

Probing the Boundaries
Innovative Dialogue

Prison Writings

Edited by

Danine Farquharson

Inter-Disciplinary Press
Publishing Creative Research

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Volume 2

A volume in the *Probing the Boundaries* project
'Prison Writings'

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Edited by

Danine Farquharson

Oxford, United Kingdom

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Editor's Note

In September of 2002 a group of diverse individuals met in Vienna to talk about Prison Writing; that is, prisoners who write, writers who have been imprisoned, written texts about prisons, alternative texts for the expression of prison experience, and the historical context of prison organization. The three days of discussion, disagreement, and dialogue were invigorating, challenging, and ultimately enlivening. The pages that follow represent but a small slice of the ideas, and the people.

A special note of gratitude must go to Dr. Rob Fisher who, along with Dr. Diana Medicott, organized the conference. His inspired ideas about interdisciplinary work are what brought us all together.

Any errors in this publication are solely the fault of the editor.

Danine Farquharson
St. Jerome's University

Thinking the Prison, Writing the Experience

Diana Medlicott

1. Introduction

This conference brings together an extraordinary combination of pieces reflecting on prison writing and prison experience. There were other wonderful submissions from around the world which could not be included, sometimes because delegates were denied permission to come. So those of us who are here are deeply appreciative of the freedoms we enjoy, one of which is to come together and discuss this provocative topic. We honour those who are here and those who could not attend.

The title of this paper refers to our joint difficulties: all of us must find a way of conceptualising the prison, with all its ambiguities, before we could write about it. In that sense, we have all had to become phenomenologists. We have had to make a transition from the ordinary, straightforward attitude toward the world. We have embraced a reflective attitude, so that we can properly recognise the prison, not as wider society sees it, but as a unique object for our consciousness, an object whose complexity and paradoxes are many. Coming from many disciplines, we all have different tools with which to reflect. Part of the pleasure of this conference will come from acquainting ourselves with each other's tools of reflection and analysis.

Traditionally, penology tends to consider the prison in conjunction with the philosophical justifications for punishment, which by extension become justifications for the prison. These justifications derive from utilitarianism and retributivism. Of course this quickly gets us into a muddle, for it is hard to provide a moral justification for the deliberate infliction of intentional harm, which is what punishment is, and what the prison provides. It is hard to provide moral justification for the prison, except in the coldest, most detached, clinical and abstract sense.

You will be relieved to hear I am not even going to try. I do not think that is our task in this conference. To think the prison today, I am uncoupling it from these philosophical justifications and from theories of punishment. The prison exists: it is a unique phenomenon, a social and political institution different from all others. Let us try to understand it, or aspects of it, and write that shared understanding.

2. The Prison as Laboratory

The modern prison in Europe emerged in a new post Enlightenment scientific age, although confinement and incarceration have been with us for thousands of years. The penal gaze, that special knowledgeable look with the power to define, discipline and manage, has remorselessly extended its remit, and the last 200 years have seen the prison evolve with an ever-increasing administrative apparatus, bureaucratic expansion and professionalization. Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon lives on in the modern prison. It is indeed a laboratory:

a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals. To experiment with medicines and monitor their effects. To try out different punishments, to teach different techniques.¹

In order to understand the prison, we must therefore try to understand those power and knowledge relations, in differing historical contexts, which produced the prison and continue to sustain it as the major form of punishment in western societies. The prison is expressive of power relations at many levels: today I am going to discuss those levels that are particularly important in relation to the experience of prison.

At the level of states and systems, the prison is a powerful expression of dominant or hegemonic ideologies. Foucault's historical analysis is helpful in pointing out the modern application of special knowledge onto the management of problem populations.² The targeting of special, problem populations has over time become more efficient, insidious and subtle: it is done through political and economic measures, the maintenance of social stratification, political repression, and economic strategies. In the prison, this targeting of special populations is so clear to see: all the world over we find prison populations disproportionately composed of the poor, the unemployed, the stateless, the marginalized, the refugee, the socially excluded, the political or religious minority, and the economic migrant. Inmate populations all over the world reflect the systemic discrimination within that particular state with regard to indigenous people, particular political or religious groups, and ethnic minorities.

Then we must consider power relations at the societal level: each society evolves and operates a prison system that is in some way a harmonious fit with the values and cultural preoccupations of that society. In turn, the prison performs some important social functions in every society. It is expressive, on many levels, of the values of that particular society.

This cultural fit produces interesting contrasts: the cell is the hallmark of the English system where we favour putting people into isolated spaces. Despite a lot of rhetoric to the contrary, coupled with statements of official intent, we largely keep prisoners idle, suffering the pains of empty time.³ In other societies, however, the dormitory is a more usual way of housing prisoners, and forced labour may well be extracted from each prisoner. Needless to say, each characteristic becomes a source of suffering for inmates, because it is imposed: each characteristic destroys autonomy, in ways consistent with that society. It is not possible to design a prison with selected characteristics from all those that are on offer around the world, and come up with something that is pleasing to the human condition, because all characteristics of prisons are forced upon inmates against their will. The loss of liberty is actually a seizure of individual liberty by the state, and just as plants grow toward light, so do human beings grow toward freedom, and shrink from the loss of it.

When Jeremy Bentham spoke of the prison in 1791, with reference to his blueprint for the innovative Panopticon, he referred to it as "a mill for grinding rogues honest,"⁴ and this demonstrates the cultural fit between the newly emerging industrial society of which he was an illustrious member, and his way of thinking about the prison. This industrial metaphor speaks of the ruthless grinding action which decimates grain, and which can be cruelly applied to the normalisation of the indigent and the criminal. Erving Goffman's characterisation of the total institution, such as the prison and the asylum, as "a forcing houses for changing persons" also carries an echo of the industrial process.⁵ The total institution is so powerful that it can alter persons against their will, just as factories force raw materials into changed forms.

Then, the third level of power relations is that of the experienced, the subjective. In any given prison, the systematised and state-sanctioned set of power relations, which is mediated and operated in distinctive ways in each society, is actually personalised. That is to say, it is put into practice: the technology of power attempts to dominate, control, subjugate and humiliate individual men, women and children. When I use the pronoun 'he', this is a shorthand for men, women and children. (There are of course some patterned differences in the way men, women and children experience and deal with prison, and we are fortunate at this conference to have two papers specifically about women's experience of incarceration).

The tools of this power inside an individual establishment are banal and ordinary, but in combination they are totalitarian, extreme, and monolithic. The grim architecture, the bars, the iron gates, the barbed wire, the dogs patrolling the perimeter, the constant surveillance, the allocation of individual space, the timetable, the rules, the penalties for rule infractions, the uniforms, and the reception procedures – all of these tools, worked out through special knowledge, form a total system of power.

What does this special knowledge and power have in its sights? What is the object of all these mechanisms of power, that bear so personally upon each prisoner, and yet depersonalise so efficiently? The object is the self. The object is individual subjectivity. The following words were written to describe the modern state, but they can equally well be taken as a description of the modern prison:

The self is a vital element in the networks of power that traverse modern societies. The regulatory apparatus of the modern state is not something imposed from outside upon individuals who have remained essentially untouched by it. Incorporating, shaping, channelling, and enhancing subjectivity have been intrinsic to the operations of government.⁶

The prison mirrors the activity of the modern state, in a heightened atmosphere of punitive loathing. It is the individual self that is the object of the special knowledge, the laborious rules and networks of power within prison. The regulatory apparatus of the modern prison does not remain external to individuals: they cannot remain untouched by it. It enters into and shapes their subjectivity, and this profound power is what is absolutely intrinsic about prisons. Quite effortlessly, it persuades some prisoners that they are worthless. Self-esteem is often the first casualty of the imprisoned self.

Every activity and every human relationship in prison takes place under the shadow of power relations: even the way medical care is practiced in prison is subsumed under the principles of domination, repression and mortification. It is doctors who certify prisoners healthy enough to be punished for breaking rules. If the prison can be said to have an intention, that intention is surely to mortify, curb, deny, or break the human spirit.

The prison's intentions do not stop with the prisoners: it is profoundly successful with the mortification of staff also. Very many prison staff in the UK are decent and ethical men and women, who struggle with inadequate resources and bad management to provide decent, humane conditions and regimes. Some burn out. Prison staff have extremely high rates of sickness, mental breakdown and early retirement. Some get corrupted,

disillusioned, crushed. Some start out rotten, drawn to work in prison because of their rottenness, others become rotten.

Prison does what it does, to staff and prisoners, with an economy of effort. So-called advanced societies have made a historical transition toward an economy of power: the lash, the torture, and the meaningless labour are no longer necessary for subjugation of the human spirit. It is not necessary to break the body in order to reach the soul. Slot bodies into spaces, remove all control and personal choice in relation to personal space, personal timeness, privacy and human association and activity, and the soul will provide its own torment, as thoughts fly inward. The following extract shows how easy it is to produce suffering, through knowledge of the human psyche coupled with the efficient management of time and space:

You keep on thinking of the years you have to do, in this little space...you are in it for 22 hours a day...well, you can imagine for yourself....(weeps). Trying to survive is a problem.... it's not possible (weeps).⁷

No-one had beaten this prisoner. He had been receiving three good meals a day, and an hour's exercise, with a further hour out of cell. But he was in torment: the management of his time and space, coupled with his own thoughts about the years ahead, was enough to produce profound pain, so deeply felt that he longed to die. Prisoners often find it hard to define the prison, because its routines seem so ordinary. For that reason, it is not often appreciated how deep the ordinary suffering of everyday life is:

If it was just the unhappiness of the place, you could cope with it, but again, the word that springs to mind is oppression, isolation. It's just getting up, sit down, get into bed and go to sleep. Get up, sit down, get into bed and go to sleep, over and over again.⁸

3. Understanding the Prison

How down to earth are the descriptions of prisoners! How ordinary prison sometimes seems! And yet we need extraordinary tools to understand it, to interpret it and to pass that interpretation out into wider society. Two of these tools are imagination and rigour.

Imagination is needed to complement the over-rational, cold-hearted approaches of positivistic science, which is so ill equipped for the task of producing real understanding of the prison. Qualitative research relies both on imagination and rigour, and is an integral part of any scientific understanding of the prison. Poetic and literary representations, autobiographies, and prison diaries are all an integral part of understanding the prison experience: without these imaginative, intuitive and personally experienced contributions, we cannot even begin to grasp at the hundreds of seen and unseen constraints on the human spirit and the human body, and we cannot truly know the meaning of prison.

Prison is a place that induces ontological insecurity. Ontological insecurity, or a deep experience of profound unease, comes about when individuals are forcibly prevented from exercising autonomy over their bodies, and excluded from predictable and safe routines and encounters.⁹ It is a state of unease where all confidence and trust in the surrounding environment disappears: in this state, the individual realises that the surrounding environment is not as it appears to be. There is no safety net: the realisation grows that there is, indeed, no safety for the deeply suffering self. The self is insecure, at risk, and on guard. This is often experienced by prisoners in a quite literal sense as falling. Trying to explain their feelings since entry into prison, prisoners often say that it has been like a long slow falling off a cliff.¹⁰

The most extreme expression of this ontological insecurity is in places of confinement where death is an ever present possibility, and Bruno Bettelheim has written about this in relation to the camps of the holocaust.¹¹ Of course the modern prison is generally a less extreme environment, but nevertheless it efficiently dissolves the feeling of autonomy of action that is so important in everyday life, and it systematically produces profound insecurity. Unfortunately very many prisoners enter prison from backgrounds of terrible abuse, poverty and deprivation, and so they already suffer deep-rooted vulnerability of one kind or another. Sometimes their circumstances have prevented them from ever experiencing that sense of security which many of us take for granted:

I never felt safe, even as a child. And my childhood is something which is good, bad, very bad, and.... if I can call it a childhood. I don't really think I had a childhood, but I grew up, from a baby to man of course. But whether that was a childhood, or just a growing process, I'm not too sure.¹²

For such prisoners, who have never achieved a sense of being at home in the world, prison is productive of particular suffering. The sense of insecurity is aggravated, and the self feels powerless to build itself a place of safety. Psychological labels such as depression or acute anxiety, so freely applied to prisoners with troubled identities, often seem to suggest that the fault lies in the sufferer himself. It is implied that the sufferer is responsible for his own crisis and his own pathology, when, in reality, the prisoner had a start in life that was barely tolerable and now, in prison, has been placed in conditions that compound that vulnerability.

However, subjectivity both in everyday life and in total institutions is infinitely adaptable. Individuals achieve a feeling of relative comfort in the world through an amazing array of skills. In institutions inmates frequently adapt with humour to the peculiar requirements of a total institution, even when it is a place of sensory deprivation and depersonalisation where the self is stripped down. Goffman's self in *Asylum* is never entirely defeated: he resists, complies, adapts, innovates.¹³ This is the good news in prison studies – the self answers back! What a grim area of study it would be were this not the case. Resistance is one of the shared themes of this conference. It comes in many guises. Resistance can face outwards, inwards or both ways. Many prisoners turn their resistance outwards: they challenge rules and routines, and in so doing, they keep alive the flame of autonomy, choice, and self identity. Prisoners resist in other outwardly expressive ways, by tending the self through the arts, music or politics, and in so doing they discover or maintain self-respect and value.

It is these effects and responses of resistance that are so neglected in Foucault's analysis.¹⁴ His is a history without subjects. There are no knowledgeable human agents in his history of the prison. He does not recognise the prison as a site of struggle and resistance. He sees the docile bodies, but he does not see inside to the complex subjectivities. In a sense I see this conference as putting that omission right: all of us are concerned, in one way or another, with issues of subjectivity, experience and forms of resistance in prison.

In my own area of suicide in prison, I am constantly brought face to face with the amazing ambivalence of subjectivity, as prisoners battle with the ambiguity of feeling suicidal in prison, and they fight to resist the falling away of the self into hopelessness and despair. Being suicidal in prison is a profoundly ambivalent feeling. Because of the despair underpinning it, there is often an inertia, a slowing down, a hopeless resignation. Part of the self may be turning toward giving up, to death, the ultimate escape from prison. But this is resisted, and this is usually internalised in ways that produce the most profound tension and dissonance. Surely the struggle between Freud's life and death instinct is at its height in prisons, detention centres, and camps: places where the human spirit is systematically stamped on, with the intention of destruction. Places where the human spirit resists most heroically this effacement of the self as a sphere of unique value.

So perhaps there is a relationship of sorts between ontological insecurity, and the many forms of resistance which prisoners engage in. Perhaps the dominant ideology of power relations, combined with the manufactured atmosphere of ontological insecurity, pushes prisoners toward forms of resistance, and in

But I want to go further than this. I want to suggest that, for some prisoners, they are nudged toward a kind of heightened awareness not just of their inner self, but of their place in the world. They reflect on life, on present experience, and on what is truly felt to be important. Many prisoners discover for the first time just what really moves them about existence – be it politics, religion, literature or bodybuilding. This heightened awareness comes to them in a place where anxiety is naturally generated, by the very nature of incarceration, about passing time, about final outcomes, about finitude and how to die. Time is passing: life is going on outside the prison, but for the prisoner, life has been arrested. And yet he lives on, ageing, deteriorating. Even if he is in prison for a very short time, he becomes aware that this is a place where time is wasting him. He tries therefore to catch at it, and make it meaningful. His subjectivity blazes out, expressed in the face of a place which would crush subjectivity if it could. Is it too extravagant to call this search for meaning authenticity? This is so often a theme in prison literature, in autobiographies, diaries and fictional treatments. Victor Serge was a libertarian Russian revolutionary, imprisoned in Paris from 1912-1917, and he spoke of the authentic feelings that imprisonment in a cell can produce:

I have changed cells several times. It has never been without feeling a certain sadness at having to leave walls which could speak, whose every secret I knew, between which I had spent such hours of plenitude. My memory of an iron-gray death cell – despite an infinite fifteen-day nightmare – contains an element of authentic clarity.¹⁵

This search for authentic clarity is surely another implicit theme in all our papers. We at this conference are all mapping, to some extent, this authentic clarity, whether we speak of political education and practice in prison, various forms of resistance, or self-expression through music, literature or drama. In very many ways, prisoners resist, and in so doing they express an authenticity of experience that was not always clear in their everyday life with its mundane concerns.

So tentatively, I offer this juxtaposition to you: prison as a laboratory and a site of power, but prison as a place that also produces the most extraordinary authenticity of experience. At the beginning of this presentation, I spoke of how honoured I feel to be sharing this platform with you all. This theme of authenticity runs like a golden thread through all your contributions. Each of you, in what seems to me highly honourable ways, is trying to grasp an extraordinary reality, inside of a most duplicitous and deceiving world. In doing so, you are bearing witness to a rich range of subjectivities, which come about through a complex dialectical interaction with power relations. As Foucault said, "Power creates: it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth."¹⁶

In uncoupling prison from its relationship with crime, deviance, and legal or philosophical justifications, it is this truth, this reality, and this domain of objects that we aspire to reach and share with each other. Let our conversations begin.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 203-4.
2. Ibid.
3. Diana Medicott, "Surviving in the Time Machine: Suicidal Prisoners and the Pains of Prison Time," *Time and Society*, vol. 8 (2), 1999: 211-230.
4. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: Methuen, 1970), 210.
5. Erving Goffman, *Asylum*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 22.
6. Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 198.
7. Diana Medicott, *Surviving the Prison Place: Narratives of Suicidal Prisoners*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 155.
8. Ibid, 110-111.
9. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 64.
10. Medicott, 210-211.
11. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).
12. Medicott, 111.
13. Goffman 1961.
14. Foucault 1979.
15. Victor Serge, *Men in Prison*, (London: Gollancz, 1977), 145.
16. Foucault, 92.

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Women's Identity in Prison: Nawal El-Saadawi's *Memoirs From The Women's Prison*

Nawar Al-Hassan Golley

When Nawal el-Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* was published in 1957, she was at the beginning of her literary and medical career. Since then, she has written many medical and literary books on issues of sexuality and sexual and social discrimination against women especially in Arab countries. By the time she wrote *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (hereafter referred to as *Prison*),¹ in 1981 the year of her imprisonment and subsequent release, she was already a well-known figure within the Arab World and her reputation was spreading abroad. Unlike the first memoir, which publicizes the private life of a female fictional character, *Prison* is a memoir that makes public aspects of the life of a well-known public figure, the writer herself, and her prison experience. This experience is itself already a public one in the sense that the writer is not confined to solitary imprisonment but shares the same prison with hundreds of other women, both political and ordinary prisoners. One of the issues discussed here is how the private and the public are merged in *Prison* and whether the public aspect of the experience has dictated the kind of "I" the writer uses and the type of consciousness that appears in the autobiographical narrative. Has Saadawi represented a political self (well aware of its own identity and accomplishments) that has preserved a sense of uniqueness, or has her political experience allowed for some development of a collective consciousness and identification with other women?

Prison is also a leading book of its kind. Political memoirs by Arab women were rarely found before 1981. It is, by no means, the first prison memoir ever written by an Arab woman. In 1972, Zaynab al-Ghazali al-Jabeli, the Egyptian woman who founded the Muslim Women's Association in 1936, published her memoirs. Al-Ghazali wrote about her six years' imprisonment in a Cairo war prison, between 1965 and 1971, under Jamal Abdel Nasser for charges of collaboration with the Muslim Brothers.² Prison memoirs by women from outside the Arab world became available in Arabic translations. Angela Davis's memoirs, for instance, which record her political experience inside and outside prison, became known to the Arab public in early 1977. Although Saadawi is by no means the first Arab woman to initiate a prison memoir, she nonetheless had only a limited corpus of conventional models of political narratives to follow.

One reason why political memoirs by Arab women have been rare until recently is the limited number of women who have been involved in politics in the traditional sense of the word. It is only in the last twenty years or so that Arab regimes have gradually opened their doors to women. Due to women's education and their participation in politics, though limited, political memoirs have become more available; for example, *Diaries of a Woman from the Saudi Prisons* by Alia Makey, published in 1989 by Al-Safa in London, and *My Home, My Prison* by Raymonda Tawil, published in 1983 by Zed Press.

According to Barbara Harlow, in "Third World Women's Narratives of Prison",³ women's prison writings from different developing countries who recorded their experiences of struggle and defiance under repressive regimes and authoritarian states, taken collectively, mark "the emergence of a new literary corpus out of contemporary conditions in the Third World."⁴ She maintains that such a corpus challenges western literary, critical and feminist theoretical developments in two simultaneous ways. First, she argues that, generically, such writings "defy traditional categories and distinctions and combine fictional forms with documentary record."⁵ Second, these women's

collective experience and the political development that they describe emerge out of their position within a set of social relations giving rise to a secular ideology, one not based on bonds of gender, race, or ethnicity – which may be shared by men and may not be shared by all women.⁶

I believe that most autobiographical forms, including diaries and memoirs, whether written by westerners or otherwise, by men or women, can be said to combine the fictional and the non-fictional in one way or another. Hence, combining the fictional with the non-fictional is not an exclusive characteristic of "Third World" women's narratives as Harlow suggests. However, Saadawi's *Prison* conforms to the two-fold challenge that Harlow theorizes.

1. The Narrative Structure: Documentary, Memory and Literary Transformation

First, *Prison* is a book based on diaries written while Saadawi was actually in prison. She did not have proper paper on which to write for the prisoners were not allowed to write. When one of the cellmates asked for

a pen and paper to write a letter to her mother, a senior prison administrator, referring to the power of writing, replied that it was easier to give the prisoner pistols than pens and paper (MWP 49). Writing is a political issue; Saadawi and many other cellmates were imprisoned because they had written against the grain. They had committed no actual crimes in that they had not killed or robbed any one. Their only crime was to write against the authoritarian state and expressed their anger against the political, social and economic injustices practised by Sadat's repressive regime. In spite of the lack of paper, Saadawi was determined to continue writing in jail. She wrote on toilet paper and cigarette papers she bought from the prison canteen. We do not know where she got the pen. She could have hidden it when the prisoners were given pieces of paper and a pen to write down their requirements for clothes; or possibly the "shawisha", (the woman prison guard who became friendly and helpful to the political prisoners, and especially to Saadawi) gave it to her secretly; or perhaps it was an eyebrow pencil (MWP 94)?

The question of exactly when Saadawi started recording her diaries is relevant to the issue of whether the book is a pure documentary of a prison experience or whether it combines real records with fiction and imagination. In the introduction to the Arabic version, Saadawi confirms that she wrote her first words on the day she entered prison.⁷ It is clear, then, that both diaries and memories are the storehouses from which *Prison* was written or shall we say produced? Memories can be accurate or misleading, true or false, exact or approximate, literal or figurative; and even diaries, the substitute for memories and protection against forgetfulness, because they are written, can be judged according to the same criteria, even when the words follow only hours after the events they describe. Reading through the 190 pages of *Prison*, one can easily feel that the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction is false. For just as Saadawi is, no doubt, truthful in her documentation of her three-month prison experience, so she also makes use of her literary imagination, not in creating actions or characters that did not happen or exist but in describing people and events and by making use of some fictional techniques. She does this without making her experience any less real to the reader than to herself.

