

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Lenore D. Maybaum for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on July 28, 2004.

Title: Traversing the Displaced: Incarcerated Women's Writing Selves

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This quasi-ethnographic research documents the autobiographical utterances of incarcerated women taking part in a narrative writing course, Life Writing, at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. The purpose of this research was to cultivate a better understanding of how incarcerated women move through different discourses of identity via narrative writing, and how, consequently, courses in narrative writing can benefit inmates by encouraging them to reconnect to their lives and memories prior to incarceration. The results of this study reveal how incarcerated women neither wholly transcend nor resist the material reality of prison existence; however, through the process of narrative writing and dialogic sharing sessions, incarcerated women were able to experience the positive effects of difference in a dialogic community of learners. Furthermore, this research illustrates how the interplay of self-constructions affirms women's identities not connected to their criminal lives and decisions.

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Traversing the Displaced:
Incarcerated Women's Writing Selves

by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction: Navigating Unfamiliar Terrain: Resituating Women’s Prison Writing.....	1
Chapter One: Constructing “Corrected” Identities: Theorizing Accountability and Corrections Models.....	15
Chapter Two: Inscribing Alternative Spaces: The Value of Self-Interest, Dialogue, and Difference.....	35
Chapter Three: Chronicling Incarcerated Women’s Voices: Rich, Erratic, and Resourceful Selves Speak.....	61
Conclusion: Negotiating the Resistant and the Transcendent: Bridging the Gap the Between Theory and Practice.....	77
Works Cited.....	86
Appendices.....	90
Appendix A: Accountability Model Worksheet.....	91
Appendix B: Classification/Scoring Form.....	92
Appendix C: Essays and Excerpts for Life Writing Class.....	93

Introduction

Navigating Unfamiliar Terrain: Resituating Women's Prison Writing

On May 31st of 1793, Marie Jeanne Roland was arrested after affirming her republican sentiments and her faith in the French Revolution. During her incarceration she produced several writings, including her memoirs, in which she sought to “employ the leisure of [her] captivity in retracing what has happened to [her] from [her] tenderest infancy to the present moment” (Roland 10). Madame Roland describes her work as “fragments” which will not “make amends” for what she has lost, but will, however, act as “the anchor” with which she will preserve her “memory from reproach” (9-10). This genealogical rendering and preservation of memory acted as a creative and emotional outlet during Roland’s stint behind bars.

Despite Roland’s esteemed birthright, her incarceration was a six-month interval during which she was chained amongst murderers, troubled by perpetual sickness, and eventually executed at the guillotine; her memoirs are an emphatic expression of her disgust with the prison system that she referred to as a “receptacle for this scum of the earth” in which the “most shameful scenes of debauchery” took place (13). Roland’s characterization of this prison in St. Pelagie contains elements similar to our contemporary “correctional” institutions in which illness, violence, and ennui run rampant. And yet, despite the depraved environment, Roland—like many other women prison writers—is able to carve out an alternative space for herself that allows her mind to “call upon agreeable impressions, pleasing remembrances, and ideas of happiness” (8). Roland’s own reasoning provides insight into the vital nature

of, and unremitting necessity for, women's expressive life writing in the prison environment:

Thus to tread over again all the steps of our career, is to live a second time; and what, in the gloom of a prison, can we do better than to transport our existence elsewhere by pleasing fictions, or by the recollection of interesting occurrences? (10)

Madame Roland's desire to inscribe an alternative identity apart from the harsh and oppressive experience of incarceration—however displaced from our own time and culture—represents a myriad of women whose voices have been stifled by the ascetic and stigmatic elements of prison experience, and who long for an alternative space where expressive undertakings can be generated. Within such a setting, narrative writing grants incarcerated women an opportunity to reconnect to humanity by offering up a testimony of their lives and experiences; such testimonies challenge the dehumanizing culture of incarceration, which all too often reduces women's lives to inmate numbers and criminal records. In a place where women are assessed according to their ability to conform, correct, and comply, narrative writing presents an alternative conception of identity, which honors women's decisions and experiences as mothers, poets, activists, daughters, sisters, and cultural workers. These stories, or "pleasing fictions," are the focus of this research.

In any current survey of prison literature, the writing of incarcerated women takes a variety of different forms, including memoirs, letters, diary entries, graffiti, poetry, and various treatment work for N.A. and A.A. programs. The content of the

writing is as diverse as the genres, and can range from overtly political outcries against social injustice, to free-verse poetry about childhood trips to the ocean. Judith Scheffler, editor of a recent, definitive collection of women's prison writing, considers all women's prison texts political in that they inherently reflect the social condition and status of women (*Wall Tappings* XXII). In addition to Scheffler's collection, many other anthologies capitalize on the political elements of women's prison writing, and one such collection, *Writing as Resistance*, classifies the women's work under headings such as, "Control of the Dangerous Classes," "In the Hands of the State," and "Talking Back: Counter-Inscribing the Prison Industrial Complex" (vii-x). These anthologies characterize women's voices and creative expression as alternatives to the monotonous, systematic, and predictable existence of prison life; in addition to creative communication, this focus on political unrest unearths categories of "traditional themes of prison writing" including class, race, gender, capital punishment, isolation, marginalization, suicide, and victimization (Gaucher 12). As a form of resistance, artistic expression and writing can be thought of as "a means of survival and a testament to surviving the dislocations of prison life" (Gaucher 12). By exposing the injustices and repression that occur on the inside of prison walls, prison writers illuminate the struggles of marginalized voices outside of the prison system. Furthermore, incarcerated women's writing works to constitute a "living testimony" to counteract the invisibility of female inmates (Schleffer XXIII). As in society, prison culture contains coded hierarchies and excessive stratification through which women

must move and negotiate as they work toward liberation: Their writing is oftentimes a response to hegemony, both within and outside of prison walls.

In addition to the collections of incarcerated women's writing that underscore political resistance, many other editors choose to highlight the creation, preservation, and expression of an alternative "self" in women's prison writing. This poetic and political self mediates the social expectations and the personal memories and aspirations of women prison writers. This form of expression, often categorized as "life writing," allows women to reorder their realities according to their own "perceptions and organizing principles" (Scheffler XXXV). Life writing, while containing particular political elements, tends to emphasize the therapeutic and cathartic nature of narrative renderings. This particular perspective constituted the foundation of my own course, Life Writing, which was created in hopes of providing a safe and inspiring space for incarcerated women's creative work and communal sharing sessions.

Rachel Williams, prison educator and professor of art at University of Iowa, emphasizes one model of the cultural work cultivated within prison studies, which highlights the therapeutic nature of creative work behind bars. In her book, *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars*, she writes,

it is a way for inmates to transform and move beyond their current reality. Inmates use art to overcome deprivation. They become artists to reconfigure their identity and boost their prison status...Some use it for body decoration; others use it for therapy. (7)

Because the prison setting is a site that generally deprives individuals of outlets for emotional expression and the families and communities from which they were once intimately connected, self-expression acts as a deterrent against depression. By helping inmates to direct their anger, helplessness, and fears into creative projects, they can experience therapeutic catharsis, or the gratification of being productive in an otherwise tedious environment. Williams envisions a prison culture that “includes greater outlets for positive individual emotional expression, interaction, and recognition” by means of artistic programs that create an environment “where self-esteem is built, emotions are dealt with, past histories of abuse and addiction are overcome, and the future is approached with a productive plan based on positive actions and attitudes” (6-7). This conception of art behind bars recognizes artistic expression as both an escape as well as an embrace: Artistic projects enable inmates to create a reality that is far removed from the sterile structure of the prison setting, while also encouraging them to incorporate their lived realities into their work as a means of reflection and recognition.

Before I began laboring over the details of my own prison pedagogy, I read *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars*, and found myself drawn to Rachel Williams’s compassionate teaching philosophy. I was at the end of my first year of graduate school, and my faith in critical pedagogy had become the driving force behind my research and writing in the field of English literature. Education, I had come to believe, should be transformative in that “individual and social needs have to be linked and mediated through a critical perspective tied to notions of emancipation” (Giroux

106). Through the language and literature of marginalized groups, and the incorporation and critiques of popular culture, I envisioned a classroom within which new visions of community and agency could be generated. Classroom exercises, I had imagined, would have direct links to students' lives; rather than becoming passive receptacles of information, students would walk away from the classroom as conscientious consumers, critical citizens, and agents of social change.

Considering my unwavering certainty in the power of critical pedagogy, the opportunity to teach writing at a women's correctional facility seemed fateful. In September of 2003, without any prior teaching experience and even less familiarity with prison settings and populations, I began teaching a course in narrative writing to a group of approximately ten female inmates residing in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. Throughout the ten-week installment, the students would read and respond to various essays, write short narratives that framed places and events in their lives, and take part in the exercises and dialogues of our weekly meetings. The women of our class brought forth a vast and complicated range of experiences, upbringings, and ages, which made for rich and erratic dialogues among us. Although most of the women identified themselves as Anglo-Saxon protestants, the first installment of our class also included one Native American woman, one Buddhist, and two Hispanic women. All the women had children; some of their children were grown and had lives of their own, while others had infants who were staying with grandparents or other close relatives while awaiting their mother's return.

At the onset of the course, I quickly became aware that I was both the youngest and the only childless woman of the class, which ultimately enabled me to understand how much I had to learn from the experiences and histories of this complicated and diverse group of women. My role as an instructor, or facilitator, was perpetually undergoing revisions as I navigated the unfamiliar terrain of the prison setting in which I was inexperienced, to some degree, as a teacher, but even more so as a mother, wife, and prison subject. While preparing for the course, I collected books and anthologies of prison writing and research. During this time, I read descriptions of inmates as shadows of society who used narrative or memoir writing as a way to transcend or resist the sterile and stigmatic elements of experience of incarceration. From these depictions, my first conceptions of the course were grounded in the desire to give a voice to such a neglected and ever-increasing portion of society. In the prison setting, I imagined a literacy site where feminism, community, agency, and dialogic learning could take place. My students were at the heart of two marginal traditions: prison writing and women's writing. Their narratives, I had imagined, would have testimonial qualities that could transgress the stringent social codes of the prison while simultaneously acting as an empowering agent in their individual lives.

In the prison setting, women dress identically according to a strict dress code; inmates' attire, according to their status, externally marks their bodies in the facility, and I wanted to somehow transcend these hierarchical signifiers during my first encounter with the Life Writing women. For my initial meeting, I carefully chose an outfit that I was convinced would reflect a studious, yet approachable, veneer: a

tailored suit jacket over a t-shirt and faded jeans. I wanted to look professional, but amicable. Although my drive to the facility that brisk, dark September morning was full of nervous anticipation, my hope for the course overpowered much of my restless energy. I felt that this was the opportunity for me to create a space where writing could transcend the women's prior experiences with formal, monotonous grammar lessons; I wanted to offer an alternative to more traditional writing courses in which the propensity to be either utterly bored or overwhelmingly alienated is amplified with each grammar worksheet and sentence diagram assigned. To make the class as inviting as possible, I would encourage the women to incorporate their lived experiences, memories, and struggles into the writing process as a way of revaluing the knowledge with which they were already familiar.

In lieu of my aforementioned expectations, however, my first visit to the prison was a harsh indoctrination into the complicated realities of prison existence, in which individual identities are obscured by a series of numbers, uniforms, security levels, and programming stages. Both visible and invisible systems marked each woman's status within a discourse of corrections, which would eventually become a significant impediment in a class that I had designed in hopes of unfettered narrative expression. I, too, was marked within the system as a volunteer, and, consequently, had limited access to resources and an increased surveillance upon my motives, classroom materials, and course descriptions. Even before entering the unit in which I would be teaching, a series of steps and codes had to be navigated.

As I approached the parking lot, I had to pull up next to a small speaker in which I was ordered to state my name and my “business.” After confirming my reply, my name was found on the volunteer list, and I was given the green light to proceed. The main facility’s lawn was littered with signs of what could be brought into the facility, and what was considered contraband; paperclips, gum, and certain types of pens were among the list of contraband items. It is necessary for every person leaving and entering the facility to push a button next to a speaker and to wait for the guard within to open each gate by pushing yet another set of buttons at the control desk. Sometimes, if the guard is preoccupied, it could take quite some time for a response; it is not uncommon for visitors to spend several minutes at each gateway before finally entering the building. Once inside, I was subjected to a thorough bag check, identification confirmation, and metal detection. Although I failed the metal detection, a guard was called in to “wand” me, which proved that I wasn’t hiding any sharp metal objects under my clothing. I was told not to wear any kind of metal into the prison, including zippers and underwire bras. In fact, I almost didn’t get to meet the women this first trip because I was wearing jeans—the only pants that the inmates are allowed to wear. This condensed image of the material reality existing in a correctional institution illustrates how a person is perpetually aware of her place within the system; her behavior, clothing, and attitude marks compliance within the expectations of each installment of prison ordering, and if a person’s appearance doesn’t accurately reflect her position within the system, she will be discharged from unit to unit, or from the institution to society.

Once into the facility, I passed through a courtyard where initially it appeared that women were socializing. My escort informed me that, on the contrary, the women outside were not allowed to talk to one another. Orange construction cones lined the courtyard and marked the boundaries of each woman's assigned station. Although not entirely visible at first, I came to realize that certain women resided in different sections of the prison: some were from the psychiatric unit, others were from the recovery unit, and still others represented sections of the prison with which I am still unfamiliar. Each woman wore the same blue shirt and identification badge around her neck. Guards positioned at every corner barked orders at women who had mistakenly forgotten to tuck in their shirts or pull back their hair.

