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Who We Are: Incarcerated Students and the New Prison Literature, 1995-2010

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Who We Are: Incarcerated Students and the New Prison Literature, 1995-2010

An Honors Project for the Program of Africana Studies

By Reilly Hannah Nadezhda Lorastein

Bowdoin College, 2013

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This project is dedicated to those who live in captivity.

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Chapter 1

The Story of Prison Studies and the Incarcerated Subject in America

Introduction

This project focuses on prison writings from the late 1990s to the 2000s. Compared to the texts of popular American prison intellectuals such as Malcolm X, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, and Angela Davis, these new forms of prison literature have received little to no attention. Today, the United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world- most of who are considered illiterate.¹ Despite this, a new kind of prison literature is emerging out of this expanding demographic. Over the past two decades prison literature, which virtually disappeared during the late 1970s and 1980s, has been making a steady comeback through emerging higher education programs within prisons. The development of these programs began alongside the institutionalization of Prison Studies.

Many of the scholars and activists who contribute to this field are involved with community outreach programs that address the direct and indirect effects of the criminal justice system. Their activism helped spur the prison reforms that led to the creation of higher education programs behind bars. These programs have facilitated the production of a new form of prison literature, written by prisoners who have received a formal education largely behind bars. This form of prison literature is primarily used by scholars

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 6.
Also see: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *Literacy Behind Bars: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey*, by Elizabeth Greenberg, Eric Dunleavy, and Mark Kutner. Statistical analysis report, National Assessments of Adult Literacy. Washington, DC, 2003. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007473_2.pdf (accessed December 30, 2012), 29.

and activists to prove the “humanity of prisoners.”² This may have been a necessary first step in a society whose popular culture demonizes “the criminal”, defines his role in American society as other, and demands that his incarceration is necessary for the safety of all other citizens. From the proliferation of fictional television shows like Law and Order, CSI, and OZ as well as “reality” television shows such as Juvies, Locked Up, Gangland, and Border Wars to news programs and politicians that sensationalize the connection between race, fear, and crime in exchange for increased ratings or poll numbers, themes of crime and punishment have long been central to American popular culture and political life.³ Unfortunately, these and similar sources have created a selective, incomplete picture of the incarcerated experience, including both the causes and consequences of incarceration. As a result, the American public remains largely misinformed about the real lives of incarcerated people today.

The aim of this project is to better understand who the incarcerated person is and what the incarcerated experience looks like in the 2000s. This study will provide a more nuanced view of the steadily growing silent population in the United States through close readings of the works created by incarcerated men enrolled in the College Program at San

² See: Patricia E. O’Connor, *Speaking of Crime: Narratives of Prisoners* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

Dae H. Chang and Warren B. Armstrong, ed., *The Prison: Voices From the Inside* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1972).

D. Quentin Miller, *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2005).

Joseph Bruchac and William Witherup, ed., *Words From the House of the Dead: An Anthology of Prison Writings From Soledad* (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1971).

³ Famous examples are the “Willie Horton” and “Revolving Door” ads of the 1988 election, which were both based on a fear of “the criminal” and “blackness.” The ads played on the pre-existing connections between blackness and crime in the American imagination in order to promote stricter penal policies, or a “tough on crime” agenda. For more information about the intersection of criminal justice and racial politics, see:

Ross L. Matsueda and Kevin Drakulich, “Perceptions of Criminal Injustice, Symbolic Racism, and Racial Politics,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 623 (May 2009):163-178.

Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Quentin State Prison. By engaging the first person perspective of the incarcerated subject, this project will reveal how incarcerated individuals describe themselves, how they maintain and create intimate relationships from behind bars, and their critiques of the criminal justice system.

This study examines three issues of *Openline*, published annually between 2008 and 2010.⁴ *Openline* is an inter-disciplinary journal featuring poetry, essays, fiction, and visual art produced by the incarcerated students enrolled in the College Program facilitated by The Prison University Project at San Quentin State Prison in California. Since the 1960s and 70s, there has been a fundamental shift in the way prison literature is produced in the United States. Today, most prison literature is published through a program of higher education behind bars, or in anthologies produced by scholars or activists with a focus on literacy and education. This differs from the prison literature of the 1960s and 70s, which was published independent of an institutionalized education program. Instead, the majority of prison literature from those decades was written as part of a political and social movement; most were penned by active participants in or leaders of black and brown freedom movements in the United States.⁵ Since the historical

⁴ The precursor to *Openline* was titled *Who We Are*. Only one issue of *Who We Are* was ever published, in 2007, before the name was changed to *Openline* in 2008. *Who We Are* is no longer available online as of April 30, 2013. For more information, contact the Prison University Project directly: The Prison University Project, "Contact Us," Prison University Project, <http://www.prisonuniversityproject.org/contact/contact-us> (accessed April 30, 2013).

⁵ For example: George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (New York: Random House, 1972). George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970).

Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968).

Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987).

Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974).

Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 1997), 1854-66.

moment has changed and there are now new conditions in which incarcerated people write, there is also a new set of conventions for contemporary prison literature. Instead of long essays based heavily in political and social theory as was the standard in the past, today's incarcerated writers and artists discuss family separation, creating and maintaining personal relationships, critiques of the criminal justice system, and how to define themselves beyond their incarcerated status through first person poetry, personal narrative, fiction, and visual art.

Creating Prison Studies

Prison Studies, in the academy, has come into existence through the work of many scholars in a variety of disciplines. Angela Davis has played a major role in the formation of this discourse as a scholar, an activist, and a former political prisoner. In 1970, she was incarcerated for several months in connection with the iconic Soledad Brother escape attempt at the Marin County Courthouse. While her 1971 trial eventually proved her innocence, her experience in prison as well as her previous social activism with the Communist Party and the Black Panther Party propelled her future research and publications.

In 1971, she compiled *If they Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, which consists of letters and essays written by each of the four Soledad Brothers and herself while incarcerated. It also includes pieces by Bobby Seale, James Baldwin, Bettina Aptheker, and other contemporary intellectuals/activists who were part of liberation movements ongoing at the time. Her next three publications, *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism* (1985), *Women, Race, & Class* (1981), and *Women, Culture, Politics* (1989) all include a discussion of the criminal justice system as

well as theory about negotiating the intersection of multiple identity categories, including race, class, gender, and sexuality.⁶

However her 1974 autobiography speaks explicitly about her personal experiences while incarcerated.⁷ She describes freezing temperatures, flooding, inedible food, and other inhumane conditions behind bars. Davis also recounts her conversations with other incarcerated women, who were interested in her politics, before she was removed from the general population and held in solitary confinement, the cruelty of which she describes in detail. In her book, Davis straddles the line between political prisoner and scholar. Throughout her career, she has walked the line between scholar and activist, while also drawing upon her first hand experience in prison for her analyses. As a result, in addition to a prolific scholar, Davis has become one of the most well-known political prisoners, writers, and activists. Her name is now one of the most commonly associated with prison literature. Her writings as a political prisoner helped to define the conventions of prison literature at that time. Davis' career as a scholar activist provides a model for current and future contributors to the emerging field of Prison Studies.

The term “prison literature” was coined in 1978, when H. Bruce Franklin published the first edition of *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*. It was expanded twice and re-released in 1982 and 1989. In the 1980s, little other scholarship was published relating to the prison system. During the same period, virtually no new texts were published from behind bars either. In large part, this had to do with

⁶ Angela Davis, *If They Come in the Morning* (New York: Third Press, 1971).
Angela Davis, *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge of Racism* (Latham, N.Y.: Kitchen
Angela Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).
Angela Davis, *Women, Culture, Politics* (New York: Random House, 1989).

⁷ Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974).

“Son of Sam” laws. Passed in numerous states, these laws made it illegal for an incarcerated person to profit from his/her writing. Then, right around the time that federal legislation denied all incarcerated people eligibility for Pell Grants (1994), more academics began to look at the United States’ prison system.⁸ Perhaps the threat to educational resources was a catalyst for a revived interest in prison writings among academics.

In the mid-90s two important works in Prison Studies were published. Historian David M. Oshinsky’s *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* and sociologist Beth Richie’s *Compelled to Crime* were both published in 1996.⁹ Richie and Oshinsky represent two different types of scholars who have contributed to Prison Studies. There are those, like Richie, whose primary research interests are related to the criminal justice system. There are others, like Oshinsky, whose careers do not focus on the criminal justice system. Oshinsky’s book documents the history of Parchman Prison Farm in Mississippi from its days as a slave plantation, a site of convict leasing, and eventually a state penitentiary. Oshinsky argues that cultural ideologies about racial inferiority and black pathology became incorporated into the criminal justice system immediately after emancipation. The prison population, which during slavery had been almost completely white, suddenly became almost completely black. This book remains Oshinsky’s sole contribution to Prison Studies.

⁸ For more information on this and other legislation, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

⁹ David M. Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

Beth Richie, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

On the other hand, there are scholars like Beth Richie, whose entire career focuses on issues relating to the criminal justice system. Richie's primary research interests relate to African American women and incarceration. In *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*, Richie reports the findings of the study she conducted at Riker's Island, a correctional facility in New York City. Based on her interviews, she melds elements of Strain Theory into an original theory of *gender entrapment*, which she argues can help us to better understand the reasons for the rapidly escalating number of African American women incarcerated in the United States. Richie defines *gender entrapment* as the situation where woman are, "set up; left with no good, safe way to avoid the problematic social circumstances that they find themselves in, unable to change their social position, and ultimately blamed for both."¹⁰ Richie links women's identity development to their households of origin, to the violence in their intimate relationships, and to their participation in illegal activities.¹¹ Richie's work builds on Davis' work by incorporating the voices of incarcerated women into the academic conversation.

The difference in Oshinsky's and Richie's approach oftentimes means that scholars in Prison Studies do not speak directly to one another and/or to others who research other aspects of the criminal justice issues. Instead, those who do not focus primarily on the criminal justice system speak more explicitly to those in their "dominant field." That is, more established departments like History or English. This makes tracing the history of Prison Studies difficult because it is a new inter-disciplinary research area.

¹⁰ Beth Richie, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered, Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

Rather than an ongoing, fluid conversation, Prison Studies has and continues to form as a series of punctuated interjections across many different disciplines. Yet there are patterns. Both Oshinsky and Richie are interested in the relationship between the criminal justice system and identity categories—specifically race and gender. This approach would dominate Prison Studies for the next decade. While this lens is necessary, it has not allowed for the consideration of the incarcerated person as its own subject position.

In 1997, Shortly after Oshinsky and Richie published their texts, Angela Davis participated in the formation of the group Critical Resistance. In 1998, this group of scholars and activists organized a conference that “examined and challenged” the prison industrial complex with the aim of “challenging the idea that imprisonment and policing are a solution for social, political, and economic problems.”¹² The end result was a three-day meeting in 1998 of over 3,500 “activists, academics, former and current prisoners, labor leaders, religious organizations, feminists, gay, lesbian and transgender activists, youth, families, and policy makers from literally every state and other countries” held in Berkeley, California.¹³ This event featured nearly 200 panels and workshops, cultural events, and a film festival.¹⁴

This conference was the largest gathering of scholars and activists who were all working to understand and dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex.¹⁵ It was an event that allowed many people interested in the criminal justice system to exchange

¹² Critical Resistance, “History,” Critical Resistance, <http://criticalresistance.org/about/history> (accessed December 15, 2012).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ A term coined by Angela Davis in her 1997 speech entitled *The Prison Industrial Complex*. This term refers to the growing number of private industries that are earning a profit as prisons have become increasingly privatized, a phenomenon, which has coincided with unprecedented increases in incarceration rates. (The speech was later reformatted into a CD: Angela Davis *The Prison Industrial Complex*, AK Press Audio, 2005, compact disc.)

information. Since then, there have been two additional regional conferences: one in the East (1999) and one in the South (2003). Today, this national organization has countless numbers of local chapters as well. In 2008, they celebrated their 10th anniversary with their first national conference in five years. The scene in Oakland drew over 3,000 people and boasted the most expansive conference plan in their history, including two years of engaging with people who are living inside and outside of prisons, jails, and detention centers all over the world.¹⁶ The aims, planning, and execution of this conference all revolved around placing importance on the words and experiences of incarcerated people in order to bring about social change. The efforts of Davis and others involved in Critical Resistance brought attention to central issues within Prison Studies and created spaces in which people with diverse backgrounds and interests have been able to exchange knowledge, ask new questions, organize, and strategize for the future. These conversations paved the way for the books and conferences that would later be sponsored by major academic associations and the movement of Prison Studies toward the center of academic discourse.

Prison Studies in the Academy

The path of Garrett Albert Duncan's career mimics Prison Studies' trajectory into the academy. As a Professor of Education, Duncan's research interests include the intersection of race, class, gender, criminal justice, and access to education. From 2000 to 2006, Duncan published a series of articles interrogating race, literacy, language, and education. These publications appear in academic journals of sociology, education,

¹⁶ Critical Resistance, "History"

culture, and language. Duncan was primarily speaking to others in those established academic fields, not Prison Studies, because those were the spaces available to publish his work. However in 2007, his chapter, “From Plantations to Penitentiaries: Race-Making and New Century Schools” appeared in *Without Fear...Claiming Safe Communities Without Sacrificing Ourselves: A Reader*, published by The Southern California Library for Social Studies Research.¹⁷ For the first time, his work appeared in a publication that facilitated the direct exchange between himself, Ruth Gilmore and others researching and organizing around issues with the criminal justice system. At the time, this was only available through a more obscure publication.

Most recently, Duncan’s article, “Fostering Cultures of Achievement in Urban Schools: Toward the Abolition of the School to Prison Pipeline” was part of *Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives* (2011).¹⁸ This book, a collection of essays written by scholars and activists including Erica Meiners¹⁹, was one of first of its kind to be published by a mainstream academic press.²⁰ The formulation of spaces and/or texts that facilitate direct dialogue between scholars whose research is related to the criminal justice system did not exist before the mid 2000s, and marks the beginning of Prison Studies’ journey into the academy.

As Prison Studies came into formation, looking at the relationship between race, class, gender, sexuality and incarceration remained one of the main methodological

¹⁷ Southern California Library, ed., *Without Fear...Claiming Safe Communities Without Sacrificing Ourselves* (Los Angeles: Southern California Library, 2008).