The technique of *Prison* is not simple or straightforward but complex and novel-like. Events are not arranged according to their chronological order; instead many flashbacks interrupt the sequence of incidents throughout the pages because memories from the past or contemplations about the present or the future are conjured up in the mind of the narrator; or because she wants to express certain feelings inspired by particular actions or scenes. For example, the book opens with a knock at the door of the flat where the narrator is sitting down trying to write her novel. It takes this door seven whole pages to be opened, including four pages of flashbacks, introspection and of reflection on who is knocking and what could have happened, before she actually answers the door which has to be broken down by the impatient policeman. Between the first and the second knock, she is thinking about the novel she is writing, the one she started in 1978 when she was in Addis Ababa working for the United Nations. Between the second and the third, it is her memory of her flat in Addis Ababa, how much she missed Egypt and its poor people while abroad, and her estrangement when she returned to Egypt, losing her job because of her outspokenness and criticism of the repressive Egyptian regime and of the apparatus of the United Nations, in which "Third World women slide to the bottom of the heap" (MWP 3). Between the third and fourth knock, she reflects upon how the agreement with Israel changed the attitude of the Egyptian people who have become corrupt. The book is full of other examples.

Moreover, the language of *Prison* is the language of a literary book, by a writer who has had a long experience in writing literature rather than the language of a simple chronicle of daily events. Daily memories are obviously the main source of the language; however, the descriptive details of people the narrator has met could not have come out of memory alone; they require a great deal of imagination. For example, at the police station on the day of the arrest, Saadawi is left for a while with an old guard. In her description of him she gives certain details that probably were not really remembered but rather were partly invented, such as the number of buttons he had on his jacket (MWP 12).

Even if people do remember astonishing details in crucial circumstances, such as an arrest, Saadawi's inclusion of such details signifies a literary narrative. The language is also ironical and the style sometimes cynical, both of which contribute to the literariness of the narrative. For example, when the police car, taking her to the station, breaks down, Saadawi finds the humour to write: "Lucky for me that I was born in an underdeveloping country where police cars are ancient and liable to break down" (MWP 20).

The use of myth throughout the pages of *Prison* also creates an atmosphere of fiction, for example, "Their long and sharp pointed rifles and bayonets reminded me of the needles which used to be plunged into the bodies of witches in search of the mark of the devil" (MWP 23) and "On one shoulder, raised higher than the other, a black stripe perches like a black feather on the head of a mythical bird or legendary beast of ancient times" (MWP 27). In fact, the whole experience of prison from the beginning "the arrest without a warrant from the chief Prosecutor or investigation – to the end seems to be a nightmare for Saadawi, because at many moments she tells us that she is "still unable to believe this scene" (MWP 10), as if the whole story were a myth.

The use of myth is entirely illustrative and localised, however, for it does not disturb the very matter-of-fact rational approach of the book. Saadawi's narrative fluctuates between a desire to identify her individual self, on the one hand, and the need to relate this self to the community of oppressed women on the other.

2. Prison Society: Dis/Unity

Thus, we see that *Prison* combines factual and fictional aspects together with documentary and literary features. The second challenge that *Prison* offers is that, although it is a diary like any other diary or autobiographical piece of writing intended for publication, which is born out of a personal desire to share one's individual experience with the reader, it is not "intended as a display of individual genius".⁸ In Saadawi's memoirs, gender and class differences are contained in an almost utopian solidarity among women and men of various convictions and backgrounds, all united against an oppressive regime. Defining a collective identity in prison, therefore, can be extended to most writers who are imprisoned under repressive governments.

Although Saadawi maintains a clear sense of achievement and self-distinction, not only in *Prison* but in most of her writings, represent, in her record of her own imprisonment experience she manages to represent the collective experience of a group of women in prison united by social and political oppression. These women, although they have personal names, lose their specific identities at times and become representative of all Egyptian women outside prison. What happened to each of them could have happened to any other Egyptian woman. In other words, none of them, including Saadawi, is intended to represent a unique or an extraordinary case; they simply represent a sample of Egyptian women under similar conditions of social and political repression. It is interesting that Saadawi uses the title *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, – not "My Memoirs in Prison", for example, or any other title in the singular mode – which indicates the collective nature of her book. Although her own story remains the central one, her own memoirs are interwoven with the lives of the other women she has met and admired in jail. Her own case, as a political prisoner, is not any more heroic or important than that of Fathiyya, for instance, who is in jail because she killed her husband for raping their own daughter.

In prison, political detainees were separated from ordinary prisoners (MWP 58); however, all prisoners got together (though still separated by bars) in the afternoons for rest and exercise. Among the two sets of prisoners, a sense of ambiguous affiliation was created producing a kind of bonding. Political detainees, most of whom were educated women and thus of middle to upper class background, were treated differently by the prison authorities. Their demands for better food and hygienic conditions in the cell were met, although only when the prison was under inspection by higher authorities, unlike those of the criminal offenders, most of whom were poor and dejected women. Some of the prostitutes from the second set of prisoners were ordered to clean the cell of political detainees (MWP 49), a further sign of class discrimination practised by the prison apparatus itself. When they complained of the noise coming from the ordinary prisoners and their children's cell, the authorities were very quick to build a wall separating the two cells (MWP 44). However, this discrimination did not deter the prisoners from both cells from communicating with each other.

The political prisoners as well, although "of different generations, ages, and outlooks on life", found some kind of mutual feeling and sympathy which brought them together. These new social ties among the women prisoners challenge not only the prison apparatus, which tries to separate political from common prisoners, but also the whole social apparatus which is built on familial or biological filiation. This is Edward Said's notion of affiliative rather than filiative groupings where individuals affiliate with a range of different groups and form their sense of identity through a set of complex allegiances.

Saadawi is put behind does not separate her from life altogether nor does it stop her activities as the authorities have hoped. She challenges the state, which separates her from her husband and children, by building new bonding relationships with inmates and other cellmates, some of whom are women of differing or even opposing views and of different social backgrounds, whom she keeps in touch with even after she is released. When she first arrives in the cell, she sees a number of veiled women, some of them old friends of hers, with whom she had discussions and disagreements about Islam and the veil. After a few days, however, a sense of love for all these women overwhelmed her and her differences from them.

Like all political prisoners, Saadawi is separated from her family and not allowed to see them at all. In jail, she finds another family, though not of her own blood. Within this family of biologically unrelated women, Saadawi relives her "entire childhood" (MWP 39); she lives "a communal life" (MWP 39). There are moments of joy, even in prison away from her husband and children, and a feeling of solidarity against the common enemy, the oppressive state.

Prison does not dedicate long chapters or pages to family members. Saadawi misses her husband and children whom she mentions here and there, but we, as readers, do not get to know anything about them. They are absent figures in the book; we just know that they are there outside prison. She does not even mention her

father much. The mother is only remembered on her death-bed. Saadawi's nine siblings are not mentioned at all. Instead, Saadawi focuses her memoirs on the new group of women with whom she shared the days of her imprisonment and the social, economic and political circumstances which led each of them to be there.

Ahdaf Soueif has criticized the type of women who come to life under Saadawi's touch. He finds it curious that other women from her cell, such as Latifa al-Zayyat, Awatif Abd-el-Rahman, Shahinda Muqallad, Safinaz Kazim and Amina Rashid, all of whom are as educated and well-known as Saadawi herself, are "reduced to the role of a chorus providing backing for Saadawi's courageous outspokenness."⁹ It is true that Saadawi writes more about women from the other cell, such as Dhouba, the gentle black procuress, Sabah, the mad, prophetic beggar, and Fathiyya-the-Murderess, all of whom are illiterate. Soueif implies that Saadawi is not crediting the other educated women by not writing about them as much as she does the other women. Instead of seeing this as a sign of arrogance, however, it could be seen more positively as Saadawi's effort to be a spokeswoman for these illiterate women and their unjust circumstances. This is another challenge to the state for ordinary prisoners are not allowed to communicate with the political prisoners. The other educated women are quite capable of writing whatever they want about their experiences in prison, just as Saadawi has done about hers.

The day after her release, Saadawi went back to prison, this time to take food to her cellmates who had not yet been released. Furthermore, she did not ignore the note they sent with the "shawisha" asking her to work for their transfer to a prison hospital. With her help through some people she knew, the prisoners were first transferred and then released shortly afterward. Thus we see that Saadawi has developed a communal consciousness which brings her together with other women. In her diary, she not only writes her own story of struggle but also rewrites the social order to include a vision of new relational possibilities that transcend ethnic, class and familial ties.

3. Assertiveness

Arab male critics have always criticized and felt uneasy about Saadawi's assertive style. Her assertiveness, however, is what has made her special and differentiated her from other Arab feminists, especially those who preceded her. This assertiveness comes partially from her authoritative knowledge of medicine, which demystifies many traditional beliefs that have, for centuries, been responsible for a great many forms of discrimination between the sexes. Saadawi is never shy about using such knowledge to support her feminist arguments. Her literary language is also greatly influenced by her scientific knowledge. Her assertiveness is manifested not only in her authoritative use of science and medical knowledge but also in feminist terms as well. In *Prison*, Saadawi, the heroine of her own book, declares on various occasions that she is "more worthy of respect than any man, including your precious Head Director" (MWP 17), as she angrily answers the guard. She does not hide her admiration for her self-image, which has features, usually ascribed to the masculine, like her "tall stature and [her] strong, taut muscles." "Femininity is not weakness" for Saadawi (MWP 41).

Saadawi's assertiveness has sometimes been interpreted as an indication of a radical attack on men. This is a misunderstanding by her unsympathetic critics. For example, a statement such as "Behind every one of these women prisoners is a man" (MWP 44), if read alone could be used in order to label her as basically a man-hater. However, she does not make statements like this without explaining that it is not the fault of men alone as a sex but that the whole social and political apparatus is to blame. These women are pushed to crime because of "oppression by men", she explains; they are the "other face of the system", which is held responsible for both women's and men's oppression.¹⁰ Men are her comrades rather than enemies, especially when they themselves are oppressed by the same system, even those who hold opposite ideas to hers, those in long beards and 'gallabiyas', namely the Muslim Brothers: "I felt that they were all my comrades - we were united by a single destiny," (MWP147) she recalls. Her recognition of economic and ideological factors in sustaining forms of oppression, including women's, is apparent in all of her writings, both literary and theoretical.

4. Writing is Power

For Saadawi, writing is the political act in her memoirs, for she was actually detained because of her writings. At the beginning of *Prison*, at the time of her arrest, she is sitting at her desk writing a novel. In fact the whole book can be seen as examining when and where writing is prohibited. Writing her diaries behind the prison wall challenges oppressive rules and regulations. But writing for Saadawi is more than just an act of disobedience. In *Prison*, she courageously writes this startling confession: "the pen is the most valuable thing in my life" and writing for her is more valuable than her life, her children, her husband and her freedom (MWP

116). She prefers jail to being free as an agent for the government and writing only what pleases the authorities. The "I" that Saadawi presents in her writings is a responsible one. It is a matter of survival that her "I" should not only be expressed but be heard as well. She has a sense of her audience in mind, "I [am] not writing for angels in the sky."¹¹ In an interview in 1986, Saadawi stated that her writings would have no effect at all if she wrote about something her audience, the Arab people, totally rejected.¹² This means that her audience is prioritized in her writings.

Saadawi has been writing mainly for other people and not only for her own self-satisfaction. She has an ambition, though, to break through all the restrictions imposed on her by the authorities, including Arab publishers, and to "experiment with language, to experiment with ideas, to have more freedom", even though this means that her new books might not be published in the Arab world at all.¹³ This does not indicate that Saadawi is becoming impatient with her audience nor that she wants to be more subjective in her new writing, but that she aspires for her writings to be more uncensored. She wants to write "freely about ... religion, sex, God, authority, the State,"¹⁴ the same subjects she has been dealing with in her writings but in a freer mode. Thus, Saadawi's "I", the censored and the less censored she dreams of representing, is an articulation of a self which, far from being self-centered, views its private existence as only part of a more public one.

5. Political Issues

There is no use asking why *Prison* was written at all: very few people would resist writing about a dramatic experience such as imprisonment, provided they have the linguistic skill to do so. Hundreds if not thousands of prison memoirs exist all round the world. This memoir, which on the surface seems to be an account of a prison experience, is, first and foremost, a book packed with political issues, which would appeal to vast numbers of Arab people with differing attitudes and interests. Throughout *Prison*, Saadawi protests against the absence of democracy and basic human rights such as freedom of speech, under Sadat's authoritarian regime. Today, most Arab countries are still ruled by one-party governments which are also autocratic, dictatorial and oppressive to those who do not conform. She criticizes the hypocrisy practised under oppressive governments. A friend of hers, for example, a "leading literary man" working at a major daily Cairene newspaper (MWP 3) does not practise what he preaches; his justification is that he is afraid to lose his job which would mean that his family would starve. It is fear which makes people submissive: "fearing servility, people become servile," (MWP 3) Saadawi argues. Freedom is necessary for all men and women, especially for writers, "for when the authorities get angry with a writer, they can... stifle the writer's voice so that it won't reach anyone," a liberal view shared by most Arab intellectuals (MWP 3).

Prison also addresses nationalism and patriotism, motifs which run throughout the book. From the first page, Saadawi tells us that she loves her country – Egypt – and that she carries it inside her wherever she goes. However, she is "estranged in [her] own country" (MWP 2), a phrase with which many Arab people would sigh in agreement today. Fawqiyya, an inmate, shouts "national duty comes before any other" (MWP 115) to the veiled women who are discussing the duty of a mother in watching out for children. Saadawi does not comment on this debate in *Prison*. Although she calls herself a socialist and a nationalist, she does not believe that socialism can get rid of women's oppression without the solidarity of women.¹⁵ In fact, in *Prison*, the economic, intellectual, political and social differences among women are suppressed, at times romanticised, and the whole experience of solidarity is represented as a utopian dream. The tension between wishing for or aiming at political unity (which is what Saadawi is doing in *Prison*) and recognising difference at the same time reflects the gap between the readership that Saadawi is trying to construct and her actual readership. In Arab countries, national and political unity is a dream; difference is reality.

In most developing countries nationalism and socialism are intertwined. In *Prison*, Saadawi develops a constant and powerful socialist consciousness. She is clearly critical of class division in Egyptian society, mirrored in the prison apparatus. She states that she has greater love for her father's "peasant" relatives than for her mother's relatives, who were rich upper-class people living in the city of Cairo. They were the poor class, but they are also the people who "urinate blood" (MWP 110).

As far as the issue of religion is concerned, many Arab readers of Saadawi consider her books to be against religion. Saadawi's so-called atheism, however, is open for discussion and one needs to read her other books before making a judgment. It might be true that she does not practise many Islamic rituals. Her language in *Prison*, moreover, is free of any religious connotation. She never intervenes in discussions about God, Islam or the veil whenever these take place among the women prisoners. She sarcastically mocks the idea of woman being incomplete because "she was created from the crooked rib, and only straightens up through beating," as Bodour, one of the veiled women, believes.

Notes

1. Nawal el-Saadawi, *Memoirs From the Women's Prison*, Marilyn Booth (trans.), (London: The Women's Press, 1986), hereafter *Prison*. Page references will be incorporated into the text with the letters MWP.
2. See Miriam Cooke, "Prisons: Egyptian Women's Writing on Islam", in *Religion and Literature* 20. 1 (Spring 1988): 139-153.
3. Barbara Harlow, "Third World Women's Narratives of Prison", in *Feminist Studies* 12. 3 (Fall 1986): 501-524.
4. Harlow 506.
5. Ibid, 503.
6. Ibid, 503.
7. My translation of Saadawi's introduction to the Arabic edition of *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*.
8. H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 250.
9. Ahdaf Soueif, "In the beggars' cell", *New Society* 15 (August 1986): 23.
10. Saadawi expressed this in one of her letters to me.
11. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (eds.). *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London: Virago Press, 1990), 404.
12. Ibid, 404.
13. Ibid, 404.
14. Ibid, 403.
15. Saadawi expressed this in one of her letters to me. See also *Marxism Today* (August 1986): 40.

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A Written Word from Women's Prisons and the Function of Resocialization

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It is my pleasure to be here and first of all I would like to greet you all. Obviously, English is not my mother tongue, so I am in trouble here – I hope that you can understand my English. Now let me present a paper that my colleague and I prepared for this conference about "A written word from women's prisons in the function of resocialization", which is the correct title.

It is well known that crimes and punishments have marked the whole human race. In other words, crime and punishment, two complementary phenomena have been eternal companions of human society. History is full of them. The present time too. Unfortunately and without a question, these phenomena shall be a part of our future. Because of that, any discussion of crimes and punishments has always been an actual and interesting topic.

Different types of criminal sanctions exist today as a reaction of a society to criminal actions. But imprisonment still has a dominant role and it is present in all repressive systems. Nowadays, a lot of critiques are referred to the imprisonment, especially to the efficiency of resocialization as a main aim of punishment. Moreover, the idea of resocialization has been in crisis over the last thirty years. Scepticism regarding the possibility of its realization increased. Although at present there are some other conceptions, who can give up from the idea of returning convicted person back into society as an equal member capable to respect law, which is the point of recocialization. In my opinion, as long as we have imprisonment as a criminal sanction, we should not abandon this idea of resocialization and efforts to realize it. The reason for that is very simple. Resocialization opens the way to reach the human heart, and in that way lies the possibility of positive influence of a sanction. Without this, imprisonment remains purely, bare repression, nothing more and nothing less.

Having in mind all this, the main question is now, if it is possible to prepare a person deprived of liberty for the life in liberty. In other words, the question is how to prepare a person in prison for life in freedom. So we have tried to find out an answer to this question by analysing several female prisons. This was a part of the Slovene-Croatian project about "Women and imprisonment". At first, as it is usual, we consulted a lot of scientific and professional literature about women's prisons. Then, we visited female prisons in Croatia, Slovenia and Germany to get our own impressions. Finally, we did an anonymous questionnaire in five prisons. As a result of it we got answers from more than three hundred sentenced women, which was, of course, very useful for analysing different variables regarding them. At the end, we had a large amount of information and our own impressions, but all the time we have been aware that something is missing. We did not make direct contact with prisoners not only because it is administratively very complicated, but also because we did not believe that superficial contact between someone inside the prison and someone out of the prison could be a basis for confidential, sincere conversation. After all of what we have done or what we have not done, we published the book "Women and imprisonment" and organized international scientific conference about the same topic. However, strong feelings that we only "scratched the surface", that at the end we are familiar only with small segments of the life in prisons, still exist. So we decided to reach something that has existed regardless of our efforts, something that without any doubt talks about life of women in prisons in the most sincere way, so we reached (do you already guess) their written word. We succeeded to get some magazines from prisons. From their own words we finally got to know women in prisons, their thinking, feelings, fears, hopes, desires and what is very important to stress, we also understood the value of written word for their resocialization.

This conference is a good opportunity to share our knowledge with you, so let my colleague Ute take the word in the rest ten minutes.

As my colleague announced I will give you a short report of our research regarding women's writing in prison. Without any doubt, writing means not only the possibility of everyday communication; moreover, it is a mode to experience the world and to reach self-perception. Using techniques of writing and reading presents a great step towards women's emancipation and self-confidence in general. Writing is even more important for women in prison. While writing, female convicts at last temporarily "leaves the hermetically closed area of penal institution. She changes her passive role of object, trapped in cruel monotony of an artificially created community, into the creative author's role. In that way, a woman prisoner gives herself up to amazing play of spiritual and intellectual creating through writing.

While reading these texts, we came across diversity and imagination of female literature through following literary techniques – prose, lyric, aphorism, diary, essay as well as report, critique and letters. We can notice a great similarity of elaborated motives if we compare the topics from female prisoners' writings. This is especially expressed in lyric. (Having in mind the subjectivity of lyric, it is the most commonly used literal genre, because it is comprehended to be the most suitable mode to express emotions.) With poems, the prisoners search and preserve their identity when spontaneously express their emotions, fears, hopes, anxiety and expectations no matter the penal institution they are imprisoned in. This means that the fact that prisoners serve their time in different states, penal systems and regimes does not influence the content and problems they feel the need to write about. Consequently, it seems that female prisoners' problems are universal.

We find very often the metaphors of wind, sun, nature, flowers, air, rain, spring etc, in prisoners' texts mostly in the form of anthropomorphism. Nature is equated with human characteristics and actions ("the wind – tousling the hair with the darling's hands and the warm sun with his look"). One of the reasons for preferring these metaphors could be prisoners' need to move, to feel brightness, warmth, scent, colors; to search for the things they miss the most within prison walls. These motives very suggestively show that deprivation of liberty means a reduction of basic human senses, which primarily serve to make contact with others and the world in general. But we also find opposite metaphors, such as wall, room, dark, coldness, key, wires and bars as the prisoner's expressing the limitation of their freedom (as in the poems titled "The Walls", "Coldness"), and which signal a true need for warmth and brightness.

It is not uncommon to use both of metaphors – those for nature and those for darkness and bars – in the same text that confirms a high emotional bruise of the author. Sometimes even the title as in the story "The window", by itself has double connotations – an isolation and way to reach freedom.

These are frequent and expected motives women prisoners use to protect themselves and to fight against external and internal prison coldness that threatens their personality in isolation. Except for the above mentioned topics, we can find the motives of drug problems and alcohol addiction as unavoidable modern society phenomena in prison reviews. In poems with those themes, in which the female prisoners often use a literary form of internal monologue focusing their problem, the writing has a therapeutic role. That is to say, focusing and admitting the problems is a big step on the long way of curing from addiction.

Personal prisoners' writings, no matter the technique and form, have always been a function of their self-perception; self-perception in the sense of seeking and preserving of a personal identity inside of the rigid, uniform prison life as the necessary condition to have a successful process of resocialisation. We remarked some poems that could be considered as the beginning of a long lasting process of resocialization. They show personal standings towards recidivism, that is to say towards failed resocialization ("In fact"); difficulties to face yourself and the environment because of criminal act ("Room 40"); burden of guilt and shame towards the closest people because of what has been done ("Without saying goodbye"). In contrast to the poems mentioned above that only discern the conditions for successful resocialization, optimistic content and spirit can be seen in the title "A New Birth" – poem showing prison in a different view: "I am going to be lead in life /by new born wings."

Except self-perception, to write in prison gives a possibility to create a distance from environment. In that way it sharpens female prisoners' perception of prison reality and motivates them to think critically. This observation was most evident in essays women have written in prison. These texts very often tell of experiences "on one's own skin" and are an authentic source of knowledge about the real woman's position in prison. Having this in mind, we should give them at least the same significance given to professional and scientific contents in comprehensive criminological and penal literature about the women who committed criminal acts.

The fact is that isolation, segregation, locking into special institution with detailed rules of conduct, which are essentially different from demands of life in a social community, creates an artificial and unnatural life environment. Such an environment is much more suitable for desocialization rather than resocialization in the sense of destroying social relationships of prisoners and limiting their social communication. Since there is no doubt that the sentence of deprivation of liberty is going to exist for a long time one (and likely to be the only) sanction for female committers of grievous criminal acts, a written word of prisoners must be encouraged and secured on an organized basis (mostly through magazines) in prisons. With a written word women in prisons express their deepest feelings, nourishing the sensibility of woman's nature in rigid prison rules encirclement. Consequently, the writing becomes one of the most truthful modes to preserve a personality, keep connections with the outside world and saving energy to survive in isolation. Texts of female prisoners, as well as any other written word, gain their real value only when being read and the value lasts so long until there are those who read the texts. In that way bridges are built to connect prisoners among themselves and us with them.