I entered into a building marked, "Treatment Unit" where I would teach a course in narrative writing for the next few months. This particular section of the prison has the most liberal social codes, which allow the women to occasionally watch television and exercise in groups, and the most promising educational opportunities. The one commonality among the women in this unit is that they are all within the last leg of their sentences, and are considered privileged amongst other members of the prison population. They have demonstrated outstanding behavior, and are therefore given the opportunity to take G.E.D., parenting, or computer courses. After seven months of teaching in this unit, I found out that my course was offered exclusively to the cream of the crop: the women who had the least time left to serve, and who were interested in enrolling in community college upon their release.

Unlike the students I had taught at the university, the students of Life Writing represented a variety of races, ages, and writing abilities. My youngest student was 23, and my oldest was in her early sixties. Many of the women had only made it through the eighth grade, while a few others had taken several college courses. After my initial meeting with them, I realized how exceptionally challenging it would be to devise a curriculum that would benefit each member of such an eclectic group. On the other hand, however, I was certain that such a diversity of life experiences would help to generate a more profound level of critical inquiry into social issues. The diversity of the class, paired with the emphasis on personal experience, would certainly politicize the course. I was anxious to trace links between knowledge, power, and representation. This methodology, I felt, would leave incarcerated women with a sharpened critical consciousness that would lead to social agency upon their release.

As our ten-week course progressed, several unexpected—and occasionally defeating—patterns emerged, which would ultimately present challenges to my initial conception of the class. Teaching a course in narrative, I had unconsciously hoped for an unadulterated, candid expression of past sorrows, struggles, triumphs, and disappointments; however, a few weeks into the course, I realized how deeply the Life Writing women had internalized the system's ordering and discourse of corrections. This ordering of identity, in some ways, obstructed the women's propensity toward critical vigilance and political resistance. I had been forewarned by a prison administrator that many of the women in my class had suffered from domestic abuse, drug addiction, and psychological problems; I had, in many ways, conceived of the

women as victims of social injustices, whose problems were rooted in larger socio-political plights, such as poverty, racism, and sexism. I had, therefore, hoped that valuing and encouraging the expressive rendering of personal struggles via narrative writing could connect the women's personal strife to larger social issues so as to promote awareness, community, and action.

Much of the prison literature I had read had confirmed this method of prison education. In her book, *Wall Tappings*, Judith Scheffler identifies various "kinds" of women prison writers. Many of them, she writes,

are political activists who speak for fellow victims of society's repression. Others, imprisoned for criminal offenses, express the plight of all incarcerated women through accounts of their own pain. Still others, despising the criminal women they have been forced to live with, seem absorbed in the task of justifying their own lives before society; yet even their works reveal much about the social condition and status of women in prison. (XXII)

Scheffler contends that her collection of women's prison writing "affirms the critical role of art" which she describes as "the practice of survival and the transcendence of prison experience" (XIII). The women whom I worked with, however, were neither political activists, nor radical crusaders who used language to "express the plight of all incarcerated women." In fact, social criticism—although encouraged—was never the preferred method of inquiry by my writing students. Despite the fact that the majority of women in my class were incarcerated on drug charges or theft, very few have

chosen to write about addiction or poverty in my 40+ weeks of teaching in the prison setting. For the handful that has embarked upon critiques of addiction, poverty, or domestic abuse, the discussions have revolved around their irresponsibility, lack of accountability, and profound regret. Although I had hoped to transgress rigorous codes of the prison system, more often than not, the prison writers would emphasize correction and rehabilitation rather than dissent or critical perspectives into social codes, hierarchies, and institutions. In essence, many of the writers reproduced the language of the correctional institution: they resided in a “treatment center” to “rehabilitate” their lives, and “correct” their behavior. These categories of existence structured the ways they rendered the past, which was frequently cloaked in the language of regret.

When entering into the prison system to teach, I had primarily conceptualized incarceration as a product of society; many of the imprisoned women, on the other hand, believed that incarceration was simply the product of their wrong decisions. This basic divergence underscored the way I went about teaching and reworking the fundamental tenants of the class; although, like Scheffler, I believe that artistic expression has the ability to make compelling social critiques, my work within the prison system has complicated my understanding of narrative expression and critical education. The following pages will explore this complication by delving into the ever-emerging body of prison studies, the narratives of prison educators, and the recent work produced by my Life Writing students. Throughout my ten months teaching behind bars, I’ve learned that agency is much more than subversive or

explicitly resistant action, and that getting at “the Truth” of a life is an impossible and even irrelevant goal in narrative writing. During each ten-week interval of teaching Life Writing, I would learn more than I would ever teach, and I would eventually come to understand how the vital and dynamic reworking of women’s lives through narrative writing illuminates the complex relationship among identity, empowerment, and community.

Chapter One

Constructing “Corrected” Identities: Theorizing Accountability and Corrections Models

The lives of incarcerated women are “grounded in a dystopic narrative of oppression, punishment, and deprivation” (Williams 4). Within this coded system, a tangled matrix of regulations, levels, and institutional hierarchies dictates how inmates address their peers, communicate with the outside world, and impart their most personal thoughts onto journal pages. Prison guards, psychologists, superintendents, and caseworkers closely monitor both written and verbal communication. Oftentimes the manner by which a woman speaks about her life, her history, and her future will dictate the length of her sentence and her privileges while residing in prison. In essence, verbal and written exchanges and representations of self are the medium through which prison administrators assess, label, and contain identity; typically, acceptable expressions of identity are contingent upon the system’s measurement of a woman’s propensity for correction, which is oftentimes gauged by her compliance with the prison’s programming and models of accountability.

The system’s intricately coded programming compartmentalizes inmates’ understanding of their progress and, consequently, their identities. Each program facilitates prisoners’ domestic, social, and psychological progress, but oftentimes at the expense expressive writing; the utilitarian nature of prison programs supersedes any emphasis on imaginative, or artistic undertakings. In order to argue for the therapeutic potential of life writing workshops, one must evaluate the existing

programs offered. The Office of Public Affairs in the Department of Corrections has published a handout detailing the current facility's programs. It states,

Correctional programs...give female state prisoners an opportunity to prepare for their successful return to the community upon release. Educational programs can help them complete their basic education. Parenting classes are designed to help them learn skills to resume care for their children in a responsible manner...Alcohol and drug treatment programs teach inmates to overcome their chemical dependencies. Work programs teach them how to hold down jobs. (DOC)

The opportunities for incarcerated women fall into the following categories: alcohol/drug treatment, educational, transition/life skills, job training, and work programs. The purpose for this core curriculum is to “give inmates access to the tools they need to practice and use to live a crime-free, responsible life while incarcerated and upon release” (DOC). One of the most popular opportunities for my students was a program referred to as WICS (Women In Community Service). This program was only offered to women serving the last weeks of their sentences. They were transported from the institution and given volunteer positions in the community, such as serving food to homeless people or providing assistance in daycare programs. The purpose of this program, as defined by the Department of Corrections, is to reduce the number of women living in poverty “by promoting self-reliance and economic independence” (DOC). Many of the women in Life Writing expressed the desire to be chosen for this program, and a few were eventually admitted.

During my time teaching, I asked the women of Life Writing to reflect on the different programs in which they had been involved during their incarceration. Because a majority of the offered courses involved extensive writing and contemplation, I was interested in how each program encouraged or discouraged specific ways of understanding one's self in relation to the world outside of the prison system. Although Life Writing didn't require or even encourage participants to reflect upon their decisions leading to imprisonment, many other programs focused solely on this aspect of inmates' identities and lives prior to incarceration. One woman reflected on her experience in a program called "In Focus." Laurie writes,

It is a drug and alcohol treatment program. Unlike the four treatment experiences I've had in the past, this one is six months for me. We have Phase One, where we work on a First Step on our drinking and using. It's a packet that asks us for specific occasions where we drank or used when we didn't plan to, where we had planned on not doing so. Times when we put ourselves and/or others in danger, specific examples that caused us to use, times when I lost my self respect as a result of my drinking and using, examples of how my health has been damaged, three worst things I have done as a result of my drinking and using.

She continues to describe the process of Phase One, which ultimately ends with a sharing session during which the women present the aforementioned scenarios to a group in hopes of graduating and moving into Phase Two. The second phase, as

defined by Laurie, focuses on “Relapse Prevention and Triggers.” Upon reflecting on her time in this program, she writes, “I am digging willingly and eagerly...all that I do revolves around my recovery.” In conclusion, she describes her belief that “this [incarceration] all happened as it should have...I do desire to tell my story. I believe it could help others who do come this far to understand and forgive themselves, and to know they aren’t alone.”

In Laurie’s writing, several interesting patterns emerge that are indicative of a larger process that incarcerated women undergo. In her writing exists a peaceful, hopeful tone indicating that she is in the final steps of the recovery process: the reworking of painful memories, and the termination of negative behaviors from life before incarceration. In the prison setting, the language of addiction/treatment—terms such as accountability, amends, (co)dependency, thinking errors, unmanageability, recovery, etc.—pervaded nearly every woman’s writing. Another Life Writing student describes incarceration as “learning through living in a therapeutic community.” She continues, “We are challenged to take a look at our own behaviors and thinking and create new patterns of living that are healthy.” She makes an important observation by mentioning that “addictions are not limited to drugs and alcohol, we also deal with gambling, relationships, sexual addictions as well as criminality and money.” The mission statement of the correctional facility “is to promote public safety by holding offenders accountable for their actions and reducing the risk of future criminal behavior” (DOC). This accountability model promotes positive behaviors by

requiring each inmate to retrace the faulty decisions and actions that lead to her present incarceration.

One way the prison system reduces criminal behavior is to rework, and oftentimes eradicate, the identities women have upon entering the system. Williams writes, “Upon entering the prison, inmates experience an erasure of the self as their personal identities are obscured behind a veil of numbers and uniforms” (9). This eradication further manifests itself in the ways that the system persuades inmates to develop very specific conceptions of self. By encouraging—and even requiring, in many cases—women to focus on their poor decisions, broken relationships, and unmanageable lives, inmates begin to see themselves as the outside sees them: broken and fragmented beings in need of rebuilding, treating, and correcting. In the prison setting, women are encouraged to take responsibility for each event leading up to their time behind bars, from their relationships with friends and family, to their job histories, to their struggles with addiction. Every event in their lives, it seems, has pushed them toward incarceration. Laurie’s response reflects this train-of-thought when she writes, “I have to believe this all happened as it should have and I do.”

This emphasis on rehabilitation, treatment, and correction plays an integral role in each woman’s movement through the justice system. The actual release of individual prisoners is dependent upon their ability to understand the faulty logic and poor patterns of past behaviors; subsequently, each inmate must have a plan for the future that substantiates her commitment to change. Recidivism is a major concern for prison administrators, making reform the primary goal of prison programs. In a

publication intended for training volunteers, a list of “tenets” includes: “Everyone has the ability to grow and adjust their own thinking, which can result in behavior change” and “[s]elf-change programming enhances facility security” (DOC). It is made exceedingly clear to volunteers that the fundamental goal for program implementation is the reprogramming of inmates’ conceptions of themselves, their lives, and their decisions. Not only can this discourage recidivism, but it also helps discipline and order inmates within the facility. By establishing a hierarchy according to treatment steps (Phase One, Phase Two, In Focus, WICS, etc.), inmates understand discipline, conformity, and order as necessary steps to freedom. As such, they internalize the language of addiction/treatment in order to make their way through the system.

William Chaloupka’s essay, “(For)getting a Life: Testimony, Identity, and Power,” problematizes the notion of identity in the judicial and prison systems by unearthing the ways that power is manifested even in the most intimate and familiar expressions of self. He warns against privileging “the autobiographical enterprise without recognizing the ways power works through even the simplest expressions of identity” (388). He writes,

Power has shifted and now operates through the practices of autobiographical telling, even if we tellers never intended to invite power into our stories, practices, and lives...the relationship between telling and power is still hard to see. (370-371)

This is especially true in the prison system, where people are broken down, ordered, reworked, and sent through a series of steps, units, and phases before they are returned

to the same world from which they originally came. As an outsider trying to teach writing in this elaborately coded setting, I struggled to recognize moments of emotional authenticity outside of the expectations of the prison system. The women of Life Writing would oftentimes express contempt for their poor decisions, rather than for the poverty or domestic abuse into which they were born; this underscores the women's fundamental collusion with the system's accountability model, which emphasizes personal responsibility rather than critical vigilance, and prizes complicity over resistance. Granted, resistance is necessarily discouraged in an institution which must account for criminals' whereabouts at all times; however, the extensive ordering and limitations violently enforced upon women's bodies will oftentimes find a way into women's creative narrative expression—a place that should be reserved as a safe space for candid social and personal commentary. “Complicity,” writes Chaloupka, “is trickier to oppose than is a state, a class, or an abstract notion of power” (370). In our Life Writing course, conceptions of identity were complicated through the women's collusion with the system's expectations, the reordering of events, the discourse of corrections, and the ever-present markings of a woman's progress within the system's established rehabilitation grid.

Narrative writing offers flexible possibilities; however, in this setting, narration can easily move from creative, therapeutic potential, to a simple act of contrived cooperation on the inmate's part. Chaloupka writes, “A prisoner who narrates his own story (to prosecutors, jailers, and, eventually, parole officers) provides material the system needs. In exchange, the system's operators can extend their appreciation”

(372). This “appreciation” uses the inmate’s representation of self to reinstate her into the symbolic structure of the system, or to deem her a rehabilitated/corrected subject ready for release. In consideration of the critical risks being waged—freedom or further confinement—the writing and recording of one’s identity within the prison system is a risky undertaking with dramatic consequences.

