometimes one woman or another would make direct eye contact with me. The room was filled with cigarette smoke; as a smoker for twenty-five years and now an asthmatic ex-smoker, I could relate to the space a cigarette can fill for someone. I remember thinking, "I'm going to go home smelling like an ashtray." But in a funny way, the rituals of smoking calmed me. I knew that eventually, someone would ask me for a cigarette or a light. That might be the beginning of a conversation about why I was there. On the other hand, as the seconds ticked by, I felt more uncomfortable just sitting there, looking at everyone. It was obvious that I was not an inmate by my manner of dress, but just who was I and what was I doing there? In those moments, I was asking myself the same question.

In order to break the tension I felt and to move my energy along, I decided to talk to one of the women sitting at the table with me. Once I started talking, others came by to ask if I had any smokes, and to inquire if I had any extra paper in my bag. Another woman, who was making greeting cards to "sell" to other inmates, by copying a cartoon character with toilet paper, asked me if I had a red pen she could have. I gave her a red, a blue, and a black pen. As I talked to her, I passed out my flyers, describing the Creative Writing Class I was offering. While describing the class and the benefits, which included a certificate of completion, I encouraged women to attend. It felt like this exchange lasted half an hour; in real time, it probably lasted 10 minutes.

By the time I had given everyone a flyer, and distributed all the loose, lined paper I had, I was beginning to relax. I recall how I sat there for a few minutes, taking in the energy of the room. I watched as one woman passed another a cigarette butt. The receiver took a long draw of smoke and it was passed on to someone else sitting at the picnic table. But it was close enough to me to recognize that the smell was not tobacco burning. Within 10 feet of the glass-enclosed guard's command center, these prisoners were smoking pot. I knew that several things were happening at once here: first, they felt comfortable smoking there. Second, they weren't intimidated by my presence – obviously I had made my point that I was not a member of the Corrections staff. Finally I realized that in order to raise my status within this group, I needed to be cool about this illegal act and show that I didn't care what was happening. That would indicate that I knew what was going on but that I wasn't bothered by it.

Such tests of my trustworthiness to the women inmates came early. As quickly as this test had appeared, it disappeared. Sensing my initiation complete, I sat for a minute or two more, then began my good-byes with more relaxed and comfortable invitations to each woman to get put on the list for the writing workshop next week. Then I walked to the guard's pod and asked to be buzzed out of the dayroom. And then I walked out through my own personal "looking glass."

### **Preparing the Class**

During the first eight weeks, Rev. Manson, who created the attendance list for my class each week, escorted me to the women's cellblock. She would go to the officer's "pod" or enclosed command center on each tier or floor, and request that

inmates are called out for class. This process required not only an intimate knowledge of the inmates themselves, but also a rapport with the corrections officers, who could, if they chose, decide that a woman could not go to class. Their decisions were based on an inmate's conduct that day, her current security status, or simply the end result of the most recent interaction between a prisoner and the officer in charge.

After I became a familiar face, I would walk the long corridor to South Two where most of my students lived hoping that the officers in charge were the same ones from last week, so that I would not have to defend my presence there, nor my request to have the women released to me for the class. I repeated my name often, waited patiently to be acknowledged and always had my letter of approval from the Warden easily available in case I needed to justify my visit.

Our classroom was barren. Eggshell white walls of concrete surrounded a room of yellow and orange plastic chairs, some broken or bent, cocked to one side, groaning with years of weight. There was no air flowing into the room, which was hot and stuffy, almost thick with human sweat and smells. The carpet was worn down to nothing, covered with filth and grime, ground in by a million footsteps all made in rubber-soled sandals scuffling across the floors. In one corner of the room sat a battered upright piano. Gospel songbooks were scattered across the room and the chalkboard was covered with song verse from the Sunday service. Here and there were bits of paper, notes or "kites"<sup>40</sup> from one inmate to another, dropped in haste as contraband or left behind as evidence of a previous communiqué successfully made.

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<sup>40</sup> A kite is a note or letter passed between two prisoners or from one prisoner to a trustee for delivery to another prisoner. A trustee is a prisoner given extra privileges and freedoms by the corrections officers.



I'd like to think that our class filled the room with life. We sat in a semi-circle unable to create a full round group because of the furniture in the room. I set up a table with materials, books, handouts, and pencils. Sometimes I brought in a tape player or a VCR tape for the women. But generally, bringing audiovisual equipment was so difficult that I avoided using it, even though the teacher in me knew that it was a good way to engage students and help them learn. I used what was on hand, our eyes, ears, and our imaginations.

There were times when the membership of our writing community changed: occasionally new members came in with agendas, or issues, determined to run "their" game in "our" workshop group. These women quickly found that we had our own rules, that we were working, and that they could either "get with the program" or leave. They usually stopped the games and stayed. And became writers.

Ideally, a workshop meeting should last about three hours. At the Detention Center, that wasn't possible. So in compromise, our workshop lasted two hours. Some of that two hours would be "movement;" students would use some of that time to come to class and some to return to their tier. Frequently, the class actually lasted less than one hour. Reasons for the abbreviated class time were various, and spoke to the subtle means of sabotage that became more and more obvious as time went on. Officers indicated indirectly and often that they did not want to be bothered calling out the students, taking role, escorting them to the classroom, or dealing with any problems in between. Sometimes they made excuses, saying that because they were short staffed or because it was their lunch hour, they could not comply with my request.

When I raised the issue with the Chaplain's office early on, the supervising guard, a lieutenant, recommended that an officer be taken from another tier to cover the shift while the students were being moved to the classroom. That solution lasted about two weeks. After that, I learned that if I came early, requested the students at 12:45 pm, I might be able to start my workshop at 1:30 pm, thus giving us an extra twenty minutes. This idea was soon countered with the complaint that I was calling the students too early and that some had not had lunch or canteen call yet. After a while, I would go to the tier myself to bring the attendance list. Even then, I was ignored, kept waiting, standing inside the tier, next to the pod, but "invisible" to the guards.

Each week it seemed there was another issue, a problem, or a reason not to assemble the women for the class. I asked the students what they thought was going on and their answers confirmed my thoughts. They felt that the guards were jealous of the class offering, that the guards wanted to use any special privilege they could to coerce good behavior from the students, and it was difficult for them to regulate who went to class and who did not. They had little control over who could come to class. My class, by design, was open to any woman who was not on segregation because of a behavior infraction. So they simply put off the "chore" of getting everyone to class until it suited them, not me. It was a test of wills between me and the guards, with the women doing their best to play both sides of the fence in order to keep peace in two camps.

One day I was waiting in the classroom for the students to come to class and a Black female guard came into the room. She walked over to the table where my bag

of materials was and started taking things out of the bag, putting them on the table. As she pulled items out, she said to me, “Why do you come in here to teach these women? You need to come in here and teach us. I need a college class; I never had an education. We need it more than they do. They should make you come in here and teach us. We want to learn.”

As she spoke, she made a small pile of papers and pens on the table. She took two writing tablets, three ink pens, three black and white composition books, and three copies of the handouts I had prepared for class. She gathered these up and then said to me, “I guess I’ll need these for myself.” Then she turned and walked out of the room, supplies tucked under her arm. I stood there stunned by her words and her actions. Clearly, she did what she came to do, which was to get what she needed and give me her thoughts about what I was doing.

But the difficult part of this exchange for me was felt on two levels: first, I was silenced by her demonstration of power, literally. I knew this officer. I spoke with her every week. But she had done something that I was unable to prevent. The “unwritten” code of conduct in the jail did not permit me to complain about her “theft.” If I reported her, my workshop would be in peril. Retaliation would be swift and merciless. I knew that the officers would have made my visits so miserable that the classes would end.

On another level, I was speechless because not only had she taken class materials, but I had purchased those materials for my students with my personal funds. I felt she had stolen from me, not from the prisoners she targeted. She thought that she, as a guard, deserved the writing tablets and ballpoint pens more than the

lowly prisoners. I was left standing there wondering where the justice in all of this positioning really was. However, just as I had empathy for the prisoners, this exchange also forced me to develop a level of empathy for the corrections officers. Once over my shock and anger, I had to ask myself some hard questions. In some ways I did to her what I despise the rest of the nation for doing to prisoners: I convicted her of a crime without regard for circumstances, and then dismissed and silenced her. What about her own words? Why shouldn't she want or have a writing class? I have been left to think through these difficult questions.

### **Pedagogy of the Writing Workshop**

As discussed above, the writing workshops I conceived were based in large part on the method designed by writer and founder of Amherst Writers & Artists (AWA), Pat Schneider. In the AWA workshop mode, the way of the writer is respected as unique to each individual. A context, a community, is created in which the individual writer is strengthened, supported, and enabled to find her own way. Schneider's philosophy is that people writing together in a supportive group not only dramatically improve in craft and in confidence; they also create bonds of profound understanding. The AWA model is a methodology for writing workshops that minimizes hierarchy and maximizes native human wisdom, restoring confidence in the brilliance of the particular human voice as it is used on the street, in the shop, in the bedroom and kitchen. As Schneider writes, "Most of us already believe in our own weaknesses. What we need to hear is our ability, our facility, the effectiveness and strength of our own peculiar and inimitable voices (Schneider 1993 137)."

