



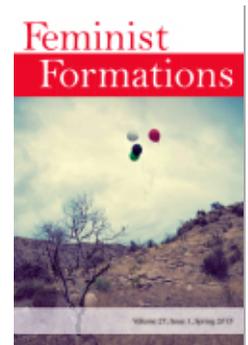
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What Words Might Do: The Challenge of Representing Women in Prison and Their Writing

Wendy Wolters Hinshaw and Tobi Jacobi

*In seeking to increase visibility of the experiences of incarcerated women involved with literacy programs, it is too easy to simplify the relationship among prisoners/teachers/texts and to overlook the material and rhetorical implications of literacy work behind bars. The article argues for methods of representing incarcerated women and their writing that resist mainstream subjectivities and provide means for more fully acknowledging the complex circumstances in which incarcerated women's writing is produced and circulated. In order to theorize a feminist ethic of literacy work behind bars, the article grounds its discussion in an analysis of the documentary *What I Want My Words To Do To You* (Katz et al. 2003) because it is representative of growing feminist efforts to document or otherwise transmit carceral writing, particularly writing by women. The article calls for a feminist ethic for prison literacy work and suggests feminist practices for facilitating and representing writing programs based in understanding how complex material and discursive contexts might work to (re)shape institutional realities for the thousands of women and girls incarcerated around the globe.*

Keywords: Ensler, Eve / ethics of representation / incarcerated women / prison documentary / prison literacy / prison writing / *What I Want My Words To Do To You*

Recent media demonstrate the seemingly insatiable appetite for stories of violence, tragedy, and sorrow drawn from the worlds of incarcerated people; such stories continue to dominate television and visual media culture more broadly. The spectacle of male criminality has been a long-time feature of television shows,

such as *Cops*, the HBO series *Oz*, and many others. Television shows featuring women prisoners and stories of women's crime have become increasingly popular as demonstrated by series like *Snapped* and the new, wildly popular *Orange Is the New Black*. However, sites for viewing incarcerated women have rarely allowed us to hear from the women themselves. Voices of incarcerated women are often silenced entirely or heavily dominated by investigative narratives focused on retelling the details of their crimes from law enforcement or other public perspectives. As Jodie Michelle Lawston and Ashley Lucas (2011) note,

“[a] major problem with both current and past mainstream media representations of incarcerated women is that the material presented tells us little about how these women represent themselves, how they conceptualize and process imprisonment and the separation from their communities and families, and how they express dissent and fight for their voices to be heard by those on the outside of prison walls” (3–4).

Television provides us with increasing opportunities to view the incarcerated though not to hear from them, and certainly not to hear from them on issues beyond the details of their crimes.

We need to hear from incarcerated writers in general, and we particularly need incarcerated women's self-representations that can counter existing narrow representations of criminalized women. As Lawston and Lucas argue, “only when imprisoned women speak for themselves—rather than having criminal justice ‘experts,’ the media, and medical practitioners speak for them—will it be possible to shatter stereotypical understandings of crime and incarceration” (6). Scholars, educators, and activists continue to work through various media to address these silences and help make prisoners' voices heard. Lawston and Lucas's edited collection *Razor Wire Women* (2011) gathers writing and visual art from incarcerated women, as well as activists, scholars, and family members working on behalf of the incarcerated. In doing so, the collection seeks to counter existing monolithic representations of women's criminality, and it is part of a growing effort to provide incarcerated women with opportunities to represent themselves. The US-based PEN International literary organization sponsors an annual prison-writing contest and facilitates a mentor program that connects inside and outside writers. In addition to *Razor Wire Women*, several other anthologies have highlighted women's prison writing in recent years (Faith 2006; Johnson 2004; Lamb 2004, 2007; Scheffler 2002; Waldman and Levi 2011), and a series of memoirs from both high-profile and lesser-known women have worked to illuminate the experience of incarceration for women in the United States. Additionally, there are smaller, self-published and sponsored literary publications like zines, program collections, and online texts that work to increase access to women's representations of prison life beyond those exploited (and often exaggerated) by popular media. Moreover, documentary and independent film representations have captured prison life, as well as the

adaptation of social programs like the Girl Scouts to correctional contexts. Nonprofit organizations ranging from religious groups to prison-abolition coalitions have created web-based communities to increase the public dissemination of policy, women's words, and activist happenings, and even popular sites like Twitter and Facebook have begun to function as venues for prison writing and reform advocacy.¹

As program facilitators and advocates for prisoner writing ourselves, we are encouraged by the growing body of publication resources available to writers inside, and the growing scholarly and public interest in accessing and supporting prisoner writing. However, such projects also require us to wrestle with fundamental questions about the ethics of representation. As Ruby C. Tapia (2010) argues in her introduction to the edited collection *Interrupted Life*, an anthology of scholarly, creative, and expository narratives on women's prison experiences, ever present is the "risk of creating unproductive, even violent, relations of representation and interpretation" (2). Such risks resonate for incarcerated women, particularly in circumstances where there are significant differences in power between those constructing (and witnessing) the representations and those being represented. The risks of representation are perhaps even more acute in the case of incarcerated women, since the frameworks for envisioning them have historically been so narrow (for example, fallen women, monsters, sexualized objects, and so on).

In the discussion to follow, we argue for methods of representing incarcerated women and their writing that resist the limited frameworks used in much contemporary media and provide means for more fully acknowledging the complex circumstances in which incarcerated women's writing is produced and circulated. In order to theorize a feminist ethic of literacy work behind bars, we ground our discussion in an analysis of the documentary *What I Want My Words To Do To You* (2003 Katz et al.) because it is representative of growing feminist efforts to document or otherwise transmit carceral writing, particularly by women. Although several other documentaries feature writing and performance work inside prisons (for example, *Freedom Road*, *The Grey Area*, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, *Voices in Time*), this film was distributed through public television's "Point of View" series and the DVD remains available on Netflix, providing it with a much broader distribution than the geographically limited showings fated to most documentaries. *What I Want My Words To Do To You*, directed by Judith Katz, Madeleine Gavin, and Gary Sunshine, focuses on a writing program developed by Eve Ensler at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York. Ensler is at the center of the film's story and also co-produces it; well-known for her long-running play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) and its accompanying organization V-Day, she brings name recognition to the project, as well as an expectation of popularized feminist ethos. As with *The Vagina Monologues*, where "audiences gain what appears to be direct access to voices now freed" (Cooper 2007, 728), *What I Want My Words To Do To You* focuses

on Ensler's attempts to empower incarcerated women through their writing. However, in doing so, the film also illuminates the challenge of representing, as well as facilitating the self-representation of, marginalized others. As Ensler's workshop and film attempt to render incarcerated women's writing and voices visible, they also raise important questions about how to support incarcerated women's self-representation and critical literacy in ways that more directly effect redistributions around power over writing and representation and that build solidarity between prison insiders and outsiders.

