

OUTSIDE-IN

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One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called "other" over the years.

— Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1999 I began graduate research while co-teaching workshops at the Women's Division of the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institution. The workshops were part of a program called SPACE — Space in Prison for Artistic and Creative Expression — jointly sponsored by the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institution (ACI) and the Howard R. Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University. Founded in 1992 by a group of women from Brown, SPACE creates a structure allowing women from two distinct institutions to come together in creative arts workshops. After ten years of experimentation and evolution, the program now makes it possible for women from Brown to conduct theatre, movement, voice, creative writing, and visual arts workshops within the minimum and medium security facilities, including the work release and drug rehabilitation programs. A journal featuring writing and visual artwork is published annually.

As a graduate student in graphic design at the Rhode Island School of Design, I was interested in ways that visually communicative devices can evoke empathy in an audience. Joining SPACE enabled me to access the ACI and meet the women who participated in the writing, collage and bookmaking workshops I taught with two other women. My objective was to learn about the social realities faced by incarcerated women — circumstances of being in prison as well as daily life on the 'outside' — and to explore a range of interpretative methods and forms for this content. Ultimately, I hoped to discover how graphic media might advocate for women in prison, women transitioning out of prison, and women who are particularly vulnerable to conditions and choices that might lead to incarceration.

This paper is a record of that experience. It describes an artistic inquiry about the ways in which social constructs define relations among individuals: between the acceptable and unacceptable, the so-called self and the 'other,' free persons and prisoners, men and women. It documents some of the expressive exercises conducted in the workshops and two performance projects based on my experiences at the ACI. The project documentation alludes to questions about criminal justice, social classification and its effect on communities within the United States: Who is a criminal and who is not? What circumstances influence criminal

behavior and lead to incarceration? When is a person no longer a criminal? How does public perception of incarcerated women influence public policy and consequently the lives of individuals? How do policies, in turn, influence public perception? How do attitudes about gender in our patriarchal society complicate these already complex questions?

BACKGROUND

The United States currently imprisons more of its residents, both men and women, than any other country in the world. The rate of incarceration in this country has increased dramatically within the last decade, from one in every 218 Americans imprisoned annually to one in every 142 (Huling, 2002). While women remain a small percentage of those imprisoned worldwide, and constitute 6.4 percent of the U.S. prison population, the increase in the number of incarcerated women in the country over the past two decades is dramatic. According to the Sentencing Project, the number of women in prison has increased at nearly double the rate for men since 1980. The number of women in state and federal prisons has increased seven-fold from 12,300 in 1980 to 96,000 in 2002. The “war on drugs” is cited as a primary factor in this dramatic growth, with a third of women offenders incarcerated for drug-related crimes (The Sentencing Project, 2003). From 1986 to 1996, the number of women sentenced to prison for drug crimes increased from 2,370 to 23,700 (Amnesty International, 2003). Our haste to ‘deal with’ the criminal element by removing female offenders from society has created numerous social problems, not the least of which affect the lives of children. More than 80,000 women in prisons and jails are mothers of approximately 200,000 children under the age of 18 (Amnesty International, 2003).

While the experiences of imprisoned women may seem anything but common, there are common profiles for women prisoners, and their growing number raises critical questions about the societal factors that lead to incarceration. Female crime statistics suggest that women commit crimes not to prosper but to survive; as a means of earning money, maintaining an addiction, or escaping poverty and battering. According to criminologist Meda Chesney-Lind, many are women of color with a history of physical and sexual abuse, and mothers caring for their children at the time of arrest (Scheffler, 2002). Their offenses are typically nonviolent in nature, and often drug-related. Incarcerated women belong to a stratum of displaced women, women with drug habits, low levels of education, poor job skills, and limited options for child-support. Barbara Owen (1998) argues “that the contemporary prison is expected to deal with the failures of other social institutions, an expectation that the prison is both philosophically and practically unable to meet.” The prison, however, is typically seen as a repository of failed or failing individuals, not a repository of failed or failing social policies.