In an AWA workshop, people write together and read aloud to one another work that they have just written and have not had time to revise or even read over to themselves. This is a powerful and often emotional experience, both for the writer and for the reader. Other members of the group do not make any critical comments or suggestions for revision of that new work; they respond only by mentioning what they like and what they remember. This is crucial protection at a critical point in the creation of a new work. The most unique aspect of this workshop method is the absolute insistence that there be a safe place in which to experiment, explore, journey into dangerous internal terrain in one's writing. That safe place depends totally upon knowing that in the moments following your creation of new work, there will be no critique (Schneider 138).

This pioneering method is unique when practiced in the free world, but in jail? How challenging for a roomful of women charged with crimes, struggling with their sense of self, mostly strangers to each other, to feel safe with one another. They were asked to follow these rules in each class. They were asked to volunteer to read either something they had written the previous week outside of class or something they had just written as an "in-class" assignment. They were asked to create a safe space in jail and to require no critique, no negative comments. They were asked to support each other, to accept each other. These concepts and activities are the antithesis of the prison hierarchy. But I blazed on each week, repeating our "rules." And each week it became easier to accomplish; each week our space became safer, our thoughts freer. Our ideas became more honest and fresh.

**“A writer is someone who writes.”**

Schneider’s philosophy is that “you can write as powerfully as you talk. If you are safe enough. If you can forget your self enough, if you can ‘let go’ and tell the truth of what you have experienced or imagined, you can write.” “If you can tell a tale, if you can make one other person want to listen to you, ‘see’ what you describe, ‘hear’ the voices you repeat, ‘feel’ the end of your story – you can write.”

Schneider believes that writing is inextricably linked to working on one’s own inner life and outer relationships. Writing is communication, and the crucible in which it occurs is community. A healthy writing group is a healthy community, and to participate in it, whether the goal is publication or healing, is to be a healthier human being (Schneider 141).

During each weekly workshop, students were given a list of writing exercises to take with them back to their cells. Their assignment for the coming week was to choose three writing prompts and complete them.<sup>41</sup> These three topics to write on during the week were called “homework.” For example one popular writing prompt asked the students to, “describe a memory you have of your mother. Tell us what she looked like, sounded like, what she liked to do, or write about a time you spent together.” Another prompt ask students to “describe what you think the world would be like if women were in charge.” One more difficult prompt for women prisoners asked, “write about your experience of mothering.” Only one writer attempted this exercise. Another popular exercise declared, “You can redo one act from your past. How do you change it? Describe what happens as a result.” Some of these narratives are included in this study.

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<sup>41</sup> These writing exercises are included in Appendix I.

Another writing exercise used frequently in this setting was a display of black and white postcards. The assorted images included pictures of people, places, animals, things, “art,” and actions. The writing in class in response to these postcards was limited to about ten minutes and could take any form: poetry, sentence fragments, phrases, writing a letter to someone, or telling a story. See Figure # for examples of these postcards.

### **Narratives In and From the Writing Workshop**

Those who have studied the effects of incarceration on women describe the grief response of imprisoned mothers and note that their coping skills are severely challenged. The very fact of imprisonment and loss of relationships impedes her ability to work through the grief caused by her confinement and isolation from family. The survival related impulse to hide emotions and feign invulnerability while in prison inhibits maintaining relationships as in a mother’s adjustment to the separation from her child which is then harmful to her own child’s adjustment.<sup>42</sup> Conflicting images defining imprisoned mothers exacerbate this problem. A woman’s criminal activity leads to her separation from her children and defines her as soon as she enters the criminal justice system. Not only does her identity as a mother become secondary; her very fitness for motherhood is compromised.<sup>43</sup> “Good” mothers place their children first in their lives and do not abandon them, as women must obviously do when they are sentenced to prison. Thus, women consider

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the psychological effects upon imprisoned mothers of the loss of their children, see Phyllis Baunach, “You Can’t Be a Mother and Be in Prison...Can You? Impacts of the Mother-Child Separation,” in *The Criminal Justice System and Women*, ed. Barbara Price and Natalie Sokoloff (New York: Clark Boardman, 1982) 155-69, and Zoann K. Snyder-Joy and Teresa A. Carlo, “Parenting through Prison Walls: Incarcerated Mothers and Children’s Visitation Programs.”

<sup>43</sup> See also Karlene Faith, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement and Resistance Inside: Parenting in a Women’s Prison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

themselves guilty of breaking laws as well as unwritten rules regulating appropriate conduct.

In cases of women imprisoned for substance abuse, or for drug-related charges, the issue of termination of parental rights becomes another concern women must deal with, often without the benefit of appropriate counsel. Due to recent Welfare legislation, incarcerated women are losing their parental rights quickly, their children are being placed into the foster care system, and then put up for adoption while the women are still in prison.<sup>44</sup>

One Wednesday in late January, I asked the students to describe a childhood memory, as homework for the weekend. When I opened our class the next week, I was looking for volunteers to read their writing aloud. A few women took turns and then the room fell quiet. Melita R. was a coffee-colored woman with light green eyes, who sat quietly in the class every week, writing and listening, but never speaking. She was in her late twenties, round and short, delicate, and trying hard not to be too noticeable. Melita was sitting to my right and handed me a sheet of paper. I looked at her and said, "Would you like to read your work?" She stared at the floor and shook her head "no" but did not pull her arm back. She offered her writing to me, and I said, "Would you like me to read it to the class?" With her hair hanging across her face, she nodded yes, and I read the following:

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<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of parental rights, child welfare and the criminal justice system, see Pamela C. Katz, "Supporting Families and Children of Mothers in Jail: An Integrated Child Welfare and Criminal Justice Strategy W," *Child Welfare* 77, no. 5 (September/October 1998), 495ff; Stephanie Bush-Baskette, "The War on Drugs and the Incarceration of Mothers," *Journal of Drug Issues* 30, no.4 (Fall 2000): 919ff and Adela Beckerman, "Women in Prison: The Conflict Between Confinement and Parental Rights." *Social Justice* 18, no.3 (Fall 1991): 171-83.



My name is Melita and I'm 29 years old. But as far as I could remember one day it was the spring or summer. My father asked me where my mother was and I was so little. He asked me to run down stairs so I slid down them and went to the kitchen. I told her that my daddy wanted her. As she picked me up, she said, "My baby girls." Then she took me up the steps on her side.

Another memory I have is I again was asked to go get my mother. And when I went up to her bedroom to wake her up, she was laying on her back with one leg out of the covers and I said, "Mommy, Mommy, Daddy wants you." But she didn't wake up. I yelled down the stairs for my father. He came up stairs and then yelled, "Call the ambulance." Then these men came with white outfits on and said that she was already dead. I never knew what that was. So then I asked my father, "why are they putting her on that wood thing?" They took her away from us.

After that my father took care of two girls and two boys by himself. Because I was the youngest; he spoiled me, but he loved all of us the same. He tried to put us in private schools, but that wouldn't work. So then he put me in school in Virginia where he was working as a bus driver. When I was in school, I used to run track, play volleyball and was a straight "A" student until I went to Middle School.

One day when I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, one Saturday morning my father asked me if I wanted to go with him to the store and I said no. But before he left, my uncle came over and said he would stay with me. So while he was staying with me, he raped me and told me if I told my father, he would kill the both of us. I loved my father very much and didn't tell him. After that, my grades started to fall and my father asked me what was wrong. But I still didn't tell him, so the counselor at school told me that something was wrong, so I told her what happened. I went to counseling for three years. During that time my father got sick with cancer and became very ill. Eventually he was admitted to the Veterans Administration Hospital where he later died.

After that I turned to drugs to comfort the pain, but as time went on, I realized I had to forget the past and move on with my life. So in the last few months, I've learned a lot about myself and my problems and how to solve them. Well, I'll be ending this for now by saying now that God has entered my life. I'm willing to change. I'm willing to change.

When I finished reading her essay, the room was silent. We could hear the announcements on the public announcement system; it was only background noise to our collective pain. I looked up at Melita; she had her head down and tears were streaming down her face, wetting the front of her blue jumpsuit. Other women in the class were wiping away tears, or comforting others who had been thrown into memories of their own. Some students looked to me for direction. I waited a minute or two, honoring the loss of Melita's innocence, supporting her courage to "talk back"<sup>45</sup> and we held her pain in a very public setting, just for a while, so that she could rest for a minute. When she finally looked at me as I spoke about her strength and courage in sharing this memory, her face was that of a little girl lost.