¹⁸ Stephen John Hartnett, ed., *Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Sometimes also credited as “Erica R. Meiners”

²⁰ Another example is D. Quentin Miller, *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2005).

approaches of research. There was also much focus on the links between education and incarceration. Today, there are an increasingly wide variety of interests and methodological approaches that have fallen into the category of what the American Studies Association and the Schomburg Institute for research in Black Culture labeled, “Critical Prison Studies” at their 2012 conference.

The “Critical Prison Studies” conference was a microcosm of contemporary Prison Studies. It brought together scholars from all over the world and in a wide variety of disciplines including English, Literature, Sociology, Anthropology, Women’s Studies, Latin@ Studies, Latin American Studies, History, and Political Science in order to discuss an increasingly large breadth of topics in Prison Studies. For instance, panels entitled *Prison Abolition and Teaching Inside Carceral Institutions*, *Prisoners in Empire: Puerto Rican Political Prisons and Resisting U.S. Colonialism*, *Prisons, Policing and U.S. Empire: Cold War Crucible*, *Dimensions of Empire and Resistance: The Nineteenth Century Prison*, and *Prison/Representation* show an increasingly broad interpretation of imprisonment as well as a transnational perspective. This has significantly expanded from the activist driven focus on the Prison Boom that has taken place in the United States since the end of the 1970s, systems of power, and liberation. In fact, some of the newer work does not have its roots in social activism.

Scholars whose research explores a more broad interpretation of imprisonment include Caleb Smith, chair of the *Prisons/Representation* panel at the “Critical Prison Studies” conference and Professor of English at Yale University. In his recent book, *The Prison and the American Imagination* (2009) Smith discusses the importance of imprisonment in American culture over time. Specifically, he looks at works by Herman

Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emily Dickinson in order to better understand how narratives of death and resurrection, which are played out in prison narratives “conceive a new ideal of humanity” which attract the American imagination.²¹ Scholars like Smith explore prisons from a completely theoretical prospective, and not as part of social activism around the prison system. This type of scholar, like Oshinsky, follows the work of H. Bruce Franklin. Franklin was the first scholar to popularize the term “prison literature” and to anthologize the greatest number of prison writings into a comprehensive annotated bibliography. But Franklin, a Professor of English and American Studies at Rutgers is a self-defined “American cultural historian.”²² He has published on subjects ranging from the cultural impact of the Vietnam War to science fiction, and mythmaking in American society. His titles include *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction*, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology*, *The Most Important Fish in the Sea: Menhaden and America*, which documents how the menhaden fish has played a pivotal role in America’s national and natural history, and *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination*, which traces the evolution of “the superweapon from the submarine to contemporary weapons of mass destruction.”²³ While he has made significant contributions to Prison Studies and to the study of prison literature, Franklin’s career has not been spent engaging with other activists and scholars who research the criminal justice system. Centered wholly within the academy, his work establishes a method of studying prisons from a theoretical perspective only, which makes his work significantly different from Davis’ and Richie’s.

²¹ Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 23.

²² “H. Bruce Franklin,” Personal Website, Rutgers University, <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~hbf/Bio.html> (accessed December 14, 2012).

²³ Ibid.

Scholars who follow in Franklin's footsteps, like Oshinsky and Smith, do not participate in social activism relating to the criminal justice system yet simultaneously contribute to scholarship relating to it. Speaking solely to academic audiences is at the same time antithetical and in line with the founding of Prison Studies. This tension has always existed in the field between scholars like Franklin and those like Davis, who take the scholar-activist role. While each have offered important insights into the criminal justice system, there is little to no space for incarcerated people's experiences, critiques, and proposed solutions about the criminal justice system in a conversation that remains confined to academics and theorists. Ironically, it seems that those who are best able to provide this information are those who live through it.

However, Prison Studies has also retained some of its activist roots. For instance, Ruth Gilmore, a founding member of Critical Resistance and Professor of Geography and Environmental Sciences, is the former president of the American Studies Association and currently serves on the Association's Board of Trustees.²⁴ The organization co-sponsored the 2012 "Critical Prison Studies Caucus" which, aside from its large range of topics, did feature two panels with an eye towards activism and expanding the discussion about Prison Studies outside the academy: *Prison Movements, Epistemology, and Social Change*, and *From Black Power to Prison Power: What does Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners Labor Union mean for Black Studies and Critical Prison Studies Today?*

Aside from her work with Critical Resistance, Ruth Gilmore published *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, which

²⁴ The American Studies Association, "Officers and Committees," American Studies Association, http://www.theasa.net/about/officers_and_committees (accessed December 17, 2012).

chronicles the explosive growth of the state prison system in California since 1982 as well as the “grassroots oppositions to the expanding use of prisons as catchall solutions to social problems” in 2007.²⁵ Her book began as a research project undertaken on behalf of a group of African-American mothers who wanted a better understanding of state laws and how to craft defenses that might produce better outcomes in the courtroom.²⁶ Although Gilmore was never incarcerated, her work, like Davis’, retains a strong commitment to both social activism and scholarship related to the criminal justice system. This approach has created space for the inclusion of more incarcerated and formerly incarcerated voices within Prison Studies.

There are also young scholars who show a commitment to social change through Prison Studies. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, chair of the panel entitled *Dimensions of Empire and Resistance: The Nineteenth Century Prison* at the “Critical Prison Studies” conference, released *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* in 2010. His book focuses on the historical discourses around crime that emerged in the urban North during the Progressive Era. By tracing the history of the social, cultural, political, and legal links between criminality and blackness Muhammad shows how crime statistics socially reproduce black pathology.²⁷ He is currently working on a second book, *Disappearing Acts: The End of White Criminality in the Age of Jim Crow*, which traces the history of the dramatic change in prison demographics after emancipation. Muhammad, a professor of African-American History,

²⁵ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

focuses on the intersection of race and the criminal justice system. As a scholar-activist²⁸ who engages his research outside of the academy through involvement with the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit criminal justice reform agency in New York City, and his position as Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Muhammad follows Davis, Richie, and Gilmore by bridging the gap between community and University.

Erica Meiners, a Professor of Educational Foundations, Women's Studies, and Latin@ and Latin American Studies also falls into this category. In 2007 she released *The Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*, in which she looks at the relationship between scholars and the prison-industrial complex.²⁹ Meiners also points to physical similarities such as uniforms and surveillance equipment, as well as organizational, disciplinary, linguistic and philosophical links between the school and the jail both in the space of the school itself and how the judicial system interacts with the school.³⁰ Meiners is another scholar-activist who works with Critical Resistance. She is also a part of Beyondmedia Education and Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM). Through all these outlets, she continues to explore the connection between jails and schools.³¹ It is this activist element that allows her, and others, to bring the voices of incarcerated people into the academy. This approach engages the first person account and uses the voices of those who are most directly effected by the

²⁸ Khalil Gibran Muhammad, "Khalil Gibran Muhammad," LinkedIn, <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/khalil-gibran-muhammad/6/a14/11b> (accessed April 30, 2013).

²⁹ Erica R. Meiners, *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ For more on how Meiners blends her scholarship and activism, see: Erica R. Meiners, "Resisting Civil Death: Organizing for Access to Education In Our Prison Nation," *DePaul Law School Justice Journal* 3 (2009): 79-95.

criminal justice system in order to make claims about how it functions and propose solutions to the problems with the system.

Including Incarcerated Voices in Prison Studies

With an estimated two million people directly involved with the criminal justice system and countless friends and loved ones tangentially affected, today the prison system touches so many people's lives that it has become a hot topic for both organizers and scholars. Incarcerated people write largely through the lens of their personal experiences. These writings function as both primary source documents and domestic literary narratives that, when analyzed, can be used to make claims about the failures of education, the importance of family and community, and provide critiques of the criminal justice system which are only possible through the first person perspective (such as the dynamics of a parole hearing). The words of incarcerated people have not been regarded useful to theoretical discussions of incarceration. The works in existence that discuss prison literature are either in the form of the anthology without much analysis of the primary texts themselves or look at literature written by "political prisoners" of the 1960s and 1970s.

For instance, Joy James is one of the most prolific scholars to publish on prison literature today. In her first book, *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, James states, "Examining intellectuals whose analyses of U.S. society, politics, culture, and social justice are rarely referenced in conventional political speech or academic discourse, this anthology takes shape along the contours of a body of outlawed 'public intellectuals' offering incisive critiques of our society and shared (in)humanity...these writings [are contextualized] in opposition to state policies that support racism, war, imperialism, corporate capitalism,

and globalization.”³² To that end, *Imprisoned Intellectuals* deals with the writings of incarcerated members of social and political movements, primarily of the 1960s and 70s. Her second book, *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (2005) is an anthology of writings including authors such as Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Mumia Abu-Jamal.³³ This text aims to put prison voices at the center of Prison Studies in the academy. However, by focusing on the critiques of political prisoners/intellectuals of the 1960s and 70s or an exceptional contemporary incarcerated writer (Mumia Abu-Jamal) who follows their established conventions, James misses the critiques and insights into our contemporary moment offered by the average incarcerated person. This remains the norm for how prison literature has been engaged so far in the academy.³⁴ However in order to better understand what is going on in America during the “Era of Mass Incarceration,”³⁵ we must look to the majority of people who are most directly effected by the criminal justice system, the ordinary people behind bars. In order to gain this perspective, one must approach an analysis of contemporary prison literature as Davis, Richie, Gilmore, and Meiners approach Prison Studies, from a scholar-activist perspective.

³² Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America’s Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 14.

³³ Joy James, *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

³⁴ Lee Bernstein’s work, specifically *America is the Prison* and “The Age of Jackson: George Jackson and the Culture of American Prisons in the 1970s” focuses on political prisoners from the 1960s and 70s as well. Bernstein argues that “covert education” within the prison was directly responsible for promoting the idea that prisoners can participate in social change as “symbols, intellectuals, and leaders.” For more information, see:

Lee Bernstein, “The Age of Jackson: George Jackson and the Culture of American Prisons in the 1970s,” *The Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 3 (September 2007): 310.

Lee Bernstein, *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hills: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

³⁵ For more information on the “Era of Mass Incarceration”, see:

Heather Ann Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History,” *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (December 2010): 703-734.

A Scholar-Activist Approach to Prison Literature

In 2010, Maisha T. Winn³⁶ co-edited a special issue of *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* with Erica Meiners, entitled “Resisting the School to Prison Pipeline: the Practice to Build Abolition Democracies.”³⁷ Instead of a comprehensive anthology of research related to prisons and education, Winn and Meiners aimed was to provide, “snapshots of practices in motion” by scholar-activists who work with families and communities as part of a larger social justice movement against the Prison Industrial Complex.³⁸ Winn has consistently written about literacy, race, and incarceration. As a postdoctoral research fellow at Teachers College, Columbia University, Winn worked with student poets and their teachers at the Power Writers collective in the Bronx.³⁹ She is also the author of *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (2009), which links literacy, agency, and self-empowerment in the lives that created the Black Arts Movement.⁴⁰ Winn has recently turned her eye toward the function of prison literature in black communities.

Winn’s interventions around literacy, race, education, and prison writings have helped to formulate the central questions of this project. In her article, “We Are All

³⁶ Sometimes credited as Maisha T. Fisher.

³⁷ Erica R. Meiners and Maisha T. Winn, “Resisting the School-to-Prison Pipeline: the Practice to Build Abolition Democracies,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 13 (2010): 271-276.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁹ This work resulted in an ethnography entitled *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007) as well as: *To Be Heard*, directed by Edwin Martinez, Deborah Shaffer, Roland Legiardi-Laura, and Amy Sultan (2010; Warren, NJ: Passion River Studios, 2013), DVD. - a documentary about the Power Writers collective. Most recently, Winn has published *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011) which is based on her work with “Girl Time” a playwriting and performance program specifically for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls. For more information see: “Maisha T. Winn,” Emory University, <http://des.emory.edu/home/people/faculty/Winn.html> (accessed December 15, 2012).

⁴⁰ Maisha T. Fisher, *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Prisoners: Privileging Prison Voices in Black Print Culture” (2010) she looks at the relationship between who she calls the “black prisoner” and the “free black citizen” living on the outside.⁴¹ According to Winn, this relationship was facilitated by black publications such as the *Black Scholar*, and *Black News*, two publications that disseminated the writings of prison inmates. These texts helped to facilitate a dialogue between the black prisoner and the free black citizen about structural inequality in America. Winn argues that the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in particular, was largely responsible for reshaping the image of the black prisoner. Instead of being looked upon as people who were bringing down the race in some way, free black citizens were now seeing the ties between the life stories of black prisoners and their own lives. This changed how free black citizens defined black prisoners in their minds. The education free black citizens received, via Malcolm X’s autobiography, enabled them to change their perception on incarceration.

Winn then describes a shift from a once existing vibrant community dialogue around structural inequality as it relates to the criminal justice system, to a current small underground interest in incarceration. This phenomenon has two causes: the way that Prison Studies is advancing into the mainstream academy without privileging the voices of currently incarcerated people in the discussion, and the loss of alternative sources of education and literacy for disadvantaged youth of color previously available through social and community activist organizations, particularly in the 1960s and 70s.

⁴¹ Maisha T. Winn, “‘We Are All Prisoners’: Privileging Prison Voices in Black Print Culture,” *The Journal of African American History* 95 (2010): 392-416.

There were radical changes in social politics from the 1960s and 70s to the 1980s as well as legislative changes in prison education policy. During the 60s and the 70s, many young people, especially youth of color, grew up with access to sources of alternative education. Community groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Young Lords encouraged talking, reading, thinking, and writing about politics, economics, the law, society, and power. It was a time in which the United States was undergoing many changes and people were invested in the situation because the national reforms provided hope that real change was possible. These liberation movements kept prisons and prison literature at the center of the national conversation.

After assassination of leadership, these organizations collapsed at the end of the 1970s. Then, during the 1980s, many “Son of Sam” laws passed, which made it impossible for incarcerated people to publish or sell their stories for profit. Much funding was cut for prison education programs, libraries were de-funded, and certain books were banned from prison libraries and the larger United States. This took prison literature largely out of the mainstream dialogue and imagination. These events coincided with the beginning of the exponential growth in the prison population that many have connected to the collection of penal and political policies known as the War on Drugs.⁴² The prison was becoming one of the most influential institutions in the United States, many communities of color were struggling to survive, and at the same time incarcerated people’s voices were being stifled. This new and rapidly growing minority was being

⁴² For more information, see: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

pushed out of popular discourse, demonized, and physically isolated from the rest of society, making the sort of contact and exchange that Winn describes almost impossible.