We see in Ensler's documentary a site of struggle, and our analysis of the documentary integrates our own research and teaching practices with incarcerated girls and women in order to offer a feminist ethic of literacy work. Our collective research and direct work with juvenile and adult incarcerated writers and readers suggest a set of practices that may move prison-education programs like Ensler's workshop toward more actively engaging a feminist ethic for program facilitation, public representation, and, ultimately, social justice. As program coordinators and facilitators ourselves, we have attempted to employ a wide range of strategies, and believe that several core practices move writers and their publics toward an ethical approach to representation without perpetuating the likelihood of personal or community harm. Such practices include building rhetorical awareness about the politics of representation through deliberate conversation before circulation occurs, the implementation of transparent guidelines for institutional expectations and regulations for textual publications, and the use of clear and understandable permission-to-publish consent forms. We also advocate making available alternative venues for publication, as well as a promotion of writing processes that model strong revision and publication-readiness assessment. Such practices might precede though not exclude a candid conversation about circulation tactics and implications. As rhetoricians Jackie Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) argue, the social circulations of feminist work—here, prison writing—have great influence on its rhetorical reception and ideological potential. Women's prison writing must be circulated among and across individual, institutional, and public contexts in order to fully engage writers (and readers) in public conversations about incarceration. In many ways, incarcerated writers are more knowledgeable than their program facilitators about negotiating these multiple discursive and material contexts; however, since workshops often introduce writers to new opportunities for writing and publication, open conversations about the possibilities and politics of self- and familial representation are both an educational opportunity and ethical responsibility.

Practice 1: Support and Sponsor Women's Contributions to Their Own Self-Representations

What I Want My Words To Do To You focuses on Ensler's writing workshop, started at Bedford Hills in 1998 as a means of contributing to the wider effort to provide incarcerated women with opportunities for self-expression.² The

workshop focuses on a series of writing exercises that the film's opening intertitles explains are designed to "challenge each inmate to address her crime, reckon with her past, and envision a meaningful future." It prompts focus primarily on the women's crimes (for example, first writing exercise: "write about your crime") and encourages them to analyze the circumstances leading up to their incarceration, their past and current relationships with family members and victims, and their processes of dealing with their own feelings of remorse and guilt. The writing group's process of self-exploration is juxtaposed in the film with actors (Glenn Close, Marisa Tomei, Mary Alice, Hazelle Goodman, and Rosie Perez) who, also under Ensler's direction, read, discuss, and prepare to perform the women's writing at a stage performance at the prison, and eventually to audiences outside the prison. Scenes from this stage performance, which was held at Bedford Hills before an audience of the writers and about 300 other inmates, provide the opening and closing of the film, and the actors' rehearsal readings of the inmates' writing are interspersed throughout with scenes from the prison writing group in which the women read and discuss their writing with one another.

We appreciate the growing efforts to facilitate public voices for incarcerated women (and men) and are committed to supporting them. We understand that in order to have representational politics, we must first have representations. However, as facilitators and researchers of prisoner writing, we also face important questions about who is best served by these representations. Who designs the websites and makes the films? Who publishes the words of incarcerated people, and where do such publications circulate? What are the impacts of such representations? Ensler's effort to transmit women's carceral writing to wider audiences provides an important site for theorizing how to support and sponsor women's contributions to their own self-representations. Because of the film's potential reach, no doubt due in part to its inclusion of recognizable public figures, it has an opportunity to help transmit incarcerated women's voices to a public audience. Ensler and the actors provide a vehicle for accessing incarcerated women's stories, and yet, the significant role that they occupy in the film also seems to co-opt the experiences of the incarcerated writers who are ostensibly its focus.

Representing Individual Transformation

The film seems designed to facilitate incarcerated women's access to representing themselves, and its title clearly places incarcerated women in an authorial role. Short segments in which writers directly address the audience and tell us "what they want their words to do" *to* and *for* us appear throughout the film, interrupting the narrative as it builds toward the final prison performance and reminding the audience of the authors' intentions for participating in this project. However, while the film seems to set out to tell the stories of the women writers, it actually spends a significant amount of time establishing Ensler's own transformation narrative. The centrality of this transformation becomes

evident in the opening scene when Ensler takes the stage at the prison to introduce the performance. She reads a poem she has written about what she has learned from her work with the writing group, admitting that “before I came here to Bedford, I imagined you the women here—mistakes lying on mistake cots behind steel mistake bars.”³ Ensler explains that through the course of her four-year involvement with Bedford she learned “there is the mistake. It is one moment. It is in the past. It is ruined. It cannot be changed. Then—there is the woman.” By placing her own transformation narrative at the beginning, it seems that she is attempting to reframe the film audience’s accustomed ways of viewing criminalized women so that we might also be prepared to view them as “women” and not “mistakes.”