When women prisoners write about family, their words are often the most powerful, the most emotional, and the most heartfelt; they hope for something better, if not for themselves then for their lost children. Reflections on happy times, lessons learned, and distance between loved ones was a very common theme in the D.C. writing workshop.

Dear Grandma, I wish that I could turn back the clock, to when I first started to live with you. You gave me everything I wanted while I was in school. Once I got out of school, you encouraged me to go to college. But I wouldn't listen to you. I went through the first half and smoked crack the second half of college. You paid plenty of crack bills. The more you paid, the more I made. You sent me to North Carolina to get a better life and I found the way to mess that up too. And now I sit in jail because you got fed up with all of the lying, cheating, stealing, and corruption I caused. I got high, went crazy and you called the police. It was the best thing you could have done...now I understand what you were giving me was tough love. I really miss you Grandma. Please come back in my life. My life is empty without you.

Love Nina.

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<sup>45</sup> From bell hooks' concept of feminist resistance through coming to voice.

For young Nina, nineteen, alone, in trouble, and without a support system, her pain and alienation is apparent in her missive to her grandmother. As one can see in examining, "To My Grandmother," Nina remembers a deep connection to her grandmother, who may have served as a surrogate mother to her. The tone of regret in violating and losing this relationship is obvious. We also hear her won self - condemnation and can imagine the struggle for self-regard this sets up. Nina acknowledges that what she needed while she was in the community was drug treatment. Although Nina has completed the requisite six weeks at CTF (Central Treatment Facility) in a drug treatment program, and it would seem she understands that she did wrong, the questions become can she stay drug-free? What is in store for her when she is released? Can she regain self-acceptance? Can she restore lost relationships? We can also sense the need she and women like her have for writing classes and other educational opportunities.

Memories of mother often surfaced when the creative writing assignments focused on food, its tastes and smells, or on holidays. Here is another characteristic narrative, this one from Crystal.

From the beginning my mom grew up in the forties, they were wearing those fleece dresses and going to dance parties. She and my father were always at these dancing events. Until my oldest sister's father (who was my mother's husband) was killed in the service. That's when the drinking began. My mother no longer wore those pretty dresses and her attitude started to change. She finished school, but she was acting like a tomboy. She was playing sports and always fighting men and women. But she still took care of our home. I remember the drinking got so bad, that my grandmother had to become our legal guardian.

I remember when I used to go visit my mother. She would always have some food prepared. We would play card games - Dutchess or Pitty Pat. My mother's name is Pauline Mason. Everyone called her

“Tiny.” She loved hot and spicy foods, so she would let red hot peppers soak inside the pickle jar. We would be steady playing cards. She would win and then I would win. Normally, I was the one putting away most of the pickles in my stomach. She would gladly refill the bowl. Then she would switch up from regular to hot pickles and would catch me off guard. As soon as I bit into the hot one, she’d burst out laughing at me, while I was fanning my mouth. Those were some good moments my mom and me shared.

She’s also a great cook. Her gravies, roast beef, beef stew, chitterlings, potato salad, crab cakes, steaks, chicken, cakes, pies, and seafood delights are all just scrumptious delicious. And that’s what I’d like you to know about my mom. She only drinks on occasions now and her temper, attitude and personality have all changed for the better. The story of Pauline Mason, my dear old “Mom.” Thanks for being my mom.

Crystal’s discussion of the good times, where she and her mother related on almost equal terms as women, playing cards and enjoying “special foods” resonate with warmth and connection.

Female inmates in this study often idealized their mothers, writing long stories about them, recalling happy, joy-filled moments with their mothers. They seem to see themselves in their recollections of their mothers. A common element of frustration for incarcerated women lie in their struggle to remake their relationships, particularly with their mothers, or to connect with significant others in the hope of moving toward empowering development and ongoing support. Some of Crystal’s writing discusses her early childhood and points to a strained relationship with her mother.

The following memoir was prompted by an assignment to “describe a memory of your mother.”

Mary Elaine W: 1938-1994. Strong, black, proud, intelligent, successful; accomplished, a potent human being. No exaggerations there! Light-skinned, big boned, strong features. Hair color was what

ever she chose. Conservative and expensively dressed during the day. Casual and leisurely attired at home. A strong cultured voice. Loud and demanding when reprimands was issued. Soft and patient when explaining a lesson to be taught to her children. She was a woman who took pride in her work as a prestigious protocol administrator for NASA Space Aeronautics. A position only held by two women in the history of NASA, my mother being the first black woman. A devoted and nurturing mother at home. A woman who after a long day at work, enjoyed relaxation and the comforts of her home. Well read, traveled, and cultured. A married, and then single parent; she could be a tyrant stern, strict, critical and judgmental.

One year for a birthday surprise she asked me to get dressed, that we were going out to celebrate my eighteenth birthday. I remember being very flattered and excited. We hadn't been getting along and I was grateful for this mother and daughter excursion. We got into the car and drove towards downtown Washington, pulling into this circular driveway and relinquishing the car to the valet. I looked ahead at the establishment curious as to what it offered. I noticed a sign that said the Gaslight Club, but appeared quiet from the outside. I noticed my mother searching for a key on her key ring. She produced an altered version of something resembling a skeleton key. It was wider and longer.

She inserted her skeleton key into a lock, opened the door, and the establishment came to life. It was obviously a private club. The maitre de escorted us to a table. Soft music played in the background lit with gaslight lanterns. Soft glows spilled across the tables. A wine list appeared and my mother selected a French white wine. She explained that we would order seafood and that the wine she chose would be appropriate for the meal. She told me to order anything on the menu I wanted. I selected a scallop and mushroom gravy dish. She selected shrimp scaloppini. Once the meal arrived, she made a toast and wished me "Happy Birthday." I thanked her for her kindness.

We talked mother and daughter small talk as we finished our meal. She called for the check and the waiter asked her how she wished to pay. I was astonished to see her pass him the key she used to enter the club. She explained it could be used as a credit card as well and she would be billed. At that moment, I was very proud and honored to be with my mother.

After the meal, we drove to Annapolis Harbor. This was an area that resembled Georgetown in Washington in the commercial district along with being on a waterfront. We pulled into a parking lot. It was dark

outside and the sky above was full stars; I could smell the river that surrounded the harbor. We went through an annex of stores, clubs, and novelty shops. We entered a club that had stairs spiraling downward into an even darker atmosphere. The smell of smoke, laughter, and mustiness greeted us as we entered the nest of the club. We found a table near center stage where a jazz artist was performing at the piano. My mother told me to sit down, that she wanted to go and have a word with the proprietor. She returned and ordered drinks, she a cognac and for me a Heineken. When the lights arose again there was a lady sitting in costume on a stool. I squinted to bring her into better focus and immediately recognized her. It was the jazz vocalist Clea Bradford, an ex-girlfriend of my fathers. I looked at my mother with surprise. She said, "I've always wanted to hear her perform and now we will. At that same moment Clea announced that the next song was a tribute to my birthday. The piano player began "Happy Birthday" and Clea sang that song for about ten minutes in various voices and styles. The audience clapped and sang along. I felt like the happiest daughter on earth that night. My mother had made the occasion of my birthday the best that I can ever remember. It was one of the most memorable occasions spent with my mother.

In many ways the essay is a coming of age story; this is a snapshot into the world of an upwardly mobile Black woman in Washington, DC in the late 1970's. Memories of another time, another life floods LaRon. She takes the reader back to a place where she felt special, refined, proud, and valued. LaRon's description of her surprise at her mother's status inside the private club is a vivid contrast to her own status in the DC Detention Center. LaRon's implicit analysis of class and of the separateness of this all-Black dinner club punctuates her memories.

My mother is 76 years old living in North Carolina and is a beautiful gray-headed, youthful-looking, strong woman. She is a diabetic, with both of her legs amputated and she sits in her wheel chair a lot. She sounds very intimidating. It's like when you hear her say something you know to jump to it. She worked two jobs as a maid and factory worker all her life until retirement to make sure her children had the best of everything. She is a Christian and loves the Lord and worshipping in his temple. She also loves shopping, especially for hats, shoes and purses for church. She loves everyone she encounters and if you are bad, she told us to get away from you and don't be

bothered with people like that. Because they cause trouble and we will be there too. And she was right again. If I had stopped to listen and pay attention to what she was teaching me, I would have accomplished something instead of doing it my way.

Joyce M.'s mother Mariah offered the workshop a glimpse into Black family values that were quite familiar to many of the women in our group. While reading her writing to the workshop group, Joyce's memories received hearty "Oh yeahs" and "Uh huhs."

### **The Writing of Relationships**

As discussed earlier, one of the ways in which the experience of imprisonment for women is different from that of men is in the centrality of relationships for women and the strong effects that being cut off from family and other relationships has on women. Whatever prompts I gave, a majority of the time, most of the women wrote about relationships. After about 8 weeks, a core group of regulars emerged, joined by students who attended for a few weeks and then were released or transferred to another facility. It was at about this period that I noticed a shift in the focus of the writings.