The statistical profiles of female offenders are like mug shots. They are abstractions, limited and dehumanizing. They often become scapegoats for our society’s failure to change the conditions and institutions responsible for the well-being of girls and women with limited resources (Girshick, 1999). Like most quantitative data, profiles answer the question, *What are these people?* Yet to comprehend the mystery that is a human being and a human life, we must be willing to ask, *Who are you, and what is your experience?* As Owen (1998) discovered in California’s largest women’s prison, “while profile data and official statistics are useful summaries of the characteristics of the women of CCWF, the details of their lives inside and outside can only be conveyed through rich, detailed narratives obtained through participant-observation within the prison.” Within these narrative details lie clues that can help us begin to

understand life experiences other than our own, to “cross the empty spaces” that exist between ourselves and those we perceive as “other” (Greene, 1998).

Acknowledging the structural barriers facing lower-class and imprisoned members of society requires some sense of what it is like to experience the details of dispossession and imprisonment. We must be willing to suspend our preconceptions, if only for a time, and enter an alternative reality, one we would rarely choose to imagine. Artistic works produced by women in prison serve as a point of entry. They enable us to consider how we might respond to the challenges of constant surveillance or long-term isolation from loved ones. Concurrently they speak to the resilience of those who contend daily with the oppressive forces of confinement. In the anthology of women’s prison writing *Wall Tappings*, Judith Scheffler writes, “Publishing women’s prison literature is one method of reminding society that incarcerated women exist” (2000). Rhodessa Jones, founder of the Medea Project, a theatre group for incarcerated women, has said that her intentions are to build bridges, “to make even the most protected and privileged of spectators feel their connection to those who are not” (Fraden, 2001). Indeed, prison artwork interrupts our sense of security and challenges the lines we draw, not only between our everyday world and the prison institution, but between the privacy of our homes and the vulnerability of life on the street. Who notices when public resources fail to facilitate basic human life? Those who fall through the cracks in our system know first hand about its limitations. We have something to learn from their accounts.

Self-disclosure is where we began in our work with women at the Rhode Island ACL. A fundamental principle of the SPACE project is the importance of acknowledging, sharing and relating life experience. The exercises allowed women to reveal and reflect on their life experiences while exploring the visual language of text and image. Structured reflection and self-disclosure was a means of honoring one another’s experience in the communal setting of the workshop. For me, it was a new landscape of narratives, powerful in and of themselves, and clarified by the context of other individual stories, the social setting of the institution, and the political realities of the outside world.

SPACE PROJECTS

Early in our orientation, SPACE facilitators listened to the warden of the Women’s Division recount her story about moving up through the ranks, from prison arts manager to warden.

“You will be emissaries and advocates now, wherever you go,” she said. She asked us to imagine the experiences of women on the inside. “What if you were sober for the first time in your adult life? Would you have the repertoire to tell a stranger how you feel? Would you want to?”

“Try waking up to guidelines which will define every waking moment of your day. Eat when you are told, shower when you are told, go to the bathroom when you are told. Then, consider being afraid to leave those behind when the time comes, because the place you are returning to is so dark, lonely and unforgiving.”

Each week I went to the intake wing, referred to as C-wing, with two other women from Brown. On this wing, women recovered from the transition into prison, awaited trial and talked frequently about the possibility of getting back out. Our routine was simple, but intimidating at times: we combed the wing, soliciting as many students as possible. They lined up single file and headed to the basement library or ‘parenting room.’ Everybody dashed for a seat, then one of us explained the evening agenda. We passed out release forms, and everyone introduced herself. One popular ‘ice breaker’ activity invited each participant to share

something about the origin of her name. Some women had plenty to say about themselves, others mumbled only a few words:

*I am Victoria; my mother named me for my grandmother who came from Portugal.
She just died last year.*

I am Ruby; I don't know where my name came from. Hey can I take some of this paper upstairs when we're done?

We designed projects to inspire personal reflection and self-disclosure; for the women in our workshops, projects also seemed to offer a much desired escape from the intensity of the new environment, from the scrutiny of strangers and the pain of being away from everything familiar. On C-wing, we conducted workshops in poetry, collage, bookmaking and photography.