As evidence of this phenomenon, I am reminded of Charlene, a woman in her thirties who became one of two women in the history of the correctional facility who was granted the 30-day early release option. In order to obtain such a rare opportunity, she was required to write an essay to the superintendent of the prison which “tells about [her] life before [she] came to prison, what [she’s] learned since [she] came to prison, and what [she] plans to do differently” upon her release. Charlene gave me a copy of this letter for my study, and it entails her rocky past with abusive and drug-dependent lovers. She begins the letter, “I never would have thought my life would have ended up this way” and continues,

My relationship slowly became very mentally and physically abusive. My thinking errors made me believe that all my relationships would be this way...I finally realized my thinking was wrong and I called the police and had him arrested for assault 4...Because of my co-dependent issues it became difficult for me to be alone...Barely able to pay my bills, I met someone and he helped me for awhile with my rent...My thinking errors lead me to believe that I needed to have someone fill the

void I thought I was missing...I ended up with nothing. I was on the streets.

Charlene renders her life up to her incarceration as a series of wrong decisions. Despite the fact that she, herself, was not a drug addict or an abuser, she repeatedly assesses each situation in terms of her own faulty logic and poor decisions. She was born into poverty, became a mother at seventeen, was beaten and robbed by her lover, and eventually spent a portion of her life on the streets. At this phase in her life, Charlene describes how she met some people who “knew a way to make some quick cash.” She writes,

They said they needed someone with ID that could cash some checks. That’s when my criminal thinking took over. Failure to consider others when I was cashing checks on someone else’s account...I realize now after coming to prison that my thinking errors made me think if I asked my family for help it would mean I was a weak person...I could have went to a shelter.

Charlene never addresses the poverty, desperation, or victimization through which she had lived. According to this letter, each tragic event leading up to her incarceration was a product of her “thinking errors.” In my class, Charlene was perpetually inquisitive, responsible, respectful, and pleasant. She wrote about fishing trips with her dad, whom she adored, and her brother’s ornery antics while they were growing up. In her letter to the superintendent, Charlene had crossed out a short paragraph at the beginning of the piece. Through the thin line, one can barely read,

I had let him hit me for the last time. I had tried to leave before but he would become furious and start breaking my things, telling me I wasn't going anywhere, no one would want to be with me. Then he would apologize.

This particular event—one which reoccurred in Charlene's life—could not be discussed in terms of her “thinking errors.” It seems that when Charlene recognized that she was going into a truly confessional moment in her writing, she pulled back and recalled the objective of the letter: to be released from prison. Charlene, like many of the women in Life Writing, realized that there are certain steps, certain ways of reconfiguring and speaking about the past, which would increase her chances for parole. The crossed-out narrative of her lover's abuse and of her own burgeoning sense of agency, “I had let him hit me for the last time,” did not fit perfectly into the prison's accountability model; Charlene's conclusive paragraph, on the other hand, demonstrates her understanding and internalization of the discourse of corrections:

I am very serious about my program. I have learned some very valuable tools to help me from making the same mistakes I made before. Some of these tools include being able to ask for help when I need it, being honest with myself...I am working on my co-dependency while in treatment...Tools I have learned to help me recognize my criminal thinking errors are realizing that I was powerless and my life had become unmanageable...I have developed a prevention plan.

This letter enabled Charlene to obtain an early release. It met the required expectations by prison officials, and because she had the good behavior as well, she was an ideal candidate for release. She proved to the administration that she had developed an awareness of her problematic thinking, and that she had organized a plan upon release that would provide her with full-time work and religious counseling.

In his discussion of identity in the criminal justice system, Chaloupka recognizes that “the job of jailers is not only in incarcerate, but also—perhaps more so—to *know* prisoners, as an adjunct to the even more central requirement that prisoners know themselves” (373). Charlene’s entry and progress through the system was marked by her participation in various treatment and religious programs. In the prison system, some constructions of self are preferred, while others are discouraged, and Charlene seemed to find the right match. Her decision to scratch out a specific change in direction of her writing seems to illuminate her understanding of those expectations.

This hierarchical ordering of the prison system is the scaffolding through which one can begin to understand the matrix of contradictions in which incarcerated populations exist and attempt to construct stable identities. In Foucault’s genealogical study of the prison system, he addresses several “universal maxims” of incarceration. One of these key elements states that,

Convicts must be isolated or at least distributed according to the penal gravity of their act, but above all according to age, mental attitude, the

technique of correction to be used, [and] the stages of their transformation. (269)

The staging of transformation affects biographical impulses as each stage “marks [inmates’] entry into a disciplinary grid” that encourages specific understandings of self, while discouraging others (Chaloupka 373). In the treatment unit where I taught Life Writing, the women were primarily working on drug and alcohol treatment steps, which consequently played an essential role in how they chose to render past events in their lives. Although the 12-step program, in many ways, worked quite well with Life Writing’s emphasis on community and rigorous honesty, it conflicted with my expectations as an avid supporter of critical pedagogy; pedagogies of liberation inherently embrace political platforms which sharply contrast the A.A. program’s insistence on anonymity and lack of affiliation with any political, social, or religious creed. Furthermore, the women in the treatment unit were all in the last leg of their sentences, and were, therefore, marked by special, privileged statuses. Women in the beginning of treatment programs were forbidden to speak—as part of the prison’s requirements for new treatment patients—which complicated my ability, as an instructor, to establish dialogue with some of my students; other days students would come in with flushed faces and dry mouths—a side effect of the many conflicting medications that most of the women were taking: tranquilizers and antidepressants were among the most prescribed. A couple of times throughout the ten-week duration of the course, a woman would not show up one day, and I would soon find out that she was bumped back to maximum security due to behavior problems or lack of

accountability (See Appendix A). This particular setback usually meant that I had lost the student for the remainder of the term.

The psychological and discursive effects of teaching in the prison setting could be compared to the dizzying motion of revolving doors, where people and identities pile in, come around, and occasionally disappear. The myriad of levels and treatment programs were an ever-present concern for me; my outsider status made it difficult to decipher the various stages of rehabilitation in which each inmate was located. A packet put together by the administration, for example, elucidates the various levels of treatment within the penal system. In the section titled, "Communication Between General Population and Treatment Residents," one can begin to understand the complexity of prison ordering. A few guidelines outlined include the following:

Communication between treatment and GP [General Population] inmates is discouraged...Exceptions to this standard include a pro-social setting such as educational classes and programming...A brief, cordial, social greeting between program residents and GP inmates is permitted. A key factor is that a resident not stand and chat, but rather keep moving along. (Coffee Creek Correctional Facility 37-38)

Other statuses in the prison setting include "Loss of Privilege" status and "Ghost Status." The former category refers to inmates who have failed to comply with prison regulations. This status prevents inmates from being part of the monthly graduation ceremony that recognizes inmates who have successfully completed all phase requirements and have maintained "positive treatment behavior throughout treatment"

(12). The latter status refers to inmates enrolled in treatment programs. Ghost Status prevents inmates from listening to the radio, watching television, making or receiving phone calls, communicating with other inmates-- either verbally or via gestures, responding to peers' attempts to communicate, participating in card games, or receiving visitors. They can, however, "attend meetings and groups as a listener/observer," respond to administration employees and treatment counselors, read and complete homework, and do laundry (38-39). Among inmates residing in the treatment facility are divisions between "In Focus" members and "Turning Point" participants. The communication between these two groups is also outlined:

At no time is it appropriate for clients to go to each others' unit, this includes going to the unit door and calling for someone...In the event that a 1 on 1 is needed between two clients, staff from both programs should be made aware of that need and should give their permissions before clients proceed with the 1 on 1. Staff may also choose to be present during the 1 on 1. (36)

This distinction, perhaps, explains the orange cones lining the courtyard upon my first day of teaching in the prison. Furthermore, the miscellaneous statuses reveal how the identities of prisoners are never fixed, stable, or unified: Identity is perpetually haunted by the disciplinary coding within the system. To an outsider such as myself, the complexity of prison stratification can be dizzyingly complicated and difficult to understand. Yet another status among the prison population includes "non-

participation status.” The Department of Corrections describes the “behavior” of non-participation population members as:

Manipulation of staff, rules, and other residents

Negative attitude and behavior in groups and in the community

Argumentative/defensive/closed to feedback

Lack of respect for self and others

Not completing homework and other assignments

Isolation/sleeping/avoidance/missing 12 step groups

Non-compliant attitude/rule breaking. (CCCF 32)

Non-participation status also requires one to “sit in a quiet chair near the Officer’s desk in Unit 1. The resident will wear a green vest while in non-participation status. The resident will remain quiet in this chair until 10 minutes before count or bedtime” (32). In the prison setting—even in a low-security site such as the one in which I taught—inmates are broken down, classified, and ordered according to offenses, prison programming, compliance with codes, and the general risk(s) that the inmate presents to both the public and the institution (See Appendix B).

In prison culture, the alienating social codes and internal hierarchies play an important role in marking each woman’s progress, or regress, in the rehabilitation process. The prison is, as Foucault states, a site of “dual functioning” where liberty is deprived while transformation is encouraged (232-233). These contradictory functions complicated my task of teaching a course in narrative writing. Although I prized critical vigilance and transgressive politics, I, too, was constrained by the

highly stratified prison setting. Fellow prison educators discouraged me from teaching feminist ideas in an “already frustrating” setting for women. In a required training program, prison administrators warned us against teaching political literature, or even discussing a prisoner’s possibility for overturning her sentence. Any kind of literature we brought into the institution had to be cleared by both administrators and guards. My understanding and goals for a course in narrative writing were challenged by the invasive rigor with which my course was addressed, as well as the sometimes deliberate, sometimes unconscious, conformity in my students’ writing and speech.

Outside of my course, the incarcerated women of Life Writing utilized their knowledge and internalization of the discourse of corrections to move through the prison system. Much like Charlene, another Life Writing student, Daria, applied her writing skills and the language of corrections in an appeal to the prison’s superintendent. In her letter, she requests the facility to allow her husband and two young children to visit her. At the time of the request she had been permitted to see her family twice a year during group functions only. The success of Daria’s letter was dependent upon her ability to justify her progress in the system. She writes,

I am now a resident at the In Focus Treatment program. I am very pleased to have this opportunity while incarcerated. As I said in my request to enter the program I believe it is the best use of my time at [the facility]. I have also completed Breaking Barriers and am on the wait list for Pathfinders and Parenting. I continue to be DR free and in compliance with my programs.

I was able to visit with my family at the TACE event. The visit did more than anything else has on keeping me focused on why I need to be in recovery and reinforcing my goals of returning home to resume my career as a wife and a mother.

She concludes her letter by requesting scheduled visits at least every two weeks. In order to justify her request, she emphasizes her progress and compliance with institutional programs and codes. Even the nature of her appeal—a very human, delicate, and private desire—is linked to the expectations and programs of the facility. She describes her desire in terms of recovery, rather in terms of her own human need to spend time with her family. Unlike Charlene, however, Daria's plea is denied.

Interestingly, the rationale behind the refusal of Daria's request is justified by yet another code. The superintendent responds to Daria in a letter that states,

This... is in response to your request for an exception to the visiting status for your husband..., and your two [children]. Taken into consideration for this review was information obtained from your DOC file, the reason for the request, police reports, psychological reports, your amended judgment order and the DOC Visiting (Inmate) Rule.

Clearly, Daria's identity as an inmate is created by a host of agencies, inspections, and reports. Without ever having met Daria, the superintendent has all he needs to know in a series of files and databases. He continues,

This situation is a difficult one because the Visiting (Inmate) Rule does not provide the superintendent with the authorization to make an exception...At the same time, the Oregon Accountability model and the criminogenics assessments used to establish sound transitional plans for each inmate, identify the development and maintenance of positive family relationships as one of seven factors to successful transition. In light of this dichotomy, it is my decision to deny your request to add your husband... and your [children] to your visiting list at this time as *the rule prevents me from doing so.* [emphasis added]

In the prison system, every individual is confined by the limitations set by codes, regulations and hierarchies. For Daria, her relationship with her husband and two young children is contingent upon the translation of prison rules. Her identity as a mother and/or wife is not as relevant as her identity as a corrected, compliant inmate. Although Daria was referred for “re-assessment” and mental healthcare to treat her depression resulting from the alienation from her family, she will not be permitted to see her husband and children for six months (assuming she is on her best behavior). The superintendent continues by offering her a glimmer of hope for the future: “If the revision is adopted, I will consider a future request from you after you have completed minimally 6 months of clear conduct and programming...At that time we will need to review the family dynamics, sentencing orders, and release condition.” For Daria, a series of steps, procedures, reviews, and prison programming lines her path to

freedom. Quiet acquiescence will provide her with the greatest possibility of resuming her roles as wife and mother.

The voices of Laurie, Charlene, and Daria illuminate the labyrinth of stages and levels in which incarcerated women are located in the prison system. Through the writing process, both inside and outside of our Life Writing course, each woman must negotiate varying and oftentimes conflicting subjectivities. Depending upon the particular discourse, women define themselves in terms of compliance to regulations and expectations, agency to enact changes in their thinking patterns/errors, and transformation through the various programs and communities located within the prison setting. Rarely does their writing reflect resistance to the established stages of the prison programming; and although there are certainly benefits to treatment programs that unearth the unhealthy patterns of addictive personalities and abusive relationships, there are also inherent setbacks in the sometimes violent ways with which incarcerated women are expected to conform and internalize predetermined conceptions of self. And while incarcerated women are encouraged to look within themselves to rework patterns of thinking and behavior so as to transform their lives from the inside out, the unjust society from which they came remains unaddressed within the prison setting. Many of the women are released back into society only to return to impoverished lifestyles, violent lovers, and missed opportunities due to the stigma of incarceration.