Toi N. used one of our class assignments, a prompt to respond to a picture of a window in an old farmhouse, viewed from outside looking in, to describe how kindness came her way while living on South Two at the Detention Center. Toi's focus on "self" leads her to accept the "other;" there is equality in this relationship that enables her to reflect back to herself.

I see a child sitting in a window looking very lonely. This picture brought up a lot of memories. Especially being an only child. Growing up in a dysfunctional family I can often remember being very lonely. Not being able to get the love and attention I deserved.

Being confined in the house or in a room. Just like my mother, only she was confined in jail.

There is hurt and disappointment in being without her love and security. Here I am confined. In a whole bunch of trouble. Because I looked outside myself, my family, for love. All I found was a life of crime. And I was in more pain because I wanted that instant gratification. Anything false that would replace that empty feeling of being alone.

Family memories can bring back many emotions, as we see in Elaine C's poem about the loneliness of not having a mother, of having no siblings, and of being confined. The loneliness is multi-layered, building upon itself, like pages in a book. Elaine C. explores the circumstances of her confinement and finds a powerful link to her own deep loneliness. Interestingly, at the center of her writing on loneliness and isolation is her memory of a mother who was also incarcerated. An example of an alarming trend these Black women, mother and daughter, have shared the same prison experiences. Approximately half of the women who participated in these workshops revealed that they knew their mothers had been incarcerated at one point also.

Because three-fourths of imprisoned women nationally are mothers of minor children who resided with them until their arrest, these women suffer a double punishment born of the necessity to negotiate childcare arrangements from behind prison walls. Some mothers, separated from their children, live in a void of information about them, never knowing about their children. Most children are cared for by the women's parents or relatives rather than by the father or foster parents. Some women lose touch with their grown or nearly grown children, their communication with those children all but ends. The mother who gives birth while incarcerated almost always endures the excruciating pain of certain separation with



the nursing infant she may never know. Some women struggle mightily to stay connected with their children, requesting visitations, keeping up correspondences in a vain attempt to hold on to their children.

Writing offers incarcerated mothers a means to express their love, the bond they share with their children and the pain they experience at the deep loss they suffer daily. For these women, writing is a balm, and a source of empowerment.

In June 1990, my husband and I had finally come to an agreement. We could no longer tolerate each other. He couldn't stand me because I gained weight and I started disliking him because he was cheating. Well, it was time for us to go our separate ways. We were living in Germany at Spangdahlem Air Force Base and he wanted me to leave. We didn't have enough money for two, so I had to leave my son there. When I landed in New York, I cried so much it was unreal. At the airport in Germany, my eyes were filled with so much water; I couldn't even see my son for the last time. Just maybe, I mean maybe, if I hadn't left my son behind, I would not be doing the things I do today. I damn sure wouldn't be in the place where I am at this present moment – in jail. I would be home with my child whom I have not seen in seven years.

Black writer Anita S. laments leaving her son behind with his father, only now to feel the profound loss of love, motherhood, and perhaps self as she awaited sentencing in the D.C. Detention Center. Writing may have brought some of these feelings to the surface. Often friends are an inmate's family, staying in touch long after family members have abandoned the prisoner in frustration or rejection. Sheila W. fantasizes about an old friend who appears to magically take her away from all her struggles to survive. Here we see the convergence of "self" and "other" of two Black women operating in relationship to each other in the characters "Doresa" and "Sheila.

I had a best friend named Doresa, and she has been gone out of touch for some years now. But she showed up on my doorstep ringing the heck out of my doorbell. When I looked out the peephole, I

immediately opened the door and just hugged her and let the love flow between the both of us. She started crying and laughing at the same time. She brought a suitcase with her and popped it open. She said, “Everything in here is yours Sheila, even this brand new suitcase with the roundtrip ticket to Florida.” “Me and my kids live there with my wealthy husband.” There was a summer short set that hit me just beyond the knees, with a nice back out strapless top made by Bugle Boy and a nice two piece bathing suit with a mini skirt, short sleeved silk blouse with saddles to match and a comfortable swinging leather bag made by Annie Klein and she said the rest is at home and there’s more to come. “I love you Doresa, I love you, too Sheila.”

The shift to exploring relationships in their writing took a variety of paths. In this prisoner’s interpretation, a kindness can fill the space of loneliness for an inmate, although many women choose not to get close to anyone. Getting close means revealing yourself; in the world of the prison hierarchy, vulnerabilities can be used against someone to gain power, to blackmail another inmate, or to intimidate another woman.

Well, sometimes in your life you are going to have to accept kindness. And when I became incarcerated, I didn’t have anything as far as necessities. I met a woman that I did not even know and we became or are becoming friends. She has just taken to me and just makes sure I am all right.

I do feel a need to pay back, but she has assured me that this is from her heart and that she doesn’t look at it as a payback thing. A friend in need is a friend in deed.

Receiving this kindness makes me feel good because I know I am a good person. I don’t or I at least try not to abuse people. I used to play games when I was younger and I learned what goes around comes around so I try to be honest, open and appreciative.

I can tell where a person is coming from and I know that this was just real and I feel it is very cute. I love feeling special. I have learned to appreciate things but I know she can get the same from me...it’s nothing she can’t ask for if I have it that she can’t get.

Some of the assignments in our workshops involved writing how one would “redo an act from the past”:

If I could redo the act of fantasizing about gangster and thinking it was to be tough and bad and getting into trouble. Knowing what I know now, all gangsters are dead and I want to live and enjoy life. Be a mother. It’s one thing to have children, but it takes a mother to raise them. Now I fantasize on being a mother. It’s my long-range goal. I will soon be off paper finally and I will be free to be a mother - the mother I can be to my two boys.

In some of these writing exercises, writers fantasized about a different outcome for past actions. Others describe how associates, partners, drugs or street life were part of their problems. Many claimed their problems for their own and vowed not to repeat past mistakes. The writing offered a place to sort out alternative interpretations and future options and to regain a sense of self. As we can see in this last narrative, relationships play a key role in maintaining a self.

There are eight different families that are living upon the church steps on a mattress with maybe 3 or 4 blankets laid down beside your mate or friend with very cold winds making chills go down your back, but as long as you and your spouse were laying together in warmth and comfort you will sleep comfortable. The love and kindness of each family is more than just different people; we are a great big family because we all look out for each other in many different ways as far as food, clothes, conversation, comfort, kindness, love, embarrassing someone when they really need it. We all care about each other while being alone.

### **Solidarity With Women**

In examining the ways in which women developed in the context of relationships, researchers at the Stone Center at Wellesley College (Jordan, et al, 1991) found that mutual empathy is the mechanism by which contacts become affirming and growth-enhancing connections. Miller (1992) offered a working

definition of power that has great relevance to this particular group of women's experiences as "the capacity to produce change." According to this conceptualization, a woman gains a sense of her own power as she develops her ability to produce change or movement in another in the context of mutually empathetic relationships (O'Brien 119).

The prison writing is partly about women surviving as a self and holding onto a sense of self. It is also about developing empathy for others and learning to navigate the complex nature of survival as a self in an environment designed to break down the strength of the individual. Judith Scheffler suggests that empathy is the defining component of solidarity in women's prison literature. Empathy is the root of solidarity, and "made genuine and honest through acknowledgement of a shared pain that transcends the particulars of individual experience: an audacious solidarity, which risks uniting women inside and outside through their common challenges" (Scheffler 221.) Many of the writings from the workshops discuss solidarity with other women. This writing was prompted by a workshop exercise that asked, "What would it be like if women ruled the world?"

I think that if women were the way we should be, unified, strong minded, and being all we could be this world would be a better place to live. I am a firm believer in men are nothing without us and side by side we could accomplish a lot because we can deal with things from both sexes point of view. I mean I don't think it should be an all man's thing or an all women's thing but I do feel women should have more input. Equality, it's a unifying thing. I do believe the old myth that a woman should stay home and have babies.

As the weeks went by I was more and more accepted by the women. They would tell their associates<sup>46</sup> about our Wednesday classes. Each week there were new faces, as well as the old faithfuls. Field notes from the middle sessions of our class highlight my observations about the ebb and flow of our encounters:

I pass back papers from last week's assignment with comments. Three will go home with me to type up. There are four new women this week; one very friendly, looks like a woman I know...Eva...beautiful smile, quiet inner peace...one sleepy and out of it, unfocused, coming down off a high or a drunk or in a fog without her regular meds...one tall with small twists in her brown hair, standing straight out all around her head like a crown; her arm is scarred by an old burn. She is defensive, pushing her words toward me like claps of thunder, demanding answers from me, controlling our exchange... she wants a copy of the current Writer's Market, she recites a long, proud poem by Langston Hughes and declares herself a student and a professional writer. Insists that her marijuana bust was the result of a DC conspiracy against Black Nationalists. Fourth woman seems has been marred by drug use, she speaks slowly and stares off into space. Doesn't look me in the eyes and thinks slowly and heavily out loud. She's in there, just very foggy.