Ensler’s opening monologue lays the groundwork for valuing the women’s self-expressions to follow, but it also creates a framework of individual transformation through which the audience will be asked to value them. The public has long imagined prison as a site for personal transformation,⁴ and these first scenes set in motion audience expectations for stories and experiences of how the women have been transformed by their incarceration. Although some of the women writers (such as Judith Clark) attempt to carefully question the consequences of a system that incarcerates more than 2 million people, the film seems to send a clear message from the start that the prison system, when combined with the emancipatory potential of writing, can turn “mistakes” into “women.” This framework limits the kinds of self-representations that it, and perhaps the women themselves, will offer. Ensler’s imagination of a single “mistake” that is “in the past” leaves no room for women who may be actively engaged in illicit behaviors or who may not perceive their actions as having been mistakes at all. Similarly, while she alludes to the audience’s mistake in viewing these women through narrow terms, there is no mention of legal mistakes, such as wrongful convictions or unjust sentencing laws. This simplified language seems inadequate when we consider the highly publicized 1998 release of former Bedford inmate Betty Tyson when her conviction was overturned,⁵ the many women at Bedford currently appealing their convictions (several of whom are in the workshop), and the large number of US prisoners serving long sentences due to mandatory minimum sentencing for nonviolent drug offenses.⁶

We argue that a feminist ethic of literacy work behind bars must make prisoners’ writing public, as Ensler’s film attempts to do, but we also submit that giving voice to incarcerated women is not enough. In facilitating and representing prisoner writing, we are obligated to be conscious of the circumstances under which these representations are produced, the vehicles we use to disseminate them, and how they are mobilized in various movements for social justice. Although Ensler grounds her film in what the writers “want [their] words to do,” as facilitators and audiences of prisoner writing we must, as Tapia (2010, 2) warns, “consistently interrogate” what we imagine and want such representations “to do for ‘us.’” Ensler’s focus on mistakes whets our appetite for prison

confessionals. The women's stories, while creating an opportunity for valuing experiential knowledge, also exist within discursive conventions that expect prisoners to confess their crimes and demonstrate remorse. Ensler's emphasis on personal transformation through the specific vehicle of confessional writing represents a fundamental tension between her feminist attempts to value experiential and nontraditional knowledge structures as a way of countering the dehumanizing modern carceral regime and the discursive conventions for viewing prisoners' speech and writing, particularly speech and writing that are about their crimes. Although Ensler does provide an opportunity for valuing incarcerated women's experiences, enabling them to describe their experiences in their own words and thereby speak back to the limited frameworks imposed on them by the justice system and the public, her emphasis on individual rehabilitation is overpowering: opportunities for change that are discursively demanded by the women, and opportunities for systemic critique, are therefore lost.

Representing Confession

As stated earlier, Ensler's prompts lead to a focus, in the workshop and film, primarily on the women's crimes and experiences of victimization. All of the women's convicted offenses are identified in the film, mostly during the women's readings and discussions of their writing within the clips from the workshop. Prompts like "describe the facts of your crime" and "write a letter to someone you love explaining to them why you are in prison" identify the women through their convicted offenses from the film's beginning, urging them to confess their crimes, whereas "write a piece about a scar on your body" focuses on their experiences of victimization. At the end of the film, each of the inmate-participants addresses the audience individually, stating her name, convicted crime, and sentence. Ensler integrates the women's confessions of their crimes with confessions of abuse they also experienced. In the first clip of the writing workshop, in which Keila Pulinario reads her essay describing the sexual assault that precipitated her murder of a family friend, her own attack is provided as a context for her crime, and the access to criminal justice that she did not have as a victim is contrasted with the punishment she is serving as a convicted criminal. Pulinario's story also sparks a discussion in the group about her initial decision not to report her rape or attempt to prosecute the rapist. She explains that it "never occurred to me to go to the police."

The women's testimonies of the abuse they suffered prior to incarceration help Ensler to complicate their status as "criminals": they also have been victims of crimes, and, unlike the crimes for which they have been convicted, the crimes against them have often gone unpunished (or at least unprosecuted). However, this social justice critique is undermined by the film's continued emphasis on individual responsibility, as demonstrated by Ensler's repeated claim to the women that "when you get to own full responsibility, you get to be free." Her alternation between frameworks of victimization and accountability also

reproduces a problematic binary evident in many representations of criminalized women. As Andrianai Fili (2013) points out, such “umbrella terms of either responsible agents or dependent victims [also] assume a false universality that excludes particular kinds of experience and obscures the realities of women and prison” (16). Ensler’s framing of the women as alternately feminized victims and culpable women who should be held responsible for their “mistakes” reproduces an individualized ethic that focuses on the women themselves, who are in need of either therapeutic or rehabilitative transformation, rather than on broader social or systemic analysis. Several workshop scenes suggest that adopting an ethic of individual responsibility can create freedom from the “mistake” itself, the guilt and trauma of crime, and the social responsibility that might be shared, particularly in cases involving domestic violence. The explanation Ensler offers not only reinforces institutional and public expectations that the women take responsibility for their crimes, but it also flattens the experiences of all of the women, equating them all as simply having reacted to the behaviors of others, whether abuse or insufficient attention.

As prison workshop facilitators and advocates for prisoner writing, we are surprised by Ensler’s focus on the women’s crimes and her desire to “pus[h] workshop participants to come to terms with their crimes as if that were the only story they by right had to tell” (Davis 2011, 211). Such a focus is common in mainstream media stories, which almost always center on revealing the convicted offense. Yet, prisoners’ publications of their own writing rarely reveal or even address their crimes, and we know of no prison workshop programs or facilitators that attempt to reveal them. The founder of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan, Buzz Alexander, writes of a philosophy that builds writing, theater, and art programs in local prisons: “we do not ask the incarcerated about their crimes. After all, they do not ask us about the private things we are ashamed of, just as we do not ask each other. Also, . . . we may be the only people in their lives who do not know, and they deserve to have such people” (2010, 65). Prison writers often hesitate to write about their crimes for a number of reasons, not the least of which can be potential ongoing appeal efforts, but may also do so out of a desire to be seen as more than just their crimes. As Kathy Boudin (2011), a Bedford writer featured in Ensler’s film, writes in the foreword to Lawston and Lucas’s *Razor Wire Women*,

[I]n prison you crave space, space to be someone other than a label of “murderer,” “bad mother,” “drug addict,” “baby killer,” “terrorist,” “victim of abuse,” “abuser,” “AIDS-ridden,” “bitch”—labels from society, labels from one another. What makes it so hard is that those labels often connect to a vulnerable pocket inside the woman. Women are craving space to forge identities that are truer, more complex, and that enable them to move forward instead of being cemented into a hole. (xix)

Enslar exemplifies how scholars and activists who attempt to bring increased attention to writing by prisoners risk appropriating the juridical role of “confessor” that they may set out to critique. Particularly to the extent that writing assignments take up labels and discourses already inscribed by the surrounding institution and culture—the “pockets” Boudin describes—prison writers become vulnerable to their reinscription through their writing and self-representations.