COLLAGE

The narrative collage project stimulates thinking about the influence of environment on a person and on self-perception. The project involves putting 'the self' in context. The procedure is straightforward. Select pictures cut from popular magazines, city streets and sunsets, rivers and mountains, urban and domestic environments. Then, select a photograph that represents who you are or who you were in the past. Arrange the images to tell a story about your life. This project elicited personal stories that told bigger stories — about domestic conflict, the lure of the streets, the desire to be a good mother, vulnerability to addiction, the pain of loss. After the first collage workshop, there were only a few magazine clippings left on the table. All those images from the 'outside' had been reworked into something that told a personal story about life on the inside, or a way of living that led to incarceration. One narrative collage describes the creators' process of negotiating addiction on the streets and a subsequent period of surrender after coming to prison. Three figures in the lower part of the image represent fight and surrender, while an angel in the upper right corner represents a higher power. This student told her story in such a captivating way that I asked her to write about it, a request she refused even after I naively prompted her again and again. It was the next day before it occurred to me to question my assumption that her refusal was born of obstinacy or shyness rather than illiteracy.

POETRY

A poem by Rosario Morales entitled "I Am What I Am" (Morales, A. L., 1986) inspired this poetry project. Participants received a handout with part of the poem already there: *I am ___ , because I am ___ , but I am never ___ , some people say that I am ___ , still I know that I am ___ ,* and so on, down the page. The instructions were to fill in the blank spaces, making changes to the wording wherever necessary. This template functioned as a starting point, and seemed to alleviate some hesitation. After the poems had been written, each person had a chance to read hers aloud. I was always impressed with the excitement around this process. Many women fanned their feathers and read with exaggerated inflection. Others slipped lower in the chair and let someone else read their work. Later, I would experiment with the poems typographically, recalling how they had been rendered as voices that night.

PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS

When the women saw the camera they headed for the bathroom before lining up in the hall. There was plenty of talk and laughter while a tube of red lipstick was handed down the line. For this photography workshop, participants were to construct their own photographic portraits and click the shutter themselves. Some were most comfortable in front of the camera, some behind it.

The processed film revealed too much intimacy. The Warden censored the batch, removing any images that suggested the women might be having sexual relations. Even the implicit suggestion of such a thing could prompt punishment and would likely evoke stigmatism among the guards. Only the individual portraits could be distributed.

DRAWN PORTRAITS

Many people are afraid to draw, especially in a group setting. This simple line drawing exercise takes most by surprise. *Close your eyes. Feel your face with your fingertips. Touch pencil to paper while your eyes are closed, and draw whatever you feel.* Forehead, brows, eyelids, nose, dimples, lips, scabs — these become landscape. Most drawings made in response to these instructions are childlike, some are sad, many are quite haunting. When the maker lets go of ideas about what an eye is, and where the nose should be, the lines reveal unexpected subtlety — textures and curves suggestive of things beneath the surface. The process is quiet and intimate. One night I looked across the work table to see two of the women, their eyes closed, hands touching one another's faces.

INTERVIEWS

After a number of months I began conducting interviews with a woman who had served six years at the ACI. Pamela (not her real name) was affiliated with an organization called Women in Transition, a non-profit organization that helps women deal with life after prison. Pamela was eager to describe how she negotiated the transition to free society — she was aware that such self disclosure could be helpful to others while it facilitated her own adjustment. She approached this role as an activist, with an explicit desire to advocate for other women as they try to make a life for themselves after prison. (The following edited transcripts are excerpts from interviews with Pamela):

Most of the people that come into prison, alright, like myself: I was on drugs and I had been livin' from place to place. So going into prison was like a savior. It was safe, it was warm, I got a shower a bed, there was people around me. So it was a safe environment.

And, you know, you kinda get used to it. Once you're there, you know, you kinda get used to it. It's not really a place that you'd wanna get used to, but if you have nothin' else and your life is like totally at the bottom of the barrel that's like the best thing for you, I mean, outside a the sidewalk, you know.