Reading these notes now, I am vividly aware that there was so much more going on in that room than I could ever know. My role as teacher includes a role as witness to pain. Judith Herman in Trauma and Recovery explains that:

Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen. Those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility. To speak publicly about one's knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims (43)

In a setting where each and every woman has had to or will declare her guilt or innocence, and set out a justification for her actions, the stigma of victimization

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<sup>46</sup> Street word for someone you do business with or someone you are acquainted with but they are not in your circle of friends.

Herman discusses is like a floating veil that no one wants to wear, but all must nevertheless rest beneath.

In her work, The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry explains that words and phrases allow the victim of pain inflicted in war, by torture [or incarceration], to remake the world that has been undone by such violence. Pain is characterized by its “unsharability;” it dismantles the victim’s capacity for language and therefore the capacity to represent that pain to others. The political advantage of physical pain is that it can deconstruct speech and transform the reality of pain into a “fiction of absolute power.” This process is what Scarry calls the “unmaking of the world” by which political discourse and identity are forged. Scarry asserts that, “the task of the victim is to regain the power of self-representation by means of imagination, which is the counterpart to pain and allows it to enter back into discourse and be represented.” Self-representation through speech “becomes the final source of self-extension; so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body, occupies a space much larger than the body (Scarry 33).” Self-representation simultaneously unveils those fictions of power that have attempted to silence the subject and empowers the body to extend itself. I propose that writing, like the speaking on which Scarry focuses, can serve similar purposes. The next section will explore where these “fictions of absolute power” thrive for incarcerated women.

### **Schooled in Silence: Survivability**

Female inmates are taught many things inside prison, but much of their social and emotional conditioning is learned from a young age at home or in the streets. Writer Wally Lamb, editor of a collection of testimonies and writings by female

prisoners at York Correctional Institution for Women in New York, describes how by using writing as a tool to unlock their creativity and begin the process of healing, incarcerated women defy the odds:

To imprison a woman is to remove her voice from the world, but many female inmates have been silenced by life long before the transport van carries them from the courthouse to the correctional facility. “If you tell anyone about this, I’ll make big trouble for you,” the pedophile warns her when she is a frightened little girl. (Because the molester is her father, grandfather, cousin, or step-dad, he’s in a good position to deliver on the threat.) “What goes on in this house stays in this house!” Her violent parent screams after she’s just taken a punch or witnessed a sibling’s beating. “Shut your fucking mouth or I’ll shut it with my fist!” her abusive husband promises. She knows he means it; the last time, he dislocated her jaw. Because incest and domestic violence cut across the economic divide, women of all means are schooled in silence. These writings are victories against voicelessness—miracles in print (Lamb 2003 9).

Most of the students in our class could be called survivors. Melita R. gave us a glimpse of her own survival skills. There is much under the surface of her explanations that bursts through. She describes how the loss of her family sent her looking to others for acceptance and love:

You see, since my father died, I’ve really been on my own. I have brother and sisters but after my parents passed away, I have turned to the street. I met new “so called friends.” And these were the people who really didn’t care about me at all. The first person that I called my friend and opened up to – we were all right from the beginning. And then he started hitting on me and telling me that I belonged to him. So being the type of person I am, I just wanted to be loved and cared about. After awhile, he told me if I loved him, I would let him shoot me with this needle with white liquid in it. And I did. And then I was off to the races after that.

Those in the field of trauma and survivor studies would define these types of interactions as ones in which the abuser (boyfriend) treats the abused as if she were a prisoner of war. In the world of drugs and crime, women are quite useful to male

addicts because women have a tangible commodity that can be traded for drugs. A woman's body can be bought and sold, traded, or bartered in exchange for drugs or favors that will sustain the addict who has become socially dysfunctional due to his/her addiction. And if the woman is also addicted, she has a great deal more at stake for herself than being concerned about selling her body. She needs to get high and stay high, or she experiences physical pain. If her partner is without drugs for any period of time, he too, will be physically in pain. He will pressure her to do what it takes to obtain drugs, as we see in Melita's memory below:

One night after we finished fighting he told me "Bitch, you are going to go get me some money." I asked how and he said, "with your body." I cried, but after I finished, he said, "let's go now." And I knew if I didn't he would beat my butt. So I did what I was told.

Judith Herman describes this dynamic as "traumatic bonding." Traumatic bonding may occur between a battered woman and her abuser or a prisoner and her captor. The repeated experience of terror and reprieve, especially within the isolated context of a love relationship, may result in a feeling of intense, almost worshipful dependence upon an all-powerful, godlike authority. The victim may live in terror of this wrath, but she may also view him as the source of strength, guidance, and life itself (Herman 92). Elements of traumatic bonding form a common theme among female prisoners.

Prolonged captivity disrupts all human relationships and amplifies the dialectic of trauma. The survivor oscillates between intense attachment and terrified withdrawal. She approaches all relationships as though questions of life and death are at stake. Prolonged captivity also produces profound alterations in the victim's identity. All the psychological structures of the self—the image of the body, the



internalized images of others, and the values and ideals that lend a person a sense of coherence and purpose—have been invaded and systematically broken down (Herman 93). In the prison system, this dehumanizing process is carried to the extent of taking away the victim's name. The prisoner is given a nonhuman designation, a number. The number follows her throughout her incarceration, is printed on every document, every article of clothing, every piece of mail, and on every job assignment.

Coupled with losing identity, many inmates wait months to have a sentencing hearing. The waiting tests their will to go on, pressures their fragile identities, and forces some to disconnect from the world. At least a dozen out of the 50 or so women on Two South sat depressed, angry, and alone on their beds all day long. There were a handful of prisoners who were not physically sick, nor mentally ill in a clinical sense, but were emotionally spent. They isolated themselves and were essentially ignored by staff. A quiet prisoner is welcome; those who are rowdy and cause problems get a lot of attention. The deep sense of loss and invisibility these women felt was palpable to me as the weeks turned into months. Try as I might, although they would greet me in the dayroom each time I came in to promote the Women's Creativity and Poetic Expression class, they had their own reasons for not joining in.

### **Why Write?**

Why did the students who did attend my workshops come back week after week? I think they each needed different things from the class. On the surface, the practical answers to this question seem quite simple. Some needed an activity, some

needed the certificate of completion in their corrections “jacket,”<sup>47</sup> some came out of plain curiosity, some out of sheer boredom. A few women wrote in their introductory essays that they wanted to learn to write. As word got around about the workshops, a few even wrote to me, asking to be added to the attendance list so they might be included the next week.

Other theorists take Lamb and Scarry’s points further to explain why women write. Black feminist theorist bell hooks places the act of “talking back” at the core of self-recovery:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject - the liberated voice (hooks 1989 9).

Writer Anne Lamont observes: “We write to expose the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through, you must.” The writer’s job, Lamont instructs, is “to turn the unspeakable into words—not just into any words, but if we can, into rhythm and blues (Lamont 43).”

But prison writing isn’t just any writing. It is a literature of trauma. Prison narratives are stories that at the core are about failed relationships. Those relationships may involve connections with family, lovers, children, neighborhoods, cultures, or belief systems, but at the center are values and belief systems that have been lost or appropriated, and then failed. The failure, the loss, brings traumatic

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<sup>47</sup> A jacket is the case file that is created for each woman who enters a correctional facility. Holding various documents such as her charging records, court orders, official documents from court, as well as information on her time spent in the correctional facility. Sick call records, classes taken, disciplinary actions, etc. are all kept in this file.

wounding. In order to heal and close the wounds, they must be filled again with something – for some, writing filled that purpose.

Some women stand out from the group of 120 women that moved in and out of our writing workshops, then stand out for themselves and for what they wrote. Jackie S. left an indelible mark on me during my tenure at the DC Detention Center. She was a quiet prisoner, not a troublemaker. A proud Black woman, she possessed a poise and grace about her that has become her shield throughout the years that I have known her. Incarcerated for trafficking crack cocaine, she was arrested in a sting operation in Washington, DC making a delivery for her drug dealer boyfriend back in Brooklyn, NY. She spent 2 ½ years in the D.C. Detention Center awaiting an appeal and then was sentenced to six years in a federal prison in Connecticut. One of her first poems, “Only the Strong Survive” plays with sounds and words, stressing hope and strength, to illustrate her own prison survival skills:

Never surrendering mentally  
To controversy, frustrations, or harsh conditions.  
I'll maneuver magnificently,  
Having courage to face enemies,  
Oppose trials and tribulations.  
Repeatedly emphasizing strength,  
Awareness and stability.  
Demonstrating invincible determination.  
Utilizing dignity, integrity, and pride  
Realizing in our society [that]  
Only the strong will survive.