It is easy for prison writing facilitators and instructors to overlook the material and discursive conditions in which incarcerated women write. Such conditions might include the role of institutional programs, policies, and surveillance in shaping what prisoners are able to write about; the power dynamics that shape relationships between writing group facilitators or workshop leaders and their incarcerated participants; and prisoners’ understanding of social expectations for carceral writing, including elements of confession and demonstrations of conversion or transformation. Indeed, we worry that, as Michel Foucault (1990) so aptly demonstrated, “[o]ne confesses—or is forced to confess” (59). It is difficult to imagine self-disclosure emerging from behind prison walls without some element of coercion, whether intentional or naïve. Awareness of these institutional and critical conditions is key to the kind of critical literacy we argue that feminist programs must work to build both inside and outside of carceral institutions.

We suggest that a feminist model for prison programming must negotiate valuing women’s stories with critical attention to the potential hazards and perils of self-representation; autobiographical writing offers women opportunities for healing and educating their peers and public, but it can also put them at risk. Program facilitators need to make space for writing that is less risky, as well as to create space for riskier autobiographical writing to remain private, as a deliberate move away from practices that expect public confessions that reify fixed-identity narratives for incarcerated writers. In our experiences—Hinshaw’s research with girls in a juvenile corrections facility, and Jacobi’s work at a county jail—the use of pseudonyms was required, as were specific methods for gaining participant (and parental) consent. Although these requirements were determined by an Institutional Review Board designed to protect the interests of the research institution rather than the participants, such policies serve as a reminder of the unstable notion of “consent” within carceral facilities. The opportunity to participate in special programs can be coercive in itself to inmates with little opportunity for outside stimulation. Although Enslar’s film provides no mention of these issues, we cannot imagine the ethical challenges in negotiating participant consent in the context of a film crew, celebrity actors, and the appeal of Enslar herself.

Practice 2: Build Critical Literacy about US Prison Conditions and Policy Both Inside and Outside

The narrow focus in *What I Want My Words To Do To You* on the women's crimes and experiences of victimization demonstrates Ensler's faith that the women's testimonies about these events will empower and help them to forge identifications with the audience through their demonstrations of responsibility and remorse. However, as we are concerned about the implications of representing women's confessions, we are also concerned about the risks of adopting romantic notions of writing-as-empowerment in *any* writing workshop through overstating the empowerment possible, even when the subject matter moves beyond disclosure. We risk perpetuating the myth of literacy in claiming individual empowerment through the written word and the writing workshop.

Building Literacy on the Inside

There is no question that the involvement of well-known actors, as well as Ensler herself, brings recognition to the women's writing that it would otherwise not receive, and that this recognition results in real benefits to the other programs at Bedford and in these women's lives. As the film states at the beginning, the actors have performed outside the prison at fundraisers for Bedford's college program. While film and stage performances have benefited various literacy programs at the prison, the writing group in the film largely represents women who are capable and often elegant writers. This is no surprise in light of the rich resources available at Bedford. It is truly a unique correctional institution, where an active volunteer base supports a college program so successful that one in five of the 850 inmates is pursuing a college or postgraduate degree: "[h]ardened criminals arriving at the prison discover that the inmate leaders are not gang members but women who stay up late reading Romantic poetry and studying for sociology exams" (Worth 2001). *New York Times* reporter Robert Worth notes that although the Bedford program is one of the largest and most robust prison education programs in the country, it is difficult to replicate: Bedford's program is entirely volunteer-run and funded largely by the donations of wealthy philanthropists in nearby areas. Most states require and provide (some) funding for basic education programs for inmates who have not received a GED, but most prison education stops at the high school equivalency level.

A feminist model for prisoner education must not only address *basic* literacy needs, but also the *critical* literacy needs of men and women in prison. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey, 37 percent of incarcerated men and women have not completed high school, and 9 percent have not even entered high school; alternately, 41 percent have completed high school or its equivalent, and 22 percent have completed postsecondary education (Greenberg, Dunleavy, and Kutner 2007, 11–12). These statistics demonstrate the varied educational backgrounds of people in prison, and the

need for broad-based educational methods that address prisoners' different needs. The GED and basic literacy programs are important to supplement the limited primary and secondary education that many prisoners have experienced, as is an understanding of the negative school experiences that many prisoners carry with them.

That said, prisoners also need feminist educational and writing programs that couch writing activities within larger methods for critical literacy, connecting them with the outside world; included in this are opportunities to build social awareness and engagement beyond the prison. Program facilitators ought to be committed to using their programs to create opportunities for varied writing for incarcerated women, including communication needs beyond the prison. Although space for autobiographical writing is often useful and desired, opportunities for writing and connecting outside of the self might encourage prison writers to link their individual experience to more systemic understandings and critiques of current practice.⁷ Ensler makes this happen in her film when it moves from autobiographical writing to segments where the women directly address the audience, stating what they “want their words to do” and thereby making connections and commitments to social change. The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, developed by Lori Pompa in 1997 between Temple University and facilities in Philadelphia, has been adopted internationally as a model for providing dialogue and education in prisons. In the program, university students enter the prisons to share classroom space, materials, and ideas with incarcerated students. As Lori Pompa (2004) writes, in these classes “incarcerated students have the opportunity to place their particular experiences with the criminal justice system in a larger context. This leads to a fuller understanding of how society functions, how the system operates, and the effect of these forces on one’s life and choices” (33). While this partnership model is certainly distinct from programs that Ensler and we ourselves have developed for prisons, we believe that Pompa highlights important objectives that are applicable to prison writing programs embracing critical literacy goals with or without outside partnerships.

