

WRITING FROM THE WOMEN'S PRISON: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS BY  
INCARCERATED WOMEN

By

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To the promise of justice and the women who have devoted their lives trying to secure it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many women I write about here serve as a testament to what it takes to try to carve out a life of meaning and purpose under the most challenging of circumstances. Though I first began working on issues surrounding the prison system and women's place within it more than a decade ago, I continue to be struck by their strength, resilience, and capacity to (re)envision what a more just system might look like. I dedicate this project to women like Joyce Ann Brown, who was erroneously incarcerated for nearly ten years, but was determined to not be destroyed by it.

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illuminating, and lasting scholarship. I am not sure that this project could have initially taken shape without his bibliographies and critical studies helping to point the way.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	4
ABSTRACT.....	9
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION: SNAPSHOT OF GETTING HERE .....	11
On The Work to be Done.....	15
Women’s Prison Writing: Recovery and Response.....	18
Situating Subjectivity.....	21
Intersectionality: Its Potential, My Aims.....	27
Charting the Course of Study .....	38
2 TRACING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL: FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN WOMEN’S NARRATIVES OF THE PRISON .....	49
Autobiographical Subjects and Feminist Constructions of Self .....	54
Women of Color, Subjectivity and Place .....	61
The Politics of Location and Space .....	69
On The Truth Status of Experience .....	85
3 RACE, RESISTANCE, AND CRIMINALIZATION: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF ANGELA DAVIS AND ASSATA SHAKUR .....	94
Racializing Crime, Reading Criminality .....	99
“Talking Back:” Resistant Representations.....	108
Criminalizing Resistance, Reading Race.....	126
4 TOWARD A NEW READING OF EMBODIMENT: WOMEN, PRISONS, AND POWER .....	136
Academic Theory and the Corporeal Specificity of Bodies .....	140
Shaping the Body Particular .....	145
Gendered and Raced Bodies: (Re)Reading Foucault .....	150
Autobiographical (Dis)Placement: Writing Bodies in Narratives from Prison .....	160
Searching for Control .....	169
Measures of Resistance in Theory and Out .....	176
5 BECAUSE IT IS THE SUBJECT IT MUST BE NAMED: ABUSE IN WOMEN’S PRISON WRITING.....	182
Naming Violence, Positioning Subjectivity .....	188
The Discourse of Abuse.....	192

Writing the Boundlessness of Violence.....	200
Why Gender, Race, and Class have Always Mattered .....	209
Dynamics of Power and Change.....	215
6 CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD FROM HERE .....	226
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	240
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	258

Abstract Of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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By

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Chair: Malini Johar Schueller  
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This dissertation focuses on autobiographical texts written by incarcerated women in the United States, a growing body of literature that raises critical questions about one of the primary institutions of our time: the American prison, and that encourages us to think persistently and progressively about many of our nation's most complex social issues—poverty, racism, abuse, and gender inequalities among them. I take as my point of entry how the experience of incarceration contributes to and reformulates theorizations of female subjectivity in women's autobiography studies and beyond. This includes an examination of how a number of writers employ the autobiographical to assert their identities, detail conditions of their confinement, and contest varied forms of subjection at work in many correctional facilities. My project is situated in autobiography and literary studies, and yet is also interdisciplinary by nature, utilizing theories proposed in criminology, sociology, African American feminist thought, and women's studies to advance a reading of these narratives and many of the socio-political concerns they speak most readily to.

I explore how subjectivity, identity, and resistance are conceptualized in these texts throughout my dissertation, with focused examination of how specific forms of disciplinary

regimen can inform and impede one's sense of selfhood and autonomy. I argue that autobiographical writings by incarcerated women complicate and clarify many findings surrounding subjectivity and issues of subject construction by drawing attention to how these writers have come to understand themselves as individuals within highly contested physical and political spaces. Specific chapters focus on such areas as how Angela Davis and Assata Shakur challenge racialized representations of black criminality and resistance in their texts; the gendered manner in which women's bodies are constructed, regulated, and shaped in penal environments; and the potential for violence to fracture one's sense of autonomy and further complicate struggles toward self-determinism for incarcerated women and juvenile girls. I conclude my study by returning to an undercurrent of this project: the varied costs of mass incarceration, and the possibilities for critical studies of the prison and prison literature to productively intervene into our current use and reading of the criminal justice system.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: SNAPSHOTS OF GETTING HERE

I am 11 years old, entering a correctional facility for the first time. The stifling air and pungent smell of the local jail meet me at the opening gate, and immediately, I am overcome with what I see. Walking along the narrow corridor as our young tour group passes one woman after another locked behind bars both shocks and overwhelms me. My anxiety and uneasiness surface in the form of fear, and I cannot wait to be “outside” again. I have been trained properly in the eyes of my community and society-at-large regarding inmates—I fear them, am glad they are kept far away from me, and hold them in contempt for the crimes they have committed and the lives they have harmed. Walking through the seemingly never-ending hallway lined with women who outstretch their arms through bars of steel and warn me of such things as drugs and doing poorly in school only serves to reinforce what I have been told all along—prisoners are bad people, barely human. Later, when I find the term “bad women” appearing repeatedly in the discourse of criminology, I am not surprised. Its roots are deep-seated in human consciousness.

I am thirteen and find out that a prison will be built directly in my backyard. My family will need to move elsewhere, as the land behind the small white house we have rented for the last twelve years has been deemed “prime property” for a new correctional facility. I am made keenly aware of the difference between renting and owning. Our home will become just another part of the institution, perhaps part of the warden’s office. There will be a groundbreaking in the yard that I have played in since I can first remember. The governor will be there, as will my teacher and all my classmates. We are told this is a good thing for our poor, rural town. I, along with other members of this agriculturally-minded community, start wondering why so many millions of dollars are being poured into this facility when the local grade school that I attend is on the state’s financial aid “watch list.” There are asbestos warning signs in the hallway, our track

program has been cut, and music and art have long been eliminated. Excitement builds around the governor's arrival, and I catch myself still not believing he and the mayor will be bringing their shovels down near the same places my family has buried beloved pets. Grievances get subdued by our belief that prisons are an essential component of our social system, one that merits a large portion of our state and federal dollars. Questions seem to be uttered more in whispers now. What will the future of schools be, as well as programs aimed at deterring crime before it surfaces, if the rapid expansion of our correctional system continues? Where will the money come from for public services, such as education, health and economic development aimed at reducing poverty, unemployment, crime, and drug abuse? That, no one seems sure of. The prison is built; in separation, comfort is fostered and maintained.

I decide to keep asking questions. I am a senior in college, working steadily on my honor's thesis focused on incarcerated women and juvenile girls, their autobiographical writing, and the lack of rehabilitation and education programs being offered to them. I have already been searching in the library stacks, where I found two full-length autobiographies by incarcerated women I had never heard mention of before. I am not sure I was supposed to find these, but feel certain there must be more. My thesis director and I go to visit Dwight Prison, the largest correctional facility for women in the state of Illinois. The intellectual distance of my research disappears, and the reality of women locked up and caged off at an even greater distance (one that cannot be measured merely in geographical terms) surfaces. My first exposure to prison life at Dwight comes through the faces that populate the visiting area. A middle-age woman is there to visit her daughter, and carries with her the weight of loss that most faces seem to bear. An older African-American woman brings in two small children, probably ages two and three, who are there to see their mother. I know from various reports that over eighty percent of incarcerated

women have children on the outside, but watching this family try to hold itself together in the most dismal of circumstances is disheartening. I wonder how many families break from this.

I am on my second visit to Dwight, this time to see the “college” classroom we might be working in during the fall if I stay in Illinois. The room offers little privacy, as both the director’s office and his secretary’s are in the same area. There is one meager bookshelf housing largely outdated materials, and we are informed immediately about the scarcity of funds they are working with. The room is meager by some standards, but a significant improvement over the 0-3 grade classroom decorated with cartoon cutouts and colored pictures. Despite the teacher’s insistence that “the women love to color” and the enthusiasm she has when showing us coloring books that they have assembled, I remain skeptical and must keep reminding myself that this is a learning environment for adults.

I am in graduate school in Florida and have finally gained access to a local correctional facility after hearing about a new program being launched there. It is one of the largest in the area, a reception site that incarcerates more than nine hundred women and girls. It has taken over a year for me to finally be allowed “in.” As I walk through one of the metal doors and across the prison yard during my orientation, I have the intense feeling that I am somehow entering another world. There is a sense of marked social division that seems to surround not just me but the entire facility upon entering the gates. Here I am in a place that many individuals are able to forget even exists in their daily lives—at the same time, that is, that hundreds of thousands of women are feeling the weight of being cut off from their families and all else that comes from the loss of freedom pressing down on them in ways most people can only try to imagine. And yet, I also think that day, as I have every day since, that prisons and jails are indeed very much a part of this world and this culture.

I am eager to begin teaching, even after being told by one of the prison officials that the women and girls will try to “chew me up and spit me out.” “Just wait,” she warns. I will begin by teaching a life skills course in three hour blocks four times per week for the first four months. After that, I will be teaching a journal writing course full-time aimed at building the women’s writing and communication skills, self-expression, confidence, and overall sense of self. There will be far more small group work and individual attention than what is commonly offered in rehabilitation programs, and I have already begun thinking about my curriculum and the poems, essays, and songs I will be bringing in to help serve as writing prompts.

I have been offered the position and am finalizing my application at our first and only orientation meeting. The application is detailed, and I am watched closely as I fill in my responses. Prison officials find out that I am in a graduate program in English and women’s studies, and I am told that I will not be able to write about my experiences teaching as a condition of my employment. Signing my name at the bottom of the form means that what goes on in our classroom stays there if I want to remain a Florida Department of Corrections employee. The woman who designed the program is a poet and has already been informed of the same. I am told this sternly, and know that contesting it will likely mark the end of my opportunity to work with the women and girls at the facility. This, I think to myself, is part of how the privacy surrounding prisons is shielded, how correctional facilities retain their sense of being unknown, unquestioned, undisturbed by those not incarcerated within. I think too of the many women in prison who have chosen to resist this enclosure by writing about what they have endured, the circumstances leading up to their arrests, their treatment once inside, and the many costs they and their families have paid.

We have reached the end of the four month term and the students are eager to plan a graduation ceremony. I am not chewed up after all. There is great excitement about the possibility of a cake and different foods being served that day. We are all discussing what we will be working on next term, and they are ready to begin writing, especially after I show them some of the books I will be bringing in. A couple of women have heard of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, or Maya Angelou before, but they do not have access to all their texts in the prison library. We are all aware of how important this class is, of how it will somehow exist outside of the daily grind of institutional life.

I am told later in the week by phone that I will not be returning to the prison, and that the graduation ceremony has been canceled. Funds have been cut for the program by the new governor, and there will no longer be a journal class offered. It is made clear that writing courses are expendable. I return the phone to the receiver, knowing that people are not. If there had been any doubts about the kind of investment the state has in securing its own interests and maintaining its priorities, they had most certainly been removed. Somehow, I think to myself, women in prison still find a way to get their work out, for it to seep through the barriers and cuts, the prohibitions and disregard. I finalize my master's thesis and continue forward on my dissertation, assured again of where this writing might take us.

### **On The Work to be Done**

It should be stated from the beginning that there is much work to do. Nearly one million women are currently under some form of correctional supervision in the United States according to recent Bureau of Justice reports, the majority of whom are women of color. An astonishing 7.2 million people from the general population were on probation, in jail, or in prison at year end 2006, representing one in every thirty-one adults. It is projected that one in every fifteen adults will do time in an American prison at some point in their lifetime if recent rates continue to hold

constant.<sup>1</sup> As these statistics and a host of others help to make clear, the correctional system is steadily increasing its position as one of the primary social and political institutions of our time. Whether widely acknowledged or not, its ascendancy of power and status has exerted its influence on key aspects of social and economic life, and—as this project examines—on our nation’s literature as well.

The rapid increase in the number of women, particularly women of color, entering correctional facilities is one of the social phenomena of recent decades, with the growth rates of incarcerated women continuing to outpace those of their male counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, we are in an unprecedented time in American history. If the late twentieth century ushered us into the “age of the great incarceration” as Susanne Davies and Sandy Cook put it, the beginning of the twenty-first most certainly cemented the sheer predominance of the prison. The United States now represents four percent of the world’s total population, but incarcerates a startling twenty-five percent of the world’s prisoners.<sup>3</sup> It is a deeply troubling disparity by nearly any social or economic measure, with infractions that are continually demarcated along the lines of race, gender, and class in ways that have measurable effects on entire segments of the population. Statistics, after all, translate into actual lives, families, and communities who are being affected daily by the varied constraints that incarceration imposes.

We have work to do that denaturalizes and interrupts what has become a “commonsense” way of responding to crime even as crime rates have yet to substantially decline. If we begin to imagine just for a moment a criminal justice system that might someday incarcerate one out of every fifteen people, as dubious as that may sound, it becomes difficult to think of another social system outside of education or the military that comprises such a large share of our nation’s overall resources or impacts the lives of so many of our inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> The difference, however, is

that the U.S. prison system has thus far been able to retain its position in the sociopolitical imaginary as an interconnected set of physical spaces that directly affects only a small percentage of the population, and those most encroached upon are seen already to be dispossessed, threatening, or ultimately deserving in some significant way. This has been a quite remarkable achievement given how high our rates of imprisonment currently are, made possible in part by continually reinventing our collective notions of criminality, safety, and rights of citizenship.<sup>5</sup> As Angela Davis emphasizes, the “ideological work that the prison performs is to relieve us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capital” (2003, 16). Intervening into this “ideological work” is a key task before us, and a motivating force behind this project.

While I have become accustomed to the question of why I, as someone whose research and teaching is grounded in the humanities (and in women’s studies and English in particular) would select imprisonment as a research focus, one short answer is this: because there is work to do on all fronts. I believe the extraordinary literature that presently or formerly incarcerated women have produced can help us understand the nature of imprisonment and circumstances of confinement better, as it “reengages” and delineates many of the primary social situations that contribute to the rising tide of people sentenced to incarceration in this county. The lives of far too many imprisoned women are positioned at volatile junctures of gender subordination in interpersonal relationships and the wider society, severe economic hardships, and racial infractions that breach our ideals of affirmed mutuality and unconstrained opportunity. Their autobiographical work helps to demystify how these forces can operate within specific contexts—a specificity that can potentially reinvigorate and strengthen our theoretical grasp of complex behaviors and situations.

In a very direct sense, autobiographical writings by incarcerated women encourage us to think persistently and progressively about some of our nation's most complex social issues—poverty, racism, abuse, and gender inequalities among them. We are fortunate to have so many personal narratives written by women who are (or who have been) imprisoned available to us now given the pressures of dismissal and erasure that often greet their attempts to publish what they have written.<sup>6</sup> We have much to learn and gain from these texts. I hope my own work will be one of many critical studies to help bring this literature into the focus it merits, as we continue to seek to comprehend the range and significance of concentrated disadvantages, stigmatized identities, and women's resistance better. It will be worth our efforts.

### **Women's Prison Writing: Recovery and Response**

Women in prison have produced a remarkable body of texts that describe their experiences while incarcerated and that respond to the social, political, and economic conditions surrounding their imprisonment. In addition to the single-authored autobiographies that I will examine, renewed interest in prison literature has resulted in the publication of several collections that feature, or focus solely on, work by incarcerated women. Recent texts include Judith Scheffler's *Wall Tappings*, Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Institution's *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* and *I'll Fly Away*, Bruce Franklin's *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America*, Karlene Faith's *13 Women*, Joy James's *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, Tim Blunk's *Hauling Up the Morning*, and Bell Gale Chevigny's *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, among others. These collections have contributed to ongoing reformulations of how we best approach and respond to literary productions, particularly those that have been placed at the peripheral of academic study. They have also raised critical questions about a prison system that now incarcerates more than two million individuals in the United States alone.

Still, however, much work in recovering and critically addressing women's prison writing remains to be done, and this dissertation stands as part of that effort. Despite the growing interest in prison literature and the state of women's corrections in America, there has never been a sole-authored book written specifically on women's prison literature in the United States. Barbara Harlow's *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* demonstrates how writing by women political detainees can function as a "critical perspective" that is capable of "underwriting" the very repressive structures that maintain national borders and "police dissent and resistance within those borders" (4). Her text is an important study of how women's prison writing proposes new models and genres for a politically critical literature that can contribute to what she calls an "emancipatory literary agenda," yet it focuses primarily on women's international experiences of imprisonment and includes only one chapter on incarcerated women in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Bruce Franklin's path-breaking *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, stands as the first book-length study of prison writing ever assembled, and helped establish how American literature, American history, and the criteria used to evaluate literary works might be redefined. He draws attention to the collective esthetic reflected in texts by incarcerated African Americans, examines the transition from slavery to the expansion of the prison system, and urges a reading of the "historical and cultural experience" of African Americans as defining the identity of American literature "most unequivocally" (xxv). Prison writing by men comprises the majority of the text, however, which is largely a function of the number of women's texts that were available at the time of Franklin's writing. Nonetheless, his rich study helps signify how central prison literature has always been to our understanding of American literature, American culture, and America's history of race relations and racial oppression.

We are fortunate that headway has finally been made in terms of Franklin's proclamation three decades ago that there were virtually "no critical, scholarly, or even bibliographical publications on this literature," despite, that is, the sheer quantity and quality of prison writing (124). My own research in the field over much of the last decade sadly reconfirmed his findings, but the last three to four years have increasingly witnessed steady growth in this area of scholarly work. Notable studies now include Shaffler and Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), Michael Hames-Garcia's *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (2004), Joy James's *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (2005), Miller's *Pros and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (2005), and Rodriguez's *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (2006). The Modern Language Association regularly features panels on prison literature, prison studies is continuing to etch out a home in the American Studies Association, and prison writing that announces itself as such has made its way into the widely utilized *Heath Anthology of American Literature*.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, Smith and Watson also point to how the archival and interpretative work being carried out in prison life writing, including its connection to earlier forms of captivity narratives as a genre of public testimony, is likely to "rewrite the field of autobiography studies in many modern languages as literary scholars and historians jointly recover more of these narratives" (2001, 149). These are exciting and necessary developments.

The surge in the use of incarceration as a first response to crime and its corresponding effects on already marginalized communities has no doubt contributed to this critical shift. Franklin has consistently and corrected asserted that comprehending the role of the American prison is "essential to understanding the society and culture of the United States of America."<sup>9</sup> It

is increasingly being recognized that having knowledge of the prison system and the social dynamics that helped to give rise to its unparalleled position in contemporary society is fundamental to studies of literature and culture, but prison writing is being put to other valuable ends as well. For example, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue that life narratives have progressively become “one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims” (1). Their study discusses the critical role that these texts can play in affecting recourse and finding means of redress to human rights violations, forging communities of activists, and ultimately enabling needed social change (3). I believe many scholars currently invested in recovering and evaluating prison writing share the hope that this literature will both invigorate and inform activists’ efforts to rethink the place of the prison in American society.

A critical application of this can be found in Harlow’s study of resistance literature in her book of the same title, which underscores how both detention and personal narratives that the prison experience generates can contest the social order that “supports the prison apparatus and its repressive structure” (1987, 123). These texts constitute a new social history as well as a new international literary corpus for her in their questioning of the relationship between the state, the position of women in a given society, and in some cases, the revolutionary program of national liberation. Women’s prison writing is not always resistant to national political agendas or dominant social ideologies. This writing almost always does, however, provide us with valuable insights about the vectors of oppression and the inner workings of a larger system of justice that currently incarcerates more individuals than any other nation in the world.<sup>10</sup>

### **Situating Subjectivity**

This project takes as its point of entry how the experience of incarceration contributes to and reformulates theorizations of female subjectivity in the growing field of women’s autobiography. It engages increasingly lively conversations in feminist studies of women’s life writing that focus

on how autobiographers envision and situate themselves as subjects, through sustained examination of how a number of incarcerated women employ the autobiographical to assert their identities, detail conditions of their confinement, and contest social practices they read as oppressive. In turn, I hope to demonstrate how autobiographical texts written by incarcerated women can potentially reconceptualize theorizations of women's subjectivity in studies of autobiography and feminist theory more generally, especially in terms of women writing about racial injustice and misrepresentations of the self, the body in specific environments, and abuse and violence—areas I explore in subsequent chapters of this dissertation. It is an investigation that will also hopefully yield a more thorough and rigorous understanding of the practice of women's corrections in America, one that I argue is very needed.

The substantial body of scholarship surrounding notions of subjectivity supports Donald Hall's assertion that it is a topic of "unparalleled and enduring importance," with every major critical movement of the mid- to late twentieth century addressing subjectivity in some form (5).<sup>11</sup> The considerable work that feminists have undertaken in autobiography studies also lends credence to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's claim that "processes of subject formation and agency occupy theorists of narrative and, indeed, of culture as never before" (1998, 5). Autobiography, considered a site that has long been a focus of inquiry into the making and presentation of writing "selves," has reciprocally helped initiate new ways of thinking about identity, environments, and the construction of subjectivity. As Anderson stresses in her discussion of the important part autobiography has played in changing and reconfiguring theoretical issues, it has emerged as a pivotal site of feminist debate "precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject" (87). The experience of incarceration both complicates and clarifies much of the theoretical discourse surrounding issues

of subject construction in this regard. When we ask, for instance, how imprisonment might impact how incarcerated women position themselves as subjects in their autobiographical narratives, we immediately become cognizant of the reality that these texts are written within or about a system that regularly contests their very subjectivity and identity as individuals from the start. Joyce Ann Brown, incarcerated for over nine years, recapitulates this situation as follows in her moving autobiography *Justice Denied*:

Remember that when you enter prison your individuality is immediately surrendered. From day one, you cease to be a person. You are a number, another head of cattle. All rights, privilege, and possessions belong to the prison administrators and, by their dictates, are doled out by their officers (119).

The demands waged against Brown's sense of herself as an individual, autonomous person are considerable, implemented in large part through the power dynamics at work in penal institutions. The distinction made between who is thought of as a subject capable of acting largely at will and who is not is acute, almost tangible. This power relationship and the feelings of inadequacy, subordination, and group identification that it is meant to inspire are cited again and again in women's autobiographical texts from the prison. As Cristy Camp, incarcerated for over sixteen years further elaborates, "All prisoners confront the same problem: how to maintain their sense of self and prove to themselves and others that they are women of substance and worth in an environment designed to destroy these very qualities" (68). Barbara Saunders provides a compelling example of this through the correlation she forges between penal institutions and her past experiences with abuse: "being a woman in prison is like being in a domestic violence relationship. You never know when the rules will change and you will get beaten again—psychologically or emotionally—by anyone who has power over you" (qtd. in Chevigny xvii).

Writing surfaces as a way to defy the depersonalization and varied forms of subjection at work in correctional facilities for most of the women whose autobiographical writing is under examination here, as I will discuss more at length in the next chapter. We are reminded at least for now, however, of why Foucault locates prisons as institutions not on the margins of social life, but as “absolutely central to the day-to-day management of our subjectivity” (Mansfield 59). They are a pivotal, daily force of regulation for both public citizens and inmates in his theoretical schema on power and knowledge in particular, whether there is literally a panopticon in place or not.<sup>12</sup> Prisons work to analyze and measure the subjectivity of all people, he maintains, by making those incarcerated feel separated and isolated from others, by plotting the behavior of individual citizens against their behavior, and finally by creating hierarchies of who is more accepted (read less criminal) in daily life (62). How incarcerated women negotiate both the forces of regulation around them and the manner in which they are regarded by the public, is an important part of how many position their subjectivity as well.

In its broadest terms, my use of subjectivity in this study draws from Moya’s conceptualization of it as one’s “individual sense of self” and “interior existence,” with the term also implying “various acts of self-identification” (98). Like Amina Mama, I hold that subjectivity is both multiple and dynamic since the social relations that it is produced in are themselves changing and sometimes contradictory, but I am also concerned with poststructuralist accounts of the self that thoroughly destabilize notions of the sovereign, autonomous subject (2). My own conceptualization of subjectivity is largely consistent with Barbara Harlow and numerous other feminist theorists in situating it as related to the material, economic, and social conditions of women’s lives. I maintain that drawing attention to specific conditions encourages us to be especially conscious of the contexts in which we speak of subjectivity, a positioning that

can help us ground and sharpen our claims. This is especially important, I argue repeatedly, in terms of the prison.

The sheer intrusion onto their sense of selfhood, autonomy, and physical and emotional well-being that writers like Brown, Camp, and Saunders alluded to earlier is not negligible—it is not just another relation in discourse or process of technology that all people are subjected to. It is direct, purposeful, and geared specifically at disabling the entire notion of willful, independent selves for those who are incarcerated. There are additional concerns, then, in undermining the notion of the self-directed individual in even feminist studies of autobiography when we look at the context of the prison, a system that attempts to thwart self-directed action on a daily basis. If we discount the significance of these disciplinary forces and only think through women's texts of the prisons in terms of relational and fluid selves, we undermine how difficult these women's efforts to achieve at least some measure of autonomy can be, as well as the kinds of resistance and repercussions their efforts to do so have been met with.<sup>13</sup>

Subjectivity is often aligned with personhood in terms of the supposed agency and basic human rights that both generally imply in much of the cultural imaginary.<sup>14</sup> When we speak of someone asserting his or her subjectivity, I think we often mean that person is positioning him or herself as a subject in one's own life and in a given community or environment—embarking, in other words, in a conscious and deliberate departure from seeing the self and being regarded as an object who might otherwise not have agency or the rights of citizenship attached so easily to him or her.<sup>15</sup> Using this definition, it is clear that full recognition of subject status (and I stress recognition here since it is different from just asserting one's right to personhood as struggles for civil and women's rights made clear), was long reserved for only certain individuals and groups of people, and that its connection to power and privilege has long been pronounced. Whose

autonomy has been assumed? Whose basic human rights have been those most likely to be upheld and protected? Who stands in as markers of citizenship? The answers to these questions help illustrate how our notions of personhood and subjectivity have long been socially and politically formed.<sup>16</sup>

In acknowledgment of the varied uses of the term subjectivity as much as for the sake of clarity, I will often hone in some of its more specific dimensions throughout this dissertation. For example, I explore how it is constructed in part by how individuals and groups are culturally and socially read in reductive ways, most notably in my discussion of criminality and minority resistance in chapter three. Addressing subjectivity in this way brings us closer to formulations of intersubjectivity, or what Cosslett defines as “the ways all selves are structured by interactions with others, and a more general attention to the ways in which the self is framed and created by the social” (7). In addition, I examine how the reclamation of subjectivity usually signals the departure from an objectified status where individuals are acted upon toward being seen as active subjects who are presented as more capable of orchestrating their movements and lives. This comes closer into view in chapters four and five on the body, bodily integrity, and abuse in particular. I certainly hope that my focus on the core areas under study here will offer readers a stronger foundation for understanding specific dynamics of the prison and how they work together to impact how incarcerated women are encouraged to regard themselves in penal settings, but this focus should lead us closer to, not further from, theorizations of subjectivity as I conceive of the term to operate.

This project, in other words, does not consider the ways in which incarcerated women envision their identities or position themselves as writing subjects to be wholly separated from key aspects of prison life such as surveillance, harassment, or racism that they take to task in

their work. On the contrary, these factors are inextricably part of how these women conceptualize their subjectivity, both in terms of how they have felt implicated or pressed upon by the most depleting conditions of imprisonment, as well as how they have attempted to resist them.<sup>17</sup> Incarcerated women provide compelling demonstrations of how processes of self-construction and reconstruction are carried out in the most challenging of circumstances and in the most regimented of environments.

### **Intersectionality: Its Potential, My Aims**

Several new texts in feminist criminology and sociology appearing in the last decade focus on social forces contributing to women's rising imprisonment rates and detail what women's particular experiences of incarceration are often like—studies that have diversified, clarified and repositioned how America's practices of corrections might be (re)envisioned. My own study of women's prison writing has been influenced by the developments that this body of work has advanced, primarily as it has been articulated by Beth Richie, Kathryn Watterson, Meda Chesney-Lind, Regina Arnold, Barbara Owen, Sandy Cook and Susanne Davies. Likewise, recent studies in critical race theory and gender research have helped reveal the impact that race, class and gender have on America's system of justice and overall use of mass incarceration. My theoretical focus is informed by this work as well, especially as it points to the bearing that racialized representations of criminality and gendered constructions of female offending have had on the rising number of women of color incarcerated in this country, the fastest growing population group entering United States' prisons.

My project is thus situated in feminist autobiography and literary studies, and yet is also interdisciplinary by nature, utilizing theories proposed in criminology, sociology, black feminist thought, and women's studies to advance a reading of these personal narratives and some of the socio-political issues they speak most readily to. The challenges faced when gathering diverse

materials and reading across varied bodies of research while pursuing interdisciplinary work are well known to many, but it is my belief that an institution such as the prison whose reach touches so many core areas of social and political life necessitates a critical response from a number of fields in return. Diverse theories and approaches help to demonstrate and address the complex issues that the prison system confronts us with, and ultimately, enlarge the scope of our collective work. Commenting further on this space of potential, Laurie Vicroy states in her interdisciplinary study of trauma that “combining knowledge from a variety of disciplines reveals the errors, defenses, and ideologies that rule many of our assumptions, which in turn prevent broader conceptualizations that might bring more collective consensus and action” (220). It is also important to note that interdisciplinary works proves integral to advancing the teaching and scholarship in the burgeoning area of prison studies which, by its very definition, exceeds the confines of any one field of study.

My approach in reading across multiple areas of inquiry also testifies to the spirit of interdisciplinarity that has long marked autobiographical studies and its own history of disrupting fixed boundaries. Once confined primarily to literary criticism, analyses of autobiography are now crossing over into the disciplines of American, cultural, and women’s studies; history; anthropology; sociology; and beyond. It provides a “meeting-place” for various feminist approaches, and those approaches have correspondingly helped revolutionize how autobiography is conceived of not just as a literary genre but as a practice impacting daily life as well (Cosslett 1). The deepening interest in life writing derives in part from the very areas of inquiry that studies of autobiography lend themselves to, including an examination of how various social locations and identity formations influence the development, construction, and reception of a given text. Autobiographical texts by incarcerated women extend these and other findings by

drawing attention to how women imprisoned have come to understand themselves as individuals within highly contested physical and political spaces, along with how our identities arise in tandem with how we are characterized by others.

Throughout this project I pay close attention to how intersections of race, class, and gender in particular mediate and inform subject positioning. Women's prison writing lies at "the heart of this issue" as Scheffler maintains, since its authors are "the female dispossessed—in society, in the canon, and, until recently, even in feminist scholarship" (2002, xxii). Even though the phrase intersectionality has been referenced repeatedly, sometimes to the point of being proclaimed as self-evident without being adequately theorized in various studies, we are still in the process of coming to terms with how these forces affect not just women's autobiographical writing, but our social institutions in general. We are also left with enduring questions of how to specify productively instead of reductively any well-cited triad (or more) of identity.<sup>18</sup> This is true despite the proliferation of critical work surrounding identity and subjectivity in feminist theory over the course of the last ten years in particular. If even one of these categories of identity and experience (i.e. race) had been adequately explored, I do not think we would hear so many calls by women of color in critical race and women's studies to foreground their integration so that we might facilitate a more nuanced understanding of what they bring to bear on the subjects we study and the socio-political world in which we live. I have come to believe, in other words, that our frequent referencing of terms like multiple or intersecting oppressions does not necessarily equate to always having a solid comprehension of the dynamic and often very complex ways in which human lives and social institutions are impacted by them.

My conceptualization of intersectionality has been influenced by the critical and creative work of individual women of color such as bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie

Moraga, Barbara Christian, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Audre Lorde, as well as through noted edited collections including *This Bridge Called my Back*, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, and *Making Face, Making Soul* to name just a few. The sustained insistence on recognizing how multiple subjugations can collude together to form both sites of subordination and social transformation articulated in these works (notwithstanding their varied approaches) has proven foundational to my reading of women's prison literature and to comprehending the structural character of the penal system. Valerie Smith's strategy of reading simultaneity offers a useful way to think about interlocking systems of domination in *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender* as well, and is deployed in the context of her study as a way to analyze how various confluences and displacements of race, gender, class, and sexuality emerge so that a more detailed grasp of oppression and oppressive relationships can be realized. She joins writers like hooks and Kimberle Crenshaw in trying to expose how the "ostensible dominance of one category masks both the operation of the others and the interconnections among them," and engages grounding assumptions in cultural and textual analysis in a manner that has been instructive in my own reading of the prison (xv).