As early as the mid to late 1990s, higher education programs began popping up in prisons. These programs did not subsidize libraries or encourage inmates to seek their own knowledge. Instead, they reconfigured the institution of the College so that it would fit within the walls of the prison. This is where the primary sources that will be analyzed in the following chapters fit into the larger academic and national history.

2012: The Prison as University

Launched in 1996, The Prison University Project is one of many prison education programs that have appeared across the nation in the past two decades.⁴³ Through this program, incarcerated people have the opportunity to take classes, attend guest lectures, and write academically and creatively- all with the intention of attaining an Associate of Arts degree. Currently the curriculum includes twenty courses in the humanities, social sciences, math and science (some with labs, which allow students to fulfill requirements needed to transfer into the UC or Cal State school systems)⁴⁴, as well as “intensive college preparatory courses in math and English.” The program also facilitates “special cultural events and activities” that involve members of the community “in the intellectual and extra-curricular life of the College Program.”

There are 300 incarcerated students currently enrolled in San Quentin’s College Program. It takes approximately three and a half years for each student to attain his degree, mostly due to the time constraints of the full-time jobs they hold at San Quentin.

⁴³ The Prison University Project, “About Us,” Prison University Project, <http://www.prisonuniversityproject.org/about-us> (accessed April 28, 2013).

⁴⁴ The College Program at San Quentin is affiliated with Patten University in Oakland, California.

However none of this money goes toward tuition. While there is currently no state or federal funding available for “prison higher education” in California, the entire project is funded through private donations. Most textbooks are donated directly from the manufacturers.⁴⁵

The mission of the Prison University Project is ambitious. The group strives to create a template for similar college programs behind bars and to “stimulate public awareness” and “meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California.” They also desire to “educate and challenge students intellectually,” encourage incarcerated students to live “thoughtful and productive lives inside and outside of prison”, to acquire the knowledge and the skills needed to “obtain meaningful employment and economic stability post-release,” and “to prepare them to become providers, leaders, and examples for their families and communities.” In this way, the College Program at San Quentin hopes to “challenge popular myths and stereotypes about people in prison”, to “raise fundamental questions about the practice of incarceration,” and to stimulate discussion around “alternative concepts of justice, both within and beyond the academy.”⁴⁶

The Prison University Project provides its students with the space, time, supplies, guidance, and (sometimes) literacy to enable them to write about their lives. These pieces are collected annually in *Openline*. There are three current issues of this interdisciplinary journal: 2008, 2009, and 2010. These are all available for free .pdf download via the

⁴⁵ The Prison University Project, “About Us.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Prison University Project's website.⁴⁷ In addition, if you choose to sign up for the newsletter on the website, you will be sent a paper letter every month, which sometimes includes the writing of an incarcerated person, as well as holiday cards each season featuring pictures of College Program graduates.⁴⁸ These materials help to form a community between the incarcerated students in the College Program and those who live on the outside. However, the impact of these materials is limited. Few people know they exist or understand their value.

Reading prison writing today can help to re-define our understanding of who is incarcerated in America and why. Learning to read these writings allows us to grasp the actual, lived experiences of those who are serving prison sentences. By reading the writings in this way, they reveal how personal experiences of inadequate education, absent parents or mentors, and poverty lead to incarceration. It also allows us to read critiques of significant problems that currently exist in the prison and parole system such as family separation due to incarceration and inadequate resources for a successful re-entry once on parole. All of this information allows us to see the particularities lying behind terms like "mass incarceration" or "prison boom." These personal insights, reflections, and analyses provide insight into the types of changes that are most needed to prevent incarceration and recidivism. This information is only accessible through first hand accounts.

Doing a close reading of the works will also reveal how the incarcerated person imagines himself through writing and art. He creates himself as an individual with many

⁴⁷ I received my copies for free after contacting the organization and telling them about my research interests, but as of April 2013 they have updated their website and free issues are now easily available.

⁴⁸ I recently received a holiday card with a picture of four College Program graduates on it, and a separate note about their release and current enrollment at San Francisco State University.

facets to his existence, rather than an “inmate”, “prisoner”, or “criminal” who exists completely because of his crime and is completely beholden to the system that physically binds him. Instead, the authors define themselves as incarcerated students, writers, and artists. By doing so, they are able to write about various aspects of their lives, which include but are not limited to their incarcerated experience. The incarcerated writers that are the primary focus of this study occupy a different position from political prisoners because they live in a different context. The terms “prison intellectuals” and “political prisoners” that once infiltrated the mainstream American discourse during the 1960s and 70s no longer apply to the majority of incarcerated people. Instead “incarcerated subjects” is the more apt phrase.

The incarcerated students who appear in *Openline* are writing with the goal of earning a college degree, creating and/or maintaining family and community relationships, mentoring youth, and critiquing the everyday practices of the criminal justice system, such as inadequate resources for parolee re-entry. To express this, they write poetry, fiction, and essays that blend personal narrative with theoretical models. This is a significant departure from their predecessors, who wrote essays filled with complex social and political theory, and about the connections between global politics, history, and activism. Today, the average incarcerated person provides insight from the perspective of the local and the everyday.

These writings focus on domestic stories. These domestic stories deal with issues of family, community, poverty, juvenile justice, and parole. While it may seem antithetical at first to draw connections between the prison and the domestic, it makes sense if these writings are being used as a means of communication and maintaining

relationships with other people. This is a common motive throughout *Openline*, most explicitly seen when incarcerated authors write about their children. It is also in the title of the journal itself. “Open line”, in a prison setting, “refers to a window of time during which general population inmates at San Quentin may meet with their counselor or go to the canteen without a pass or prior permission.”⁴⁹ In the words of Chuck Hopple, an incarcerated student whose writing appears in *Openline*, the name represents “access to information, or conversation, which not only allows the hearing but also the ability to be heard.”⁵⁰

The following chapters provide close readings of the writings and artwork found in *Openline*. By reading these works blind to the race, gender, class, or sexuality of the authors, these writings shed light on a new subject: the incarcerated person. Through these writings, we learn how an individual came to be incarcerated through a first person singular account and how he maintains and develops personal relationships while incarcerated. Following the work of scholars like Davis, Gilmore, and Winn who all work to privilege the voices of incarcerated people, these readings of prison writings attempt to examine the inner lives, personal struggles, and critiques of the criminal justice system offered by the incarcerated individual through his/her own words.

By bringing the voices of incarcerated people into the academic conversation, the subsequent sections of this project follow Joy James. However, rather than looking at texts from the 1960s and 70s which support a larger political argument, or contemporary texts that follow those conventions, this project will conduct a close reading analysis of

⁴⁹ “Letter to the Reader,” in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga. (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

existing anthologies (the *Openline* journals) in order to better understand the concerns of contemporary incarcerated people. These works provide insight into local community dynamics, family relations, and personal life that are useful to further the sorts of grassroots activism that Davis, Gilmore, Meiners, and Winn all discuss and partake in as part of their contribution to Prison Studies.

Furthermore, because the majority of individuals are considered illiterate upon their incarceration, this project will not look at the exceptional prisoners as both James and Winn have done. Instead, the focus here is on reading the writings of those attaining a GED and/or undergraduate education while behind bars. As a result, this project sheds light on the concerns and critiques of the average incarcerated person. This approach will help to define what the incarcerated experience is, from the point of view of the majority of people who are living it, instead of from a “spokesperson” or “intellectual” who speaks on their behalf. Unlike other scholars who have engaged with prison literature, I am reading these writings blind to the race, class, gender, and sexuality of the writers. This means that the common thread between each individual is his incarcerated status. Therefore reading these writings begins to define a new subject position necessary for analysis in an era when the criminal justice system has a greater impact on American society than ever before: the incarcerated subject.

Chapter 2

“We Stay a Family Through My Writing”: Incarcerated Fathers and Mentors

This chapter examines incarcerated writers who have used *Openline* as a platform to rebuild their own intimate relationships and community with incarcerated and un-incarcerated youth who are struggling with poverty, abuse, and strained familial relationships. Reading these writings blind to the lenses of race, class, and gender, through which the incarcerated are generally viewed, reveals the effect of the prison system on the authors as incarcerated subjects how this status effects their ability or inability to be part of families and communities. This approach provides a new understanding of how the criminal justice system affects the everyday lives of incarcerated people. These writings teach life lessons that can be applied to those living outside prison. These lessons are the result of the experience of incarceration. Rather than solely serving a therapeutic or practical purpose for the author, these works are also rehabilitative and preventative for readers who identify with the situations the authors describe in their narratives and poems: being born into poverty, violence, isolation due to a disjoined or absent family, absence of a role model or mentor, and lacking the resources, both emotional and material, to build a home.

The authors who contribute to the *Openline* journals, published through the Prison University Project, are either pursuing or have completed a GED, B.A., or B.S. degree. Because the authors have varying levels of education, the writings collected in *Openline* more accurately represent the average currently incarcerated person than do published works by well-known, often exceptional incarcerated people such

as Angela Davis (1974), Mumia Abu Jamal (1995), or Wilbert Rideau (2010).⁵¹

Rather, *Openline* features short pieces or “snapshots” of important events in the lives of the incarcerated authors. As opposed to book-length autobiographies, these snapshots highlight the most important turning points in the lives of the individual. These range from the author’s past relationship with his mother that he believes led to his incarceration, to his current relationship with his daughter. These snapshots provide first person insight into what led to the author’s incarceration, and how to prevent future incarceration

Openline is also published and widely disseminated on the internet. The Prison University Project’s website has direct links to all issues of *Openline* and all are available for free .pdf download under the “publications” tab.⁵² The website also provides email and telephone contact information, which allows anyone to request a physical copy of the materials or inquire further about the program.⁵³ While the degree of censorship of these documents is unclear, being published means that the incarcerated students have an audience beyond their fellow incarcerated peers. With *Openline* available free online as well as through mail order, the authors also have the ability to reach anyone on the outside.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974).
Mumia Abu Jamal, *Live From Death Row* (Reading, M.A.: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1995).
Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

⁵² The Prison University Project, “Publications,” Prison University Project, <http://www.prisonuniversityproject.org/publications> (accessed April 30, 2013).

⁵³ Prison University Project, “Contact Us,” Prison University Project, <http://www.prisonuniversityproject.org/contact/contact-us> (accessed April 30, 2013).

⁵⁴ It is unclear how *Openline* is distributed within the prison beyond the participants in the program—including general population as well as those who live in areas with higher security. The access that other incarcerated people at facilities beyond San Quentin have to *Openline* is subject to the rules of that facility

Despite being edited, the main aim of *Openline* is to present the past and present experiences of incarcerated individuals directly. Everything within the journal is written by an incarcerated person, rather than presented through the pen of an activist or academic with a preface, introduction, and extraneous notes, as are most prison writings that appear in anthologies. Each issue of *Openline* is edited by a small group of fellow incarcerated writers. Their editorial interventions are minimal, and rather than provide an explanation of the materials, they give brief background information on the program⁵⁵ and what the reader can expect to get out of reading the journal in the form of a one page letter from the editor. For instance, in 2009 editor Michael C. Gallardo wrote, “This issue takes you deeper into the minds and lives, past and present, of the students who share with you their experiences, hopes, fears, doubts, and aspirations.”⁵⁶

In line with Gallardo’s claim, the pieces in these journals are most often written in the first person and offer subjective, divergent accounts of the everyday lives of incarcerated individuals before and during their incarceration. This point of view is largely missing from the current academic conversation around incarceration in the United States. Looking to the subjective accounts and reading them blind to the race, class, gender, and sexuality of the authors provides insight into how the author’s incarcerated status affects his life. These perspectives will

and therefore also unclear. However, writings within the journal do suggest that authors believe other incarcerated people will read their writing.

⁵⁵ Specifically, Michael C. Gallardo opens his *Letter from Editor* by referring to the journal as a “collection of literary and art work from the students and graduates of Patten University at San Quentin State Prison in California.”

⁵⁶ Michael C. Gallardo, “Letter from the Editor,” in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 3.

provide new insight into the incarcerated experience that will help scholars and activists to develop strategies that will reduce incarceration and recidivism.⁵⁷

Incarcerated Mentors

Many of the pieces within *Openline* are written around common themes and follow a similar narrative arc. Typically, the author shares his own experiences and then provides reflections and advice to others who may be struggling in similar situations. Each piece describes a transformation in the author's life or perspective that he wishes to share. In sharing these moments, he hopes to build relationships with others. By sharing what he has learned from his incarceration with family members, friends, those outside the prison walls, and fellow incarcerated people he aims to provide them with advice about how to avoid incarceration and recidivism.

Published in the 2008 issue of *Openline*, "Stop the Violence in My Community!" describes how the author, David Garner, came to be incarcerated at San Quentin. Written in the form of the personal essay, he focuses on his experience of growing up in relationships destroyed by violence. He begins by talking about his immediate family, where the violence he witnessed as a child put strain on his relationship with his parents and broke up his home. "Growing up in a single parent home, my mother was on her own. As for my father, very abusive. I think that's why they broke up. How can you tell someone that you love them, then beat them until they're bleeding? My father used to tell me that."⁵⁸ The image that Garner provides

⁵⁷ That said these sources are not perfect. There are also qualifications for being allowed in the program. One must have a GED and be in the general population of the prison. In this way, the individuals who are writing are from a limited pool of inmates. However this is still a greater scope than has been explored.

⁵⁸ David Garner, "Stop the Violence in My Community," in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 10.

of a father beating his son violates the ideal of parents as protectors of their children. By juxtaposing this image of physical abuse with his father's claim to love him, Garner helps the reader to better understand how the hypocrisy of those two co-existing, contradictory ideas in his everyday life as a young child was confusing and painful.