These complicated realities were present in my mind as I first began planning our course in narrative writing. I knew I couldn't change their lives within or outside

of the prison, but I desperately wanted to create a space within the staggeringly monotonous and coded setting where the women of Life Writing could address their pasts in ways that would revalue many of their decisions as mothers, wives, daughters, lovers, and friends. I would never ask about their criminal decisions, but rather I would encourage them to reconnect to another life apart from their struggles with addiction, victimization, and criminal activity. For ten weeks, each woman would be asked to reflect back upon a favorite childhood memory, a place in nature where she found solace and reprieve, a description of her home (a psychic or physical), and her experiences with the writing process prior to and including her time behind bars (See Appendix C). The work they generated acts as a reminder of the thriving humanity that exists within the prison setting despite the stringent codes, hierarchical ordering, and perpetual emphasis on the poor decisions of one's history. At the same time, however, one must acknowledge that the discourse of corrections is also present as each woman weaves and reworks her way through the past.

Chapter Two

Inscribing Alternative Spaces: The Value of Self-Interest, Dialogue, and Difference

In the weeks following my proposal to teach narrative writing to incarcerated women residing in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, I reworked the ideological foundation for the course several times without ever arriving at a comfortable or coherent conclusion. I found myself perpetually oscillating between vague hopes for a nebulously defined experience of transcendence via expressive writing, and an equally naïve and obscured conception of transformative education via agency enacted by autobiographical writing. During these early stages, I was still adhering to an oversimplified conception of agency, which primarily prized overt political resistance of systems of domination. I envisioned my first class of Life Writers as political dissidents who would be eager to engage in critical analysis of social structures; I had hoped that they would be unsettled, opinionated, and primed to excavate the nature of the injustices that they had undergone in their lives prior to incarceration.

Fortunately I was invited to meet the Life Writing students before the class began. It was within this early encounter that my awareness of the women's diverse needs and goals was initially generated. As I faced the room of twelve women dressed in identical blue shirts and jeans, mixed expressions met my gaze. A few of the women looked interested and eager to begin; they clutched notebooks and gave me animated accounts of their incessant journaling practices. Other women's eyes averted my glance as I spoke; a few women appeared disengaged and looked out the window as fellow inmates passed by. One woman, who had come in late and stood

quietly in the back, tentatively raised her hand and asked, “Do you have to be a professional writer to join the class?” I returned her question with a smile and assured her that everyone, regardless of ability level, was welcome.

In retrospect, I am able to see how this woman’s timid question reflects the difficulty, resistance, and genuine fear that most of the women had experienced during prior writing and educational processes. I realized my original conception of the class—an exercise in formal techniques and activities-- had potential to alienate many of the women from the learning process, hence reproducing the experiences that a majority of the women had undergone prior to incarceration. Although some of the women had taken college English and literature courses, a majority of the Life Writing participants had struggled through school, barely passing the eighth grade before dropping out and entering the working world.

Taking these complications into consideration, my subsequent goals for the course revolved around the benefits of cultivating a dialogic community of writers within the prison institution. It was during this phase that I ascribed the name, “Life Writing,” to the course. Under this heading, I envisioned a class that would encourage participants to rework their lives on paper; through autobiographical telling, the women of Life Writing could narrate the events of their pasts in a way that would validate their experiences as women, as well as build a community of witnesses in the classroom. This recognition of the potential of women’s prison writing could be compared to what Carla Kaplan has referred to as an “erotics of talk” (*The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms*). This trope traces,

those forms of intimacy, reciprocity, equality, recognition, and respect for difference which do not find realization under the prevailing conditions of modern social organization but which are nonetheless—or all the more—longed for and desired so much in women’s writing.

(16)

An “erotics of talk” makes room for both personal desire as well as social criticism. By encouraging a community of women writers to illuminate their struggles, histories, and victories, I envisioned a space where feminist criticism would be generated.

Such linking of personal experience with institutionalized learning can also be found in texts such as, “Keeping Close to Home: Class and Education,” in which bell hooks challenges the notion that the academic and “real” worlds are oppositional spheres. This “false dichotomy” alienates students from classroom learning, thus making institutionalized education a meaningless exercise in “Teacher Psychology.” Hooks’s critique played an important role in my understanding of how Life Writing should be structured. In a course devoted to the narration of women’s lives amongst a community of women, I foresaw a connection between lived experiences and theoretical analyses of social structures. Classroom learning would have a direct link to women’s lives, which would ultimately affirm my belief in critical pedagogy and the transformative possibilities of education.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the insidious and ever-present hierarchies and disciplinary correction within the prison system thwarted my hope for pure and unfettered cathartic and/or resistant writing. This paradoxical site—to which we send

people to change, but inevitably deny them of many liberties—unearthed the contradictions present in the writing of my students. However, autobiographical writing—regardless of the site in which it is written-- is inherently contradictory as it “involves the complex negotiation of identities, which are themselves affected by language and are in a constant state of struggle” (Hesford 56). This state of individual struggle signifies the local nature of literacy, which becomes a “complex and uncertain task of constructing a self or selves that can enter specific discourses in order to *act* in specific situations for specific purposes—academic or otherwise” (Yagelski 92). This “multifarious self” represents the conflicting ways that students write themselves with and against discourse practices. Fundamentally, by assuming the students of Life Writing were all in need of catharsis, revival, and transformation, I, too, was falling into the myth that there exists an essential identity—a constant and buried self—which I needed to engage, unearth, and liberate. This is a one-dimensional conception of identity in that it ignores “how discourse communities define which voices are the most personal or real” (Hesford 56).

By resisting the “complexities and struggles involved in writing autobiography,” I underestimated the agency that is enacted through the very clashes, contradictions, and give-and-take transactions between different and opposing constructions of identity (56). Unlike the discourse of corrections, Life Writing would generate a space in which experiences of difference would enable conflicting selves to thrive, hence carving out alternative subjectivities within the ascetic prison setting. Through style, subject matter, and language, the women of Life Writing could position

their self-interests; although many of them would write themselves within the dominant prison discourse of corrections, accountability, and complicity, their experiences as mothers, artists, and writing students would inscribe identities which starkly opposed their stigmatic and dehumanized prison selves. It is through the “interplay of social discourses” that “students negotiate their identities discursively and claim authority” (57). In Life Writing, these “interplay[s]” took the form of animated dialogues and autobiographical utterances: Narrative writing eventually became the medium through which the Life Writing women could appropriate various conflicting voices, styles, and stories that ultimately worked to validate their experiences as women, writing students, and recovering addicts. The act of narrating—of reworking and re-envisioning intimate experiences of their pasts—allowed the Life Writing students to revisit and reclaim their identities outside of the prison setting.

My first Life Writing course was a series of trial-and-error episodes. I incorporated various texts that were relevant within the context of the tenuous units I had proposed: home, childhood event, writing and spirituality, nature, and changing perspectives. In our first unit, I assigned essays by Joan Didion, Barbara Smith, and Alice Walker; the second unit featured “The Chase” by Annie Dillard; in our third section on writing and spirituality, chapters from bell hooks’s *Remembered Rapture: the Writer at Work* informed our discussions; the fourth unit on nature featured highly canonized work by Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, and our final segment on changing perspectives included a poem by Smokey Epley—a male prison writer—

called, “The Human Screw” in which the prisoner-narrator imagines he is a prison guard looking into the lives of inmates. During the last day of the first Life Writing course, I asked the women to reflect upon the reading I had assigned as a way of gauging what would work in future Life Writing courses. Although few of the women felt the same about any one essay, every woman chose to discuss the various chapters from bell hooks’s *Remembered Rapture*.

Seeking to understand how *Remembered Rapture* was experienced by my students, I have, retrospectively, concluded that it is a text which makes room for emotion by evoking readers’ most intimate memories; hooks’s candid, personal accounts of childhood wonder, shame associated with journal writing, and experiences of marginalization speak to women’s experiences regardless of class, race, or religious upbringing. At the onset of the course, I had chosen *Remembered Rapture* because of its emphasis on the arduous, emotional, and transgressive characteristics of the writing process; also, I had taught hooks in past classes and had admired her ability to move sinuously from personal and confessional narration to theoretical analyses of lived experiences. Rather than devaluing her experiences as a southern, black female from a working-class family, hooks embraces each facet of her identity by using individual subject positions as avenues of critical inquiry into larger social practices. In the beginning of *Remembered Rapture*, hooks discusses her childhood as a “time in anguish—as a dark time” (3). As the chapter progresses, she complicates the common understanding of darkness as a “stark, bleak, or empty” space by revealing the possibilities of darkness as “a rich space of knowledge, struggle, and awakening” (3).

Within this darkness subsides a “tormented and struggling self” which hooks refers to as the “shadow self” (6). Through the writing process, this “shadow self” can be unearthed, validated, and embraced.

Hooks’s “shadow self” personifies what I had erroneously considered the essential self during my early stages of teaching writing behind bars. Her description of writing as “irrevocably linked...with the effort to maintain well-being” played an imperative role in my initial configuration of the tenets of Life Writing. As a creative process, writing can be “intimately linked with the experience of transcendence” (9). Like many prison educators, I desired to create a space where the monotonous and stigmatized experience of incarceration could be overcome by expressive writing; however, in reality-- as well as in hooks’s own writing—autobiographical enterprises are not always transcendent. In fact, transcendence isn’t necessarily an ideal outcome of narrative writing. Hooks complicates the understanding of art as transcendence of sorrow by articulating that although writing can “keep us away from death [and] from despair,” it does not necessarily “help us to be well” (10). She continues,

Writing enables us to be more fully alive only if it is not a terrain wherein we leave the self—the shadows behind, escaping...A distinction must be made between the writing which enables us to hold on to life even as we are clinging to old hurts and wounds and writing which offers us a space where we are able to confront reality in such a way that we live more fully. (11)

Writing cannot be truly transformative unless it ceases to displace, and begins to unearth and restore memories of the past. To “live more fully” indicates a creative process which values every facet of identity and assumes a multiple layering; for example, the Life Writing women needed to confront their experiences as inmates and as addicts, but also as mothers, daughters, friends, lovers, women, and writing students. This multi-dimensional and oftentimes inconsistent conception of identity works against essentializing practices in institutional settings, such as the prison or college classrooms. Hooks’s conception of narrative writing and, consequently, identity construction, values intricate and conflicting subjectivities of lived experience; rather than prizing one experience over another, hooks understands herself in terms of how her inconsistent selves create tension and illuminate the richness involved in the struggle to make meaning from her insight as a Southern, black, academic female working within a “white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy” (hooks, *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*).

Hooks’s discussion of the “shadow self,” elucidates the inherent limitations of oversimplified therapeutic models of prison writing can be addressed. The “shadow self” in hooks’s writing is not a hidden aspect of identity that seeks liberation and transcendence; instead, the “shadow self” is one aspect of identity that sheds light on other selves existing within a single person. Hooks, for example, employs her subjectivity as an African American to illuminate her experiences growing up in the South. The shadowing effect of each individual’s conflicting selves allows a person to more freely traverse discourses of identity: shadowing works to open up spaces of

rich, dark possibility, rather than obscure, or whitewash, the complexity of an individual's lived experience. While expressive writing enables inmates to temporarily displace the uninspiring and colorless aspects of incarceration, it should also work against any privileging of one identity construction over another. Granted, there are encouraging merits in Rachel Williams's conception of prison programming as an engagement in the arts which "temporarily removes prisoners from their experience and the losses associated with imprisonment by creating a fantasy world" (Williams 9); however, creative work cannot be truly transformative or healing unless it recognizes the rich and conflicting aspects of identity through which we are perpetually moving and negotiating.

Unlike many of the essays we read in *Life Writing, Remembered Rapture*—which is reminiscent of much of hooks's work—moves fluidly through different discourses of identity. In the opening chapter, her experience as a child was shaped by growing up amidst "country black folks" within which culture "there was an intense passionate place for telling stories" (9). In a culture that prized oral storytelling, hooks's driving desire to write generated conflict and estrangement from her home community. Journal writing and the experience of displacement are therefore associated with what hooks refers to as "women's development of a counter-hegemonic experience of creativity within a patriarchal culture" (5). Hooks's move from childhood displacement to women's subversive journal writing as a "narrative of resistance" delineates the movement of writing as an "act that intimately connects the art of expressing one's feeling on the written page with the construction of self and

identity, with the effort to be self-actualized” (5). This example underscores a move through different discourses of identity, which ultimately benefits writers by illuminating the complex and conflicting experiences within an individual’s life. Self-recovery, in hooks’s work, is intimately linked with self-discovery: Writing should “critically confront” through the chafing of conflicting identities, rather than transcending or working toward a stable, essential self.