This attention to intersectionality is also a mainstay of my pedagogy, with courses I have taught on global violence, transnational feminism, poverty, and autobiographies by women of color respectively only reinforcing that one would be hard pressed to identify any social issue that is not shaped, influenced or altered by these politicized (and politicizing) categories. I draw from Anne Goldman's position that race, gender, and every other determinant of identity is not a "pure and irreducible category," but instead is formed by and informs the "whole range of social, historical, political, and cultural circumstances within which the subject locates herself" (292). I address this at more length in the next chapter in terms of how women of color have constructed

their subjectivity in autobiographical studies. But always in this dissertation, like my other work, I advocate a context-driven approach that is more capable of accounting for the diverse ways intersectionality can shape experiences of subordination, resistance, and transformation in specific environments than metatheories might otherwise produce.<sup>19</sup>

In actuality, there is little about women's overall position in the prison system that does not call for an intersectional analysis, so central are the overlapping and often mutually reinforcing social and political dimensions of race, class, and gender. In fact, I would argue that starting from this standpoint is essential if we are ever to adequately respond to what many see as the current crisis in women's imprisonment. This is not to suggest that sexuality is not an equally central part of subjectivity or that incarceration is unlinked to the regulation of sexual activity. Girls who are considered sexually deviant are more vulnerable to being charged with status offenses to give just one of a number of examples, and of course prostitution laws and their disproportionate effects on women have long been a central debate in feminism. Nor is it to suggest that correctional institutions have less bearing on one's sexuality than on other dimensions of one's identity. Rather, the opposite is true: the regulation of sexuality, prohibitions against its expression, and the close surveillance under which it is monitored are defining characteristics of the prison experience, as I will address at various points in the project. Yet, when it comes to who is brought into contact with the penal system and why the number of women incarcerated continues to grow so rapidly, the overwhelming majority of studies have pointed most directly to intersections of race, class, and gender. Beth Richie, increasingly considered to be one of the theorists at the forefront of these social shifts for African American women especially, demonstrates well how fundamental this particular intersection can be in the following characterization of penal institutions and women's place within them:

I cannot imagine a place where one might stand and have a clearer view of concentrated disadvantages based on racial, class, and gender inequality in the country than from the walls of a women's prison. There, behind the razor wire fences, concrete barricades, steel doors, metal bars, and thick plexiglass windows, nearly all of the manifestations of gender domination that feminist scholars and activists have traditionally concerned themselves with—exploited labor, inadequate healthcare, dangerous living conditions, physical violence, and sexual assault—are revealed at once. That gender oppression is significantly furthered by racism and poverty is undeniable from this point of view (438).

When we speak of intersectionality, multiple subjugations, or simultaneous oppressions in ambiguous ways that do little to clarify how systems of domination can act upon one another, we can potentially do a great disservice to individuals and groups of people bearing the brunt of those systems on a daily basis. It closes us off from addressing the specific obstacles that they might face, and it reduces how “concentrated disadvantages” as Richie puts it in the above passage, are linked in ways that disrupt any easy reading of subordination and the complicated ways it can be enacted.

Focusing on the impact and range of simultaneous oppressions also has a great deal to do with how we approach and respond to women's actual law violations in the context of imprisonment. I concur with Elizabeth Commack that locating these violations in structural terms and contextualizing the social, economic, and political nature of their actions does not have to implicitly deny any accountability on the part of women or suggest that they are merely victims of patriarchy, capitalism, or racism. It does, however, illuminate the need for a different orientation to approaching women's incarceration (126). The crimes that most women are arrested for—welfare fraud, non-violent property crimes, forgery, and drug and alcohol charges, among them—would simply be more productively addressed if we paid more attention to the social contexts in which they occurred. Examining the terms and conditions through which specific policies and laws are implemented and the gendered, raced, and classed effects that they

have is a primary way that we can interrupt the surge in women's imprisonment, and perhaps the only way that we will fully understand why it is occurring.

Examples of why this kind of critical perspective is necessary, if not urgent, are unfortunately plentiful. Women convicted of drug or alcohol offenses, crimes that usually result in the incarceration of women of color, are those with the least successful parole outcomes (Mann 131). As a result, these women, especially if they are poor, can expect to be convicted more and sentenced to longer prison terms than their white male and female counterparts. Rubinstein and Mukamal, for instance, report that African Americans make up thirteen percent of the nation's months drug users, but represent thirty-five percent of those arrested for drug crimes, and a staggering fifty-three percent of drug convictions (40). People of color are also the most likely to suffer from unfair sentencing practices, meager counsel and representation at hearings, and discriminatory convictions.<sup>20</sup>

Because the number of women brought into contact with the criminal justice system on drug charges has risen so dramatically over the last two decades, from one in ten women doing time for drugs in 1979 to one in three in 1997, this has a direct bearing on the overall female prison population.<sup>21</sup> When these incarceration rates are combined with the time now being served by women drug offenders (up from twenty-seven months in 1984 to sixty-seven months in 1990), it is no wonder that Chesney-Lind and others position the long-standing pattern of ignoring women in corrections and then targeting them as part of the national "war on drugs" as laying the foundation for a "policy and programmatic crisis" (5). When we lose sight of the gendered and racialized dimensions of these laws and how they might intersect with such social factors as women's overrepresentation in low-paying, low-status jobs or their caretaking responsibilities, we do little to disrupt the public support behind prison construction. Prisons are able to retain

their position as institutions that will help to alleviate some of our most troubling social problems, regardless of the considerable evidence that points to the contrary.

Commenting on the further normalization of prisons that can result when we discount how these institutions are gendered, Angela Davis asserts that, “forward-looking research and organizing strategies should recognize that the deeply gendered character of punishment both reflects and further entrenches the gendered structure of the larger society” (2003, 61). We need not look further than at the daily operation of most correctional facilities for confirmation of her claims. Women are housed in the most inadequate and remotely located institutions, given less pay for the same jobs performed by male inmates, suffer from an ever greater loss of parental rights, and are generally offered less opportunities for advancement or job training than their male counterparts. And while the surge in women’s prison rates is being acknowledged more and more, changes in the rates of female adolescents have received far less attention even though they are deeply concerning as well. Dorhn reports that the use of detention and pretrial incarceration for girls increased by sixty-five percent as compared to thirty percent for boys from 1988 to 1997. Most ominously, she found that the use of court ordered incarceration for girls in residential facilities had increased by 105 percent during that period as well (305). Once again, we witness gender overlapping with race and class in the most punitive of ways for young girls of color: seven out of every ten cases involving white girls were dismissed in a study of court dispositions, but only three out of every ten cases involving African American girls received the same designation (309). Those with considerable financial resources are most likely to have access to private or boarding schools, counseling, and other support services (what Leonardo might refer to as the “class net” wealthy families can spread), and those without find themselves increasingly vulnerable to being caught up in the juvenile justice system.<sup>22</sup>

Fortunately, the kind of critical positioning Davis advocates can now be found in the vast majority of scholarship coming out in feminist criminology and sociology, a welcome departure from the casual references made to incarcerated women in traditional literature of the prison. On the rather rare occasions when women were mentioned prior to the last thirty years, they were characterized as either negative exceptions to their sex on one end, or as embodying the most potentially destructive characteristics of femaleness on the other as Lombroso and Ferrero's study *The Female Offender* elucidates.<sup>23</sup> Yet, even now women who commit crimes are seen as violating standards of behavior and acting in opposition to accepted tenants of womanhood. As Suzanne Davies and Sandy Cook point out in "The Sex of Crime and Punishment," women offenders often receive heightened scrutiny for the crimes they commit, with their condemnation "inextricably linked to their transgression of the sexed norms that frame everyday life" (53). Female offenders are usually depicted as violating specific social codes of gendered behavior as "bad" or "deviant" women, in part because they have become involved with the public world of criminality and have thus neglected their socially-sanctioned roles as wives and mothers.

This representation of criminal women as inherently "bad" is frequently countered in women's prison writing, and their collective work helps redefine how women's contact with the criminal justice system might be conceptualized. Their re-articulation of women's criminality stems in part from the attention they draw to several social and political factors that contribute to women increasing prison rates, such as economic marginalization, prior abuse, and changing sentencing policies, which are repeatedly cited in the work of feminist criminologists as well. Jean Harris has been consistently outspoken in this regard. Her three autobiographical texts—*Stranger in Two Worlds*, *They Always Call us Ladies: Stories from Prison*, and *Marking Time*—are replete with commentaries on the gendered aspirations of early reformatories to redeem

fallen women, the place of feminism, and women's law-breaking and abiding behavior. For example, she offers the following reading of historical conceptions of "depraved" female lawbreakers in *They Always Call us Ladies* and the religious ideologies that underpinned them:

A man who broke the law was just being his normal, rough, tough, aggressive self. He had broken the law of man (sic), but he had not broken any laws of nature that required him to be any other than he was being. Not so with women. God had created a woman to be passive and pure, loving and fertile, obedient and submissive. When she committed a crime she had not only offended society, she had offended God. The "Cult of True Womanhood" had been violated (38).

Harris writes openly of how women are often processed through the justice system as deviant women who have acted out, breaking not just legal sanctions, but also social and moral codes that contribute to the gendering of American society. Through these critiques she joins many women practitioners in criminology whose assessments of the current state of women's imprisonment have grown increasingly cautionary. Barbara Owen, for instance, cites prison as a "tool" for managing women already dispossessed and dishonored through multiple marginalizations. In addition to processes of dispossession and dishonor that arise out of their subordinate position in society, she claims that prison harms women by making them "further discounted, demeaned, and ultimately, dismissed" (263). One of the dominant themes that seems to emerge in much of the contemporary feminist writing on the prison is that we sever the connections between socially sanctioned female behavior and the punitive response that greets most non-violence offenders at our own peril. Taking the gendered, racialized, and classed character of the penal system and its supporting laws out of our political analysis works toward the erasure of the real, and often damaging, ways that they surface in women's lives.

We might link this to the theoretical problems that have been cited in studies of women's subjectivity as well in terms of the bearing that a perceived group membership has on those already marginalized. An emphasis on individualism as a cornerstone of selfhood in traditional

readings of masculine texts does not take into account the place of a “culturally imposed group identity” for either women or minorities, as Susan Stanford Friedman suggests, with individualistic paradigms often “ignoring the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process” (35). When we think through why women of color currently compose over sixty percent of the prison population in most areas, for example, or why communities of color are already experiencing some of the highest projected rates of imprisonment and sometimes even exceeding them, it becomes difficult to fully discount the function of injurious representations of group identity. On the other hand, an incarcerated woman’s desire for autonomy should not be critiqued as simply masculinist.

Ogden reports that on any given day one in fifteen Native Americans is under jurisdiction of the criminal justice system, with Native women in South Dakota making up just eight percent of the general population but an astounding thirty-four percent of the prison population (57). Diaz-Cotto has written prolifically about the profiling and harassment Latinas have experienced, including the discriminatory treatment that they have encountered once incarcerated.<sup>24</sup> And the overall position of African American women in the criminal justice system, continuing to grow at a faster rate of imprisonment than any other group male or female, supports in many ways Carol Boyce Davies’ assertion that if we “take any feminist issue and run it up to the scale to its most radical possibility, its most clarifying illustration will be the experience of black women” (29). She encourages us to address how questions of black female subjectivity can potentially result in a more developed awareness of feminist theoretics and concerns as opposed to an escape from them, and that in turn, certainly contains transformative possibilities for all of our scholarly and activist work.

## Charting the Course of Study

I hope the previous discussion on intersectionality and women's grim position within the justice system underscores why subjectivity has been chosen as one of the organizing principles of this project. It is important to point out that while I have often been surprised at the sheer frequency with which the word subjectivity appears in numerous articles surrounding autobiography, identity, and literature in general without ever being defined, on another this omission has come to be somewhat expected. We understand this word, it seems, to be something that is already known, perhaps because we are assumed to already possess the self-awareness and personhood simply as human beings that it is usually connected with. But when we complicate our notions of subjectivity, when we become cognizant of how abuse, violence, racism, gender subordination, and poverty can subvert (though not necessarily extinguish) one's best attempts to both claim and be recognized as having the kind of agency, autonomy, and self-understanding upon which our uses of the term frequently depend, we find that we "know" about this critical concept may not be all there is to know after all. And, at last, we are reminded that all of these factors and more are at work in what has become one of the most defining institutions of our time: the prison. My project grows out of this awareness.

Chapter two, "Tracing the Autobiographical: Female Subjectivity in Women's Narratives of the Prison," begins with a focused examination of how female subjectivity has recently been theorized when responding to women's autobiographical texts, especially those written by women of color, whose work was frequently excluded from even feminist studies of autobiography until the last decade. Theorists such as Nellie McKay, Lourdes Torres, and Hertha D. Sweet Wong have demonstrated how women of color often construct their subjectivity in terms of intersections of identity and multiple social positionings, and thus complicate previous readings of selfhood in normative readings of women's personal narratives. The critical

explosion surrounding and theorizing ethnic identity has “rewritten the terms of autobiography and arguably dislodged the novel as the master narrative of American literature” according to Smith and Watson, and this work has proven valuable on numerous fronts (1998, 14). Scholars focusing on texts by women of color emphasize the need to be cognizant of the politics of location from which these narratives have been written, and rightfully so, given a tendency on behalf of earlier studies of women’s autobiography to claim the “we” of women’s experiences uncritically and without adequate contextualization. Understanding the complex identifications and multiple positions from which autobiographies by women of color are written is integral to the reading and theorizing of these texts, and has helped revamp how studies of women’s autobiography are undertaken, positioned, and theorized in the present century.

Once we bring the experience of incarceration into autobiography studies, however, we introduce another identification stemming from processes of imprisonment that shapes not only how the autobiographies are written and the subjects writers are most engaged in exploring and exposing, but also how women’s status as subjects is envisioned—often against the very contested grounds of penal regime, disciplinary procedure, and racial and economic subjugation. One of the questions Smith and Watson ask in their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, is how the canon of predominately white women’s writing gets disrupted and revised by a focus on texts by women of color. The work of McKay, Torres, Wong, Henderson, and many others writing about these texts has helped answer and clarify that question. What I begin exploring in this chapter is how the canon of women’s autobiographical writing gets disrupted and revised by a focus on texts written by incarcerated women, primarily in terms of how female subjectivity is theorized in autobiography studies.<sup>25</sup>

I examine how these and other incarcerated women are encouraged, and in some cases forced, to identify with state power, various disciplinary rules and regulations, and the coercive environment of the prison in ways that the vast majority of women outside of prison walls are clearly not, and how these demands, as well as the physical and social location of the prison itself, get represented in texts by such women as Norma Stafford, Kate Richards O'Hare and Barbara Saunders. We are reminded when reading these compelling autobiographical texts, for instance, that "doing time is also doing space" as Bell Gale Chevigny asserts, "for the temporal distortion is paralleled by tyrannical control of space" (1999, 25). The manner in which incarcerated women resist, act complicit with, or are forced to identify with the state power reflected in correctional facilities is an important area to examine when thinking about how these women situate their identities and subjectivities, in part because it broadens our theorizations of how specific environments and practices mediate and impact autobiographical productions.

I also attend to two critical concepts that have become central to the field of autobiography studies in this section: experience and truth. The status of both have been the subject of persistent questioning in the wake of postmodernism critiques of objectivity and knowledge production, as well as through calls for deconstruction. While it is now commonly agreed upon that experience is mediated and "not outside the interpretive grids of culture" as Smith puts it, the supposed death of the author and the impossibility of truth have received far less agreement from feminist scholars in particular (1999, 30). I discuss Joyce Ann Brown's autobiography *Justice Denied* in this section, highlighting both the potential costs of dismissing the possibility for truth (and truth as it is presented in women's life writing specifically), as well as the ways in which we might situate experience to account for how it is constructed and acted upon in autobiographical productions.

Chapter three, “Race, Resistance and Criminalization: The Autobiographies of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur,” focuses specifically on autobiographies written by Angela Davis and Assata Shakur in terms of how these writers challenge racialized representations of black criminality in their texts. I explore how both women use the autobiographical to position themselves as subjects by contesting dominant representations of them as dangerous, unruly resisters, and by re-politicizing issues surrounding the movement for black liberation that were often misrepresented and misconstrued during the period of Black Nationalism and thereafter. Davis suggests that she views her own text as a political autobiography that emphasizes the people, events and forces that propelled her into activism (1988, xvi). For both writers, the act of resisting oppressive state practices and injustices figures in their texts not just as an activity that is often discouraged for women, but as a political necessity and social responsibility. Resisting images that marked them as particularly dangerous and threatening and that undermined their activist work and the work of others involved in the struggle for black liberation constitutes an integral part of how they position their subjectivity.

Their texts also lend themselves to a closer examination of how specific representations of black criminality continue to get transmitted to the public today, including how crimes by African American men and women are often made hypervisible in the media and public discourses surrounding incarceration in American society. Evelyn Gilbert, for instance, articulates how prevailing Eurocentric explanations for crime identify poverty, little or no education attainment, high unemployment, and the unmarried female-headed household as “manifestations of the social deviance” assumed to be contributing to crime epidemic. Racial oppression is perpetuated, she argues, by “defining these as social problems that are cultural artifacts of African Americans,” which ultimately helps build institutional inequality as well

(239). Davis and Shakur's own activist work has encouraged a sustained response to these damaging stereotypes and their political uses in the time leading up to and following their own incarceration, beginning with Davis's essay "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation." My own reading of continued representations of black criminality is done the spirit of this activism, and in recognition of how both women position their subjectivity as being intimately connected with other marginalized people of the world.

In terms of contextualization, I want to point out that both Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, whose texts were published in 1974 and 1987 respectively, conceive of themselves as political prisoners, defined by Davis as "a reformist or revolutionary interested in universal social change" (1998, 41). It would be an injustice not to situate these texts in the period of Black Nationalism since much of their writing is a response to the social upheaval and racial climate of that time and takes its place alongside other notable texts from the period that focus on revolutionary change, black liberation, and racial injustice.<sup>26</sup> It is also important to point out that both women's imprisonment was directly related to their revolutionary activities and that their treatment once incarcerated was especially stringent due to their political affiliations. Assata, for instance, was described as being treated like "no other female prisoner ever was," and both women were placed in specifically designated holding areas and isolated from the rest of the prison community because of their political standpoints (Hinds x). Other women who conceive of themselves as political prisoners, including Kathy Boudin, Marilyn Buck, and Judith Clark whose work informs this project, have also been exposed to particularly harsh forms of punishment as a result of their political commitments and activism, including being forced to spend extended amounts of time in solitary confinement.

In chapter four, “Theorizing the Body Particular: The Body in Autobiographical Texts by Incarcerated Women,” I concentrate on how incarcerated women write about their bodies and the practices that are imposed onto their bodies while imprisoned in ways that problematize dominant theorizations of female subjectivity and what is commonly referred to as feminist “body theory.” I argue that bodies that are placed in some form of captivity challenge not only the supposed boundlessness of bodies as theorized by scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler, but the foundational status of other constructions that are often seen as being connected with bodies themselves, including subjectivity, bodily resistance and expression, intimacy, and privacy. When these are no longer thought of as inherent aspects of the corporeal, or at the very least, not seen as operating in any monolithic way, a challenge is posed to not just how we think about each of these issues, but how we think about the body in general. Because the body is often regarded as a site where representations of identity are inscribed, I want to examine how women’s bodies are constructed, regulated and shaped in the specific environment of the prison. This includes a reading of how women respond to both institutional power and the implementation of that power in such forms as strip searches, chain gangs, and psychotropic medications within correctional facilities.

Despite the rather considerable amount of work that largely came out in the late-nineties focused on representations and theorizations of women’s bodies in various mediums, we still have more to learn about female embodiment and the ways in which bodies appear and are conceptualized in texts, especially when the bodies of women are placed in environments where they are held captive in some capacity. In this chapter, I draw from Joyce Ann Brown’s *Justice Denied*, Barbara Deming’s *Prison Notes*, Jean Harris’ collection of letters *Marking Time*, Clare Hanrahan ‘s *Conscience and Consequence*, and selections of autobiographical poetry by Carolyn

Baxter, Norma Stafford, and Marilyn Buck. Some might read these poetic texts as existing outside of the bounds of autobiography studies, but I argue that women have long used a variety of forms of life writing to expose and represent events that have held significance for them and that have contributed to how their identities have been shaped. As these texts reveal, the ability to transcend certain boundaries, exercise autonomy, and even control movement and bodily expression without significant repercussions—activities that are often central to contemporary interpretations of the body—is not an equally shared one. Incarcerated women’s bodies challenge these notions of transcendence and fluidity, and even boundary itself. Their texts testify to the impact that confinement has on one’s body, and invite an examination of how bodies are marked by the various configurations and environments they are placed in.

Chapter five of the dissertation, “Because it is the Subject it Must be Named: Abuse in Women’s Prison Literature,” examines how women write about their experiences with abuse and violence both in their pre-prison lives as well as within penal institutions. The autobiographical writings of incarcerated women are frequently replete with stark images of violence in all of its varied forms, images that challenge the divisions between coercive private, communal, and state responses to women living on the margin, and that compromise the full range of choices that might otherwise be more readily available to them. Prior abuse before incarceration is a very real part of an estimated eighty percent of women’s pre-arrest and conviction history, with twin processes of victimization and criminalization often propelling women into correctional institutions.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, many incarcerated women, such as Marcia Bunney, Christy Camp, Jan Warren, Gloria Killian, and Patricia Gaines have written autobiographical pieces that detail and respond to the violence that has been inflicted onto them as children and teens, or as partners in intimate relationships. I draw from writers who recount such instances of abuse in the collection

*Couldn't Keep it to Myself* as well, as their texts make it clear that abuse and victimization often play an important role in women coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

Yet, gendered violence often does not end inside of prison walls, but instead shifts and changes forms. As Marcia Bunney's autobiographical account "One Life in Prison" suggests, coercive conditions within penal environments can continually "reinvoke memories of violence and oppression" (30). Many of these same writers discuss, to varying degrees, moments in which they have felt further victimized once incarcerated, victimization that often stems from processes that are imposed onto their bodies in penal environments as detailed in chapter four. I argue that abuse and violence often work to destabilize one's identity and subvert one's best attempts at selfhood and wholeness, and that this destabilization can be reinforced through language, or what I term the "discourse of abuse." Examining these acts of subjection, as well as attempts made by women to write about and recover from specific acts of abuse, is fundamental to a more nuanced reading of how violence affects the construction of one's subjectivity in autobiographical texts.

I conclude my discussion in chapter six by returning to an undercurrent of this project: the costs of mass incarceration and the possible ways critical studies of the prison might productively intervene into our current use and reading of the criminal justice system. I also draw from poetry written by women like Judith Clark in a Bedford Hills writing group led by Eve Ensler to encourage readers to question the rather widely held assumption that women in prison are "without voice"—a pronouncement frequently made even in most literary, critical examinations of this writing. Instead, I complicate that paradigm via Bradford and Sartwell by drawing attention to the contexts in which prison literature emerges and is responded to. The previous chapters emphasize gendered, classed, racialized, and sexualized aspects of the prison

system and conditions that help give rise to the imprisonment of marginalized women in particular. I end with reflecting more on what these women have to teach us about those conditions through their work.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This is reported in Schaffer and Smith's *Human Rights, Narrated Lives* (2004, 158). These findings can be accessed at the following Bureau of Justice Statistics site: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm>. It should absolutely not go without mention here that an estimated 32% of African American males will enter state or federal prison as compared to 17% of Hispanic males and 5.9% of white males based on current rates of first incarceration according to BJS.

<sup>2</sup> BJS reports that during 2006 the number of women in prison increased by 4.5%, reaching 112,498 prisoners. This was larger than the male growth rate of 2.7%. The growth rate for female prisoners during 2006 was also larger than the average annual growth rate of 2.9% from 2000 through 2005. Over the 5-year period, the number of female prisoners increased by an average of 2,878 inmates per year. In 2006 the number of female prisoners increased by 4,872 women (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/ascii/po6.txt>).

<sup>3</sup> This statistic can be found in Chevigny's "All I have, a Lament a Boast": Why Prisoners Write" (2005).

<sup>4</sup> I discuss in the conclusion how states like California are actually spending more on their prisons than their educational institutions.

<sup>5</sup> By this I mean not only to imply who is considered to be a full citizen of the nation with the legal standing that entails, but also how rights of citizenship are defined in broader terms. Many of the core issues receiving national attention in the last decade, including healthcare, the availability of living wage jobs, personal safety, suitable educational facilities and more, have increasingly been positioned in terms of whether or not United States citizens have rights to these basic areas of human life or if they are instead more readily available to only certain segments of the population, placing those without in ever more vulnerable social and financial situations.

<sup>6</sup> The controversy surrounding the publication of *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* by Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Facility is but one recent, fortunately well publicized, example of this repression. The incarcerated women whose testimonies form the body of the collection found out that they were being sued one week before the book was to be published. They were charged with violating Son of Sam laws dictating that one could not access profits from one's writing about a crime, and consequently sued even though they did not write directly about their crimes in the book. Significantly, they were not sued for what they would have earned from the *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* text, but for the entire cost of their imprisonment. Lamb writes of how the women were charged \$117 per day, with one woman in the group accumulating a bill of almost one million dollars to the state of Connecticut (2003, 6). The fight with the state went on—the writing program was suspended, the women's computer disks were confiscated, and their work was erased from the hard drives of the school's computers (6-7). When *60 Minutes* featured the story and all was later settled, the women did not have to pay for their imprisonment in fiscal dollars, and State Commissioner Armstrong resigned and took an administrative position at Abu Ghraib prison (7).

<sup>7</sup> Harlow addresses a number of international texts written from or following detention in *Barred*, including works from Ireland, Palestine, Egypt, South Africa and El Salvador.

<sup>8</sup> Miller points to the inclusion of prison literature in the *Heath* as well, and draws attention to popular films such as *American History X*, *Dead Man Walking*, *The Green Mile*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *Hurricane* that focus on stories of imprisonment. His edited collection grows outward in large part from his assertion that "as we encounter

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the stories, memoirs, and poems that originate behind bars, we need to make a space in our critical landscape to analyze, discuss, and contextualize these works” (1). I use the phrase “announcing itself as such” when addressing the *Heath* since the work of writers like O. Henry, Oscar Wilde, and John Donne who have also been imprisoned is found in any number of anthologies, even though it is generally not categorized as prison literature.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Franklin’s expanded edition to *Prison Literature in America*, in which he notes how “one must comprehend the role of the South African prison to understand the society and culture of the Republic of South Africa” (xii). He suggests that “comprehending the role of the American prison is even more essential to understanding the society and culture of the United States of America” (xiii).

<sup>10</sup> Vivian Stern reports that the U.S. hit the “top of the world’s imprisonment rate league” in May 2000 when a Russian Parliament approved prisoner amnesty made 90,000 individuals eligible for release, and as many as 350,000 more eligible for subsequent release (283). H. Bruce Franklin notes that the United States held more prisoners than did thirty-six other nations combined in 1992-1993 alone, and that these nations had a combined population “well over five times the population of the United States” (1998, 15).

<sup>11</sup> Hall suggests that once considered potentially “knowable,” subjectivity has now been rendered infinitely various and indefinite due to a new awareness of the complex nature of our social roles and the “multiplicity of our interactions” (118). It is a dynamic, multi-faceted concept, evidenced in part by how it has been variously defined and utilized by any number of theorists. When placed together, those that I examine at various points in this project, including Sidonie Smith, Amina Mama, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Paula Moya, Chris Weedon and Donald Hall, reinforce Mansfield’s claim that the human subject is simply not easily “susceptible to final explanation” (6).

<sup>12</sup> Mansfield offers a succinct description of the panopticon as follows: taken from Jeremy Bentham’s 19<sup>th</sup> design of a model prison, the panopticon emerges as a “summary and image of how the putatively criminal subject is managed” (61). Tiers of cells open to a central courtyard, and in the middle sits a guard tower. A single guard placed in the tower is able to look into dozens of cells simultaneously because the cells are open at the front. Prisoners will not know if they are being watched or not, and thus become responsible for appearing to behave in a responsible manner. An opaque window-covering can be fitted to the tower as well, meaning that it may never need to be occupied. This further emphasizes that prisoners will not know if they are under observation all the time or never. Mansfield suggests that these institutions are not interested in “merely making sure criminals will not repeat certain acts, but in curing them, changing the nature of their subjectivity” (61).

<sup>13</sup> I want to emphasize here that my use of autonomy also draws from Herman’s conceptualization of it as a sense of one’s own separateness within a relationship (52).

<sup>14</sup> Donald Hall’s study of subjectivity is organized around varied conceptualizations of agency, for instance, which he claims has “been at the center of discussions of subjectivity for centuries, and one that will never be wholly put to rest, even as it remains compelling” (5).

<sup>15</sup> Another primary way of thinking about subjectivity draws from the range of positions that one inhabits, negotiates, and fulfills on a daily basis. Sidonie Smith, for example, defines it as a “merging of political, physical, personal, and geographic placements, infinitely variable, unpredictable, and therefore unstable.”<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on placement, for some, brings subjectivity very close in line with identity, but subjectivity usually implies a degree of self consciousness and way of thinking about those variables. As Hall puts it, “we may have numerous discrete identities, of race, class, gender, sexual orientations, etc., and a subjectivity that is comprised of all of those facets, as well as our own imperfect awareness of ourselves” (134). It is this awareness or consciousness of oneself that helps form a distinction, even if slight, between identity and subjectivity. Elaborating further on how we might conceptualize this difference, Hall explains that subjectivity invites us to consider how identity arises and from where, to what extent it is actually understandable, and to what degree we have any influence or control over it (3).

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Robert’s excellent study *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* is an important demonstration of how African American women’s autonomy and reproductive liberty have been continually infringed upon by violence, media sensationalism, and reductive reproductive policies. The question of who possesses (and who is seen as possessing) full subjectivity as human subjects and citizens is at the core of her

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text. Her discussion of slavery, eugenics, the criminalization of black mothers, and Norplant demonstrates that the relationship between reproduction and regulation has always existed for African American women, with their bodies acting as an “assumed and acceptable arena where this regulation can take place.”

<sup>17</sup> If this writing is read dangerous or subversive, it is, after all, largely because it proclaims a remaking of selves “despite state attempts to confine, fix and stabilize identities as inmates” (Stanford 278).

<sup>18</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson raise this question in terms of the triad of race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality in their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, but I believe it certainly applies to gender as well.

<sup>19</sup> This has underscored my decision to focus specifically on texts coming from the United States prison system. I made the choice not because growing prison populations across the world over and the critical literature that is being produced out of them are not equally important or deserving of more study (they most certainly are), but because I wanted to be able to attend to some of the nuanced features of the prison system in America as reflected in these women’s texts than I would have been able to do if I had substantially enlarged the scope of my study. If part of what I am aiming to do is demonstrate how particular environments and material conditions can clearly impact constructions of identity and subjectivity, it is important that I am deliberate in conceptualizing my work in specific contexts as well. There is a great deal at work in the justice system of the United States (historically, politically, and more) that exceeds even the most in-depth of studies, but I wanted to move as closely to a grounded, informative analysis as I could, and felt that I needed to stay situated on one geographical/social area in order to accomplish that.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Mauer, Mann, Richie, and Diaz-Cotto.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Encyclopedia of Women and Crime*, edited by Rafter (292-293).

<sup>22</sup> See Leonardo (1997) and Dohrn.

<sup>23</sup> *The Female Offender* argues that female criminals are “biologically distinct from noncriminal women” and occupy, like male criminals, a “lower place on the evolutionary scale.” These women are described as more masculine than feminine, devoid of maternal and religious feelings, more dangerous than men, and “excessively erotic.” The born female criminal was thus condemned as the “ultimate embodiment of wickedness.” See Davies and Cook for more information on Lombroso and Ferrero’s findings as well as their own abbreviated reading of the text in “The Sex of Crime and Punishment.”

<sup>24</sup> See *Chicana Lives and Criminal Justice: Voices from El Barrio* (2006), as well as *Gender, Ethnicity and the State: Latina and Latino Prison Politics* (1996).

<sup>25</sup> In *Pragmatism and Lesbian Subjectivity in the Twentieth-Century United States*, Kim Emery expresses her uneasiness with the assumption that lesbians who are not in the academy constitute an “acritical community desperately in need of academicians’ sophisticated insights.” In response to this, she suggests that she wants to instead “invert the attribution of authority implicit in this understanding, to see what academic theory might learn from lesbian experience” (2). One might say that I want to do a similar inversion in terms of examining what academic scholarship might gain from the experiences of incarcerated women as reflected in their autobiographical texts.

<sup>26</sup> One could include in this list George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, and the Panther 21’s collective autobiography *Look for me in the Whirlwind* (published later).

<sup>27</sup> See Arnold, Owen, and Chesney-Lind.

CHAPTER 2  
TRACING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL: FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN WOMEN'S  
NARRATIVES OF THE PRISON

They have to be taught a lesson. They have to be corrected. We are the parents, the authority, and they are the child. And how do you get a grown woman who has been convicted of any crime, who's going to spend the next ten years in prison, how do you contain that woman? What do you reduce her to? You reduce her to a little helpless kid in order to control her. You have to break down her dignity. . . . And then you gradually start working away from that—Former officer at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

(qtd. in Diaz-Cotto 1996, 281).

Writing is simply the best way to hang on to the self, to keep it from being bull-dozed out of existence, to keep it from being shattered, to keep from being ground under—

Kathy Boudin (qtd. in Chevigny 2005, 251).