A View of Their Own: A Sociological Analysis of Prison Narratives Written by African American Prisoners in the United States, 1990-2002

Rebecca L. Bordt

In *Prison Literature in America*, H. Bruce Franklin analyzes the history of prison literature in the United States written by prisoners beginning with the British convict colonies through the modern penitentiary of the 1980s. He argues that the work published in the 1960s and 1970s is distinctive in a number of ways. First, the quantity of material that came out of prisons during this era was unprecedented. Second, the convict writers were "ordinary criminals who [became] literary artists through their prison experience."¹ Finally, this body of literature included manuscripts with significant critical commentary on American culture, particularly from the perspective of African American writers (e.g., Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson). Specifically, Franklin contends that during this era of prison writing "nonwhites recognize[d] that they are in prison not for what they have done as individuals but for what they are collectively."²

The decade of the 1980s can be characterized quite differently. The publication of prison literature by mainstream publishing houses in the United States virtually stopped. Journals that published inmate poetry and short stories disappeared. Earlier publications that were well received in the 1960s and 1970s were taken out of print. Franklin points to a number of reasons for this sea change. The political climate was more conservative. For example, states began to pass legislation that denied convicts the right to benefit from royalties. Small presses suffered economically. And, due to the highly publicized killing by Jack Henry Abbott, author of *In the Belly of the Beast*, it was no longer chic for high profile literary icons to sponsor fledgling prison writers.³

What has happened since the 1980s? Using data from a larger project, this paper picks up where Franklin left off. Has prison literature recovered from its near disappearance in the 1980s? Who are the authors? How can this literature be characterized? Are these narratives a continuation of the era when prison narratives were primarily the domain of highly politicized African American inmates? Should we expect them to be?

1. Social Factors Influencing Prison Writings

There are reasons to hypothesize that the 1990s should look no different from the 1980s in terms of the number and types of narratives produced by inmates. Like the 1980s, the 1990s was not a decade that will be remembered for its grassroots mobilization and political activism as was the case for the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, although the prison population has exploded and the disproportional representation of African Americans in the system has increased dramatically, the age of the inmate population has shifted as well.⁴ Prisoners are younger now than they were in the 1980s, which suggests even less likelihood of political activism.⁵ Also, gang membership has become a requisite part of African American convicts experience over the past decade. There are also *more* gangs. Instead of having a relatively unified African American population as it was 30 years ago, now this population is divided into several warring camps of Crips, Bloods and 415s.⁶ Although some have described this trend as a "politicization" of the inmate population, gang activity tends to direct prisoners attentions inward (e.g., among gang members and between gangs) rather than outward (inmate versus prison administration or inmate versus power elites in society).⁷

Yet, there are just as many reasons to hypothesize a change from the 1980s to the 1990s, particularly in terms of an increase in prison narratives written by politically-conscious African American prisoners. First, the actual conditions of prisons are worse (overcrowding; influx in Secure Housing units; inmate violence) and they are disproportionately affecting African American inmates compared to all other inmates.⁸ Second, some believe racism in prison is on the rise, given the national trend to build prisons housed by urban minorities in rural, predominately white towns. As a result, the majority of prison guards have very little experience interacting with urban black inmates, increasing the potential for abuse of power.⁹

To determine which direction the 1990s has taken, the remainder of this paper will describe in detail the prison narratives published in this decade. Particular focus will be on those narratives written by African Americans.

2. Methodology

The data for this paper come from a larger study that has amassed the body of published books about prison life written by prisoners in the U. S. from 1964 to the 2002. The larger project consists of 67 books written by "common criminals" (e.g., burglars, rapists, drug dealers, murderers, embezzlers) who became authors while in prison because of their desire to describe their experiences.¹⁰ To make the project manageable,

I have excluded poetry, novels, short stories collected in anthologies and articles written for newspapers. The work of inmates who were famous before their incarceration, those who were professional writers prior to their prison experience and political prisoners are by-passed as well. The books were analyzed using a combination of content analysis strategies. First, the books were read and coded by a student of mine using a structured coding instrument. Information that was extracted includes, for example, date of publication, outside sponsorship, location of prison, rationale for book, form of narrative and demographic information about the author. Second, I re-read the books to double-check the first round of coding and to identify key concepts and patterns across texts and over time. These ideas were documented in memos and "meta memos" (i.e., memos about memos).¹¹

For this particular paper, only a sample of the entire data set is used. To answer the questions posed above, all non-fiction narratives published from 1990-2002 (n16) are included in the following analysis. Two cautionary notes are warranted before proceeding with the analysis.¹² First, while our search for prison narratives was meticulous, it is entirely possible that there exist books, out-of-print, that our data collection methods did not uncover. Second, the following analysis is based on a unique group of prison narratives: published books. We should ask ourselves throughout, "how might the findings be a function of the privileged status (relatively speaking, of course) of prison authors who had the necessary resources, sponsorship, co-authorship and/or knowledge to see his or her work in print?"

3. Findings

Has prison literature recovered from its near disappearance of the 1980s? The answer is no. While sixteen manuscripts were published from 1990-2002 compared to only five in the 1980s, once we take into account the large increase in prison population over these two decades, the difference in the number of published books per 100,000 inmates is negligible.

Who are the authors? Of these 16 books, all except one are authored by men. One is co-authored by two inmates, and six were co-authored with someone in the free world (journalist, attorney, academic). One-half of the books are written by Caucasians and one-half by racial minorities (primarily African Americans). With the exception of two young authors, convicts penned their pieces while middle-aged. Nearly all of the authors wrote their manuscripts during their incarceration; there is only one who wrote her book post-release. Fourteen of the 16 authors are or were housed in state prisons, as opposed to federal penitentiaries. Three-fourths of the prisoners are serving long sentences for violent crimes. The remaining one-fourth committed white-collar crime or the offense is not revealed in the text.

Are these narratives a continuation of the era when prison narratives were primarily the domain of highly politicized African American inmates? As mentioned above, the most recent decade of prison narratives is not dominated by African American convicts. Five of the sixteen narratives are penned by African Americans, one by an African, one by an Egyptian American, one was co-authored by an African American and a Caucasian, and eight were written by Caucasians.

If not dominated by political African Americans, do any present day George Jacksons and Eldridge Cleavers exist? Three of the five narratives written by African American men are clearly reminiscent of the revolutionary writers of the 1960s. They echo these earlier works by describing their prison experience in direct relations to the fundamental structural inequalities of American society (particularly social class and race inequalities). Two of these are written by the same author, Mumia Abu-Jamal, who has spent two decades on death row in Pennsylvania. Published in 1995 and 2000, both books take the form of a series of short essays. While there is some overlap in essays in the two publications, the most recent manuscript contains the radio commentaries that were banned before airing on National Public Radio, Mumia's positions are unequivocally revolutionary:

In every phase and facet of national life, there is a war being waged on Americas poor. In social policy poor mothers are targeted for criminal sanctions for acts that, if committed by mothers of higher economic class, would merit treatment at the Betty Ford Center. In youth policy, governments hasten to close schools while building boot camps and prisons as their 'graduate schools.' Xenophobic politicians hoist campaigns to the dark star of imprisonment for street beggars, further fattening the fortress economy. The only apparent solution to the scourge of homelessness is to build more and more prisons.¹³

Writing more directly about his experience inside prison, Abu-Jamal offers the following:

Prisons are repositories of rage, islands of socially acceptable hatreds where worlds collide like subatomic particles seeking the freedom of psychic release. Like Chairman Maos proverbial spark, it takes little to start the blazes. I thought of that spark one morning in October 1989 when I heard an eruption of violence that hit Huntingdons B block, snatching the writer from the false escape of dreams. A white mans rural twang spits out a rhetorical question: 'Oh you like hurtin' people huh?' Punches, grunts, thuds, and crunches echo up the steel tiers, awakening the groggy into sudden alertness. 'Get the f--- off that man, leave that man alone, you fat racist pig!!' A quiet morning on B block is shattered, as much by the yells of fearful rage as by the blams of batons on flesh and bone.¹⁴

Writing before Abu-Jamal, but just as radical, is Sanyika Shakur (a.k.a. Monster Kody Scott). At the age of 11, Shakur joined the Los Angeles Crips, where he acquired the name "Monster" for his loyalty as a combat soldier and overzealous (even for gang standards) commitment to violence. While incarcerated, he experienced a political and personal transformation. He joined the New Afrikan Independence Movement and crusaded against gangs. Shakur's analysis is a structural one. Here he comments on the inevitability of prison for African American men in the inner city:

Prison loomed in my future like wisdom teeth: if you lived long enough you got them. Prison was like a stepping stone to manhood, with everything depending on going and coming back...And so each individual going and coming back learns a new scheme to be used in the ever-growing arsenal of criminality. The 'hood also gains yet another expert in another field.¹⁵

Shakur's testimony to the reality of prison life, especially in maximum lock-up, is gripping.

[O]n the Rock, the illusion of freedom vanished, and in its place was the harsh actuality of oppression and the very real sense of powerlessness over destiny. Because there was no shooting war to concentrate on, your worst enemy was easily replaced by the figure presently doing you the most harm. In prisons this figure is more often than not an American [Caucasian]. An American who locks you in a cage, counts you to make sure you havent escaped, holds a weapon on you, and, in many instances, shoots you. Add to this the fact that most of us grew up in an eighty percent New Afrikan community policed – or occupied – by an eighty-five percent American [Caucasian] pig force that is clearly antagonistic to any male in the community, displaying this antagonism at every opportunity by any means necessary with all the brute force and sadistic imagination they can muster.¹⁶

The work of Jerome Washington differs from the above authors in both form and content. In *Iron House* (1994), he communicates what life is like in prison through a series of short passages about individual characters he has encountered during 15 years behind bars. While simultaneously critical and funny, Washingtons critique of the prison is not political in the sense of identifying structural inequalities (such as classism or racism) as integral to our understanding of the American prison experience.¹⁷ Rather, his focus is on the prison writer compared to writers in the free world:

No other class of writers in America is subjected to the totalitarian controls placed on the writers in our prisons. Prison controls are absolute, even to the point of when and where inmates may use a toilet. As a result of this repression, writers in prison have learned to survive the situation, not rationalize it. They write *from* the prison experience, not about the experience. It is this particular point of view which sets the prison writer apart from all others...The line is clear and clean between that which is born from experience and that which is reported from the safety of an observation deck.¹⁸

When Washington does address the structural issues so central to Abu-Jamal and Shakur's analyses, he tempers their revolutionary potential with the reality of individual responsibility. This is most evident in his account of "Revolutionary Frankie:

When Frankie came to prison he chanted revolutionary slogans and changed his name to a Mau-Mau sobriquet that sounded like a threat to the warden...Frankie strutted his liberation rhetoric and condemned any who didn't share his zeal. However, in the dark, when his

revolutionary fervor dozed and his strident self-image hung like an oversized raglan coat on the bars of his cell, Frankie could find no way to rationalize the rape-murder of the sixty-nine-year-old grandmother with arthritic hands and swollen, tree-trunk ankles. Nor could he explain away any of the other sex crimes that sent him to prison. Alone, at night, Frankie feasted on self-hate.¹⁹

The fifth book written by an African American since 1990 is *Life in Prison* by Stanley "Tookie" Williams. Williams was a co-founder of the Crips gang and has been on death row since 1981. During his incarceration, he has worked explicitly to end gang warfare through his writings and his Internet education program geared toward adolescents. This book was written for, and marketed to, a young audience. The purpose for which the book was written most likely explains its form and content. In a simplistic, yet dramatic, manner, Williams outlines what life is like in prison in hopes that children will not follow in his footsteps. He removes the "glamour" of prison by laying out the reality of such things as strip-searches, solitary confinement, boredom and homesickness. Here is his rendition of a strip search.

At the beginning of a strip search, the guard takes off the inmates handcuffs and tells him to remove every piece of his clothing...[H]e must raise his hands above his head and wiggle all of his fingers. Then he must open his mouth as wide as he can while waving his tongue from side to side and up and down as the guard peers inside to make sure nothing is being hidden in the inmates mouth. After that, the inmate has to run his hands through his hair and brush his ears back and forth to ensure that nothing is in his hair or behind his ears. Once thats done, the inmate must lift his penis and scrotum so the guard can see if anything has been stashed underneath those parts of his body. He also has to turn all the way around, with his back to the guard, and raise each foot so the soles of his feet can be checked by the guard. Finally, an inmate has to bend over at the waist and grab each of his butt cheeks, opening them up while coughing out loud a few times. Meanwhile, the guard, sometimes with the use of a flashlight, searches the inmates rectum for hidden contraband, such as a knife, drugs, keys, coded messages, or anything else that might be there.²⁰

Throughout the book, Williams addresses children directly, as this passage suggests:

I am sure there are times when you feel your parents are being too hard on you, that they have too many rules for you to follow. But know this: No matter how unfair you may think your parents are, or how tough you may think their rules are, your parents rules are nothing like the rules we are forced to abide by in prison...Many inmates don't even bother trying to remember all of the rules. Yet they know that if they break certain rules, they are likely to end up in the Hole, or solitary confinement, which is worse than any punishment from your parents.²¹

Perhaps for very pragmatic reasons, Williams envisions change in terms of the choices that individual children make: "just say no" to gangs. He does not place those choices into a larger context nor does he consider how ones individual choices can be severely constrained by structural inequalities in society. This is understandable to some degree. That is, he is trying to reach an audience that is too young for anything more sophisticated than a "just say no" message. On the other hand, this approach is a troubling one. The very population of children he is targeting (i.e., young, poor, African American boys) has the fewest alternative options from which to choose.

4. Conclusion

So what does all this mean? First, the small number of published manuscripts the 1980s has carried over into the 1990s to the present. While the number of published narratives in the 1990s (to the present) is three times greater than in the 1980s, when we take into account the substantial increase in the prison population during this period, the increase is minuscule. This continued pattern is particularly significant given that contemporary prison conditions (overcrowding, violence, control) are far worse than conditions 30 years ago. Third, while revolutionary African American convict writers have had a voice in the last decade, they are not as the predominant as they were in the 1970s. I can only speculate as to why this is the case. Are prison administrators and apparatuses more effective at silencing political voices today than they were in the 1960s and 1970s? Is the population of African American inmates too young, too distracted, or too unprepared (in

terms of writing and politic skills) to pick up where their 1970s counterparts left off? Is the publishing industry (both the popular and academic presses) the problem?

Finding the answers to these questions is important. For social scientists and policy makers studying the efficacy of prisons, for human rights activists documenting the everyday conditions of incarceration, and for families of convicts searching for connection with those inside, having access to the *full range* of perspectives on the experiences of those imprisoned is crucial. Secondly, given that half of all prisoners in the United States are African Americans, it is especially important to hear their views – both political and apolitical – as the African American experience increasingly becomes the "typical" inmate experience. Finally, given the dire prediction that as many as "30-40 percent of African American men will lose their right to vote for some or all of their adult lives," the need to understand why there are so few revolutionary African American prisoners writing (or getting published) political treatises is more compelling than ever before.²²

Notes

1. H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, expanded edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 244.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xv.
3. Jack Henry Abbott, *In the Belly of the Beast* (New York: Random House, 1981).
4. Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: New Press, 1999).
5. Hunt, Geoffrey et al, "Changes in Prison Culture: Prison Gangs and the Case of the 'Pepsi Generation,'" in *In Their Own Words: Criminals on Crime*, 3rd edition, ed. Paul Cromwell (Los Angeles, California: Roxbury, 2003), 264-273.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Joseph T. Hallinan, *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation* (New York: Random House, 2001).
10. Franklin, p. 181.
11. Anselm Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
12. A list of the books included in the sample is available from the author.
13. Mumia Abu-Jamal, *All Things Censored* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000), p. 205.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
15. Sanyika Shakur, *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), pp. 163-4/
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-4.
17. I use the term *Apolitical* with some trepidation. On one level, I believe that any act of writing about one's prison experience is a political act. On another level, however, I think it is important to distinguish between writings that see prison as a microcosm of (and perhaps incubator for) the fundamental structural inequalities of American society in general and those that do not make structural arguments.
18. Jerome Washington, *Iron House: Stories from the Yard* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), preface.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
20. Stanley "Tookie" Williams, *Life in Prison* (New York: SeaStar, 1998), p. 42.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.
22. Mauer, p.186.

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Penology, Autobiography, and Fiction: The Prison Novel as Interdisciplinary Sub-Genre

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The importance of the prison in the Western literary tradition has been well documented. As literary critic Victor Brombert remarks, "Prison haunts our civilization."¹ Canonical writers who have written in or about prison are legion: Defoe, Wilde, Dostoyevski, Chekov, Tolstoy, Hugo, Verlaine, Malraux, Camus, Genet – I could continue, but you get the idea. Within the context of this interdisciplinary conference, I thought it would be most appropriate to examine a category of prison literature that deliberately blurs distinctions between disciplines and genres: the documentary prison novel. There is a broad spectrum of writing about prison, ranging from the sociological and the documentary, to the autobiographical, to the purely imaginary. The texts that fall into the sub-genre of the documentary prison novel represent artful intersections of autobiography and fiction, and their narrators often attempt to be sociological in their precision when observing and depicting the nature of conditions and relations behind bars. Some novelists are so adept at blurring the line between fiction and non-fiction that the American Library of Congress has placed their texts in the criminology and social pathology sections of its classification system. The prison novel – as I shall refer to it for the remainder of this paper – represents a modality of literature that attempts to go beyond the traditional mimetic function of fiction. In other words, the texts claim to document carceral reality, rather than simply represent it.

The manner in which the documentary value of prison novels is postulated varies from text to text. These carceral novels rely on a combination of textual and paratextual strategies to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction. That ambiguous generic boundary establishes a contract between text and reader that opens the possibility for both referential and fictional interpretations. The fluid contract (or pact, as Philippe Lejeune would call it) impacts readings of the novels in two ways. On the one hand, the autobiographical inclinations enhance the documentary effect of the texts. The heightened referential implications indicate to the reader that the carceral experience portrayed is not simply the product of the author's imagination, but that it is representative of real conditions of captivity. On the other hand, the fact that the texts are works of fiction allows the writers to manipulate their source material without a breach of contract between text and reader. The authors use the flexibility provided by fictional production to achieve a variety of ideological ends. Their representation of the prison serves as their sociopolitical loudspeaker, and enables them to highlight issues – through the prison – that they perceive in society as a whole.

Before I continue I'd just like to say a few words about what institution I am referring to as 'the prison.' It is important to highlight what I specifically mean by prison because it is a distinct cultural modality that results in a distinct literary modality, the prison novel.

A number of different spaces of detention – such as POW camps, Nazi concentration camps, and overseas penal colonies – were devised, developed, or refined during the twentieth century. Each realm involves different sociological and bureaucratic processes, and the inmate in each type of detention center has a vastly different experience from his or her counterparts in other types of institutions. What institution, then, does the term 'prison' denote in the context of the twentieth century? In her work on French women's prisons entitled *Carceral Relations (La Relation carcérale)*, sociologist Corinne Rostaing defines the prison (and this is my translation) "as a place of detention, materialized by a fixed space and a bureaucratic organizational apparatus."²

Rostaing underlines the institutional facet of the prison: its administrative aspects, and its compartmentalization of space and time. The purpose served by the prison is punishment through detainment. Rostaing's study on women's prisons was in part inspired by her reading of French prison novels from the 1960s, and she acknowledges the sociological bent of those texts. It is important to note that the sociological element of prison novels in general is reinforced due to the fact that these novels borrow their authority from real-life experience; hence the importance in underlining the text's autobiographical and referential aspects. Prison novels are driven by an implicit question: "What is prison life like?" The texts attempt to treat – albeit through wildly divergent strategies – every facet of life behind bars, from arrest to release. Unlike traditional autobiographical texts, prison novels do not recount a life; they focus on telling the story of a specific experience. The telling of the story is necessitated by the brutality of that experience, and the narration is motivated by a desire to publicize the nature of carceral life as it was experienced by the narrator-author figure.

While these texts are works of fiction, they are by no means novels in the Balzacian sense of that term. Prison novels are testimonial and documentary literature; and they constitute a literary modality that has received scant critical attention. Each text at once eschews its status as a work of fiction (to emphasize its referential grounding), and at the same time embraces fictionality (so the authors may manipulate their source material). It is the artful interplay of fictionality and referentiality that sets prison novels apart from the

traditional novelistic model. A novel about prison is not necessarily a 'prison novel.' For example, while prison figures prominently in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, the novel does not attempt – either textually or paratextually – to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, there is no deliberate conflation of the identities of narrator-protagonist and author.³ Critical reception of *The Stranger* reflects the work's straightforward and unambiguous status as a non-documentary novel.

To provide you with an idea of how I treat a specific example of a prison novel, I will now give you a brief overview of my work on François Bon's *Prison*.⁴ Bon's 1997 work is representative of documentary prison novels as a subgenre in its attempt to transform prisoners into witnesses, its narrative and thematic characteristics, and its strong ideological thrust. Based on the author's experience directing a writing workshop at the Bordeaux/Gradignan Youth Detention Center, *Prison* is a non-linear narrative that is broken up into six chapters that are strongly divergent in their subject matter, tone, and degree of fictionality. The novel's storyline meanders in and out of the prison: it depicts life inside the jail, the mechanics of the writing workshop, and daily life in Bordeaux and its suburbs. Yet, while the work's six chapters do not follow a single narrative thread, they do consistently revolve around the context of the writing workshop in the prison. The only character who appears with any regularity throughout the entire narrative is the anonymous narrator-protagonist, who directs the writing workshop depicted in the text, and whose experience is based on that of the author.

In the year 2000, Bon published a volume elaborating on his methodology in his writing workshops.⁵ In that text he notes that, as a rule, he saves all of the texts produced in his workshops, and in the case of the youth detention center, he compiled them in an unpublished document entitled "Sometimes I Wonder: A writing workshop in the Gradignan Youth Detention Center."⁶ Within the context of the writing workshop portrayed in *Prison*, Bon re-uses and re-cycles the texts of the sixty-two real-life inmates with whom he worked during his seven-month tenure at the youth detention center. The distinction between 're-use' and 're-cycling' is particularly important when comparing *Prison* and "Sometimes I Wonder", for some texts resurface in *Prison* exactly as they were written by the real-life convicts themselves ("re-use"), while other texts appear in an altered, fictionalized form ("recycling").