Building Literacy on the Outside

Writing workshops facilitated at carceral institutions ranging from county jails to federal supermax prisons occasionally produce compilations of women’s writing as a way of both celebrating the accomplishment of writing and increasing access to these women’s words for audiences beyond the participants. (In fact, the writing workshop at Bedford produced such a compilation: *Aliens at the Border* was published in 1997 by Segue Press, one year before Ensler began her involvement with the program.) Jacobi’s SpeakOut! writing workshop, for example, attempts to build critical literacy by incorporating global perspectives into the workshop activities, again taking a cue from Royster and Kirsch (2012), who argue that globalization is an opportunity for extending our notion

of how influence occurs, where shared concerns might emerge. SpeakOut! has attempted this by regularly introducing writing examples that raise women's issues beyond US borders; for example, by experimenting with culturally informed form/content and "meeting" other women's writing groups, such as the Afghan Women's Writing Project (<http://awwproject.org/>). The workshop group also produces and sponsors the biannual publication of *SpeakOut! Journal*, a creative and expository collection of writings from four adult and juvenile groups. The aim of the journal is to recognize underrepresented writers, offer space for representations of self that counter those told for incarcerated writers, and to increase public access to such narrations as a way of shifting public perceptions. Such work intends to enact the kinds of responsible rhetorical action that Royster and Kirsch call for as integral to the work of contemporary feminist research practices that embody an ethics of care and hope (146–47).

Hinshaw has also worked with prison programs that have produced compilations of writing and art of incarcerated girls. In her current partnership with an arts organization serving incarcerated adult women, she has worked to facilitate the publication of their writing in outside venues, including the collection *Women, Writing, and Incarceration: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out* (2014) edited by Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford. She has also worked to develop opportunities for dialogue that are modeled on Pompa's program; while her partnerships do not bring university students inside the prisons, she has developed opportunities for written exchanges between university and carceral students that provide both groups with critical conversations about how their writings are shaped by various institutional and social contexts. Such exchanges are designed to provide both groups with perspectives on how their writings are situated and where they might circulate.

Other groups work to facilitate prison writing with the intention of fostering more direct political intervention. Prison-abolition groups like Beyondmedia Education, Critical Resistance, and Justice Now have moved in this direction by working with incarcerated writers to deploy narratives strategically for specific policy-change campaigns. Beyondmedia's "Women+Prison: A Site for Resistance" program encourages women in prison, as well as their families and those who are released, to "use media arts to voice their stories, promoting public dialogue, healing and community organizing."⁸ Justice Now's "Building a World Without Prisons" campaign, for example, emphasizes alliances built across subject position and status through the use of "popular education, training, theater, music, art, and community organizing to create a vision of a world without prisons and develop the tools to make it a reality now." The group partnered with *Vectors*, a culture and technology journal, to create an interactive literacy project called "Public Secrets" aimed at increasing the visibility of the conditions of incarceration for women in California.⁹ While we support individual advancement in terms of traditional educational paths, participation in critical political work like Justice Now's embodies a feminist ethic by moving

beyond the autobiographical and affording women writers with opportunities to leverage their experiences and perspectives beyond individual culpability and toward public education and meaningful policy change.

Practice 3: Accelerate Tactical Redistributions of Power

Feminists committed to social justice, such as Angela Davis (2003) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), have argued that the formation of a more socially just world depends on the development of strategic alliances and coalitions built across power, privilege, race, and nation. Such coalition-building requires attention to relationships forged within carceral classrooms and across diverse institutional contexts, and must acknowledge the tensions between individual agency and larger social responsibilities. A critical feminist model for prison programming must redistribute power in both its private and public actions. Although Ensler seems committed to some of these goals, at one point telling the actors' group that the workshop is based on the rule that "no one is ever allowed to judge anyone," she wields significant influence in the film over the content and direction of the workshop. Ensler controls the writing prompts and is in the center of many of the film's workshop discussions. However, some scenes show the tensions and negotiations around the power dynamics of the workshop; for example, at one point during a discussion of their relationships with their mothers, she suggests to the group that none of them really had a "core"—in other words, love and support from their mothers. Ensler continues, "I don't want to say that this is the only factor. . . . I think you get your mother's love or you don't. This is my own theory." Several of the women disagree, including Roslyn Smith and Judith Clark. Smith flatly responds to Ensler's statement, "I can't agree with that, Eve." She insists that even though she was abandoned by her mother and raised by her grandmother, she never missed her mother's love and rejects Ensler's theory as a framework for understanding her crime. The conversation is sparked by Clark's reading of a personal narrative she has written about seeking her mother's attention as a child. In her essay, she relates a childhood memory of seeking her mother's attention when she was home sick with the chicken pox, and then uses this memory as a frame to help her understand the later periods in her life where she continued to perform increasingly extreme acts in order to command the attention of others. However, Clark resists the simplified explanation that Ensler attempts to apply, arguing that many people do not receive enough love from their parents, yet most do not end up in prison, pointing out (rightfully) that the same conditions produce different results in different people.

It is to Ensler's credit, and our benefit, that she includes this scene in the film, because it reminds us of the tensions that often exist between the frames we may want to apply to prisoner art or writing and the explanations they choose for themselves. In other words, the frameworks that best serve us politically or theoretically may often oppose prisoners' lived experiences, or the understandings

of their experiences that best serve them. Ensler's "core" explanation seems to her to be a productive, critical frame that helps to contextualize the women's actions within individualized experiences of victimization or neglect, but the women in the group overtly resist it. Our own experiences with incarcerated writers (both youth and adult) corroborate the challenge of assuming that any one narrative frame can/will speak to all experiences; instead, and as Fili (2013) argues, we need more complex frameworks in order to account for "how women conceive of their actions and how the institution perceives them" (18). Ensler joins a tradition of feminist teachers, activists, and scholars who work to bring attention to writing and art produced by prisoners; yet, her method of pressing for individual accountability of crime—even when framed in terms that resist the retributive and "just dessert" rhetoric of the modern prison regime—limits the agency of women who might very well understand the events that led to their incarceration in myriad ways.