It is surely not by accident that the two quotations above are placed next to each other—one revealing strategic efforts exercised by the penal system to reduce and regulate the women it incarcerates, the other focused on how integral writing can be to help keep some semblance of one's self intact for those who bear the brunt of that regulation daily. Juxtaposed together, they are indicative of many things at once: the struggle for a measure of selfhood that one can claim as her own, sanctioned attempts to diminish the self-awareness that helps facilitate one's basic understanding of self, and the desire to form certain kinds of "subjects" in correctional institutions that one would likely not connect with the agency and independent thought usually associated with subjects at all. The gaps and fusions between these forces coalesce to produce the complex space in which subjectivity emerges in many narratives of the prison. Autobiographical texts by incarcerated women speak perhaps more directly than most to the varied constraints that one's self-awareness and presentation can be waged against. Yet, what they reveal about these constraints and their effects on conceptualizations of selfhood can deepen our investigations into autobiographical subjects, and studies of the prison more generally, in the most constructive of ways.

Life-writing displays a number of means through which women in prison create a “self” to sustain and express themselves as Judith Scheffler claims, with autobiography offering a place to maintain at least some control over one’s world by “ordering reality according to one’s own perceptions and organizing principles” (xxxv). This is an assumption many of us can likely appreciate. It is no wonder that incarcerated women and men have turned to writing repeatedly as a way to claim some measure of self-definition, carve out a space of resistance, and explore the range of their identities and experiences in the midst of some of the more pernicious features of institutional life. It is important to acknowledge, for instance, that Kathy Boudin, herself a mother, longtime activist, writer, caretaker, AIDS educator, and accomplice in the widely publicized Brinks robbery that resulted in murder, is a “self” comprised of all of these aspects of her life and more. They surface in poems like “The Call” written about communicating with her son, her poignant essays, and her introspective autobiographical prose. These varied dimensions of her identity are clearly not, however, what is of interest to the officer in light of the epigraph above—how easily and through what means they can be compressed are.

Still, it would likely be overly optimistic to believe that even the self that Scheffler alludes to exists freely apart from the coercive environment that marks most prisons, or that it emerges separately from the ways that female prisoners are often categorically read as exceptionally unlike those in the public imaginary. Instead, it is the dynamic interaction between the desire for a self impervious to the rigors of disciplinary regime and the knowledge that we are all shaped in some way by the environments we are placed in and the social worlds we inhabit that resists any easy overgeneralizations about women’s subjectivity. This is the case both as represented in women’s texts of the prison and in studies of women’s personal narratives as a whole. A subject

is “always linked to something outside of it” as Mansfield argues, “an idea, or principle or the society of other subjects. It is this linkage that the word subject insists upon” (3).

Penal environments provide vivid occasions upon which to think through what can be involved in issues of subjectivity given the complex character of these links as they are revealed in narratives of the prison. Miller, suggests, in fact, that the “obsessive subject” in prison literature today is “the way identity is shaped, compromised, altered, or obliterated by incarceration” (3). The attention paid to how one’s identity and sense of self, or subjectivity, emerges is clearly a pivotal force in this body of literature, amplified no doubt by the varied forms of social control at work in most correctional institutions. The particular breed of control that informs these environments—taken here to mean the numerous constraints, strategies and techniques aimed at circumscribing and producing individual behavior—creates alternative spaces of limitation and resistance for many incarcerated women whose work is examined here.<sup>1</sup> Prisons give rise to “an existence of endless repetition, restriction, and regimentation” as described by Diana Metzger, incarcerated since 1975, and maintaining a viable sense of self within them is a formidable challenge for most incarcerated women.

Though post-structuralism has made suspect the idea of the sovereign subject and deconstructed much of the coherence and self-knowledge upon which it is based, the question of the sovereign, autonomous self simply takes on different meaning in the context of the prison as presented in autobiographical texts by incarcerated women. Chris Weedon, for example, looks to Kristeva’s theory of the subject as “unstable, in process and constituted in language” as being that which is of “most interest to a feminist poststructuralism” (70). She goes on to suggest that this “radical alternative” to a humanist view of subjectivity where it is “self-present, unified, and in control,” offers instead the “possibility of understanding the contradictory nature of

individuals and their dispersal across a range of subject positions of which they are not the authors” (70). However, as I will argue, this idea of a self-directed or defined individual that has been so thoroughly critiqued and deconstructed is conversely appealing for many incarcerated women as a result of the exacting environment that they are placed in.

I want to suggest from the start that my intent when thinking about the complicated spaces in which subjectivity comes into view in these texts is not to discount the important role that writing plays for women in prison in helping to assert selfhood. I am continually reminded of individuals like Judith Clark, a fellow activist with Kathy Boudin incarcerated since 1983, who maintains that “writing has been central in my repossessing those aspects of myself that I had disavowed, dispossessed, and denied” (96). Writing has been an essential part of responding to the abuse, violations, and racism many incarcerated women have faced, with some going so far as to call it their “lifeline” in coming to terms with their past and present circumstances.<sup>2</sup> My intention is to situate this writing, to position the understandings of self that emerge in women’s personal narratives of the prison within an environment that does its very best to undercut one’s moves toward self-actualization and self-determinism. Doing so hopefully complicates our reading of subject construction in a manner that is decidedly productive, that enlarges our comprehension of placement and the multiple locations individuals might inhabit, and that exposes the austerity of a location like the prison itself.

Autobiographical studies emerges as a particularly fitting place to situate a discussion of subjectivity in this respect given its long history of analyzing constructions of selfhood and their varied presentation. As Shari Benstock suggests in *The Private Self*, rather than taking the self for granted, “a theory of selfhood is always under examination in analyses of autobiographical writings” (1). This has especially been the case in feminist studies of personal narratives.

Recognized as a field in approximately 1980, feminist scholarship surrounding autobiography has continued to flourish as questions concerning the autobiographical subject, memory, language, identity, and subjectivity have problematized and reformulated traditional conceptions of what can be considered an autobiographical tradition. Feminist scholars have brought challenging evaluations of self-portrayal to bear on foundational masculine texts, and their theoretical interventions have proven enormously fruitful for women's studies at large.

Yet, in the midst of these developments, women's prison writing has largely retained its marginal position in autobiographical and literary studies, as have those texts that continue to complicate dominant investigations of selfhood (transcultural and transnational works among them). This has been an unfortunate gap in a field that has witnessed tremendous growth in the last twenty-five years, but one that is at last, if slowly, beginning to ebb. Scholarship influenced by postcolonialism and postmodernism has helped reframe women's subjectivities at diasporic sites in various geographical areas, with critiques of women's autobiography spawning articulations and analyses of women's narratives in a more globalized framework.<sup>3</sup>

Autobiographical narratives by women of color writing in the U.S. as well as scholarship surrounding these texts have begun finally receiving sustained critical attention in the last decade, and this work has proven instrumental to the critical examination of all women's personal narratives.<sup>4</sup> At the forefront of this remapping one might say are such scholars such as Francoise Lionnet, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Nellie McKay, Lourdes Torres, and Hertha D. Sweet Wong, whose collective work has reinforced the notion that we simply cannot respond adequately to women's autobiographical texts if we do not take a more nuanced understanding of subjectivity into account.<sup>5</sup> The consistent attention they give to the importance of focusing on multiple subject positionings is a valuable entry point to my discussion of autobiographical texts

by incarcerated women given the emphasis that is placed on the idea of complex social locations and multiple marginalizations in their narratives as well.

Later in this chapter I will return specifically to ways in which the penal environment affects how women position themselves not just as writers, but also as individuals within a system paradoxically bent on curbing their very expressions of individualism. I want to first begin, however, by briefly pointing to some of the chief contributions feminist studies in autobiography have brought to the field. This is done not in an effort to give an exhaustive overview of these interventions (that would be its own project entirely), but to situate my own analysis of how the writings of incarcerated women add to and complicate this discourse. I argue throughout that the prison needs to be theorized as a primary social and political location that these women write from and respond to in their autobiographical writing. This has some bearing on how we approach the study of all women's texts, for it challenges us to be conscious of the assumptions we bring to our fields with regard to how a specific location (social, geographical, economic, or otherwise) can influence the development and reception of a given work, as well as exert its own set of influences on women's conceptions of selfhood. It also lends itself to an examination of the truth status of autobiographical experience when individuals are read as less than credible sources of authorial reliability from the start.

### **Autobiographical Subjects and Feminist Constructions of Self**

Likely the most comprehensive survey of how women have positioned their subjectivity in autobiographical texts can be found in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's expansive introduction to their edited collection *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Here they point to how the personal narrative, once deemed unreliable and too elemental for academic study, has emerged as one of the most critical sites for thinking about issues of writing at the intersection of feminist, critical race, postcolonial and postmodern theories. A reification of personal criticism, along

with a growing acknowledgment of the potential for women's autobiographical practices to act as important sources for articulating feminist theory, has helped solidify the personal narrative's status as a valuable site for addressing issues of knowledge formation and how individuals negotiate their identities and placement within communities. Autobiography, considered by some as an attempt to redefine the self in defiance of the shaping forces that govern one's life (Birch 145), has thus emerged as a critical location for understanding how self-portrayal both reflects and shapes one's understanding of the self and the process by which that self is governed.<sup>6</sup>

The story per se of how autobiography began as we know it has been rather widely told. It often centered on an isolated male figure embarking on a journey or pilgrimage where one's autonomy, rather than relationality was emphasized. In this context, the individual could look within himself as a "self-directed unit" who could assume command of his life (Bree 173). It was his individualism and exceptionality that garnered attention, and as Joanne Braxton notes, most critics have tended to settle on what has been identified as a single myth, that of the solitary but representative male figure on the "physical or metaphysic frontier of the new world" (204). This myth of the self-directed and defined individual is important in the context of this discussion for two primary reasons: first, complicating notions of identity as presented in masculine texts ushered in the beginnings of what later turned into the field of feminist autobiographical studies, initiated by Estelle Jelinek in her 1980 landmark text *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Although the text has been the subject of critique itself for its concentration on white women's experiences, it was valuable in calling forth the multidimensional and fragmented self-images presented by several female authors, and helped debunk the assumption that authenticity equaled a one-dimensional subject.<sup>7</sup> Several books began to lay the groundwork for a counter women's autobiographical canon in the wake of

Jelinek's collection, and extended questions earlier studies posed concerning the fluidity of the autobiographical subject, the appeal to experience, alternative rhetorics, and oral narrative strategies.<sup>8</sup>

Second, complicating dominant readings of foundational texts created the space for theories of women's selfhood that would both highlight and initiate readings of intersubjectivity that have been pivotal for feminist theory in a range of disciplines. By drawing attention to constructions of the self in terms of the social, more emphasis was placed on the varied interactions that work to produce a fluid understanding of self. The effects and uses of this for feminism were rather widely embraced, because the conditions of women's lives and the ideologies and belief systems surrounding them were brought more sharply into focus. As awareness shifted from the universal human subject as a given to more complex constructions of gendered and racialized subjectivity, autobiography emerged as a "central preoccupation and testing ground for feminism" (Cosslett 2). We continue to see reverberations of this today in literary and cultural studies, academic course offerings, and more. A study like this one contributes to this dialogue in addressing the varied ways in which incarcerated women come to an understanding of themselves in terms of the social and political world surrounding them, but with some important distinctions. Harlow suggests in her study of resistance literature, for example, that many autobiographies by third world women and those who were active participants in liberation movements especially, provide "striking contrasts" to the conventional protocols pointed to by Jelinek. Relational elements of women's lives do not disappear, she asserts, but they are "relocated in the context of public and historic struggle of their people" (187). There tends to be a marked emphasis on the "public aspects" of these women's lives, so heavily invested are they in resistance movements, a position Jelinek felt was subordinated in the narratives she studied.

Harlow concludes, in fact, that the “combined exigencies” of the struggle for liberation and revolutionary programs for change “demand a restructuring of personal and political relationships” (189) in the context of the narratives she focuses on. My reading of the narratives under study throughout this project advocates the close scrutiny of the penal environment in producing the need for different kinds of subject orientations than what writers like Jelinek have suggested as well, given their heavy emphasis on relationality and disperse subjectivities in particular.

When autobiographical criticism was first coming of age, defining and articulating former models for what it meant to write a personal narrative were seen as necessary prerequisites in order to come to terms with works written by women. We know better now. Leigh Gilmore, for instance, points out that many of the texts by men that constituted the emerging canon of autobiography are problematical in and of themselves of the principles they have been used to demonstrate. As she asks, “through what theories of representation and in relation to what values had certain texts come to signify coherence, stability, and rationality?” (xi). The willingness to accept definitive models has at times been a disservice to the field of autobiographical studies itself, especially in terms of those texts whose form and content depart from traditional forms of life writing. One of the primary political uses of breaking with the belief of an essential, always unified subjectivity is that “it opens subjectivity to change,” with feminist poststructuralism often insisting that an individual is posited at the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity due to shifts in discursive fields, society, and culture.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the notion of the seamless self has been held under scrutiny because the implied authority of texts like *Confessions*, heralded as defining the tradition, had clear repercussions in terms of undermining the credibility of women’s autobiographies. Noted critic

James Olney, for instance, proclaims that the “entire justification, validation, necessity, and indeed exemplary instance of writing one’s life, of finding the words that signify the self and its history” are offered in *Confessions* (2).<sup>10</sup> Benstock intercedes into these discussions, positing that male autobiographers like Thomas Jefferson and Henry Adams do not admit to the internal cracks and disjunctions that appear in their texts, but rather seek to “seal up and cover over” gaps in memory, dislocations in time, and insecurities that might destabilize the “I” of the autobiographical writing. The result of this positioning, she asserts, is a “narrative of synthesis” (or the appearance of such rather), that became a model of autobiography that structured Western thinking about autobiographical texts since Plato (1988, 20). She maintains that women’s autobiographical writings, however, often put into question what is considered the most essential component of the autobiographical: the relation between “self” and “consciousness.” There are indeed moments where there are “fissures of discontinuity” at work as she identifies, in which one explores relations between the psychic and the political, the personal and social (20). These fissures or breaks, once considered evidence for the instability of women’s literary texts, have increasingly been positioned as important sites of identity formation, meditation, and subject positioning. But that, most would agree, was a long time coming.

Questions have most certainly also been asked of the supposed death of the author in the wake of poststructuralist and other critiques that have destabilized the notion of a autonomous, coherent self on which many assumptions authorship are based. Clearly, this has not gone unnoticed by feminists. Patricia Waugh, for example, positions the alleged end of the self this way: “as male writers lament its demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world” (6).<sup>11</sup> Her association between subjectivity and the kind of agency and

autonomy that facilitates a more unified notion of self is at work both in her presentation of the desire for a more coherent and secure identity, and in her critique of those ideologies that threaten its stability for marginalized groups in particular. Commenting further on this, Nancy Miller asserts that “the postmodern decision that the Author is dead, and subjective agency along with him, does not necessarily work for women and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had . . . [they have collectively not] felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, etc.” (qtd. in Anderson 88).

Women of color have also articulated their dissatisfaction with a theoretical notion of “unsubjecthood” we might say that undermines the possibilities for agency accessed through subject status. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese repositions the terms by which this “death” is understood, suggesting that white male authors may be dying, but “it remains to be demonstrated that their deaths constitute the collective or generic death of subject and author. There remain plenty of subjects and authors who, never having had much opportunity to write in their own names or the names of their kind, much less in the name of the culture as a whole, are eager to seize the abandoned podium” (67). Her referencing of the collective surfaces strongly here, and is echoed in Torres’s concern that once people of color began “to define and construct their subjectivity,” the construct of the subject itself suddenly turned “anti-theoretical and problematic” (277). There is a real sense in both of their comments, and in Miller’s and Waugh’s as well, that deconstructing notions of selfhood to the point where we would be hard pressed to identify where it exists at all, simply has a different set of repercussions for women and minorities whose agency and subject status has yet to be always assumed. I argue that this is especially the case for incarcerated women given how rigorously their claims to selfhood are

infringed upon and often denied by the institution of the prison and its implementation of state power.

There is an excerpt from *What I Want my Words to Do*, a documentary that centers on a writing workshop headed by Eve Ensler at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women in New York, that points to the complex construction of selfhood reflected in the work of many incarcerated women. One of the workshop participants, Roslyn Smith, suggests the following during one of the group's discussions about some of the women's offenses and how they have come to approach and respond to them:

I mean so much transformation goes on behind these walls, and a lot of the outside people don't even understand how people reinvent themselves, how they become aware of things they weren't even aware of before they got here. It creates new people, and we're not the same people who came in here 10, 15, 20 years ago.

The idea of a fluid self is at work here, and the possibilities for change and transformation that it entails clearly speak to how many women conceive of their experiences in prison. They frequently posit a self that is capable of change and that seems to defy notions of fixity. But I want to reinforce that this occurs alongside and not in direct opposition to the desire for autonomy and the kind of "subjecthood" that has been deconstructed through poststructuralism and through recent scholarship surrounding autobiographies in the last twenty years. I do not want to suggest here that the importance of autonomy for women has been placed completely at the peripheral for critics like Benstock or Sidonie Smith, but it does not emerge as a site of great emphasis either. The "fissures of discontinuity" that Benstock examines are admittedly at work in a number of autobiographical texts by women, and certainly there are moments of discontinuity presented in women's prison literature as well. Indeed, the idea that people "reinvent themselves" that Smith alludes to above does not just happen organically, seamlessly, or outside of the varied contexts in which one is positioned, and the notion of ten to twenty years

indicates that there are moments, months, and years even in which processes of self-understanding involved in the progression toward self-actualization reveal themselves.

But, and this is an important but, we have to realize that in the prison there are demands waged against one's sense of self that are unique to the penal environment, that can work to nullify and invalidate a woman's best attempts to claim subject status with the kind of agency and self-determination that term often implies. Whether we refer to them as penal regulations, prohibitions, or restrictions, they all point to the need for a more autonomous self than what is usually alluded to in feminist studies of autobiography. That is not to say that relational aspects of subjectivity are displaced altogether—clearly they are not, as evidenced by the considerable attention given to children, families, and fellow incarcerated women in these texts. Yet, the self desired is not fully fragmented, or relational, or in flux either. Instead, within the context of the prison where so many relationships can be broken and placed under unyielding stress, there often needs to be a more autonomous sense of self simply to withstand that strain that incarceration places on even the most intimate and solid of relationships.

### **Women of Color, Subjectivity and Place**

Gilmore points out that feminist interpretations focused on women's differences from men has been strategically advantageous within and outside of the academy, but that we are witnessing the erosion of that position's benefits as the stresses within the political group "women" reveal the "extent to which feminist analyses have been limited by their own biases" (xi). She goes on to say that many feminist interpretive strategies produce gender as a coherent category of analysis even as they "fail to reproduce feminism as a political critique of much categorical thought" (xi). An overzealous willingness on behalf of many white feminists to accept and adopt notions of universal experience and shared subjugation limited our understanding of self-presentation as articulated in autobiographical works by women of color

and foregrounded oppositional models of experience that did not necessarily hold true. These assumptions are often reconfigured in autobiographical writings by women of color as new ways of conceptualizing these texts are posited. Collectively, much of the scholarship emerging on this body of work emphasizes the plurality of voices that can emerge from an identity that stems from multiple locations.<sup>12</sup> As such, the universal subordination of women itself is critiqued as the specific historical and material realities of varied women's lives are brought into focus. More than a theoretical euphemism, the critical function of this position includes exposing and sometimes bridging contradictions inherent in women's subjectivity, asserting agency, and mobilizing political identities.

One of the most important books focusing on women of color that emerged during the second stage of autobiographical scholarship was Francoise Lionnet's *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, written in 1989. In it, Lionnet proposes a theory of *mestissage* to characterize how marginalized subjects articulate their lives. She argues that women and colonized peoples create "braided" texts of several voices that speak their cultural locations dialogically, and in turn, she emphasizes orality and the "irreducible hybridity of identity" (qtd. in Smith 12). Her privileging of plurality and difference also foregrounds later articles written by Mae Gwendolyn Henderson and others who employ dialogism to address an autobiographical subject's multiplicity. For Henderson, perspectives of race, gender and their interrelationships structure the discourse of African American women writers and are signaled by a plurality of voices and a multiplicity of discourse that she calls "speaking in tongues." This "simultaneity of discourse" helps build a model that seeks to account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity in an attempt to move away from an "often simple and reductive paradigm of otherness" (117). Henderson wants to make clear that because

African American women writers in particular often speak with both heterological and unifying voices, their literature speaks as much to commonality as it does difference, universalism as it does diversity. One finds as a result a kind of “internal dialogue reflecting an intrasubjective engagement with the intersubjective aspects of self,” she claims, which expresses an engagement with social aspects of self (349). She argues that this “subjective plurality” is what allows black women writers to be expressive sites for a “dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference” (349).

I appreciate the close attention that Henderson and Lionnet both give to competing discourses that alternately build upon and play off of one another, because it expands even feminist notions of multivocality in the contexts that they provide. Both writers helped to initiate important critiques based on women’s historical ties, communities, and their placement in a world where competing and mutually informing “isms” retain the potential to constrict agency. Indeed, the need to examine one’s specific location has perhaps been most pronounced in the field of African-American autobiographical studies, with critics like Nellie McKay, Hazel Carby and Joanne Braxton illuminating the contributions women writers have made to this literature. While there are naturally some differences that separate them, these authors join other women of color in employing new ways of envisioning how autobiographical studies might take shape and how texts are evaluated within and outside of the field. This is especially true in terms of works written by women for whom a stable, monolithic identity is not possible, and for texts written from such “remote” locations as the slave plantation, reservation, internment camp, or prison. My concern is less with how representative they are than with specific interventions that they make that have proved valuable to mobilizing readings of location, identity, and subjectivity. One of the ideas that has emerged and proved particularly useful in terms of texts written by incarcerated women and my own work on intersectionality, for example, is the positioning of

racism as “texturizing subjectivity,” rather than wholly determining African American social, psychological, political and emotional life (Mama 111). This is not to undercut, of course, the significance of race but to situate it as Amina Mama does as one of many dimensions of subjectivity that alone does not constitute the “totality of an individual’s inner life” (111).

In “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography,” McKay traces how autobiography has been used by African-Americans throughout history as a mechanism to challenge white hegemony and engage in the search for political and psychological freedom. She observes that autobiography became the genre of preference for those wanting to challenge discourses on freedom and race from the earliest writings in the West. Because African American writers did not participate in an ideology that separated the self from either the black community or the roots of one’s culture (a position clearly foregrounded in the autobiographies of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur), McKay argues that the personal narrative became a “historic site on which aesthetics, self-confirmation of humanity, citizenship, and the significance of racial politics shaped African-American literary expression” (96). Though she points out that the struggle for agency is central to these writers, it is not the end given the complexity of narrative strategies at work in these texts. She turns to gender as a force in African American women’s stories that interrogates the narratives of black male sexism, white female racism, and white patriarchal authority; yet, she asserts that these narratives are shaped in such a way that the self is a witness against the master text and not its “absolute victim” (104). This rejection, we might agree, is vital to the process not only of self-actualization, but of articulating that self.

Smith and Watson point out that for Asian American writing, the prolific scholarship on Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* inspired an examination of narratives of

immigration as well as a theorizing of specific national identity, hybridity, and distinct histories—a theorizing of ethnic identity that continues in the work of Lourdes Torres and Hertha Sweet Wong in their work on Latin and Native American women’s autobiographies, respectively (1998, 14). Such interventions necessarily complicate how we understand the ways in which an autobiographical subject negotiates key aspects of her identity within multiply contested spaces. As this women’s now rich autobiographical tradition has evolved through the building of archives on women’s personal narratives and the interventions made by feminist scholarship, it continues to be interrogated through questions that destabilize the boundaries of the genre of autobiography itself.<sup>13</sup>

For Torres, recognizing the multiple positions that an autobiographer inhabits and reflects in one’s writing is central to understanding Latina autobiographies since this is work, she claims, “whose political identity can never be divorced from her conditions” (278). She argues that Latina and African American autobiographers use personal narrative as a mechanism both to “name their own experiences and project their own images,” in contrast to the traditional autobiographical construction of the “superior” individual who wants to separate himself from his community, a stance reflected in McKay’s essay as well (278). Existing discourses of autobiography will remain insufficient, she contends, so long as they necessitate the repression of different aspects of the self. The radicalness of Latina autobiographical projects is the author’s refusal to “accept or forge a politics from any one position,” working instead to “acknowledge the contradictions in their lives and to transform difference into a source of power” (279). As evidence of how this fragmentation can be insisted upon even among feminist groups, she points to how Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s attempts to name the oppression they experience as lesbians

has earned them their share of contempt from Marxists feminists who argue that issues of sexuality are not central to the lives of Third World Women.<sup>14</sup>

Texts like *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Borderlands*, and *Loving in the War Years* brought with them the insistence that multiple differences were inextricably bound. They also reenvisioned the very terms of theorizing by positing what they term a theory in the flesh, defined as a theory in which “the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual long—all fuse to create a politics born out of necessity (23). When writing about the *Bridge* collection, Norma Alarcon argues that many of the writers were “aware of the displacement of their subjectivity” across many discourses (feminist/lesbian, socioeconomic, political, and historical, among others), and that the “peculiarity of their displacement” implies multiple positions from which they grasp and understand “themselves and their relations with the real” (356). Instead of seeing this as wholly oppressive, however, a shifting, fluid and multiple sense of self is positioned as a place of great potential. Torres asserts that the power of a critical politics that grows from this understanding of self and consciousness is located in the “continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of all prescriptive paradigms offered to those who are marginalized” (285).

Like Torres, Hertha D. Sweet Wong sees writing as intimately connected to political strategy and the survival of one’s identity within a community and social structure that makes self-articulation difficult. In her essay “First-Person Plural: Subjectivity and Community in Native American Women’s Autobiography,” a central concern is how relational subjectivity for women has been too simplistically analyzed when it has only been opposed to men’s self-narrations. She asserts that for theorists of Native relationality, subjectivities are often associated with cultural grounding as it is likened to one’s family, community, and kinship networks, as opposed to

theorists of female relationality who often consider relational subjectivity associated with biopsychological, family, and gender socialization (168). As she argues, to say that Westerners write in first-person singular and that indigenous people speak or write in the first-person plural as a function of their communal relationality, is to oversimplify what is actually a complex narrative position. Here, like Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, she draws from Bakhtin's notion of polyvocality to demonstrate how what appears to be a singular voice actually challenges monolithic constructions of identity by its very plurality. In this framework, that one that has been very useful for many theorists in thinking about the multiplicity of subject positions, the paradigm of individuality is replaced with one of multivocality.

She concludes her essay by demonstrating how contemporary narratives by American Indian women make it clear that discussions of their autobiographies need to resist positing a generalized female, relationality, or community in favor of working toward an understanding of the "diverse and shifting trajectories they simultaneously reflect and construct" (177). The expressed need, in other words, to pin down individual vocal structure often runs the risk of blurring the complexities imbedded in both individuality and relationality as well as their relationship to one another. Her question "Who else is crowded into that I?" is an especially useful way to think about the collective, and one way we might link her work back to other studies by women of color foregrounded here (168). It is also an important question in terms of women's prison writing given the attention so many authors pay to the women around them in their texts and, at times, the communities from which they came prior to imprisonment (168). Harlow maintains, in fact, that prison memoirs should be distinguished from conventional autobiography inasmuch as their narratives are "actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle" (1987, 120). I would be

reluctant to classify all women's texts of the prison this way, since the politically-motivated autobiographies of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, for example, are oriented around advancing widespread, transformative social change in a way that texts by women like Patrice Gaines, Barbara Saunders, and other women profiled here are not. There does seem to be a collective urge expressed by the vast majority of these writers to detail and document oppressive conditions within prison environments not only to communicate their own personal struggles, but also to incite change for the women they are housed with, but this is different from the kind of globalized resistance struggles that Davis and Shakur discuss in their texts, and that I believe Harlow is alluding to as well in the international liberatory narratives she focuses on.

As the following section will hopefully illuminate, concepts surrounding relationality are simply placed under additional stress in the prison. I would argue that individuals who desire to see themselves as being more self-defined do not have to resist engaging in meaningful relationships, and again, I am not advocating the critical stance that incarcerated women do not position themselves as at all relational in terms of their selfhood. We are talking about an environment though where one can be placed in solitary confinement for weeks and months at a time, where women may not be able to see their children or families during the entire length of their confinement, and where physical intimacy and sexual contact among women is strictly regulated. Many women still strive to try and create some sense of community amidst these constraints, but my point is that relationality as it pertains to autobiographical presentations of selfhood is also complicated in women's narratives detailing their imprisonment.

Susan Stanford Friedman, for instance, claims that "the emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of

individualism” (39). To say that this notion of individualism is always a necessary “precondition” for all women in prison in the ways that she describes it might be going a bit too far, but to say that it is emphasized and desired would not be. There is not an expressed desire to always see the self apart from all things relational (the prison is predicated, after all, on the physical separation from the larger public that it fosters), or to position oneself as a superior individual reflecting back on one’s life and experiences. But just because those two elements have been associated with masculine notions of individualism as presented in traditional autobiography studies, does not mean that there is not a way to think about individual selves apart from that. The subject created can be at once both “individual” and “collective” as Torres puts it. The prison just makes us think that much more urgently and closely about how extraordinarily difficult it can be to posit an individual self at all when chains, numbers, and dormitory assignments serve as markers for identity.

### **The Politics of Location and Space**

Indeed, when we arrive at the prison and the autobiographical writing that it informs and is scrutinized in, we find many of the core issues in feminist studies of personal narratives revealed at once. Here questions of selfhood, identity, space, placement, and voice abound and intervene upon one another in texts written from what surely has to be one of the most exigent environments found in contemporary culture. If prisons “fascinate the societies that create them,” as Nicole Rafter asserts, “it is partly because they are “the ultimate form and symbol of the power of the state over the individual” (xi). The varied mechanisms employed to exercise this control are detailed in many incarcerated women’s autobiographical pieces both to expose, and testify to, the harsh nature of imprisonment today.

Clare Hanrahan is one of several writers who comments on the changes that have occurred in prisons in the wake of political shifts and the eventual closing of women’s reformatories. She

was incarcerated at Alderson women's prison for trespassing at Fort Benning, GA in protest of the counter-insurgency training camp there, and writes of her imprisonment in her full-length autobiography *Conscience and Consequence*. In it, she suggests that, "Gone is any semblance of education and rehabilitation, of dignity of personal choice in clothing, of the respect and encouragement of the wardens, many who lived in the small home-like cottages with the prisoners. Instead, the military power and control model dominates with a punitive and disrespectful attitude to the women confined here" (53). This is a position echoed in numerous scholarly studies of the prison as well, which collectively point to the swift changes that anticipated and later accompanied mass incarceration as we know it in the twenty-first century. An increase in citations, penalties, and mandates; decreased opportunities for vocation programs and family contact; and rigid boundaries between officers and inmates all became markers of the particularized form of punishment for women that departed significantly from the cottage-style efforts to "redeem" so-called fallen women.

These dimensions of prison life are also utilized to debunk any assumptions by the wider public that offenders are doing "soft time," or that individuals have it "better inside" than on the street. Jean Harris writes very directly of comparisons between country clubs and prisons in her collection of largely autobiographical letters *Marking Time*. In addition to suggesting that there is a selection of members made in prisons as well given their "strong preference" for the "poor, sickly, uneducated," she writes sarcastically of the "high dues," work conditions, stipulations against visitation, health conditions, "public housing" they provide for the poor, and forced separation among mother and children that denote the prison experience (66). It is an indicting commentary on the stories and images of prison life that have circulated in public media, and the work they perform in further naturalizing the status and austerity of the prison system itself.

In reality, prisons might be characterized best by the regimentation and disciplinary rigor they employ to try and mold behavior, leading to the frequent observation that above all, a good prisoner must know her place. Foucault brought needed attention to this in *Discipline and Punish*, and many have drawn from his conceptualization of docile bodies as a result. Though I depart from his readings of penal regime for women at times in large part because of his tendency to treat gender and race as tangential topics, I value his efforts to situate subjectivity in the prison as something to be closely managed.<sup>15</sup> The words of one officer point quite directly to this: “It’s true—in jail a woman sleeps, eats, bathes by regulation. Everything she does is controlled, and everything she doesn’t do is controlled. Her flexibility and our flexibility can expand only to the walls of the jail or within the confines of the walls” (Watterson 170). The breaking down and/or controlling of women and then later expecting them to perform as self-sufficient members of society is a contradiction many do not triumph against. Instead, it can create a heightened dependency on institutional life that contributes to feelings of powerlessness already experienced by some imprisoned females.<sup>16</sup> Although men are also broken down in correctional facilities and subjected to a variety of punishments aimed at better controlling the inmate population, their independence as males is assumed in the wider public (prior to their incarceration at least). Even if their self-assertion is penalized, seldom is it denied as a defining characteristic of manhood. Self-sufficiency and womanhood, however, were historically thought of in mutually exclusive terms in many circles, making the same process of breaking an inmate down especially problematic for women. And, of course, these concerns are heightened all the more when we consider the past abuse that far too many incarcerated women have experienced in their relationships prior to prison, as I will examine in much more detail in chapter five.