And, as long as you can follow rules and regulations; some people need structure, to get them, you know, going. And once you're off the drugs for awhile and you start educatin' yourself, and you start seein' a clearer picture of where your life is going and what's really happenin' in it — get a

grasp on reality — then you kinda like, try to work on ways to better yourself to get yourself out. Unfortunately, I was there for a good length of time, six years, um, due to breaking and entering, for money for drugs, and I ended up hittin' a judge's house, so that's why I got so long. So the court system wasn't very nice with me, and being there that length of time, you kinda get a little seniority, and you build yourself up, and you know you get to work the best jobs, and you go through all the programs and everything, and what ends up happenin' is, you get institutionalized. And, then you have fears about going back into society, and the way that society's gonna accept you.

Some of the places (on the outside), it's like, okay, say a girl's picked up for prostitution, okay, the girl's not prostitutin' no more, but she leaves this house and she has to go to the store cause she has to get soda or milk or whatever the case may be, and because the police see her walkin' and she's known for this crime, they're gonna pick her up anyways even if she's not doin' it. Or they're gonna pick her up and harass her and want her to set up a drug dealer, or whatever, and if she doesn't she's going back to jail. So it's like, she says, "Why bother? Why am I botherin'?" Because you're only endin' up in the same place. She can't win, you know?

So we need, you know, houses in fairly decent neighborhoods. And, I mean they don't have to be like in these big rich neighborhoods. I know that people, they don't want these kind of houses. They don't want halfway houses and jails in their neighborhoods, and I understand that totally. However, these people have to go somewhere, okay? They are our brothers and our sisters. They have to go somewhere.

And you know, this is the first time I've got my own checking account. I've never had a credit card. I just got my checking account in September. I'm doing things the legal way. I never wrote my own checks, there were other people's checks, that I used to steal, you know what I mean. Take other people's credit cards and use em', but I'm trying to do all these things for myself. And it's a good feeling, you know, but in some ways, you think, Ah jeez I'm thirty-five years old. And I've wasted so much time. You know what I mean? You kinda like want to kick yourself in the ass thinkin' hey you know, I shoulda stopped a long time ago, why didn't I?

And it's too bad, but I am very grateful for prison. I hate it, and I love it. Because it's done so much for me, and it's took so much from me, you know? But now, it's time not to even think about that, it's time to just give back what I've gotten. Because if I don't I'm not going to go any further in life. And I need to go further.

And I've come to understand that it doesn't matter where I've come from, and what I've done, and where I've been. It matters what I do now, and where I'm goin', you know what I mean? And it doesn't matter what you think I am, by lookin' at me, or what he thinks I am, or what she. It only matters what I think. It matters how I feel and if I'm at peace with myself, and I'm okay with what I'm doing then I'm okay, you know?

REFLECTIVE PROJECTS

Thus we confront the central problem: any landscape is comprised not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads...We are concerned not with the elements but with the essence, with the organizing ideas we use to make sense out of what we see.

— D.W. Meinig, *The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene*

What can and should be done with the details made so readily available in these workshops and interviews? Some of the accounts evoked compassion in me, others reinforced my own prejudice about who goes to prison and why. It was important to recognize these responses, and be careful with the information that had been entrusted to me. I had requested to design the SPACE journal for 2000, a printed document representative of the 1999-2000 academic program. By organizing images, texts and other artwork produced in the workshops, I would necessarily become more familiar with the visual material and the life stories embedded therein. But more reflective work was necessary for me to make sense of this material and my reactions to it. I had not been to prison and had not lived life as these women had. I felt entirely naive about the best way to honor the stories and visual narratives, yet I perceived a responsibility to amplify these works in some way, so that others might witness and reflect upon them. The rituals involved in the performance piece *Reckoning* were one way to reflect on my experience as observer-participant and consider my role as an outsider.