All else being equal, there is nothing remarkable about a writer taking advantage of his creative license to alter his source material. Indeed, a free relationship to his sources is one of the basic privileges granted to a novelist. What IS remarkable, however, is that Bon plays with his source material in a text that claims, through a variety of markers, to be a non-fictional documentary work. When asked about the generic status of *Prison*, Bon denies vigorously that it is a novel. But to avoid dubbing his work a novel is not tantamount to a denial of fictionality. Indeed, comparisons between *Prison* and the prose composed by the prisoners illustrate that Bon liberally transforms his source material to fit within the contexts established by his own imaginary musings. For example, he conflates the voices and experiences of at least eight real-life prisoners into the voice of one fictional inmate who has been forced into solitary confinement (whose story constitutes the entire sixth chapter). Or, in another striking example, Bon takes the texts of three prisoners who recount their daily routine and instead of returning home at the end of the day as they do in "Sometimes I Wonder", the three young men are all arrested for the fictional theft of a Ford Cosworth. But without the benefit of examining the prisoners' prose on its own, it is impossible to distinguish which texts are re-used verbatim and which are recycled and transformed to fit into fictional contexts. Readers of *Prison* are, in a way, "set up" by the discourse of referentiality in the work's opening chapter to think that, unless otherwise told, what they are reading is non-fiction. In the first scenes of the text, we see the anonymous workshop director learn about the murder of one of his former workshop participants, Jean-Claude Brulin (which is a pseudonym for Frédéric Hurlin, a workshop participant who was indeed murdered). The director then goes on a detective-like journey through the city of Bordeaux to the scene of the crime, marking each step of his walk through the city with pinpoint precision (noting details such as bus routes, the writing on street signs, and prominent Bordelais landmarks such as the Place de la Victoire and the marché des Capucins). He even mentions, and quotes from – accurately, I might add, as an archival search has proven – a newspaper article in *Sud-Ouest*, Bordeaux's daily newspaper, that reports the murder and its surrounding circumstances.⁷ That surfeit of realistic detail, combined with the interpolation of prisoners' writing into the narrative as such (the texts are delimited by quotation marks or italics) constitutes a form of documentary realism – in other words a type of realism that purports to document rather than simply represent.

In the first chapter of *Prison*, as in the remaining chapters, Bon resorts to fiction to complement his authentic source material. Yet unlike his creative production in the remainder of *Prison*, Bon makes an overt declaration that his own imaginary creation is fictional (imaginary monologues by people affected by the murder – the perpetrator, his sister [whom Bon invents], and the deceased himself – complement the documentary telling of the Brulin saga). That overt distinction creates an expectation in *Prison*'s readers that material that is not overtly presented as fictional is meant to be read as referentially valid, and non-fictional –

which is not the case. In other words, the declaration of fictionality confers non-fictional status on that which is not overtly declared fictional. In reality, one of the most heavily fictionalized chapters (the one that tells the story of the joy ride in the Ford Cosworth) follows the highly documentary chapter about Brulin's murder. Thus, not only are the fictional and non-fictional elements of *Prison* intertwined, but they are presented such that fiction takes on the guise of factual information. With the notable exception in the first chapter, shifts between fiction and factual information are obscured. The result of the artful combination of fact and fiction in the narrative is an ambiguous – and sometimes duplicitous – contract between text and reader. Fictional information is used to fill in the details of stories that are based in, and presented as, fact; and authentic factual data is used to enhance the documentary effect of fictional stories. Somewhere in the middle of this confusion, the reader attempts – with some difficulty – to determine how to read *Prison*: as a work of fiction, as a work of non-fiction, or as some hybrid of the two.

So strong is the referential thrust of *Prison* that critics and reviewers routinely misinterpret the narrative as a non-fictional representation of Bon's own experience. Christian Molinier, for example, refers to the first chapter's narrator as "l'auteur."⁸ Yet, however tempting it may be to make that type of narrator-author link between the anonymous workshop director and Bon himself, it simply should not be done, as it constitutes a misreading of the text. Bon's omission of his own name in the text, combined with his failure to give his narrator a fictional name other than his own (as he did with Brulin), maintains the deliberate generic indeterminacy that is exemplified by the work's generic categorization, 'récit', or 'narrative.'

Due to its sheer indeterminacy of meaning and its wide variety of connotations, Bon's choice of the term 'narrative' is an appropriate generic designation for his work, as it reflects the singular mixture of the real and the fictional found in *Prison*. By choosing such a fluid term to define his narrative, Bon is able to transcend generic constraint, while remaining focused on writing. He remarks, "The literary process is independent of genre: there is writing – the term 'narrative' (récit) is simply a bare minimum of generic definition." Through a variety of both textual and paratextual strategies, Bon deliberately cultivates a generic indeterminacy to, on the one hand, bolster his text's documentary value, and on the other hand, allow him to take advantage of the creative license afforded by fiction writing. While, by and large, Bon's re-use and re-cycling of the texts composed in his writing workshop is loyal to and representative of what was actually produced, comparisons between *Prison* and the corpus of texts produced in his workshop do reveal how the author plays freely with his source material to construct a coherent narrative that recounts numerous stories of incarceration, criminality, and marginality. The result is that *Prison* contains a more thematically balanced representation of the carceral universe than does "Sometimes I Wonder". In *Prison*, for example, Bon explores the difficulties inherent in solitary confinement, whereas in "Sometimes I Wonder", the subject is not even mentioned for the simple reason that Bon never had his workshop participants write about prison itself. Unlike "Sometimes I Wonder", *Prison* represents an attempt at a comprehensive representation of the experience of incarceration. The novel's documentary bent results in the inclusion of a significant amount of detail about penal practices, rules, and conditions.

Like the generic category 'narrative', the term 'writing' encompasses the broadest of connotations simply due to its lack of specificity. Bon's emphasis on writing and the act of writing is revelatory, as it is consistent with his workshop project in the youth detention center. *Prison* would not have the same documentary and sociological implications were it not for the dominant presence of the voices of prisoners. *Prison* is, above all, a text that seeks to bear witness to the experience of the workshop participants within both the prison and a variety of urban and suburban contexts. The texts of the prisoners themselves are heavily laden with sociopolitical significance, as they offer the reader a rare glimpse into the minds of those who have no voice in mainstream cultural discourse. Bon remarked in an interview that, "These texts seem to me to be an essential contribution to the understanding of today's society". The focus on the importance of the written word, as well as the process of writing itself, has a leveling effect on the textual production of the prisoners and the portions of the text that originated in Bon's own imagination. The text thus becomes a space in which equality – both social and literary – can be achieved.

Comparisons of Bon's source material and his finished product not only give us a window on how he transforms personal experience into art, but also allow us to perceive more clearly how the author's personal bias enters into his representation of the carceral realm and the marginal universe of the underprivileged young men. In a move characteristic of prison novelists in general, Bon uses his text to promote a specific ideological agenda: in this case, the author gives his readers a rare documentary glimpse into the minds of imprisoned, marginalized young men. Yet, however documentary his text may be, Bon does indeed alter his source material not only to give his readers a more complete view of the carceral universe, but also to make the prisoners he depicts more palatable to his (ostensibly) bourgeois readership. For example, Bon eliminates nearly all references to hard drugs found in the prisoners' original narratives. Moreover, Bon alters some key situations to make the social services available to the prisoners seem more deficient than they are in reality, thereby

accentuating the apparent victimization of the prisoners at the hands of an unjust system. I raise these points not to discount the sociological importance of Bon's text nor to criticize his methodology, but mainly to remind myself and my audience that prison novels, however documentary they may be are still novels, and that representation of the carceral can, and often does, differ from carceral reality.

Notes

1. Victor Brombert, *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition* (Princeton UP, 1978), 3.
2. "[U]n lieu de détention, matérialisé par un espace fermé et une organisation bureaucratique. C'est la prison-institution." Corinne Rostaing, *La Relation carcérale: Identités et rapports sociaux dans les prisons de femmes* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 4.
3. Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).
4. François Bon, *Prison* (Paris: Verdier, 1997).
5. François Bon, *Tous les mots sont adultes: Méthodes pour l'atelier d'écriture* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).
6. François Bon, "Parfois je me demande: Un atelier d'écriture au CJD Gradignan."
7. Jean-Paul Vigneaud, "Pour un motif futile," *Sud-Ouest* 10 Dec. 1996: Base de données SOURCE.
8. Please see Christian Molinier, "Prison," *Le Matricule des Anges* <http://www.lmda.net/din/tit_lmda.php?Id=292>.

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Irish Ironies: The Prison Writings of John Mitchel, Brendan Behan, and Gerry Adams

Danine Farquharson

I'm a student of Irish literature. In particular, I'm interested in Irish fiction that characterizes the "troubles" and the Irish Republican Army. Given the kinds of novels and films that such an interest evokes, I've had some exposure to prison writing, but that hasn't been my focus to date. As such, my interest in the texts I'll be speaking to today is both the political climate in which they were written and the narrative strategies employed by the authors. So, what I'd like to share with you is a brief, but in no way comprehensive idea of the variety of prison writing that comes from Ireland, both the Republic and the North.

It was with an eye to diversity that dictated my choice of texts for this presentation. John Mitchel's *Jail Journal*, Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* and Gerry Adams's *Cage 11: Writings from Prison* are very different works in terms of length, organization, tone and intended audience. Three men, at different historical periods (albeit all involved in a conflict with Britain) offer varied perspectives on their imprisonment.

Jail Journal is exactly what its title claims it to be: it is a dated document of John Mitchel's almost seven years as a prisoner of the British crown. I'll give you a bit of biographical information if only to frame the discussion of his journal writing. Mitchel was born in County Derry (in what is now Northern Ireland) in 1815, the son of a Presbyterian minister. He was educated in the law and practiced until 1842 when he joined Young Ireland – a nationalist, some would say romantic, group who are best known for their confrontation with another Irish nationalist, Daniel O'Connell, over the use of violence in the Irish campaign for political self-determination. Young Ireland also, for a brief period, had a newspaper called *The Nation*; it was this paper that Mitchel moved to Dublin to work on from 1845 to 1847. Mitchel contributed articles about ambush tactics against British forces in Ireland and he championed the doctrine of rent resistance and armed rebellion during the 1845 Famine.

Writing in and editing a newspaper that advocates the use of violent rebellion against Britain in 1848 is almost guaranteed to get you arrested. But what is interesting about Mitchel's arrest and trial is that the British government brought in new legislation so that he, in particular, could be tried under the new "Felony-Treason Act". In *Jail Journal*, Mitchel theorizes that the British knew full well that if they tried and convicted him for treason he would likely be heroized in Ireland, but the British wanted to ruin any chances of that so they tried him as a felon – a word and a category that didn't carry the same romantic notions of heroic martyrdom as treason did. Sentenced to fourteen years labour in Van Diemen's Land, Mitchel spent the first nineteen months of this time on prison ships off of Bermuda and South Africa before reaching what's now Tasmania. Another point of interest of Mitchel's sentencing is that the court decreed that he would be treated, at all times during his incarceration "as a person of education and a gentleman."¹ This meant, in practical terms, that Mitchel had no contact with the other "felons" on the ships. Mitchel notes this hypocrisy very early in his journal when he writes that if the British legal system deems him a felon then he should be treated as all other felons are treated. But because he was allowed an officer's cabin on the ship (one he did not have to share with anyone else) and he was allowed writing materials and books and his own clothes, then obviously the British didn't really believe him to be a felon. Gentlemen cannot be felons. The false logic of the British legal system is not lost on Mitchel.

The lengthiest parts of the *Jail Journal* deal with Mitchel's time on the prison ships, I'm guessing because he had way more empty time there than when he landed in Tasmania and was allowed to work, to buy land, and to move about more freely. The *Journal* is an extraordinary document of a privileged man in the mid-nineteenth century. Mitchel writes in Greek and Latin with ease, he quotes Carlyle, Herodotus, Shakespeare and Dante, and the style of much of the journal is unquestionably superlative. He is an accomplished essayist. For example, Mitchel writes about contemplating suicide and comes to a decision not to kill himself by constructing a lengthy debate between his "Ego" and his "Doppleganger." In a kind of Socratic conversation with himself, Mitchel rejects suicide because that would have been tantamount to conspiring with the British.

Much of the journal is dedicated to the articulation of Mitchel's belief in violence as the only means by which the Irish can attain any level of self-government. Mitchel thunders against the British landowners in Ireland who do nothing but make the famine years worse and worse for their tenant farmers; he rages against "The Thing" his euphemism for the British political and economic system – a system that is driven by, in his words, "the heartless cash nexus of industrial capitalism."² Indeed, if one word had to be found to describe Mitchel's tone in the *Jail Journal* it is rage. His savage Anglophobia is primarily directed at the "Thing" in what he describes as "vicious tirades discharged into this receptacle."³ But the force of his narrative is also directed at an Irish audience. He writes that he will publish the journals in some way and that he wants to goad the Irish (and maybe a few influential and wealthy Irish-Americans) into "regaining their self-esteem" by rising

up against the British. Ultimately, however, Mitchel's journal betrays his own stated purpose of agitating a rebellion. He is keenly aware of the irony of writing about Irish freedom while he, himself, is imprisoned and in one of the most poignant moments in the text Mitchel acknowledges that the journal is really a book "that will help remind me of what I was, and how I came down hither, and so preserve the continuity of my thoughts, or personal identity."⁴ *Jail Journal* may ostensibly be a political treatise on the brutality of British industrial capitalism and the advocacy of violent revolution, but it is also a document of personal survival. I mean personal survival in two ways: Mitchel's needs the writing of the journal to keep going, to stay sane, and he also knows that if the journal is published then his own personality, his identity will continue and persevere. "The public role [of the journal] serves not to conceal the private self but rather to clarify and express its dominant aspect."⁵ Thus, even though Mitchel writes that "The general history of a nation may fitly preface the personal memoranda of a solitary captive," it is the inner workings of the solitary captive that drive the writing.

Brendan Behan's autobiographical work, *Borstal Boy*, is also centrally concerned with personal identity. Unlike Mitchel's contemporaneous journal, Behan wrote *Borstal Boy* almost twenty years after he was released from the British institution in which he was incarcerated until the age of nineteen. Younger than Mitchel, and in another century, Behan's experience of the British prison system is quite different than Mitchel's. It's 1939, WWII has started, and Behan is caught in a Liverpool tenement with bomb-making materials. He is sixteen years old and he writes in the book and claims throughout his life that he was on IRA assignment. There is some dispute over this: the IRA recently released "documents" that showed Behan to have been suspended from involvement in the IRA for undisciplined behaviour and he may have been acting on his own while in Liverpool. Nevertheless, at the time he considered himself as IRA.

Borstal Boy is divided into three parts of unequal length: the first covers his two-month stay at Walton Prison during which he encounters and consolidates friendships with British youth, in particular Charlie and Ginger; the second part summarizes his shorter stay at Feltham, during which he was ex-communicated; and the third section, which is the longest, describes his formative experiences at the Borstal, or youth detention centre. Early in the work, Behan recalls his arrest, and writes

I refused to answer questions, I agreed to make a statement, with a view to propoganda for the cause. It would look well at home, too. I often read speeches from the dock, and thought the better of the brave and defiant men.⁶

Such youthful bravado does not last long – and the older Behan makes it quite clear that his sixteen year old self was overwhelmed by fear in the first days in jail – but that fear is complex. He writes:

I was worried over going to prison for 14 years or to Borstal for 3 and ashamed too, because it was not really the length of the sentence that worried me – but that I'd sooner be with Charlie and Ginger and Brownny in Borstal than with my own comrades and countrymen any place else. It seemed a bit disloyal to me ... There's a fearless Irish rebel for you.⁷

The more mature Behan is able to deflate the puffed-up image of Irish manhood and heroism that he read about, but the conflicting emotions of anxiety over his sentence, shame about his lack-lustre patriotism, and desire to remain with his fellow (and British) prisoners are placed in sharp relief.

Behan's early romantic and heroic conception of himself is weakened at the Walton lock up by unquestionably brutal treatment by the guards. But once he arrives at Hollesley Bay Borstal Institution (a youth detention centre), Behan's narrative takes on the qualities of a pastoral: a country setting with details of gardening, harvesting and celebrations of earth, sea, sun and sky evoke a harmony with nature. Unlike Mitchel, Behan comes from a similar economic class as his fellow inmates: he doesn't get along with all of them, but an unmistakable community develops among the young men. In such company, Behan abandons the stifling categories of nationality and religion and instead lives out his time as Charlie's china and general hail fellow well met. His allegiances shift from a kind of Irish republicanism learned at home and from books, to an appreciation of the humanity of his British friends and even some the British staff. Behan's years at Borstal are formative: he learns friendship, trust, and pride in his work. By the end of the narrative, Behan writes of the liberating experience of imprisonment and the ironically limiting feelings that bear down on him upon his release. The final lines of *Borstal Boy* are worth mentioning. Behan arrives back in Ireland on the ferry and approaches the immigration desk. He hands the officer his expulsion order from the British crown.

He read it, looked at it and handed it back to me. He had a long educated countryman's sad face, like a teacher, and took my hand ... A hundred thousand welcomes home to you ... I smiled and said, Thanks. He looked very serious, and tenderly enquired,

‘It must be wonderful to be free.’
 ‘It must,’ said I, and walked down the gangway, past a detective, and got on the train for Dublin.⁸

The nuances of Behan’s answer to the question of freedom are palpable only after he describes that walk down the gangway past the detective. Behan appreciates the value of freedom because he lived it at Borstal. To return to Ireland after he has outgrown its religious and political preoccupations is, in itself, a problem. That he is to be watched by a detective while home forces on him the painful realization that his “freedom” is to be as ironic as his “imprisonment.”⁹

Such is not the sort of irony informing Gerry Adams’s collection *Cage 11: Writings from Prison*. By way of concluding, I’d like to present Adams’s stories in light of their marked difference from both Behan’s and Mitchel’s. The obvious differences are spacial and temporal. Adams was taken and interned without trial in Long Kesh prison in Northern Ireland. His incarceration does not take him to another continent as in the case of Mitchel, nor does it take him very far away from home – as Behan felt the geographic distance between Britain and Ireland. In one of Adams’s stories, a character comments on being able to hear the Dublin train – an auditory signal that they are not far from familiar territory.

Temporally, it is 1972 when Adams is first arrested: a period of civil rights demonstrations, street riots and political upheaval in Belfast. Adams is in and out of Long Kesh, and he has a period of brief respite from prison that Behan and Mitchel do not experience in the course of their writings. When Adams comes to write *Cage 11*, prison is not new to him. The bulk of the stories in *Cage 11* are published under the pseudonym “Brownie” between 1975 and 1977. They range from humorous descriptions of the near-quotidian details of prison life, to political treatises on the nature of terrorism, to depictions of other prisoners such as Bobby Sands and Brendan Hughes.¹⁰

The style of the collection is telegraphic: The stories are very short, with little or no narrative continuity other than the location of *Cage 11*, and the reader must fill in the gaps between the tales. This telegraphic style of the stories – some would label them disjointed – is a factor of their purpose. These are not lengthy debates about the nature of personal identity or the crafted tale of an adult-coming-into-being. Adams’s original pieces, that would later be collected and published as *Cage 11*, were smuggled out of Long Kesh and printed in *The Republican News*. Thus, the stories are necessarily brief and enjoy neither Behan’s luxury of hindsight nor Mitchel’s stylistic smoothness. Perhaps the most significant difference is that Adams’s collection is not about an individual consciousness; rather, the stories evoke a communal experience among his fellow prisoners. Another difference is that Adams does not experience, or at least does not write about, either the alienation of Mitchel’s solitary existence on the prison ships or the initial marginalization of Behan because he was Irish. Adams’s characters tend to seep into each other from story to story, sometimes not given names at all, as if they represent the collective or general experience.

The stories in *Cage 11* have a narrative urgency or drive to them that profoundly articulates their status as messages of defiance and protest. The texts themselves – that they got out, that they were published – are testament to the solidification of Adams’s resistance to British authority in Northern Ireland. Of course, it is exactly such defiance, such resistance that got him arrested in the first place. Irony is not so much a narrative device used by Adams (as it is with Mitchel and Behan), but irony is certainly a factor in the dissemination of his writings.

So it is that, despite the variances of circumstance and style of *Jail Journal*, *Borstal Boy* and *Cage 11*, some form of irony connects these three Irish writers and their narratives of prison.

Notes

1. John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1913), 12.
2. *Ibid*, 138.
3. *Ibid*, 60.
4. *Ibid*, 60.
5. Thomas Flanagan, “Rebellion and Style: John Mitchel and the *Jail Journal*,” *Irish University Review* 1.1 (1970):
6. *Ibid*, 100.
7. *Ibid*, 371-372.
8. Bernice Schrank, “Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy* as Ironic Pastoral,” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 18.1 (1992): 74.

Writing Our Own History

Laurence McKeown

1. Introduction

Long Kesh prison camp is situated outside Lisburn, Co Antrim in the north of Ireland. Once home to several thousand inmates it now sits empty though not closed – the last of the prisoners having been released early under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Several of the eight H-Blocks within the prison remain in ‘warm storage’ though, just in case the volatile political situation might give rise to a sudden demand for additional prison places.

Few other prisons in the world have impacted upon the community (and vice versa) in the way that Long Kesh has since it opened its gates in 1972. Previously an RAF camp during the Second World War, in the early 1970s it housed those imprisoned without trial; trade unionists, students, republican activists. When it became too notorious, in particular for the ill treatment and brutality inflicted upon those interned, the name was changed to HMP Maze.

Long Kesh by that time did not only contain internees. Those convicted in the courts for political offences arising out of the conflict were also incarcerated there. They enjoyed political status or ‘special category status’ as the British Government preferred to call it. That changed in 1975 when the Gardiner Commission recommended the release of all internees but also the introduction of a policy of ‘criminalisation’. What this meant in effect was that anyone arrested and convicted post 1 March 1976 would be treated as a ‘common criminal’ regardless of the offence or motivation. To facilitate this change in policy a new section of the prison was developed and special cellular units called H-Blocks (because of their distinctive shape) were constructed. The H-Blocks were to become the site of the longest and harshest prison protest ever in Ireland.

2. The ‘blanket protest’ 1976-1981

I was arrested and imprisoned in August 1976 at 19 years of age, inexperienced and politically naive. What myself and others knew, however, was that we would not conform to the new policy. We would not wear prison clothes nor do prison work. As a result of that decision, between the years 1976-1981 we were locked in our cells 24 hours a day, naked except for a blanket to wrap around ourselves; hence the protest became known as the ‘blanket protest’. We had no radios, TVs, books, newspapers, magazines, writing papers, pens; no exercise; nothing but a piece of foam for a mattress and a container of water. From March 1978-March 1981 we refused to wash, shave or have our haircut though in many instances were forcibly washed and shaved. In 1980 we embarked upon a hunger strike that lasted 53 days. The following year another hunger strike lasted 217 days and during it ten prisoners died; one of them, Bobby Sands having been elected a Member of the British Parliament and another, Kieran Doherty having been elected a Member of the Irish Parliament. Before he began his hunger strike Bobby Sands wrote:

I believe I am another of those wretched Irishmen born of a risen generation with a deeply rooted and unquenchable desire for freedom. I am dying not just to attempt to end the barbarity of H-Block, or to gain the rightful recognition of a political prisoner, but primarily because what is lost in here is lost for the Republic and those wretched oppressed whom I am deeply proud to know as the risen people.¹

Looking back on it now, Bobby’s writings, just as importantly as his actions, undoubtedly influenced many of us in later years to also record our thoughts and experiences, our beliefs, desires and needs. The origins of all later developments within the republican prisoner community, political and creative, also lie in that period, 1976-’81.

3. A radical learning process

Although those years on protest were harsh and brutal they were also ones that transformed us. In that period and within those circumstances there developed a culture of discussion and debate. Without books and access to the usual media we only had what thoughts and knowledge was in our own heads. There were no ‘experts’ around to say how the world was shaped. There were certainly people who had a little more knowledge about particular topics than others but the topic could be fishing, farming, geography, history, maths, or the Irish language. And when it came to the discussion of moral and social issues there was certainly no definitive view be it on the question of religion, abortion, euthanasia or the many other topics of debate that often lasted for days

if not weeks. Learning, debate, discussion and personal development became a central feature of our lives. There was a thirst for knowledge and critical analysis.