I want to return now to the officer's comments, however, as the connection he forges between regulating behavior and the actual physical outlines of the institution is all the more significant here when considering the spatial restrictions that are exercised over women in prison. Gerri Reaves's study of autobiographical productions in *Mapping the Private Geography* reveals how keenly the practice of self-representation usually requires one to "define the emotional, cultural, and psychic landscape in which one conceives that self to exist" (2). In drawing our attention to how America and Americanism are inevitably bound up with the right to command, consume, and inscribe space and "set and cross boundaries at will," she asks intriguing questions of what one's spatial existence has to do with identity boundaries and formation, separation, and more (14). It is worthwhile to think about this in terms of the prison given first, how closely monitored a women's sense of space is, and second, how the physical composition of the prison itself is defined by its denial of private space and range of movement at the same time that it has emerged as a primary American social institution. In other words, Reaves's claim about America being closely connected with the right to command and inscribe space holds true in most respects; one could look even briefly at our history of colonialism and imperialism for demonstrations of this. But the prison is built at least in part on the premise that those individuals designated as outside the confines of normal, abiding, full-rights bearing citizens, are most properly managed through the contraction of space. It is another tactical indicator of just how different inmates are from those on the "outside," and a signifier for just how directly the state is charged with defining and marking out the boundaries of spatial existence.

Elaborating more on how controls over space intercede with identity formation, Harlow suggests that the imposition of schedules and routines inside correctional facilities combined

with the arbitrary changes of those schedules is highly effective in “depriving the prisoner of a grasp of his place and disposition in time and space – and thereby of his (sic) historical existence as well” (1987, 152). The impressive poetry collection *Aliens at the Border*, written by incarcerated women involved in a poetry workshop led by Hettie Jones at Bedford Hills, contains a number of works that speak to this sense of spatial dislocation and the considerable stress on one’s subjectivity that it poses. I want to draw attention to “Tetrina,” in particular, a relatively brief workshop collaboration centered on six women who are “reaching for words” as a way to somehow regain hold of their place in the world. The fourth stanza reads, “we have taken in our streets / the clash, the color, the broken streets / and shaped them into dreams / and then to words / to change our lives” (12-16). Writing becomes a mechanism in the text to etch out a new geography, a new spatial existence of sorts. In this convergence of streets and words and the women’s pre-prison lives, we witness both the clash between their current reality and the difficulties that contribute to it, as well as the hope that language will serve as the agent of transformation that they are seeking. As evidenced in the last stanza, “six lives held by dreams / a world of streets, our luminous words” (17-18), writing serves as an origination point, as a place to recreate notions of space, but it is equally informed by the brokenness of dreams unrealized—this culminates in a space of simultaneous expansion and contraction that points again to the complex construction of self-identification and agency in many of these texts.

We might position the controls over space and the regulations in place in penal environments as forces of subjection as Judith Butler conceives of the term to operate in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Drawing from Foucault, she suggests that subjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject whether by interpellation or through discourses. The subject emerges, that is, through a “primary submission

to power” (2). Power has a dual function in this schema: at first it is seen as external and works to press subjects into subordination, and then it comes to assume a psychic form that “constitutes the subject’s self-identity” (3). Subjection in the prison in particular becomes literally the “making of the subject,” otherwise considered the “principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced” (84). Power is conceived of here as both acting on a given individual and as activating it to “form the subject,” but this is, of course, a certain kind of subject indeed—one marked not by his or her individualism, but by exhibiting proscribed and defining standards of behavior that reinforce the dominance of the prison itself. This dominance is sustained, as Gaucher asserts, through “controlled routines, numbing boredom, relative deprivation, and violence. . . . Surviving the prison demands that you understand where you are and what is happening to you; that you resist the changes in self and self-identity forced upon you by carceral life” (19).

The adverse effects these forms of subjection and domination can have on one’s understanding of self are intense, expected, and many would argue purposeful in their orientation. Collectively, they encourage us to rethink the thorough deconstruction of the autobiographical subject and women’s potential uses of, and needs for, a more stable notion of interiority and selfhood depending on the environments they are in. Pamela Thomas writes that “after a year or more of looking at these bricks you kind of feel like a caged animal” (qtd. in Chasnoff 385). Her account is brief, but speaks directly to the psychological oppression that can arise in dehumanizing spaces and the toll they can exert on one’s sense of self. Despite changes in penal environments and priorities, the “most important aspect of enduring prison” laid out in the 1950 publication Prison Etiquette still rings true for many: “Maintain as much as possible one’s sense of being an individual.<sup>17</sup> If only this were always an easy task. Christy Camp, for

instance, discusses the regulations surrounding most personal expressions of self when it comes to even the smallest of items in one of her many autobiographical essays published through *Cell Door Magazine*. As she states, “just how important possessions are as an assertion of the self is demonstrated by the risks and expense to which inmates go in trying to give their clothes and their cells a touch of individuality” (*Cell Door*). There are only two things women in prison can own, she claims, “the power of your will and the quality of your mind” (1). Even these are susceptible to the intrusion of disciplinary regimen, however, especially in the paradigm of subjection that Butler details. The use of psychotropic medications and controls specifying movement are tangible examples, but what weighs just as heavily on most women’s conceptions of selfhood, it seems, are the daily reminders that one is always subject to the larger will of the institution. Resisting this position is possible, as I will explore, but it is not free from potential repercussions. These dynamics also change the way we might approach conceptions of relationality and intersubjectivity even as they have been proposed by theorists like Wong and Henderson given the considerable state power that informs penal environments and mediates subject positioning. There is little we can take for granted in the space of the prison.

Many women also take the erasure of their varied identities to task in their work, pointing repeatedly to how they are read in singular and limiting terms by the penal system and the wider public. Barbara Parsons, incarcerated for murdering her abusive spouse after finding out that he sexually molested their granddaughter, writes candidly of this in her autobiographical essay “Reawakening through Nature: A Prison Reflection.” As she states, “I am Barbara Parsons, who has been a health-care worker, a business manager, a homemaker, a gardener, and a killer—and who is consequently a state prison inmate. Good-bye to the trusting daughter, sister, wife, and mother I once was. I have one grandson and six granddaughters, and I live in fear that I will

again learn that one of them has been harmed” (240). Our narrow constructions of female offenders simply do not easily allow for incarcerated women to be perceived in their fullness. The fragmentation that is insisted upon here means, for Parson at least, that it is those aspects of her self aligned with family, sustained relationships, nurturance, and protection that are effaced once the label “inmate” comes to stand in for her identity as a whole. Her subjectivity, by contrast, is still shaped by these other roles that she plays and her understanding of them, but this sense of herself exists within the contested spaces of both the prison and public thought.

Parsons’s comments highlight those times where the presence of her identity is made known, but for other incarcerated women it is its perceived absence that serves as a site of reflection. Barbara Saunders’s essay “Counting the Days” is a poignant tracing of her time immediately before and following her release from the Eddie Warrior Correctional Center. Questioning in the very first paragraph if “someone become[s] someone else simply by walking through the gate from inside a prison to outside the walls,” she initially positions a “self” in flux, clearly shaped in part by the spaces she moves in and through (510). She writes directly of women who assume that they will be able to enter back into the lives they left, suggesting instead that “it doesn’t happen that way.” She goes on to detail aspects of her transition from prison here:

The effects of being incarcerated are subtle, insidious, and often debilitating. Imagine you have spent years being a number, not a name. All that time you avoided eye contact with other people to decrease the chance of conflict. When you have lived a life that was invisible while you were in prison, it’s a shock when you get out and people actually see you, smile at you, nod to you, or speak to you. . . . I had come to believe I was invisible. Being invisible in prison is a good thing; it’s a survival trick that cuts down on conflict with other inmates, hassle by the officers, frustration, and irritation. Getting out may look like it all happens in an instant on a certain day, but that’s a fallacy. You may be physically out of prison in an instant but it takes your mind much longer than that to adjust (517).

Saunders speaks well to the deliberate measures taken to curtail individual identity that I alluded to earlier. Some would no doubt argue that there are many, many features of institutional life

that are all but subtle, but she calls attention to the effects that depersonalization can have and the purposes it can serve in valuable ways. Her essay details how strange she found it when she could turn lights on and off by herself as opposed to having them go off automatically for her at certain times, what it was like to have a paying job, and the rush of liberty she felt when she first went outside past 9:00. The absence of these freedoms operate in combination with numbers standing in for her own name to obscure and reduce her sense of self-determinism, and the effects of this lingered on far past her release date. As she goes on to write, “I have wasted hours of time standing in the aisle of the grocery store trying to make a decision about what cereal, what size, what price per ounce only to walk out of the store without any cereal at all because I couldn’t make a decision” (517). The effacement of her identity in other words, the sense of being both indistinguishable in one sense but very much present in another, collides with the assurance she has to make her own informed choices about even the smallest of matters. This can be a most insidious, but injurious element of the prison experience.

For Norma Stafford, the pressures of institutional life are also presented as weighing down heavily on her sense of self and circumscribing what she believes is ultimately possible for her. She was incarcerated for over four years for writing bad checks at the California Institute for Women (CIW), and writes the following about her apprehensions that arose from the daily grind of the facility:

The thing I have always feared most is getting to be like so many of my sisters in here, that is, to lose interest in life, in myself, and just stagnate. For almost a year I just drifted through my time. At night, alone in my cell, I saw myself as a robot. I functioned only when a guard pushed a lever that indicated I should move so many paces in a certain direction. When they pushed another lever, I would stand, sit, eat or lie down and sleep. I had quit questioning anything. I succumbed to mental lethargy, and physical lethargy overwhelmed me (104).

The lack of agency Stafford describes, as well as her heavy reliance on others to orchestrate her movement, is presented here as a dangerous denial of individual willfulness. The passage speaks most to a fear of resignation, of acquiescence to forces outside of the self that actually come to exert great influence over what seems desirable, needed, and warranted by that individual. It is a most confining space to exist in to be sure, and one that Stafford was fortunately able to largely disentangle herself from as her period of incarceration wore on. It also necessarily complicates any unproblematic disavowal of the stable, self-directed subject.

Joanne Braxton's account of how the autobiographical act can be an attempt for African American women to "regain that sense of place" in the new world following multiple disruptions and the loss of one's sense of place amidst violent encounters is also a potentially useful way to conceptualize how incarcerated women situate themselves in their autobiographies given the physical and social displacement that correctional facilities rely upon. I have found in my own reading of these autobiographies that one of the main sites women write about being displaced is their physical bodies, as I explore in much more detail in chapter four. The issuing of mandatory clothing, the frequent use of strip searches, and the employment of devices and practices to contain the inmate population through such forms as the chain gain, are all means through which one's physical control over one's body gets displaced or infringed upon. Closely guarding inmates' bodies turns out to be "a license for defining what a prisoner is" as Wideman claims, and women bear the brunt of that classification in ways that are all but indiscriminate.<sup>18</sup> An incarcerated woman known as G.W. provides a compelling description of this and its implied effects on one's interiority here:

It isn't the demands for sex for me anymore. After twenty years in prison, it's about losing the last thing I have, my private body self. It's the male guards watching my naked body, openly, and as I get older the comments change to making fun of it, mocking me, my aging

woman. . . . It's being yelled at for needing more toilet paper, for asking for an extra sanitary napkin" (qtd. in Labelle 416).

Clare Hanrahan pays exceptionally close attention to this particular power dynamic exercised over the body in most facilities as well throughout her autobiography. Following her description of a required STD exam, for instance, she writes that, "There are so many hurdles here. So many times when dignity is assaulted. It is so hard to realize that at any time all boundaries—including some very hard-won personal boundaries—can be violated at the whim of someone with authority over my body" (90). Marilyn Buck and Laura Whitehorn join her in voicing their concerns over the lack of bodily autonomy that women in prison have; they suggest that the hardest part of being incarcerated for them is the pat searches intent on sending the message that "your body is meaningless" (James 2005, 262). The effects this can have on one's sense of self and conceptualizations of private space are significant. Bunyan argues that the invasion of a prisoners' psyche signals another "one-way spatial boundary"—one I believe we can conceptualize as a simultaneous border and crossing accessed through the body. Correctional officers need to know what prisoners' bodily needs and mental weaknesses are, he claims, so as to ensure that they can be "neutralized" (187). The expressed need to deny a prisoner the privacy of her spatiality emerges in his schema as a primary way to better control identity and exert influence over one's interiority.

Likely nowhere were these efforts to disrupt bodily autonomy, fracture subjectivity and curb agency more insidiously merged than at the Lexington Unit for Women. The prison's goal was to "reduce prisoners to a state of submission essential for ideological conversion," Harlow claims, with "four walls becoming the world" (1992, 198). It was constructed to house sixteen of the country's most "threatening" women, but was closed in 1988 following a rash of concerns over human rights violations. The six politically active women who were incarcerated for two years

there found themselves in an environment marked by sensory deprivation, extreme voyeurism, sleep deprivation, small group isolation, twenty-four hour camera and visual surveillance, and extensive regulations forbidding personal property, work and educational programs (Melveny 326). Lexington's expressed interest in housing women who were affiliated with politically subversive organizations worked alongside the near debilitating conditions inside to make it a location that was clearly social, geographical and political in nature.

The damaging effects this environment had on the women's subjectivities who were imprisoned there were extensive. Rosenberg describes it as "existential death," and Debra Brown likens it to being "in the grave" (326). Mary O'Melveny, counsel to Rosenberg, traces the harmful physical manifestations of long-term isolation that the women experienced (weight loss, memory loss, and lethargy among them), but the psychological effects were just as considerable, and included depression, withdrawal, hallucinatory symptoms, and more (326, 327). Two of the things that emerge as most striking about this particular facility are how calculated the controls over one's psychological and physical existence were, and how directly they were aimed at destabilizing the women's identities and political imperatives. Lexington also indicates that sometimes, despite many theoretical critiques of the last three decades to the contrary, some separation of body and mind might be needed, even required, simply to retain a sense of psychological well-being in an environment like this.

Resistance to forces that are positioned even on the same continuum as those at work in Lexington is complicated, as Butler concedes to as well, and some would likely argue nearly impossible. There are clearly intense moments of resignation in many incarcerated women's texts, signaled, for instance, in the title of Jessica Scarbrough's poem "Today Prison Won," where she writes of how she is simply "undone" (280). But a fierce commitment to continued

activism and resistance remains for many writers, and that is certainly part of how they position their subjectivity in terms of the need for a more stable identity as well. As one might surmise, this can be especially evident in texts written by political prisoners, but it is not exclusive to them. Elizabeth Flynn, author of *The Alderson Story* triumphantly writes, “come what may, I was a political prisoner and proud of it, at one with some of the noblest of humanity who had suffered for conscience’s sake. I felt no shame, no humiliation, no consciousness of guilt. To me, my number 11710 was a badge of honor” (29). This position is echoed, though not quite to the same degree, in Judee Norton’s poem “Arrival.” “They / think they have me,” the speaker states, “but / my mind / wheels and soars and spins and shouts / no prisoner / I hold the small and sacred part of me close” (9-14, 19). Fiercely protecting interior space emerges as one way many women seem to try and ward off the most challenging aspects of the environments they are in. We might trouble this notion of interior space some in light of Benstock’s and others observations concerning the presentation of selves that appear as wholly natural or organic, but I think authors like Norton are clearly suggesting that a sense of psychological autonomy remains vital to them despite state attempts to weaken it.

Other writers substantiate Smith and Watson’s claim that autobiographical narratives can be enabling sites of self-reconstruction and determination within coercive state environments in their insistence on “imagining forms of resistance to those de-individuating routines” (2001, 57). But this is not done easily, I want to point out, theoretically or practically. Several feminist scholars (Kruks, Oliver, Bordo, and Alcoff among them) have raised concerns about who stands in for an agent of political change once the unified subject has been destabilized and deconstructed. Kruks, for instance, questions how to theorize a subject that has much choice at all when she presumably lacks the freedom and reason previously associated with the classical

subject of Enlightenment, and Oliver asks who the “agent of political action” can now be once the subject as “center of agency is undermined” (13, xi). My aim here is not to uncover all the features of these already relatively well-laid out theoretical discussions, but to once again think about how we might situate incarcerated women’s articulations of subjectivity and agency in their texts. Patricia McConnel, for instance, author of *Sing Soft, Sing Loud*, writes that “prisons work actively to remove every last vestige of autonomy, every self-assertive instinct, every last trace of initiative, responsibility, and self-respect we may have left by the time we get through the court system. Take any well-adjusted, successful woman, put her in jail for a year, and when she comes out she will need permission to put on her own shoes” (237). Through McConnel and others we witness again how purposefully and directly institutional power is held over the individual, and the complex, contested space that personal agency arises in as a result.

The prison inherently reveals the struggle over “whether any identity or model of identity or subjectivity can make you free” that Mansfield traces in his study of the concept (78), and yet another contribution narratives of imprisonment make to the study of autobiography lies in their presentation of resistance even in the most dire, seemingly defeating of circumstances. There is still a desire for many of them to lay claim to their own sense of personhood, even after they are made to feel like they possess the antithesis of agency. The image of women tapping relentlessly on a stone wall in order to communicate with others “epitomizes the will to survive psychologically,” as Sheffler claims, and informed the title of her edited collection *Wall Tappings* (123). My argument here is that this will to resist can be stronger at times than even the harshest conditions of confinement, even if it cannot significant alter those conditions. This willfulness is not enough to fully account for how an incarcerated woman might position her subjectivity if we are going to take stock of the penal environment and the other multiple

identifications she might have as suggested in the scholarship by women of color presented earlier, but it can certainly be a critical component.<sup>19</sup> As I addressed in this project's opening, writing about these experiences at all is itself an act of resistance to the kind of enclosed privacy many of these institutions are so heavily invested in safeguarding.

There are writers like Kate O'Hare, who call attention to the rigors of institutional life at the same time that they voice their opposition to the resignation it might otherwise inspire in them. She writes in a letter to her family dated April 3, 1920 of some of the most difficult aspects of her incarceration: "Prisons starve us physically for food, action and fresh air; they pervert every normal urge of sex and ruthlessly and brutally violate and outrage every instinct of the ego" (284). However, in a previous letter she maintains that her inner life has not yet been compromised: "I march in the prison lockstep, but my soul is free; I slave in a prison workshop, but I know the peace that passeth understanding" (241). We might consider her text an antecedent to those written in its wake by other political prisoners in particular. Marilyn Buck's poem "Prisoner" speaks also to the considerable lengths correctional institutions will go to in order to make inmates feel overly "categorized/classified." Yet, as the last stanza of the poem reveals, "behind the profiled face / she lives / beyond appearance / unrevealed" (14-17).

The protected interior space revealed in this poem, like Norton's, also parallels on some level the intricacies of personal relationships, especially with children, that many incarcerated women try their best to guard. I start from the assumption that not all female inmates are mothers, and that some mothers "inside" do little to foster contact with their families. But over eighty percent of incarcerated women do have children, and for many of these women visits are made next to impossible due to the physical locations of the facilities, transportation difficulties, caretaking responsibilities, and other scheduling constraints, not because of the lack of desire to

see their children. In this context, the considerable efforts that go into keeping a relationship with one's family in tact as much as possible and continuing to share in one another's lives is itself a measure of resistance for most women given how directly the prison system intercedes into and attempts to regulate these relationships as well. Kathy Boudin's excellent poem "The Call," for example, written to her son Chesa Boudin, signifies the emotional lengths many women will go to in order to try and stay connected with their children. As Sheffler suggests, it is a relationship that is frustrated but not defeated by the distance between mother and son, and Boudin is able to revel in the "richness of a contact she has savaged from sterility" (2005, 116). I bring this up to suggest that one's role as a mother surfaces as an important part of how many incarcerated women envision their subjectivity as well, even though the place that they write from does little to nurture, or even salvage, these relationships from the strains of separation. This can be a particularly vulnerable place for many women to enter into emotionally given how they are categorically read as inherently "bad" or uncaring mothers in the public imaginary, but their autobiographical texts testify to the fact that they go there nonetheless.

Smith and Watson lead us to ask how people try to change the narratives written about them or write back to the cultural stories that have "scripted them as particular kinds of subjects" (2001, 176). I delve into this at far more length in the next chapter in terms of how Davis and Shakur position their own identities as activists engaged in revolutionary efforts to secure widespread social change. But the act of "writing back" to cultural interpretations that have constructed women in prison as specific kinds of subjects often involves more than it appears to from the onset. We are reminded repeatedly of the tangible difficulties that incarcerated women face when it comes to even writing their narratives, like getting access to writing materials, books, and classes. And then there are certainly the complexities always at work in the very

term location itself. As Carole Boyce-Davies suggests, one's location may be a site of creativity and rememory, exploration, challenge, instability, or of further repression (154). I would add that it can be many things at once, with the prison acting as a compelling demonstration of this.

Location can also have bearing on the manner in which texts are both written and received, on how identity is conceptualized, and the terms by which it is measured and evaluated. Davies writes of this in more detail in the following, likely the most encompassing description of the "politics of location" as it is so often coined that I have read:

It is location which allows one to speak or not speak, be affirmed in one's speech or rejected, to be heard or censored. The politics of location brings forward a whole host of identifications and associations around concepts of place, placement, displacement; location, dis-location; memberment, citizenship, alienness, boundaries, barriers, peripheries; cores, and centers. It is about positionality in geographical, historical, social, economic, educational terms. It is about positionality in society based one's class, gender, sexuality, age, income. It is also about relationality and the ways one is able to access, mediate or reposition oneself, or pass into other spaces given certain other circumstances (153).

In the next section I turn to how location, and the site of the prison specifically, exerts influence over not just who is "heard" or "affirmed" as Davis rightly points to, but whose voice, if any, stands in as a potential representation of truth in autobiographical productions.

### **On The Truth Status of Experience**

Franklin points out that the reason most individuals who have become "literary artists because of their imprisonment" turn to the autobiographical mode is obvious: "it is their own personal experience that has given them both their main message and the motive to communicate it" (1989, 250). Nancy Miller stresses in *Getting Personal* that feminist theory has "always built out from the personal: the witnessing "I" of subjective experience," with the notion of one's "authority of experience" founding one of the most central currents in feminist theory that has continued ("dismantled and renovated") to "shape a variety of personal and less personal discourses at an oppositional angle to dominant critical positionings" (14). These scholars, and a

host of others, point to the need to retain a sense of informed authorship as it is evoked through personal experience, and to the transformative potential that that these discourses can hold. However, most would likely agree with Kruks's claim that even though experience was once regarded as a "bedrock" of feminism, it is a "suspect concept" today, one that feminists have "grown weary of talking about" (131). I would suggest in the context of prison literature and women's autobiographies in general, however, that we not tire out quite so quickly.

A number of writers have moved beyond even pointing to the "suspect" character of both truth and experience to questioning their use in critical studies and theoretical applications altogether. Kathleen Daly, for example, argues that "with respect to authoritative sources, the time has come to suspend belief in 'women's own stories' and resist privileging any one account of a biography. . . . My concern is that we don't succumb to empiricist notion that women's own stories are closest to the truth or the reality of their lives" (150). Kari Winter argues that feminists need to problematize the "current, often untheorized enthusiasm for autobiography" for similar reasons (206). I admittedly have difficulty seeing feminists' uses for and draw toward autobiography to be "untheorized" given the large body of scholarship centered on this area of narrative production, and question what is left being "closest to the truth" of women's lives after we undermine the status of what women themselves suggest about their experiences. Nonetheless, I can appreciate these writers' efforts to trouble critical concepts that remain integral to a number of fields.

Indeed, these discussions are especially central to autobiography studies given that, as Gilmore asserts, our "notion of the autobiographical is bound up in our notions of authenticity and the real, of confession and testimony, of the power and necessity to speak, and of the institutional bases of power which impose silence" (80). They are also integral to examinations

of women's autobiographical accounts of their imprisonment, in part because of the tendency exercised on behalf of many to invalidate the truth status of these narratives and these writers via their classification as inmates from the very start. We are left with a perplexing question: what are the consequences of discounting a person's truth, particularly when that person is already marginalized in some way (or in a combination of ways) through his or her race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or nationality? Perhaps I should assert from the start that I do not want to advance a reading of these or other narratives that is reductive in its orientation, or that blindly assumes that they were written without any outside influences or that they have not been constructed in particular ways. Yet, I am equally committed to not dismissing what gets revealed in women's writing purely on the basis that it is found in an autobiographical text.

I would argue that Joan Scott's essay "Experience," more so than any other has encouraged a rethinking of the use of this concept in literary, autobiographical studies, and beyond. In it, she urges her readers to think through the appeal to experience as "uncontestable evidence," as an "originary point of explanation," and as a "foundation upon which analysis is based," because this critical posture, she argues, "weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference" (59). One of her core arguments is that when experience gets taken up in this way the "vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historical who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built" (59). The danger of this position as she sees it is that questions about how experiences are constructed and how subjects are constituted as "different in the first place," along with questions about language and history are "left aside" (59). I have long appreciated Scott's critiques. They bring to mind Kaplan's discussion of "out-law" genres and the ways in which autobiographies can be mediated by editors, publishing limitations and demands, translators, and more (209). And I am well aware of how both Wally

Lamb and Hettie Jones, leaders of writing workshops at Ninantic and Bedford Hills respectively, discuss the “craft” that is involved in the writing and presentation of the works that incarcerated women wrote and that ultimately ended up in the collections *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* and *Aliens at the Border*. This writing does not just appear transparently or without outside influences. There are issues of narrative framing, language selection, memory, arrangement, and more at work in these texts just as could arguably said of any other form of literature.

I want to suggest, however, that we can call attention to the constructed nature of experience and the presentation of truth and certainly push our examinations of them further, without undermining their importance altogether. It is a critical posture, in other words, that does not embrace experience as unmediated or always already self-evident, but that also acknowledges that women, minorities, and other marginalized people across the world over have long turned to autobiographical modes of production precisely because it does offer them a space to assert their version and understanding of events that have held personal significance for them and/or their communities. I do not believe that fully emptying experience of its potential uses for feminism is Scott's aim, but I am hesitant to embrace her notion that the evidence of experience becomes “evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (59). In the context of prison literature, I would argue instead that the opposite is often true. Jean Harris, Barbara Deming, Kate Richards O'Hare, and a number of other incarcerated women all provide illuminating examples of how difference gets constructed and read as a result of their particular placement within the punishment industry, and the social and political coding that it gives rise to.

Scott's critiques are valuable given autobiography's obvious reliance on first person narration, and they have the potential to keep pushing us further in our analyses of pivotal issues surrounding ideologies and constructions of identity, difference, and power that so much of contemporary theory relies upon. I am simply arguing that we can work to situate experience and be conscious of the autobiographical truth that can be revealed, without stripping either concept of its critical possibility. Moreover, I want to remain conscious throughout this study of the historical and political significance critics like McKay, Torres, Braxton, Gates and V.P. Franklin have accorded to autobiographical narratives in their work. Franklin points out, for instance, that autobiography has been the "most important literary genre in the African American intellectual tradition in the United States" (11). Gates asserts that of all the various genres that comprise the African American literary tradition, "none has played a role as central as autobiography," and goes on to remark on the significance of "declaring the existence of surviving, enduring ethnic self" (4).<sup>20</sup>

The work of Scott, Kaplan, and other scholars who have argued for contextualizing experience notwithstanding, readers and critics alike are still at odds over what I sometimes think of as the "duty of truth" in personal narratives, memoirs, and other forms of autobiographical writing. That is, to what standards should writers aspire to be held accountable when writing about their lives, and to what extent can readers count on what they reveal to have validity. This was made very public two and a half years ago in America media through the accusations and questions that swirled around James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, his account of drug addiction and rehab that he later admitted to fabricating segments of. Frey's appearance on Oprah and the Larry King Live Show helped cement the book's wide appeal and propel it toward sales of over three million copies, but when viewers were finally let in on the seemingly million little "could

have been” experiences conveyed in the text, we found ourselves as a larger public returned amidst the noise and clatter to a central question: does the truth matter?

At the time of the Frye controversy, I was teaching Joyce Ann Brown’s *Justice Denied* to a group of forty students enrolled in my course “Incarcerated Women: Literature from the Prison.” On the first Tuesday that the announcement about Frye’s exaggerations came out, some students defended him, suggesting that this was the type of thing that could happen to almost any writer. But on that Thursday, after we had read the first section of Brown’s text, the responses to the importance of truth as revealed in autobiographical texts were markedly different. Brown is an African American woman who served nearly ten years in prison for a crime she never committed. Her alibi was confirmed by others, and there were clear indications that she was not present at the scene of the crime. But she was relatively low-income, black, and a single mother, and was sentenced (by an all-white jury I might add) to life imprisonment despite the considerable “proof” she had at her disposal. She was only released after a new legal team decided to work with her and actively sought to bring her justice, with her case eventually appearing on *60 Minutes*. It took a four year fight to even get her record expunged. Brown lost her son to suicide while she was imprisoned and was not allowed to attend his funeral, watched as her daughter became a mother herself at a young age, and witnessed the slow deterioration of the family life she had worked hard at building. Brown’s truth didn’t “count” in the system of law that dolled out her sentence. Does it count, I wonder, when presented in her autobiography?

I was extraordinarily fortunate to meet Brown and hear her speak last year when she came to the University of Florida’s Law School. I vividly remember that she referenced how much time she was in prison repeatedly during her talk: nine years, five months, and twenty-four days, and that the harshness of prison life and the toll it took on her family remained raw. Every one of the

days she spent unjustly imprisoned, every one of those strip searches and medical procedures, and every one of those family events that she missed counted for her.

Can we take incarcerated women's autobiographical writing as seriously as we might? Can we fully interrogate the conditions described and examined in these texts, the demands waged against their identity and subjectivity, the costs that their imprisonment might have on their families and their communities if we start from the assumption that life writing is already more false than it is true? Personally, I would much prefer to keep closely examining the critical concepts that we use (experience, truth, and subjectivity, included) complicating them, and pointing to their possibilities and limitations before we deconstruct the potential for their importance altogether. I have a feeling there are many more women like Joyce Ann Brown out there who turn to writing in order to present the truth as they know it about their experience, and I am inclined to believe that can count for quite a bit.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> My use of social control draws considerably from the definition laid out in the *Encyclopedia of Women and Crime* (245). Prison historian Nicole Rafter also uses it to describe the mechanisms by which powerful groups consciously or unconsciously attempt to "restrain and induce conformity, even assent, among less powerful but nonetheless threatening segments of society" (49). I find her reading of the term to be valuable as well in the context of correctional facilities and their efforts to produce certain forms of behavior.

<sup>2</sup> In *Couldn't Keep it to Myself*, Nancy Birkla writes that "one day I figured out a dying little girl lived inside of me, so I threw her a lifeline in the form of a paper and pen" (141). Many other incarcerated women have written about the importance of writing in similar ways. Bell Gale Chevigny suggests that the best prison literature "continues to testify to the human experience, to critique and resist institutionalization, but it also helps writers find themselves, make themselves whole, forge significant contact with others, and make reparations" (2005, 247).

<sup>3</sup> New concepts of subjectivity are being proposed by writers as transcultural, hybrid and diasporic that have moved the "I" toward the collective as Smith and Watson trace, and have consequently assisted in shifting the critical focus beyond the long-standing "boundaries of identification." See both the introduction to *Women, Autobiography*,

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*Theory* (1998, 16, 27-31) and their abbreviated discussion of these forms of identity being posited in *Reading Autobiography* (2001). They claim in the latter that “increasing numbers of life narratives contribute to a resistance literature that has begun to reorganize global knowledge” (132). This is especially the case in their discussion of life narratives from global areas outside of the United States that witness to torture, disappearance, and imprisonment.

<sup>4</sup> Lourdes Torres notes, for instance, that there has been a proliferation in the publication of literary works by United States Latina writers in the 1980’s and beyond, but that this growth has only “begun to address” the relative absence of this literature on the marketplace and in critical resources (276).

<sup>5</sup> This list is certainly not meant to be exhaustive. Other individuals that have made marked contributions to the study of these texts include Hazel Carby, Joanne Braxton, Sidonie Smith, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, bell hooks, and Shirley-Geok-lin Lim, several of whom are referenced at various points in this discussion.

<sup>6</sup> At the end of twenty-five years of considerable interventions into the field of autobiographical studies, Smith’s assertion that the real legacy is a “welter of conflicting positions about subjectivity and autobiography” still feels largely accurate (1998, 23). The reworking and critical exploration of this concept, of which this study takes its place in part, has nonetheless proved useful for feminists and the critical study of women writers. Smith and Watson clearly seem to take the expansiveness of the concept of self into account when they define the constitutive processes of subjectivity as experience, identity, memory, embodiment, and agency (2001, 15).

<sup>7</sup> One of the most striking differences many critics found in differentiating between texts written by men and women was that men tended to heroicize their lives and offer up their achievements and accomplishments in autobiographical prose for examination, whereas women often examine their experiences in order to try and extract meaning from them. This was seen, and often still is, as a decisive split that prompted the study of women’s relationships to their communities and how those relationships were reflected in their narratives. Nancy Chodorow’s work on the dynamics of mother-daughter relationships as well as Mary Mason’s essay “The Other Voice” stress that female identity is grounded in relationship and produces textual self-presentations that inherently contrast with masculine self-presentations (Smith 1998, 16-17).