Garner describes his relationship with his father as physically and psychologically abusive. He goes on to add that his mother treated him the same way, then comments, "I wonder if that's what the slave master said."⁵⁹ Garner connects his physically and psychologically abusive childhood relationship with his parents to the trauma that enslaved people went through at the hands of slave masters. Both sets of relationships subject the child and the enslaved person to violence beyond the subject's control. Children are born emotionally and lawfully bound to their parents. Likewise, enslaved people, treated much like children, were lawfully tied to their masters and had little agency in dictating the terms of their own lives, or in their direct interactions with slave masters.⁶⁰ Moreover, the life of an enslaved person did not often improve, unless he or she had the rare luck to successfully escape. He or she was born enslaved, lived a life enslaved, and died enslaved. Garner compares this life path, and his own life course as a young boy born into poverty, abuse, and violence who eventually become an incarcerated man. Just as within the system of slavery there was very little room to deviate from the life path of an enslaved person, Garner tells us that without personal relationships

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Here I say "little" agency in order to acknowledge the work of scholars such as Stephanie Camp on enslaved women's geographies and Shane & Graham White on expressive cultures of slaves, who look at the ways in which enslaved people found agency in the everyday.

or mentorship there was no way for him to deviate from the path beginning with poverty and abuse and ending with incarceration.

Garner's narrative illustrates how poverty and violence disconnect people from their family, community, and themselves-as did the system of slavery. By showing how poverty and violence in the absence of mentorship led to his incarceration, he draws a connection between the well-known conventions of slavery to the less well-known condition of the incarcerated person today. This connection, of course, is not new. Many academics and scholars have pointed to the similarities between slavery and/or Jim Crow to the current Era of Mass Incarceration and/or the War on Drugs.⁶¹ However, what sets Garner apart is the form of his writing. Garner does not make his comparison with laws and statistics. Instead, he does it from the point of view of the subject; he writes a personal narrative. He wonders if being born into poverty and violence means he was destined for incarceration-just as people of color were destined, by law, by the circumstances of their birth, to be enslaved or subject to Jim Crow laws in the United States. Instead of making a connection between mass incarceration and slavery

⁶¹ For examples of scholars who make this connection see:

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

D. Quentin Miller, *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2005).

Ross L. Matsueda and Kevin Drakulich, "Perceptions of Criminal Injustice, Symbolic Racism, and Racial Politics," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 623 (May 2009):163-178.

Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Angela Davis *The Prison Industrial Complex*, AK Press Audio, 2005, compact disc.

Beth Richie, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 14.

Joy James, *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

based on race, class, gender, incarceration statistics, discriminatory legal practices, or public perceptions about the links between blackness and crime, Garner draws on his personal experiences to make the analogy.⁶²

Growing up, Garner's friendships were as violent as his interactions with his parents. In his essay, he shares an anecdote in which after stealing an ounce of weed from a friend, his friends attempted to kill him. "I was hit with a fist from the blind side. Straight to my head...Behind the fist came a shot gun cocked back...I was praying that I got home alive."⁶³ Garner's narrative provides an implicit critique of society. From his point of view, the source of the violence between friends and neighbors is money and the quest for things only money can buy. Garner stole the weed in order to get a pair of sneakers and a pager. He sacrificed his relationship with his friend to have enough money to purchase items that would buy him status with other people. "I had took that ounce so that I could buy myself some Nikes and a pager. I couldn't get it at home so I committed a crime."⁶⁴ The "it" that Garner couldn't get at home is two fold-the material items themselves, and also the connections with people they promised. After all, he wanted a pager, a device literally invented to help people communicate and keep in touch. Ironically, he found neither.

Now incarcerated, Garner reflects back on these episodes in his past "free" life. While living on the outside, he believed having things was more important than his relationships with people. Perhaps this was because no one had ever shown him

⁶² Alexander, "The New Jim Crow," 25.

Muhammad, "The Condemnation of Blackness," 15.

⁶³ Garner, "Stop the Violence in My Community!," 10-11.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

why relationships could be important to maintain, or how to maintain them. As a result of this void, he could not see the paradox he was operating within: while material items bought him the possibility of more connections with people, the pursuit of these possessions negatively impacted his existing relationships. It is only upon his separation from his family, friends, and community as a result of his incarceration that he is able to understand how a mentor or a better relationship with his mother could have changed his life.

After almost being killed by his friends, Garner needs to talk with his mother about what happened. He waits for her to come home, but her interaction with her frightened son is brief and hurried. "Mom I'm glad to see you.' 'Boy help me with the groceries! I don't have time right now I'm on a lunch break.' She moving fast just taking the groceries out the trunk and putting them on the ground. 'Baby make sure that you put all these up for me I'll be back. I don't have time!' 'Mom I need to talk with you before you go?' 'Baby I just don't have the time right now.' 'Ok,' I had said as she was getting into the car to leave."⁶⁵ This is the only part of Garner's essay that utilizes dialogue. Garner re-creates the scene between him and his mother on paper because it was a major turning point in his life. In that moment, his anger and hurt that no one seems to care about his life-in this scene, literally, since he was just almost killed-boils over and changes him. This scene re-creates Garner's breaking point in dealing with poverty and violence by himself. Without his mom, or a "meeting" or "mentor to talk with" he turns "to the streets."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

At the time, Garner was only able to see his own hurt in the situation, but looking back now he can see his mother more clearly. Though his tone is bitter it is also wistful-he wishes she had done something different in that moment. Earlier in the essay, he says that he wishes she had talked to him about getting into high school sports and going to college as well. If she had, "I think that I would have stayed out of trouble. I would have never cut school."⁶⁷ After being incarcerated, participating in the College Program behind bars, and reflecting on his relationships, Garner believes that if his mother had spent more time talking to her son about his feelings as well as his future plans, he may not be incarcerated. Yet at the same time, he does not blame his mother for his incarceration. He acknowledges that there are many dimensions to the story.

Garner presents his mother as neither inconsiderate nor irresponsible. On the contrary, he speaks of her with love and sympathy. In the description he provides of her, she is using her lunch break from work in order to buy food and bring home groceries for her family. Despite working hard, as a single parent, it was still difficult for his mother to ensure that her family had food on the table. Ironically, at the same time she is trying to give her son what she believes he needs, she is unable to give him what he really needs: someone to talk to, someone who will listen to him. From Garner's perspective, poverty is not just about a lack of money or resources, it is also about a breakdown of communication between mother and son. There is no free time for either to reflect on this. It is only once Garner is incarcerated that he understands these dynamics, develops the skills to

⁶⁷ Ibid.

communicate, and through the College Program uses his writing to be a mentor to youth growing up in similar situations.

As a direct consequence of the absence of “someone to talk to” Garner went into a downward spiral that included theft, dealing drugs, and addiction.⁶⁸ Now Garner realizes that the resources he wished for as a teenager do exist. “I didn’t know anything about a sponsor or having an all men’s meeting to go to...This is why today I think it’s important to have a young men’s group to come to.”⁶⁹ If Garner had access to these relationships in his life, he believes his incarceration could have been prevented. With this knowledge, he wants to be a mentor to someone else and help to prevent future incarceration. He believes that it is important to have “young men like myself in a room helping each other. So that they don’t have to come to the pen with a long time and never have a chance to see a stop sign again or their family.”⁷⁰ Here, “pen” can be read with two meanings. Garner wants to prevent future youth from ending up in the penitentiary, but he also wants to help them figure things out about their lives while they can still make changes, before penning their thoughts about the past becomes their only remaining option. Through his writing, Garner begins to create the community he never had access to but always wanted. He uses his writing in order to make real changes that he now understands are important and valuable.

Now in prison-a space known for its violence, isolation, loneliness, and separation from society- Garner is writing to help incarcerated young men and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

young men on the outside feel less alone and to teach them lessons which could prevent their incarceration. Through his writing, Garner provides the mentorship he lacked throughout his life to others who need it. Because of *Openline's* publication and its high potential to reach people on the internet, Garner is able to mentor youth from behind bars. His writing bridges the gap between the incarcerated populations and people on the outside, which exists because of physical separation, isolation, and social stigma, much like Winn argues that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* bridged the gap between the "black prisoner" and the "free black citizen."⁷¹ Garner's piece aims to be a catalyst for the creation of the community he lacked and now, because of his incarceration, sees the opportunity and necessity to form.

Similarly, Gary Scott is also writing from prison in order to help young people. Scott's letter "Dear Self," which appeared in the 2009 issue of *Openline*, provides readers with the insight he wishes he had about the choices he was making before he was incarcerated. Scott begins by delving into the personal subconscious of his target audience. He writes, "You're looking in places of false love being that you never learned what true love is in a broken home. Since you're fatherless, you walk in the footsteps of the fatherless. Footsteps of some men with secret motives and selfish gain and some young men searching for love because love wasn't found at home."⁷² Based on his personal experience, Scott tells the audience that a young person's desire to find the love of an absent parent from another source will make

⁷¹ Maisha T. Winn, "'We Are All Prisoners': Privileging Prison Voices in Black Print Culture," *The Journal of African American History* 95 (2010): 392-416.

⁷² Gary Scott, "Dear Self," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 45.

them vulnerable to being exploited. They will be driven to do things they might not normally do because, as Garner says, they are unable to find “it” at home. Scott defines “it” more clearly: love is missing. As a result of the absence of a father’s love, Scott warns that a young person is more likely to be misled by older people who do not have his or her best interests at heart, and who themselves were at one time lost and confused without a father. Scott believes the cause of this destructive cycle is a home without sufficient love, but what keeps it going is greed.

Scott believes that greed is the reason why so many young people end up incarcerated. He says, “Don’t let your dreams and aspirations come to an end because of greed. Slow Down! The fast lane is too fast for you. Not to mention that your affiliations have you living close to the edge of existence. What benefit is it to represent a group of people that doesn’t care if you die or spend the rest of your life in prison?”⁷³ Like Garner, Scott believes that greed, spawned over the pursuit of possessions and the things money can buy, leads to the breakdown of relationships because things are valued more than people. Instead of being mentors to other fatherless youth, those who have grown up without a father exploit the new generation of young people who are in the same position they used to be in. This destroys the potential for the types of relationships that Garner tells us could prevent the incarceration of those born into poverty, violence, and absent family. Scott does believe that the young person’s greed for material things plays a role in the cycle of incarceration, however based on Scott’s experience, he believes this is

⁷³ Ibid., 46.

second to the anxious desire to feel accepted, cared about, and find love to replace that which he never adequately received from his father.

To address this deficiency of love and mentorship, Scott writes a letter to his younger self in *Openline*. By doing so, he is also writing a letter to all the youth that can identify with his experience. Through his writing, Scott, like Garner, is acting as the source of support that he wishes he had to intercept himself on the path to incarceration. Now, as a result of his incarcerated experience, Scott is capable of being this person. Scott is writing to help prevent young people like his former self from trusting the wrong people and ending up in prison as a result.

At the end of his letter, Scott says, “I still don’t believe that you understand how much you really mean to me-chose life-be great. And always remember that love is the reason for being.”⁷⁴ In this line, the “you” referenced is his younger self and also all young people struggling with absent fathers. Scott lets them know, through his writing, that he cares, because he was, is, just like them. This is the reason that Scott’s letter is different than a report on the correlation between single-parent households and incarceration rates. Scott provides the first person perspective. He puts his personal story out there for young people to connect with because he has walked in many of their shoes and gone down a difficult path. He wants young men to learn from his mistakes, but not because they shouldn’t commit crimes or because going to prison is a bad thing. Scott wants them to listen to him because he cares about them. He establishes the trust and authenticity to make this claim by sharing his personal story. This gives his words a unique power to spark

⁷⁴ Ibid.

change on an individual level. Ironically, it is an incarcerated person, not a free person, who is best suited to provide effective advice about how to avoid going to prison.

In his Contributor's Notes, Scott says, "I dedicate this letter to all the youths who are faced with difficult challenges in finding direction and vision. Mistakes will happen. How you rebound from them determines your inner strength."⁷⁵ The words "direction" and "vision" show that Scott believes, as important as it is to be cared about, it is also important to have someone who can help guide a young person's future. This is similar to Garner's wish that his mother had talked to him about college. Having this allows a young person to imagine a different life. This is especially significant if they are dissatisfied with their current circumstances. It gives them hope that there is something worth working towards.

Through their writing, both Scott and Garner aim to fill a void in the lives of others who grew up without parental love and guidance, or mentorship. By doing so, Scott and Garner actively create a community through their writing in *Openline*, despite the seemingly personal, reflective nature of their writing. Danny Vince Cox has similar motives. However instead of reaching out to others in the form of a descriptive personal narrative like Garner's, or a personal reflective letter like Scott's, Cox connects with others through a poem. Cox's poem provides less description of his past and instead focuses more on his present incarcerated status.

⁷⁵ Gary Scott, "Contributor's Notes," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 57.

The immediacy of Cox's title, *Listen* (2008), is an urgent call to all those he is trying to reach: *please listen to me before it's too late!*

In his first verse, Cox builds trust with his audience. "Listen-/Stems from the heart of a well-seasoned O.G./That's O.G. as in the original gentleman,/one who has erred much too often,/but now has softened."⁷⁶ He describes himself as an O.G., which the reader expects to understand as "original gangster." His knowledge of and willingness to identify with the street momentarily serves as common ground between Cox and youth on a path toward incarceration. He then uses word play in order to convey that he has gone through a personal transformation. No longer an original gangster, he now defines himself as an "original gentleman." Instead of the impulsive and individualistic "fast lane" life that Scott describes, after being incarcerated, Cox understands the importance of helping to create a community through teaching manners and character that he has learned are valuable.

Now, Cox "has high hopes of reaching and teaching/pre-dominantly the youth/no one excluded, all of us included, that we may curtail our erratic behavior."⁷⁷ He wants to use his own experiences and mistakes in order to teach youth how to avoid coming to prison. Cox wants to help them to make safer, healthier choices by using his life as an example. "The lifestyle we previously lived was/moronic,/some demonic,/thus it's ironic/this message comes from a guy like myself,/whose life is basically on the shelf."⁷⁸ He also recognizes what Scott alludes to in his letter: the irony that an incarcerated person is the one best suited to

⁷⁶ Danny Vince Cox, "Listen," in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 15.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

prevent others from coming to prison. Cox argues that this is because the incarcerated person has made mistakes, learned from them, and is able to pass this knowledge along to others.