Following the ending of the protest and the beginning of a much more 'normal' existence within the prison there was a time when education and learning almost lapsed into the more traditional format – that of compulsory republican lectures where one person 'taught' and others 'learned'. However, it was during this time, early 1982, that the writings of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationalist, reached the camp. His book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, had a major impact upon our thinking.²

Freire challenges the popular notions and methods of learning. He describes how, for him, education in its true sense should be a revolutionary force, it should help people become aware of, and be responsible for, themselves and their world. Central to Freire's theories is the idea of praxis - the process of reflection followed by action and further reflection. Freire suggests a problem-posing approach to education and one that treats learners as subjects (active agents) not objects (passive recipients). Freire outlined for us in a clear and comprehensive manner the approach we instinctively wanted to adopt to education but which until then we were unable to articulate in any coherent way.

In our search for answers to our many questions Freire came to act as a guide to the practice, processes and structures through which we organised our lives. Central to that process was building the self-confidence and self-esteem of those who, upon leaving school in their early teens, had been labelled 'failures'. Given that most of us came from working-class urban and rural areas, this constituted the vast bulk of republican prisoners. In the period that followed, 1983-88, we established a radical political education programme designed to cater for the individual at whatever level he was at but which also encouraged him to reach further. It was a collective and communal process not an individualistic or competitive one. It required reading, discussion and debate but just as importantly, writing. People began to express their political opinions in a much more coherent and clear manner. Utilising the prison education department's provision of academic classes prisoners got to grips with how they could express themselves more concisely, coherently and cogently. Given that republican activists came from a 'culture of silence', operated on a 'need to know basis', and adopted the principle, 'whatever you say, say nothing' (and definitely never write it!) this was a radical break from normal practice. It paved the way for more personal, reflective and creative writings.

4. Poetry workshops

In 1988, almost by chance, a poetry workshop was established in one of the prison wings, which used imaginative exercises designed to stimulate thoughts and provide new forms of expression. Prior to that some individual prisoners had written pieces of poetry but by and large it was a fairly 'secretive' practice. Soon workshops flourished in most wings. Brian Campbell (McKeown, 1981) describes the impact they had on him:

I was at the first poetry workshop and it was astonishing. The workshops were like a real creative explosion almost and the men loved them. The crack at them was mighty. There were ground rules: you had to write and criticism was expected and you had to take it and accept that the criticism was of the poetry and not of you. There had to be that openness, honesty and trust within the group and that's why everyone who was there had to write.

I didn't initially twig on to the significance of the workshops in building men's confidence and so on. To me they were to improve men's ability to write poetry. It was only later I became more aware that they gave people the confidence to speak about things ordinarily they would not have spoken about, to be able to express emotions.³

The problem with the poetry workshops was that they flared up and then couldn't be sustained but they had served their purpose. They prompted the development of a culture of expression of a totally new and more personal form to that which had preceded it and yet was rooted in the same politics.

5. *Scairt Amach* (Shout out)

Poems from those workshops were compiled into a small publication, *Scairt Amach* (Irish for 'Shout Out'), the first of its kind within the camp. The idea was to give the workshop participants a morale boost through seeing their own words printed, not handwritten, but also to signal the creation of the workshops as an important development. The foreword in the magazine outlines how we saw and regarded the role of poetry within our political struggle.

Poetry is about expressing how we see the world and relate to it – it is a political statement using our revolutionary voices. By writing a poem we bring our feelings and experiences to life using words in a skilful way. We reject the obscure poetry fit only for academics. Our poetry will shout a clear message to our people, not by using strident propaganda but by writing imaginatively and truthfully about our own lives and feelings.⁴

The reference to writing ‘to our people’ echoes the words of Alice Walker the black, feminist novelist and poet who has said of her work that she writes ‘for her village’. We too were primarily writing for the community from which we came and viewed the exercise as a liberating one through the expression of deeply felt emotions. We understood the establishment of the workshops and the creative energy they were releasing as another important step in our developing personal and political consciousness;

Every revolution has had its revolutionary culture, including its revolutionary literature. Ours is no exception and it is another step in our political development to become part of that culture. These poems are linked into that process of awareness.⁵

The samples of poetry contained in *Scairt Amach* cover such diverse topics as the wing library, the workshops themselves, emigration, robots, the ‘Save the Whale’ campaign, religion, poverty, plus more surreal subjects. Nowhere is there to be found what could be termed overtly republican propaganda statements, nor inward-looking or depressive tales of incarceration. The poems instead reflect an awareness of the broader issues of life and an outward-looking and inclusive view of society coupled with a humanity and concern for others who suffer oppression in its various forms.

6. *An Glór Gafa (The Captive Voice)*

The poetry workshops and the publication of *Scairt Amach* fuelled our desire to ‘have our own voice heard’ and in the autumn of 1989 the first edition of *An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice* appeared. The idea of a prisoners' magazine had been talked about in the camp on several occasions but never with any firm resolve to actually establish one. At various times in the past republican prisoners had produced small newsheets but primarily these were for internal distribution only. What we wanted was a quality publication that could be distributed on the outside. We felt that the standard of writing being produced in the camp was of a high enough quality to compile a magazine that people would actually buy. The other factor was that such a magazine would show the diversity of the culture of imprisoned republicans and the high level of political awareness that existed. It would also provide us with a creative role in promoting the wider struggle. Brian Campbell was appointed as the first editor of *An Glór Gafa*.

We discussed what the content of the magazine should be and were in agreement that it should be a variety of material; art work, politics, satire and humour. I remember people being surprised at the professionalism of it when it appeared as people thought it was going to be like *Scairt Amach*, a wee A5 stapled effort. The first issue wasn't on glossy paper, later ones were, but it still looked well.⁶

In the editorial of the first issue we clearly defined what we saw our role as prisoners to be:

The state is not sustained by force alone ... The media, the education system, the churchmen and politicians all play their part in guarding against the dissemination of revolutionary ideas ... Thus, the gaols have been the arena for a different struggle – the struggle through education. Time and a common purpose have enabled us to study the nature of the world in which we live and to educate ourselves to become better able to bring about change in the Ireland of today ... We hope our *Captive Voice* will be heard by all those who share our vision of freedom in a socialist Republic.⁷

We did not know how the prison authorities would respond to the publication so initially the finished magazine ready for print was both smuggled out of the prison and sent out through the normal prison channels. We were taking no chances! However, apart from a delay going through the censor the authorities did not present any difficulties.

An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice was published three times a year over a ten-year period, 1989-1999, the last one being produced before the remaining republican prisoners were released early (in July 2000) under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement (1998). The magazine covered topical issues for prisoners and their families and also raised other issues that could be seen as controversial within republicanism, including; relationships with partners and wives on the outside and the issue of gay republican prisoners. It was our view that the raising of controversial topics and a critical reflection upon commonly held republican beliefs was a

main motivation for producing the magazine in the first place; we could raise issues that were simply not covered in any other republican publication.

In establishing *An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice* as a regular publication we had taken a decisive step in 'writing our own history' and 'creating our own images'. Being in total control of the content of the magazine from soliciting contributions, compiling, editing, through to publishing meant that the final construct was all our own work. We did not have to 'shape' the contents of the magazine to meet with someone else's view of what republicanism should be about. Nor was content determined by what 'sold'.

7. 'Nor Meekly Serve My Time'

By 1981 several copies of *An Glór Gafa* had already been published. It was the year of the tenth anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike and there was a view that we should mark it with the publication of a small booklet. We asked prisoners to write their memories of the hunger strikers and of that period. A huge volume of material was produced. It was as if the floodgates had been opened and a tidal wave of memories and emotions came gushing out. Eighteen months later we had refined those accounts into a chronological manuscript. Three years later, in the summer of 1994, it was published under the title, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The History of the H Block Struggle 1976-1981*.

The accounts told in *Nor Meekly Serve My Time* are often deeply personal, especially so in the case of Ciarán McGillicuddy who, just 17 years of age when he joined the blanket protest, describes an internal body search, which to him was like rape.⁸ Others talk about their experience of the hunger strike, the emotions they felt as comrades died, relations with their families and the frustrations, hope, despair and comradeship they experienced over those years. In the epilogue to the book a statement from the republican prisoners written in 1994 makes no attempt to pretend that what the prisoners were involved in during the years of protest was as the result of careful and prior analysis. The statement reads:

It would be all too easy in retrospect to present the history of the Blanket struggle against the backdrop of careful prior analysis on our part. Such was not the case ... We found ourselves, all too suddenly, thrown into the middle of Britain's attempt to criminalise our struggle. Our response was more instinctive than analytical.⁹

The book couldn't have been written without two things: one was the gap in time from the hunger strike. People needed that time and space before being able to write about something that was deeply personal, deeply emotional for them. And it couldn't have been written without the process of education and creative writing that had gone on within the jail during those years and the confidence that had given to men to write openly and honestly about some of their fears and weaknesses. Therein lies the strength of the book.

8. From 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' to 'Theatre of the Oppressed'

Numerous articles, short stories and poetry appeared in other publications on the outside over the years but it was again the subject of the hunger strike, or more exactly, the writings of Bobby Sands that prompted a significant creative/artistic development in 1985 - the adaptation of Bobby Sands's writings for a stage production entitled *The Crime of Castlereagh*. Mícheál MacGiolla Gunna, who co-ordinated the project, viewed it as the continuation of the cultural struggle waged by the prisoners. MacGiolla Gunna adds that:

They write, compose poetry, sing and play music, paint and carve. They utilise every form of self-expression. They do so not merely because they are talented, thoughtful individuals (one of the reasons leading to their imprisonment), but because they wish to give voice to the pain of their people and articulate the need for radical change to end this pain.¹⁰

Mícheál goes on to quote from Edward Said, the Palestinian academic; Ken Saro Wiwa, the executed Nigerian human rights advocate; and Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, locating the writings of the prisoners within an international, philosophical, literary and revolutionary tradition. He adds that the type of theatre they chose through which to interpret Bobby's writing was one that allowed for collective input. All involved in the project participated in the creation, production and direction of the drama. Mícheál says of this approach that:

... we retained control and ownership of our own images, actions, and meanings. The style was surreal; thus, we created our own world with its own rules and deeper truth, rather than conforming to naturalistic conventions and the dominant version of superficial reality.¹¹

What Mícheál Mac Giolla Gunna and the other prisoners did was to further develop the cultural/political struggle within the prison re-interpret and adapt the writings of Bobby Sands for a prison audience, many of whom would not even have been born when Bobby Sands first went to prison. The play also had resonance from an earlier time as the prisoners employed the principles of Augusto Boale and his 'theatre of the oppressed', principles that run parallel to Paulo Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' which had so much influenced our thinking in the early 1980s.

9. Prologue

Thus, the cultural/political struggle in the H Blocks had come full circle; the pedagogy of the oppressed had prepared the ground for the theatre of the oppressed just as the struggle and sacrifice of Bobby Sands and his comrades in the late 1970s had established the jail conditions that allowed for a new generation of incarcerated republicans to take the prison struggle a stage further. Many of those ex-prisoners are working today, directly or indirectly, in politics, community development or creative, artistic, or cultural roles. In many ways they have already fulfilled Bobby Sands' prophecy and vision – **"... unlike their laughs and jibes, our laughter will be the joy of victory and the joy of the people; our revenge will be the liberation of all."**

Notes

1. Bobby Sands, *The Diary of Bobby Sands* (Dublin, Sinn Fein Publicity Department, 1981).
2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Great Britain: Sheed and Ward, 1972).
3. Brian Campbell qtd. in Laurence McKeown, *Unrepentant Fenian Bastards: The Social Construction of an Irish Republican Prison Community* (PhD Thesis, Queen's University, Belfast, 1998).
4. Republican Prisoners, *Scairt Amach* (spring edition. Long Kesh, Authors, 1989), 2.
5. Ibid, 2.
6. B.Campbell qtd in McKeown.
7. Brian Campbell, "Editorial", *An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice* (1989, I.1).
8. Brian Campbell, Laurence McKeown, and Felim O'Hagan, Eds, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle 1976-1981* (Belfast, Ireland, Beyond the Pale Publications, 1994), 90-92
9. Ibid, 266.
10. Mícheál MacGiolla Gunna, *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, (1996-97, 7.1),7.
11. Ibid, 9.

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The Power of Words or Light in the Darkest Places

Jean Trounstine

Since the World Trade Towers were attacked on September 11th, my students at Middlesex Community College have asked me: why should we care about people in prison? Why, when the world is so full of battles and when they struggle so hard to make ends meet, working, attending college, balancing jobs and family responsibilities, why on earth they ask do I want them to stop and think about what it's like to live on the inside, to have freedom taken away, to be without most of what they hold dear?

Sometimes I tell them a story, a story because I have been privileged to grow up with words and I know the power a book can have to change a life. When I first read *To Kill A Mockingbird* in high school, I wanted to be Atticus Finch, the wise lawyer who stood up for Right, as a single parent nurtured and his son and daughter, had values and the kind of wisdom that comes from years of standing up for what you believe in , in spite of the barriers against your actions. I had the privilege that many of the people behind bars with don't have, parents who read to me, plays to perform in, books in my home. Atticus Finch says, "You never really know a man until you walk around in his shoes," and I believed him. But my students glance at me politely. In no way do they want to get close much less inside a prisoner's mind.

There is, of course, no easy answer, no simple story to get them to care, no reassurance that such caring will provide them with the jobs they seek, the money they want, or the elusive boyfriend or girlfriend at the end of the rainbow. We, who struggle daily to find compassion when the job insists that we be cynical, know all too well that it is not always easy to care about people behind bars. But we do. Why?

Another story. In 1986, I was a high school teacher in a well-to-do suburb of Massachusetts where students wrote papers with lines like "The first time I saw a black person I was sixteen." So when I was offered the chance to teach adjunct college classes at Framingham Women's Prison, I jumped. It was a chance to teach in what I thought, at the time, was "another culture." Although I knew nothing about the men and women living behind bars, I told myself I could create my own curriculum; teaching college was a step up from high school and \$1200 was a lot of money in those days. Even if I had never thought for more than two minutes about the people who lived behind bars, I figured my students might benefit from knowing something about a world different from their conservative and prosperous John Updike town.

And then I met the women in prison. Dolly – a white Italian grandmother who brought her knitting to my classes, started a battered women's group and was the second woman at Framingham to earn her Associates Degree while incarcerated. Dolly wrote poems to stay afloat, ones that talked about her brother Eddie and longed for the things she missed outside – lemons, her grand-daughter, going to her mother's funeral. She had been a hairdresser in "the free world," but she wanted to take advantage of college classes in the prison, at first, to get back at the state for taking away her freedom, but eventually because she wanted to expand her horizons. Dolly, who was at the scene but didn't raise a hand to harm the man her lover killed, got fifteen years to life on the theory of joint venture – she was considered a party in the crime. For weeks she brought letters to lawyers, petitions complaining about the food, rants on health care. Her need to speak out helped ease her loneliness and although it could not fill the enormous hole she felt away from her family, her poems, plays and essays made her feel that she was capable of a better life.

Bertie – a young Jamaican beauty with sass who called Dolly "Ma" wore hats to class, even though she had nowhere to go. Early on, Bertie let me know why she was taking my college writing class. She stood with her hand on her hip, looking down at me while I tried to look friendly and tough at the same time: "It was ESL or you," she said and flounced into a seat. Bertie never talked about her crime but it was clear many of the other women shunned her and when, some months after I had begun teaching at Framingham, Dolly told me that she had killed her four month old child, I felt shock but even more, unbelievably sad for Bertie as well as the child who was killed. It was in Bertie's writing that I began to understand more deeply what she struggled with. First of all, she wrote about growing up in rural Jamaica and told one story about owning a pet goat. Bertie said she loved this goat, took her to school for "show and tell" and bragged about the goat to all her friends. One night her mother had a party and Bertie felt something strange. She went outside the house to shake off the feeling and there, behind the house, she found her goat's head in a pot – her mother had killed the goat and served it to company for dinner. After I heard of what Bertie experienced as her mother's betrayal, I thought long and hard about what a life she must have had and although this didn't justify her killing her child, it certainly made me see that everyone has a story, another face behind the mask, a complicated history. Bertie also struggled with herself in class journal writing where she told me that for the first time, she began to write about her crime.

Mamie, a large African American woman from the South, the prison gardener who brought dried flowers to class and made cards for her family, got cancer and was shipped out to Shattuck, the hospital for those who

have no families, criminals and the loneliest of the criminally inside. She asked me to bring her books, to bring her writing assignments, to feed her mind and when I tried to tell her how sorry I was for her, she said, "Oh Jean, I have my own room, a window. I look out on a patch of green. It's almost like being free." And Rose who wanted to be onstage because she needed to get away from the HIV which haunted her daily --and in 1986, we knew little about HIV. Rose felt feared and shunned by guards and inmates alike and said she wanted to be onstage "to be someone else, even if just for a night." Even Kit, the class clown, an Irish American considered ugly, scraggly, more a homeless woman than an inmate, who told me that her kids had been taken away, wrote amazing pieces of writing about what she imagined was inside her brain or what it felt like to shop with a small child when she couldn't afford a bottle of milk. She came to class to ease her pain and "to learn another way of living than the streets."

I had come to the prison to teach them English – to give them skills – and I did, but it was a shock to find women who bared themselves on paper, who shared their troubles, their mistakes, their flaws and who were always grateful. "Drive home safely as Bertie used to say to me, standing with her back against the wall, books in her arms like a co-ed. As a teacher, I didn't have to think about their crimes, I didn't have to focus on the little column in the newspaper that proclaimed "murderer," or "thief." I had the luxury – and I use that word importantly – of seeing the person and not the label –seeing the relationship, if you will, they had with themselves and with others. Bertie might come to class and cower because someone in her unit had picked a fight with her, but in my class she could write and her loneliness. She could also imagine the world outside hers where Kate and Petruchio live in *The Taming of the Shrew* and insist that Kate should "get a life." It's not that it didn't matter that Bertie had killed her four month old daughter, it's just that it also mattered that she was imprisoned in the USA, miles away from her homeland, her traditions, most of her family .

Yes, I tell my students, it's not just about the crime a person commits. I saw the women, 80 % of them mothers, worrying about their kids, There wasn't a day that went by that Bertie didn't wrestle with her crime, with sin, with the horror of the life she had lost, and when she played Hester Prynne's daughter Pearl, she wrote reams in her journal, struggling with being what she called, "a babykiller," But I loved Bertie. That is, I grew to love her because I grew to see who she was. She performed in five plays, told me that theatre helped her lose her accent and when she got out of prison, she wrote that she was being deported. I also heard she had first gone to New York, got a job, had another child "It's got to be healing," Dolly later told me. Dolly too, insinuated herself into my heart and was the one who knew most about the power of words. "We have to do a play, Jean," she said to me eight months after I had started teaching at the prison. "The men have theatre programs – they came here last year and performed *The Man of La Mancha* – so why can't the women have them too?" And so I began to apply for grants, to make plans to bring more words to the women.

I started with Shakespeare. Certainly there were other roads. England's Geese Theatre Company does wonderful theatre with incarcerated adults using the stories of people's lives. But I am drawn to the classics and to the idea that they can teach us ways to be deeply who we are, that great words can go inside and touch parts of our inner selves. We need to be who we are and we need to be who we are not. Stepping into the shoes of another is, as Atticus Finch says, a way to grow, to transcend some of old ways and find new insight. Shakespeare is the playwright people in America find most difficult. If you have given up on yourself and yet you achieve what you think is most difficult, life again has possibility.

Yes, I tell my students, women have committed crimes, some of them horrendous, but what would it be like, no matter what you have done to be behind bars when your mother dies? To hear that your kids have witnessed the brutal murder of your boyfriend? Not to be able to go to them? What would it be like to be without those things you take for granted? Blowdryers? A watch? Keys?

"Nobody on the outside cares about women in prison," Dolly said to me early on in my tenure. I know you wouldn't be here if you believed this. And yet, we need to care more.

As of 1995, 60% of college classes for prisoners were cut nationally. In spite of the fact that the more education an inmate has, the less likely they are to go back to jail, and in spite of the fact that only 1% of federal Pell Grants went to prisoners, Pell Grants for prisoners were abolished nationwide. And today, with budget cuts and our insistence on "tough on crime," even GED classes are being cut in some facilities. I feel our words must ring out about the value of education, about the value of words, of theatre, of art. We must not let this happen.

A life touched by words can produce inner change. Dolly served fifteen years for a crime committed by her boyfriend. *She* was there. *He* knifed the man. Like so many people we know behind bars, she was poor, couldn't afford a lawyer and had a boyfriend who cut a deal. Dolly was in two plays, graduated from college, never imagined she could be anything but a hairdresser. I am not saying that art saves lives. I wish it could. But it provides light and light is better than darkness. Dolly was one of the 2% of people in Massachusetts who got Parole the first time she went before the Parole Board and now that she's out, at 65, she lives a reasonable life, has a good heart, a solid head, has survived the overdose of her daughter, the death of other relatives and like the rest of us, does her best to survive. Dolly goes on speaking engagements with me now and talks to students

about her experience behind bars. She says that she learned to read better, to have more confidence in herself from our six months of rehearsing and performing plays for over two hundred women, and that she loved being part of a process of adapting plays for performance. “I remember when I first realized that I understood Shakespeare and I thought there was something wrong with me,” she says, and eventually knowing his words made her feel smart. I tell her that her words – her writing and her talk – taught me to care.

In ten years, I directed eight plays. Hundreds of women came to classes, read books, wrote papers, stripped themselves of masks. “We write to find out who we are,” I told them, and we’d scribble away, listening to the sound of pipes overhead, the noises from the pool room down the hall, the prayer service upstairs. “We read to know we are not alone.” We’d argue about characters.

Was Shylock a vengeful money lender who wanted his pound of flesh at all costs or was he a man, betrayed by his daughter who ran off to a Christian world, ditching her Jewish father to aim for acceptance at all costs? Both we say, hating Shylock when he sharpens his knife in the courtroom, preparing to take the “pound of flesh” he is owed because his customer, Antonio, defaulted on his loan. And yet, when the moment comes at the end of *The Merchant of Venice* when the rich merchant has his turn to dole out mercy, to temper justice, he is as vengeful as Shylock. Not only does he want to take away Shylock’s money and his livelihood, but he says, for trying to go after his life, Shylock must suffer. “Convert to Christianity,” he declares, laughing at Shylock’s losses.

At the moment in our production, when Rose, the woman with HIV playing Shylock the Jewish money lender, an outsider in the Christian world as she was an outsider in prison, at the moment when the lawyer pulled off Shylock’s skullcap, the symbol of her religion, and tossed it to the floor, Rose was silenced. But the audience, the two hundred women watching the play were not. They cheered, they yelled, they said “You can’t take away a man’s faith. There’s nothin’ wrong with bein a Jew if that’s what you are.” And they literally embraced their fellow prisoners after the play, saying your success was mine. The playgoers and the audience found themselves in our adaptation of Shakespeare. And they understood that there are some things you cannot do in the name of justice. How does this work? Transformation through art is not a new theme but in prison where words and action are censored, an artist like Shakespeare can provide a vehicle through which the prisoners speak their own truths. Rhonda, our feisty Portia, who got into crime after her father died, did not finish her paralegal degree outside. But in our adaptation, where she spoke the sense of Portia’s words, coupled with creating Portia’s behavior, she became a lawyer for her audience. She was empowered and her own voice was not dissipated but enabled through the playing of Portia. She stepped into her shoes and we believed she was capable of solving the case.