<sup>8</sup> See Smith and Watson’s introduction for more information on this shift and the resulting texts it produced (1998, 10-13).

<sup>9</sup> See Chris Weedon’s discussion of subjectivity and poststructuralist theory for more on these shifts. Hall draws from her work as well in his study of subjectivity (100-101). For Smith and Watson, identities are provisional precisely because social organizations and symbolic interactions are always in flux. They assert, for example, that identities (considered here subject positionings), “materialize within collectivities and out of the culturally and marked differences that permeate symbolic interactions within and between collectivities” (33). Identities are relational and contingent as a result.

<sup>10</sup> *Confessions*, written by St. Augustine in approximately 397 C.E. is usually acknowledged to be the first full-length autobiographical narrative written in the Western region of the world. It centers in large part on the author’s spiritual conversion to Christianity.

<sup>11</sup> Waugh goes on to critique deconstructions of the self and of a unified selfhood further for marginalized groups in particular. She suggests that “a sense of identity as constructed through impersonal and social relations of power (rather than a sense of identity as the reflection of an inner essence) has been a major aspect of their self-concept long before post-structuralists and postmodernists began to assemble their cultural manifestos” (3).

<sup>12</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa’s conception of a mestiza consciousness is often regarded as a primary example of how women might alternately speak and define their identities. In *Borderlands*, itself a mixture of autobiographical prose, poetry, myth and realism, she identifies the *la mestiza* as a “consciousness of the Borderlands,” one who is a “product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (78). Written in 1987, the text made a timely contribution to current debates about how subjects locate themselves in narrative and what historical and geographical locations inhabit “the” autobiographical voice.

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<sup>13</sup> Given the proliferation of women's writing about women's autobiography that has taken place over the last two decades, one might speculate what the field would presently look like if the questions scholars of texts written by women of color were implemented not as additives, but as integral components of analyses years earlier.

<sup>14</sup> Moraga takes on these challenges by untangling the construction of female sexuality, exposing the social and familial restrictions to a lesbian identity, and incorporating her body as a vital site of theory. The criticism she and Anzaldua have received nonetheless brings with it a set of questions that I believe deserve further reflection regarding the autobiographical practices of women of color. For one, what expectations do readers of these texts bring with them from the start about what it means to write from what is actually a varied position? How do these expectations surface in the critical evaluations of these texts?

<sup>15</sup> Mansfield suggests that Foucault drew from Nietzsche's notion that subjectivity emerged as an invention produced by dominant systems of social organization in order to exercise control over individuals. Foucault's application of this in terms of the prison and its desire to manage the inner and outer lives of those it incarcerates is a useful investigation into subjectivity, even as I problematize his ungendered reading of bodies in chapter four (10). I want to reference again as well to his point that prisons perform the function of disciplining the society as a whole.

<sup>16</sup> Diana Metzger, for instance, writes in her essay "Life in a Microwave" that prison is "sameness, day after day, week after week, year after year. It is total confinement of body and spirit and total separation from everything real and important" (140).

<sup>17</sup> This is public domain, but is also featured as a selection in James's collection *The New Abolitionists* (2005, 9).

<sup>18</sup> See Bunyan (179).

<sup>19</sup> Patricia McConnel provides a compelling examination of both this will to resist and the repercussions it can be greeted with in *Sing Song, Sing Loud: Stories from Two Lives*. This text has an interesting place in incarcerated women's prison writing, because it announces itself as a semi-fictional account, even as McConnell (who spent time in several correctional institutions for various petty crimes) stresses in the afterword that "about ninety-five percent of the events described in this book actually occurred" (233). Names were changed and characters were invented, she claims, partly to "protect the privacy of other prisoners" (233). She writes of a woman named Angora in the title selection of the book, who continues to sing out after prison officials demanded that she stop and placed her in "flatbottom," a cell without a toilet, water, or cot (63). Angora sings out loudly as an assertion of the self, in recognition of her own will, in defiance of those forces that attempted to impose silence, and in an effort to remain in community with her friend. There is, in other words, a clearly expressed need for relationality and a sense of communion with others here, but it exists alongside a fervent desire for a self that retains a sense of autonomy and self-determinism.

<sup>20</sup> I was in a graduate classroom once focused on American Cultural Studies when a discussion revolved around the question of whether or not autobiographies could even count as literature. When the question was first raised, the room fell silent before someone finally suggested that yes, when pressed, she thought that they "probably could." Others did not seem to think they did at all, which seems to me to be a pretty far (and limiting) departure from closely scrutinizing the presentation and use of a critical concept like experience.

CHAPTER 3  
RACE, RESISTANCE, AND CRIMINALIZATION: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF  
ANGELA DAVIS AND ASSATA SHAKUR

“My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented”—Hortense Spillers (203).

“They had rehearsed this moment with the false arrests of scores, perhaps hundreds of tall, light-skinned Black women with large naturals. Only the fingerprints would tell them whether they had caught the real one this time. The prints were compared. The panic on the chief’s face was replaced with relief. His underlings were ransacking my purse like bandits. As I stood there, determined to preserve my dignity, elaborate preparations were being made to get me out. I could hear them alerting other agents who must have been stationed at various points in and outside of the motel. All these “precautions,” all these dozens of agents fit in perfectly with the image they had constructed of me as one of the country’s ten most wanted criminals: the big bad Black Communist enemy”—Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* (16).

In that pivotal moment when Angela Davis is first being questioned by FBI agents after appearing on the nation’s ten most wanted list, her awareness of herself as an icon made to symbolize black deviance and resistance is acute. She was arrested in New York on October 13, 1970 on charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy—charges she was found not guilty of at the close of her trial in 1972—after living clandestinely for the months before her arrest. Her autobiography makes it clear that in the time preceding her acquittal, and even after, she was consistently aligned with terrorism and portrayed as “the big bad Black Communist Enemy,” as the epigraph above details. Like other black revolutionaries actively involved in the struggle for liberation, including Assata Shakur, Ericka Huggins, Kathleen Cleaver, and George Jackson, she was represented as being particularly threatening to the nation and body politic as a whole, and her image was widely broadcast in various media as someone dangerous and in need of confinement.<sup>1</sup> Davis became, in other words, a specific representation of criminality, with her imprisonment and her very public trial serving as powerful examples of how virulently resistance, and black resistance in particular, could be criminalized and persecuted.

In response to this social and political phenomenon, I want to explore in this chapter how Angela Davis and Assata Shakur challenge dominant constructions of criminality that marked them as innately threatening, unruly activists in their respective autobiographies. Both women were often represented as militant black resisters, derived in part through their participation in such organizations as the Black Panther Party and Davis's former membership in the Communist Party, and write openly in their texts about this characterization and how it affected the nature of their imprisonment and the conditions of their confinement. Widely circulated images of both women as criminal, culminating in the fact that each was at one time placed on the nationally broadcast FBI's most wanted list, made explicit the connection between black revolutionaries working for widespread social change and the threats such activists were assumed to pose to the larger American society.

These writers, however, employ the autobiographical to position themselves as subjects by contesting dominant representations of them that fractured their public identities and reduced the foundation, scope, and aims of their activism. Within the larger framework of this study, their efforts to do so can be seen as critical components of how each woman attempts to construct her own subjectivity amidst prevailing discourses of how she was culturally and socially "read" as a threatening and subversive other. As Moya asserts, even though subjective identities are often thought of as fully internal, many theorists since Hegel concur that they are "inescapably shaped by the experience of social recognition" (98). In Linda Alcoff's formation, for instance, subjectivity is "itself located," given that the internal is "conditioned" by the external and "mediated by subjective negotiation" (qtd. in Moya 98). Autobiography affords Davis and Shakur the opportunity to expose incongruities between their own conceptions of themselves as individuals working alongside other activists for needed social reform, and the public and

political uses of their images that departed significantly from their own understandings of self. In doing so, readers witness links being formed in their works between how they were represented and how the wider movement for black liberation as a whole was negatively characterized, even demonized, in the minds of some. As Barbara Harlow puts it when commenting on such misreadings and their larger ramifications, at stake are issues of “political status, self-determination, and self-representation—for women, for dissent, and for literature as well” (1992, viii).

For both Davis and Shakur, the act of resisting oppressive state practices and injustices figures in their texts not just as an activity that is often discouraged for women, but as a political necessity and social responsibility. That this activism became implicitly associated with criminality, serves as a powerful reminder of how specific images of crime are so often racialized and so seldomly interrogated on a national level. It also signals how readily focused, directed resistance activities can become disconnected from their social and historical significance within a dominant public record bent on curbing the political content and parameters of activist work directed toward transformative change. As a result of what we might call this kind of active forgetting, readers witness in each text a struggle being waged over the “historical and cultural record,” one that exist alongside other struggles against racial and gendered subjugation (Harlow 1987, 7).

If Davis and Shakur are referenced as “cultural” or “public” historians, it is largely because their efforts to redress the larger public remembering of their activist work and the social conditions that gave rise to it resonate so strongly in their texts.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting, for instance, on the broad circulation of photographs and visual clips that reduced her to an iconic image and otherwise circumscribed the lives of preceding African Americans, Davis writes of how there is

a danger of historical memories becoming “ahistorical and apolitical” (1998, 274). Recentring the daily challenges and triumphs of their activism and the activist work carried out by so many others, as well as the broader political climate that engendered it, becomes a primary way that both writers situate their own subject positioning. It also encourages readers to critically assess their own knowledge of this key period and the social dynamics that inhibited the recognition of all people as fully rights-bearing individuals, whose shared humanity received social and political acknowledgement. As Davis suggests in the introduction to her autobiography, she realized early on just how “important it was to preserve the history of those struggles for the benefit of our prosperity” (vii). This struggle was mobilized around what Rodriguez aptly classifies as “a radical and socially transformative (revolutionary) historical bloc, a people’s movement that partly emerges from the prison’s inside and irrevocably alters the everyday of the nominal free world” (136). Davis’s and Shakur’s autobiographies help carry this history as they present it forward, with their works continuing to galvanize resistance workers organized around revolutionary social change.

If we are to avoid not just the ideological pitfalls of historical inaccuracy, but the fractured cultural remembering that discounts the full complexity of resistance movements themselves, the relevance of these women’s autobiographies continues to reveal itself today. Indeed, given how central resistance has long been to securing fundamental human rights and rectifying social inequalities, I also want to address here how minority resistance itself (or crucially, what gets read as such) has been criminalized in more recent times. I take as my point of entry Davis’s earlier essay “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” written in 1971 while she was incarcerated at the Marin County Jail. Standing as what Joy James calls perhaps the very first essay every authored by a black woman in the genre of contemporary African American protest

and prison literature, it offers a direct challenge to the categorization of political activities as criminal aggression and advances the notion that individuals have long been brought into contact with the prison system because of their efforts to combat injustice (1998, 14). And yet, as we have seen vividly in the number of visual clips that present African Americans as central crime threats; the Rodney King, Eleanor Bumpurs, and Amadou Diallo cases; and racial hoaxes that rely on assumptions surrounding black deviance for their validity; the public reading of what constitutes criminal resistance and how that resistance should be met continues to be expressed in racialized terms far too readily in the decades since Davis's essay was first written.

In the spirit of Davis's and Shakur's own efforts to continue to speak out on the overrepresentation of African Americans in our nation's criminal justice system, I want to begin by positioning their texts, even briefly, against a larger backdrop of some of the more salient ramifications of America's history of racializing crime and the bearing this continues to have on the racial composition of our prisons and jails.<sup>3</sup> My hope is that this will underscore some of the damaging effects racialized representations of criminality bring to bear on public discourses on crime and incarceration in American society and the ever-growing number of people of color being sentenced today. I hope as well that it highlights Davis's and Shakur's own subject positioning within their autobiographies as women whose personal freedom is intimately connected to the economic, social, and political freedoms of African Americans and all marginalized peoples. The autobiographical "selves" embodied in these texts take their place in the African American autobiographical tradition characterized by Fox-Genovese as one in which the self "cannot be divorced from the history of that self or the history of the people among whom it took shape" (83). She suggests further that "it also cannot be divorced from the language through which it is represented," with the gap between the self and the language in

which it is inscribed looming “especially large” and remaining “fraught with struggle” for African American women writers (83). We are reminded daily that representation is far from value-free, occurring instead in a contested, politicized space where visual and linguistic forms intervene upon one another to produce meaning. Perhaps nowhere are these tensions more pronounced or their repercussions made more evident than in racialized representations of crime.

### **Racializing Crime, Reading Criminality**

Addressing representations of crime and criminality as well as the literature that has been produced from America’s prisons that responds to these representations seems especially pressing at a time in which women and minorities are being incarcerated at such alarming rates. African American women are now the fastest growing population group in our nation’s prisons, and are eight times more likely to have contact with the criminal justice system than their white counterparts. African Americans, like members of other minority groups, also continue to serve disproportionate sentences for the crimes they commit and are frequently underrepresented in juries and by lawyers and judges.<sup>4</sup> Many of these infractions are overlooked, however, within a social context that frequently relies on specific kinds of representations of criminality informed by intersections of gender, race and class to determine what our shared responses to crime should be. It is within this context that crimes that African American men and women commit have often been treated as icons and thus used to lessen the impact of racial oppression in relationships of dominance so that black crime itself can be made spectacle.<sup>5</sup>

America’s long history of racializing criminality has made its presence felt in the incarceration of more minorities than ever before and a public discourse on crime that frequently renders blackness as innately suspect. The powerful representations of crime and criminality that have surfaced in myriad forms through literature, historical record, print and visual media, films, and other forms of popular culture, have largely reinforced stereotypes that mark blackness as

especially threatening. As Susan Bordo reminds us, a “cultural storehouse” of scientific theory, stereotypes, and images that associate blackness with aggression exists—images that move from merely existing on paper or film to mediating “perceptions of actual human beings” (1997, 97).

One might include in this category films like *Boys in the Hood*, *Traffic*, and *Training Day* that construct “ghettos” and African American communities in limited ways and suggest frequent, open violations of the law; laws that targeted black males and that were accompanied by public discourses suggesting men of color were more predisposed to the crime of rape; representations of black women on welfare as just trying to live “off the system,” and the recent rhetoric surrounding drug addicted babies where mothers are nearly always assumed to be African American in much of the public imaginary, no matter how false that actual reality might be. Though all of these constructions differ in form, they play a part in how criminality has and continues to be racialized, and give rise to specific criminal images such as the drug dealer/pusher, rapist, welfare queen, and crack mother that have the potential to stand in for far too many African Americans in the public imaginary. As Katheryn Russell-Brown suggests in *The Color of Crime*, the “poor, homeless, drug-addicted, mentally unstable, and hardened criminals are all lumped together as Black crime threats,” with images of everyday black life often “overridden” by images of black deviance (2,3).

Significantly, these images are both deeply rooted and continually produced anew. One has only to listen to the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform and the war on drugs or view their accompanying images to find evidence of how potent many representations of black criminality continue to be. The last decade’s discourse on welfare has often posited African American women as overindulgent welfare mothers unabashedly taking from the system, with little supplementary information presented about increased housing costs, limited employment or

childcare resources, and disparities between living and real wages. The visual clips played alongside the war on drugs largely focus on African American offenders, communities, and schools, and depict them as being those individuals or locations in need of greater surveillance, even as studies have shown that whites are the majority of illicit drug users.<sup>6</sup>

There is a certain “logic of visibility” at work here, to borrow from Moya’s use of the term, one that ascriptive or imposed identities generally “operate through,” and that can contribute to our understanding of identity and subjectivity more generally (97). The racialized and criminalized dimensions informing and arising from this “logic” clearly implicated Davis and Shakur, and as I will examine later via Butler’s conceptualization of the visual as a potentially “racist formation,” have continued to promote specific cultural readings of crime and resistance long after both women were incarcerated. Moya asserts that ascriptive forms of identity exist in a “dialectical” relationship with one’s subjectivity, which she argues also implies our “various acts of self-identification, and thus necessarily incorporates our understanding of ourselves in relation to others” (98). Ascriptive identities are “inescapably historical and collective,” and become “highly correlated with the selective distribution of societal goods and resources” (97). Because, as she suggests, the meanings associated with them often linger and can be “invoked and mobilized” by those in positions of power to “justify day-to-day processes of social and economic inclusion and exclusion” (97), they clearly can have bearing on how one situates one’s own subjectivity, or comes to understand oneself in relation to the social world in which one lives. I am not suggesting here, and either is Moya as I read her, that imposed forms of identity are fully determining of one’s agency or sense of self, but that identities instead are “indexical,” referring outward to social structures and “embodying social relations” (97).

John Sloop convincingly argues in *The Cultural Prison* that since mass-media outlets will often “necessarily reproduce” (with some changes) the “dominant culture’s ideology and its perspective on a topic,” the representation of situations like those described above surrounding welfare and drug crimes might differ from reality, but it “cannot be outside of what is ideologically acceptable to a great number of people whom advertisers wish to reach” (11). After all, as he goes on to suggest, those who have control over media outlets, like many consumers themselves, have a vested interest in keeping current systems of power in place since it is “constitutive of their sense of ‘self,’ their subjectivities” (12). We do not have to look far to see how a focus on minority crime has helped to lessen the cultural focus on white crime threats, or how it has operated to diminish the representational power of even severe legal and human violations that whites have carried out. Serial murderers, for instance, have almost always been white throughout history, but their actions surely do not stand in for or mark white subjectivity as a whole. We need to not just demystify, but “demythify” representations of African Americans as Gooding-Williams puts it, so that we can subject these images to the “critical scrutiny” that is needed to better understand how they function as “forms of sociopolitical imagination” (158).

The ramifications of stereotypes and representations that associate African Americans with criminality have had considerable effects on both public policy and on American’s understanding of criminal behavior, especially in terms of who is thought of as in need of greater policing and confinement, and who is assumed to be safe and in need of protection. Statistics show that the imprisonment percentage for African-American women is now almost four times their population proportion and that nearly one in three African American males between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine is now under some form of correctional supervision (Mauer 124). Christian Parenti notes in *Lockdown America* that African Americans made up approximately

twelve percent of the national population and over twenty-three percent of those arrested on drug charges in 1980, but that they constituted forty percent of those arrested just ten years later even though their general population rate had not significantly changed (57). Far too frequently there is a startling divergence not only between who is being arrested and convicted for specific offenses, but who goes on to serve time for them as well, and that divergence seems clearly demarcated along racial lines. Franklin points out, for instance, that the arrest rate in New Jersey for violent offenses among people of color is eleven times the comparable rate among whites, and that the commitment rate for those convicted is twenty-two times what it is for whites (1989, xvi). A staggering one out of every 28 African Americans is currently behind bars, and that should give us all pause.<sup>7</sup> As Toni Morrison suggests, “The site of exorcism of critical nation issues” has long been “situated in the miasma of black life and inscribed on the bodies of black people” (x). We have to look little further than at the establishment of Black Codes and their resulting effects on the racial composition of America’s prisons to find evidence of her claim.

One of the most important historical shifts that contemporary researches on race, crime, and justice need to be cognizant of is the transition from slavery to Black Codes and Jim Crow segregation laws following emancipation, in part because these codes and laws had such a dramatic impact on the number of African Americans that were imprisoned once slavery officially ended. H. Bruce Franklin’s introduction to *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America* details how Black Codes established as early as 1865 were used to redefine black criminality, with acts like “mischief” and “insulting gestures” coded as crimes—if, that is, they were committed by an emancipated black individual (4). He goes on to examine how laws carried out in certain states, like the Mississippi Vagrancy act, defined free African Americans as criminal unless they were able to “furnish written proof of a job at the beginning of every year,” and the

constraints of being able to always do that given the racial dynamics of the time are obvious (4). Loitering, vagrancy, disturbing the peace, using foul language, public drunkenness, all as he points out, “provided highly subjective and convenient definitions of crime” (4).

The damaging effects of these codes, strengthened all the more through convict leasing and punitive fee systems, had a dramatic impact on the number of African Americans confined in certain states almost instantly. The African American imprisonment rate went up over 300% in Mississippi and Georgia between just 1874 and 1877 as Kurshan points out, with some former all-white prisons simply unable to contain the surge of African-Americans sentenced for petty offenses (140). We need to be mindful of the reverberations that can continue to be felt today from these racialized systems of punishment in light of the kind of generational and communal impact that widespread incarceration is capable of having. Shakur, for instance, responds to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s clause that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted” in her autobiography by connecting it to the rapid incarceration of minorities and the role of the prison as a punishment industry. She writes in her autobiography, “Well, that explained a lot of things. That explained why jails and prisons all over the country are filled to the brim with Black and Third World people, why so many Black people can’t find a job on the streets and are forced to survive the best way they know how. Once you’re in prison, there are plenty of jobs” (64).

Although Black Codes and convict labor constitute a “hidden part of history” as Angela Davis rightly asserts, the manner in which crime has been racialized certainly did not “wither away as the country became increasingly removed from slavery” (2003, 30, 35). Davis goes on to point out, in fact, that the current racial composition of the incarcerated population is actually steadily approaching the proportion of black to white prisoners that it was during this era of

convict leasing and chain gangs (94). To take Georgia's punitive measures for "two strikes and you're out" laws as just one example, an astonishing 98.4 percent of those serving life sentences for a second drug offense under the provision in 1995 alone were African American (Scully 67).

As Patricia Hill Collins puts it, "intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence" (69). We must ask how representations of black crime continue to get generated today, how they are justified in our nation's rhetoric on crime and incarceration, and to what uses they are put. For Davis and Shakur, the uses were quite clear: to neutralize their resistance, constrict the challenges they were posing to the dominant order, and to justify the poor treatment they received while incarcerated. Though not always similar in nature, justifications for the ever-increasing number of minorities imprisoned continue to abound today. Along with conveying the message that African Americans are not entitled to "a greater share of resources within American society" to the larger public as Jewell claims, it also implies that our safety as a nation is predicated on relying that much more heavily on our criminal justice system to instill order and protection from those deemed most dangerous (12).

Indeed, judging from the flood of crime reports in daily papers, newscasts, and political speeches, the possibility of being victimized by crime is looming large. Viewers are saturated with violent criminal images, causing many to believe that child molesters, rapists, and murderers heavily populate our nation's prisons. These same images provide justification for our rapidly expanding criminal justice system, the reduction of rehabilitation programs, and the rising costs of imprisonment. From a drug outbreak threatening to erode the social fabric of our society to cop shows on television depicting lawbreakers in the act, crime has become a big business and booming industry. So big in fact, that the cost of imprisoning America's over one

million nonviolent prisoners alone exceeded the entire federal welfare budget for 8.5 million people in 1998 alone (Jamison 5). These are astounding economic and social shifts.

Images of exploding crime rates do not, however, always give an accurate account of who is actually being imprisoned and for what offenses. For instance, Marc Mauer of *The Sentencing Project* reports that murder stories rose by 369 percent from 80 stories in 1990 to 375 by 1995, a period in which actual murder rates declined by 13 percent (172). Glassner adds that 62 percent of Americans described themselves as “truly desperate” about crime in the mid-nineties, even though nearly half of that number considered themselves as such in the 1980s when crime rates were actually higher (xi). Russell-Brown correctly asserts that it is African Americans who are generally the “repository” for this fear (1998, xiii).

Our perceptions of violent crimes and those who commit them are simply not always consistent with the realities of our current criminal justice system and the imprisoned population. Nonetheless, as Bordo contends, we are learning as a culture to respond “most powerfully and to give our ultimate assent” to what appears to be the most “compelling story or picture, the narrative plot or set of images that makes most sense to us, coheres with our picture of the world, or has simply been presented in the most convincing way” (1997, 69). To recall Sloop and Gooding-Williams here, the ideological acceptance and uses of these “truths” deserves additional critical analysis on a variety of fronts if we are to dislodge them from our established cultural and public record. The autobiographies of Davis and Shakur contribute to this critical analysis by helping us to understand the consequences of misinformed, and ultimately damaging, racialized representations of crime through their explorations of the effects misconstrued images had on their own public personas and those of other activists in struggle as well. They are exceptional

examples of what Rodriguez terms “radical intellectual formation under conditions of state captivity” (116).

Certainly, I do not endorse a position that would minimize the brutality of the many violent crimes that do occur in our country; to do so would discount the trauma suffered both by victims and their families and the effects that these crimes have on intimate and wider communities alike.<sup>8</sup> Rather, my concern is with how fears and reactions about criminality in general are continually informed by limited ways of thinking about social deviance that have the potential to result in disparity and narrow constructions of race, and that bring great consequences to bear on already marginalized communities. Perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of this is the imprisonment of people of color who have been incarcerated for crimes they did not even commit, such as Rueben “Hurricane” Carter or Joyce Ann Brown, but race has been found to affect the treatment individuals receive at nearly every stage of the justice process.<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising that crime exists as what Davis terms in “Race and Criminalization” as one of the “masquerades” behind which race can mobilize old public fears and create new ones, given the relative ambiguity that race and representations of criminality play in the reproduction of racism in social institutions (266). Fear has always been a central component in how societies respond to difference and social organization in general, but its impact on the prison system is especially significant. The prison has become what Davis calls the “perfect site for the simultaneous production and concealment of racism” because of the tendency to view it as an abstract site (271). Though prisons on one level are very much a part of this country’s public response to criminality as evidenced both in the support given to legislators and policy makers who promise to “get tough on crime” and in the sheer number of institutions that have been constructed in recent years (over 350 within the last decade alone), they are also remarkably

detached from much of public consciousness (BJS 2001). The physical barriers found surrounding most prisons are a testament to this, but correctional institutions in general exist as physical and social spaces that remain difficult sites to examine and interrogate fully. For the criminal justice system, this has meant not only that government officials have often not had to “answer for the racial implications” of certain laws as Davis asserts, but also that the structural persistence of racism in general is increasingly absent from discussions about crime and criminality; any racial imbalance, in short, is treated instead as a “contingency” (1998, 264). This is counterpoised against, I might add, findings that African American men in the United States are imprisoned at a rate higher than they were in South African Apartheid according to Huling (xi).

### **“Talking Back:” Resistant Representations**

The abstractness of the prison, its tendency to resist the public’s intimate knowledge of its functioning on a level that yields both understanding of its operation and political response to its practice, contributes to the prison’s overall elusiveness in public consciousness. There have, however, been several autobiographies written by incarcerated African Americans who intervene into the cultural ambiguity of the prison by writing openly about the injustices they have encountered, their personal experiences in court and while incarcerated, and their participation in resistance struggles in the 1960’s and 1970’s that led to their imprisonment. Beginning with Malcolm X’s autobiography, these texts include, among others, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* and *Blood in My Eye*, Mumia Abu-Jamal’s *Life from Death Row* and *All Things Censored*, and The New York 21’s *Look for Me in The Whirlwind*. The texts written by Angela Davis and Assata Shakur are two of the only autobiographical works written about the black power movement by women, along with Elaine Brown’s *A Taste of Power*, with

Shakur's and Davis's being the only two that detail their imprisonment in full length, sole-authored autobiographies.

In the tradition of centuries of African Americans who have turned to autobiography as a “powerful means of addressing and altering sociopolitical as well as cultural realities in the United States,” these writers have been resolute in their determination to register a new conception of justice and equality in American society (Andrews 1). This body of prison literature in particular has continued to be written and received despite the hostility and censure that has sometimes greeted it, raising all the while critical questions about our system of corrections and the place of people of color within it. Standing as part of an important counter discourse of literature that has been produced in such forms as emancipation narratives, political autobiographies, and prison poetry, autobiographical writing has long been employed as an “important tool for advancing political struggle.”<sup>10</sup> For Harlow, the counterstrategies of reading and writing employed in the context of the prison are further developed and used as “critical weapons in struggle itself” (1992, 5).

I use the term “talking back” in the subheading in reference to bell hook's text by the same title. She suggests in her opening essay that writing can be a form of bearing witness to “the primacy of resistance struggle in any situation of domination,” and of the strength and power that can emerge from sustained resistance (8). It is her conviction that these forces can be healing and can even protect one from dehumanization, and I think this sentiment is echoed in the autobiographies by Angela Davis and Assata Shakur in varying forms as well. Clearly, they “talk back” to those who have categorized them unfairly, and resist through their writing the representations that have marked them as dangerous criminals by detailing instead the conditions that gave rise to their activism and some of the resistance movements they took part in. They also

draw our attention to how the hostile treatment they received while incarcerated was affected by their political participation and beliefs, even as that treatment is not portrayed as being unique to them.

As Patricia Hill Collins asserts in *Fighting Words*, this manner of “talking back” to elite and powerful discourses remains “essential for black women’s journey from objectification to full human subjectivity” (47). She suggests further that it is this act of insisting on black female self-definition even more than what the actual content of the self-definition might be that “validates black women’s power as human subjects” (2000, 114). For Collins, liberation and empowerment as a group rests on two primary goals for black women as a collectivity: that of self-definition—what she conceives as the “power to name one’s own reality”—and that of self-determination—or aiming for the “power to decide one’s own destiny” (45). Responding back to powerful public discourses emerges as a way to foster precisely the kind of oppositional knowledge that she feels is necessary to create viable social theory capable of examining social constructions and uses of power. It also allows women like Davis and Shakur to assert their subjectivity as writers who refuse to be complicit in those power dynamics that attempt to objectify and misrepresent them. For both women, this assertion of self is closely connected with their relationship to the communities in which they work and live.

Rather than positing what might be considered a wholly “free” or organic self, however, one that situates itself as transparently formed and presented, I refer again to Moya’s conceptualization of identities as “indexical” when thinking about these texts. Certainly, I advocate analyzing both women’s autobiographies in a manner that takes into account how directly and for what purposes they address potentially damaging representations of them that were widely circulated, and the challenges to their basic personhood as African American

women in the 1960's and 70's that they contest. When positioned historically, I am reminded of Gates' remarks that that "black self" would be "forged in language" if it could not fully exist before the law, with the "will to power" often serving as the "will to write" (4). The dominant mode this writing assumed, he claims, was the "shaping of a black self in words" (4). The "self" (and by extension, the autobiographical subjectivity) that emerges in both texts comes out of an awareness of larger historical and political struggles for freedom, exists in dialog with other so-called "freedom-fighters," and positions itself as poised against cultural rememberings of each woman and the movement as a whole that fostered often serious inaccuracies. Yet, I recognize that one's internal sense of self is conditioned by the external, which "is itself mediated by subjective negotiation" as Alcoff puts it (qtd. in Moya 98). This indicates that there are mechanisms of subject construction and presentation at work in all autobiographical narratives, Davis's and Shakur's included. As I argued in chapter two, however, I do not believe that recognizing issues of strategy, mediation, and craft involved in subject (and textual) presentation has to wholly lessen the critical thrust of these texts, or altogether strip them of their potential to emerge as the type of social theory that Collins refers to.<sup>11</sup> In short, I draw from Moya's assertion that people are not "wholly determined" by the social categories through which we are recognized, nor can we be "totally free of them" (99).

An interesting juxtaposition that both Shakur and Davis set up early on in their texts is that their particular circumstances should be seen as part of a wider movement made up of thousands, often anonymous individuals who contributed to the struggle for liberation, even as both autobiographies illuminate their particular experiences before, during and following their incarceration. While one's expressed individuality is subordinated in other words by each writer, they nonetheless detail and draw considerably from a number of personal encounters and events

that they had in substantial sections of their texts, beginning with both were just adolescents. Shakur writes of her early relationship to the church, first jobs, and summers with her grandparents, with Davis similarly detailing her upbringing, schooling, and family dynamics. In some ways, then, they reflect the tensions Fox-Genovese points to in African American women's autobiographies between one's "independent relation to dominant culture and their people's relation to it" (84). The difference that emerges here though from other autobiographical works in terms of their subject positioning, is that even those personal experiences are depicted as being conveyed for the purpose of helping others understand the draw to, and dynamics of, resistance struggles. Infractions that they experienced as individuals, are refigured as examples of the kind of infractions visited upon African Americans as a collectivity. Davis's account of her father being unjustly pulled over and threatened with arrest while driving through Tennessee, and Shakur's provocative account of how she and a friend were catered to when they pretended to have French accents while shopping as opposed to being discriminated against as they were more accustomed, are just two of many examples of this type of situational reframing.<sup>12</sup>

Davis makes it clear in her original preface that she was hesitant to write an autobiography to begin with given its attention to the individual and because she felt that it would require to her have a "posture of difference," or otherwise make it seem that she was somehow "unlike" other black women and thus needed to explain herself (xv). She also states that she was reluctant to write the book because she feared the concentration on her personal history might "detract from the movement that originally brought her case to the people in the first place" (xvi). The discomfort she expresses with a genre of literature generally assumed to place significance on the life or experiences of a particular individual resounds strongly here given how centrally her own subjectivity is predicated on her relationship to her community and fellow comrades who

engaged in struggle alongside her. This resounds in her conception of liberation itself, in which she advocates the “building of a collective spirit, getting away from this individualistic orientation toward personal salvation, personal involvement” (qtd. in James 1999, 110).