Hooks’s discussion of self-recovery presents a useful alternative to more commonplace conceptions of the therapeutic possibilities of narrative writing that primarily uphold the restorative experience of transcendence via autobiography. Hooks’s emphasis on the rich instabilities of identity signifies a larger body of feminist writing, which seeks to disrupt the myth of an essential self in favor of a multiplicity of subjectivities. One such study, *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autography*, addresses the question of “who and what is meant by that written ‘I’ as an element in the ‘we’ of feminist communities, and takes up problems of feminist articulations of self and writing in the context of current debates of subjectivity” (Perreault 2). In her exploration of the feminist writing self, Jeanne Perreault has coined the term, “autography” to refer to

a kind of writing that can and should be identified in order to foreground the suggestive and flexible process of both *autos* and *graphia*...In autography, I find a writing whose effect is to bring into being a “self” that the writer names “I,” but whose parameters and boundaries resist the monadic. (2)

This conception of women's autobiographies values self-reflexivity and community, and can be applied to discussions of life writing, in which writers "trace the discursive boundaries of...identity" (3). Life writing texts, or autographies, oftentimes contain a "provisional" self; rather than understanding this self as "a fixed notion, clearly conceptualized and needing only to be 'expressed,' the feminist writer of self engages in a (community of) discourse of which she is both product and producer" (7). This interrelatedness, argues Perreault, enacts agency in that the feminist writing of self becomes part of creating new communities in her revelations of the "intersections of individual experience" (7). Autography is more than the process of narrating life events: The "writing itself [is] an aspect of the selfhood the writer experiences and brings into being" (3-4). In this way, the self is perpetually in-the-making and evolving, thus working toward a more complex and dynamic understanding of identity, which opposes more essentialist conceptions.

In a recent response to bell hooks's chapter on women's subversive journal writing, one Life Writing student, Angie, expresses at length how hooks's writing resonated with her. Her response projects a self-in-motion, which ultimately works to affirm the interrelatedness existing between Angie's understanding of herself and of our community of Life Writing students. Her response begins,

[hooks] speaks of how the self represented in her diaries kept her from attempting suicide. She felt that death was the only way she could escape that inner darkness, the secret shadow self. Confronting the secret shadow self can humiliate and humble.

In this first passage, Angie is working within the discourse of an academic class that asks her to respond to scholarly writing. She paraphrases hooks's chapter and incorporates many of the same terms that hooks uses: confronting, shadow self, and "humiliate and humble." As Angie's response progresses, however, her academic voice shifts and agency transfers from hooks to Angie:

To see yourself, good and bad, light and dark, innocence and deviousness, all sides. The intentional and the unintentional. It is the hardest, most frightening thing I have ever done is to see, confront, and walk through my shadow self. All the shame, guilt, and insecurities.

This passage contains Angie's own unique interpretation in which she incorporates language that is not found within hooks's chapter: innocence and deviousness, and intentional and unintentional. Angie continues,

Shadow encounters enable her to learn herself anew in ways that allowed transformation in consciousness and being. This has been true for myself and my own journey. I write a lot. I write mostly to my fellow man, not in diaries. I write what's true and real, my reality. I speak of where I've been, what I've done, where I want to be, and where I want to go. I write of doings and feelings of all things and life currently...I am so full. Full of words and experiences. I express it as best I can. It benefits me and just maybe it benefits my fellows.

Although Angie began by aligning her experiences with hooks's, she ultimately claims agency by resisting the internal, subversive qualities of hooks's journal writing, and

ultimately, by asserting her own experience of writing “mostly to [her] fellow man.” By working both with and against hooks’s conception of the shadow self and diary-keeping, Angie reasserts her self-interest and agency.

Agency, in this sense, is much more complicated than overt political resistance; it involves the negotiation of clashing discourses in order to gain fluidity and clarity of purpose. Robert Yagelski’s work in the developing field of local literacies has unearthed the various ways that agency can be located within students’ texts. He argues for a conception of literacy that addresses both the social and the individual currents composing the ways that students interact with texts; although one must recognize the conflicting discourses that constitute individual lives, it is imperative not to understand those discourses as determining students’ lives. Yagelski writes,

Each of our students, as a function of his or her *self-interest*, participates in these discourses differently, and their respective texts manifest these differences. Thus, their decisions—about the assertions they make in a specific assignment for the class, about how they position themselves in that assignment, about the sort of texts they write—reflect their agency. (83)

Angie’s alignment and resistance of bell hooks’s writing can be understood in terms of Yagelski’s definition of agency. It is this “interplay of social discourses” that reveals the ways students work through conflicting notions of identity (Hesford 57). Within this conception, agency is not viewed as a simple vehicle for resistance, but

rather “as a means to begin to understand [students’] texts and the differences between them... as a process of negotiation within and among discourses mediated by an individual’s self-interest” (Yagelski 82). Because self-interest is a process perpetually in motion, it is impossible to locate Angie’s exact motive, but it involves her negotiation of the text and of her own self-narrative. Self-interest consists of both the subject’s self-narrative as well as the process of social negotiation (81).

During our class discussion of bell hooks’s “Writing from the Darkness,” Angie raised her hand and asked if she could share her response. She began by reading her work slowly and deliberately; the earlier passages of her response were mainly summaries of hooks’s writing. As her reading progressed, her voice gained strength and the focus moved from the text to the room full of women. She read the following words from her paper:

[Expression] benefits me and just maybe it benefits my fellows. This causes me to reflect and contemplate my past and how I was as a child, adolescent, and being an adult. I consider the many sides of myself and humanity and how we are truly within, deep within ourselves and what we all struggle with. The shadow self to me is all our insecurities, the discontent, unrest, and hate. It’s all things with ourselves we don’t like. The things we are afraid of...However it’s all the things we see within ourselves that we see in others that we don’t like and are afraid of, or try to hide.

Angie closes her reading and writing with, “Thank You.” Her reading began as a timid, private conversation with bell hooks, and eventually swelled into a public address to the women of our class. Her final lines, “Thank You,” suggest that the final passages-- which feature a move from the personal and reflective, “I” to the public and provocative use of “we”—was intended for public expression. In this way, Angie has become both the subject (the producer) and the produced in and through our class’ discourse concerning bell hooks’s conception of the “shadow self.” Perreault writes, “as women write themselves they write the movement. The transformation of self, of community, and of material reality are brought to possibility and registered in the writing” (8). Within Angie’s response, one can locate the various colorful and conflicting discourses which are mediated by the writer: Her self-interest seems to be shaped by her identity as a student (the careful consideration and summaries of hooks); as a woman undergoing treatment in a correctional facility, “It is the hardest, most frightening thing I have ever done...to see, confront, and walk through my shadow self”; as a poet-writer, “I am so full. So full of words...I express it as best I can. It benefits me and just maybe it benefits my fellows”; and, finally, her negotiation between the private self and the public, inspirational self which reminded our class how the “shadow self...is *all our* insecurities” (emphasis added). Angie incorporates conflicting messages of both private shame and public, communal pain. Her writing reflects a complicated and sometimes uncertain subjectivity. In doing so, “it foregrounds that writer’s *agency* within those discourses...individual writers who

sit before the writing teacher...represent a myriad of ways to engage the broader discourses that shape their lives” (Yagelski 84).

The candid, assured, and bard-like qualities of Angie’s presence were not always present in our Life Writing class. In fact, preceding our initial meeting, the other participants had warned me that a woman, Angie, would be coming in late and might not stay the duration of the course. Soon after their announcement, a timid woman in her mid-thirties came through the door with her head lowered, and quietly mumbled that she wasn’t sure about joining the course. I assured her that she could simply sit in on our first session, and make a final decision sometime before our next meeting. On my list of participants, Angie’s name remained enclosed in parentheses for the next four weeks.

Despite our initial encounter, however, Angie became increasingly vocal as the class progressed. Her writing, even from the onset, was adventurous, motivated, and very personal. Although she didn’t share her work for a couple of weeks, she eventually became the most vocal member of the class, continually willing to express her reactions to readings, and always eager to share her own essays with the group. Following suit, other women began offering up their own responses and narratives that would work to form a dialogue with Angie’s work. While some women would allude to the common texts we were reading as evidence of agreement or disagreement with Angie’s work, others would voice memories of childhood events, birthplaces, or family histories as a way of making sense of our classroom discussions. These competing discourses— intimate and personal histories and traditionally academic

references—cultivated a dynamic community of writers and speakers in our class. Neither discourse was valued over the other, which opened up avenues of communication that otherwise could have been obstructed by perceived expectations of what a writing class entails.

In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire has written that, “The person who is open to the world or to others inaugurates thus a dialogical relationship with which restlessness, curiosity, and unfinishedness are confirmed as key moments within the ongoing current of history” (121). The interactive nature of Life writing discussions created an environment in which dialogue thrived. Dialogue, particularly in this setting—where stringent orders regulate statements of personal opinion and experience—challenges authority and creates a climate of questioning. Jon Mill’s book, *A Pedagogy of Becoming*, addresses how dialogue “fosters the democratic co-creation of reality whereas other more traditional forms of pedagogy are less conducive to such co-creation” (Miller 101). Dialogic classrooms transcend one-directional information exchanges and make room for the “friction of difference” (109). These components of dialogic learning were imperative to our progress in Life Writing, where it was necessary to create a community in which a diverse array of experiences, languages, and abilities were acknowledged and validated. The dialogic nature of Life Writing helped to foster interdependence among its members, which would ultimately affirm a sense of community and respect for the emergence of difference.

The unit, "Home," occurred early within the framework of each Life Writing course. This provided the opportunity for us to open up and discuss the places from which we came. This unit emphasized the ambivalence oftentimes linked with our memories of home, and the unique knowledge of regions, customs, and cultures that each woman brought into the classroom. In planning the course, I searched for essays that would dispel the romantic idealism that is typically attributed to memories and conceptions of one's home. Among the essays that underscore the rich, contradictory emotions associated with one's upbringing and land of birth were: Joan Didion's "On Going Home," Alice Walker's "The Place Where I Was Born," and Barbara Smith's "Home." Each of these essays explores themes such as displacement, the vitality of memory, alienation, and ambivalence concerning one's homeland. These topics generated intricate dialogues among the Life Writing members, which often dipped back into memories of our childhoods, estranged family members, and present relationships with our parents and/or children. After reading Joan Didion's essay, "On Going Home," I asked the women to reflect, in writing, on one of the following quotations from the piece: "Marriage is the classic betrayal," (494); "We did not fight. Nothing was wrong. And yet some nameless anxiety colored the emotional charges between me and the place that I came from," (494) and, "I smooth out the snapshot and look into [my grandfather's] face, and do and do not see my own" (495). Overwhelmingly, a majority of the women chose to write about marriage as the "classic betrayal."

During the second installment of Life Writing, I can recall a particularly rich and energetic dialogue ensuing Didion's essay. I opened the discussion by asking, "What does Didion mean by 'betrayal'? What could marriage betray?" Malorie, an avid Christian who oftentimes wrote about her spiritual life, responded, "Marriage is the betrayal of God because when you get married, you put your husband before God." I went to the chalkboard and wrote, "Marriage as the betrayal of:" and "God/spirituality" underneath. Although I had not expected her particular interpretation, a few other class members nodded approvingly at Malorie's contribution. Another woman described how, in her own marriage, her union with her ex-husband was a betrayal of her family. She was married at a young age, against her parents' wishes, and eventually suffered through years of domestic abuse. Many of the women expressed similar experiences and readings of Didion's line; other women thought of marriage as the betrayal of one's self as matrimony oftentimes involves difficult compromises and sacrifices that single women do not necessarily have to make. Interestingly, another woman discussed how marriage betrays society: Because marriage is idealized in the media, real marriage—which typically consists of hardship, boredom, and sacrifice—seems to betray the perfect image of couples on television and in advertisements. As each woman brought forth a new reading, I would record it on the board; many of the women took notes, while a few were content to merely consider their classmates' ideas and experiences. Similarly, many of the women would justify their responses by narrating a personal experience, while others would hinge the discussion back to Didion's text. Each woman's ideas included both

her own language, as well as the language brought forth by her peers. Because each woman's response elicited new and different interpretations, the women's integrated articulations forged new communities of meaning among us-- as individuals and as a collective group. Meaning, in Life Writing, was self-reflexive, communal, and always evolving.

The energetic dialogues that stemmed from class essays, such as Didion's, involved students' appropriation of other students' languages and underscored the interrelatedness among Life Writing participants. Each class member had experienced marriage quite differently, and yet each interpretation generated new and competing understandings of marriage. One woman, Vera, was in her forties and had never been married. Following our rich discussion of Didion and marriage as the "classic betrayal," Vera wrote the following reflection:

Looking into the idealism of institutions, like marriage, Joan Didion's writing resonates with my soul as she refers to marriage as the ultimate betrayal.

I ask myself, "Why?" What has gone so wrong in our country that so many have forgotten to uphold the traditional values of marriage? In reflecting upon my own life, however...I have given up the dream of walking down the aisle...As I look back and feel the desire that pulls at the strings of my heart, I reevaluate the benefits of the path I have chosen. I look down at my hands and wonder if I should go.

Vera's response moves from Didion's essay to a contemplative narrative of her own life's relationship to the institution of marriage. She recalls a man from her childhood, Bob, who she had considered, as a child, the ideal husband and father. Vera's own conception of marriage was founded upon her perception of Bob as a hardworking, simple man who loved his wife and family. She writes,

Trucks, old trucks, new trucks drive down dirt or gravel roads, stirring up dust in their wake...As you see [Bob] in your mind's eye looking over his old gray and white striped overalls, hands in his pockets, looking toward the north, you wonder if times of today have caught up to him...I am hard-pressed to pause and look out my window, seeing no clouds from old dirt roads, no quiet or calm. I hear the neighbors fighting and wonder about old Bob.