Cox also uses personal pronouns- “my”, “our”, “you”, and “I”- in order to speak directly to others and to create these subjects as people who are just like him. The pronouns create a link between Scott and his target audience, despite never having met. They allow Cox to form a relationship between himself, an incarcerated community, and youth on the outside. This bond makes his audience more likely to listen and take his advice seriously-solving the trust problem Garner describes with those who provided suggestions in rehabilitation programs.⁷⁹

Cox is speaking to youth on the outside of prison in order to help them avoid incarceration, but he is also speaking to incarcerated youth. He says, “Please listen,/you in blue like I,/ I know we are missing, out,/ on a wonderful life that we forfeited for/prison politics and strife.”⁸⁰ “You in blue like I” refers to their identical blue uniforms, and their common incarcerated status. This implies shared experiences between those who end up behind bars. Initially, one may assume that incarcerated people have things in common because they are all part of prison life and subject to the same set of restrictions. However, Cox, Scott, and Garner are all talking about common experiences *before* their incarceration. Instead of referring to a common race, class, gender, or sexuality, they cite the consequences of poverty,

⁷⁹ Garner writes that his rehabilitation program “didn’t run on anything but suggestions. I wish that I knew that following these suggestions was going to prevent me from coming in and out of jail” (Garner, “Stop the Violence in My Community!”, 11). He did not connect or trust those who provided the advice at the rehab centers enough to follow their guidance. As a result, he was consistently incarcerated.

⁸⁰ Cox, “Listen,” 15.

violence, absent parents, inadequate love, and exploitation as factors that have just as much to do with one's incarceration as does the fact that they violated the law.

To strengthen his connection with the incarcerated population, he shares some of his personal history. Cox dealt crack and has now been confined in prison for ten years, with a sentence of 25 years to life.⁸¹ Aside from time, his sentence has also meant isolation from loved ones. "How do I explain to my family and friends/when this misery ends./ I can't-/it's hell."⁸² By appealing to these shared consequences of incarceration, Cox reaches out to a group of individuals who are similarly deprived of personal relationships as part of the nature of their punishment. Cox juxtaposes this image of the harshness of prison life with the limitless potential of everyone's life on the outside.

Cox wants youth to recognize that being incarcerated means missing out on a "wonderful life" and that a lifestyle that puts a person at risk of incarceration is not worth the consequences. "Don't be out there doing/ something that can ruin/the rest of your natural lives."⁸³ The word "wonderful" is noteworthy because it provides hope for a different sort of life, much like Scott believed it was important to have "vision" of the future. Consistently, the authors in *Openline* have described their lives before incarceration as sad, lonely, isolated, and without love. Reaching out to young people going through the same thing, Cox presents them with the possibility of hope for a different life: a happy, fulfilling, "wonderful" life and the chance to live their "dreams." If an incarcerated person, who's experiences are

⁸¹ Ibid., 15-16.

⁸² Ibid., 15.

⁸³ Ibid., 16.

marked by a definitive lack of control, can see the hope in a situation, it can inspire those going through difficult times on the outside not to “give up”⁸⁴ on themselves and instead make better choices that will improve their lives and, in Cox’s words, “[make] the world a better place.”⁸⁵

For Cox, this starts with more incarcerated mentors. When speaking to incarcerated people, he tells them that it is their responsibility to mentor *each other* as well as youth on the outside. “This kind of life ain’t nice./No!/I’m not content, until I’m totally spent,/my quest is to prevent/our youth/from making the same mistakes/you and I made.”⁸⁶ Because Cox understands the value in sharing his personal story as a way to prevent the incarceration of more young people, he is writing to encourage others who are incarcerated to do the same. In this way, his writing also helps to form an incarcerated community. By encouraging everyone to help each other, incarcerated or not, Cox’s goes beyond aiming to prevent incarceration, and instead is encouraging everyone to live their life to their fullest possible potential.

Incarcerated Family and Community

The pieces discussed so far have largely been aimed at mentoring “youth.” The authors have advised youth to make positive choices and simultaneously created preventative and/or rehabilitative communities with them through their

⁸⁴ Garner writes, “When I was high I didn’t really worry about that day my mom had ignored me...My life really down-spiraled. I quit going to school...doing drugs and alcohol...I really just gave up on my life” (Garner, “Stop the Violence in My Community!”, 11). He makes a direct correlation between hating his life and making a series of decisions that led to his incarceration. Providing hope for people in this situation, as Cox does, could make all the difference in stopping the downward spiral.

⁸⁵ Cox, “Listen,” 15-16.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

non-fiction narratives. Published in the 2009 issue of *Openline*, Frank Valdivia's poem *My Girls* captures the sadness and pain caused by a father being separated from his daughters. It is the other side of the narratives that both Garner and Scott provide from an adolescent's point of view. *My Girls* is the perspective of the absent (in this case incarcerated) father. The poem gives readers insight into the emotional and psychological consequences of the family separation caused by incarceration.

In this poem, Valdivia, like Cox, Scott, and Garner, explores the emotional cost of the destruction of a family. However Valdivia's perspective is different because as he says in his *Contributor's Notes*, "I lost everything I had and everyone I loved when I came to prison."⁸⁷ Valdivia is separated from his family as a direct result of his incarceration. Valdivia's poem focuses on how and why this affects him emotionally everyday. "I am sad because I cannot be with my girls,/ I miss them all the time."⁸⁸ Being separated from his daughters is painful for Valdivia because he loves them, yet he cannot talk to them about their daily lives-moments the non-incarcerated population, like Garner's mother, sometimes takes for granted. Valdivia asks, "I wonder how they spend their day,/ Do they miss me too?"⁸⁹ As a result of his incarceration, he cannot ask his daughters simple questions like *how was your day?* That a father cannot know the basic details of his daughters' lives is presented as a major tragedy. But these seemingly small questions also have significant practical importance. They are necessary for building and maintaining relationships. The

⁸⁷ Frank Valdivia, "Contributor's Notes," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 59.

⁸⁸ Frank Valdivia, "My Girls," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 32.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

absence of these daily interactions leads to the destruction of families. It leads to the estrangement and isolation that Garner and Scott tell readers is a major cause of their incarceration.

Valdivia does not think that lack of a relationship with his daughters should be a consequence of his having committed a crime. He writes, "Life is not supposed to be this way."⁹⁰ However being absent from his daughters' lives also has ramifications for his children. Garner and Cox's stories tell us that the absence of strong family relationships leads an individual down a road ending in incarceration. Valdivia tells us that being incarcerated eliminates the daily interactions that create familial bonds between parent and child. Taken together, these stories tell us that incarcerating parents increases the likelihood that their children will be incarcerated. Valdivia's writings provide a model for ending this cycle of incarceration. He shows us how an incarcerated parent can maintain a relationship with his children while incarcerated.

Being incarcerated renders the traditional idea of the domestic invisible. The domestic requires being in the physical presence of loved ones, sharing moments together, as well as the establishment of a home or shared space. All of these are impossible for the incarcerated person. In his poem, Valdivia says that his daughters "get me through" and that "they're my reason to keep on fighting, /Because if not for them I couldn't do it!"⁹¹ These lines suggest a significant relationship between father and daughters despite his physical absence from their lives. It is not the traditional

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

narrative where father supports daughter, but instead a symbiotic relationship where father and daughter both help to support one another. Even in their absence, Valdivia's daughters are able to motivate him to get through the loneliness and isolation caused by incarceration. In his absence, he is able to be a present father for his daughters through his writing. Valdivia writes, "We stay a family through my writing." The choice of the word "family" here is significant. Valdivia and his daughters don't just stay in contact, they stay a *family* through his writing. His writing is not solely a means of communication with his daughters. It goes a step further and creates the domestic interactions that are otherwise missing because of the restrictions imposed by incarceration.

The poem communicates Valdivia's thoughts and feelings as a father, such as how much he misses spending time with his girls and how important they are in his daily life. This emotional contact is important since physical is impossible. It allows Frank to share things with his daughters that would otherwise be unknown to them. The style of the poem supports the idea that he intends for his daughters to interact with the text. The didactic poem is short and has a simple a/b/a/b rhyme scheme. It sounds like it was meant for a young child to read. He employs simple words, uncomplicated metaphors, and common childhood images. The language and style are straightforward so that his young daughters can read it, quickly understand it, and easily recall portions of it. Perhaps, in order to feel their father's presence at different moments in their daily lives.

Valdivia also wrote and illustrated a thirteen page children's book dedicated to his daughters, Kayla and Alicia. Published in the 2010 issue of *Openline, The*

Adventures of Kayla and Alicia is a fantasy story about his daughters' search for treasure. Along the way, they encounter a goblin who throws them down a well, a threatening giant, and a large friendly bird, who they teach to dance.⁹² As a reward, the bird flies them to a castle where they hope to finally find the treasure they seek. There they meet King Frank, who tells them that they are the most important treasure of all. They become princesses and the three of them live happily-ever-after. The lesson of the story, taught to them by their father, both the author and the hero of the story, is to value oneself above material wealth. This message echoes Cox's sentiments about valuing one's "future" over what is easy in the moment, Scott's argument that greed stems from valuing things over people, and Garner's testimony that relationships are more important than the things only money can buy. Through the fictional story, Valdivia is not only expressing his personal beliefs, but also helping to mold his daughters' values despite being separated from them.

The form of the story allows Valdivia to create everyday interactions between himself and his daughters. He uses realistic elements, such as the girls' real names and his own real name, which allows Frank and his daughters to go on a real adventure together. However the rest of the story is a fantasy, filled with magical and unlikely elements like goblins and giants, just as the idea that Frank and his daughters could go on an adventure together is a fantasy because his incarceration makes it impossible. He can only have that interaction with his daughters through fantastical fiction, where the impossible and illogical take place. At the same time,

⁹² Frank Valdivia, "The Adventures of Kayla and Alicia," in *Openline 2010*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Harrison Seuga, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2010), 35-50.

the fantastic and personalized elements make the story entertaining for young children to read.

Aside from the imaginative text, Valdivia also engages his daughters in a game through his illustrations. In each picture, Valdivia hid the initials of his daughters' nicknames, "Kay-kay" and "Li-ci". This extra layer is revealed at the end. This means that after reading the story through, his daughters will be compelled to go back and spend more time with each page of the story in order to find their initials. Hiding their initials in the illustrations allows the three of them to interact. Even though Valdivia is incarcerated, this element allows them to play a game together.

Valdivia also includes personal details throughout the story that let his daughters know he cares about them. Knowing someone cares about you is something Scott and Garner argue can completely change someone's life and actually prevent their incarceration. At one point in Valdivia's story, Kayla and Alicia find a cake tree. Valdivia writes, "And everybody knows cake trees always grow chocolate cake-Yum!"⁹³ The accompanying picture shows two girls smiling and chewing in front of a tree sprouting chocolate cake from its branches. Valdivia knows his daughters like chocolate cake-and it's important that he knows it because it means even though he can't be with them or buy them chocolate cake for their birthday or make chocolate cake with them on the weekend, he can write a story about them and draw a picture of them enjoying chocolate cake. Writing and reading about chocolate cake becomes just as good as the experience of actually

⁹³ Ibid., 43.

making and eating a chocolate cake. The writing allows Valdivia to bond with his daughters over something simple they enjoy-like a favorite dessert-because he can't do it in any other way. Another point in the story shows Valdivia's daughters teaching a giant bird to dance. "We can teach you how to dance. We love to dance!"⁹⁴ Kayla and Alicia, the characters, proceed to teach the bird to dance. Again, Valdivia takes something that he knows his daughters enjoy and incorporates it into part of the story. Writing and reading about their dancing allows Valdivia to share in his daughters' joy in dancing, and for his daughters to dance with their father. At the end of the story, Valdivia writes, "This book is for my two beautiful daughters who mean more to me than the world. I can't wait to share your adventures with you."⁹⁵ In the meantime, while incarcerated, he has created adventures for the three of them to share through his fiction.

Valdivia creates his relationship with his daughters through his writing. Curtis H. Roberts, another incarcerated father, does the same, but through non-fiction. Published in the 2008 issue of *Openline*, Roberts' untitled essay describes the day his daughter Kristiona was born. The story describes, in great detail, the day he and his wife went to see Dr. Thompson at 9 o'clock, found out she was in labor, and checked into Northridge hospital across the street in order to give birth. The emotions of the narrator, Roberts, range from calm, excitement, happiness, and panic. The essay is even comical at times when describing the agitation and antics of an expectant father waiting to hear news about his wife and child.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 49.

“I asked the nurse if I could use the phone; she told me to use the phone in the room that I was in. I picked it up and there was no tone, so I yelled for the nurse again and told her it’s not working. She assured me that it did work and to try again, so again I tried to use the phone only to find it not working. I raced down the hall frantically searching for a phone to use, yelling at the nurse that the phone is not working. That’s when she walked me back to the room, showing me that all I needed to do was to dial nine and the dial tone would come on.”⁹⁶

Roberts quickly switches from this comic, somewhat iconic scene to a discussion of his wife’s difficulty giving birth and need for an emergency caesarian procedure. With the switch to a more serious subject matter, the form of the essay switches from a descriptive narrative to a reflection on what the birth of his daughter meant to him. In his eyes, having a child signified the transition of him and his wife from a couple to a family. He refused to see his daughter for the first time without his wife. He describes the moment he first saw his daughter as, “the three of us...together, looking into each other’s love-filled eyes.”⁹⁷

Roberts writes about the day his daughter was born because, for Roberts, it was also the day that the family unit was born. And while he is incarcerated, this is the thing he misses the most. For Roberts, like Valdivia, both everyday moments and special moments like childbirth are now impossible because of his incarceration. In his Contributor’s Notes, Roberts says, “This story was written to capture the thoughts and memories of my daughter Kristiona who over 12 years ago was taken

⁹⁶ Curtis H. Roberts, “Untitled,” in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 32.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

from me upon my incarceration.”⁹⁸ Roberts explicitly says that his separation from his daughter is a consequence of his incarceration. His writing “is my [his] way of remembering her, and hopefully for her to read that she is never far from my [his] thoughts. I love you, Kristiona.”⁹⁹ Roberts’ essay uses descriptive detail in order to show his daughter that even though they are separated, the day she was born is still one of his most important, vivid memories. Despite the fact that he is an absent father, he still loves and cares about her. Garner, Scott, and Cox all believe that this can be life-changing for a child or adolescent to hear and feel.