Davis ultimately decided to write the text because she had come to envision it as a “political autobiography,” one that emphasized the people, events and forces that “propelled” her to her commitment, and that might serve the “important and practical purpose” of having her readers better understand why she and others felt they had “no alternative but to offer our lives—our bodies, our knowledge, our will—to the cause of our oppressed people” (xvi). Clearly, a central objective in writing was to not only have readers gain a better understanding of why she felt it was so crucial to risk what she did to take part in the struggle for black liberation, but also to propel others into that very struggle and inspire them to think about what they too could bring.

Exploding the myth that only certain people can play an active role in struggles for liberation emerges, in turn, as one method that she employs to encourage the kind of sustained political involvement that she took part in. Davis writes of her desire to “demystify the usual notion that history is the product of unique individuals possessing inherent qualities of greatness” in the introduction to the second edition of her autobiography (viii). This is a central intervention into the autobiographical genre itself, given its early history of a singular person, usually assumed to be male, reflecting upon his life, his experiences, and their implications in terms of their personal significance. It was more important for Davis to position her responses to oppressive forces that had “shaped and misshaped the lives of million of my people” as purely unexceptional, with her political involvement standing as a “natural, logical way to defend our embattled humanity” (xv). Her personal victory in turn, is connected to the victories of other grassroots movements and struggles for liberation everywhere. Like Shakur, she recalls aspects

of the blues tradition here, which Braxton identifies as an autobiographer incorporating “communal values into the performances of the autobiographical act, sometimes rising to function as the point of consciousness of her people” (5).

It is not unforeseen, then, when Davis comments about trying to not get overly upset about her individual situation repeatedly within the text. As she states about her first night in jail, “I fought the tendency to individualize my predicament. . . . I kept telling myself that I didn’t have the right to get upset about a few hours of being alone in a holding cell. What about the brother [Chris Jordon] who had spent, not hours, but days and weeks in a pitch-dark strip cell in Soledad Prison?” (28). She remains cognizant of the struggles other revolutionaries and citizens are facing daily even in the moments where she is most despairing and facing her own set of grueling circumstances. The movement, she insists repeatedly, was “never exceptional for her” considering the harsh treatment many other activists received as well. This sustained attention that she gives to other revolutionaries in struggle surfaces as a primary way that she is able to counter an ahistorical understanding of the wider movement for black liberation—one that can sometimes circumscribe the daily costs of challenging the dominant social order so that all social members might one day possess full political freedoms. As Garcia claims, freedom seems to operate for Davis, Shakur, and other political prisoners he profiles (George Jackson and Piri Thomas included) not as a “possession” per se, but rather as something “to be enacted and practiced through struggle for the freedom of others” (xliv).

As a testament to this, Shakur persistently calls attention to how racism, economic exploitation, and imperialism affect not only her and her family, but African Americans and people of color worldwide. Her stance is emphasized in part through her use of a lower case “i” each time that she refers to herself. This rhetorical device is symbolic of her intent to not

privilege her set of experiences over those of others who participated in the movements she was involved in, even as she writes at length about the particular circumstances that led to her imprisonment and the conditions she suffered under while incarcerated. Shakur also emphasizes the feeling of community that her participation in struggle brought her, and she writes fondly about many of the people that she met, the support they gave her, and the influence they had on her and her life's course. "There was never a time," she states, "no matter what horrible thing i was undergoing, when i felt completely alone. Maybe it's ironic, i don't know, but the one thing i do know is that the Black liberation movement has done more for me than I will ever be able to do for it" (223). Participating in resistance struggle is also refigured here as something that one not only gives to, but can also take valuable things from. For Assata, this participation was a central part of her life and her activist work.

Given their focus on the repression people of color are exposed to worldwide and the need for a movement to counter it, one of the valuable components of both women's texts is that they are able to contest those representations of militancy and criminality that marked so many people of color in the 60's and 70's and continue to criminalize black resistance today—an objective they were able to accomplish in part by chronicling some of their personal experiences. In other words, by recounting and revealing information about their childhoods, schooling, activism, and eventual incarceration, they are able to personalize histories that otherwise would have likely been misread and misconstrued even to a greater extent than they are today, subsumed underneath iconic images that do little to explain either woman's motivations for social change. Their countering of dominant representations of criminality allows us to see as well how other prominent leaders and anonymous individuals who were central to the black nationalist movement were also characterized in the media as especially dangerous or threatening, by

extension and sometimes directly through their references to them. Certainly Davis's and Shakur's work does draw attention to the personal circumstances that motivated them to take part in this struggle and details key aspects of how they as individuals were treated when brought into contact with the criminal justice system, but it also allows readers to learn more about the participants, daily challenges, and goals of revolutionary struggle in general. For example, the dialogue that runs throughout sections of Davis's text between her and George Jackson in and of itself establishes the notion that liberatory thinkers were in communion over strategies and tactics to bring about social freedoms with one another, and did not merely act out in impulsive aggression as public record might have one believe. But even this communication was misappropriated for political use, with one of the letters between the two brought up in the trial against Davis to sway the jury that her offense was a "crime of passion"—the action of an "emotional female," as Harlow suggests, on behalf of George Jackson (1993, 167).

Davis nonetheless becomes all the more rooted in her desire for her freedom to not be isolated from the larger goals of the movement as her trial is nearing and the people in the streets are growing in number and in intensity of their support for her. Even while in court when her fate remains very uncertain, she reinforces how important it is that her freedom is seen "not as something exceptional but as a small part of a great fight against injustice, one bough in a solidly rooted tree of resistance" (382). She also wants to make certain that all of these struggles were waged against not only political repression in the United States, but also as she puts it, against "racism, poverty, police brutality, drugs, and all the myriad ways Black, Brown, Red, Yellow and white working people are kept chained to misery and despair" (382). This is a vision of transnational coalition work echoed in the prison writings of Marilyn Buck, Kathy Boudin, Judith Clark, and Laura Whitehorn, who also situate their commitment to activism in terms of

struggles against colonialism, imperialism and the inequalities arising from the globalization of capital.

Both Davis and Shakur believed that a successful resistance movement needed to be mindful of and responsive to its international dimensions, and that economic imperialism, neocolonialism, and other forms of political oppression must be looked at globally, as part of how people of color all over the world are affected by racism, poverty, and the enduring reverberations of colonization. These connections to global movements are often reduced through ahistorical portrayals of activist work that discount the transnational solidarity many individuals and groups were working to forge. Like Shakur, Davis is able to recenter them both in her autobiography and in her other writings from or about the prison, for her own subject positioning is clear throughout. As she puts it in one of her many prison interviews, “one can’t really be a true revolutionary without being cognizant of the need to link up with forces all over the world battling with imperialism” (1971,190). This focus on the collective is emphasized again in the preface she and Bettina Aptheker wrote for *If They Come in the Morning*. Here they assert that freeing political prisoners transcends the objective to free specific individual victims of repression because the political ramifications of each victory are “connected to the liberation movement as a whole” (xvii).

Readers are still made aware of the constraints that achieving her freedom will have to be waged against early on. Davis was charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy after a weapon used by Jonathon Jackson in a courtroom revolt was found to be registered in her name. Her autobiography opens with her accepting a wig from another woman to aid in her safe travel underground. The wig is significant here, for she has later written about how she had to try and create an appearance that would be far different from the one “defined as armed and dangerous,”

and she felt like a glamorous look might be the only kind of appearance that “might annul the likelihood of being perceived as a revolutionary” (1998, 275). Upset at her need for disguise and with her altered look, Davis hits a sink heavily described with racial overtones as “cold, white and impenetrable,” and attempts to reconcile herself with the fact that she is now a fugitive, and one highly wanted at that (4).

We are reminded of the connection between her ordeal and those that other African Americans in confinement had to struggle against on a number of occasions, but this is especially true in the text’s opening section. Her historical ties are poignantly illustrated in the reason she gives for deciding to live as a fugitive, including moving around with all of the paranoia such a lifestyle brings. She writes, “Thousands of my ancestors had waited, as I had done, for nightfall to cover their steps, had leaned on one true friend to help them, had felt, as I did, the very teeth of the dogs at their heels. It was simple. I had to be worthy of them” (6). The association here between Davis and the African American men and women of generations before who preceded her is made explicit. Davis’s own subjectivity, in turn, is depicted as being intimately connected not just with the subjugation of her ancestors as might be assumed, but with their will to resist. The selfhood that emerges here can be tied to Butterfield’s conception of African American women autobiographers as positing a self that is a “conscious political identity, conceived as member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members, . . . and drawing sustenance from the past experience of the group” (2-3). Assata references the strength she receives from her ancestors as well in her discussion of the parallels between the harsh environment of the prison and conditions on the street, especially in terms of the drugs, poverty, sexism, racism, and alienation that surface in both. She speaks well to Butterfield’s characterization of the African American women’s autobiographical tradition as she reflects

upon what women of her present generation can learn and obtain from those who came before here: “I can imagine the pain and the strength of my great-great-grandmothers who were slaves and my great-great-grandmothers who were Cherokee Indians trapped on reservations, . . . We need the strength of our foremothers to make us well again. We need their medicines to give us strength to fight and the drive to win” (qtd. in James 86,88).

The circumstances that led to Assata Shakur’s imprisonment are just as complicated as Davis’s, and center on charges of attempted murder following a shootout on the New Jersey State Turnpike in which a state trooper was killed. Shakur and one of her fellow passengers were seriously wounded and another man who she was with, Zayd Malik Shakur, was also killed. Considerable evidence showed that she was shot while her hands were raised in surrender and that she could not physically have fired a weapon, but she was convicted in 1977 by an all-white jury and sentenced to life plus an additional twenty-six years (Franklin 1998, 200). She was already on the FBI’s Most Wanted list before the incident on the turnpike on charges of bank robbery, kidnapping and murder, but she was acquitted from all previous charges in subsequent trials.

Shakur’s autobiography opens with her on the scene at the turnpike as she is being threatened by officers who want to know which way the men she was with had gone. From there she is moved via ambulance to a hospital for care of her gunshot wounds, broken clavicle and nerve-damaged arm, but the authorities are never far from her. The threats to her life are imminent: at one point she recalls seeing the now dead Zayd and being told, “that’s what’s gonna happen to you before the night is over if you don’t tell us what we want to know” (6). This is a traumatic opening, filled with details about Shakur being harassed and physically assaulted by various detectives and state troopers while she is in the hospital, including being questioned

about the size and scope of the Black Liberation Army. It is also one of the few times that she comments on her feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Like Davis, however, she is resolved to not be destroyed by her circumstances, no matter how challenging they might become. Her steadfast determination is revealed in a brief poem simply titled “Story” that concludes her first chapter: “you died. / I cried / And kept on getting up. / A little slower. / And a lot more deadly” (1-5).

When Shakur is taken to a New Jersey workhouse, she is immediately placed in segregation and told by the warden that they have to keep her in her cell because the other prisoners are placing threats on her life. She is justifiably skeptical of this and feels certain that she is being isolated for reasons pertaining to her participation in resistance movements; she is only told that she is there for her own “safety.” Davis was also placed in isolation while incarcerated, and it is then that she writes of feeling the “weight of her imprisonment” most (46). She was placed in 4b, the area of the prison reserved for “mental cases,” and told, like Shakur, that they needed to keep her there for her own well-being. The power signs she receives from other prisoners confirm her suspicion that her isolation has been imposed for reasons other than her protection, and also provide her with additional encouragement to continue battling forward. Davis eventually launched a hunger strike, and on the tenth day received word that the Federal Court had ruled that she could no longer be held in isolation or under maximum-security conditions. She asserts that this earlier punishment was “meted out to me because of my political beliefs and affiliations,” and because others were fearful that she would talk to the other women about Communism (47). She also finds out that officers on duty were to write entries into a log entitled “Angela Davis’s Daily Activities,” describing all of the activities she took part in

over the course of a day—a physical manifestation of the close surveillance she is continually placed under while incarcerated in an attempt to further contain her (43).

For Shakur, the isolation that she experienced in the prison can be connected to the segregation and uses of her public image. Commenting on the need to have a continually growing and changing movement, she writes that the “first thing the enemy tries to do is isolate revolutionaries from the masses of people, making us horrible and hideous monsters so that our people will hate us” (181). Her physical removal from other women while incarcerated surfaces as an additional tangible representation of how her widely broadcast image became increasingly removed from her motivations behind, and activities within, resistance struggle. Lennox Hinds asserts in the foreword to Shakur’s autobiography that “In the history of New Jersey, no woman pretrial detainee or prisoner has ever been treated as she was, continuously confined in a men’s prison, under twenty-four-hour surveillance of her most intimate functions, without intellectual sustenance, adequate medical attention, and exercise, and without the company of other women for all the years she was in their custody” (x). Shakur does detail some of this treatment in her text, including the nearly constant battles she has to engage in to receive proper medical attention and physical therapy for her injuries, but in her determined fashion, it also during this time that she records the tape of “To My People” that was subsequently broadcast on several radio stations.

“To My People” is resolute in its message to continue the struggle for freedom despite the many obstacles that attempt to circumvent the full realization of economic, social, and political liberation for all oppressed groups. She proclaims herself as a black revolutionary woman, and says that because of this, “i have been charged with and accused of every alleged crime in which a woman was believed to have participated. The alleged crimes in which only men were

supposedly involved, i have been accused of planning” (50). She also comments directly about how her image was used by the media, asserting “They have plastered pictures alleged to be me in post offices, airports, hotels, police cars, subways, banks, television, and newspapers. They have offered over fifty thousands dollars in rewards for my capture and they have issued orders to shoot on sight and shoot to kill” (50).

To say that both Davis and Shakur were merely cognizant of the misappropriations and negative uses of their images would be an understatement, one that reduces their knowledge of the social and political dynamics that underpinned any representation of them as dangerously subversive, overly militant, or threatening to the nation as a whole. Davis, for example, comments early on in her autobiography about the publicity that she received upon her capture, and efforts that she felt were directed at discrediting the Black Liberation Movement, the Left, and the Communist Party as a whole by using her “as an example.” As she puts it, “I was only the occasion for the manipulation” (25). Davis has continued to comment on the political uses of her image in the decades since her incarceration, including how photographs have been read in narrow and restricting ways since posters of her first appeared more than thirty years ago. She writes the following in response to this in “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia:”

With the first public circulation of my photographs, I was intensely aware of the invasive and transformative power of the cameras and of the ideological contextualization of my images, which left me with little or no agency. On the one hand I was portrayed as a conspiratorial and monstrous Communist (i.e., anti-American) whose unruly natural hairdo symbolized black militancy (i.e., anti-whiteness). . . . On the other hand, sympathetic portrayals tended to interpret the image—almost inevitably one with my mouth wide open—as that of a charismatic and raucous revolutionary ready to lead the masses into battle. Since I considered myself neither monstrous nor charismatic, I felt fundamentally betrayed on both accounts: violated on the first account, and deficient on the second (275).

Davis does briefly acknowledge that the wide circulation of her image had a double function, one that helped to rally her supporters even as it mobilized much of the public against her. As Moya

points out, identity ascriptions are an inescapable though “not necessarily pernicious” part of human existence, as they can both enable and constrain freedom (101). But for Davis, the compartmentalization and misappropriation that it fostered remains. Her motivations behind becoming an activist, difficulties she faced alongside other comrades in struggle, and the ideological parameters of her work are precisely among those that she is able to try and reconstitute in her autobiography. Recentring these dimensions of her life and work surfaces again as key to how she locates herself as a writing subject and positions her subjectivity.

Shakur is also heavily attuned to the power dynamics at play in constructing her image, and comments on how the ownership of capital allowed those in positions of influence to do so that much more readily. She contends that, “since we did not own the TV stations or newspapers, it was easy for the news media to portray us as monsters and terrorists” (242). Commenting furthermore on the representational power of certain images and their ability to somehow stand in for other people of color, both Shakur and Lennox Hinds write directly about a picture of Shakur that was taken from the FBI’s “militant casebook” and used against her during the course of her trial on a bank robbery charge. The picture was found to have been altered by the FBI according to Shakur in their efforts to superimpose a bank surveillance photo over her actual picture, and ended up not being of her at all. Still though two people signed affidavits saying that it bore a resemblance to her (under the premise Shakur felt that all African Americans somehow “look alike”), and it took an outside photograph expert to confirm that the image had been falsely presented (213).

Shakur’s description of this episode and the possible consequences it could have had is clearly a direct way that she is able to respond to and critique misrepresentations of her image, and like Davis, her knowledge of the wider political uses of similar photographs resonates

throughout her autobiography. Both women were cognizant of how their images were situated securely within the matrix of social repression, directed at limiting the freedoms of African Americans and other people of color, and broadcasted to send messages to their allies and supporters that resisting the state could result in severe repercussions that extended beyond just their personal lives. The fact that Richard Nixon congratulated Hoover and the FBI upon Davis's capture, claiming that her arrest would serve as an example to "all other terrorists" is but one example of the latter.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the political suppression that greeted each woman, neither is reserved about critiquing the racism in the prison system, exposing how their political affiliations led to their arrests and incarceration, or examining why their images were used by the media and courts to further subjugate the movement as whole. They also point out repeatedly how resistance organizations themselves are often categorized in debilitating and ahistorical ways in order to remove the focus from the political and social content of their work. Even today the Black Panther Party is frequently associated with rage and militancy in a manner that eclipses the community and public service work they spearheaded and the collective changes they hoped to help put into place. They led education, economic, and political consciousness courses; developed a Free Breakfast program for thousands of largely African American children residing in poverty that Shakur herself participated in; ran a newspaper, and established an anti-heroin campaign, but these activities remain largely out of focus. As James claims, the "deradicalizing tendencies of iconography mask the diverse and significant contributions "Panther women" made under considerable difficulty and hardship" (100). Both Davis and Shakur struggled with various aspects of the organization, particularly with the sexual politics that defined revolution in terms of patriarchal power and relegated the roles many women in the party could play to

support and secretarial work, but despite their decisions to eventually leave the party they remained mindful of how the organization was incorrectly represented in the minds of the public as merely a combative, dangerous and threatening group bent on destroying the current social system at any price.

Davis and Shakur are also particularly attuned to how the party was targeted by the FBI's COINTELPRO, a covert series of programs intent on "neutralizing" targeted groups like the Panthers through frequently violent measures.<sup>14</sup> In the beginning, Shakur writes that she "didn't feel the repression too deeply. I knew the Party was under attack, but it felt like it wasn't so near, like it was lingering in the background. What made me maddest was the media treatment of the BPP, which gave the impression that the Party was racist and violent. And it worked" (222). It is not long, though, until Shakur realizes that the group is increasingly under assault, and that she is just one of their primary targets. The FBI's intent, both women repeatedly stress in varying forms, is not just to discredit, but to destroy their attempts at resistance and implementing political change. In detailing the human costs involved in these efforts to neutralize revolutionaries and the activist organizations they were part of, these writers are able again to add needed historical dimensions to a larger public reading of the period and the consequences that resisting the state brought to them. As James Baldwin recalls in the foreword to *If They come in The Morning*, "Some of us, white and black, know how great a price has already been paid to bring into existence a new consciousness, a new people, an unprecedented nation" (23). That price receives needed recognition in both Davis's and Shakur's autobiographies, and it is foundational in how each woman positions herself as a writing subject as a fellow comrade in struggle.

## **Criminalizing Resistance, Reading Race**

As Davis argues in “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” whenever blacks in struggle have recourse to self-defense it is ultimately rendered synonymous with “criminal aggression,” even as acts of assault or even homicide carried out by officers or others “defending” themselves against these alleged aggressors are deemed “justifiable” (43). Davis’s own autobiography details examples of attacks that occurred on the bodies of her fellow comrades as well as their meeting houses: “we knew that for the moment our commitment meant that we were chained to a vicious circle of violence. . . . In a sense, therefore, we always expected the violence, we knew it was coming, though we could never predict the next target. Yet each time it struck, it was equally devastating to us. No matter how many times it was repeated, there was no getting used to it” (195).<sup>15</sup> And she is not alone in responding to the violence that surrounded either the Black Panther Party or the Black Nationalist Movement, as other leaders such as Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Mumia Abu-Jamal have also in their respective texts. Collectively, all point to the vulnerable space that minority resistance inhabits when it comes face to face with more sanctioned uses of aggression in a court of law. Decades after some of these autobiographies were written we still find disturbing evidence of how minority resistance can be “read” and responded to in especially pernicious ways.

One of the most potent and devastating examples of the tendency to rely on the justifiable actions of persons defending themselves from dangerous raced others in even more contemporary times occurred during the Rodney King beating and the subsequent trial held in Simi Valley when the four officers who assaulted King were acquitted. In her essay “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” Judith Butler examines what constitutes visual evidence by exploring the impact that racism has on white perception and its ability to interpret events before they actually occur. She argues convincingly that the visual

field is itself a “racial formation,” and that there is a “racist organization of the visible” that is capable of circumscribing what we think of as evidence and even truth. In this context the video of King’s beating was used to demonstrate that the “body being beaten was itself the source of danger,” and that it “bore an intention to injure” (15). The actions of the officers were made justifiable because the jury believed that they had to protect themselves from who was assumed to be most dangerous body. Even in the moment when King’s palm was turned away from his body and held above his head, the gesture was read not as “self-protection,” as Butler claims, but as the “incipient moments of a physical threat” (16). We need to ask what is at work in making a reading like this not just possible, but sanctioned in a court of law and supported by far too many in the wider public.

Had King’s body as an African American man not been read as dangerous and in need of containment, the transference of violence that was assumed to happen at any time from his body onto the bodies of endangered officers could not have occurred. As Butler claims, the perception that King was both potentially “wielding the violence” onto others and receiving it himself, made him “the beginning and the end of the violence” (20). He became, in these terms, both the cause and the result of what took place on the basis of his bodily specificity. According to this racist ideology, she argues that he is in fact “hit in exchange for the blows he never delivered, but which he is, by virtue of his blackness, always about to deliver” (19). The workings of racial injustice were thereby erased, and his body was made symbol of what could happen to resistant bodies of color.

Certainly we have witnessed how this mode of “seeing” and establishing what constitutes visual evidence works to render white criminality and white violence much less visible in general. Patricia Williams’ articulation of how King’s body was described as gun with a

“cocked” leg and an arm in “trigger position,” reminds us all that “not going into compliance” and having the right to yield “power strikes” is indeed partly a function of where we are in reference to what we see (1993, 52- 53). Williams goes on to discuss how many citizens perceived that African Americans were responsible for most of the rioting and looting that took place following the verdict that was delivered, even though it was found that they comprised only 36% of those who were arrested (54). Again we can observe how visual perceptions of what occurred were informed by stereotypes surrounding minority resistance that circumscribed the reality of what was “seen.” We need to read not only for the actual incident of violence as Butler urges, but also for the “racist schema that orchestrates and interprets the event” (20).

While King’s case has undoubtedly received the most media attention and public outcry for the blatant racism that surfaced throughout the subsequent trial, events surrounding the deaths of Eleanor Bumpurs and Amadou Diallo also raise very critical questions concerning how minority resistance can be read by those in positions of power and then lethally responded to. In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Patricia Williams details how seven white police officers entered Mrs. Bumpurs’ apartment on October 29, 1984 and shot and killed her while attempting an illegal eviction. She was less than one hundred dollars behind in her rent.<sup>16</sup> Thirty-seven year old Mrs. Bumpurs had a knife, and when Officer Stephen Sullivan, armed himself with a shotgun fired at her and missed (Williams reports that the blast removed half of her hand that was holding the knife), he then fired again and “made his mark the second time around” (136).

It is true that some controversy swirled as to whether or not a gun should have been used at all in a situation like this and that Sullivan was initially indicted for reckless manslaughter by a grand jury, but he was cleared of these charges two years after his trial by a New York Supreme Court. New York Commissioner Ward and other city officials maintained that there was “no

evidence of racism,” and even though the law called for nonlethal alternatives to be utilized first, the degree of “police discretion” allowed presumably established the basis upon which Sullivan was found to have acted legally (139). Williams poignantly argues in response to his acquittal that the “extent to which technical legalisms are used to obfuscate the human motivations that generate our justice system is the real extent to which we as human beings are disenfranchised” (139).

Speaking of the presumed “fear” that Sullivan had of Mrs. Bumpurs, notwithstanding the presence, she notes, of six other armed men, Williams contends that it seemed to be a “fear embellished by something beyond Mrs. Bumpurs herself; something about her that filled the void between her physical, limited presence and the ‘immediate threat and endangerment to life’ in the beholding eyes of the officer” (144). Commenting further on the mental condition of Mrs. Bumpurs, who was known to struggle with hallucinations, Williams asks of Officer Sullivan’s actions, “what spirit of prejudgment, of prejudice, provided him such a powerful hallucinogen” (144). I am reminded again here of Davis’s essay “Race and Criminalization,” in which she stresses how crime can both “mobilize old public fears and create new ones” (266). That fear seems inextricably bound to the failure to dislodge constructions of minority resistance from historical stereotypes of aggression and unrestrained volatility that came to inform notions of black criminality for centuries to follow. Mrs. Bumpurs’s resistance to the officers intrusion into her home was read not just as dangerous, but as potentially deadly, and as a result, it was her life that ended up being taken. It is a reading of supposed minority resistance that devastatingly resurfaced for Amadou Diallo just five years later in the same city.

I was fortunate enough to attend a talk by Amadou’s mother, Kadiatou, held at the University of Florida during the fall of 2005 in which she valiantly recounted the events

surrounding her son's tragic death. Amadou was killed by New York City police in 1999 at the age of just twenty-three. He was standing outside of his apartment building, his mother recalled, when four officers saw him and thought that he was either a rapist they had been looking for or on lookout for a robbery due to the "suspicious gestures" he was making (bear in mind Shakur's statement on all African Americans somehow "looking alike" in criminal situations). He went inside the vestibule of his apartment, and it was there that he was met with a shower of an astonishing 41 bullets. The reason behind the shooting: officers claimed that he was reaching for a gun, while in fact Amadou was unarmed and only had his wallet and a pager on him. It is important to note as well that the officers were operating undercover.<sup>17</sup> According to Kadiatou, her son was just 5'6 and weighed 150 lbs, had never been in a fight, or been known to display overly aggressive behavior. His only crime, she said, was to "believe he could stand safely in front of his own home." Although the family recently received a sizeable settlement in their lawsuit against the City of New York, the four officers who fired those bullets were cleared of all criminal wrongdoing. Amadou's untimely death and the acquittal of the officers responsible for it stand as travesties of justice.

I would argue that Shakur's *Autobiography* and Davis's collective body of work, beginning with "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation," is at the forefront in helping us to understand how the fear of crime, the response to minority resistance, and the continued representation of African Americans as primary crime threats coalesce to produce ideological constructions of black criminality that our society is still far from fully dislodging. As Davis suggests, "racism has always found an easy route from its embeddedness in social structure to the psyches of collectives and individuals precisely because it mobilizes deep fears" (1997, 270). What we appear to be seeing even more now is that these types of racial infractions are often

neutralized in public discourses that focus on fear as necessitating a dramatic response to crime rates that are perceived as rising, and that the fear of raced bodies in particular is concealed through pervasive representations that mark them as posing the greatest danger to the safety of (read white) America. In short, it is difficult to place any of the cases detailed above, the actions of the FBI's COINTELPRO, or the frequent transmission of representations of African Americans as primary violent crime threats outside of a racialized framework of reading, responding to, and wielding violence.

Homi Bhaba's reading of stereotype can be useful here, for he connects how what is "known" or "in place" can actually be something that needs no proof due to the very ambivalence that it relies on (66). He writes, "It is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency; ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization" (66). In this way, stereotype can be read as more of a function than just an image. Ambivalence makes it flexible to changing circumstances since the stereotype is something that does not have to be proven or fully known in order to have influence, but seldom is the currency of the stereotype diluted. Instead, the stereotype helps produce certain relationships of power that rely, at least in part, on the assumptions made possible by specific images or constructs. In terms of crime, these stereotypes also have the ability to influence and even "set policy agendas for the state," and curtail or otherwise redirect public discourses on issues involving justice, fairness and parity under the law (Culverson 126).

The pervasiveness and impact of racialized representations of criminality surface in the sheer number of racial hoaxes that have occurred in this country in which an African American person was falsely blamed for a crime because of his or her race. This is a productive area to

think about alongside Bhabha's comments regarding the ambivalence connected to stereotypes considering that the hoax in general has to rely on what is unknown to demonstrate what can be, and is often thought to be, known. Kathryn Russell documents nearly seventy hoaxes that occurred during 1987 and 1998 alone in *The Color of Crime*, most of which involved whites who fabricated crimes against African Americans. These hoaxes allegedly involving black aggressors have cultural capital precisely because black criminality has been so firmly planted in the public imagination. They also demonstrate how many people are increasingly lax to differentiate between the offense that was committed, the individual who committed or took part in it, and that person's group affiliation. Examining the circumstances under which this occurs, however, allows us to consider how people are often "fetishistically exchangeable" with the crimes they have or will allegedly commit, as Davis suggests, so that their lives become bound up in constructions of dangerous crime (1997, 267).

Two hoaxes that resonate most strongly are the Susan Smith and Charles Stuart cases in which both blamed the murders that they each committed on African American men. Smith told police a young black man carjacked her and drove off with her two young sons, but later confessed to drowning them in a South Carolina lake nine days later. Stuart told officials he and his pregnant wife had been shot by a black jogger and went on to identify a black man from a police line-up as the criminal. When Stuart's brother informed police that Charles had developed the hoax in order to collect his wife's insurance money and they decided to question him as a murder suspect, Charles committed suicide.<sup>18</sup> Mike Dyson argues in *Race Rules* that their stories were made believable not by the fact, but by the "perception of black crime" (35). Indeed, statistics show that an overwhelming number of whites are in fact victimized by other whites in this country, even though we never hear phrases like white-on-white crime in news reports or

through other outlets in the media.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Dyson insists that Smith's and Stuart's stories were able to find millions of white believers because black males have become "racially coded symbols for pathological, criminal behavior," and that only when race is understood as a subtext can we get a handle on the "changing forms" of racism in our culture (35). Hoaxes are of course clearly different from active forms of minority resistance, but in the context of my discussion here, they also lead us to ask central questions regarding who is represented as criminal in our current rhetoric on crime and incarceration, how those representations get transmitted, and the kinds of ideological work that they perform.

As Wahneema Lubiano points out, categories like black woman or a particular subset of those categories like welfare mother or welfare queen are not simply "social taxonomies," they also "describe the world in particular and politically loaded ways" (330). One of the dangers inherent in these terms is that they become part of what she calls the "building blocks of reality," by providing uncomplicated and often inaccurate information about what's wrong with some people while simultaneously "shielding the text of power" (331). This surfaces in a system of laws that is quick to condemn African American men and women as offenders but slow to recognize their victimization, and in a system of justice that responds most stringently to people of color who become bound up in labels and specific, racially charged group identifications that deny individuality.<sup>20</sup>

Collins suggests that social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of groups of people who have been historically oppressed "investigate ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice" (xiii). She includes black nationalist political ideologies as contributing to this theoretical space of potential, and I certainly think we could consider Davis's and Shakur's autobiographies to be foundational texts in this critical discourse

(even though, that is, texts by men of the period far more frequently receive designations of this kind). I would add to Collins's point that these works could productively intervene into the complex study of subjectivity and identity formation as well. One of the core struggles that Davis and Shakur engaged in centers on what Garcia rightly calls the "struggle for the establishment of concrete social relations in which self and other might recognize one another under enabling conditions" (120). These women sought to build, and are still seeking, a society where one can pursue self-realization free from the "coercive effects of an inhumane social and economic system" (120), and where one's exercise of liberty is far less constrained. And that, of course, enlarges the scope of freedom for all people.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Bettina Aptheker notes in *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis* that pictures of Davis in handcuffs appeared on covers of *Newsweek* and other leading journals. She also states that President Richard M. Nixon congratulated the FBI on their "capture of the dangerous terrorist, Angela Davis," and that this statement was echoed by Ronald Reagan and by an editorial featured in the *New York Times* (xi).

<sup>2</sup> Joy James, for instance, calls both Angela Davis and Eldridge Cleaver public historians who analyze "past radical or revolutionary movements," with their efforts to do so becoming "central to their iconography as Panther currency has risen in American popular culture" (1999, 104).

<sup>3</sup> There is a cd recording of one of Davis' lectures called the *Prison Industrial Complex*, and she has written about these issues widely in a variety of publications, including *Abolition Democracy* and *Are Prisons Obsolete*. Assata Shakur has spoken out in reference to Mumia Abu-Jamal's case, has participated in several interviews on issues surrounding the prison and the expansions of global capital, and introduces the collection *Hauling Up the Morning* from her exile in Cuba.

<sup>4</sup> See "Women of Color and the Criminal Justice System" by Mann, "Processes of Victimization and Criminalization of Black Women" by Regina Arnold, and "Prisoners in 1998" by Allen Beck and Christopher Mumola.