RECKONING

Reckoning is a one-woman performance that took place in a neglected corner of an outdoor courtyard on an urban street in Providence on the campus of the Rhode Island School of Design. Although the site is not visible from all sides, it is vaguely reminiscent of a prison ground. Wooden bleachers face a square patch of exposed dirt, a brick retaining wall, the emergency exit of a university building, and one struggling, misshapen bush. No one plants anything in the patch of dirt. Rarely does anyone sit on the bleachers. When people do come here they seem to be looking for a place where they will be left alone. Yet the corner is exposed to street and sidewalk traffic, and to a lawn above the retaining wall. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes of the sensory deprivation and social isolation experienced within the structural space of a prison: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never the subject of communication” (1979). His description references a common penitentiary design based on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon of 1787. The panopticon style prison enabled warders to view all prisoners from a central tower. Although women’s prison reform in the 1970’s influenced the introduction of a more domestic ‘cottage system’ of dormitories for women (Banks, 2003), the atmosphere of the ACI reflected the sense of control and exposure of older prison architecture.

I wondered what it would be like to be confined to this outdoor corner, to reside in such a space, to be so isolated yet visible. I imagined Mad Max, a prisoner I had met who had unstoppable energy. She had little to do with her energy and nothing but time. As a graduate student I had much to do and very little time. I asked myself: If I were confined to this abandoned place, what would I do with myself? I decided to count the bricks.

I arrived at the site in the morning with masking tape, a notebook and an alarm clock. For four-hour periods at a time, I counted the bricks, marking each one with a piece of tape.

When I had counted all the bricks within reach, I started again, marking each piece of tape with graphite pencil. Occasionally, bystanders interrupted me and asked about the significance of the ritual. A few others stopped me on the street at other times, when I was going about my day, dealing with obligations and expectations. However, few were concerned with the brick counting ritual or any significance it might have. After several weeks I stopped the ritual and left the tape to fall away at will. When I told one of the inmates about the project, she laughed.

HIDDEN VOICES RELEASED

A very different kind of performance transpired near the site of *Reckoning* on a cold December evening in 1999. The space itself gave birth to this one-time event — a group poetry performance and candlelight vigil to honor imprisoned women and acknowledge the power of women's prison literature. The event was designed to create a sense of confinement in public space, bringing the prisoner to the attention of the civilian while referencing our cultural ignorance with regard to the incarcerated and the issues they face.

The site, reminiscent of a scene from the play *West Side Story*, is a place known as 'The Pit' to students on the campus of the Rhode Island School of Design. Between two vertical buildings is a narrow concrete crevice that functions as passageway from a low parking lot to a pedestrian street above. One must walk either up or down several narrow stairs to make the passage. Fire escapes loom overhead and a stench of stale grease fills this alleyway. After dark, security floodlights shine from overhead.

A week before the event, guests received invitations — dark blue paper circles designed to catch wax from thin white tapers. Printed on the invitations was an image of a hand reaching toward the sky, and handwritten text that read *Hidden Voices Released*. Instructions informed guests to arrive at the parking lot below 'The Pit' with invitation in hand at 6pm on the evening of December 9th.

On the evening of the event, forty surrogate inmates poured in to the crevice from the pedestrian street above. These were the actors, dressed in blue denim shirts and blue jeans, the uniform worn by inmates at the Rhode Island ACI. They moved quickly, spoke in low voices and reviewed cue sheets. Most would stand facing the walls of the corridor. A few others would hover on the cat walks above. All were prepared to recite poetry written by women in confinement. Some of the poems had been written at the ACI, others came from a recently published anthology of prison writing edited by Bell Gale Chevigny, entitled *Doing Time: Twenty Five Years of Prison Writing* (1999).

Meanwhile the guests did arrive at the parking lot, where they huddled against the cold and watched a video projection of my interview with Pamela. The projection spanned 14' x 20' of a stone wall just below the concrete stairs to the performance site. Attendants distributed white taper candles and event programs that slid over the tapers and rested on top of the invitations. The programs indicated actors' names and poems to be recited, but revealed no other information about the performance. Within moments, attendants prompted guests to make their way up the stairs, where they would help set the stage for the reading; indeed, they would become an integral part of the performance that they were expecting to merely watch.