Like Valdivia, Roberts is writing in *Openline* to have a relationship with his daughter. But unlike Valdivia, who is fairly confident that his daughters are reading his works in *Openline* and even claims that the writings are what allows them to stay a family, Roberts seems uncertain about whether his essay will even reach his daughter. In his Contributor’s Notes, he is *hopeful* that she will read his story and get his message. While all of the authors so far have discussed creating a relationship with someone through the writing in *Openline*, Roberts brings up a good point. The writing can only have an affect if it is read. There are a number of reasons why Roberts’ daughter might not read his essay. She might not know it exists, she might not want to deal with it emotionally, or (at the time) it may not have been easily available.¹⁰⁰ Bringing the existence of *Openline* and similar prison writings into the mainstream conversation about prison literature will increase the existing

⁹⁸ Curtis H. Roberts, “Contributor’s Notes,” in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 71.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Full issues of the 2008 and 2009 issues of *Openline* have only been made available online in the past 3 months.

readership. This may serve as a catalyst for expanding the reach of the authors like Garner, Scott, Cox, Valdivia, and Roberts who all contribute to a project that will change individual's lives and ultimately reduce incarceration and recidivism.

While Roberts is not sure whether he is getting through to his daughter or not, Michael Endres' descriptive, non-fiction essay *Today We Took Photos Together* (2009) encourages Roberts and others not to give up. Endres' essay describes his own struggle to re-create a family from behind bars. He provides proof of why it is important to keep trying to reach out and build relationships from behind bars.

Throughout Michael Endres' career writing in *Openline* he has focused on the domestic-both the space and the relationships that help to create it. His first piece, published in the 2008 issue of *Openline* is untitled. It is a short paragraph that describes snapshots of his childhood in no particular order. In five sentences, Endres describes his "small white house" with "wood floors" where "the windows were little", sleeping on a couch with his brother, building a room for himself "with cardboard boxes in the back yard" and walking home from school everyday with his dog.¹⁰¹ In his *Contributor's Notes*, Endres says, "I wrote it because whenever I think back to that time and place it always brings a smile to my heart."¹⁰² Endres' paragraph is significant because while Endres, too, is an incarcerated father, he brings a child-like simplicity to the complicated emotions expressed by both Valdivia and Roberts. While lonely and isolated as a result of incarceration, writing about family is a bittersweet experience because reminiscing both reminds the

¹⁰¹ Michael Endres, "Untitled," in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 9.

¹⁰² Michael Endres, "Contributor's Notes," in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 69.

writers of what they are being denied and brings the writers joy by participating in the domestic. Writing about these memories is what allows the author to remember and imagine a domestic space while in prison. Endres' reason for writing his paragraph is poignant because it is simple: he writes to remember home.

Today We Took Photos Together is a longer piece. The essay describes how his relationship with his daughter, Samantha (Sammi), has changed while he has been incarcerated. Upon his incarceration, the last time he had seen his daughter was when she was four years old. In 2002, after she turned 18, she sent her father a letter. After receiving it, he was "shocked." "I was tickled to death to know that she wanted to know me, and I was sad for her cause she didn't know how I would feel about hearing from her. She didn't know that her letter caused my heart to truly smile. She didn't know that I loved her, missed her and always thought about her."¹⁰³ Endres, like Valdivia and Roberts, provides the voice of the absent father. The uncertainty that Sammi expressed to her father is exactly what Valdivia and Roberts are trying to prevent and the feeling that causes the hurt that Garner, Scott, and Cox say is so destructive. At the time, Endres was not participating in *Openline*, and had no published writing. This made it difficult for Endres to find ways to begin a relationship with his estranged daughter and bridge the physical gap between them. But after 14 years of silence, he was able to respond to her by mail.

After a few miscommunications due to the delay in receiving letters behind bars, Endres describes their first phone call, "I was shaking and crying so much I

¹⁰³ Michael Endres, "Today We Took Photos Together," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 34.

could hardly dial the phone, but the moment I heard her voice it all stopped. We talked and it was great.”¹⁰⁴ He then proudly describes their relationship. He learned that she is in the Navy, married to a man named Kyle, has a son, Ethan, and a daughter, Isabelle. Endres is excited because he knows the details of his daughter’s life. This is exactly what Valdivia wants, and is pained not to have. Recently, Endres’ daughter’s family was stationed in California and they visited him. Endres describes, “The moment I saw her, her eyes and smile said to me ‘we are going to be O.K.’”¹⁰⁵ Endres describes himself as in awe of the situation and the little things that happened during their meeting. It seemed surreal for him to re-unite with his daughter and meet new members of his family while incarcerated. “There across the table from me sat this beautiful young woman, wife, mom, and still I could see my little girl.”¹⁰⁶

In this moment, Endres finally has access to the domestic space he has been denied for over 20 years. “She didn’t hug or even shake hands, and the kids didn’t hug, shake hands or call me grandpa but that’s all O.K. Because seven years ago I got a letter, and today we took photos together.”¹⁰⁷ Finally, Endres is allowed to participate in an important, everyday family activity: taking pictures together. After being denied this opportunity for years as a direct result of his incarceration, he is finally able to create memories with his daughter. He is able to share an adventure with his daughter and her family, an interaction only possible for Valdivia through a fantasy story or for Roberts through a distant memory.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Endres chooses to write about this experience in *Openline*. Unlike Valdivia and Roberts, he is not trying to communicate with his daughter because he already has other avenues to do that. Instead, his motives are more like Garner's, Scott's and Cox's. He wants to inspire others who are also dealing with reconciling their familial relationships not to give up. He wants them to learn from his roller-coaster experience connecting with family. In his *Contributor's Notes*, he makes this clear, "I am sharing my story in hopes of helping to encourage other dads, moms, daughters, and sons to never give up. Thank you, Sammi, I love you and I am very proud of you."¹⁰⁸ In the same way that Cox's poem provides hope for the possibility of a "wonderful" life for youth growing up in difficult situations, Endres' essay provides hope for other incarcerated parents to create or maintain their relationships with their children while behind bars. Not only is this personally fulfilling as Endres shows us, but it can also help to break the cycle of incarceration.

Conclusion

Openline has been influential in changing the lives of many of the incarcerated authors. Some write about separation from their family and community as a direct consequence of their incarceration. They share their personal stories in order to encourage others who are going through similar difficulties not to make the same mistakes and end up incarcerated. Through these writings, the authors create links between those who are incarcerated and those who live on the outside, as well as developing a community amongst the incarcerated. Writing

¹⁰⁸ Michael Endres, "Contributor's Notes," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 55.

poems, essays, and stories has made it possible to create strong personal relationships and homes that may end the cycle of incarceration and/or circumventing the forced separation of family members.

The incarcerated authors who provide the perspective of children and adolescents who grew up with absent parents write in order to mentor youth currently going through the same difficulties; to teach them from their experience and prevent them from making the same mistakes that resulted in their incarceration. The incarcerated fathers who write in *Openline* attempt to re-create domestic interactions such as sharing feelings, memories, and events with their children through their non-fiction and fiction. One incarcerated father in particular, Endres, uses his personal experience re-connecting with his daughter in order to encourage other incarcerated parents to continue to reach out to their children. All of these authors provide alternative models of family that take into account the physical separation that is a consequence of incarceration. All of the pieces teach the reader something about their own lives and families no matter what the situation of the reader. Garner teaches us that it's important to talk with our kids, Scott teaches us it's important to love ourselves and have affirming relationships with others, Cox teaches us it's important for people in communities to help one another, Valdivia, Roberts, and Endres teach us how to build relationships despite obstacles.

Chapter 3

Doing Time Inside: Interpreting Incarceration at San Quentin

The writings in *Chapter 2* taught readers about the life-story of the authors both before and during their incarceration. In doing this, they prove that the terms “inmate” and/or “prisoner” are inadequate to describe the incarcerated experience because they define the incarcerated subject by their isolation and removal from the non-incarcerated population. Instead, through their writing, the authors demonstrate how they remain and/or become sons, fathers, and mentors while behind bars. These writings, then, re-define what it means to be an incarcerated person in the United States. This final chapter will continue to expand the conventions of incarcerated experience. The works analyzed will show that the incarcerated people who contribute to *Openline* are also students, poets, and artists who express themselves in a variety of mediums. These works allow us to break away from an imagined, uniform definition of what it means to be behind bars, and understand that despite their physical separation, these authors are not socially dead, and instead actively participate in American society.

A discussion of the author’s race is conspicuously absent from the majority writings that appear in *Openline*. Instead, the authors write about their experiences as a consequence of their incarceration. They refer to the specifics of their daily lives and how they exist in relation to others as a consequence of their incarcerated status. This is not to say that race does not play a role in either of these. Rather, it shows that their status as a subject of the criminal justice system has significantly affected who they are, how they live, and how they are seen by and interact with others. Their incarcerated status has

become an aspect of their identity that shapes who they are, what they do, and how they do it.

As a whole, the writings within *Openline* allow us to better understand what it means to be incarcerated. They help us to imagine what the incarcerated experience might be by giving us insight into the lives of incarcerated individuals. We learn that the men who write in *Openline* are fathers, sons, mentors, students, activists, poets, and artists. The writings discussed below focus on how the incarcerated person defines and creates himself as a student, an activist, a poet, or an artist through his personal life behind bars. That is, what they do when doing time.

Incarcerated Students: Writing and Understanding “The Incarcerated Experience”

Chuck Hopple’s *It’s Not Forty Acres & a Mule; It’s Only Two Hundred Dollars, Gate Money* (2008) blends stylistic features of autobiography and essayistic modes into a new form, a form that I call “the incarcerated student essay.” Through this form, Hopple describes the pitfalls of parole from the perspective of one who has experienced them.¹⁰⁹ Citing his personal experiences with the parole system and his observations of others who have gone through the parole system, Hopple’s essay offers new insights into how parole should be reformed in order to help newly released people make a successful re-entry. But his essay goes beyond the personal. He couples his personal experience with theory that he has learned in his undergraduate classes. He takes journalist Kelly Virella’s assertions in “Trapped by the System: Parole in America” (2000)¹¹⁰ - that the increase in incarceration rates since the 1980s was caused by the destruction of prison rehabilitation

¹⁰⁹ Chuck Hopple, “It’s Not Forty Acres & a Mule, It’s Only Two Hundred Dollars, Gate Money,” in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 47-49.

¹¹⁰ Kelly Virella, “Trapped By the System: Parole in America,” AlterNet, last modified December 2, 2000, http://www.alternet.org/story/10163/trapped_by_the_system%3A_parole_in_america.

programs and social services for parolees, as well as an increase in the number of parole officers per state-and uses this information as a framework. Hopple then makes an original contribution, he provides readers a view from the inside, that is, what it feels like to live within the parole system.

What sets Hopple's essay apart from a critical essay is that he draws on his personal experiences to support theory. Hopple has "spent the last two years at San Quentin's H-Unit, which is predominantly a parole violators yard."¹¹¹ He has "witnessed many violators returning from parole, two, three, and four times."¹¹² As a result of living around and befriending many people who have returned to prison after receiving parole, Hopple believes that the current parole system could actually help to decrease incarceration rates if it provided access to transitional housing, job assistance, better vocational training, and a greater variety of parole options.¹¹³

Hopple's knowledge of the parole system is the result of a psychic transformation. At first, Hopple blamed the individuals for their failed attempts at re-entering society. He believed that those who failed to make a successful re-entry were "weak", "drug addicts", or didn't "want to change their behavior, lifestyle or environment."¹¹⁴ Writing about the parole system changes his views. He begins to realize that he previously took their failure "personally, like it was me that had failed, as though their failure foretold my future" and blamed the failed parolees as a result of feeling "upset", "angry", and "resentful towards them."¹¹⁵ Hopple is only able to shift his perspective and understand that it is the system of parole that is failing, rather than the individuals, through a series of conversations with

¹¹¹ Hopple, "It's Not Forty Acres," 47.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

a man who violated his parole (both before his release and after his re-incarceration), and another man who is about to be released on parole.

Hopple presents readers with Kelly, a forty-four year old heroin addict who has spent the majority of his adult life in prison. Kelly has never had a driver's license and most of his friends on the outside are also addicts. Kelly tells Hopple that he is tired of coming to prison and really wants to change his life around. But once paroled he was back behind bars talking to Hopple in less than two weeks. According to Hopple, Kelly was re-incarcerated so quickly because he was forced to return to his previous community, where most of his associates were also on drugs. And with, "no sure place to live, no job, no car, no food, no extra underwear, no toiletries, and not even a picture I.D" he became completely reliant on a network from his previous life that was not going to help him change his lifestyle on the outside.¹¹⁶ Hopple also introduces readers to Jimmy, who is about to be released on parole. He also has no place to live outside prison, and may not be able to access a suggested rehab program because it could fall outside the boundary lines set for his parole. Like Kelly, Jimmy expresses a deep desire to turn his life around. But even after talking out his options for a successful re-entry with Hopple, he is still going through "mental anguish" at the idea of being paroled without any means of maintaining himself on the outside besides "two hundred dollars and a pair of sweats."¹¹⁷

According to Hopple, the two hundred dollars at the gate is useless. What would make for more successful re-entries is access to transitional housing, job assistance, better

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 49.

vocational training, and a larger variety of parole options.¹¹⁸ Hopple knows this because his experiences while incarcerated have changed his approach to the criminal justice system. Like many who write about the criminal justice system from the outside, Virella only uses the primary experiences of a failed parolee in order to provide a narrative arc to her article while her perspective on the problems is formed through engaging with the opinions of various experts, activists, and lawyers. Hopple, on the other hand, uses experts like Virella as a framework. The core of his argument involves the words and experiences of people who are living the consequences of the current parole policies in order to make his own claims about why parole is failing. By providing a perspective based on the words and experiences of people who know best why parolees fail, those who have failed to make a successful re-entry themselves, Hopple is able to suggest concrete changes that can help to prevent re-incarceration.