Vera's reflection integrates ideas from our class discussion with her own personal memories and impressions of marriage. While a few women of the class critiqued the idealistic representations of marriage in society and the media, Vera—although beginning her response similarly-- eventually moves into her own intimate and sentimental sketches of Bob. In *Voicing Ourselves*, Christian Knoeller writes, "Though a largely untutored skill, appropriating the words of others is an essential component of such discussion, and quite possibly a *necessary* one" (18). He continues,

Viewed as multivoiced, an utterance—whether spoken or written—becomes *internally* dialogical when another's language is expressly

incorporated...The richness of interpreting works collaboratively—especially in a decentered lesson format such as student-led discussions—is the intertextuality introduced by voicing the words and perspectives of others. Classroom dialogue reaches its fullest consummation when students feel licensed to not only speak their own minds, but respond openly to the ideas of authors and classmates. (18)

In Life Writing, women would generally volunteer to read their written responses aloud to the group, which would oftentimes, if not always, generate new discussions revolving around the reading. We would also take turns reading aloud bell hooks's chapters from *Remembered Rapture*, and many times these verbal renderings would create integrated and multi-layered understandings of concepts such as, "shadow self," displacement, and marriage. These ongoing dialogues moved between difference and recognition, which facilitated identifications that were complex negotiations of inconsistent selves. Unlike the coded discourse of corrections, the dialogic nature of Life Writing encouraged and honored difference as a positive experience, which illuminated the concrete struggles, recognitions, and identifications within the classroom.

My original conception of Life Writing was quite contrary to the dialogic struggles that unfolded once I actually began teaching behind bars. As I began to understand the nature of the prison institution and how thoroughly subjects are inscribed with very dehumanized and rigid identities, I began valuing difference and dialogue in the classroom over overt political resistance and therapeutic "cures" of an

essential, buried self. Although I had originally prized relatively traditional ways of enacting agency, responding to academic texts, and promoting a nebulous concept of “healing” via narrative writing, I eventually revised my conventional expectations to help encourage participation from each member of Life Writing, regardless of how she chose to speak, write, or reflect on her experience and understanding of our texts. A successful community, I slowly came to understand, is not composed of a tensionless, homogeneous group of students with a common aspiration, moving toward a common goal. Analogous to conceptions of identity that work against essentialist conceptions of self, the community established among our Life Writing class members was one that consisted of a slippery plurality: The ages ranged from early twenties to sixties; race, religion, and various social classes were also diversely represented; furthermore, the reasons why each woman had chosen to take part in Life Writing varied greatly from writer to writer.

In “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing,” Joseph Harris, English teacher and scholar, argues for a “useful dissonance” that is created when students “are confronted with the ways of talking about the world with which they are not yet wholly familiar” (17). This definition of community challenges oversimplified and romanticized definitions that gloss over the importance and livelihood of difference. He writes,

What I am arguing against, though, is the notion that our students should necessarily be working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse. It seems to me that they might better be

encouraged towards a kind of polyphony—an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own.

(17)

In Life Writing, the diversity of experiences, ages, and ways of knowing helped contribute to the development of a community in which students and teacher alike were encouraged to “acquire not only certain skills or data, but to try on new forms of thinking and talking about the world as well” (16). The students worked with and against the academic discourse of some of our readings and exercises, while also working within and against their own modes of speaking and conceptualizing the world. Although writers were speaking through the Life Writing community, each student had her own pulsating and distinctive way of rendering ideas that established an inviting and dynamic tone to each of our sessions.

It was never easy, however. I can remember the first time I saw the institution’s “library,” which consisted of two shelves of primarily romance novels and religious publications; white stripes ran down each book’s spine, indicating its frequent circulation. One of the inmates approached me to tell me how she had read every publication in the facility twice. At that moment, I realized how limited the incarcerated women’s resources would be for the duration of the course. I can also recall my first three or four drives home from Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, which mainly consisted of an hour and a half of crying for an unarticulated sadness. Furthermore, despite the prison system’s focus on discipline, order, and control, our class work was oftentimes interrupted or halted altogether by rampant illness running

though the unit, week-long “lockdowns” during which time women were not allowed to leave their bunks, and occasional suicide attempts that would leave the women, understandably, unable to concentrate on their work. Among the many severe setbacks of teaching within the prison system, however, perhaps the most epidemic is the high level of medication that is prescribed to a majority of the inmates. I have had students withdraw from Life Writing because they have been placed in G.P. (general population) after hiding medication under their tongues; another time a student came into class sweaty and unable to see straight because the Vicodin prescribed for her toothache conflicted with the antidepressant and tranquilizer that she was also taking. These severe setbacks are unique to the prison setting and require great patience and compassion. Most importantly, one must acknowledge the utmost importance of improvisation in the prison classroom; rarely do things go as planned. In the prison setting, a syllabus provides a helpful, general overview, but by no means should it act as a definitive articulation of comprehensive objectives.

Prison educators must navigate the complicated and commonly disheartening prison terrain without the comfort of a well-established prison pedagogy; my own sense of my teaching behind bars has been mainly informed by my intuitive understanding of each individual group’s needs, apprehensions, and desires. And although the work we have done was neither wholly resistant nor healing, our efforts have enabled each Life Writing woman to carve out a space for herself where she could engage the ideas that were put into the air of our class in ways that allowed for difference: As Life Writing participants, the women did not necessarily transcend the

prison experience via narrative writing, but they were invited to reconnect to their lives outside of the institution in ways that valued their decisions and experiences as students, mothers, friends, and daughters. Moreover, through the women's common experiences of struggling for knowledge and negotiating the various, competing versions of self, each woman's presence as an active listener and speaker helped to generate new communities of meaning. The Life Writing women's work is a testimony of their rich, erratic, and resourceful selves in spite of the oppressive and routine experience of incarceration.

Chapter Three

Chronicling Incarcerated Women's Voices:
Rich, Erratic, and Resourceful Selves Speak

Prison anthologies, which feature work by both prisoners and prison educators, are becoming increasingly available through non-profit programs that promote creative work behind bars. Anthologies that showcase inmates' writing are commonly made available through Internet websites, writing and/or literacy journal subscriptions, and grassroots campaigns that advocate for prisoners' rights and public awareness of prisoners' lives and thriving humanity behind bars. W.R.A.P., (WRite Around Portland), is a well-known regional group that routinely conducts poetry writing programs in correctional facilities around the area. Similar to Life Writing, W.R.A.P. puts together collections of the inmates' work and circulates copies among inmates as well as through their website. Other recent collections, such as Rachel Williams' *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars* (2003), provide prison pedagogical guidance and resources, such as essays on how to embark upon teaching behind bars and what to expect once entering into the surreal and coded setting of a correctional facility. The collection edited by Williams, *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars*, was particularly invaluable to me the summer that I first started planning my own Life Writing course. Not knowing where to begin, I was relieved to find a collection of essays that debunks the myths about prison populations, offers up valuable advice concerning the implementation and setbacks involved in creating a prison curriculum, and poses methods to evaluate one's own arts-in-corrections program. In 2004, *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service Learning, and Community Service* issued a special edition

called, *Prison Literacies, Narratives and Community Connections* (vol. iv). This volume features writing by art-behind-bars educators, essays and poetry by prisoners, and appendices and book reviews for future research in prison studies. Other more recent collections, such as Wally Lamb's *Couldn't Keep It to Myself* (2003), singularly feature the work created by incarcerated populations. *Couldn't Keep It to Myself* is a beautiful collection of essays produced by women residing in York Correctional Institution, and features photographs of each contributor as a young girl and as an inmate, hence reminding readers that although this population is both misunderstood and neglected, it consists of women with childhood memories, pasts, and aspirations like any other member of humanity. Less elaborate prison anthologies, such as "Prison Poetry Project," published by Artrageous, a non-profit organization that teaches the arts to help prevent violence and cultivate compassion among "high-risk" populations, are DIY (Do It Yourself), grassroots collections that are sold inexpensively in local bookstores. Collections vary in tone, from strictly academic to solely expressive, but most prison publications consist of an assortment of essays, poetry, and prose concerning the lives and literacies of incarcerated populations: Most collections seek to increase society's general awareness of prisoners' inner lives and experiences by publishing the very genuine and human records of prisoners' creative work behind bars.

In the tradition of teaching behind bars, I decided to put together collections of our own Life Writing groups' work. Throughout the ten-week duration of each course, every woman would respond, in writing, to approximately twenty essays or

chapters from books and would write five longer narratives that corresponded to the following units: childhood event, home, writing and spirituality, nature, and changing perspectives. Of the five longer pieces, the women were able to choose two to three of their favorites to submit to an anthologized collection of the class' work. This was the culmination of Life Writing as it captured the movement of the course as it progressed and reminded us of the struggles and recognitions that came to pass during our time together. The final two weeks of each installment of Life Writing were devoted to peer review sessions during which time the women would swap writing and respond to one another's essays. By the time I distributed the completed anthologies, most of the women had already read the entirety of their peers' work, yet they were still very animated about receiving the final product. I would always make at least two copies for each woman so she could send one home to her family and keep one for herself: Because so much of their work commemorates family members, it was important that the Life Writing women were able to send a finished product to the person whom they had honored. After the distribution of the completed anthologies, we would spend the duration of our last class together signing one another's copies, uncovering a few of my many typing errors, and reading sections of work aloud to one another. Even now, as I approach these fragile, revelatory student texts, I am reminded of the dialogues that transpired during our classroom discussions and the interchanges of ideas that are manifested in the students' writing.

Many of our units—particularly, the home and childhood memory units—stimulated a host of affectionate and endearing depictions of the women's family

members-- predominantly, women's relationships with their mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and childhood girlfriends. In an article, "Do You Hear What I Hear? Voices from Prison Composition Classes," from *Prison Literacies, Narratives and Community Connections*, Phyllis G. Hastings reflects on her own experience teaching a composition course to inmates residing in Saginaw Correctional Facility. She writes,

We define who we are through our associations with others: our friends and our enemies, our families and our colleagues. Even relationships from the past—a relative who has died, or a romantic attachment that ended or never started—can continue its hold over us...For persons in prisons, memories of relationships play a strong role in maintaining one's sense of identity and belonging, since actual relationships have usually been strained or broken. (107)

In *Life Writing*, every woman, with the exception of one, had children—a majority of whom had been procured by the state; many women discussed how the embarrassment and anger revolving around incarceration had severed ties with their parents, and several others discussed how, upon being released from prison, they were no longer able to associate with their former friends for fear of getting involved in criminal activity again. By encouraging the women to reflect on their memories of childhood events, home, and people whom they had been disconnected from, they were able to revisit places within themselves, which were otherwise neglected within the accountability and corrections models of the prison system.

When I began teaching this unit, I had expected the women to write out the painful memories of their pasts as a way of moving beyond their experiences of incarceration and initiating some kind of catharsis. During this phase of my planning, however, I was still adhering to oversimplified conceptions of the therapeutic potential of life writing, which commonly discuss autobiographical enterprise in terms of its ability to transcend material reality; however, once I received the first few finished essays from my students, I was taken aback by their animated chronicles, which render the details of lively and idyllic childhood memories, warm and inviting mothers' kitchens, and generally carefree, youthful pastimes.

In the course of our unit on home, collective themes emerged among the Life Writing women's narratives: Each woman communicated an acute longing for the ephemeral impressions from their physical homes—the scent of a favorite dish, the hue of a springtime blossom, or the vigor of a grandmother's embrace—which had left permanent imprints on their minds. In the prison setting, inmates are deprived of the most seemingly insignificant details of life—such as arranging cut flowers in a vase, or snoozing with a napping cat-- which seems to beget a more adept ability to mentally and emotionally recall exceptionally scrupulous images, scents, and tactile sensations. Rather than plot-driven pieces, by and large, the women's home narratives would create a tapestry of intricately laced, detail-oriented landscapes. Daria's home narrative, "Norckenzie Road," illustrates how elaborately the Life Writing women reconstructed their very visceral memories of home. Prior to entering into the physical house, even, Daria describes the walkway to the door, at which point the guest is,

enveloped in an air heavy with floral perfume...the bright hues and multitudes of color are almost dizzying. The landscape is overflowing with flowers: rhododendrons, daffodils, tulips, dogwood, honeysuckle, azaleas, and an obvious favorite--shown by its mass quantity—hyacinths in every color imaginable.

Once within the dwelling, Daria gives a picture of who lives herein without explicitly naming or defining ages of the residents,

The room is a reflection of its inhabitants: a Lego monster on the coffee table, ready to do battle at a moment's notice, and there's a worn, well-loved Winnie-the-Pooh pillow. It has not been abandoned, but carefully placed for safekeeping and within easy reach when the need to cuddle arises. Next to it is a big, fluffy blue blanket in a careless mound—left just the way it was thrown off on the coziest spot on the couch—not a child's comfort object, but a memento from the courtship that brought this home into being.

Daria's inviting and vibrant illustration of her home resonates with several other home narratives, which highlight the minute sensory details of intimate and familial spaces.

In "Soul Land," for instance, Angie centers her emotive rendering of home on the enticing scents wafting from her house's hub, the kitchen. She writes,

You walk in, kick off your shoes in the kitchen and are overwhelmed by the scents of garlic, onion, dill and vinegar. The vinegar is so pungent that it almost makes the eyes, nose, and back of your throat

water. Mom is making pickles again. Other times, early in the morning on the weekends, I hear dad and mom in the kitchen. I can smell breakfast dad is cooking; it's always delicious...You can smell his famous waffles and bacon with homemade syrup. As I lay in bed, I felt so secure and lazy with the sun shining on my bed, on my face, warming me—my skin.