It was difficult to really get to know any of the students in our class. But as the weeks and months went by, some prisoners in particular took me into their circle of friendship. From the moment I met Jackie, I could see that she was trying hard not to be swallowed up by the uniformity and facelessness of the DC Detention Center. All

inmates wore orange or blue jumpsuits to enable the staff to quickly determine who needed high security (orange) and who could be part of the general population (blue). Jackie wore blue, but she danced to her own drummer. Her jumpsuit was clean and pressed, unlike so many others. And instead of her collar lying flat, she turned it into the inside of the neck of her shirt, eliminating it altogether. Not only did this give her a smooth look, the absence of collar was different. It was also “out of bounds” – not allowed. Out of bounds, not in a radical way, but in a small, yet very deliberate way that made me smile.

Jackie’s way of doing time was to write, often and in great quantities - poetry, essays, memoir, autobiography, and letters. Every letter ever sent to me from Jackie begins, “How are you doing? I’m maintaining under the circumstances.” Her survival instincts are strong and her philosophy on life is as follows:

Never give up on anything. Keep holding on, and smile with strength. Never stop hoping and praying. Things will be a different way. Keep holding on, and be thankful for the day. When you feel like your world is coming to an end hold on ... and ask the Lord for guidance...Keep holding on, and fight with all your might. One day things will be a different way. All the holding on you’ve done will pay off in a better way. Just keep holding on...

As the weeks went by, Jackie opened up more and began to write a “poetic memoir” as her goal for the class. I believe that for her, this was one way to create order in her world, to have some control over her memories, and to re-define herself. Here she creates a timeline marking her journey emotionally:

Living on edge. Disappointment. Captured heart. Playing by the rules. No limits to love. Being afraid. Lost and found. Feeling good. Busted. Released into population at D.C. jail. Guilt. Sentencing day incomplete. Departing from D.C. jail. Danbury FCI arrival incomplete. Mothers incarcerated. Outside family incomplete. Lesbianism. Addiction. Rehabilitation by whose standards? Judicial system prejudice in the laws incomplete. Treacherous trauma incomplete. Accepting the

things I cannot change. Feelings and thoughts. Positive and negative side of incarceration incomplete. Love incomplete. Family incomplete.

In this more personal delineation of rites of passage, Jackie defines a self in terms of others. In a surprising twist at the end of this poem, as she symbolically gives birth, she creates a new version of self, that can't be hurt:

### **I Didn't Cry**

Expressed to me without emotion  
My aunt professed my father was killed on the street  
(I cried)  
the love of my life killed  
died before your eyes  
(I cried)  
being a man of all men at seventeen  
protecting a family from robbery  
killed, shot down in cold blood "my brother"  
(I cried)  
eyes filled with tears you exclaimed to me  
cancer would take you from me  
"my mother"  
(I cried)  
confused depressed and feeling alone  
knowing AIDS will be your death  
"my uncle"  
(I cried)  
excruciating pain and agony  
giving birth  
I tried, but,  
I didn't cry...

Jackie was one of the success stories, not only because she has eventually gained her freedom but because she continues to write. Jackie's work on a prison memoir, which has continued for years, now, is a life in progress, one that can stand on its own. Her essay, "Fighting for Parental Rights in Prison" has been published by an academic journal. She is one participant who has found that her stories are fruitful, define her life, and establish an identity that can be useful upon release. Jackie left

federal prison on July 3, 2003, entered a halfway house, and now lives with her sister in the Bronx, while holding down a full time job.

### **Captive**

Your thinking ability has been confined  
Held prisoner within your mind  
Anxiety and stress have a grip on you  
Strong and powerful  
No room to break through  
Not being able to break free from the hold  
You find yourself crying lonely and alone.  
What should you do?  
Condemned lost and confused  
Suddenly a little voice comes to you.  
Escape...escape...escape  
To a better place and time  
Freeing yourself from emotional bondage  
Breaking free  
Learning to express yourself openly and honestly  
Making conditions unlimited  
Reaching new heights each day higher and higher  
With stability awareness and desire  
From the process you'll produce  
Positive thinking creativity and most of all  
Love and security  
Escape...  
Jacqueline Smith 10/96

Another prison writer who stood out was LaRon. Her essays about dining out with her mother, celebrating her birthday with a night on the town gave workshop participants a glimpse at a middle-class Black life in the 1970's. Other poems expressed her loneliness and isolation.

### **Lost Soul**

Running...breathless...with no sense of direction  
Just knowing that I cannot stay still  
Demons chasing ...danger lurking  
Is there nowhere I can rest?  
I tremble in the darkness of my soul  
No space to reach out and feel reality's touch  
Restrained against my will

Enslaved to a substance that's taken control  
Crimes gone unpunished, goals beyond my grasp  
Whispers from the darkness drawing me back  
To a place of alienation  
From all that really matters  
I stand where I am as my spirit screams.  
LaRon J

The tempo of the next poem is almost a rap or could be put to a hip-hop beat.

Written in 1996, this poem elevates poetry to song.

### **Hear My Roar**

Wastelands of concrete and blacktop transactions  
Selling addiction, despair, destruction, and death  
Lost inside an oblivion of darkness  
That doesn't take away the pain.  
Mother's whoring, father's tricking  
Too many sounds of a trigger clicking  
No compassion in this malicious game  
Growth stunted, education rejected  
Not much in life to be expected.  
Hopelessness, helplessness  
Where are the footholds to dreams?  
Lost behind the scenes  
Police corruption, department of corrections  
Warehousing all the lost souls  
Even the plot of C.I.A. unfolds.  
Who can you trust? Who really cares?  
The pain continues to flare  
Narrow minds and cynical opinions  
Media misrepresentation of our people's devastation  
I cry out without hesitation  
But, who hears my roar?

LaRon J.

As LaRon's poem vividly demonstrates and more broadly suggests, the prison narratives from the DC writing class express the difficult pre-prison situations incarcerated women come from. As we have seen, work from the class also focuses a great deal on relationships and the pain of relationships gone badly or relationships

from which the women have been cut off. Finally, and connected with this, the women's writing both expresses and affirms the struggle to survive as a self on "the inside."

The creative work produced in the DC Detention Center writing workshops was collected and published as an informal chapbook, or simple collection of poems, called, "Visions Behind the Stone Wall: Mixed Emotions Feeling the Pain, Love and Laughter" in December 1995. Each workshop participant received a copy and the sponsoring agency, the Detention Center's Religious Services office, retains a copy in the office files.

My aim in this study was to investigate why some women chose to use the prison narrative to witness their isolation and confinement and how they employ the techniques of writing - its strategy, and themes of self, authority, power, and resistance. My interest focused on the ways in which women's prison narratives could be located in the conversation of criminal justice public policy and the prison reform movement. In the concluding chapter, I will explore these and other possibilities.



## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Future Directions for Research

“There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*.” Claudia in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1994 9)

In this study I have gone inside the prison walls in order to listen to what women in prison have to tell us about their lives. I have sought to hear what they say, to understand what their stories can tell us, and to grasp the various ways in which the act of narrating helps these women prisoners make meaning out of their situations.

I have used three different approaches to women’s prison narratives. I have explored the process of production of an underground prison newsletter and I have used the writing and narrative material found in the newsletter to illustrate the themes of prison narratives. Additionally, I have investigated the milieu in which those “inside” and those “outside” collaborate to write women’s prison experiences. I have used oral history methods to interview and interpret the stories of two former prisoners, each of whom had found her way into the free world. Finally, I have used women’s prison writing from the DC Detention Center to present and interpret what women in prison, or women who have been in prison, have to tell us about the nature of their experience in prison and their reentry into society and life after prison. Their life stories and poetry offer important insights into the nature of imprisonment for women today and into the importance of narrative for women prisoners.

By probing three different kinds of narratives, versus a single type, I was able to offer a richer, deeper understanding of the scope of women’s narratives as well as to offer a comparative perspective on the evolution of struggles women in prison have faced since 1976. Incorporating both insider and outsider commentary on issues over

twenty-five years enables us to see more clearly both the broad as well as the fine details of a very complex social problem.

The period of my study 1976 to 2004 was one of enormous social and political change outside the American prison system. However, inside the prison system, most of the conditions remain unchanged from the 1970s. The one main difference was the tremendous rise in the women's prison population. This rising number of prisoners has overburdened a system that was already inadequately addressing the rehabilitation and reentry needs of women in prison.

Prior to discussing the prison narratives, I began by setting the context, that is, by reviewing the available evidence on women's prisons. Here I showed the proliferation of incarceration among low-income women of color in America. Based on Bureau of Prisons census data, and a variety of sources operating from a gender-based analysis of issues in criminal justice, Chapter One offered a discussion of the "prison-industrial complex," as well as a review of trends in women's incarceration.