Hopple's essay also aims to bring attention to how the current parole policies are both similar and different from slavery. Hopple writes, "A parolee, leaving prison with only two hundred dollars, forced to return to his own community where his parole officer will 'closely observe' him, and with little to no resources or social services to assist his successful reentry back into society, has a tough row to hoe."¹¹⁹ Here, again, as in the title of his piece, *It's Not Forty Acres & a Mule; It's Only Two Hundred Dollars, Gate Money*, Hopple compares the experience of incarceration and re-entry to the experience of slavery and emancipation. The historical slogan, "Forty Acres and A Mule" epitomizes the failure of reconstruction to provide adequate resources for newly freed people to survive following emancipation. Hopple compares the difficulties faced by the newly

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

freed person to survive without adequate land and labor resources to the lesser known struggle to survive and prevent one's re-incarceration upon re-entry without transitional housing, job assistance, more highly skilled vocational training, and a greater variety of parole options. But the "not" in the title is also significant. While there are similarities, the two experiences are not the same thing. This subtle distinction helps to differentiate between the "black experience" and the "incarcerated experience" in America.

The institution of slavery was based upon a system of racial difference. It created its subjects, enslaved people, solely on the basis of their blackness. However, Hopple never mentions blackness or whiteness in his piece. The absence of a discussion of his race means that something else defines him as "not free" from his point of view. Unlike being enslaved, which was a large part of the black experience in America for hundreds of years, Hopple's incarcerated status is not the same as his racial identity because to be an incarcerated person is not based solely on one's race.¹²⁰ Rather, the conditions of Hopple's incarceration, specifically restrictions on intimate relationships, forced separation of family and community, and inadequate resources to become part of society once freed, are comparable to what it meant to be enslaved in the United States. From Hopple's perspective, what is similar between the incarcerated subject and the enslaved subject is their relationship to power. These common conditions of subjugation are ultimately what define the incarcerated experience. While other aspects of one's self (e.g.

¹²⁰ Here I think it is important to acknowledge the work of Ruth Gilmore, Michelle Alexander, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Beth Richie and others who's research shows that race does play a factor in the criminal justice system. They prove that because of racial profiling, unequal policing of neighborhoods, biased laws and sentencing practices, and the historical and cultural links that exist in the United States between blackness and crime, the criminal justice system does disproportionately affect people of color in the United States. My intervention is that because one's race is not the sole factor that determines who is incarcerated and who is not, the criminal justice system today is different from slavery and Jim Crow. The writings within *Openline* help us to understand the nature of that difference, which is ultimately necessary if we hope to organize and change our current historical moment.

race, class, gender, or sexuality) can and do intersect with one's incarcerated experience,¹²¹ by separating one's incarcerated status from one's racial identity, Hopple differentiates between the black experience and the incarcerated experience in America today on the basis of power and agency. This is important because the two are often conflated in much of the existing scholarship and activism around the criminal justice system and as a consequence, this re-produces the link between blackness and criminality in the American imagination that ensures the criminal justice system remains racially biased. Hopple's writing helps to construct an alternative discourse where the incarcerated experience is defined by conditions of subjugation, which mirror those of the enslaved experience, rather than "the black experience," whatever that means.¹²²

Charlie Spence is another incarcerated student who publishes a critique of how power operates in the criminal justice system in *Openline*. Spence describes himself as a 28 year old serving a 26 year to life sentence who, while incarcerated, has had the "the opportunity, through Patten University at San Quentin, to start earning an education."¹²³ Like Hopple, he blends personal experiences and elements of a critical essay in *Sixteen* (2009), which focuses on the problems with the juvenile justice system in the United States.¹²⁴ According to Spence, his education behind bars gives him a perspective he could not have gotten any other way because there are two elements to his education at Patten University: his status as an undergraduate student and his status as an incarcerated

¹²¹ See: James Hall, "Equal Oppression," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 37-39.

¹²² "The black experience" itself is a dangerous phrase. There is not one, uniform "black experience." Individuality is often lost in these words. Instead, people function as a product of all the spaces they occupy.

¹²³ Charlie Spence, "Contributor's Notes," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 58.

¹²⁴ Charlie Spence, "Sixteen," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 11-14.

person. As someone who experiences the consequences of the juvenile justice system daily and someone who can understand where his experiences fit into the academic conversation, Spence can provide a perspective that most cannot. *Sixteen* is a product of Spence's unconventional position.

In his essay, Spence argues that it is unfair to charge juveniles as adults and sentence them to life imprisonment because their abilities to make decisions are not fully developed. He supports this claim with studies in child psychology and neuroscience that state that juveniles, by the nature of their biology, do not have the same ability to make decisions and to think about consequences as adults. Spence supplements these expert opinions with his first hand experience. He writes, "A perfect example of an immature brain is a fourteen-year-old child, with whom I became acquainted in Juvenile Hall, who had been asked by a peer to beat up a homeless man for twenty-five cents."¹²⁵ Based on his conversations with the child, Spence believes that the child beat up the man in order to be accepted by his peers. Tragically, the man died, and the child was sentenced to life in prison. According to Spence, the child "lacked the critical thinking skills of a fully developed mind."¹²⁶ Spence cannot provide medical evidence to support this case, but based his relationship with the child, he is able to understand why a young kid who has never felt accepted by friends or family is desperate to feel included. He claims, "had this been a mature adult who had been asked to beat up a homeless man for twenty-five cents, I find it hard to believe that he would have done it."¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid.,13.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

As an incarcerated undergraduate, Spence is able to use both academic articles and his first hand experiences to argue against the current juvenile justice policies. He studies the juvenile justice system in the classroom and, as someone who was sentenced to life in prison at the age of sixteen, lives the consequences of its current policies on a daily basis. In his *Contributor's Notes*, Spence adds that his education is not just about higher learning, "it is also about the deeper and more profound quest to unlock an educated, experienced, and articulate voice for thousands and possibly millions of underdeveloped youth who have and will receive life sentences throughout the United States."¹²⁸ The adjectives "educated", "experienced", and "articulate" describe the person Spence thinks is qualified to represent those affected by the current juvenile justice policies in the United States. "Educated" and "articulate" both refer to someone who is well versed in the issues being discussed. But being "experienced" is just as important. Spence believes that the experiences he has as a result of being sentenced to life in prison as a juvenile are necessary in order to write comprehensively about the system, understand its problems, and suggest solutions.

Spence provides readers with insight into his personal experiences in a narrative vignette at the beginning of his essay. This form is completely different from the rest of his essay. It is the only time that he breaks his use of a present, academic voice and transports readers to the past. He writes the moment that changed his life forever, when he realizes he is going to be incarcerated for the rest of his life. There is fear, pain, anxiety, and confusion in his story. He writes, "They seemed larger than me that day, the

¹²⁸ Spence, "Contributor's Notes," 58.

rain drops, as they fell from an endless gray sky.”¹²⁹ Spence is upset about what is happening to him, but the sky is also crying raindrops that are larger than him, a poetic expression of how the tragedy that has taken place in his life is not only his experience. It is the experience of all the other juveniles who have faced, and will have to face, a similar reality because of the United State’s juvenile justice policies.¹³⁰ Spence continues, “They illuminated the headlights of oncoming traffic in an iridescent and blurred shine. The display of colors seemed only to intensify the fear and magnify the pain I felt inside about yet another tragedy taking place in my life.”¹³¹ Things are “blurred” because Spence is confused about the changes that are taking place, about what it will actually mean to spend the rest of his life behind bars. Spence writes about this moment in a poetic, narrative form because it is the only way that he can reconcile the confusion and uncertainty he felt in that moment about what it was going to mean to be incarcerated for the rest of his life, and the fact that now, twelve years later, he is a student and a potential activist for others but still incarcerated. He writes, “I sat there dressed in an orange jumpsuit, feet shackled together and a waist chain tightly secured around my midsection to restrict my arms firmly to my sides.”¹³² This describes his physical transformation into an incarcerated person. His shackles and orange jumpsuit are the phenotype that will now mark him as different. However in that moment he cannot know how being incarcerated will transform other parts of him. Writing about this experience in the narrative form is how Spence remembers his past, which allows him to better understand who he is in the

¹²⁹ Spence, “Sixteen,” 11.

¹³⁰ Note: The United States and Israel are the only two countries in the world to hand out life sentences to juvenile offenders. There are 2,387 juveniles who have been sentenced to life in prison in the United States, while only seven have been given the same punishment in Israel. In the United States, 51% of the sentences issued were issued to first time offenders. (Spence, “Sixteen,” 12.)

¹³¹ Spence, “Sixteen,” 11.

¹³² Ibid.

present as a result of his incarceration. He writes, “The sheriff’s van traveled at what felt like the speed of light, never allowing me to collect my thoughts before arriving at my next destination: life in an adult institution at the age of sixteen.”¹³³ Spence did not have a chance to process what happened to him that day. He is allowed the space to do this through his writing. Through his writing, he solidifies his memories and combines them with his present life as an incarcerated student and his hope for the future: to one day provide a powerful voice for those affected by juvenile justice and are still as lost and confused as he once was. By putting all of these elements together in one essay, Spence provides us with insight into the multiple dimensions of his incarcerated experience.

Representations of Self in the Present

Similarly, Kenneth Brydon’s *Parole Plans* (2009) uses the narrative and poetic forms in order to process his present status as an incarcerated person and to articulate, for himself and others, who he has become while behind bars.¹³⁴ Brydon’s autobiographical poem narrates his meeting with the parole board and argues that parole is failing because of the attitude of the parole board. According to the poem, no matter how great Brydon’s post-release plans have been over the past 25 years, they have never been accepted after being presented to the parole board because those on the board are more concerned with making sure Brydon suffers for his crime than about who Brydon has become while behind bars.

After Brydon critiques of the Chairman of the parole board’s inconsistent judgment year after year, the Chairman responds angrily with: “‘Excuse me, sir!’ He

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Kenneth Brydon, “Parole Plans,” in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 17-19.

spoke in a loud voice,/ ‘You’re the guilty one, who made that heinous choice!/ You pulled the trigger, you committed the crime,/ Look into the mirror to know why you’re doing time./ I must decide who is worthy to walk out that door,/ I must decide who’ll walk free and never kill anymore.’”¹³⁵ The Chairman must decide who is “worthy”, but based on what criteria? There is a legal standard for a potential parolee’s logistical plan for re-entry, which he or she must meet. But according to Brydon’s poem this is not the only factor that decides whether a candidate will get parole or not. The ultimate decision also depends on things beyond the incarcerated person’s control, like if the Chairman of the parole board thinks the candidate has suffered enough for his crime. This is a problem because Brydon’s future is now subject to the Chairman’s moral opinion, rather than his ability to decide if Brydon has met a legal standard.

Brydon’s poem provides first hand evidence of a flaw in the criminal justice system. It is impossible for the individuals on the parole board to separate their biases against “criminals”, “inmates” or “prisoners” from their jobs to uphold the law because they, like all Americans, have grown up and continue to live in a society dominated by the idea that that everyone behind bars deserves all of the consequences of being there. One problem with this is that most are uninformed about what these consequences actually are because the only people who can describe them are being ignored: the incarcerated people themselves. Including incarcerated voices into the conversation about the criminal justice system allows people to better understand what it means to be incarcerated, part of this is more fully understanding the consequences. Reading

¹³⁵ Ibid.,18.

Brydon's poem allows us to see why this is important: it provides insight into the pitfalls of the system, what needs to be changed, and why.

The tone of Brydon's piece is the opposite of the pieces discussed in *Chapter 2*. Those pieces, which described the pain, trauma, isolation, and loneliness caused by family separation while incarcerated, had a wistful, hurt, worried, or anxious tone. *Parole Plans* is upbeat and triumphant, even though it narrates the scene where Brydon is sentenced to another year behind bars, which one would think is a depressing topic. While Brydon cannot change his physical conditions, his poem teaches readers how he finds his agency in the everyday by changing his mindset. After denying Brydon parole, the Chairman attempts to end the conversation by saying, "Perhaps you'll have a better attitude in another year."¹³⁶ But Brydon replies, "So Sorry, but no, I'm through playing this trick,/ No more will I be a jackass, chasing a carrot on a stick./ I've done 10 times what you need to be satisfied, / 10 times beyond, what your cold heart has denied./ So, call me scum for a mistake at 19 I do admit,/ But I'll sleep well tonight, for not being a hypocrite."¹³⁷

In that interaction, Brydon gains his mental freedom even though he is still being denied his physical freedom. The tone of the piece is triumphant because he stands up to the Chairman and the system that does its best to strip him of his free-will by regaining control of his emotions and his mind. He will no longer be enslaved to the idea of freedom that the Chairman has the power to bestow or revoke. Instead, through his writing, Brydon has changed his perspective on freedom. He writes, "Walking back to my cell I breathed in air anew./ No fear of my future, gave me wings on which I now

¹³⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

flew.”¹³⁸ The line brings out the paradox of his situation. While his physical condition has not changed because he is literally walking back to his cell, both a symbol of and physical consequence of his incarceration, his perspective on what it means to be inside that cell has changed.

This transformation of his psyche is a result of the conversation that he has with the Chairman of the parole board in his poem. Brydon’s piece is not a transcript of a confrontation he had with the parole board. Instead, it is a conversation in the poetic form with an aa/bb/cc rhyme scheme. The lines roll one into the other and fit together so perfectly that they do not represent a real conversation. While the poem may be based in truth, Brydon takes artistic license with it. By doing this, he is able to create a different relationship between himself and the parole board through his writing. In the text, he gains his personal freedom despite his incarcerated status. As a whole, Brydon’s piece re-writes the life of an incarcerated person to include daily resistance, autonomy, and joy. Instead of victims of an unjust system, Brydon’s poem teaches readers that incarcerated people exercise their autonomy in ways- both real and imagined- that challenge the system they are subject to on a daily basis.

Like Brydon, John O. Neblett also uses the poetic form to imagine himself differently and re-define himself for others. Neblett’s *A Random Variable* (2008) is much more abstract and less narrative than *Parole Plans*. Brydon needed to write dialogue in order to re-create an interaction between himself and the parole board to change the conditions of his subjectivity and his relationship to those in power. Neblett’s purpose is much less specific. *A Random Variable* relies heavily on allusion in order to express

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Neblett's emotions and belief that the practice of incarceration itself is unnatural and that it is potentially dangerous to those who keep others subjects and not citizens.¹³⁹

The first verse of the poem describes how things are before one's life begins: everything is quiet and still. "Under a cloud/ the earth is quiescent/ in its submission to chance."¹⁴⁰ Once a person is born, this peaceful equilibrium is disrupted because they are subject to random chance. They may be born into a wealthy family, a poor family, an abusive family, a loving family, a splintered family, a tight-knit family, or no family. Garner's piece in *Chapter 2* shows that being born into poverty, abuse, and in the absence of family members contributes to the likelihood that a person will end up incarcerated. Scholars like Alexander, Muhammad, and Gilmore have written books about how blackness, poverty, and being male or female increase the likelihood of incarceration. Neblett's poem references these characteristics and all possible others simply as "random variables." Instead of listing combinations of variables that make one have a higher risk of being incarcerated he references them all as the parts of our lives that we cannot control. These random variables end up creating human lives that may or may not end up being incarcerated.