The evocation of these intimate and cherished memories unearths the equally vital and valued relationships with family members whom are intricately tied to the sensations depicted in the women's narratives: The potency of a family's bond is illustrated by the way a mother affectionately recalls the playthings of her children; the devotion of a loving father is revealed by a daughter's blissful rendering of kitchen spices and scents.

“Home” meant different things to different women: some women, like Daria and Angie, conceived of home as a collection of sensations that triggered memories of loved ones; others, such as Loren, elucidated the cultural traditions that embodied the imprint of their homes. Loren is a Native American whose cultural practices and beliefs played an integral role in how she interpreted texts and rendered autobiographical accounts in our class. In “Autumn Harvest Times,” Loren associates feelings of home with her spiritual practices during the peak of autumn's bronzed brilliance. She writes,

I remember wanting to be like a window watching the willow tree on a mountain—pondering the magnificent grandeur of nature's colorful

beauty...Humility and courage greet my soul as I pray to the North, East, South, and West with a meditating clamshell. The smoke in the fire of the clamshell with sage, sweet grass, and lavender fill my personal meditation of the autumn morning with hope to carry on...I can see [the] natural world with eyes toward spiritual cleansing—sober new paths to beginnings.

Loren's narrative, like many of the women's home narratives, conceives of "home" as a mixture of psychic and physical sensations: Boundaries between the women's emotional and physical realities become blurred as they retrace the familial and spiritual meanings within the memories of every object, scent, aroma, and sensation from their lives prior to incarceration.

While some home narratives focused on the details of transient sensations, many others were centered on a family figure most closely associated with the writer's memories of home. Oftentimes narratives from our home unit would feature the matriarch of the household running family events and doting upon the child-narrator. For example, in a detailed sketch of her grandparents' home, one writer, Nicki, lingers on her grandmother's convivial and energetic presence as she "would rush [the children] into her heart-built home" where her grandmother was "often talking, filling everyone's plates full of food, or seating everyone at the table." In a similar home narrative, another writer, Tonya, revisits her childhood perceptions of home, where "strong aromas of some great mixed blend of coffee filled the air, mixed with old

cigarette smoke.” Tonya’s perception of home is grounded in her memories of her mother. She writes,

[My mother] had this secret inner beauty that she rarely allowed anyone to see and an absolutely angelic voice. To think of the way she used to sing and laugh brings tears to my eyes and sorrow to my heart. How incredible she was then. Wrongs of her past created an inner strength and an unbelievable determination. She had to be the absolute, most stubborn, woman I have ever met. I believe a lot of my strength is because of her.

Tonya’s graceful and affectionate characterization of her mother eventually moves inward, where Tonya reflects on how her childhood relationship with her mother has transformed, and, consequently, how her perception of her mother has been affected. She writes, “My heart breaks to think of the way she was then and the way she has become now...Some days I feel as though I caused the spark inside of her to burn out.” As her narrative comes to a close, Tonya writes, “I am grateful to have the memories of how we once lived.” However inaccessible and dislocated from Tonya’s prison experience they may seem, this narrative honors aspects of both women’s identities, despite the rift in their present relationship. Tonya’s self-perception is intimately connected to her understanding of her mother; through the process of writing this narrative, she is able to rework her identity as her mother’s daughter, using the self-reflexivity of her writing to approach aspects of her experience in different times of her life.

In the prison setting, where women are persuaded to focus primarily on their criminal lives and liabilities, intimate memories of one's homeland and family connections can be obscured or utterly lost amidst the rigorous and coercive focus on reprogramming and correcting identities. Because these delicate and cherished memories are such an integral component of each woman's understanding of herself, it is crucial that they are recorded, contemplated, and valued as such: If we, as a society, truly want to rehabilitate this population, it is necessary for us to recognize that incarcerated individuals are more than their criminal selves and should, therefore, be encouraged to reflect upon their many colorful and conflicting identities as mothers, lovers, daughters, and spiritual beings.

The rigidity of prison life is undeniable: From the moment incarcerated women rise from bed, their days are broken down and dictated by meticulously planned work, religious, and treatment programming. They are rarely granted time outdoors, and little light reaches the inside corridors and rooms where inmates reside. When they are permitted to go outdoors, they must remain within a small space of grass that is enclosed on all four sides by facility units—tan and brown buildings surrounded on one side by barbed wire, which connects to large gates that operate by an electronic lock system. Orange construction cones mark restricted areas, guards perpetually patrol the small and enclosed courtyard, and the clanging of slamming metal gates rings across the open sky.

The rigidity of a prisoner's material reality is not easily negotiated; however, in Life Writing, the women were asked to reflect on a memorable place in nature where

they sought refuge and solace in their lives prior to incarceration. Because many of the women were from the Pacific Northwest, the nature narratives primarily identified the ocean as the place of unmatched tranquility and reprieve from their everyday anxieties. Unlike the prison setting, the ocean seems to be free from boundaries; it is unpredictable and eternal. Daria writes, “the wilds of the rapids express the rage I sometimes feel, but cannot act out...The ebb and flow of the tides on the beach tell the stories of my life.”

In “O Mighty Sun,” another Life Writing student, Kara, reflects on her time as a sun-worshipper who fell into a deep depression while she was living in Alaska in the midst of an unrelentingly dismal and sunless winter. In describing her zealous reverence for the sun, she writes,

When I was young, I thought the sun was God. I would try hard to look directly into it, but its brightness was far too powerful. As I grew into adulthood, I learned that Native Americans often worship the sun; this knowledge validated my childhood beliefs in the greatness of our brightest star.

Kara’s narrative chronicles her depressing winter stint in Alaska, and moves into her time in San Diego where “[her] time was spent divided between sun-scorching days on the beach, and hot days spent in stuffy [college] classrooms.” It was here, in San Diego, where her “love for the sun grew” and she “felt healthier than [she] had ever before.” Eventually, however, Kara’s life took an unexpected and unfortunate turn; she found herself behind bars, “locked up in county jail” where the “hardest part...was

not having any windows” and limited outside exposure. She “missed the sun like [she] missed her family” and upon her release—after seven months-- she “stood forever...let[ting] the heat warm [her] face and revive [her] soul.” For Kara, sun exposure is imperative to her overall well-being.

Other women discussed the lands of their birth as places where they sought refuge. In Angie’s “Connection,” the reader is transported to her homeland, consisting of farmlands of “rolling hills that look like a patchwork quilt from above” where “hazelnut, peach, cherry, apple, and even some walnut trees” flourish. For Angie, the farm was the place in nature where, when “sad, scared, or lonely,” she would “grab a cat...and walk away from the other animals, the house, any prying eyes or ears, and the garden to walk up into the hills and hay fields.” Here, with a purring cat in her lap and the tall grass above her head, Angie “felt safe, and yet small, insignificant in the world.” Amidst the farm, her “burdens start to seem not so unbearable; [she] finds no answers, but [she does] find a sense of belonging, oneness with [her] surroundings.” Toward the conclusion of her narrative, Angie writes, “It has been a long time since I have remembered or thought of this, but I can still feel the sunshine and recall all the emotions inside as I fondly remember the love of...the hay fields in the grass where...I was one with nature.”

The nature narratives offered the Life Writing women an opportunity to connect to their former places of mediation and solace. Although the writing of these narratives could not transcend the stagnant and inflexible experience of incarceration, the reworking of memories of the natural world opened up a mental space where they

could invoke a former time in their lives when their bodies were liberated from the confines of cell units, barbed wire fences, and sunless corridors. In these narratives, there are points of negotiation—moments in time when they are able to excavate memories of physical freedom from confinement and linger in these recollections of the natural world—which facilitate movements through different discourses of identity. Although sentenced to exist within the confined spaces of the correctional facility, each woman maintains her attachment to the farm, sun, sky, or sea; the nature compositions underscore how closely a person’s development is linked with her natural setting, and how—regardless of the duration of confinement from the outside--certain constructions of identity are configured in the natural world.

During each ten-week course of Life Writing, the students wrote narratives on their homes, favorite places in the natural world, memorable childhood events, and a myriad of responses linked with the readings for each unit; conversely, despite their present circumstances, none of the women chose to write about their criminal lives. In fact, by and large, the women involved in Life Writing did not choose to reflect upon their general experiences as inmates. Of the forty-one collected pieces, however, two address the experience of incarceration, and both of these are poems that weave a similar motif: the emotional, vivid inner lives of incarcerated women sharply contrast with the stark, coded uniforms that they must wear.

One of these two poems, “Old Blue Shirt,” was written by a woman, Daria, who took part in the first Life Writing course between September and November of 2003. Her poem expresses the struggles women endure upon their entrance into the

prison system, during which time “inmates experience an erasure of the self as their personal identities are obscured behind a veil of numbers and uniforms” (Williams 9).

It begins,

The old, blue shirt
had obviously seen a lot of stories
before it was finally retired to a pile
with other old, blue shirts.

If only it had a voice—
it would tell you the stories
of the women who wore it.
There were many—
too many—
both in numbers and as
a reflection of society.

The women at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility wear these “old blue shirts” described in the poem, and oftentimes upon my entrance into the classroom where I taught Life Writing, a woman would comment on how she admired my clothes and had a similar outfit back home. In the prison, I was a rarity in my colorful skirts and clunky heels; I never once made my walk through the courtyard without a woman complimenting me on my clothing or shoes. One particular morning, while I was walking through the courtyard that separates the treatment unit from the dining hall, a woman followed me for quite some time, and eventually stopped me to ask, “Is that Victoria’s Secret’s ‘Amber Romance’ perfume that you’re wearing?” I was shocked that she could distinguish the precise type of scent I had on that day; after I verified that that her guess was correct, she told me, “My daughter wears that same kind; I’d recognize it anywhere,” and then she quickly walked away. Having been deprived of communication with her daughter—as well as dispossessed of any simple markers of

individuality, such as perfume—the slightest encounter seemed to cause the woman to acutely recall how and where she had last experienced the scent. These sorts of episodes happened frequently during my teaching stints, and would always make me think twice about my daily, mundane choices, such as choosing whether or not to tuck in my shirt or wear socks. Incarcerated women’s featureless, identical uniforms externally mark the eradication of their identities prior to prison life. Darcy’s personification of the voiceless “old, blue shirt” signifies the deeper, more profound eradication that happens to women’s former lives once they enter into the disciplinary grid of the prison system; however, contrary to its drab appearance, the “old, blue shirt” has seen a lot in its life:

All of [its] stories—
heartbreaking.
Poor choices, poor luck—
occasionally the sheer desperation
of just being poor.

The “old, blue shirt,” much like the women who wear it, is voiceless and, consequently, unable to communicate what it has witnessed. However, even if it had a voice, “Maybe that old, blue shirt / would not choose to share-- / feeling it would be breaking some / unspoken confidentiality.” This “unspoken confidentiality” possibly refers to the fact that although women choose to speak about their identities in a myriad of conflicting ways, very few choose to discuss their identities as convicts. In fact, in response to the question, “Do you desire to tell your story?” the same woman, Daria, who wrote “The Old, Blue Shirt,” responded,

Do I desire to tell my story? Yes and no. I've never been in any trouble before, no prior arrests, citations, or even trips to the principal's office. I feel like an outsider here. I see things differently. I think my version of what prison is like would be interesting and possibly informative, but after I'm out of here I have a feeling that I will want to put it all behind me and try to forget it ever happened. That's easier said than done, I think.

The "old, blue shirt" in Daria's poem signifies incarceration and its dehumanizing monotony, but it also represents the stigma of incarceration: Even if the shirt had a voice, it might not "choose to share / feeling it would break some / unspoken confidentiality." This "unspoken confidentiality" ensures that the woman's experience of incarceration will remain behind bars, with the voiceless shirt, where no one can cast judgment upon her because of it. The poem ends,

The stories for the old, blue shirt
are not over, though.
It and the other old, blue shirts
will be shredded, reconfigured—
they will become the jeans—
part of the same uniform
that other women will wear.

These last lines indicate the perpetual continuation of women's imprisonment, heartbreaking histories, and broken down and reconfigured identities. The stories of one woman will eventually become pieces of the story of another woman, and all of them will bear the stigma of incarceration.

Conclusion

Negotiating the Resistant and the Transcendent: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

The perpetuity of the material reality of incarceration—signified by the recycling of the old, blue, voiceless shirt-- underscores the basic complications and obstructions in teaching narrative writing behind bars. The women who wear these old, blue shirts are trapped within the coded and anesthetizing prison complex where bodies are ordered, and identities are uniformed; in the prison setting, a “treated” individual typically translates into a compliant subject, and the capacity for “rehabilitation” signifies one’s ability to be refitted into the symbolic order. Incarcerated women will oftentimes cultivate an acute awareness of the correctional facility’s internal hierarchies, and in order to obtain freedom, many will simply comply to the system’s prescribed methods of self-reflection and identity construction.

Under these circumstances, narrative writing neither transcends nor resists the powers that be. Consequently, as an instructor and idealistic supporter of critical pedagogy, my weekly journey that traveled along barbed wire fences, through sensitive metal detectors, and along paths lined by orange construction cones was an emotionally and intellectually draining one, which oftentimes left me questioning my role as a teacher: If I couldn’t promote critical vigilance or political unrest among members of the most neglected and misrepresented population in the world, how could I move more privileged groups of students toward accepting basic democratic ideals, such as compassion and justice for all members of society, regardless of class, race, or gender? Along my journey, however, I was aware of the fact that if I didn’t hope for

such things, I wouldn't be teaching behind bars; in fact, I wouldn't be teaching at all. Moreover, as my time participating in Life Writing unfolded, and as I began bonding with each of the women involved, I started to understand how identities—although not transformed—were certainly complicated through our dynamic dialogues and intimate narrations; while the women were incarcerated subjects writing their identities within the coercive and coded prison institution, their identities weren't wholly written *by* the institution. The community of Life Writing women created a space where a myriad of languages, histories, and ways of knowing opened up room for difference and allowed for stirring and spirited negotiations of selves: Personal histories were given a voice, and excavated memories generated powerful recognitions among us.