Prison programs that wish to counteract the existing hierarchical prison regime must work to redistribute power and agency throughout program participants. Of course, this is often easier said than done. As Pompa (2004) notes, for incarcerated students, "the setting from whence they come and to which they return each class day is authoritarian and oppressive. It is an environment that is antithetical to what is necessary for a productive, creative educational process" (30). Program participation in carceral institutions is often highly unstable, and programs that attempt to build consistent and long-term participation with inmates are at the mercy of shifting work and therapy schedules, appointments with social workers, unpredictable opportunities for outside communication and or/recreation, sudden inmate release or transfer, disciplinary restrictions and/or institutional lockdowns, conflicts among group members, and even competing programs. There are tactical ways, however, to redistribute power within the workshop structure by allowing writers to contribute to curricular design (for example, by prompting choice and activity dynamics), to make critical choices about publication and individual and group representation (titles, photos, bios), and to maintain ownership over their writing (ethically sound responses to writing, revision choice rather than mandate). Indeed, we note important representational strides being made by some literacy- and arts-based prison programs (Hartnett 2011; Lawston and Lucas 2011; Sweeney 2010).

That said, incarcerated women are not accustomed to having power redistributed in their favor, and so program facilitators must cultivate leadership that is capable of maintaining an emotionally safe space for writing and self-expression even as they consistently encourage participants to take responsibility for the content and direction of the group. We suggest that a writing workshop model that invites and reinforces writer and group autonomy better enacts feminist social and educational goals. While we resist the notion of any one model for diverse situations and institutional contexts, we turn to a "continuum model of solidarity" as a way to encourage local acts of agency.

Practice 4: Making Space for Solidarities

A feminist prison program seeking to facilitate and/or represent writing by incarcerated authors must fully situate itself within larger representational concerns, and for many prison teachers and scholars this means developing solidarity.¹⁰ As we have argued throughout this article, this responsibility includes protecting the interests of the individual writers, as well as considering the social and cultural impact of their writing. To imagine such change we draw on what Katherine O'Donnell (2011) calls a "continuum model of solidarity," one that embraces a "solidarity ethics." In her essay "Feminist Social Justice Work: Moving Toward Solidarity," she suggests that such a continuum might move from "alignment to accompaniment to solidarity" (54). O'Donnell defines *alignment* as "identifying oneself with an issue, a person, a movement, or an organization" (58), a process that follows sociopolitical or -cultural awareness of a problem. She identifies the second step, *accompaniment*, as "walking with one another through the process of mutual learning and deepening collective commitments" through a set of nonhierarchical practices. "Accompaniment," she writes, "is based on trust and respect and allows greater trust to potentially develop. Such relationships involve high stakes, sensitive insider knowledge, and emotional attachment and thus can also produce deep hurt and injury" (59). O'Donnell defines *solidarity* through the work of Paulo Freire, who recognized solidarity as "involving praxis, education for the liberation for all parties, and the transformation of oppressive conditions" (54). For her, this translates into a bottom line in all social justice work that focuses on "addressing structural issues reflecting or associated with the root causes of disparities—poverty, food, sovereignty, political voice, and equity" (53).

Aligning and Accompanying Women's Words

In *What I Want My Words To Do To You*, the actors' performances of the incarcerated women's writing that culminates the film provides an important example of *alignment*, in that the actors, much like the film audience, are moved to identify with the women's words. There is an understandable pleasure that the women at Bedford seem to take in hearing famous actors read their work at the cumulative performance; however, there is also a distinct separation between the actors' performances and the writing group that prevents the kinds of "mutual learning" that O'Donnell identifies as part of *accompaniment*. As far as film viewers know, the actors have no contact with the inmates, let alone an opportunity to hear them read or interpret their own writing. The rehearsals take place in New York City, and in one rehearsal clip, Mary Alice describes what she has learned from "reading the inmates' writing," as opposed to hearing them in person. Because the actors do not visit the prison themselves to prepare for their performance, it is up to Enslar to provide a context for the women's writing, and in some ways, she amplifies the drama and mystique of the prison

in her direction of the rehearsals. During the first clip of rehearsal that appears in the documentary (all the clips are taken from one rehearsal session), Ensler tells the actors that in the writing workshop “people put terrible things out there, horrible things, shameful things,” but that the members of the group support one another without judgment. Even though the context of this discussion is that Ensler is trying to explain the relationships of trust that exist in the group and make its existence possible, her allusion to the “terrible,” “horrible,” “shameful” things that the actors are preparing to read (and we are preparing to hear) also seems titillating, potentially sensationalizing the stories that follow.

O'Donnell defines *accompaniment* as a stance of “conscious partiality” that involves participant activism, as opposed to participant observation (59). Arguably, the actors are doing some of this through their involvement in the project, by taking up the cause, and by performing their work outside of the prison at various fundraisers. The actors' performances introduce the women's writing to a wider audience, and serve to make it recognizable to that audience. However, their separation from the inmates removes the responsibility of authenticity from their performance, transporting the women's words from the realm of testimony to art, and their performances further amplify the emotional spectacle of the pieces. The actors interpret and perform the writing as roles or stories that are not grounded in the authority of the writers themselves over their own experiences, but in the actors' (and Ensler's) interpretations of these roles or stories. Although the actors are accountable to their prison audience—the authors themselves are in the front row—they offer creative interpretations that are often very different from the writers' original readings. For example, in Pulinario's reading of her essay (discussed earlier) she is reserved, reticent, halting. Her eyes remain focused on the page and her tone remains largely flat, except when she stumbles briefly over the sentence about her rape. Her reading is then juxtaposed in the film with Perez's performance of the piece in which Perez is much more expressive, revealing, and emotional. In contrast to Pulinario, Perez chokes back tears while grimacing through the first line, “my best friend, or the person who I thought was my best friend.” Importantly, Pulinario's flat tone and reserved demeanor reportedly proved detrimental to her in her initial murder trial in which the prosecution argued that her “seemingly calm demeanor . . . [was] evidence that she had not been raped” (Goodman 2003). In some ways, then, Perez provides a reinterpretation of Pulinario's experience, a demonstration of the impact of her sexual assault that may be more recognizable to audience expectations of the testimony of a rape victim. We might read this performance as rhetorically effective; yet, it also suggests an emotional engagement connected to a kind of healing and understanding that Pulinario's own performance does not reveal. Although Perez's social status might grant her the opportunity to occupy a testifying role, it does not replace the ongoing support for physical and mental health that incarcerated women need in order to survive sexual assault. While we applaud

most efforts to bring public attention to issues of sexual and physical violence, we note that alignment and accompaniment cannot stand in for experience in the ways that a performance of experience might suggest.