<sup>5</sup> See Collins' *Fighting Words* for further discussion on the use of icons and their function in producing spectacle.

<sup>6</sup> Judith A.M. Scully cites a study from the National Institute for Drug Abuse that showed that whites were 77% of the estimated 13 million drug users, yet up to 90% of prison admissions for drug offenses are African-American or Latino. She references another study showing that whites and African-Americans use cocaine and marijuana at roughly the same rates, though African-Americans are arrested at a rate five times higher than their white counterparts (74). She goes on to suggest that if the war on drugs had been focused on "drug users in general, without regard to race" the prison population would in turn be largely white since they comprise more than 70 percent of all illegal drug users.

<sup>7</sup> This statistic is cited by Critical Resistance in their special issue of the journal *Social Justice*.

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<sup>8</sup> Nor am I suggesting that there isn't a place for correctional institutions in our country or that there are not many individuals who simply have to be held accountable for the crimes they have committed.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Coramae Mann's *Unequal Justice: A Question of Color* and Marc Mauer's *Race to Incarcerate*.

<sup>10</sup> Though Perkins situates her discussion of how life writing can be used in this way in terms of Black Power activists, I think the use of autobiography to advance political struggle can be seen in these other areas of writing as well (xii).

<sup>11</sup> I want to thank Tace Hedrick for encouraging me to think about how autobiographers are exposed to various storytelling techniques, narrative strategies, intertextual influences, and more. I agree that this leads to a more nuanced reading of these texts and calls attention to how we come to acknowledge and think of the "truth" of autobiographical experience. It also has bearing on unproblematized claims surrounding the assumed resistance of women's writing, including assumptions about how they challenge the presentation of the self as enacted in masculine texts.

<sup>12</sup> Braxton notes in her study of African American women's autobiography that "almost inevitably black women speak of a perilously intensified adolescence, accompanied by a perception of gender as well as racial difference." (5). Certainly we see elements of this in both Davis's and Shakur's personal narratives as well.

<sup>13</sup> See "Angela Davis: A Political Biography" in *If they Come in the Morning* and *The Morning Breaks* for additional discussion about these and other comments poising Davis as a terrorist.

<sup>14</sup> See "Human Rights: U.S. Political Prisoners and COINTELPRO Victims" for an extended discussion on the mission and aims of the program.

<sup>15</sup> This is not to suggest that laws were never openly violated in the process of resisting, as Davis herself acknowledges. She points out, however, that many individuals have been labeled criminals and "methodically persecuted by a racist legal apparatus" when their resistance was legal (1974, 20). See also Ward Churchill's "To Disrupt, Discredit and Destroy" for a further elaboration on criminalizing black resistance during the Black Nationalist Movement.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter seven of Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* for an extended discussion of the circumstances surrounding Eleanor Bumpurs's death.

<sup>17</sup> This is a point that Russell-Brown addresses in *Underground Codes* as well.

<sup>18</sup> See *The Color of Crime* for additional information on these and other hoaxes.

<sup>19</sup> Russell-Brown discusses the omission of white-on-white crime as well in *The Color of Crime*.

<sup>20</sup> Certainly this refusal to not individualize African Americans but instead rely on group affiliation, and certain types of affiliations in particular, is often a cultural response to difference, as Toni Morrison so brilliantly illustrates in her essay "Friday on the Potomac." She writes, "In a society with a history of trying to accommodate both slavery and freedom, and a present that wishes both to exploit and deny the pervasiveness of racism, black people are rarely individualized . . . Without individuation, without nonracial perception, black people, as a group are used to signify the polar opposites of love and repulsion" (xv).

CHAPTER 4  
TOWARD A NEW READING OF EMBODIMENT: WOMEN, PRISONS, AND POWER

Everybody that is arrested is given a bath. They are instructed to remove all of their clothing, including their underwear. Then we give a narco search. . . . I would have a flashlight and I would feel through her hair and use the flashlight to look inside her ears, behind her ears, in her nose, in her nostrils and her mouth. I would look between her fingers, both sides of her hands, under her arms, and around her breast area. If her breasts are too heavy, I would have her lift them up—sometimes they tape things under them. I'd have her spread her toes apart. Then I'd have her turn around and do the same thing down her back—hair, arms, and all. Then I would have her spread her legs and bend over, and I would look up into her vagina area to search for weapons, contraband, or narcotics. The only area I touch is her hair. I can see into her vagina because her legs and buttocks are spread and I use the flashlight. I don't touch her. I couldn't say I look into her rectum—I look into her buttocks area. I have her lift her feet and check the bottom of her feet. That's a complete narcotics search.

After she has completed her bath, she's instructed to get out and clean the bathtub. Then she is sprayed with Kwell lotion. She is sprayed under her arms, under her breasts, and in her pubic area to get rid of any body bugs she might have. Some people come in and appear to be very clean and I don't suppose they have body bugs, but everyone has to be sprayed. It would be terrible to have bugs spread around the institution—Deputy Walton (qtd. in Waterson 67-68).

For an incarcerated woman, one's initiation into prison life occurs when she is being received, or as many refer to it, "processed" through the institution. It is a time in which one's physical body becomes the object of intense scrutiny, and as the passage above illustrates, careful procedures are administered in order to prevent "contamination" and to ensure that the individual is properly contained. As she is searched, showered, sprayed, checked for tattoos and other markings, issued clothing, and photographed (documentation that will later be made public), she is examined extensively through inspections that occur at the level of her body. It is, in other words, the body of an imprisoned woman that must at all times be made secure.

Over the course of the last two decades, the body has emerged as one of our most active sites for addressing and rethinking many of the central issues facing cultural and gender studies today. A number of theorists have insisted upon its centrality as a conceptual tool of analysis,

giving rise to a prolific and diverse outpouring of meditations on and articulations of the body. Considering how bodies have emerged throughout the centuries in a variety of forms—as metaphors for nationhood, symbols of difference, and sites of ideological contention to name but a few—this focus is neither surprising nor negligible. The diversity and depth of writing on “the” body, its processes, its role as a signifying medium and more, testifies to the engagement many have with Body Politics—a practice of regarding both the body and its relationship to myriad facets of power and society as central to nearly any discussion of representation and culture.

The body has emerged as a critical tool for feminist theorists in particular, who have often insisted upon its connection to and reformulation of traditional conceptions of gender, sexuality, subjectivity and power. There is a good reason for this. The importance of bodily autonomy has long been a mainstay of feminist struggles for liberation and the recognition of full personhood, with popular ideas about women’s bodies clearly affecting the spaces within which they live and the opportunities they have historically been afforded. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, the body is far from an inert, passive, noncultural or ahistorical term; it is, rather, *the* crucial term, *the* site of contestation, in “a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles” (19, emphasis mine). And nearly always, there is power rippling through and informing these negotiations, constructing bodies and regulating them. It is useful here to borrow from Foucault’s conception of power as a network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination within a particular domain, for it allows us to examine how power operates within specific environments to shape and police bodies.<sup>1</sup> The body, in turn, has come to be largely regarded as the site where representations of identity and subjectivity are inscribed, making pivotal its relationship to power and issues ranging from language to commodification.

As Smith and Watson suggests, “Subjectivity is impossible unless the subject recognizes her location in the materiality of an ever-present body” (38).

For my purposes here, I would like to focus specifically on women in prison, where a variety of practices, both disciplinary and otherwise, regulate, mark, and attempt to shape the bodies of those incarcerated. These practices, combined with the physical environment of the prison where one’s movement is largely contained, give rise to what can be considered bodies held captive—a position which inherently problematizes many existing epistemologies of “the” body and its supposed fluidity as I will examine throughout this chapter. Images of bodily confinement abound in personal narratives written by Joyce Ann Brown, Jean Harris, Barbara Deming, Clare Hanrahan, Norma Stafford, Patrice Gaines, Assata Shakur, and several other women who have been incarcerated, including descriptions of not only their own bodies and the practices that have been imposed on them, but also the bodies of other women with whom they are or have been housed. The attention that so many women have given to state intrusion into and onto their bodies indicates its significance on both a personal and a socio-political level.

I approach this chapter with two central questions in mind. First, in what ways do incarcerated women’s bodies disrupt and alter how bodies are often thought of in academic discourse as a focus for social and cultural analysis? While I acknowledge the important work that theorists working extensively in what is now often referred to as “body theory” have contributed, scholarship that has helped to revolutionize feminist theory as we know it, I am clearly writing against a tendency that I see in much of that work to position bodies as capable of always “extending the frameworks which attempt to contain them” or to “seep beyond their domains of control” as Grosz puts it (xi). As the autobiographical accounts of incarcerated women demonstrate, the ability to transcend certain boundaries, express full subjectivity, and

even control movement—features of corporeality often treated as prominent features of how we have come to read embodiment—is not equally shared.

Second, I want to explore how autobiographers detailing their prison experiences conceptualize and place their bodies not only in such areas as a prison cell or compound, but also how they see their bodies as affected by institutional power, disciplinary regimen and other components of prison life. How, for instance, do these women view and describe their bodies and movement as impacted by the coercive environment of the prison as well as the direct implementation of that power through handcuffs and other restraints, searches, and various prison practices? Through descriptions of their cells and living spaces, inspections, abuse, and medical treatment, their accounts are replete with the details of living in bodies held in captivity. How women position themselves, not just as writing subjects but as individuals trying to assert control over their own bodies, factors heavily into the construction of their subjectivity and their very identities in a setting infused with state power.<sup>2</sup>

I am also concerned with how incarcerated women's bodies alter conceptual arguments as they have been articulated by Foucault, whose landmark work on disciplinary power and the production of docile bodies in *Discipline and Punish* signals a shift in the treatment of the condemned from his or her body to his or her soul. I draw attention to the importance of centering race and gender in discussions like his of penal regimen in an effort to further ground an analysis of the position of women in correctional environments. I also explore some of the ways in which women's bodies are affected by institutional practices within correctional facilities in gendered and racialized terms, emphasizing throughout how the body remains a primary target of disciplinary procedure. My analysis, then, signals a significant departure from Foucault's unnuanced rendering of a prisoner's body, even as it draws from some of his and

others' macro-arguments concerning power and the potential for the body to act an inscriptive surface.<sup>3</sup>

If we are willing to bet on Grosz's wager that all effects of subjectivity can be adequately explained using the "subject's corporeality as a framework," or if we can accept that the effects of interiority can be described by way of the "inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface," then the importance of these texts becomes readily apparent (vii). They pose a theoretical and practical challenge to how we might conceptualize bodies as locations and sites of resistance always capable of circumventing established norms and reconfiguring cultural, political and social spaces. My hope is that this work will not just augment, but strengthen and clarify how we approach studies grounded in both female subjectivity and in readings of "the" body as we move forward into the present century—a time when so many women are still struggling to even claim and hold on to bodily autonomy.

### **Academic Theory and the Corporeal Specificity of Bodies**

Feminism has had a vested interest in the body from the start: as something to be rejected in the pursuit of pure rationality according to a masculinist standard, or as something to be reclaimed as the essence of the female.<sup>4</sup> For writers ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft to Simone De Beauvoir, the specificities of the female body, including its particular nature and cycles, are on one end regarded as a limitation to women's access when poised against a thinking (read male) disembodied subject, and on the other, viewed as a unique means of accessing knowledge and modes of living in ways that men are less privy to (Grosz 15). A woman's body then simultaneously acts as a constraint, one that can conceivably hinder transcendence and any real gains in gender equity, and as her greatest asset in the move toward reclaiming femininity and celebrating the feminine with all the unique bodily processes and possibilities that might entail. These positions have not gone without significant critique, however, particularly from

theorists like Denise Riley who argue that many celebrations of the body as female “intoxically forget the temporality and malleability of gendered existence” (222).

More recently, and perhaps in response to similar critiques, emphasis has been placed on embodiment as a “differential and fluid construct,” operating as the site of possibility rather than as a “fixed given.”<sup>5</sup> The body has come to represent not only a physical entity, meaning the fleshy, organic material one is composed of, but something that in Judith Butler’s terms can “indicate a world beyond itself,” a movement beyond boundaries and of “the boundary itself” (ix). If there is one thing that many feminists scholars writing about the body agree on, particularly those working in the fields of postmodernism and poststructuralism, it is that the body cannot be contained by fixed categories, that it possesses meaning beyond its own measure and can be characterized by its fluidity. This capacity of the body to spill over, to break boundaries, to escape the limitations that greet it, has come to be read by many as a fundamental, if not inherent aspect of the corporeal, and the influence of this theoretical positioning on many of our contemporary understandings of “the” body has held great critical currency. Price and Shildrick claim, for instance, that the body has become a “site of intense inquiry, . . . in the full acknowledgement of the multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment” (12). One might also look to such theorists as Grosz, Butler, Irigaray, and Haraway to see varied elements of this position reflected in their work.

But what of women whose bodies, because of their comparatively bounded existence, disrupt these notions of transcendence and fluidity, even boundary itself? Regrettably, it is those bodies marked and shaped not only by their environments, but also by what is read as the material realities of race, sex, and class difference that continue to have a marginalized presence in the corpus of scholarship on and about the body. Viewing the body in terms of its universality

became a way historically to establish gendered norms to which all bodies were supposed to “approximate without substantial variation,” a framework in which it is taken for granted that sexual and racial difference are “inherent qualities of the corporeal” (Price 3). The result of this position was damaging to all women, but especially to women of color, whose bodies and bodily processes were considered not only volatile, but dangerous because they disrupted established standards of normality that governed social scripts of femininity and womanhood. Even now, however, there is a tendency to regard the body as self-evident, as something that might well be gendered, or even raced, but is often not placed in a specific context where the differences that shape and distinguish the body particular are insisted upon. As Bordo asserts in her discussion of Butler and Susan McClary in *Unbearable Weight*, current postmodern tendencies to “textualize” the body have the potential to give what she sees as a “free, creative rein to meaning at the expense of attention to the body’s material locatedness in history, practice, culture” (38). The result of this critical positioning, for her, is that readers can be left wondering whether or not there is still a “body in this text” (38).

Debra Walker King convincingly argues in her introduction to the collection *Body Politics and the Fictional Double*, that frequently used phrases like *the body* or *the female body* “prefigure a paradigmatic construction that emphasizes categorization of bodies, all bodies, as immutable and externally defined, though fundamentally similar” (ix, emphasis hers). The result of this construction as she sees it, and that I acknowledge as well, is that individuality can remain “quarantined, while corporeal mechanisms of representational control become agents of perception and corporeal colonization” (ix). Thus, it is not unexpected that women whose bodies are continually acted upon, read by others in ways that differ dramatically from what they believe their authentic selves to be, or who are living out the day-to-day realities of racism,

homophobia, or any other form of repression that has the potential to constrain and marginalize, have emerged most centrally in debates about the materiality vs. the supposed boundlessness of embodied subjects. There is much at stake. I concur with Deborah McDowell's point, for instance, that evaluating the "state of black women's physical bodies within [the] larger social body remains among the most crucial and demanding body work to undertake" (309).

I want to reemphasize that any discussion of incarcerated women's bodies necessitates the discussion of gender and its potential intersections with such categories of identity as race, class and sexuality as well, with these factors treated not as additives but as integral components to understanding how bodies are read. This attention to the particularity of bodies seems to be especially critical since the bodies of women who are incarcerated are seldom outside of corporeal distinctions based on race, sex, and even class even within the prison environment. The construction of prison "families" based in part on one's size and race, slang used to describe the amount of money women possess in their commissary accounts ("she's a \$45er"), and the general consensus within many prisons that women of color are ultimately considered and treated as more suspect, all point to some of the many ways that bodily difference surfaces on prison compounds.

The importance of bodily specificity is magnified when considering that incarcerated individuals themselves are already seen and thought of as outside of the larger society and the "body" politic, creating a context in which deviance can in fact be embodied. As Jean Harris states in her autobiography *Stranger in Two Worlds*, "Of all the great variety of qualities and characteristics that a woman in prison has, there is only one the public knows or cares about. She is in prison, and that separates her from the rest of womankind in a way that nothing else can" (344). Because her body has been placed behind bars and literally removed from the larger

society, she has already been displaced and named dangerous, her body is thought to need careful surveillance, and her actions are seen as those that need to be controlled. We need not look far to see how a racialized rendering of incarcerated individuals has been strengthened by prevailing discourses on crime and incarceration in this country either as discussed in chapter three. Bodies emerge as sites of ideological struggle indeed, both inside and outside of the academy.

Sandy Cook and Susanne Davies, for instance, point out that when women were focused on in traditional criminology they were usually rendered captives of their bodies, with their condemnation “inextricably linked to their transgression of sexed and gendered norms that frame everyday life” (53,62). Beginning with the observations made by Lombroso and Ferrero in their 1898 *The Female Offender*, every form of women’s offending could be and was attributed to the “uniquely perverse female body and temperament” (57). Although their work is often considered dated now, its fundamental premises have often resurfaced when biological essentialism has been used as a framework for studying and explaining women’s criminality. As late as 1985, Frances Heidensohn explained this fascination with the corporeal and what distinguishes writers on female crime: “they seek to rationalize and make acceptable a series of propositions about women and their consequences for criminal behavior. Women, in this view, are determined by their biology and their physiology. Their hormones, their reproductive role, inexorably determine their emotionality, unreliability, childishness, deviousness, etc. These factors lead to female crime” (qtd. in Cook and Davies 62).<sup>6</sup> The body has undoubtedly served as the place where some of our most prevalent and persistent gender ideologies have been played out, and this is reinforced through even the most casual glance at the history of women’s criminality in America.

## Shaping the Body Particular

Although the body's significance as a cultural medium is largely undisputed, the focus on certain cultural configurations but less on others has left our shared cultural analysis partial, incomplete. A great deal has been written on practices of femininity and Butler's notion of gender performativity for instance, including how stable or subversive these constructions really are or have the potential to be. Susan Bordo's and Sandra Bartky's influential work on the production of docile bodies through processes of self-surveillance imposed by beauty culture has helped advance the study of women's subjectivity through their exploration of culture's "direct grip" on bodies, as has Jane Gallop's study of the historical domination of the body. Feminist theory has, in all, clearly been at the forefront of analyzing how sex and gender alter conceptions of "the" body in fundamental ways, demonstrating repeatedly that only by looking at women's embodied experiences and how they are socially constructed can we fully understand "women's lives, position in society, and possibilities for resistance against that position" (Weitz 10).

Within the last ten years especially theories have started to emerge that place embodiment in a specific context, as have those that focus on how perceived differences in one's race, class or sexuality impact how bodies are understood. It is seeing those two components working together, placing differences in materiality within a particular context, which is often lacking. Yet, it becomes nearly impossible to come to a full understanding of how bodies function, are culturally read, and are regulated without addressing the specific ways in which they are affected by the power relations that surround them.

Even as some theorists invest the body with culture and power within a given environment or time period, its supposed fluidity remains problematic for those bodies whose boundaries are more fixed. Elaine Scarry's discussion of individuals held in torture points to this in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. For Scarry, the tortured person is continually

implicated not just by the torturer, but by the power structure of his or her holding area. The prisoner's physical world is limited to the room and its contents, and this world is slowly dissolved through a process in which the torturer's expanding world-ground depends on a demonstration of the prisoner's "absence of world" (37-41). The tortured prisoner is unable to transcend varied attempts at controlling his or her body or movement, particularly since one person's physical pain has come to be understood as another person's power. We might say that a similar demonstration of power results not from the modern prisoner's pain, but by his or her bodily containment—one he or she is largely unable to transcend. An incarcerated woman is not only placed in an enclosed physical environment where there is less freedom to move due to prison gates, wire, or other deterrents, she is also marked corporeally within that environment as someone whose movement is under or subject to surveillance. The constant threat of a search, mandates to wear prison clothing, referrals and corrective penalties for not being at count at a certain time, and other forms of disciplinary regimen reinforce the fact that an incarcerated woman's body is not entirely her own. Coming to terms with the body involves examining how its functions and the various practices surrounding it exist in a complex interplay that work to form and structure the body's materiality.

The call to recognize the specificity of bodies and their environments is resounded in Bib Bakare-Yusuf's "The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror." Although our subject matter differs (her focus centers on the violent capture and treatment of African bodies within the context of slavery), our desire to situate particular, often marginalized bodies within their cultural and historical specificity is commensurate. As she puts it, "it is not enough to show the body as discursive entity without addressing how different material practices are interwoven with the discursive to affect and shape the materiality of the body" (313). This

has led some to look to Foucault's concept of the interdependency between the fleshy materiality of the body (the bare physicality of the body itself we might say), and its functioning, regulation, and representation in specific discursive fields to locate a more fitting and equitable rationale.

It is Foucault's attention to the historical specificities that produce the body in discourses and structure the ways experiences of the body are organized that many find most useful, for in this framework, the body is always in a political field where "power relations have an immediate hold upon it" (25). As Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish*, power has the ability to invest the body; to mark, train, and torture it; and to insist that it carry out tasks, perform ceremonies, and emit signs (25). Bakare-Yusuf insists that by recognizing this interdependency between the lived body, its functioning, and the power relations that regulate it, we can become aware of the slave experience as an "embodied phenomenon." In doing so, the history of the middle passage and slavery act as histories of endless assaults on bodies and bodies "forcibly subjugated in order to be transformed into productive and reproductive bodies" (314). The historical context is centered here, as are practices and processes of regulation.

It is clear that she as well as others focusing on the racialized body feel that connections need to be with "matters of the flesh on the lived body" in order for current analyses to be useful for a black feminist project in particular (313). As Carla Peterson asserts, the body is "inextricably linked to ideation and subjectivity," and nowhere else is the body's very subjectivity more evident than in the "instability of representations of the black body" (ix, xi). Bakare-Yusuf notes that it was through corporeal inscription that the black woman was seen as embodying a hyperbolic sexuality, findings reinforced in Sander Gilman's earlier study of the Hottentot Venus in "Black Bodies, White Bodies." If the Hottentot was to represent the essence of a black woman as Gilman argues, then her pervasive (abhorrent) display produced the overt

sexuality of a black woman as the ultimate marker of sexual difference. It was Saartje Baartman's physical body, marked and shaped through corporeal inscription as deviant and uncontrolled, that came to embody not only her sexual identity, but the sexuality of all black women.<sup>7</sup> To reiterate a previous claim, the stakes involved in understanding and specifying "the" body – its representations, uses, and lived realities are high.

Bakare-Yusuf's difficulty with other theorists concerns their unwillingness to engage with the physical body even as they seemingly invest it with its cultural and historical specificities—a concern I want to draw attention to since it signifies the dissonance many have with discussions they feel move away from any real engagement with the lived body. While she is careful to point out that Grosz and other theorists of the body call for the need to fuse the historical specificity of bodies with the biological concreteness of the body, she claims that the focus of corporeal feminism is often grounded in linguistics and psychoanalysis where the body is read as discursive or textual even as it claims to be concerned with the *lived* body.<sup>8</sup> This leads to what she calls, "a mere flirtation with the idea of the lived body where the experience of lived bodies is constituted as a metaphor that is good to think with" (312). As a result of this vexed relationship between the lived, physical body and textuality, conceptions of how the very materiality of bodies are shaped remain underdeveloped.

The tension between staying grounded in the physical body and seeing the body as inherently fluid where "boundaries of embodiment are never fixed or secure" as Price and Shildrick claim, is felt in terms of imprisonment as well (3). On one end, I want to focus on how various components of institutional life and disciplinary regimen impact the lived, physical body, thus my reason to turn to autobiographies that give evidence of how certain practices, a strip search for instance, affects the body in very real and dramatic ways. These accounts provide a

context in which it is possible to see how physical bodies are implicated in the power structure of the prison in ways that are unique to bodies held in a form of captivity, but challenge how we might think about all bodies as “indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities” as Grosz positions them in “Bodies-Cities” (382). However, I also want to acknowledge the role that shifting context plays, not only because the bodies of those incarcerated are seen as outside of what might be considered “natural” bodies, but also because the meanings associated with them, while relatively fixed, remain inconsistent and subject to the social conditions that surround them. The body of one offender, such as the middle to upper-class white man incarcerated for a corporate crime, carries with him different assumptions and stipulations than does that of the poor woman of color arrested for a property crime. As these texts attest, it would be unjust to say that all incarcerated individuals, or potential “criminal bodies” are thought of in equal terms. There is a shared stigma that moves through the lives of all prisoners, yet differences in race, sex, and sexuality are still pivotal.

*However contested the rhetoric surrounding the lived body may be, a focus on the body as a corporeal articulation of lived experience is not without just cause given the ways in which bodies have emerged throughout the centuries. For many theorists, understanding the lived, physical body and its participation in various activities becomes a way to understand history. Bodies, in turn, become an integral part of analyzing relationship of power, if not acting as the very marks of power themselves.<sup>9</sup> It is in this context—one of seeing bodies and the infractions imposed on them as inextricably bound—that one would likely ask what the history of an incarcerated individual’s body is. While it would be outside the scope of this project to fully address that question, I want to emphasize that the history of incarcerated individuals could likely never be fully realized without an awareness of how their bodies were marked throughout*

*the centuries by various practices that took place within and outside of penal institutions. Apart from the issues frequently found in studies of crime and criminology—the establishment of institutions, security, changes in architecture, reform, and crime causation—the treatment of bodies would also be seen as paramount.*

### **Gendered and Raced Bodies: (Re)Reading Foucault**

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's much celebrated work on the penal system and modes of punishment, he asserts that shifts in the latter brought with them a "slackening of the hold on the body" (10). Setting forth his central thesis in his opening chapter "The Body of the Condemned," he argues that punishment now became the "most hidden part of the penal process," its effectiveness derived not from its visible intensity, but from its inevitability and certainty (9). He suggests as well that the body was no longer the main target of penal repression, as focus had instead shifted to the soul following the eventual end of spectacular forms of public punishment. As he puts it, "The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (16). The soul, in short, became the new target of reform.

While it is clear that corporeal punishment no longer takes place in the form of spectacle in the same manner that it once did, I want to explore here how the body continues to exist as a signifying medium where the rules and procedures of institutions are inscribed in gender specific and racialized terms for incarcerated women.<sup>10</sup> Foucault's positioning of the body in *Discipline and Punish* is of special interest here. On one end, he establishes how the body is a primary target and instrument of power, a position that we can identify as being highly useful for feminists who have explored the "grip" that culture and social practices have on women's bodies.<sup>11</sup> And yet, alongside this, his shift of emphasis on the soul results in several statements that situate bodies as being manipulated in more distant ways, even as they continue to operate as

mediums through which power functions. Despite some of the objections I have to this positioning in light of the women's autobiographical texts under consideration here, it is Foucault's conceptualization of the body as ungendered, unraced, and unclassed that I see as most problematic. He attests to the ways the body remains regulated by disciplinary regimen, but in so doing does not differentiate between how specific types of bodies are affected, and this changes the conceptual outcome of his project in fundamental ways.

Since women have long had a marginal presence in criminology, excluding any discussion of sex and gender difference is especially debilitating. There are clear indications that their bodies function and are regulated differently from those of men, both when their bodies are considered purely physical and when they are seen as cultural metaphors or as sites of inscription. Beyond, for instance, the implementation of cavity searches that affect women psychologically and physically in particular ways as I will examine, women are often sent very clear messages concerning their need to return to a more suitable, often feminine, pattern of behavior. This was made evident in the creation of women's reformatories in the nineteenth century as Nicole Rafter carefully traces in *Partial Justice*, where the professed goal was to return a woman to her rightful place as a proper wife and nurturing mother. One of their aims, to borrow from Bartky's phrase, was to produce "practiced and subjected bodies," not altogether unlike what we find in most modern institutions today (33). Women, after all, are still largely put to work in traditional female-centered tasks in prisons (laundry, cosmetology, garment making, etc.), and laws still act as extensions of ideologies that work to naturalize systems of power and establish what roles individuals should play in society. Bodily subjectivity is never far removed from these social, legal, and political dynamics.

We can also come to very different conclusions about the body of the condemned when considering that the majority of prisoners in the United States are and have consistently been people of color. Angela Davis's critique of Foucault in "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition" illuminates these concerns. As she points out, African Americans were considered to be without not just the soul that might be shaped and transformed by punishment, but the very subjectivity that needed to be reformed and redeemed. If there was a move to a different kind of punishment, she asserts that these models were still based on a construction of the individual that did not apply to those "excluded from citizenship by virtue of their race" (97). She argues further that African Americans were not treated as rights-bearing individuals, nor "considered worthy of the moral re-education that was the announced philosophical goal of the penitentiary" (98).

The move toward punishment as an economy of suspended rights is thus inapplicable to those who were considered to be without the very rights meriting suspension. Foucault suggests, for instance, that if one intervenes upon the body to imprison it or make it work it is "in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property" (11). But clearly liberty itself has been demarcated along the lines of race and gender (and class and sexuality as well), so depriving one of this means something very different in a racialized or gendered context attune to how it has been historically withheld. As a result, we are prompted to ask what else motivates the punishment industry when we trouble this position.

Differences based on race are significant within the prison environment as well, as many incarcerated women's personal narratives demonstrate. Angela Davis writes the following about being placed in restraints in her autobiography, providing just one example of how race intersects with other components of disciplinary procedure:

I was accustomed to being handcuffed with my arms behind me—it had become a part of the routine. When the three other women prisoners were brought out into the corridor, the

manner in which we were handcuffed revealed the blatant racism of the matrons. They were cuffed to each other, the right arm of one locked to the left arm of the other. The one remaining prisoner was a white woman. The matrons had done nothing to restrain her movements. So there we were, me with both arms manacled behind me, the Black woman chained to the Chicana woman, and the white woman with both hands free (298).

In this example, Davis has automatically been rendered more suspect because of her bodily specificity. It is her physical body that must be subject to restraints, that necessitates harsher, more careful treatment by its very corporeal inscription of difference. It is also Davis as an African American woman, but as a politically active black woman in particular, who must be isolated from the other women, whose body is unable to commune with others. Her body in this context does not have the same claims to fluidity, nor transcendence that often get associated with the body general in theory. It is held in a form of captivity not only by surveillance and the physical restraints that work to control movement, but also by a damaged history that renders people of color especially suspect and in need of additional measures of disciplinary control.

Thus, while several basic assumptions about “the” incarcerated body might be able to be made that particularize it or differentiate it from bodies outside of the prison environment, race remains an integral part of analysis. The bodies of all prisoners are subject at various times to restraints, shake-downs, and searches; they have limited control over their freedom of movement and are required to wear institutional clothing, eat certain meals at certain times and reside in cells or dorms within the compound; they must be present at call-outs and counts occurring throughout the day; and they are often subject to substandard medical care. But to see race and gender apart from these practices and procedures is to diminish the role they play in structuring daily life. These omissions are troubling not only because they fail to particularize how certain practices affect women, and especially women of color as individuals and as a collective, but

also because they dismiss a long history in which the bodies of many individuals were excluded from political participation by their bodily specificity.<sup>12</sup>

Within the prison, the bodies of incarcerated individuals are continuously shaped by restrictions concerning their movement, their ability to touch others, and their freedom to express physical intimacy. For many women this can be one of the harshest realities of prison life, in part because they are overwhelmingly the primary caretakers of their children prior to imprisonment. Joyce Ann Brown puts it this way in her autobiography *Justice Denied* when discussing her desire to touch her family during a visit: “Our justice system speaks out loud and clear, Joyce, you’re not human. You’re a convict, so you can’t hug and kiss your family like other humans” (93). The female body in theory is one often invested with physical, intimate desires that are seen as essential, even natural outgrowths of the human body. But as this example illustrates, the desire to touch and communicate through one’s body is withheld from a woman who is incarcerated, making attempts at intimacy, or at the very least, outward, public expressions of intimacy an activity of those considered fully human, fully capable of experiencing such sensations in the eyes of prison officials. It is in this manner that a prisoner’s body is viewed as outside of traditional ways of understanding not just the physical body, but even humanness.

Asha Bandele’s riveting memoir *The Prisoner’s Wife* reminds us that this denial of intimacy is felt intensely by spouses and families as well. As she recalls breaks in her visits with her husband Rashid because he had to leave for a count and her own humiliating experiences being searched upon entry, it is clear that one of the couple’s greatest difficulties is their inability to be together in a way that is “unmonitored, unrestrained, unrestricted” (152). Certainly part of modern day penal regimen concerns the sexual repression that is a feature of nearly all institutions nationwide—a form of punishment that clearly affects the bodies of individuals in

powerful ways. As another officer puts it in Watterson's *Women in Prison*, "A girl has to have friends, but when they get to a point of getting to be homosexuals, we try to separate them. You have a good idea when they've gone too far" (299). Diaz-Cotto discusses the establishment of the "Daddy Tank" in her study on Chicana women in the criminal justice system, one of the most deliberate attempts to restrain women's sexuality in SBI, a California penal institution for women. Lesbians were confined in this maximum-security cell block in the 1960s, kept under additional supervision, and prohibited from participating in the few programs available to other prisoners at the institution (251). Diaz-Cotto reports that the policy was supported by a California state law requiring the separation or "exclusion" of identified lesbians from the general population, and it was not until 1976 that SBI moved prisoners housed in the Daddy Tank to a dormitory where lesbians were granted more freedom of movement. It is an example, even if atypical, of how far some institutions will go, or have gone, to regulate women's sexuality despite the infractions onto their liberty and basic human rights that this might entail.