Many people who work in prison do not have the benefit of sitting in a room and hearing the lives of prisoners on paper or sitting in an auditorium and seeing them act out a play on stage. They may be engaged daily in work that does not offer such a perspective. Those of us on the outside must continue to fight for the programs that we know can make a difference. If we don’t, who will? Surely, not the majority of people, like my students, who need me to prod them to look inside another’s life. Even if art cannot always save a life, I know it provides hope. I know it provides insight and truth.

The world I want to live in does not lock up women and throw away the key. It does not make laws solely based on “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” It is a world where prisoners can begin to see in the darkness, to know that they can transform their lives through the beauty of the written word, through the music of a line of poetry and through an idea that soars through prison bars and endures forever.

A Distant Voice In The Darkness

Mary Stephenson

Prison writing is the privilege of the few. In reality a large number of prisoners have literacy problems, so writing isn't an option and help with creative writing alone is not going to be much good. There is a real danger that their creativity becomes locked in, prevented from being communicated simply because the prisoner doesn't hold the right key to unlock their inspiration.

Surprisingly, a lot of prisoners turn to poetry when they hit their darkest days - mostly writing it but also reading it. It is often a struggle. Scraps of paper with crude rhymes, awkward rhythms and clichéd phrases mask the depth of emotion behind their words. They are enslaved by the fear of 'not doing it right', of teacher telling them they're no good and thus annulling their right to self expression, compounding their sense of isolation and worthlessness.

But those feelings continue to seethe, all that rage and energy has to be expressed somehow. A writer in residence's job is to unlock those barriers, not in a patronising 'Here's how you do it' way. We're not there to teach; we learn as much, possibly more, about what art really is from the prisoners we work with. Prisoners put the passion back into the arts. We're there to help them find their voice through the arts.

Some prisoners need to be locked up - the serial rapist, the dangerous paedophile, the psychopath - let us not deify them. Yet they are such a tiny percentage of the prison population. The vast majority are people whose lives have gone horribly wrong and who need the space, support and time to examine how and why that has happened, and to develop the skills to change their lives and take control.

Music is probably the most popular form of expression for prisoners. Whether it is in moving to a beat, identifying with the lyrics, or writing and playing music themselves, it always has a powerful effect.

In 1999 I brought in a musician to work for five days with a group of 13 volunteer prisoners. Some had never learned to play a musical instrument, others were more proficient like the lead guitarist who had taught himself in his cell. Their brief was to devise music to poetry written by prisoners on the theme of 'Childhood', to be performed in a concert on the Friday evening before an audience of visitors and prisoners. This was seat of the pants stuff and you couldn't find a more disciplined team anywhere. They even gave up their cigarette breaks to concentrate on putting the material together. Unfortunately most of the childhood experiences were harrowing, as this example demonstrates.

Childhood Memories

Mark Godman

"You're scum," you said.
"You're worthless," you said.
"You're not fit to live," you said.
"You're a leech," you said.
"On my life," you said
"I wish you had never been born," you said
As you smashed my head
Then sent me up to bed. You said:
"I'll make you wish that you was dead."
"You deserve," you said to my mother, you said:
"To be beaten," as you punched her in the
Face you said:
"I'd be free without you and all the kids,"
You said,
As you punched and punched her face.
You said:
"If you ever run away and tell the police...,"
You said
You would find me and kill me, you said
As you rammed your fist into my face.

I was crying, you said you was coming
As you climbed the steps to the stairs

You said
 You would show me how not to be bad.
 As you came into my bedroom, you said:
 "Shut up!" to my mother you said,
 As she cried and begged you not to beat me.
 "You should think yourself lucky that I
 Only blacked your eyes."

Then he said nothing.

"Don't hurt me," I said
 As you punched me. I said:
 "It wasn't my fault I was born," I said.
 "Please don't," I said
 And I screamed as you took the belt from
 Your trousers.
 "I'm sorry for what I've done," I said
 As you beat me and beat me.

Then I said nothing.

Mark had come on the music project as a musician but after the first day he went back to his cell and, moved by the poems he'd already heard, decided to write down his own childhood memories. He presented this poem to me the next day with his idea that it should be performed by three men to a background of music devised by the group. Mark had never brought me poetry before, he had certainly never thought of himself as a poet. Yet the project had made him realise that his experiences were as valid as those of any famous writers and that he didn't have to be Shakespeare, or to spell well, to create a poem. All he needed was the passion and the belief that what he had to say and the way he chose to say it, was valid. The reaction he received from the other prisoners and indeed, the audience at the concert, confirmed what he had dared to hope.

Another man found poetry unleashed the rage and frustration he felt when he was sentenced to life for a murder he says he didn't commit - and the evidence is mounting to back up his claim. He was sentenced at the age of 19 on the basis of a confession which had been extracted from him by a policeman who was subsequently sent down for perverting the course of justice on another case. By the time I met him, the scared lad of 19 had become a campaigning man of 42. He told me how, in the early eighties, he had gone through a phase of writing poetry, almost to the exclusion of everything else. He hadn't had much of an education and he certainly didn't think of himself as a writer, but it had been like a purging of the rage and although he still felt very angry, that phase of poetry writing had helped him somehow to cope. He stopped writing poetry some years before I met him because he felt as though he'd said it all, the flow had ceased. But he'd kept it and while he was at Channings Wood he collected his favourite ones together and made a book of them which he sold in aid of the local children's hospice.

Blue II

Different seasons
 In a blue deep sleep
 Immersed in winters
 As autumn creeps
 Nature's tears
 Of morning dew
 Tranquil thoughts
 Halos of blue

Absent friends
 Seem to hide
 In a portrait gallery
 Of a blue veiled bride
 October roses
 In April snow

Draft in dreams
Ripple and flow

Tangled up
In a blue phase of time
An age of reason
Is not mine
Love and rage
Is all that remains
As the man in my eyes
Is bound by chains

Another lifer who had done over 20 years, was a complete stranger to punctuation, yet he wrote prolifically and my time at Channings Wood was made richer by his work. He never spoke of his crime, nor dwelt on it in his writing, but when I asked if he visualised the settings he created he said hastily that he avoided visualisation because of the horrendous pictures that he saw. He, too, had found a channel for his intense feelings through creative writing. It had helped him understand himself better and he had found something for which he could rightly be proud. I was sorry when it was time for him to move on to an open prison. He continued to send me work for my comments and one of my favourites was a piece called 'The Night'. As a prisoner for over 20 years he hadn't been able to walk outside on his own at night time, and now he could. Here is how he started it:

The Night

John Wrigglesworth

There's something about the night that sings to my soul. It could be that the dark reminds me of the womb, the last time I felt truly safe. It could be that the shadows I slide through, as I make my way home, hide my true nature, or rather the nature others would have me own. It could be that the night sounds I'm attuned to, give me advance warning of danger, and so let me pass through the urban jungle I haunt, in safety. It could be that the night shrouds my fear of living life to the full, and allows me to trespass on the edge of society without risk. It could be all of these things and many more, I suppose....

Radio has a very important potential role to play within prisons, a fact that some UK prisons have woken up to. Radio gives prisoners a voice regardless of their literacy skills. It allows them anonymity, they don't have to learn lines for radio drama, and it can reach through prison walls. It can also help prisoners to escape, through their imagination. I was fortunate to be able to persuade the governors at Channings Wood, with the help of substantial arts funding, that a radio station would be a tremendous asset to the establishment and on November 13th, 2000, Con Air made its first programme.

Initially we didn't have the finance to transmit the programmes, so the material had to be recorded onto audio cassettes to be made available in the library. Some prisoners had televisions in their cells so the programme was also recorded onto video tape and played through the video channel on the living blocks. One prisoner who worked in the Con Air studio told us how he had come across three prisoners listening to Con Air, their eyes glued to the television screen with the Con Air logo on it, while the programme played.

Then in the autumn of 2001 we received funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to install a transmitter and on December 13th, 2001 Con Air was broadcast live throughout the prison for the first time. Now, a year later, the radio station has become an integral part of prison life, broadcasting for 1_ hours during the lunch-time lock-down period a programme of prisoners' music, poetry, stories, information and interviews.

Separation from their families and their children growing up without them is one of the most deeply felt losses that prisoners endure. The phone becomes the umbilical cord through which they keep that relationship alive. 'The Spare Phone Card' was written as a devised piece for radio by me in collaboration with a prisoner serving a life sentence for murder. His only child, Rhys, was born four months after he started his sentence. The relationship with Rhys's mother foundered and the telephone became their only contact. In the play the little boy starts school and there he learns, from another child, what his father has done. Until then he had been told his father was abroad, working. This was a hard scene for the father, Allyn, to play because in reality he had yet to tell his little boy the truth about him and he knew this scenario could easily happen. Playing the leading part, he had to experience the scenario where his 'son' rejects him, calling him a liar and a murderer. It was a tough scene for him to do and he wasn't the only one with tears in his eyes as we did the recording. Now when it is played on Con Air, I am often stopped by prisoners who say it could have been their story.

Drugs are such an integral part of many prisoners' lives. At Channings Wood in 1997, they set up the first therapeutic community for substance abuse within a UK prison. These are some of the most motivated and expressive prisoners anyone could wish to work with.

In September 2000 we devised a project in which a group of 12 residents on the therapeutic community made a three part radio documentary entitled 'Journey Through Drugs', using music, dramatic improvisation, poetry and interviews to map the route from first experimentation, through addiction to crime, prison and rehabilitation. The final piece totalled over 60 minutes of material in which the prisoners spoke, sang or portrayed aspects of their lives that they had never shared with others before, even within the open atmosphere of the community. A recurring theme was their relief to find others had felt or experienced the same depths as they had, they were not as alone as they believed and now they were sharing those experiences with an audience.

Since I began at Channings Wood in 1998 there have been so many exciting projects: Con Artists - the exhibition in a local supermarket of prisoners' paintings and poetry; 'When the Cell Door Closes' - another improvised radio play which was broadcast on BBC local radio as a Christmas special, dealing with the prisoner's loneliness behind the bravado; 'Inside Out' - the 90 second video made by prisoners showing how a postcard on a bare wall can transport a man beyond the walls through his imagination; the monthly prison magazine full of their poetry, stories and articles. The list, as they say, is endless.

The Writers in Prisons scheme has developed to include storytellers, song-writers and musicians in residence. The agency that administers the scheme no longer has to do the hard sell each year, ringing governors and persuading them to take on an artist. Now there is a waiting list of prisons wanting to join the scheme. It has taken years for the message to get through but now they recognise that prisoners desperately need to find their voice in the darkness of their loss of freedom. It is also recognised that offering them creative writing support alone is not enough. It is no coincidence that so many prisoners turn to the arts while in prison.

Finally I would like to share with you a poem that was slipped under the cell door by a woman at Dartmouth House of Corrections when we visited last March. I don't know who wrote it, and it's irrelevant anyway. What is significant is that the poem spoke for the woman. It was handwritten on a scrap of paper and through the window in the door she indicated that it was for us. That gesture and the poem sum up what my work in prison is all about.

Apollo stood on the high cliff
"Come to the edge," he said.
"We can't," they said. "It's too high."
"Come to the edge," he said.
"We can't," they said. "It's too high."
"Come to the edge," he said.
"We can't," they said. "We'll fall."
"Come to the edge," he said.
And they came, and he pushed them,
And they flew.

Playwright and Writer in Residence, HMP Channings Wood, UK

Mandela's "Missing" Manuscript: Appropriation and Repression in Accounts of Robben Island Prison

David Schalkwyk

Everybody in this room knows of Robben Island. Indeed, to a large number of people around the world, the name Robben Island has a familiar, if chilling, ring. But who has heard of Prison No. 4 – the “Fort” – , Leeukop, Barberton, Kroonstad, Pretoria Local and Pretoria Central, or the other no 4, Quadro? All of these, with the exception of the last (which was in Angola) are prisons that held the political opponents of the apartheid regime, along with hundreds of thousands of “common-law” prisoners. And then there are the dozens of holding cells in police stations where people were held in solitary confinement, tortured, sometimes killed for at least thirty years. All of these were an integral part of apartheid’s penal system.

But Robben Island Prison has always been a thing apart: its apartness exemplified by its separation from the mainland by eleven kilometres of icy sea, but also systematically kept apart through both administrative confinement and symbolic representation. In this paper I wish to explore the ways in which Robben Island has displaced broader forms of experience and struggle in recent South African history. Such displacement may be traced along three related lines: Robben Island has come to stand for all prisons in South Africa, and especially for the experience of political prisoners as a whole; it has become synonymous with the African National Congress (ANC), despite the fact that its inmates included members of other political organisations, often fiercely antagonistic towards the ANC; and the ANC itself has come to be represented by the overwhelming figure of Nelson Mandela, whose representation of the Island has in crucial ways, become the Island.

Neville Alexander, himself a Robben Island prisoner, has referred to the “peculiar” status of Robben Island, claiming, after his release in 1974, that the island “is the most important prison in South Africa”.¹ This status comes not merely from the empirical fact that the Island contained the overwhelming majority of sentenced opponents of the regime. It has long symbolised both the repressive apparatus of the apartheid state and the unflinching resistance to such repression. In a subsequent interview, Alexander has questioned the recent status of Robben Island Prison as a place apart.² The treatment of prisoners, he reminds us, brutal as it was, was not especially harsh by the standards of other political prisons around the world, or even in comparison to other prisons in South Africa that housed non-political prisoners. We should look at the Island, he suggests, as an expression of the complexity of historical processes and the structural forces that work on individuals and groups, rather than as a place of pilgrimage or commercial exploitation.

Both of these uses of the Island are apparent, despite the best of intentions, in the Robben Island Museum, one of the three or four most popular tourist attractions in post-apartheid South Africa, where hundreds of visitors a day now not only set foot on the old prison’s previously remote soil, but are also conducted through the prison by its former inmates. Here, the cramped cell in which Nelson Mandela spent eighteen years forms the climax of the tour: a shrine that far outshines the Muslim “kramat” of Abdul Mattara just beyond the walls of the prison or even the tiny house to which the PAC leader, Robert Sobukwe, was confined by an act of Parliament in the early nineteen-sixties. Despite the prior claims over some three hundred years of numbers of indigenous leaders who were consigned to the island, and died on it, Robben Island has become virtually synonymous with the name of Nelson Mandela. Most people who know of the conditions on Robben Island as an apartheid prison do so through Mandela’s autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, published in 1994, at the threshold of his presidency of the new “rainbow nation” South Africa.

This brings me to my title. One of the stories told repeatedly on the prison tour concerns a manuscript of a prison memoir that Mandela was persuaded by his colleagues to write in 1975, after he had been on the island for 11 years. Mandela wrote the memoir surreptitiously, accepting critical comments from Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada, before Kathrada transcribed it in minute script, so that he could smuggle it out on his release in 1976. The original manuscript was divided into three parts, each buried in the courtyard adjoining their cells. But a working party digging foundations for a wall to isolate common law and political prisoners uncovered it. It was handed over to the prison authorities, who quickly identified its author’s hand. Kathrada did, however, manage to smuggle the transcript abroad, and presented a typescript of the memoir to Oliver Tambo, then Chairman of the ANC, in Lusaka. “From there,” Mandela writes, “the trail grows cold. I heard nothing from Lusaka about the manuscript and still don’t know precisely what Oliver did with it. Although it was not published while I was in prison, it forms the basis of this memoir.”³

Strictly speaking, then, this intriguing manuscript is “missing” only in a special sense: *A Long Walk to Freedom* displaces or acts as a substitute for the original, which, unlike the later work, was forged in the actual conditions of incarceration. The later memoir thus represses or suppresses the former. It is the product of a

different time, changed circumstances, even altered authors. The document that Kathrada smuggled to the ANC in 1976 was presumably an extraordinary testimony, given the secrecy and censorship with which the apartheid regime surrounded its repressive activities and the voices of its opponents. It represented a direct and sustained voice from the heart of apartheid's darkness. Why, then, did it "disappear" for a decade and a half? Was it in turn suppressed by the ANC leadership-in-exile? And why did Mandela himself not have it published upon his release? Why was its historical testimony displaced by a subsequent memoir, one written, unlike other memoirs of Robben Island, with an eye firmly on the future rather than on the past?

Compared with early accounts of Robben Island Prison, especially those written by members of the PAC, Mandela's published tale is extraordinarily reticent, even colourless. Eschewing the passionate intensity of Moses Dlamini's *Robben Island: Hell-Hole*,⁴ the fantasising interiority of D.M. Zwelonke's fictionalised *Robben Island*,⁵ the self-conscious uncertainty of Ntoko Babenia's *Memoirs of a Saboteur*,⁶ or the strict objectivity of Neville Alexander's *Robben Island Dossier*, Mandela shapes his memoirs with an eye on a much more urgent task than the mere record of a personal trauma: the forging of a new, non-racial democracy in which reconciliation is more pressing than truth. This is not to claim that Mandela deliberately distorts the truth; merely that certain aspects of life on the Island that are apparent in other accounts are either downplayed or repressed. Mandela betrays little of the raw anger or anguish of his contemporaries, nor is he particularly willing to acknowledge conflict among prisoners on the Island. Whereas Dlamini is bitterly contemptuous of the common-law prisoners on the Island, Mandela sanguinely regards them as potential converts to the political struggle; and if each of the other writers acknowledges the problem of sexuality in the Prison, indulging in their own forms of displacement, by confining it to exclusively gang-related sodomy, or isolation-cell fantasies about distant wives and mistresses, or prurient accounts of the sexual exploits of warders' wives, the de facto leader of the ANC in the prison is totally silent on the matter.

This omission is not a trivial matter. Sex has long been a central, if not obsessive, aspect of prison life. In South African prisons as a whole it forms the nexus of an often brutal play of power and exploitation, being in symbol and practice the shaping force of individual defencelessness and communal violence. For Herman Charles Bosman in his classic, *Cold Stone Jug*,⁷ his sexual vulnerability played a major role in his slide towards insanity; Hugh Lewin devotes a whole chapter to the subject in his memoir, *Bandiet*;⁸ and the political prisoner poets Denis Brutus⁹ and James Mathews¹⁰ both acknowledge the personal intensity of sexual longing and even depravity. In a recent interview with Brutus, Charlotte Bauer remarks on the poet's "independence from apparatchik morality", especially considering that "homosexual sex was taboo among ANC prisoners".¹¹ One might add that this taboo is not confined to the ANC. Dlamini, who was a member of the PAC, equates homosexuality with the criminal brutality of the common-law gangs on Robben Island. When he discovers two political prisoners who have clearly become lovers, he colludes in their being severely beaten and interrogated by their cellmates, before dismissing their actions as the unnatural product of colonialism and their "peasant" origins. They are cannier than he gives them credit for, however, insisting that nowhere in the PAC constitution is their relationship forbidden or censured.¹²

To refuse to talk about sex in prison, then, or to deny that sexual desire contaminated the lives of political prisoners, even if it deeply informs social structures amongst other prisoners, is to engage in a form of apartheid: to deny or suppress forms of experience in the name of truth or the political struggle. It is possible to draw a paradoxical generic difference between texts cast as memoirs and those less tied to factual truth. It is in the fictionalised forms, in the poetry of Brutus and Mathews and Zwelonke's novel, that one finds a freer exploration of fantasy, contradiction, conflict, and identity than in the memoirs, especially the later ones, where the heavy hand of political solidarity and discipline enforces a single vision of communal struggle, enduring resistance, and democratic harmony. One certainly needs to give the reality of that resistance and the importance of such discipline its full due. But Stephen Watson has questioned the uncritical universality with which Robben Island as a whole has been turned into the pre-eminent symbol of ANC triumphalism, exemplified for him by Ahmed Kathrada's claim that the Island is a monument to "the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil; a triumph of freedom and dignity over repression and humiliation."¹³ Watson points out that the very notoriety of the Island as a political prison between 1960 and 1990 has itself repressed centuries of suffering under perhaps more arbitrarily brutal regimes. He notes not only the ways in which the Dutch and the British used the Island to confine their colonial enemies, but also the casual brutality with which crimes ranging from sodomy to insurrection were punished: the first by throwing the weighted bodies of the perpetrators into the sea to drown, the second by breaking them on the cross.

One of the most poignant sites on the Island is a cemetery, its graves neglected, their headstones now barely legible: the burial ground of the lepers expelled from the mainland between 1886 and 1931. Lepers were confined to the Island arbitrarily, often on the flimsiest medical evidence. They were segregated by race and gender, even if they were married or belonged to the same family, cast beyond the process of appeal. There was no path back, no end to the sentence. Each one stayed on the island until and even in death. Two adjoining

headstones record the deaths of an elderly couple who, even in marriage, were kept apart. Despite the fact that they had no contact while they were confined to the island, they died within the same day.¹⁴

The lepers' plight was shared by a variety of now nameless and forgotten confinees: prostitutes, people with venereal disease, the insane, and the chronically ill poor. These human beings whose sole crime was to have been labelled outcasts and untouchables by an oppressive and indifferent colonial empire have been all-but submerged through the active recovery of Robben Island's more recent past. Their plight is the more moving for the fact that, unlike the political prisoners of apartheid, they could aspire to no future, could rally around no political programme, could appeal to no regulations or laws and lawyers, could look forward to no date of release, and their voices died with them on that desolate outcrop. As Watson reminds us, their mere existence, even in silence, undermines the symbolism of the Island as a "triumph of freedom and dignity over repression and humiliation".

Does that mean that Robben Island does not represent such a triumph? No. The problem arises when that triumph is made to stand for the whole history of the island, and its peculiar manifestations are confined to this prison, especially when it is claimed by and for a single political movement. Jean Middleton, who was imprisoned in the notorious Barberton Prison with other white, female, political prisoners, decried the tendency to obscure, forget, or ignore the prison experiences of those who were not male and those who are unable to tap into the powerful symbolism of Robben Island. In an attack on the tendency in the media to allow the male experience to eclipse those of female prisoners, she writes that "the notion remained, that men were at the cutting edge of imprisonment, and women inhabited some more ladylike and comfortable world ... I believe that that women prisoners suffered more hardship, not less, because the fact that they were few made it possible for the prison authorities to isolate them, singly, or in small groups".¹⁵

Isolation and community are key factors in any prisoner's life. Middleton is one of the few prisoners who candidly acknowledges the difficulty of forging and maintaining a sense of solidarity. "There is no doubt," she writes, "that we supported and saved each other, and that without each other we would all have been lost, but our relationships very nearly destroyed us, too".¹⁶ In contrast, especially the later representations of Robben Island attenuate, even deny, conflict and tension. In a prison that at times had over one thousand political prisoners, it is remarkable how few of the writers, leaders, and present tour guides (themselves ex-prisoners) are prepared to concede the presence of conflict among the political inmates. Violence (and its flip-side, sodomy) is projected onto the common-law prisoners, who are either dismissed as "incorrigibles" (Zwelonke) or regarded as material for political conversion (Mandela). Most concede that the massive influx from a much younger generation after the Soweto uprising of 1976 caused tension. But in Mandela's sanguine view, they were both a healthy educative force for an ageing leadership that had been cut off from the outside world for over a decade, and an educable recruiting ground for the ANC, their passionate, if at times incoherent, Black Consciousness ideology readily tempered by the more strategic and more disciplined principles of the Freedom Charter.