Solidarity across Privilege

The extent to which the actors remain separated from the incarcerated women, adapting and perhaps even correcting their “words” into more emotive performances, ultimately prevents the kind of solidarity that Ensler seems to want to build through her workshop and film. The actors, and Ensler herself, occupy positions of privilege and mobility through their abilities to move in and out of the prison, to access the women’s writing, and to ultimately control its circulation. Of course, this is, to some extent, unavoidable: no amount of solidarity with the incarcerated women will change their different levels of freedom and mobility. However, the film never takes the opportunity to interrogate this privilege and therefore also misses the opportunity to encourage audiences of this (and other) prison writing to examine their own privileged access to it. A feminist model for prison programming based on solidarity requires us to recognize the different levels of privilege and freedom that form the basis of our relationships; in other words, solidarity across different levels of power must critically examine those power relations.

The 2012 film *The Grey Area: Feminism Behind Bars* (Ashkenazi) documents a women’s studies class facilitated by students from Grinnell College at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women. Although not focused on prisoner writing per se, the film provides a forceful critique of the structural factors, including gender, race, and class, that shape how women become criminalized, as well as their experiences during imprisonment. The film offers prisoner students and audiences an explicitly feminist framework for understanding women’s incarceration, while also acknowledging the privileged position from which it is able to formulate such a critique. At one point during the film, as the two facilitators return home after a prison class, they discuss the rhetoric of individualism and choice that is so prevalent within the prison system and society at large, and the particular burden that such rhetoric places on incarcerated women. One facilitator argues that such beliefs deny the wider structural issues involved in women’s criminality: “[As a society,] we believe our actions are individual and that privilege has nothing to do with what kind of life we’ll end up living.” The other facilitator responds by questioning whether structural critiques of the causes for and conditions of women’s incarceration actually help incarcerated women: “Wouldn’t it be easier to just accept that I did something bad and that’s why I’m in prison? Are we helping them or are we making it harder?” The first responds that “[f]eminism is hard—it’s hard to constantly question . . . but it’s important.” While the film ultimately privileges this feminist structural critique, this moment raises important questions about who can marshal such critiques and who benefits from them.

In contrast to *What I Want My Words To Do To You*, *The Grey Area* provides a structural analysis of the circumstances that shape women's criminalization and victimization, as well as a self-critical analysis of the limitations of this perspective. In the film, personal and structural analyses provide incarcerated women with new ways of understanding themselves and their surrounding institution and culture of incarceration. However, such critiques work directly against the institutional discourses. While the critiques may empower the women intellectually and emotionally, they are unlikely to help, and may even work against, their material conditions and opportunities for freedom. The film makes clear that individualist explanations are not only easier for the incarcerated women to accept, but also necessary for their access to special programs and eventual release. The film follows two inmates' appeals to the state parole board where both are evaluated rigorously on the extent to which they have taken responsibility for their crimes. While the board recognizes that both women are survivors of severe sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and that their crimes were either directly targeted at their abusers or directly triggered by their experiences of trauma, both parole appeals are denied. The film ultimately values the emotional, intellectual freedom provided by the class, but importantly, it also recognizes its potential limits: namely, the burden it may impose on imprisoned women (and men) to confine their circumstances within structural rather than individualized frameworks, and the reality that such frameworks work against the discourses that prison programs and parole boards use to evaluate prisoners' "progress."

As a feminist model for prison programming based on solidarity requires us to critically examine varying levels of power within our relationships, it also requires us to recognize our relationships to the institutions in which we serve. This includes recognizing the structural critiques and critical frameworks that we offer inmate participants, being conscious of the shifting institutional and cultural contexts in which such frameworks may or may not best serve them. At the same time, solidarity also requires us to recognize our complicity with the institutions in which we serve. We must acknowledge the limits and compromises necessary in any carceral education program; however noble the aims and values of our educational programs, they seldom literally "break down the walls," despite the romanticized ways by which we might like to talk about them or the titles we might use for our published collections. This is also about understanding the extent to which our participation in prison programs makes us complicit in the larger prison-industrial complex; working to improve the conditions of women's incarceration is not the same as, and may in fact be in direct opposition to, working to abolish the modern prison system. Even as our participation might purport to improve the quality of life of the women involved, it also improves conditions within prisons, making inmates easier to manage. Although we may enter the prisons with our own goals for social change, the prisons often let us in the door for the simple reason of making

the job of incarcerating human beings easier. Along the way, we are compelled to accept countless rules and policies to which we may object: for example, the presence of unsupportive or even hostile corrections officers, the censoring of our materials and/or writing by program participants, the involvement and objections of program administrators and staff, and, of course, the surveillance process that accompanies entry into and exit from corrections facilities.

As critical and educated scholar-researchers, it is our responsibility, then, to critically engage representations of prisoner writing in order to examine how institutional relationships are made visible and to question the elements that remain veiled. More than simply tolerating the institutions in which we work, we must recognize them as stakeholders in our programs and, more importantly, in the lives and material conditions of the women served by them. In our own work, we must develop the critical practices that allow us to ethically proceed, retreat, or protest involvement in prison-sanctioned programming and to accompany the writers we work with as we move toward potential solidarity. Further, we must continue to share such practices for negotiating institutional relationships to build broader networks of feminist prison programs.

Conclusion: What Words Might Do

“It’s not that reality is outside. We’re just as real as the outside.
 . . . This is our life right now.”