Inside the narrow crevice the uniformed actors stood in silence, perfectly still, two feet apart, facing the walls. Each one held a white cue sheet in one hand, the other hand resting at her side. When guests filed into the space one by one, they were surrounded even though the blue clad figures did not move or turn to acknowledge them. They had to situate themselves in relation to this unbroken strand of women — women symbolic of our institutions of

confinement, literally up against a wall, without faces or names. The architecture of the setting, the relative positioning of persons and the contrast between street clothing and uniform made it easy to discern that these groups, each consisting of about forty people, were from different worlds. Guests held lit candles, programs and invitations that further distinguished them as 'other' than the actor/inmates. Yet each guest played an essential role in the performance, taking up physical space such that the cavernous passageway became a womb of heat and light. Central to the performance were excerpts from poems contained in Chevigny's *Doing Time* (1999). After moments of stillness, an actor broke the silence from the fire escape above, with an excerpt from the poem 'An Overture,' written in 1979 by M.A. Jones: "Something in the darkness has given birth to a sky spinning with a fierce impossible light." Other actors repeated the passage in round fashion, such that the space was filled with language and intonation, voices coming from different points along the strand of blue-clad women. This chorus of voices was followed by silence, then a solo recitation, from a group poem 'Tetrina' written at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in 1996:

*Six women argue with their lives
as they write among their dreams
chasing shadows down streets
and reaching for words*

The performance continued while the audience stood harnessed by people and spoken word from all directions. The chain of voices called out, followed by a monologue from the 1975 poem 'Notes of the Score' by Norma Stafford. The first stanza reads:

*you say that i am fixed
in my black and white state
watch the smoothness of my runs
see my blackness blur*

Actors recited poems in tandem and in unison, concluding with the same excerpt from 'An Overture,' spoken in round. After the last utterance of the word *light* a final silence pervaded the space, until the guests, still holding candles, drifted single file out of the crevice and down the stairs to the parking lot below.

Hidden Voices Released brought an unsuspecting audience into a space created by surrogate inmates on behalf of actual inmates, forcing participants to acknowledge the long-established boundary between ourselves and the criminal 'other.' By virtue of being present in the space, everyone was exposed, even to themselves, as part of a culture which depends on the existence of an incarcerated subculture. Simultaneously, we were exposed to our ignorance of that subculture. We stood as human beings within an unmistakably divided human community. The performance reflected some objectives of the Medea Project, a collaboration between the San Francisco County Jail system and women performers. The Medea Project intends to "intervene in the way we imagine the boundaries of community." In Medea performances, actual women inmates "interrupt the normal boundaries of the theatre, and they even manage to interrupt our view of each other as they parade among us. They have been let out and are now in our midst, invading the space usually reserved for the audience" (Fraden, 2001). This interruption of a perceived boundary infuses these performance projects with

potency, and is a valuable component of any prison arts project that seeks to facilitate understanding among individuals.

We know so little about those we fear, and fear sustains our ignorance. Robert Ellis Gordon reflects on this dilemma in *The Funhouse Mirror*, a text about his experiences teaching writing in Washington State prisons. He asserts that a solution to the disastrous state of our systems of incarceration lies in an assault on public ignorance:

As vast as this subculture is, very little is known about it. Perhaps that is due to the fact that as a society, we've been in no hurry to lay claim to the prisoners in our midst. And perhaps this reluctance to peer into the funhouse mirror explains our apparent inability to address the problems we are doing our best not to see. Whatever the case, it has been my observation that the best educated, best intentioned, and most influential citizens are fundamentally clueless when it comes to the matter of our prisons. (Gordon, 2000).

Indeed, well-educated, considerate, influential citizens and self-described activists responded emotionally to the unhealing experience of *Hidden Voices Released*. Such reactions point to the catalytic potential of art. At its best, art introduces us to ourselves while enabling us to recognize ourselves in one another. If only for brief periods, art can suspend the boundaries that support our social structures and confine our imaginations. Art about experiences of imprisonment, produced by insiders and outsiders alike, has the potential to expose our essential connections. Such connections, when acknowledged, help to counteract ignorance and cynicism about the incarcerated — attitudes so pervasive in our culture that they are scarcely recognized. Such connections make a space for us to transcend attachment to so-called private life, and appreciate our relationship to the ongoing experience of human community.

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