Now this is certainly true. It appears that discipline among ANC prisoners was remarkable, considering the usual prison conditions: the function both of a passionate sense of political solidarity and an extensive committee network. But Mandela was himself a relatively remote figure, confined with the other political leaders and a handful of others in the isolation section, where they slept in single cells, and were generally kept apart from the other prisoners. There was an ingenious system of underground communication, but is it not likely that on occasion the leaders either heard nothing of particular conflicts, or were deliberately not informed when tensions were dealt with in a manner of which the leadership would not have approved. Saths Cooper, who was not a member of the ANC on the Island, is positively scornful of the tendency to transform Robben Island into a symbol of political harmony and common resistance. He has objected to the "romanticised" or "idyllic picture of [Robben Island as a] great university [where there was a] sharing of experiences". He furthermore denies the qualitative difference that is systematically drawn between the social behaviour of political and common-law prisoners: "When the sordidness of prison behaviour is examined, there is little difference between common law and political prisoners generally. Where the former are organised into deadly rival gangs, the latter are organised into often warring political groupings".¹⁷ Significantly, Murphy Morobe, one of the leaders of the 1976 uprising, and a fellow prisoner concedes that the behaviour of the criminal gangs and the political prisoners was identical, but that the latter should be excused by their political motives: "The actions were the same, but the reasons, the motives behind it, were ... different. Our ideas are much more morally acceptable reasons to actually get into a fight".¹⁸ He may be right, but this concession contradicts other claims, especially by the ANC leaders, that their methods were qualitatively different: that discipline was not coerced but achieved through democratic negotiation and natural political solidarity. Some publicity is given to the more lurid instances of the kind of violence that Cooper and Morobe mention: Moshuoa "Terror" Lekota was attacked with a garden fork by his colleagues for leaving the BCM and joining the ANC, and Jonathan Mlambo, leader of the PAC on the Island, had his eye gouged out by fellow PAC members when he tried to

stop them from operating a smuggling ring in the kitchen. Are these isolated incidents, or the tip of an iceberg? We may never know.

Contradictions are, however, evident even from accounts that stress the harmony of resistance. Joseph Mati, for example conveys the decision that everyone should study as a top-down one, imposed without consultation: “the ANC Disciplinary committee concentrated on encouraging and enforcing [note the uncertainty here] two things in particular: studies and political discussions. ‘People must study’, the ANC would repeatedly say.”¹⁹ His interview (published in 2000!) is also the first to mention that fact that ritual circumcisions took place within the prison. There was a great demand for this operation after 1976, as many young men found themselves confined without the customary *rite de passage* into manhood. Gallelikile Sitho shows why circumcision may have been in the interests of the ANC leadership, even though none of the “Rivonia Group” mentions circumcision in any of their accounts of the prison. The administration and leadership of the ANC on Robben Island, he says, “was the result of the ANC’s belief [that] if you don’t control a young man you have done something wrong”.²⁰ Circumcision is more than a merely symbolical passage into adulthood. It is a process of intense discipline and control: a subjection of the individual subject to the disciplinary requirements of his society. As such it would have been a crucial way for the ANC to impose party discipline within the prison.

The desire for such discipline is apparent in the anxiety expressed by the older generation about the influx of youths after 1976. Babenia states his antipathy towards these new comrades with unusual candour: “I call them the ‘TV generation’ because they were born when television came to South Africa. They had seen too much American trash, liked it, and become americanised. They were not of the calibre of the older generation”.²¹ A member of that very generation has, however, expressed his own dissatisfaction with what he perceived to be the unacceptable tendency of the older generation of prisoners – Nelson Mandela’s generation – to engage in what Buntman calls strategic resistance.²² In contrast to claims that improved conditions were the result of the older members’ less defiant and more strategically accommodating stance towards the authority, Strini Moodley claims that the right to things like beds, pyjamas, and study was actually achieved by the 1976 generation’s confrontational style, rather than through the negotiating wisdom of the older men. Indeed, to this member of the “TV generation”, Nelson Mandela and his colleagues were caught in a “time-warp” which kept them in its grip even after their release: “when you embark upon that kind of programme of conciliation [it] leads in the end to you actually now being able to sit down and have tea with your enemy. Once you do that, particularly in revolutionary struggle, that is when the revolution begins to be compromised ... Even though [Mandela] was released from Robben Island, he was still living in the ‘50s’”.²³

Moodley is mistaken to attribute Mandela’s political canniness to his having lost touch with reality. If anything, Mandela had made it his business to understand the reality of the apartheid state and the psychology of its leaders in the mid-1980s, partly through the challenges of the 1976-generation. If his approach was ultimately a betrayal of revolutionary struggle, he betrayed that struggle with his eyes fully open.

This raises the question of the ways in which the struggle itself betrayed its young revolutionaries, and it takes us some distance from Robben Island, geographically speaking, to what one might call the dark side of Robben Island, as if that were not dark enough, to a prison camp in Angola called “No 4” (or *Quadro*, its Portuguese name), in Angola. The same generation that had suddenly upset the balance of Robben Island after 1976 was to cause considerably greater unease for the ANC in exile. Thousands of revolutionary youths left South Africa to join the ANC’s military wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the “Spear of the Nation”. Kept in military camps in Angola while the ANC attempted to use its unexpected new cadres strategically, those cadres became restless. Many cadres complained repeatedly of high-handed treatment by the ANC leadership. Discipline collapsed in camps where living conditions were extremely poor, and one of the camps underwent a mutiny. One of the solutions was the establishment of an internment camp (*Quadro*) by the ANC Security.²⁴

Quadro is not particularly well known. Certainly it is less famous or notorious than its island cousin. Although the ANC established a number of commissions of enquiry in the nineties, few senior members other than Nelson Mandela were happy to have the appalling conditions and treatment of its prisoners made public. It

has been suggested that Thabo Mbeki attempted to suppress the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with regard to Quadro. The same brutal conditions that marked the early years of Robben Island as a political prison appear to have been duplicated and even intensified at Quadro: arbitrary beatings by guards, torture, the lack of proper food and in some cases no bedding whatsoever for months on end, and backbreaking labour sometimes leading to death. The symbolism of Quadro aped apartheid institutions: the name of the camp was derived from a notorious apartheid prison, and the isolation cells were called after their counterparts on the much better-known Island some two thousand miles to the South. There was one difference, though. The apartheid regime strangely paid some attention to the rule of law. Suspects were detained and tortured in police stations, but once found guilty by a court of law, they had a determinate sentence, and could in theory appeal to the technical impartiality of the law and prison regulations. Many of the improvements in the living conditions came as a result of such strategic appeals. As Moodley says, “we knew the prison regulations backwards, and we used every clause in the prison regulations to be able to defeat the warders.” But there appear to have been no prison regulations of this sort at Quadro. Many detainees were held without charge, and few could look forward to a definite release date. Treatment was arbitrary, like that of the lepers at the Cape.

The events Quadro may well be explained by adducing the peculiar conditions of the ANC in its war with the apartheid government—its vulnerability to infiltration by spies and *agents provocateurs* and the lack of understanding by the 1976 generation cadres of the ANC’s political strategy—but it remains as the shadow of Robben Island: both obscured by the light that has recently been cast on the more famous prison, and a blot on the recent triumphalist symbolism of the Island. This is especially telling in the light of the fact that it was an ex-prisoner from the Island, Andrew Masondo – one of the old-guard leaders – who was commissar in charge of Quadro and other military camps during the worst human-rights abuses.

It may well be that the ANC-in-exile might have learnt something about democracy and discipline from its members who were isolated on the Island for many decades, and that this lesson threatens to be forgotten in the post-Mandela era. Perhaps more, not less attention needs to be paid to the culture of open criticism and participatory democracy that was at least held up as a founding ideal of those held in the prison now known affectionately by its former inmates as the “University”. But that should not be allowed to entrench further the hegemonic role that the Island has played in coming to stand for all struggle, all forms of incarceration, all anti-apartheid experience. Ten years after the last political prisoners left Robben Island, many of them now occupy senior positions in the new South African democracy, and one of them is arguably the most famous ex-prisoner and ex-president in the world. One would have thought that their experiences would have focussed their attention, at least to some degree, on the plight of prisoners in general. But the old distinction between enlightened political prisoner and incorrigible, sub-human criminal has reasserted itself even as thousands of visitors are taken through their common space of suffering and resistance. Evidence is now coming to light of a horrendous degree of corruption and brutality in South African Prisons as a whole, where gangs rule over even the warders, where young prisoners are casually sold for sex, where overcrowding is horrendous, arbitrary brutality a commonplace, and where “knowing the regulations” appears to be of no help at all. For a decade now, Robben Island has been a rallying-point around which South Africans have been challenged not to forget, lest it happen again. But memory, it seems, is short.

Notes

1. Neville Alexander, *Robben Island Dossier: Report to the International Community* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1994), 11.
2. Neville Alexander, interview with David Schalkwyk, 5 September 2002.
3. Nelson Mandela, *A Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Randburg: Macdonald Purnell, 1994), 467.
4. Moses Dlamini, *Robben Island: Hell-Hole* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, n.d.).
5. D.M. Zwelonke, *Robben Island* (London: Heinemann, 1973).
6. Nattoo Babenia, *Memoirs of a Saboteur* (Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1995).
7. Herman Charles Bosman, *Cold Stone Jug* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1969).
8. Hugh Lewin, *Bandiet: Seven Years in a South African Prison* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989).
9. Denis Brutus, *A Simple Lust Collected Poems of South African Jail and Exile including Letters to Martha* (London: Heinemann, 1973).
10. James Mathews, *Poems from a Prison Cell* (Athlone: Realities, 2001).
11. “The Scourge of Sandton”, *Sunday Times Lifestyle*, 25 August 2002, p. 5.
12. See Dlamini, 131-33.
13. Ahmed Kathrada, “Opening Address”, *EsiQithini: The Robben Island Exhibition* (Cape Town: South African Museum and Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1996), 11.

14. See Harriet Deacon (ed.), *The Island: A History of Robben Island 1488-1990* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip & Belville: Mayibye Books, 1996), chapter
15. Jean Middleton, *Convictions: A Woman Political Prisoner Remembers* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1998), 117-8.
16. Middleton, 102.
17. Deacon, 143.
18. Ibid.
19. Jan K. Coetzee (ed.), *Plain tales from Robben Island* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2000), 24.
20. Ibid, 97
21. Babenia, 194.
22. Deacon, 137.
23. Strini Moodley, interviewed by John Carlin. www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/mandela/interviews/moodley.html (5 September 2002).
24. See the Reports of the Commission of Enquiry into Certain Allegations of Human Rights Abuse Against ANC Prisoners and Detainees by ANC Members (Motsuenyane Commission Report), 20 August 1993; the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Complaints by Former African National Congress Prisoners and Detainees (Skweyiya Commission Report), 1992; and Stephen Ellis, "Mbokondo: Security in ANC Camps, 1960-1990", *African Affairs* 93 (1994): 279-298.

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“Hell Exploded” How Prisoner Music and Memoir Helped Topple America’s Convict Lease System and What This Means for the Future of Penal Reform

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Today I want to speak about the politics of prisoner writing; how prisoner artists and activists have remodeled their own houses of incarceration. This poses various challenges, of course. Prisons are designed to extinguish the agency of their inmates, which makes them odd places to look for prisoner political influence. Nonetheless, in conducting research for my book – *The Long Shadow of Slavery: Texas Justice and the Imprisonment of a Nation*, which will examine successive periods of institutional upheaval in Texas prisons since the American Civil War – I have found that prisoners indeed exercised political influence, sometimes decisively, at every stage – though not always in ways I had anticipated.

Today, I want to outline briefly the role prisoner writers and musicians played in one of those Texas institutional transitions. I want to explain how dogged prisoner activists helped overthrow the cruelest penal regime in American history and how, tragically, they undermined its reformist successor as well.

Texas is not just any locale, of course. Stretching from the old South to the new West, it brings together Anglos, Latinos, and African Americans, and it has served as a contentious testing ground for rival traditions of discipline: retributive hard labor vs. rehabilitative corrections. Most acutely, Texas stands as the unrivaled capital of the American gulag archipelago. By the 1970s, it had built the largest, most restrictive prison system in the United States. Since then, its prisoner population has increased sevenfold, surpassing 150,000 in 2000. Today, Texas alone incarcerates more people than Austria, France, the UK, and the Netherlands’ combined.¹

All together, this makes Texas a highly illustrative case study; it is the nasty underbelly of the meaner, more conservative nation the United States has become over the past thirty years. The evolution of its prison system, in turn, can suggest more broadly how penal regimes change, what prisoners have to do with it, and why penal reform efforts so often fail.

Texas’s modern prison system took shape after the Civil War, as thousands of former slaves tested their new freedoms and as bitter white folks scrambled to limit them. Almost immediately, punitive “black codes” served up a record crop of African American felons. Rather than erecting another penitentiary like the Auburn-style fortress at Huntsville, however, white policymakers turned to a loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited “slavery [and] involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime.” Along with other southern states, they decided to hire out convicts to the highest bidder.²

This “convict lease” system proved as pernicious as it was profitable. Because railroad companies, mining outfits, and plantation owners grew rich by minimizing expenses and maximizing labor output, the arrangement encouraged wanton neglect and ghastly abuse. Divvied up by race and physical strength, convicts were chained at the neck, stuffed into boxcars, and shipped to work camps across the state’s slavery-plantation belt. There, they toiled from “sun to sun” in the most wretched conditions: living in squalid, disease-infested barracks; subsisting on “food buzzards would not eat”; and enduring grueling punishments. In the summer, convicts labored through days so hot “we wuz almos’ dyin’,” while in the winter, they worked “barefooted...in six inches of snow.” Hundreds of prisoners – many of them convicted of petty crimes like “stealing a cap” – were simply worked to death, then buried unceremoniously where they dropped. As one leasing guard tersely remarked, “Before the war, we owned the Negroes...But these convicts, we don’t own ‘em. One dies, get another.”³

Given the isolation and brutality, it’s no wonder that many convicts fought back. While most prisoners grudgingly obeyed most of the time, Texas convicts also undermined their lease masters in myriad ways – stealing, quota cheating, faking illness, singing rudely, engaging in sabotage, horribly mutilating themselves, even participating in riots and work strikes. Between 1883 and 1910, some 3,000 prisoners simply ran away.⁴

Still others cried out in print – assailing their exploitation, begging for redress, and defiantly asserting their personhood. I lost “the prime of my life,” exclaimed one prisoner, confined in a “monotonous...abject manner, as a slave.” Another lamented that he was “buried alive...dead to the world” in Texas’s “prison hell.” Although relatively few convicts could write and still fewer had the opportunity or gumption to do so, a remarkably rich trove of Texas prisoner writing exists. Ranging from obsequious clemency appeals to eloquent autobiographies, the documents testify to the determination of some convicts to craft a public self beyond the

reach of the whip, to channel their rage and hopelessness, and, most of all, to seek redress and release.

Reflecting the relative powerlessness of their authors, many of these documents conformed to the language of power. Grateful for the chance to write rather than cut sugarcane, for example, some prisoner newspaper writers described Huntsville's officers as "sympathetic and friendly," adding that "the feeling among the convicts is one of enthusiasm and hopefulness." Others went so far as to defend the dreaded lash. "A young [inmate] is very like a puppy," editorialized the *Prison Bulletin* in 1897. "He learns good tricks and bad. And if whipped for doing wrong, he is apt to turn tail, run home and try to lead a wiser, more manly – or dogly – life."⁵

Such censored, compromised writing constitutes what political scientist James Scott has called a "public transcript" – the deferential, duplicitous language of power that both masters and subordinates adopt in rigidly hierarchical settings. Even more so in prisons than other authoritarian milieu, however, an angrier critique of power, a prisoner's "private transcript," lurked just beneath the surface. In fact, many convicts never mastered the two-faced servility necessary to curry favor with their keepers. Jewish prisoner Samuel Kaufman, for instance, carefully plotted his pardon for months, befriending a powerful rabbi and ingratiating himself with Huntsville officers. But when these efforts failed, his carefully crafted personae abruptly snapped. Having strived to "think pure thoughts and perform good deeds," he now warned that "uncharitable conditions...bring out the brute passions in men, when the thirst for blood becomes inevitable."⁶

Neither writing style – neither obeisance nor outburst – proved especially effective. Fawning newspaper articles, while preserving the author's trusty status, portrayed Texas punishment as justice and tended to reinforce administrators' loftiest visions of themselves. Sudden ruptures in the public transcript, on the other hand, confirmed stereotypes of the convict as sullen, shifty, and dangerous. On their own, neither tactic posed an acute threat to convict leasing.

Prison field music, by contrast, while never directly confronting authority, helped harmonize prisoner perspectives in ways that encouraged more overt subversion. African American convicts, in particular, drew on slavery's cultural memory to compose thousands of field hollers and work songs that would eventually coalesce into an original body of music. Ironically, this is southern justice's only praiseworthy gift to world culture. By preserving the practices of slavery and by herding black people together in conditions of such dreary servitude that only oblique, soulful music offered partial solace, southern prisons became key incubators of that uniquely African American style at the heart of so much modern popular music – the Blues. Many of the most virtuoso bluesmen honed their skills in prison, among them famed Texas performers like Lead Belly and Lightnin' Hopkins.

Less individualistic and more pragmatic than blues in the freeworld, bluesy field hollers served a variety of purposes. Old slave songs like "Go Down Ol' Hannah" helped pass the time even as they lamented its agonizing creep in the broiling sun. They set the work pace and synchronized dangerous tasks like group wood chopping. Yet black prison music was more than utilitarian. With lyrics about hard bosses, long sentences, loves lost, and spectacular crimes, convict ballads also enabled prisoners to pool their sorrow, revel in past exploits, and verbalize defiance. Consider this work song called "Early in the Mornin'," which was popular in Texas in late leasing period:

Wake up in the mornin', well-a
 With a cup and a pan, (2x)
 Well, you say anything about it,
 Well-a have trouble out the man. (2x)
 Oh captain, captain, don'tcha,
 Well-a know my name? (2x)
 Well, I used to be a porter, well-a
 On the southbound train. (2x)
 I'm the same grand rascal, well-a,
 Stole your watch and chain. (2x)⁷

To the steady downbeat of synchronized hoe strikes, the singers decry their abjection, lamenting that any complaint only invites trouble out of "the man." Yet rising above this conformist drudgery, the lead singer both asserts his individuality – he once had a "name" rather than a number – and subverts authority by repositioning the "captain" as his criminal prey. The tables could turn at any time, the unrepentant singers imply, so the captain better keep an eye on his watch.

Such lyrics surely gave convicts a chuckle, but they also imagined freedom, however tenuously, and help forge a collective sense of oppositional identity. At moments when the prison's mythic invincibility faltered, prison songs helped give convicts the courage to rebel.

Prison work songs persisted through the lease era and beyond, but as leasing's legitimacy began to crumble in the late nineteenth century, more overtly subversive forms of prisoner self-expression emerged with greater political influence. Convict leasing had always been controversial; as early as 1876, legislative investigators had denounced leasing as "a system of vilest slavery." By the 1890s, however, with the Populist revolt in full swing, the practice had become so unpopular that every political party advocated its abolition. Amidst this gathering storm of opposition, prisoner dissidents became increasingly bold. They signed detailed grievance petitions, candidly testified to investigators, and fired off angry letters to the press.⁸

Most remarkably, a new form of prisoner writing flourished as leasing faltered – professionally published memoirs. Starting with *The Texas Convict*, written by Andrew George in 1893, nearly a dozen prison autobiographies appeared over the next twenty years, all of them written by well-educated white men, whom Texas imprisoned in higher numbers than any other southern state. Angry, muckraking, sometimes introspective and sentimental, the documents varied in style and literary merit, but together they constitute the most intimate, detailed record of leasing in any state. In their own time, the texts spurred on prison reformers and helped define convict leasing to the public. What was in reality a hodgepodge collection of penitentiaries and far flung labor camps, convict writers depicted as a unitary system – as a spirit-breaking throwback to "slavery" staffed by "brutes of the most savage kind"

Among the most compelling memoirs was Charles Campbell's *Hell Exploded: An Exposition of Barbarous Cruelty and Prison Horrors*, published in 1900, shortly after the author's release from a prison ironworks. Like many prison autobiographies, the book began with a hard-luck tale of Campbell's childhood but quickly boiled over with rage. Composed in an apocalyptic idiom with the cadence of a curse, Campbell forged words as weapons against his former tormenters. Borrowing from Dante, he commanded: "Follow me, and I will place before you acts of fiendish cruelty the like of which ought to cause even the red hot dragons of lowest damnation to thunder forth protests."

After recounting his conviction before a "thick-headed" jury, Campbell dwelled on his transformation from citizen to convict, which he described as a harrowing descent from man to beast. Arriving in neck chains, he soon had his property confiscated, his head shaved, and his civvies traded in for prison stripes. Sociologist Erving Goffman has written extensively on these mortification rituals, which, he argues, systematically replaced self-fashioned identities with institutionally molded, semi-deadened ones. For Campbell – a proud white man in the Jim Crow South – the metamorphosis proved insupportable. "Subjection! Oh, the terrible, the awful import of that word!" he exclaimed.

Inadvertently no doubt, Campbell's memoir followed the plot structure of many slave narratives, guiding the reader through a series of grueling tests until he finally reclaimed self-respect and freedom. His trials began on the first work day, when, as a "fresh fish," he was assigned to drag a charcoal cart across the yard on all fours like a mule. Later, he moved to the ore beds, where the "rough-handed pick" soon rendered his hands "as devoid of skin as a beefsteak." Upon his first act of impertinence – a brief altercation with his field boss – Campbell was stripped, held down, and lashed until his back and legs were shredded.⁹

Campbell took a certain pleasure in peddling what Karen Halttunen has called a "pornography of pain," in yanking his gentle readers to the limits of human misery. In the book's climax, he described in wrenching detail having his fingers cut off by an axe, being chained to the wall in the "luny's cell" after being accused of self-mutilation, and lancing his own abscessed wound with a shard of glass. "If ever there was...a soul in hell that suffered...greater agony," he wailed, "heaven is a farce and God a tyrant."¹⁰

Yet through it all, Campbell insisted he was an unbroken man. Like Frederick Douglass, who defined his manhood through suffering and his deliverance through resistance, Campbell boasted he "would not get down in the dust and beg them for mercy." Rather, he closed his polemic with a vow of revenge. "The only reform" I seek, he declared, will be complete "when the form of the devil is seen clambering up out of [the prison's] hot ashes and takes the entire gang by the neck and slams it into hell!"¹¹

Campbell's memoir was uniquely furious, but it shared many elements in common with others in the genre. It defined leasing as inherently corrupt, sadistic, and spirit-breaking; as dedicated to avarice rather than public safety; as staffed by white degenerates; and as incompatible with an "advanced and enlightened age." Bourgeois reformers adopted these tropes wholesale, such that by the dusk of the leasing era, clergymen, club women, and politicians seemed to speak in one voice with convicts. Texas prisons are "gruesome and satanic," declared one newspaper, while key lawmakers excoriated the system as "a disgrace to Christian civilization."¹²

Crucially, though, penal progressives almost always ignored prisoners' most radical critiques of the prison. Set on building scientific reformatories, they sidestepped the fact that most convicts valorized resistance over cooperation; that they thirsted for revenge and release rather than rehabilitation. Texas prisoners portrayed

not a paternalistic world, in which inmates and their teachers would join hands to produce honest citizens, but a Manichean arena, in which subjected convicts suffered under the lash and yearned to trade places with their persecutors. This fateful divide would spell trouble for penal reformers when they finally came to power.