Neblett then makes two allusions that are critical to understanding the argument of his poem. First, he references Borneo, an island that is politically divided between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. "In Borneo/ a butterfly's habitat/ has been clear-cut by Man."¹⁴¹ The land, which is part of Earth's natural world, has been divided up as a result of Man's interference. According to Neblett, the one who suffers and has their home

¹³⁹ John Neblett, "A Random Variable," in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 63.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

compromised because of Man's political and economic systems is one who has no agency, interest, or agency in Man's political and economic systems: the butterfly.

The butterfly represents the natural world, which should be allowed to exist apart from Man's interference. "Man, altering chance,/ has reduced the butterfly's/ damping effect on// probabilities."¹⁴² The term "damping effect," alludes to *the butterfly effect*, a phenomenon discussed in chaos theory of dynamical systems, a subset of mathematics. In chaos theory, reducing the damping effect on a system increases the chaos of the system. As a result, pre-existing differences in equations that produce similar patterns for a period of time eventually cause the equations to diverge and have very different outcomes. The butterfly effect is used to better understand how small points of difference can lead to huge changes in the outcome. Neblett references "damping effect" in order to show that human beings cannot control all of the variables in the equations they are born into. Yet people are still forced to live subject to these random variables within social, economic, and political systems that they, like the butterfly, have not created. The condition of the butterfly in Borneo mirrors the situation of the incarcerated person both before and during his or her incarceration. Referring back to the example Garner provides, a child born into poverty, abuse, or absent family members is similar at birth to someone born into wealth and a close family. But as life goes on the random variables assigned at their birth end up having tangible effects on their opportunities and eventually changes the outcome of their lives.

Up to this point, the poem is deterministic and somewhat depressing, but the last verse completely changes the tone of the poem. It begins with the word "probabilities." It

¹⁴² Ibid.

is the only word in the poem to stand by itself on its own line, and is the only first word of a verse not capitalized. Neblett is letting us know that this word is one of the most important in the poem. Until this word, Neblett has described the depressing realization that one does not have agency in one's own life, and is instead subject to the randomness of their birth. But here, at the beginning of the last verse, he uses the word "probabilities" instead of "certain outcomes." Using this word implies that there are also other unknown, indefinable factors which allow someone born into difficult circumstances to not become a subject in whatever oppressive system they are seemingly "destined" to function in. This idea is reminiscent of the hope that Scott and Cox presented to young people: that they could have a different type of life than they could imagine. It is also the same idea that Brydon's poem communicates—a way in which someone does something different and becomes someone other than who he or she was "supposed to be." An incarcerated person is not traditionally "supposed to be" a student, a mentor, a father, a poet, or happy—yet all of the writers in *Openline* use their writing to incorporate these labels into a new definition of the incarcerated experience.

Neblett ends the poem, "a tornado may be spawned-/ a child of earth's wrath."¹⁴³

This line likens a person's autonomy within an oppressive system (their ability to make things "probabilities" and not "certain outcomes") to a force of nature. This personal resistance is "earth's wrath" at Man for destroying the natural order of things and forcing people to live in captivity as a result of variables both in their lives and in society that are out of their control. Neblett's entire poem argues that it is unnatural for people to live in subjugation to another, but as long as this cycle exists there will always be resistance.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

The last verse also reads as a warning that this resistance could one day boil over with unprecedented consequences.

Like Brydon's poem, Neblett's poem discusses resistance within captivity. While Brydon finds his through re-creating an interaction with the parole board, Neblett finds his by comparing his situation with the natural world. Neblett's poem uses many allusions and has subtleties that a reader must work to understand. On the other hand, Brydon's poem is easily accessible and understandable by all audiences. This matches Brydon's message, he wanted to provide inspiration and hope to others by writing a scene people could relate to and identify with. Neblett's tone is darker, more mysterious and fragmented. People cannot relate to it right away, they must work in order to understand what he is saying-just as Neblett himself has to do work in order to figure out how to function in a world that keeps everyone in captivity-not just incarcerated subjects.

The Life of the "Socially Dead"

The creators of *Openline* use their writing or visual art to participate in a society from which they are physically and mentally removed. The writings and visual art allow each of the authors to become someone other than an "inmate" or "prisoner" both in the public sphere and in their private lives. Instead of being defined by the oppressive system he finds himself in, Neblett sees himself as an *incarcerated poet*. This subject position suggests an element of autonomy that does not exist in the term *inmate* or *prisoner*-just as *slave* does not encapsulate what it meant to be an *enslaved person*. These terms provide the necessary language for people to describe John Neblett, and others, that acknowledges his incarceration is a part of his life, but also acknowledges his personal life, his existence apart from the system which controls their physical life and

opportunities on a daily basis; and for him to describe himself. They also diversify the seemingly homogeneous incarcerated experience.

Just as Spence is an incarcerated student, and Neblett and Brydon are incarcerated poets, Henry Edward Frank is an incarcerated artist. In 2008, he published a block print in *Openline* entitled *Self-Portrait*. With it, he literally re-creates his image for the world to see. The block print does not show a depressed man sitting in isolation, or a man who is violent or dangerous-as the popular images of who is incarcerated encourage us to imagine him. Instead, Frank is sitting, hands on his large belly, laughing.¹⁴⁴ Frank uses his visual art to provide a new snapshot of himself and his life to the public. In his 2009 *Contributor's Notes*, Frank defines himself as an artist. He writes, "I began artistic expression at a young age and my latest genre is block printing. I, along with other block printers, such as Felix Lucero, have had our prints accepted in the Library of Congress Collection. I love animals and I believe it shows through my art."¹⁴⁵ In those lines, Frank acknowledges a part of his life that existed before his incarceration and continues to exist as both a part of and apart from his incarcerated conditions. Art is something Frank has been creating since he was a child. Now, from behind bars, he continues to create art as an incarcerated student that is published within the College Program's annual arts journal. His art links together two seemingly distant parts of his life. It is a medium, like writing, in which he can show who he has been, as well as who he is now. Frank, the incarcerated artist, reveals another layer of to what the incarcerated experience looks like.

¹⁴⁴ Henry Edward Frank, "Self Portrait," in *Openline 2008*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, John Hart, Felix Lucero, Harrison M. Seuga (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008), 36.

¹⁴⁵ Henry Edward Frank, "Contributor's Notes," in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 55.

Frank has also had his work accepted into the Library of Congress collection. This is not something that one usually imagines is possible for an “inmate” or a “prisoner” because usually they are defined by their separation and isolation from the society that exists outside prison walls. However Frank shows us that through the creation of his art, he is actively participating in outside society, and is being acknowledged for his contributions by the Library of Congress. Similarly, Kevin O’Donnell, another incarcerated artist who’s drawing of a lighthouse on a rocky coast, entitled *Not the Lighthouse at Yaquina Head, Oregon* appears in *Openline 2009*, writes in his *Contributor’s Notes*: “I began my career as an artist some 12 years ago, shortly after receiving my life sentence...The drawing included in this edition of OpenLine is the result of years of dedication and hard work.”¹⁴⁶ His use of the term “career” is noteworthy because it implies a certain amount of dedication and success in a given field. O’Donnell has dedicated his time to developing a career in the arts. This shows a level of autonomy and interaction with others that is antithetical to the idea of the incarcerated person as removed from society. Like all of the contributors to *Openline*, O’Donnell navigates the everyday obstacles of incarceration in order to exercise his personal autonomy by making a conscious choice about how to spend his time. Through this decision he is able to create space for a *personal life* within an oppressive system.

Randall Countryman, whose pencil drawings appear in both *Openline 2008* and *2009*, writes in his 2009 *Contributor’s Notes*: “Mr. Countryman prefers to draw in pencil because it gives a sense of nostalgia and an antique quality to his artwork. He has drawn portraits and landscape scenes for clients all over the world, including Europe, China, and

¹⁴⁶ Kevin O’Donnell, “Contributor’s Notes,” in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 57.

the United States.”¹⁴⁷ Countryman’s artistic decisions represent a choice to find freedom in the everyday within a system of seemingly complete domination. Furthermore, like Frank, Countryman has had his work featured in other places besides *Openline*. He has drawn for “clients” all over the world. The word “clients” implies that Countryman, like O’Donnell and Frank, is participating in a life that is outside of prison while at the same time being in prison. This means that a part of the incarcerated experience is being a member of society on the outside. In a system that functions to keep incarcerated subjects apart from society, Frank, O’Donnell, and Countryman show that they actually function as citizens through their art. They are not socially dead, and their works give us insight into the specifics of their lives.

Conclusion

All of these artists define themselves as something more than an “inmate.” Their work, published in *Openline*, actively re-defines what it means to be incarcerated in America. Reading the *Openline* journals, then, re-creates who the incarcerated person is, and what the incarcerated experience looks like in the American imagination. This begins to create conventions for one’s incarcerated status as it’s own subject position that intersects with race, class, gender, and sexuality. The conventions of the incarcerated experience are based on common themes that appear in the writings within *Openline* such as family separation and re-creation, destruction and re-building of community, and difficulties faced re-entering society on parole.

¹⁴⁷ Randall Countryman, “Contributor’s Notes,” in *Openline 2009*, ed. Michael C. Gallardo, Felix Lucero, Jonathan Wilson (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2009), 55.

Paradoxically, at the same time that *Openline* provides a multiplicity of voices that begin to define the incarcerated experience, the content of the writings prove that there is not one incarcerated experience-just as there is not one American, black, brown, female, male, homosexual, or heterosexual experience. Instead, these categories intersect with each other. However, it is important to mark incarcerated experience as its own subject position because otherwise the black incarcerated experience and the black incarcerated subject are conflated with the black experience and the black citizen. To conflate the two only contributes to (rather than breaks from) a discourse of “black criminality” in the United States. Reading the writings in *Openline* blind to the race of the authors allows one to see what the incarcerated subject has in common with all subjugated people: the ways they negotiate their existence within dominating and oppressive systems of power.

The incarcerated authors are not socially dead as their physical separation, isolation and misinformation about their daily lives would suggest. Instead, the incarcerated people who contribute to *Openline* use their personal lives to become a part of society: either through literary or visual art. What keeps them apart from the outside world is the outside world’s reluctance to engage with their perspectives and stories. The pieces within *Openline* also teach us how incarcerated people find and use their agency to become active citizens in a system that defines them as subjects. Through their essays, literary and visual art, they re-define themselves and prove *who they are* to readers. Their writing and art come to shape their incarcerated experience for themselves and others.

Conclusion

The writings within *Openline* provide the language and insight, from the pens of the incarcerated students themselves, to begin understanding the incarcerated experience. Through their writing, the authors define themselves by re-telling or re-creating their life experiences. These memories represent their lives on the outside as well as their lives while incarcerated. At the same time that they highlight the experience of incarceration as central to their lives, they are not divorced from their former life on the outside. They maintain and also create new intimate relationships with those on the outside. Through the relationships they develop and the way they choose to spend their time, the incarcerated students writing in *Openline* find a way to define themselves while still remaining subjects, not citizens.

However, their writing and art provides an avenue for changing this status. Their work defines them in the American imagination as something other than stereotypes or statistics. It reveals that they are fathers, mentors, sons, poets, and visual artists. This helps to reformulate the image of the incarcerated person. Instead of being defined by his race, class, gender, sexuality, or crime, the works in *Openline* allow us to define the incarcerated person based on his particular experience of subjugation and its set of conventions, namely forced family separation, destruction of community, and difficulties faced re-entering society on parole.

That said, this project has not defined the “incarcerated experience.” If anything, it has shown that it is different for each individual. All the individuals who are incarcerated students enrolled in a the College Program at San Quentin have done different things with their resources based on what is important to them (being a father,

mentoring youth, critiquing the criminal justice system, writing poetry, drawing, etc). But these experiences only become real for the citizenry through the literature and art.

Without these mediums, incarcerated individuals remain socially dead in the American imagination. The works in *Openline* function as the evidence of, as well as the medium through which, the meaning of incarceration is complicated. The writings allow us to know who the incarcerated person is, who he has been, and how he functions in American society.

These voices and opinions provide a view from the inside that can augment the existing scholarship and activism in Prison Studies. By reading *Openline*, we find that incarcerated people are active participants in society, though the nature of their punishment is to isolate them from society. While physically separated, they do play a role in American life. We need to know what the nature of their role is in order to better understand what it can be. For instance, the writings tell us that incarcerated individuals are already mentoring youth, and creating an incarcerated community. Because we now understand this, we know that expanding mentorship programs or providing incarcerated people with a more mainstream platform to speak could significantly help to prevent youth incarceration and recidivism. The works also provide activists and/or policy-makers with necessary information about flaws in the criminal justice system and possible solutions. For example, juveniles should not be tried as adults. Instead they should be tried as juveniles and given a second chance at the age of 25. Similarly, providing \$200 at the gate does not help a person to successfully re-enter society, what would be more helpful is transitional housing and more vocational training.

While *Openline* has taught its readers a lot about the incarcerated experience, we must also keep in mind that there are other incarcerated people without the privilege of communicating through a published journal or without access to a program of higher education at all. What of these experiences? A step for further research and activism in Prison Studies would be to organize arts groups for incarcerated people (where they do not yet exist) and for new parolees. Analyzing the writings and stories coming out of these programs would continue to chip away at uncovering who is incarcerated in America today as well as the flaws in the criminal justice system from the first person perspective. These projects would also be a step toward understanding how one's race, class, gender, and sexuality intersects with one's incarcerated status. Ultimately, *Openline*, the Prison University Project, and other similar endeavors are about education: for both the incarcerated and the un-incarcerated.

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