—Kathy Boudin, in *What I Want My Words To Do To You*

Although we believe that a feminist model for prison education must address representational politics with care, we also believe it must be committed to broadening and complicating available images of incarceration and facilitating access for incarcerated women to represent themselves. This is a fundamental commitment that we share with Ensler, and we applaud her attempt to bring voice to women behind bars, particularly to an initial PBS viewership that might develop empathy for incarcerated women. We have tried to make clear that there is much to admire in Ensler’s attempt to increase public awareness about the experiences of women prisoners; yet, as we have also argued, even a rendering by a public feminist activist like her is rife with representational choices that can rob women of their potential agency and power and dismay many prison educators, ultimately working against feminist-inspired social change. This is not to dismiss the power of writing and literacy work behind bars; indeed, there is much that words might do as they continue to emerge from women’s jails and prisons in the United States and beyond. In *What I Want My Words To Do To You*, Judith Clark demands: “I want my words to fracture the images in your head and leave more questions than answers. I want my words to turn everything upside down. I want them to invite you in. Open up a dialogue. Disrupt your

day.” We believe statements like Clark’s—here represented by her own voice rather than an actor’s interpretation—have much to offer a wide range of publics as we continue to grapple with the floundering US justice system.

We opened this section with Boudin’s claim that life inside is not a suspension of reality; rather, it is real life for over 200,000 women in the country today. We believe that ethical feminist sponsorship of literacy- and writing-based programming has the potential to contribute to the growing social movements in opposition to a global prison-industrial complex, particularly one that locks up women based on policies that criminalize race, gender, sexuality, and poverty. A feminist ethic of literacy work behind bars is a commitment to developing shared democratic practices that work toward social justice. That justice will look different for each participant. University teachers and researchers, for example, may contribute to and experience pedagogical justice through work with engaged writers or through direct advocacy work with policymakers. Incarcerated participants, on the other hand, must face the physical, economic, and psycho-social reality of their living conditions and thus may experience justice work differently; it might be metaphoric, transient, or more tangible justice that comes in the form of momentary relief, new perspectives, or the revision of a relationship within or beyond bars (for example, shifted prison library policy, renewed contact with relatives through writing, textual homage to a loved one, and so on).

We are particularly interested in supporting programming that counters the systematic denial of access to the educational tools that might allow women to break cycles of incarceration that are becoming increasingly generational in nature. This requires conscious redistribution of the ways that power is deployed across the relationships that prison educators and program facilitators have with students and writers inside to create space for individual and collective agency and solidarity. It means recognizing the likelihood of past trauma for many participants in domestic, work, and educational contexts, and working to create frameworks for collaborative learning that avoid reproducing such contexts. Similarly, ethical practice entails recognition of the inevitable complicities of program design and risk of participation for incarcerated students and writers. We suggest that feminist prison program design and teaching principles like those outlined by Amanda Davis (2004) and Tobi Jacobi (2012) demonstrate context-specific approaches that value women’s experiences and narratives, acknowledge prior/current trauma, and increase the access to educational skills and critical spaces for participation in social/civic representations of the self and imprisonment. Such direct work with incarcerated women must also be complemented by efforts to shift the exploitative contemporary-media representations that perpetuate sexualized/hardened/victimized portraits of women in US prisons. Increased publication and circulation of narrative, visual, and oral self-representations of past experiences, as well as critical commentaries on the prison-industrial complex and other social issues that incarcerated women are

often well-positioned to speak about, will result in a much-needed redirection for a US (and global) citizenry capable of initiating systematic change.

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Notes

1. For example, see the public profiles of *Water Under the Bridge* (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=250087818465205&story_fbid=311652108975442#!/pages/Water-Under-the-Bridge/250087818465205?fref=n), an organization dedicated to helping women reemerge into the world after time in an Oregon prison, and *Community Works* (<http://www.communityworkswest.org/>), particularly the performance piece called *Well-Contested Sites* that features formerly incarcerated people making art on Alcatraz Island.

2. In her book *Insecure at Last*, Ensler (2006) explains that she first started going to Bedford Hills in 1994 after being invited to write a movie script about women in prison. After completing her work for the film, Ensler founded a writing group there on her own initiative.

3. Although Ensler does not discuss this film project in *Insecure at Last*, this poem is also published in the book. The book presents a longer version of the poem; in the film, she uses an abbreviated version.

4. The earliest penitentiaries were designed to compel inmates to repent for their sins through silent reflection and prayer. Some early penitentiaries, inspired by the “separate system” or “Pennsylvania system” used at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia (established in 1829), insisted on silence and seclusion at all times, stripping

inmates of all identification and outside stimulus (with the exception of the Bible and biblical teaching) in the hope that their seclusion and disorientation would produce a transformed self.

5. See LaVerne McQuiller Williams's "25 Years to Freedom: An Interview with Betty Tyson."

6. In 2009, mandatory minimum sentences for drug possession were revised in New York, and retroactive legislation has made it possible for thousands of imprisoned men and women to appeal their original sentences (see Jeremy W. Peters, "Deal on State's Drug Laws Means Resentencing Pleas").

7. We do not make such recommendations lightly because involvement in radical prison reform can result in significant backlash, such as loss of privileges, program cancellation, confiscation of writings, loss of good time, and/or physical reassignment, to name just a few.

8. Beyondmedia Education produced a 2004 film titled *Voices in Time* that highlights the effect of mothers' incarceration on their children. It was filmed and directed by formerly incarcerated women. Beyondmedia also sponsors the "Women+Prison: A Site for Resistance" website (<http://womenandprison.org/prison-industrial-complex/>) in which women prisoners, scholars, activists, and families use creative and expository writing to advocate for increased attention to the conditions and challenges within the US prison system.

9. See Justice Now, "Building a World Without Prisons" (<http://www.jnow.org/what.html#>), and *Vectors*, "Public Secrets" (<http://vectors.usc.edu/issues/4/publicsecrets/index.php?overrideReferrer=1>).

10. As Mia McKenzie (2013) argues in her snappy analysis of the ready invocation of "ally" by those in privileged classes, sometimes the will to ally creates more harm than good and obscures the work of creating change because time and energy centers on the ally's relationship with those being "allied" rather than the social issue at hand. McKenzie calls for those with a current interest in collaboration to adopt the language of present action; that is, "currently in solidarity with" or other phrasing that focuses on current work (for example, "showing support for" or "demonstrating my commitment to ending . . .").

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