Already crumbling by the 1890s – its walls pounded from within and without by prisoner and freeworld critics, its foundation eroded by demographic and economic change – convict leasing in Texas finally collapsed in the first decade of the twentieth century. A precipitating factor was another piece of prisoner writing, an incendiary letter sent to the Governor by convict Lula Sanders, who revealed that leasing's worst vices prevailed on the women's farm as well. Not only did Sanders report that black women prisoners "cut down trees...like [they] were men" and were stripped naked and whipped if they didn't, she also detailed a sordid tangle of coerced sexual exchanges. Guards could take "any woman in any squad they want to use for their convenience," she charged, adding that "two thirds of the Children that have been borned down there is the guards'." One critic went so far as to accuse lessees of intentionally breeding convict workers, just like in the days of slavery.¹³

Penned neatly on ten sheets of loose-leafed paper, Sanders' letter set off a maelstrom. A new progressive governor ordered the women transferred to a different farm. And when more scandals erupted there, two major newspapers and both houses of the legislature launched sweeping, sensational investigations – interviewing scores of prisoners, auditing lessees' crooked books, and confirming nearly every charge outlined in convict exposes.¹⁴

Finally, in the fall of 1910, Texas legislators abolished convict leasing, some forty years after its inception, and set out to build a new system based on "order" and "humane treatment" rather than profit and brutality. Swept up in a landslide of public indignation, the lawmakers hired administrators sympathetic to scientific penology and ordered far-reaching changes: a 10-hour work day, convict wages, a cottage system for women, and expanded recreation and education programs.¹⁵ The new system would continue to rely on prison agriculture for revenue, and it would actually strengthen racial segregation, but it still represented a sharp break with the past. "Kind treatment and a ray of hope to the forsaken felon," pledged the Governor, will be "more potent...in his reformation than the lacerations...of the strap."¹⁶

Auspiciously inaugurated, the new government-run penal system nonetheless faced "trying and vexing" problems from the start. The legislature made no special appropriations, which meant prison commissioners had to keep most convicts on cash-crop plantations and soon had to dispense with prisoner wages. Moreover, top reformers had to contend with embittered, old-regime officers, who doubted any prison could be managed without the strap.¹⁷

Most unexpectedly, penal progressives received little cooperation from convicts—the presumed beneficiaries of their benevolence. Agitated by two years of fervent press coverage and legislative pronouncements, Texas convicts expected immediate, substantial changes, and they were quickly frustrated. Several months after abolition, most convicts still labored in field gangs and still returned every night to crowded, ramshackle barracks. Most of all, they were still prisoners, held against their will and made to work for nothing. Having been briefly quieted, prisoner troublemakers resumed all types of agitation by the spring of 1911. During the first grueling harvest season, arsons and work strikes spread across the system. Over the next two years, disciplinary cases and escapes doubled. As one former leasing official gleefully observed, "They had more mutiny and hell raising all over this country than ever in the history of [Texas]."¹⁸

As Texas's reforms staggered, old-line retributionists plotted a counter-coup. Out-of-work lessees fed stories to the press about out-of-control plantations run by "convict...governors" and "subservient" guards. Penny pinching, racist politicians urged a return to profitable cane and cotton farming, adding that "enough expensive experiments have been indulged."¹⁹ Finally, the prison commissioners themselves succumbed, orchestrating a major rollback – increasing labor quotas, defunding programs, and approving whipping orders en masse. As if to sound the funeral bell of reform, eight black prisoners suffocated to death in a sweatbox on September 6, 1913 – more than had ever been killed on a single day under convict leasing.²⁰ Barely three years after the state resumed control of its prison system, the spirit of reform was dead.

Sadly, this cycle of reform, rebellion, and retrenchment forecast the rest of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, 40s, and 80s, convicts and freeworld progressives again embarked on grand experiments in reform only to be driven back by parsimonious politicians, revanchist guards, and irascible convicts. In each case, Texas prisons returned to their roots. Texas's punitive, profiteering penalty prevailed over its rehabilitative rival, and to this day, Texas has yet to step out of the long shadow of slavery.

So what political lessons can we draw from this tortured trajectory of Texas prison writing? Arch-retributionists like John DiIulio would have us believe that prisoner activists are "stone-cold predators" and that "nothing works" except incapacitation and deterrence.²¹ But I believe that the private transcript of Texas convicts—their struggles for humanity in song and print; their resistance to sadistic as well as therapeutic punishment—underscore the essential irredeemability of the prison rather than its prisoners. True, the rise and

fall of reform in Texas shows that prisoners are better at overthrowing penal regimes than building better prisons. But this is not necessarily a bleak conclusion. Perhaps it is time, especially in over-incarcerated America, to heed to the advice of Texas's angry prison writers, to recognize that after two centuries, the penitentiary has produced little more than human misery. Perhaps it is time we heed Charles Campbell's rancorous suggestion to slam the prison into Hell and begin looking for alternatives.

Notes

1. Kevin Krajick, et al., "Profile Texas," *Corrections Magazine*, March 1978; Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), *Annual Report* (2000); "World Prison Population List," (London: Home Office, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2000).
2. Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989). Texas Governor Richard Coke believed there was little point in reforming "Negro and Mexican convicts" because they had a "limited capacity...to acquire technical knowledge." Richard Coke, Address to the Legislature, 12 January 1875, in Archive and History Department of the Texas State Library, ed., *Governors' Messages, Coke to Ross, 1874-1891* (Austin: A. C. Baldwin and Sons, 1916), 96, 102.
I have written at length about the rise of convict leasing in Texas in my dissertation. Robert Perkinson, *The Birth of the Texas Prison Empire* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2001). Also see Donald R. Walker, *Penology for Profit: A History of the Texas Prison System, 1867-1912* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988).
On the rise of convict leasing throughout the region, see Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Milfred C. Fierce, *Slavery Revisited: Blacks and the Southern Convict Lease System, 1865-1933* (New York: Africana Studies Research Center, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, 1994); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (London: Verso, 1996); David M. Oshinsky, *"Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Anne M. Butler, "Still in Chains: Black Women in Western Prisons, 1865-1910," *Western Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (February 1989).
3. Testimony of James H. Taylor, Francis Miner, Thomas Morris, William Price, John H. Smith, and Levi Crockett, Texas, Commission Appointed by the Governor, *Report* (1875), 72-77; "Go Down, Ol' Hannah" as recorded by Lead Belly. John Avery Lomax, Alan Lomax, and George Herzog, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly, "King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players of the World," Long-Time Convict in the Penitentiaries of Texas and Louisiana* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 118-120; D. C. Dickson to Governor Pease, 20 November 1867, Correspondence concerning the Penitentiary, RG022, series I, box I, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin, Texas; Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 2-3, 38.
4. Texas, Prison Commission, *Annual Report* (1911), 38.
5. "Ebb or Flow?," *The Monitor Magazine* 1, No. 3 (May 1909): 12-14; Editors, "Comments and Clippings," *The Prison Bulletin* 1, No. 2 (15 December 1897): 19; Editors, "Boys, Chicks and Pups," *The Prison Bulletin* 1, No. 1 (1 December 1897): 7.
6. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Samuel Kaufman to Henry Cohen, 22 Dec. 1914, Henry Cohen Papers, box 3M296, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.
7. *Southern Journey: Bad Man Ballads—Songs of Outlaws and Desperados*, recorded by Alan Lomax, Rounder Records CD 1705, compact disc.
8. Texas, House Special Committee on the Penitentiary, *Report* (1876), 9. On the widespread political opposition to leasing, see Ernest William Winkler, ed., *Platforms of Political Parties in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Bulletin no. 53, 1916).
9. See Henry Louis Gates, ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: New American Library, 1987). Campbell, *Hell Exploded*, 16-19.
10. George, *The Texas Convict*, 159; "Torture in Texas," unidentified newspaper clippings, c.1912, Colquitt Records, TSLA, box 301-332, 9-23 Aug. 1912 folder; "Convict Camps," *Rusk Press-Journal*, reprinted in *Dallas News*, 2 November 1909, 6; Texas, Penitentiary Investigating Committee, *Report* (Austin, 1910), 7-19.
11. "Female prisoners...are treated like brutes," reported Sanders, "and when they whip poor women they tie there clothes up over ther heads and expose their nakedness to all the guards" [sic]. Lula Sanders to Thomas M. Campbell, 2 October 1907, Thomas Campbell Papers, box 301-229, Center for American History, UT Austin; John Tardy to V. J. Douglas, 16 September 1907, Campbell Papers, box 301-229.
12. For an account of these events, see George Waverly Briggs, ed., *The Texas Penitentiary* (San Antonio: San Antonio Express, 1909); Tom Finty, "The Texas Prison Investigation," *Survey*, 18 December 1909; Charles S.

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- Potts, *Some Practical Problems of Prison Reform*, vol. 162, *Humanistic Series 10* (Austin: University of Texas Bulletin, 1910); Texas, Penitentiary Investigating Committee, *Report* (Austin, 1910).
13. Texas, *An Act Establishing a Prison System*, 1910.
14. Oscar B. Colquitt to *Waco Times Herald*, 12 July 1911, Colquitt Papers, box 2E110.
15. See Prison Commission, *Annual Report* (1911).
16. For a general overview of the disorder, see Texas, Penitentiary Investigating Committee, *Report and Findings* (Austin, 1913); Texas Legislature, Joint Penitentiary Affairs investigative committee, *Testimony* (1921), testimony of Jacob A. Herring (vol. 4).
17. John H. Regan, "Addison Tells Convicts Repetition of Mutiny Will Mean Restoration of Bat," *Houston Chronicle*, 20 Aug. 1912; Texas, Penitentiary Investigating Committee, *Report and Findings* (Austin, 1913), 27, 36.
18. See Ben E. Cabell to Henry Cohen, 5 Sept. 1913, Cohen Papers, box 3M296; Richard Barry, "Next Step in Prison Reform," *Century* 87 (March 1914): 746-751, in Corinne Bacon, ed., *Prison Reform* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1917), 219-226; Tom Finty, "Troubles of the Texas State Prisons," *The Delinquent* 4, no. 1 (1914).
19. John J. DiIulio, Jr., "Rescue the Young from Barbarism," *American Enterprise* 6, No. 3 (May/June 1995): 32-33; Robert Martinson, "What Works?--Questions and Answers About Prison Reform," *The Public Interest*, Spring 1974. DiIulio began his career with a conservative criticism of reform efforts in Texas. See John J. DiIulio, *Governing Prisons: A Comparative Study of Correctional Management* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

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Digging Up Resistance: An Exploration of Inmate Infraction as Resistance

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I am very pleased to be a part of this conference and, for the opportunity to join in and offer a contribution to this discourse on Prison Writings. The occasion to explore the sad and fascinating worlds that compose prison and the prison experience is a significant undertaking; to do so across the academic, political and cultural landscapes that encompass our interests in prison and prisoners is, as well, a truly worthwhile task. As we set out on this examination of [P]rison, it is vital that we understand one point, that at its core, at the heart of the prison experience, that point where ideology, praxis and lived experience meet, we are talking about power. Specifically, we are talking about systems of power and the relationships and realities these systems produce; relationships that are unequal, based almost entirely on bringing people under the control of the State.¹ This power to control, presented as axiomatic, leaves little room to consider its legitimacy. Not all is lost however, the domination and control visited upon inmates is not complete. There is room for an inverting, if only temporarily, of these differing power relations, and it is in that space, those gaps in control and domination on which I will focus here today.²

The instances when inmates chose to 'rebel' and how they go about doing so have been a focus of my research for some time now. As my contribution to this conference, I want to discuss and develop the notion that inmate rule infractions are not simply a breach of policy or further proof of deviant behavior, but instead that these acts hold the potential to be an inversion of power relations within the prison milieu. In short, that infraction can be a form of inmate resistance to State power and control. Among the many things that take place when inmates resist authority is a renegotiation of a power relationship; inmate's infractions are creating counter-hegemonic moments if not competing hegemonies with those of the prison administration.

This interaction with power, this constant negotiation is terribly obscured of course because there is just so little unfettered access to inmates and the worlds inside of the prison, at least in the United States. It is this lack of access that serves to further illustrate the kind of power prison, as an apparatus of the State, holds.

States protect, with 'extreme jealousy' their workings and any attempt to examine politically institutionalized power at close quarters is, in short, liable to bring to light the fact that an integral element of such power is the quite straightforward ability to deny observation the ability to withhold information, and dictate the terms of knowledge.³

The ability to obscure, to deny an observation of its workings, reminds us that when talking of the power prisons hold, we are talking of a power held over us all. Yes, we all know about prisons and we see what they are like on television, film, literature and even through tours or fieldwork in institutions, but I think that often times those descriptions only hint at all that is going on because of this Power prisons exercise in creating and rationing the information on its workings.⁴

Drawing from my fieldwork experience at a halfway house for Federal Inmates, as both an anthropologist and a staff member, I would know like to talk about certain inmate strategies that illustrate this notion of infractions as a form of resistance. However, rather than view all infractions as resistance, my attempt is to excavate the many layers of motive and meaning behind certain infractions in order to determine their political motivations, in order to then articulate those instances of resistance. It is through this very excavation of meaning that we can come to an understanding of the ways inmates resist, and perhaps their reasons as well. When resistance is defined with an eye towards its flexibility of form, when it is based in both the heroic and the mundane actions of inmates, noting its potential to be both organized and unorganized, we can then come to interpret inmate infractions as not simply 'criminal thinking' or 'immature coping' strategies but as articulated forms of resistance. On the other hand, inmate's acts of disobedience can also serve to reinforce the very systems of domination in which they find themselves, but that too tells us something about the workings of power in prison.⁵

Rather than continuing to postulate on rule infractions as potential acts of resistance, allow me to offer a few examples of inmate infractions, which I contend, were in fact also acts of resistance. Most inmates, at the halfway house, were able to advance through a level system, earning increasing amounts of time out in the community and at home with their families. As this halfway house was a minimum-security facility, staff closely monitored inmates' accountability in the community. Inmates (residents) had to meet certain condition in order to gain time out of the facility. Chief among these conditions was obtaining a fulltime job. Once an inmate was employed and had been at the facility for at least two weeks they were able to earn passes into the community and ultimately, on the highest level, they could spend the weekend at home, or eight hours a day out in the community. On sign outs and passes, inmates made check-in calls every two hours, failure to maintain this accountability could lead to a recall from pass and to the loss of subsequent passes, sometimes even removal

from the facility. An inmate, Jean, signed out to go to a large outdoor mall, about eight blocks from the facility, and his pass came and went without incident.⁶

A few weeks after this pass, during a routine search of rooms, staff found pictures of Jean showing off a tattoo. Now, as part of the intake policy at the halfway house, all new residents have their tattoos photographed, and the case managers keep these photos in the inmates case file. As I was Jeans' case manager, it fell upon me to confront him and verify, via the intake photos, that this was a new tattoo. Jean quickly admitted that during a weekend sign-out to the Mall, he had gotten the tattoo. Now, tattooing is a 400 level infraction, meaning its severity is low, yet the range of possible sanctions is loss of future passes up to removal from the program. Jean also committed a more serious, (300) level infraction in that he lied concerning his location, and he violated a program rule in not obtaining prior permission to spend more than \$50 dollars. Jean faced the possibility of returning to prison and losing eighteen months of a sentence reduction had he been removed from the program. Ultimately, his sanction was the loss of sign outs and demotion to the most restrictive level of the facility, allowing him only an hour of recreation time per day.

This infraction, innocuous as it may seem, is illustrative of not only the power prison and its agents exercise over inmates but it also serves to show us how inmates resist this intrusion. In general, Prisons take away a great measure of the self – inmates become their State Identification (SID) numbers, uniforms serve to repress identity, and the body becomes a site for this regimen of punishment. The suppression of agency, this prohibition of choice is of course essential to the task of incarceration. Disguised as rehabilitation or outed as warehousing, incarceration is about controlling people and bodies. Whether done so knowingly or not, by taking a measure of control over his body, by claiming some agency, Jean was calling into question the right of the Bureau of Prisons to control his body, quite literally. Of course getting a tattoo was about fashion and style, but at a more basic level, it is about choice. The affront to authority that controlling one's body, in the carceral setting, is a total inversion of how the inmate/prison relationship is to work. This act, while not heroic or particularly political in nature, still serves to explode the idea that prisons should blur control of bodies with that of identity. I think this episode raises serious questions about what prisons produce in their populations. What is the mold Institutions are using in their reformulation of inmates?

Another example I will share, involves inmates caught outside of the facility during a count. These incidents were treated as escapes, a 200 level (high) infraction, and generally resulted in an inmate being placed in a more secure setting for the duration of their sentence, sometimes several months. Generally, an inmate would walk out the back gate to meet a wife, girlfriend or relative.⁷ All of these infraction involved inmates on the most restrictive component of the facility's custody levels. Counts conducted at the facility were to take place at random times, however, staff would fall into routines and consequently there was rarely a count after seven in the evening. Generally, inmates made these unauthorized visits between seven and ten (curfew). During these incidents, inmates attempted to cover for the missing person, offering misleading information as to where they were and how recently they had been there. I also noticed that regardless of race, gender or even affinity, those missing were aided by a wide cross-section of those in the facility.

Now this type of infraction easily used to exemplify immature coping – focusing on short-term rather than on long-term goals and ignoring consequences – also shows another form of resistance. Inmates caught committing this act where usually those inmates with recent disciplinary actions and extensive 'adjustment' problems in the institution. I have no doubt that those committing this infraction, caught I might add when they were returning to the facility, were not trying to escape the facility. These inmates wanted time with their families and friends, to re-establish ties in the community, purportedly the goal of the halfway house. This failure to stand count, while not on par with prison riots like those at Attica or New Mexico, or more recently those that took place at several Federal Facilities when sentences for possession of rock cocaine became harsher than for that of powdered cocaine, is still an act of witness to an injustice. By failing to take into account the issues of class or 'race' of those denied passes, this facility and the BOP by extension create an atmosphere of discrimination and what seems like institutional caprice. What inmates do, along with commit an infraction, is call into question the legitimacy of the State's right to dictate the terms and pace of their re-integration. The review period for changing an inmate's custody level was pre-determined, there was little or no thought given to the actual "programming" of an inmate.

Finally, I want to bring up a tactic called 'Papering'. When an inmate's request for time out of the facility to shop or go home for a few hours was denied because the proper paperwork was not turned in or, it had not been turned in on time, s/he would sometimes react by papering the Program Manager. This act simply consisted of submitting several requests a day, for various sign-outs, and it also included submitting correspondences which had to be answered by staff in a 'timely' manner. This generally went on for no more than a week, then the inmate would get bored or would be 'warned' by staff to cease submitting paperwork. Now this act seemed to me at the time to be ripe with rhetorical richness with which to detail a bold act of resistance. However, after examining these acts and speaking to inmates about them, something quite different became apparent. This was

not about inducing some systemic change, nor was it about exposing some outright injustice in the facility. Instead, this act validates the bureaucratic fondness for generating paper. When inmates chose this or similar strategies to show administrators that they too are skilled policy wonks, they do not call into question the legitimacy of all these administrative hoops, quite the opposite. This strategy ultimately serves to reinforce the legitimacy of having to file form upon form in order to access the most basic of services. It seems to me that this tactic exemplifies how prisons have been able to get inmates to legitimate this administrative regulation of their lives- to play ball as it were.

In this short time, I have tried to focus on the politics behind inmate's actions, rather than create a list of what is or is not resistance in the carceral sense. The politics of inmate actions can be indeed very personal and, at times, they can be geared toward systemic changes. Resistance is not always enacted within an articulated or coherent revolutionary scheme; altruism and group solidarity are only sometimes part of resistance in the prison. Therefore, the possibility of resistance and the acts that articulate it depend on the implied meanings behind these actions. I was able to see instances where refusing to comply was an act of resistance, it was a strategy to claim agency in a situation where the 'self' was not an allowed participant. I also observed acts that were the result of addictions, poor choices and mere indifference. I am not sure that this paper or any other media can completely articulate which acts by prisoners are resistance and which may simply be 'bad' behavior. This, however, should not be our aim, if it is then we lose the chance to articulate the richness in peoples lives, even those lived in prison.

Right now in the United States, we as a society seem to know that prisons as they function now do not work. Yet, we not only permit but it seems that we are satisfied in the knowledge that, "If recent incarceration rates remain unchanged, an estimated 1 of every 20 persons (5.1%) will serve time in a prison during their lifetime."⁸ Therefore, what we have is either a people that simply do not care or cannot conceive of an alternative to the way we incarcerate. This is a classic example of how hegemony works. Blunt force or dogmatic training does not do this; those tools do not come into play here. This is done in movie theatres, on televisions, in books. This system has become such a part of a value system, part of our cultural tool kit, that why bother thinking about it, prison is for bad people, isn't it? I do not mean here to make light of the work many of those here are engaged in, Prison reform is an awesome movement, but it faces "...systems of meaning and values- constitutive and constituting- which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming".⁹

The above-mentioned examples serve not as the totality of resistance carried out at the halfway house, and certainly not within prisons. They do however, highlight the need to take a more nuanced approach to understanding why inmates carry on in certain ways. Attempting to elucidate the workings of domination, hegemony and resistance in apparently unlikely places and situations can lead to some anemic illustrations, especially when the goal is to outline what can or cannot be considered resistance. It is therefore that I offer in this paper not a catalogue of resistance, but a somewhat messy approach to interpreting inmate actions. By opening one's theoretical grab bag to the possibility of resistance being articulated in a variety of acts, and dependant on the implied meanings of these actions, we can then begin to construct an analysis that not only details the richness and struggle of inmate's lives but also one that tells us a great deal of the workings of domination. Inmates are bringing about changes in the penal system, they are resisting, and reformers are serving as witnesses to the injustices carried out in prison. I take heart in this simple fact.

Notes

1. The purpose of bringing so many under the control of the State, via the Prison, is not my focus here today. Yet, that class, race and gender all play a role in the tracking of some toward prison is a fact one cannot ignore. While beyond the scope of this paper, the above noted markings of 'otherness' must be taken into account as they do affect the strategies that inmates will use in their resistance strategies.
2. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections in The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. (OUP, 1977), Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women." *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990): 41-55, and Roger Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation: The Kwaio Struggle for Cultural Autonomy*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990).
3. Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1988): 58-89.
4. As Michel Foucault has discussed, Power is not only or ever simply prohibitive, part of what makes it hold sway, maintain its pervasiveness is its ability to produce and induce.
5. Abu-Lughod, 44.
6. I have used pseudonyms for all inmates and staff at the facility
7. During my two and a half years at the facility, I did not observe a female inmate in this situation; I therefore cannot offer a more nuanced discussion that considers gender differences.
8. www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm. U.S. Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Statistics website.

9. Williams, 11

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