In Chapter Two, I explored the creative spirit and political motivation behind the publication and production of a Seattle, WA based underground women's prison newsletter *Through the Looking Glass* that involved cooperation among a set of African American, Native American and white women. . My findings revealed a strong feminist production base that enabled hundreds of women prison writers from around the United States to have their voices heard in a monthly newsletter format. My research focused specifically on the poetry in the newsletter, finding that in each issue, many common experiences of loneliness, abuse, racism, homophobia, and

struggle were detailed, offering a space for the women's prison community to connect and identify.

In Chapter Three, I presented the oral life histories of two white female prisoners from the Seattle, WA area. One woman has been in and out of prison for 35 years and in oral testimony, she offers a vivid detailed account of her life experiences leading up to her first incarceration and the story of her life in the criminal justice system, as a prisoner, a poet, and a political activist. The other woman shares her prison testimony in order to describe her pre-prison experience, then her literal "escape" from the criminal justice system, and finally to share her status as a fugitive and activist.

The life stories of both Shelly and Jane were products of an arranged opportunity for them to explain to the academic world, to activists, and to the public just what they experienced during their many years of incarceration. These two women shared a glimpse of their pre-prison life, their prison experiences, and their lives after prison. On the one hand, their stories, taken as case studies, illustrate some of the broad patterns in the lives of prisoners. On the other, they vividly portray the unique stories of these individual lives.

In Chapter Four, I discussed my own teaching and research project wherein I created a space inside the DC Detention Center to enable women prisoners to develop their creative writing skills and find their voices as prison writers. This part of the study examined the themes in prison poetry and in the personal experiences of women prisoners in the DC Detention Center, where almost all of the prisoners were African-American. In the Detention Center classroom, women used the opportunity

to write about their lives, before, after, and in prison from the safety of our classroom. For some this was an escape into healing. For others, the classroom became a safe space in which to explore their past and their present, and to invent their future. Throughout this research, I have sought to show how female prisoners make meaning out of the prison experience through writing. In this work, I have sought to show commonalities among these and other women's prison writing communities spanning the past thirty years. For example, I found that women prison writers write about their family connections, the loss of self and in turn their humanity in prison, and use writing as a means to re-member themselves and to articulate for themselves and others positive aspects of identity as they contemplate possible futures back in society.

Prison narratives from the Seattle newsletter, Through the Looking Glass, as well as material written in the DC Detention Center's creative writing workshops contribute unique voices to the canon of prison literature. Ethnographic observations inside the jail setting offer a look at women's prison culture today. Life stories from prison writers and activists show the continuity of themes as prisoners attempt to reenter the free world. Finally, the approach taken in this research, combining ethnography and life history, offers findings that confirm that women prisoners are still struggling with the same basic issues, the same degradation, and the same hopelessness today as they fought against thirty years ago in America's prisons.

In this conclusion, through my analysis of the narrative material presented, I offer an interpretation of the past and current nature of women's prison experience and a critique of the social policies behind them. When we compare the narratives of

each chapter we find in these poignant personal accounts common portrayals of each of the three phases of the prison experience. Speaking of the pre-prison phase, women give voice to their struggles with abuse and poverty. In prison, they struggle with isolation from family, the difficulties of prison life and their problems with their sense of self. After prison they struggle, with great difficulty, to gain a place in society that will not lead them back again to prison. While the exact truth of some of these narratives might be open to question by skeptics, their accounts in their general form are completely consistent with what we know from other sources, including statistical survey data, about the kinds of women who go to prison, the things that bring them to prison, the kinds of experiences they have, and the difficulties of their return to society.

Throughout the narratives, we find that the physical and psychological effects of incarceration on women have a profound influence on women's ability to maintain their sense of self; most women struggle against the deadening effects of prison life. The narratives offer innumerable instances of women truly battling to make it through each day, to literally survive the physical and psychological isolation, humiliation, and degradation they experience as they do their time.

The oral storytelling and the writings in both the creative writing class and the newsletter, create a complex account of the past and current nature of women's prison experiences. In these narratives, we see a pattern of abuse and neglect in the prisoner's childhood and young adult life. A common circumstance for many women prisoners is a pattern of traumatic events and often poverty and drug use in their pre-prison experiences. Once in prison, the narratives reveal the women prisoners' search

for identity, family, connection, and support within the institution. Another cluster of themes found in the prison narratives and poetry involve plans and hopes for the freedom that may come with return to society. Women writers create plans for a new life and reunion with children lost. Dreams of economic independence, family, and a home of one's own are revealed in their writing.

The prisoner's use of narrative as a form of expression creates coherence in her life and offers her the opportunity to construct a self and a sense of past and future that she has control and ownership over. Narrative allows women to construct a sense of self from which to resist the negative identity as an imprisoned criminal. Finally, narrative allows women to express their relationality, to connect with other prisoners and with real and imagined individuals, family members, and communities on the outside. As we have seen, writing is a fundamental and powerful survival tool for women in prison.

Directly or indirectly these narratives can be read as strong critiques of the past and current nature of women's prison experience and the social policies behind them. Even though there are ongoing government-sponsored data collection efforts that survey large samples of women in the justice system and some excellent in-depth studies of selected groups of women, it is difficult to piece together from them a clear picture of the various and complex lives that women have led before incarceration.

In this dissertation I have sought to understand some of the ways in which incarcerated women define their lives through personal writing and oral stories. Additionally, I have demonstrated that the issues prison writers address in their narratives are sufficiently compelling to be included in future research focused on

rehabilitation, quality of life and reentry planning. It is my contention that women's efforts to maintain meaningful relationships and to carve out a semblance of self-affirming lifestyles within prisons are, as Michel Foucault has argued, examples of resistance to state institutions that in recent history perpetrate unprecedented "intrusions into the soul." Women in prison are constrained by the law and the justice system's embodiment of the structures of gender and race that shape their sense of self by interactions and opportunities before and during incarceration. Women in prison are constrained and influenced by stereotypes and misconceptions of who they are and what their lives are like. My research has captured some of these self-revelations and words of resistance. A few women in prison actively participate in raising their children and some are involved in litigation to change prison conditions and to challenge the oppressions of sexual abuse. Yet, often the prison and its correctional programs prevent or undo empowerment and reinforce women's dependency. Still, women do resist, respond to, or even change these environments as the narratives reveal.

Despite the limited research on women in prison and the barriers to their being heard and understood, it is possible to distill some sense of prison life, the forces that impinge on women in prison, and the women themselves from prison narratives. Policymakers, criminal justice practitioners, academicians, and the public should consider women prisoners' perceptions and thoughts, as well as their circumstances and characteristics. The controversies pertinent to women in prison are increasingly complex as each year goes by. A society that prides itself on justice needs to examine the foundations of its practices – and to evaluate all available inputs – to determine

future effective practices, practices that should recognize and deal with the special needs of women in general and of women from particular racial ethnic groups as well.

It is clear that incarcerated women represent a marginalized and vulnerable group of women. Even though it may be easier to forget those whom we lock away, we must remember that the vast majority of prisoners are ultimately released. How successfully women reenter the community is directly related to who they have, or have not, become as a result of their imprisonment.

As researcher Mary Eaton has observed, the woman who leaves prison is:

A prisoner. She brings this knowledge, this identity out into the world. The prison experience will affect her response to the outside world. The prison record will affect the response of others to her. When she comes out she brings something of the prison with her...As Fran [a former prisoner] put it: "You can never leave prison, because prison never leaves you (Eaton 56)."

### **Reframing Prison Narratives as Guideposts for Reform**

Let us consider the basic rationales for incarceration and what these women's narratives say about the policies based on them. All would agree that the concept of prison today has been one developed over time to remove criminals from society so they cannot harm other people and to punish them for wrong doing. Women's prison narratives allow for the concept of punishment and accept that there must be punishment that fits the crime. Certainly, throughout the prison narratives we have explored, the women writers seem to agree that the rationale of incarceration applies to policies based on punishing people for severe wrong doing. However, given the fact that most women prisoners commit relatively minor crimes related to drugs, we must question why we are punishing drug addicts and petty thieves for crimes that have a direct link to social injustice. If we agree that the crimes are linked to



economic deprivation, low skill levels, poverty, low literacy, racism, sexism, homophobia, as well as addictions that are used to self medicate in order to avoid the stark realities of poverty and abuse, then why are we treating them with such severe punishments? “The war on drugs has become a largely unannounced war on women,” writes Sharp (2003 8). A decade and a half ago (1979), 1 in 10 women in U.S. prisons was doing time for drugs. In 1998, it was 1 in 3 (33.9%) (Beck 2000: 10). Prison narratives from the DC Detention Center as well as Shelly Baker’s life stories are testimonies to the negative pattern of punishing victims for these “crimes” and for their drug and alcohol dependency. As we have seen, my research also demonstrates the intrinsic value of women’s prison narratives, of how writing to construct a self, and of sharing stories presents the prisoner with a very constructive reflexivity. Narrating is reminiscent of talk therapy, where one reviews the past events and feelings, restructures behaviors and supportive frameworks, creates a new plan of action for improved response to stress and challenges, and then moves forward in a supportive setting to meet those challenges head on.