Just as the identities of incarcerated women's writing selves were engaged, complicated, and negotiated, my identity as a critical pedagogue was reworked throughout my weeks in Life Writing and continues to undergo complex negotiations as I am presently writing and reflecting on my experiences as a prison educator. At the onset of the project, I was drawn to the components of critical education that view classrooms as political spaces where the languages and consciousnesses of individual subjects can be opened up through classroom practices. In the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, dialogue plays an imperative role in working against one-directional information exchanges, or "banking" methods, in educational settings. Dialogue, in this sense, worked in a similar way in our Life Writing course: Rather than standing at the front of the room lecturing to the women of Coffee Creek, I sat among them as we each reflected on the reading and writing of the course in ways that valued personal

histories, languages, and ways of knowing. In this way, dialogue worked against the reproduction of power relations by cultivating intersubjectivity among Life Writing participants. Dialogue, as encouraged and conceived of by the tenets of critical pedagogy, worked well in Life Writing; other tenets, on the other hand, had to be taken apart and reworked as I cultivated my understanding of myself as a critical and prison educator.

One such example is the simplified and rather vague manner with which critical pedagogy addresses students' voices inside the classroom. Oftentimes critical pedagogy seeks to restore a kind of lost or stolen voice to marginalized and oppressed groups of people, and while I was in the early stages of teaching behind bars, I aligned my own goals with this ideal; however, there are many shortcomings in an ideology that assumes all marginalized and oppressed people share a common or authentic voice that unites their struggles. Just as the definitions of agency, community, and identity must make room for difference, negotiation, and struggle, the conception of an authentic voice of oppressed peoples must be opened up to acknowledge the layering of identities, histories, and languages. In doing so, the myth of an authentic voice can be dispelled, and classroom practices stand the chance of working against institutional ordering and essentializing of identities.

The "lost" voice of the Life Writing women, I had originally imagined, consisted of the painful memories of broken homes, abusive relationships, drug addiction, and poverty: After all, these were, in fact, reoccurring experiences that many of the women had undergone in their lives prior to incarceration. It was,

therefore, expected that these themes be expressed in their narratives for the class: The critical education I was bringing to them would enable the women to restore their lost voices, which would ultimately speak to marginalized and victimized groups of people everywhere, or so I had expected. Because of this shortsightedness, I was baffled when I read the first batch of compositions by the women, which featured trips to the ocean, warm memories of grandparents' homes, and hopeful expressions of their lives after incarceration. Before this first reading of their writing, I had been incapable of imagining the women's identities as anything other than victimized and oppressed; however, although many of them had undergone these experiences, they also had histories as triumphant mothers, nature-lovers, and spiritual beings. This layering of identity is sometimes overlooked among the tenets of critical pedagogy. My initial experiences illuminate how easily such a seemingly liberating conception of education can simply reproduce what it seeks so passionately to eliminate: the silencing of personal voices and experiences. My initial assumption that either my teaching philosophy or I would restore an essential voice of and to the Life Writing students fundamentally reproduced the prison programming's insistence that there is only one way to conceive of identity-- only one set of experiences is meaningful to the outside world—and that it is obtained by the reprogramming and correctional measures instituted by the people in charge. Essentially, when putting to practice the theories of critical pedagogy, one must be careful not to deny or devalue the identities that are brought into the classroom.

Henry Giroux, one of the more influential critical theorists in my own conception of the prison classroom practices and goals, writes that,

Critical educators...develop pedagogical conditions in which students can read and write against existing cultural codes while simultaneously having the opportunity to create new spaces for producing new forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and identity. (*Border Crossings*, 31)

This definition of a critical education resonates with the goals of the Life Writing class in several ways, including its insistence that students create new discourses of meaning within classroom dialogues, and, consequently, new identities and ways of knowing are made possible. At the same time, however, the language of Giroux's definition unearths a common problem in much of the writing within the field of critical education: the identity of the educator is left unaddressed. In my own burgeoning understanding of critical education, I, too, left myself out of the equation. I imagined the struggles and negotiations of my students' languages and identities, but I did not acknowledge my own negotiations and tensions as an instructor and member of the discourses of our Life Writing class. My own ability to be self-critical needed to be developed through a series of challenges to my own personal values, politics, histories, and general particularities. Part of the risk for critical educators, I slowly came to realize, is that they must be very aware of their own motives and political agendas when entering into a classroom. These aspects of identity have a great and sometimes awful bearing on the meanings created within the classroom discussions and activities. Had I not recognized that my own predetermined expectations of the

Life Writing women's ways of speaking and writing about themselves were rooted in my own need to affirm my abilities as a critical pedagogue, the Life Writing space would have risked being as rigid and compartmentalized as the other prison programs. This kind of self-scrutiny is key in critical education as it encourages the self-reflexivity and acknowledgement of difference that are essential to creating a space where trust and awareness are cultivated.

In an attempt to break away from the typical teacher evaluations of students' work in a writing course, I incorporated exercises that would encourage the women of Life Writing to reflect and evaluate their own work and progress in our Life Writing course. On the backs of each of their compositions, the women were asked three questions: What are the strengths of this writing? What are some weaknesses? If I had another week, what would I change? Each of these questions and considerations lends itself to the idea that writing is a continual process, and that students are capable of looking critically at their own work in the same way an instructor would. Similarly, at the end of each ten-week installment of Life Writing, I asked the women to reflect on the nature of writing in both their lives and in the Life Writing class. In response, Malorie writes,

I was exposed to different kinds of literature. Some I liked (bell hooks), some I didn't like at all (Allen Ginsberg). The nice thing about this class was being able to discuss what resonated with us or even what we disliked. Hearing other people's impressions opened me up to a deeper understanding of the writers. I really enjoyed

the challenge of writing creatively, and editing my peers' work. This was a life changing experience.

In this reflection, Malorie focuses on the class's openness to difference, which allowed her to work both with and against the ideas presented in the readings by voicing her personal interpretations and by listening to the ways her peers experienced the texts in new and different ways. In doing so, Malorie's own initial interpretations were opened up and complicated, and new meanings were developed. Difference, in this illustration, generated negotiations and new recognitions. Other reflections on the class focused on the ways that Life Writing worked against some of the principles of the accountability model. For instance, Vera writes,

This class is awesome. I can express my feelings—mainly suppressed feelings—and I have been given a door that opens up the memories I've held within for decades—suppressed memories, thoughts, feelings, ideas, and perceptions. In treatment, we look mainly at the criminality and accountability aspects, in Life Writing, we are free to dig deep and generate from within.

These “suppressed memories, thoughts, feelings, ideas, and perceptions” were oftentimes rooted in Vera's idyllic childhood on the farm. Contrary to my own expectations of what the women were suppressing, the memories that the Life Writing women unearthed were generally recollections of a loved maternal figure or of a bucolic place of birth. While the accountability model, as expressed by Vera, generally encourages women to reflect on their criminal decisions and thinking

patterns, Life Writing created a space where the suppressed memories of home, nature, and loved ones could be communicated and honored. Similarly, in a reflection on the process of writing narratives, Angie writes,

I came to realize that my memories are more clear than I had thought. I've also come to see that my being raised on a farm is an integral part of me and in my soul. I've seen my senses are very much alive and vivid. I have more memories than I thought—good, healthy ones that I carry with me in all I say and do.

Angie's response elucidates some vital components and complications of our Life Writing class that do not necessarily receive recognition in the field of critical education: Transformation via education is problematized and somewhat thwarted by the materiality of institutional settings, hence challenging the models of resistance that critical pedagogy upholds. In an institutional setting, such as the prison, the political is expressed not merely by resistance of the powers that be, but also by a burgeoning understanding of one's personal history in relation to competing discourses.

The importance of personal histories in educating and creating meaning was an aspect of critical education that I failed to acknowledge in the early stages of Life Writing's development. As I look back on the early stirrings of this research, I am reminded of an email of advice from a seasoned prison educator. In it, she warns,

I can tell you that when you hear the stories of the women with whom you will work...a distanced analysis will become sort of meaningless. I would also warn you that it is difficult to raise the consciousness

of the women. There is a real power imbalance inside the prison... To point out the inequities only serves to frustrate and upset inmates... This is not to say you cannot empower them. Encouragement is going to be the best thing you can give them. Honesty is also really important. You will find they are amazed at their ability to create meaningful ideas that others find beauty and power in.

Eventually I came to understand the relevance of this advice, and it allowed me to work against and move through the modes of prison education that uphold experiences of transcendence or resistance behind bars. Life Writing gradually became the space where women's varying histories and languages allowed for differences and recognitions among us, and the needs of the incarcerated women replaced my needs as a critical pedagogue as the central component of the course. The materiality of the prison setting—the lived reality of the women of Coffee Creek—was never displaced or transformed in the process of our Life Writing class, but identities outside of the prison setting were welcomed into our discussions and narratives as a way of valuing the multifaceted and layered histories of each woman. My own identity as a woman, instructor, Life Writing participant, displaced Midwesterner, critical pedagogue, and prison researcher continues to undergo complications, contradictions, and surprising recognitions as I look back on my experiences and the “pleasing fictions” of Life Writing.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Accountability Model Worksheet

15

NO SHOW TO APPOINTMENTS

Being on time to all of your appointments is an essential part of time management, scheduling and structure.

NAME	DATE	COLOR
------	------	-------

A. FIRST VIOLATION/1 HOUR AT SANCTION TABLE

You will sit quietly at the sanction table for one hour. You will write a 200-word essay, describing your criminal thinking errors. Use specific examples and thinking errors in your essay.

TIME	CREW CHIEF	DATE
------	------------	------

B. SECOND VIOLATION/3 HOURS AT THE SANCTION TABLE

You will sit quietly at the sanction table for three hours. After your sanction, you will meet with your Primary Therapist for a 1:1 to discuss the importance of time management. You will be given an assignment by your Primary Therapist at that time.

TIME	CREW CHIEF	DATE
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C. THIRD VIOLATION/THIS IS YOUR THIRD VIOLATION FOR NOT SHOWING FOR YOU APPOINTMENTS. YOU WILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE BY A GROUP OF YOUR PEERS. YOUR SANCTION WILL BE BASED ON THEIR ASSESSMENT OF YOUR VIOLATIONS. DURING THE ACCOUNTABILITY GROUP, YOUR PEERS WILL BE LOOKING FOR YOUR BASIC ATTITUDE WHILE IN TREATMENT, HOW YOU ARE WORKING IN TREATMENT, AND YOUR ATTITUDE DURING THIS MEETING.

MEETING TIME	DATE
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SANCTIONS:

Appendix B

Classification/Scoring Form

CLS221BR Corrections Information Systems 5/08/02
POPOFFC Classification Summary/Scoring Form 13:00:45

Offender: Name Sid # Loca: CCCF Page 1
Cell: F2-45A Scored: MINIMUM Override: Final: MINIMUM
Cycle begin date: 1/22/2002 Action date: 1/22/2002 Type: RECL
DOB: 1/03/1979 Admitted: 7/22/1999 Projected release date: 01/30/2003
Counselor: MCBRIDE, MARK

PUBLIC RISK CRITERIA

Risk	Type	Score	Severity
Severity of Offense	Class A felony	19	C
Extent of violence	Threat of injury or minor	15	B
Weapon used	None	12	A
History of violence	No prior person-to-person conv	12	A
Prior escapes	None in last 36 months	12	A
Time remaining	less than 25 months	1	A
Felony detainer	None or expires before RD	12	A
Public Risk Criteria		83	

INSTITUTION RISK CRITERIA

Risk	Type	Score	Severity
Institutional misconduct	1 or less the last 12 months	5	A
Severity of misconduct	no high/moderate, 12 months	1	A
Compliance w/primary program	Full compliance with IITP	7	A
Threat group affiliation	Not Active STG Affiliate	7	A
Substance abuse	None	7	A
Age	23 years old or less	16	C
Institution Risk Criteria		43	

BM4: N BM11: N BM40: N SB1145: Security issues.... SGL:

Superintendent _____

CD1120D (2/93)

Appendix C

Essays and Excerpts for Life Writing Class

Childhood Event:

Annie Dillard's "The Chase"
 Alice Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self"
 Maxine Hong Kingston's *Speaking in School* (excerpts)
 chapters from bell hooks's *Remembered Rapture*

Home:

Joan Didion's "On Going Home"
 Alice Walker's "The Place Where I Was Born"
 Barbara Smith's "Home"
 Scott Momaday's "The Way to Rainy Mountain" (excerpts)

Writing and Spirituality:

Scott Momaday's "Sacred and Ancestral Ground"
 chapters from bell hooks's *Remembered Rapture*
 Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream*

Nature:

"Loomings" the first chapter of *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville
 "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman (excerpts)
 "Nature" by Ralph Waldo Emerson (excerpts)

Changing Perspectives:

Smoky Epley's "Human Screw" (prison poetry)

Other readings:

Franklin E. Zimring's "Confessions of a Former Smoker" (for new vocabulary words, mainly)
 Ani DiFranco lyrics (listening to songs and responding to them in class)
 Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (making comparisons with Whitman's writing)