These issues combined offer important perspectives on rehabilitation. Women’s programs must, first and foremost, give participants strategies to deal with their profound substance-abuse problems; they must also be gender sensitive. Program designers must understand that most women take drugs as a form of self-medication (rather than for adventure or challenge as men often do); they must also be sensitive to women’s unique circumstances (by providing services such as child care and transportation). Community programs must also deal with women’s immediate need for safe housing and stable employment, an undertaking made more

difficult by the passage of the Felony Drug Provision of the Welfare Reform Act, which bars women with drug convictions from receiving services. Clearly, any national strategy for dealing with the problems of women in prison must include a call to repeal this initiative, as well as advocating for the creation of women-centered programs to accompany any efforts to shift women from prison back to their communities (Sharp 12).

Women's prison narratives have offered us insight into what prisoners believe is necessary for them to live better lives on their return to society. We must recognize that women in prison and in transition from prison have different needs than their male counterparts due to their different experiences of incarceration and the ways that gender organizes identity. Recall the following lines from a poem published in

Through the Looking Glass in 1982:

Hey judge why do you think I stole  
That bread and cheese  
Don't you know that food stamps and welfare aren't enough?  
I have two hungry children to feed  
Hey judge what do you know about women in need?

These prison narratives are valuable resources for understanding what is needed when adopting a rehabilitative perspective for the complex needs of women prisoners.

Prisoner Shelly Baker offers a powerful assessment of the success of rehabilitation:

You put them in a cage and you poke them with a stick and then you want them to take responsibility and be a law-abiding citizen and treat you good? I don't think so. That's just not the way it works. It's just ridiculous that we go around and around with this. They say rehabilitation doesn't work. But you know, it takes at least twenty years for a new process to show any kind of evidence that it's working and they have never kept with the rehabilitation notion long enough. They try it for a year or two and something happens and they go, "oh no, it can't work." But look how many years we've had this punishment thing going on.

Prisoners are insisting that prison programming promote a belief in women's capacity for growth and change, but without precluding expectations of accountability. They compel us to recognize that women of color are disproportionately subjected to incarceration, increasing the importance of developing and implementing culturally rich strategies for supporting their efforts toward wholeness. Prison narratives demand that policy makers establish alternative models of sanctioning that recognize the reality of women's criminal acts and revitalize women's internal and external resources, rather than models that reinforce their separation and isolation from community. Women's prison narratives insist that society reform policies that expect ex-offenders to re-integrate effortlessly. The voices of women in prison speak clearly that more consideration is needed for the way in which gendered identity is corrupted and destroyed during incarceration:

The system runs off the backs and the sweat, the sacrifice of inmates —[it's] one thing to incarcerate and to take someone's physical freedoms and liberties away ... then it's another to f--- with who they are as a human. I mean do you want us in society, very embittered, angry—like Bob Marley says you know, “a hungry crowd is an angry crowd.” And do you want to starve people on those levels? [And] then live with them afterwards? I don't think so, because now some of the people I did time with, they're gonna get out. Most of the people are gonna get out some time, some day.

Drawing on themes in the women's prison narratives, it appears that prison rehabilitation policy should consider programs in the following areas, programs that are gender sensitive and also sensitive to the particular cultural-racial-ethnic backgrounds of different women prisoners:

Drug counseling and education - It is clear that the link between female criminality and drug use is very strong. Research consistently indicates that women

are more likely to be involved in crime if they are drug users (Merlo & Pollack 1995). The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment reports that approximately 80 percent of women in state prisons have substance abuse problems.

**Mental Health Counseling** - Many women who enter the criminal justice system have had prior contact with the mental health system. Approximately 75 percent of women who have serious mental illness also have co-occurring substance abuse disorders. Women in prison are receiving medication for psychological disorders, have been diagnosed with a current episode of depression or are receiving medication for a psychological disorder.

**Job Training** – It is also clear that women in prison need appropriate job training programs that will enable them to support not only themselves upon release but their families as well. Looking beyond traditionally gender specific roles such as secretarial and housekeeping positions, women could benefit from skills-based training in vocational or technical fields, such as electrical or plumbing work, carpentry, or receive training in the computer and Internet Technology fields.

**Family Unification Programs** – Women who stay in touch with their children while incarcerated appear to have a lower recidivism rate than those who lose their children to the foster care or adoption systems. Developing programs that allow women to keep in good touch with children and programs that allow women with babies and small children with them in prison could be implemented on larger scales across the country and used as incentive programs to both foster bonding and good parenting skills.

Re-entry Programs – When women are released from prison or jail it is imperative that they have a safe and affordable place to restart their lives. A halfway house offers initial support in the transition. Other alternatives to halfway houses, including alternative sentencing placements such as house arrest and electronic monitoring, can assist women in the transition from prison to the community.

Educational Programs – In order for women to be successful in their re-entry, women's educational needs must be met. As female prisoners have a wide range of educational background, but the majority have an eighth grade education, obviously GED and high school diploma programs must be standard in all correctional facilities.

Writing Workshops - As this research clearly shows, writing workshops can be used to enhance a prisoner's self esteem, to enable her to develop an empathic support system within the workshop group, and can be utilized to create a safe space for uncovering relational issues and generating the means of resolving conflict in women's lives. Writing workshops can also be used to address addictions, as well as the multiple issues surrounding drug acquisition, use, and sales, neglect of children and lack of parenting skills, and women's experiences of exploitation, abuse, and victimization.

This study has focused on the narratives of women prisoners over the past 30 years. We have explored women's prison writing that has not been public, often contraband, sometimes written for other prisoners, and sometimes in order to change the way the public interprets the female prisoner. This research has shown us how women in prison do their time. We have learned how they survive prison rules, how they feel about themselves, and how they struggle with self and with relationships.

We have nearly heard the ache in a woman's voice as her words express her longing for her children. We see the prison poet, an African American woman, a Native American woman, a Chicana or Latina, or a Caucasian women, standing in an orange jumpsuit as she reads her poem to the classroom full of prison writers. Those moments when an exiled women steps out of the silence and raises her voice above a whisper to share her thoughts about the prison walls can be instructional for all of us.

## Appendix A

### Sample Writing Exercises I

1. Describe a memory you have of your mother. Tell me what she looked like, sounded like, what she liked to do, or tell me about a time that you spent together with her. Remember a scene in which you felt most connected with your mother. Describe her and put action into the story. Maybe you remember going shopping or visiting relative, a holiday gathering, or a happy day with your mom. Bedtime, mealtime, or fun time. Put as much detail and feeling into the story as you can, be as colorful as possible.
2. Imagine your self in a large store—department store, sporting goods, antique, jewelry, and restaurant supply store. Ten items are free to you. Describe what you would get.
3. Set ten (or more) realistic goals for yourself. Imagine your life after you have accomplished each of them. Describe your life five years from now after you have accomplished these goals. Remember to give as much detail as possible.
4. Describe what you think the world would be like if women were in charge.
5. You can redo one act from your past. How do you change it? Describe what happens as a result.
6. You find a suitcase containing things you have needed or wanted for a long time. Describe each item as you take it out of the suitcase.
7. Recall kindness and help you have received. Remember kindness creates a nature desire to repay it. Describe one act of pure kindness that you have received. Give lots of details and be as honest as you can about how receiving that kindness made you feel.
8. Celebrate a food in a poem. Write about cooking or eating that food. What does it feel like as you prepare it? How does it smell while baking? How does it taste? What effect does it have on others when you give it to them warm from the oven?

## Appendix B

### Sample Writing Exercises II

1. Someone in your past returns and gives you a gift. Who is it? Describe the gift.
2. You have been given a single dose of love potion. What do you do with it? What are the results?
3. You win the lottery. What do you do with the money?
4. Think of someone you love. Write a poem for him/her. Write your own diary of motherhood, of your experience during pregnancy, mothering or childbirth. Include and leave out whatever you wish. You might consider telling at least part of the story from your child's point of view. If you've never had a child, imagine the situation and describe the experience.
5. Tell the story of your own birth as told to you by your elders.
6. Tell a story about your father that takes place before you were born.
7. Write a biography of your father. Make it as long and as complete as possible. If you find there are gaps, don't worry. Imagine what he might have been like given the information you do have.
8. Make a list of all the things that are against your (or your mother) as a single parent.
9. Make another list of all the advantages of being a single parent.
10. Write about the power and difficulty of all types of sisterhood – biological and ideological. Consider what degree of expectation you bring to a “sisterly” relationship.



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