Questioning the boundaries of what is considered appropriate physical conduct has been a prominent feature in many incarcerated women's autobiographical accounts, seen vividly in Marilyn Buck's frequently anthologized "Clandestine Kisses." Dedicated to Linda and her lover, it centers on a prisoner who knowingly breaks the prison ordinance on physical touch: "A prisoner kisses / she is defiant / she breaks the rules / she traffics in contraband women's kisses" (6-9). Fully aware that she attempted to enter into precisely the kind of physical intimacy that is denied her, particularly because it is with another woman, Buck ends the poem with her protagonist recalling a rare moment when the couple was able to engage in a "crime wave of kisses," leaving the officers "furious / that love / cannot be arrested" (14-16).

Norma Stafford was expelled from nursing school in Alabama when it was discovered that she was a lesbian, and was later incarcerated on bad check charges. She discusses how she had to “walk carefully” at California’s Institution for Women, not only because getting caught while being intimate with women meant disciplinary action, including being placed in segregation, but also because of her own marginalized identity. She addresses the personal costs and consequences she has had to face as well as her attempts to resist them here:

The fact that I’m a butch requires that I think twice on every word and action that could possibly have any significance regarding another woman. I can’t talk to the same woman too often. I cannot use the word love lest it is overheard: in here, love equals sex equals hanky-panky. . . . This place makes homosexuality something ugly, and they try to give you the feeling that you are base and degraded. I am neither” (qtd. in Faith 96).

Stafford’s resolve to not be resigned to what she is labeled, but to struggle instead to hold onto her sense of self, is echoed in Carolyn Baxter’s poem “35 years a Correctional Officer,” written while she was incarcerated in New York City’s Correctional Institution for Women. In it, she clearly points to the hypocrisy of officer Ms. Goodall, who believes that drinking, swearing, and certainly masturbating is “against God’s will,” by suggesting that it is her own sexual repression that is motivating her to listen so intently for sounds coming out of anyone’s bedroom. Baxter’s protagonist listens back for her shoes to “creep by the door,” wanting to ask her foremost, “what’s the difference between a / creaking bed / and a manic breathing heavy under the door?” (13-14). I point to these particular works not only because they underscore the physical deprivation that characterizes part of prison life, but also because they point to ways that punishment does still “make use of the body” rather than just the representation of physical pain as Foucault asserts (94). Texts like Baxter’s and Buck’s also underscore women’s attempts to delineate how sexuality and the prohibitions surrounding it are constructed in the prison.

The inverse to these prohibitions is the relatively open access that many officers have to women's bodies in correctional institutions and the sheer lack of privacy that this affords. Kurshan, for instance, describes how Crane prison for Women in Michigan is composed of open dormitories divided into cubicles, all without doors or curtains, and some with walls only four feet high. It is worthy of note to mention that 80% of the staff there is male and that officers are also allowed to do body shakedowns on the women (155). Elizabeth Morgan writes in her autobiographical essay "The Violence of Women's Imprisonment," of how male inmates were able to watch the women shower through clear glass walls—a policy she finds to be deliberate in its orientation in terms of gender since the administration specifically refused to let female blocks have the same dark glass around their showers that was made available to male blocks (36). Morgan's narrative is a telling illustration of how gender needs to be kept at the forefront of our discussions on "the" practice of incarceration, for women's bodies are clearly impacted in sex-specific ways.

Even though we might agree with Foucault's argument that body has lost its place, at least in part, as an object of violent spectacle, displaced bodily images are often those most haunting to incarcerated women who have written about their prison experiences.<sup>13</sup> Jean Harris provides a stirring example of this when discussing how women are to stand at the door of their cells and place the palm of one hand in the window in the door when count is taken each morning. She writes: "To look down a hallway of disembodied palms pressed against a tiny rectangle of glass in a metal door is the ugliest, grimmest, most dehumanizing sight I have ever seen or imagined. I haven't the words to say. Whatever other rules there may be in this insanity, I will never, never put my hands this way. As long as I am breathing I will be more than a disembodied hand" (1986, 301). For Harris, the act of resisting disembodiment serves as a means for her to attempt

to reclaim her personhood and her entire body in a system that actively opposes seeing individuals and their bodies in their fullness. The parts of the body that often emerge in narratives as important to prison officials are those that can be counted, those that can be easily acted upon: the hand for a count, wrists and ankles for handcuffs. We can say, then, that part of disciplinary regimen relies on the very type of disembodiment that Harris finds so important to contest.

Foucault admits that there is still a “trace” of torture in the modern mechanisms of criminal justice and that there are elements of punishment that still concern the body, including the rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, and solitary confinement, but he then goes on to ask if these are not the “unintentional, but inevitable consequence of imprisonment?” (16). He also concedes that there might be objections to his argument given the physical penalties of forced labor, penal servitude, confinement, and deportation, but maintains that the “punishment-body relation” can now be distinguished along the following lines:

The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary. . . . The body, according to this penalty, is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions. Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, it is no longer the constituent element of the penalty. From being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights. If it is still necessary for the law to reach and manipulate the body of the convict, it will be at a distance, in the proper way, according to strict rules, and with a much higher aim (11).

While it is true that pain is no longer regularly inflicted onto the bodies of those incarcerated in ways that it once was, I think we can look to autobiographical texts by incarcerated women to find ample evidence for how the law manipulates their bodies in ways that are clearly read as being extraordinarily invasive. A vaginal search, for example, is all but distant; it enters into the crevices of the body considered most sacred, most private, and is thereby read as a violation for most women. Nonetheless, it is a process that nearly all women experience during their

incarceration in order to ensure that their bodies are “secure,” sometimes repeatedly depending on the institution. The penal environment is marked by its very enclosure, its very denial of private space, and signified by its rules and regulations aimed at habituating daily life that send clear messages concerning whose bodies are in control and whose are under it. Searches for women, especially body cavity searches as I will explore in the next section at more length, surface as one of the most dramatic ways that these messages get sent. The fact that these searches are generally considered to be required of women of color even more than they are of white women, points to the racialized dimensions of this mode of disciplinary procedure as well.

Foucault’s attention to how the body is impacted in and through power has been theoretically revolutionary, but that does not mean we cannot extend and complicate his findings. Bordo, for instance, maintains that not differentiating between bodily experiences of men and women perpetuates the powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed (1999). Envisioning an ungendered criminal body is problematic for Bartky as well, who claims that Foucault is “blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (132). Instead of seeing this as an isolated case, I want to emphasize that it points to wider concerns applicable to any discussion of “the” body—most notably, that of seeing one’s body apart from specific modes of materiality. To put it another way, if we do in fact “strip corporeality of its multiple forces” as Grosz asserts in her reading of Foucault, we often end up doing an injustice to all bodies of study (147). Whether the female body continues to be thought of as the container of deviance as it was in traditional criminology or as a target of reform in modern penal regimen, it always surfaces as paramount to any discussion of disciplinary procedure or institutional power. In short, not only do incarcerated women’s bodies

challenge how bodies are often thought of in academic discourse, they also prompt us to ask a central question: under what costs does this type of bodily regulation continue?

### **Autobiographical (Dis)Placement: Writing Bodies in Narratives from Prison**

The title of this subheading is meant to suggest first, that incarcerated women are displaced simply by being in prison. They are taken out of their home environments and placed in another, with the constant threat of being transferred to a different facility at any time if they are housed at a reception site. But the act of focusing on how the body emerges and is conceptualized within a text is often a form of displacement as well, since critical attention is often placed on other issues in autobiographical studies, including memory, language, identity, and voice. This omission seems to be indicative of a broader neglected area concerning female embodiment and the ways in which bodies appear and are conceptualized in texts, and it is one that feminist scholars are increasingly intervening in.

The bodies of incarcerated women are already considered transgressive and dangerous within many circles outside of the prison. Because they have been used to commit a crime, whether this involves the inhalation of drugs or other substances, prostitution, or theft, they have transgressed the boundaries of how society dictates women's bodies in particular should function—where they should reside, what activities they should be involved in, and more. The implications for how the bodies of female offenders are viewed are especially stringent due to the associations that have long been made between women and the home (the site where their energies should be largely directed), and moral upbringing and piety (virtues historically celebrated in women). What I want to continue examining here as a corrective to these shaping ideological forces is how incarcerated women conceive of their own bodies, how they view their bodies as regulated under certain practices and procedures, as well as how they describe the power fields per se that surround them.

It is worth pointing out that the autobiographies under study here were written at different historical moments and under varying conditions. Yet, even though Jean Harris, a white former headmistress of an exclusive school for girls, or Patrice Gaines who spent time in correctional facilities in connection with drug charges, probably wouldn't claim to be a political prisoner as Angela Davis or Assata Shakur does, each of their texts does act as a type of resistance narrative by posing significant challenges to our history of prison studies in America. In fact, I think it could be argued that simply writing about the body at all in the context of a correctional institution is in itself a measure of resistance, simply because it breaches the establishment of privacy many facilities are so heavily invested with. As Perkins puts it, autobiography can act as a way to "expose repressive tactics of the state," and these narratives do just that by closely interrogating how their bodies are manipulated by and through the implementation of state power (149). There are, after all, few published accounts of searches or other forms of bodily regulation written by those not imprisoned, and those that do exist are written from the perspective of security, not the effects the practices might have on the women themselves. Taken together, these narratives construct a different kind of knowledge that stems not just from the perspective of someone who is incarcerated, but from the activities of the body. It is a fitting paradigm considering that criminality is something that I would argue has largely always been embodied, as historical discourses on race and gender in this country help make clear.

Joyce Ann Brown's first exposure to prison life comes primarily through her physical body in the reception area, a time in which one's body first becomes subject to the range of disciplinary procedures carried out in a correctional institution. After remarking on how she and the others are "rounded up like a herd of cattle and processed through the jail," she goes on to describe the conditions under which she is received into the prison: "Our wrists were handcuffed;

anklecuffs were snapped on our legs. A long chain connecting the anklecuffs was stretched out along the ground. After we were hooked up to the chain, we had to walk together as one, in single file and in unison, or be jerked to the ground” (25). The strange familiarity of this procedure and the immediate hold it has on one’s mobility and sense of selfhood is evidenced in the description one woman offers on how she met Brown: “We arrived on the same chain” (31).

The chain not only acts a measure of the women’s inability to express their individualism within the correctional facility, it also denotes their relationship to one another. Whether they are placed next to someone who committed murder or wrote bad checks, all of their bodies are initially processed in the same way as criminals. With the exception of those placed in isolation cells, this can be indicative of how their bodies will often be treated once they are inside the institution as well. The chain provides an early indication that they are entering a facility where their movements are not trusted, where freedom can exist openly only as an activity of the mind.<sup>14</sup> The body in most theory possesses this freedom, this potential to traverse across a wide array of boundaries and move in ways that are particular to a given individual. For Butler, for instance, the movement of boundary is positioned as central to what bodies are. Though she claims that the “lived experience of differentiation” can constitute the boundaries of the body in certain instances, that differentiation is positioned in relation to the question of gender difference and the “heterosexual matrix” (65). In prison, however, we see that corporeal boundaries are constituted by myriad factors outside of just gender or even sexuality; an incarcerated woman is always subject to being reprimanded when bodily freedom disrupts the codes of conduct mandated by the institution. They are no longer just personal bodies whose unique expressions are assumed, but are treated instead as the property of the state and must literally move through the stages of justice accordingly. One of the most telling examples of this occurs when Brown is

reprimanded for not eating and thus “destroying state property” by an officer who told her that she was “going to have to learn” that was exactly what she was (154).

For Brown, one of the most debilitating parts of being “received” is the manner in which her ability to control her activity is startlingly stripped from her. The first section of her autobiography is brimming with the loss of power she has over her own movement, accompanied by her feelings of isolation once her personal world has been invaded. For women in prison, privacy is often that which is most sacred—it is, in fact, one of the only things that many women feel that they can call their own, and some relish in moments spent in solitary. Although the immersion into one’s personal world is often conceived of as an act of isolation, Brown feels alone when this personal sense of space is taken from her, when in other words, the very ability to be isolated is removed. From stipulations stating how long her fingernails can be to where her skirt must hit on her knees, her personal expression is continually confiscated, and this inability to express herself, to even be physically alone with herself, is what makes her feel especially isolated from other human beings. The right to privacy that most individuals in this society are afforded is one of the first that incarcerated are often unable to hold onto. Carolyn Baxter writes of this denial of private space in her poem “On Being Counted” as one who tries to envision a world apart from where she is only to “smell the questioning flashlights / walking down the hall / closing the storage doors / on dead lives / demanding I recite the patented number, stamped / on my ass” (22-26). Despite her attempts to imagine herself someplace else, it is the officer’s spotlight that she says “invades my public privacy,” described as a “peeping tom, inspiring me to sleep insomnia” (40, 41).

Like Baxter, Brown repeatedly discusses the notion that when an individual enters a correctional facility, he or she ceases to exist as a person, acting instead as a number, or as she

puts it, “another head of cattle” (119). Patrice Gaines voices similar sentiments in her text *Laughing in the Dark*, and writes that upon her entrance into prison she was “reduced to a number and a last name, to an existence that did not allow any privacy, unable to express my singularity by the way I dressed or wore my hair” (111). Prison is not a place for individuals, as evidenced in the little support given to programs aimed at increasing an individual’s capacities. It is a place where one repeatedly hears codes and numbers voiced in radios throughout the compound, where a control room has its pulse on the activities of those incarcerated. All of the descriptors one normally associates with the body: style of dress, height, even name, are replaced by what can be thought of as institutional locators—items such as a DC number or dorm assignment, which allow officers to identify where a prisoner is in the shortest time possible. The reference to animals is also indicative of how many women feel rounded up any time their presence is requested. Not only are they not allowed to move in the same ways that others are while incarcerated, they are not described, or some would claim even thought of, as human bodies.

The distinctions between human and non-human bodies have been blurred in feminist theory as well, but normally in reference to our emergence into an increasingly electrated age and not in accordance to how we are treated and processed in specific environments. Haraway’s conception of the cyborg and cyberfeminism in general places the notion of the human in a state of flux, but the boundaries that are blurred are often those between human and machine, actual and virtual, and not just those between human and animal.<sup>15</sup> Much of that theory leaves us with the realization that genetic processes and technological innovations create “bodies” that are less stable; that in fact, this very instability is inextricably part of the body itself.

In the prison environment, however, questions do not surround the composition of bodies nor their genetic make-up, for to do so would display an interest in the individuation of those bodies. It is assumed, rather, that a physical body is one that can be acted upon, and concern is placed on how incarcerated women can best be manipulated, identified, and restrained. The inmate handbook that Clare Hanrahan is given upon entering prison reveals this as well in its section on late evening and morning counts: "If you are completely covered, the correctional officers will lift the covers to make certain you are accounted for. The correctional officers must see human flesh" (58). The very physicality of the body, in other words, must be accounted for. If women like Brown or Hanrahan write of feeling like a "head a cattle," it is often because the demands of institutional precision require submission to the rigors of disciplinary regimen. As Barbara Deming recalls in *Prison Notes* when describing how an officer made a "curious little clucking noise" to all of the prisoners rather than using normal human speech, "magically, now, we are no longer quite of the same species" (1).

Despite the dismay with which Brown greets the initial facets of the processing center, it is her physical examination that she finds most disturbing:

I was not prepared, however, for the type of examination they provided. It was more humiliating and embarrassing than I can describe. I entered the room and was told to take my clothes off. Once I was undressed, the nurse told me to bend over the table and when I did, she rammed her finger up my rectum, searching for drugs. Then I was made to lay down on the table with my legs spread. As I climbed up on the table, I could see only one speculum in the room and no sign of any means of sterilizing it. Before I could object, she grabbed the speculum and inserted it. I felt no lubrication, only a sharp, dry pain. I closed my eyes and once again, in spite of my promise just a few hours before, the tears began to flow. I was unable to control what was happening to me and my body. Before the examination, I was afraid that I might have picked up some disease or germ at the county jail. Now I had to worry about picking up something from an unsterilized community speculum that was being used on, among others, the nineteen other women who had arrived with me (28).

Brown finds this incident particularly upsetting because it signals not only a violation of her health, but the eventual loss of control of her own body—a progression away from bodily autonomy and subjectivity. In much of academic discourse, subjectivity is assumed to be an inherent aspect of the corporeal by its very dynamism, its very capacity to change. Yet, the bounded body is less able to transform itself in accordance to one's will when it is acted upon in a manner such as Joyce's was, and thereby challenges not just how we think about certain bodies, but how we think about subjectivity and its very association with bodies that much of theory relies so heavily on. The ties commonly made between a subject and the ability to claim movement, understand oneself in relation to the world, and maintain a sense of self accessed through bodily autonomy become problematic when the body in discussion is held captive. Subjectivity, then, relates not only to one's body and its dynamism and multiplicity, but also to one's ability to place control over that body so that it is not rendered static, so that it is not subject to the will of another. It becomes decidedly more difficult to posit any body with an inherent subjectivity in this manner when there are thousands for whom corporeal subjectivity can never be so easily assumed.

In fact, when Brown is temporarily released pending trial, one of the things she rejoices in most are the bodily experiences she is able to embrace and take control over. She describes every day of her release as a "holiday," and delights in the bodily sensations of being able to take a bath in hot water and go to the bathroom with the door closed (174). Thus, what many consider to be the mundane activities of human existence end up being written about by incarcerated individuals as the experiences they most miss. The ability to touch children, pick out an outfit in the morning, and take a shower without others watching become privileges, not inherent rights or activities of the corporeal as they are often thought of as being. It is the denial of these and other

actions that contributes to structuring daily life for an incarcerated woman, for it reminds one that she is in captivity, that her corporeal expression can no longer be openly expressed in the way it likely once was. A vivid example of this surfaces in Norma Stafford's "May I Touch You." The poem is part of her collection *Dear Somebody*, published in 1975, and is also featured in *Wall Tappings*. It is a brief, but moving depiction of the sense of physical and emotional alienation that can surface when gestures directed toward corporeal intimacy are denied: "may I touch you? / that is what I have missed / more than anything else / a warm human touch / I will not touch you hard" (1-5).

This loss of control over one's body and movement is not a unique aspect of any one autobiography about prison, but the form that it takes in each can certainly vary. Kate Richards O'Hare likens the labor that she is expected to perform to her own sense of individualism and bodily autonomy, compelling her family to "remember that I have ceased to be an individual, that I have no mind, no reason, no judgment, and that I have no more control over the amount of work that I must do than my sewing machine" (216). Jean Harris writes of the frustration she has on one end with a dorm officer that would seldom escort her to the medical facility, and on the other with rules stating that inmates were unable to go without an escort. She describes herself as a "human yo-yo, a pawn in a sick game," threatened with a charge sheet if she went back or forward (1986, 311). Her account is illustrative of how many women see themselves as regulated by institutional restrictions that structure their movement—stipulations that assign how long they have to walk from one place to another, to eat, and as many complain about, to wait. As Harris goes on to write, "She stands in line to get through the door to get in line for the next door, in order to get in line to be fed and to get medication, . . . to sign into the clinic and to sign out of the clinic in order to get into the line to the nurse, which will get her into the line to see the

doctor—not all in one day, but sometime in the future, at which time she will go through the whole thing all over again” (368). Clare Hanrahan writes of how she feels like a “steel ball moving through this massive prison pinball machine” (107). Once again the controls in place over her movement are given great emphasis in connection to her subjectivity, as suggested in her description of the arbitrary nature of penal regimen: “one guard will pull and release the spring propelling me this way or that, another will flip a lever, changing the direction to keep me moving—back and forth, here and there. I’ll just let the drama unfold and try to adjust the direction I’m propelled toward. . . . I’m in a new game here and the rules shift at the whim of my keepers” (108). These keepers, whom she terms her “pinball masters” in this particular context, are clearly granted disproportionate power over her sense of space and mobility.

And again the very humanness of the incarcerated woman is placed into question, for O’Hare, Harris, and Hanrahan all feel themselves not as a self-monitoring, self-actualized individuals, but as objects whose movements are constantly being manipulated. This too marks an important difference between bodies held in a form of captivity and the body as it is commonly evoked in academic discourse. As Eisenstein points out, the very physicality of the body becomes what she terms a “horribly powerful resource” for those who desire to “conquer, violate, humiliate and shame” (33). Even though a good deal of body theory posits a body that is relatively unstable, much of this instability stems from its very fluidity and ability to transgress, and from our inability to pinpoint its exact locations. Here, however, the instability is derived not from questions concerning how far it can transgress or what boundaries it can spill over into, but because it cannot do so without state-supported repercussions, because it does not possess the same potential to cross over. In turn, the bounded body throws into question not just how we think about fluidity, but how we think about bodies themselves. What happens, in other words,

when fluidity is no longer an inherent quality of the corporeal, when boundaries, rather than the ability to traverse across those boundaries shape the body?

### **Searching for Control**

Although it could be argued that there is a certain freedom of movement within institutional walls, and I would agree that there is (though obviously this is extraordinarily limited), one of the many things that makes correctional facilities different from other environments is that one is always subject to an enforced search of the body. An inmate can resist or refuse this, but the punishment that follows, most often being locked in confinement or placed in restraints, operates on the body as well. Incarcerated women are left facing the distressing realization that one must submit to a shake at any time. Brown elaborates on this in the following:

There was another nasty practice I couldn't stand. It was a certain embellishment on the shake-down policy. As an inmate, no matter what you are doing and no matter where you are, you must submit to a shake from any guard any time of the day or night. This involves standing at attention while a guard rubs her hands all over your body, searching for illegal and concealed contraband. Many officers, familiar with the inmate practice of legging it (moving contraband through one's undergarments) delight in giving a short chop of the hand to your crotch. . . . That's one of the reasons I wore a skirt as often as possible. I found that even the most insensitive guards are reluctant to "chop the crotch" when you're wearing a skirt (47).

As we might anticipate, the search appears as a dehumanizing agent of regimen repeatedly in personal narratives of the prison. For many women, the search and its threat permeate throughout the penal environment, and even start to structure their daily movement. All visits with family, all court appointments, and all accusations of handling contraband, bring with them the threat of being subject to yet another invasive examination of their bodies. Angela Davis recounts her feelings towards the procedure preceding her trial here: "My steps heavy with hesitation, I moved from the line to the other side of the screen. I held my breath while they frisked my body, dug their fingers in my hair, and asked me to lower my underpants, . . . It was frightening to realize the regular trail-goers had to submit themselves to these humiliating

searches day after day” (344). Jean Harris too tells of the recurrent orders voiced by one guard she has particular disdain for: “That ain’t a good squat. Squat again. Now squat and cough. Now take that thing outta your hair and shake your hair. Run your hands through it” (1986, 321). Not only is Harris subject to a search, she is also forced to participate in it to further implement the search procedure, to monitor her own body by running her fingers through her hair. The effects this can have on one’s sense of self are often immediate. As Barbara Parsons reveals about her strip search at York, one that occurred in groups of five no less, “By the time my clothes are handed back, I’m a piece of meat. I dress hastily and leave the small bathroom that stinks from the memory of the hundreds of naked women previously searched there” (227).

Although much of academic theory on the body is concerned with the unboundedness of bodies in general, there are those boundaries that are closely guarded, that are seen as personal. To violate them is to do violence both to the body and to one’s subjectivity, which is part of the reason many women have been so involved in the crusade against rape and domestic violence. We usually think of being in a body as having the ability to try to protect that body, to guard it from being unduly acted upon. Yet, it is these very boundaries, those that guard the confines of the personal, that are most often transgressed in correctional institutions. Incarcerated women are subject to being touched all over by hands they would likely refuse if they were free, and forced to do things (squat, for instance) that find to be intrusive and insufferable.

They are also left, as Davis was, to deal with the feelings of shame and humiliation that follow. Lynn McDonald, for instance, puts it this way when discussing a recent intrusive exam that she underwent and the reaction from her that it inspired: “I felt like they could start peeling me in layers, down to my raw nerves. I started screaming at her/them, backing into the wall. . . . I got myself together. . . . These outbursts are usually punished with isolation or worse” (qtd. in

Faith 1996, 168). It is this dismantling of boundaries that ends up ultimately helping to shape bodies held in captivity, and many female prison autobiographers conceive of their bodies in this way. They see their bodies as always subject to violation, as surfaces that officials are continuously able to inscribe with institutional power, and their texts often depict a keen awareness of how their bodies are monitored.

Many women are extraordinarily cognizant of the real message of power over the individual that is conveyed through these practices. Clare Hanrahan offers a compelling example of this in her recent memoir *Conscience and Consequence*. Describing how she was made to have a cervical culture for gonorrhea taken and her efforts to refuse the test by the male physician's assistant that she had previous difficulties with, she writes the following about the incident:

There are so many hurdles here. So many times when dignity is assaulted. Today I submit, part of me dying as I climb up on the table. I just want it over with. I feel violated, yet at the same time I feel foolish for making a big deal out of what on the surface is a routine medical procedure. But there's a difference here: This is about power and control (90).

I wanted to quote her account at some length in part because it illustrates how clearly aware she and the majority of writers profiled here are about the loss of bodily autonomy that they experience within prison walls, as well as the manner in which they sometimes feel invaded on both a physical and an emotional level by the sheer intrusiveness of state power. This keen attentiveness to what they believe is informing many modern punishment practices today is echoed by Barbara Deming when describing her own attempts to "struggle hard for self-possession" during her admission process (3). She discusses how she knew the whole time that their search was not for drugs or weapons per se as much as it was for "our pride," and writes of how she "think(s) with a sinking heart: again and again, it must be, they find it and take it" (4). Such searches are read, in other words, as violations of one's interiority as often as they are felt as violations of one's physical exterior.

Prison officials insist that these procedures are absolutely necessary in order to ensure the safety of the institution, staff members, and other inmates, and I am not willing to suggest that the trafficking of contraband and narcotics is not a significant, potentially dangerous problem within correctional facilities. Yet, the fact that approximately 80% of these women have been victims of physical or sexual violence or both and the reality that inappropriate sexual contact, including rape has been known to occur in facilities nationwide, makes this procedure more than just a measure of security.<sup>16</sup> Hanrahan complicates this further, pointing out that one does not have to have a history to sexual abuse to “feel unnecessarily violated by indignity” (193).

One aspect of these procedures that I find especially troublesome is that the search is often indicative not just of how facilities are made secure, but how the bodies of women are regarded as always potentially deviant, always suspect. Critics will assert that there is no alternative, given the fact that the majority of women housed are guilty of committing a crime and that that in itself is grounds for suspicion. But, I want to consider what it does for the mental and emotional status of women when they are always rendered suspect, when they come to the realization, as most do, that for as long as they are in prison, their bodies will always be subject to being made secure in ways that have little control over and that these procedures can happen with alarming frequency and with little to no notice.

Jean Harris points to the harmful effects of this susceptibility to a search in *They Always Call us Ladies*, its title derived from her insistence that the only thing constant in prison is the sound of C.O.’s calling “Ladies, ladies.” She writes that after several of the women went to a program on domestic violence in which they had discussed the importance of a positive self-image, an officer announced that “no inmate is to leave the gym without being strip-searched” (263). The women proceeded to be lined up at the door and waited to be led into a cubicle to be

stripped and searched in order to, as Jean puts it, “make sure that none of the media or representatives from the governor’s office had brought us in contraband” (264). As she states, “It seemed to me like a good day to take a big chance and let us leave the room like women instead of cattle” (264).

Again, the comparison to animals is invoked, not just to illustrate how little individualism is allowed to surface in most facilities, but also to describe being processed directly out of a program designed to empower the self into the coercive environment of the prison. Harris’s comments also demonstrate the fact that many disciplinary procedures within correctional institutions require the suppression of all aspects of self, subjectivity and bodily disruption included, that might pose challenges to the regulation of prison bodies. Thus, some of the very things that the body in theory most depends on—subjectivity, freedom of bodily expression, and autonomous movement included—are those that are repeatedly infringed upon for a woman who is incarcerated.

Of the various accounts of searches that surface in these texts, however, those that emerge repeatedly as most invasive are the vaginal searches given to women following the birth of a child. It is the moment in which the most protected, private area of the body is rendered public. This is understandably a dramatic experience for Assata Shakur, who writes rather extensively about the conditions under which she had her baby. Like other women who pose little threat due to their medical conditions, she was restrained before being taken to the hospital and then placed under constant and unyielding surveillance while there. She describes this surveillance here: “I was taken to Elmhurst hospital in a motorcade. It looked to me like a million police cars buzzing around the vehicle in which I, a woman in labor, was riding. And they all followed. Into Elmhurst Hospital and up to the delivery room. They surrounded the hospital” (143).

Shakur is forced to deliver in front of a multitude and has to wage a difficult battle just to get to choose her doctor—to get to choose, in other words, the one who is to have the most intimate contact with her body throughout the birthing process. It takes both a press conference and an outside demonstration in order for her to finally be able to get her personal doctor, and she has to try to shield herself from others wanting to inspect her in the meantime. Kept bounded in restraints throughout the delivery, the ties between her physical body and the restraints of disciplinary procedure remain firmly in place, dismantling connections between her body and her ability to fully transgress the rigor of regimen. If there were any doubts that women might actually have to deliver while in handcuffs or other restraints, one only needs to look at the gripping photographs Jane Atwood has assembled in her collection *Too Much Time*.<sup>17</sup>

Once the baby is finally delivered, Shakur is initially told that she cannot breastfeed since the doctor “hadn’t written a prescription” for it (144). When she is finally discharged, without, she asserts, the consent of her doctor, she is put in an ambulance, chained to a stretcher and brought back to the facility where she is told that she will have to be examined. Upon her refusal to do so, she writes that she is physically forced to stay in an observation room where she is left, hands and feet cuffed, with bleeding wrists, no sanitary napkins, and no means to wash herself. It is not until two weeks later, after she agrees to be vaginally searched, that she is allowed to go back to her floor. She is thereby forced to take part in her own submission to disciplinary procedure, and must turn her body over to those in a position of power in order to regain any sense of movement. Conversely then, accessing bodily control depends upon her own bodily submission—a relationship that again challenges the assumed reciprocal association between one’s body and one’s ability to place control over that body.

Shakur ends up being surrounded for the duration of her stay, but this type of surveillance is not uncommon. Shakur's is particularly intense because of her political affiliation with the Black Panther Party and the institution's fears that she might escape or negatively influence other inmates, but all of the women studied here write about the constant feeling of being watched in one form or another. The structural facilities of most prisons make this readily apparent in and of themselves. Not only are most showers without curtains around them, most of the bathrooms do not have doors on either the main entrance or the individual toilets. Angela Davis writes of this infringement on her private space early on in her autobiography in response to an officer insisting to get into the booth with her: "As she intently watched me urinate, I couldn't resist asking her if she thought I was going to flush myself down the toilet" (73).

It comes as little shock that that the body often described in prison narratives is one fraught with the tensions of institutional life when considering these and other disciplinary practices. It is a body medicated by drugs and psychotropic medications aimed at maintaining social control in the prison, drugs that often produce an anesthetizing effect on those whose dispositions need "managed." Bonnie Foreshaw, who was tranquilized three times a day, recounts the following in the collection *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* about this: "One day I'm a machinist at a manufacturing company, a middle-class mom doing my best to provide a good life for my kids. Next day I'm a prisoner of the State of Connecticut, locked away in the mental health unit, confused, overtranquilized, and falling apart fast" (192). Since there are few monetary resources for programs that might help women with the various psychological and emotional problems that they bring with them to the prison, these medications act as temporary fix, a holding ground to keep the women under control. Jean Harris describes in *Stranger* women who would carve their initials in their arms, swallow safety pins, and start physical fights in order to deal with the

anxiety that they were unable to find other outlets for (421). There are accounts of women hurt, even bleeding in their cells, or partaking in attempts to end their own lives under the stress of their environments. These are individuals that feel as though they must act out against themselves, and bodies that must feel the pain of their existence.

### **Measures of Resistance in Theory and Out**

Perhaps this is why the body is also sometimes used as a mode of resistance, as a way of reacting against the infractions of disciplinary regimen rather than as the location many of its procedures are enforced upon. Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Barbara Deming threatened and partook in hunger strikes until their treatment and conditions improved, and used their bodies, or the deprivation of their bodies rather, to change their circumstances. Joyce Brown and Jean Harris both write of their desire to keep their appearances up, to do what they can through scarves or shoes to retain their individualism, which is why any action by officials against this expression is so devastating to them. Recall as well Brown's decision to wear skirts so as to hopefully avoid being "chopped" by officers during a search. And although she is unable to partake in its indulgence, Davis writes a letter to George Jackson about her desire to get close when she was with him. She writes that she is supposed to "rip off the chains. I'm supposed to fight your enemies with my body, but I am helpless, powerless. I contain the rage" (311). In this instance, Davis's body has become the physical container of her inability to react against the correctional instruments that hold Jackson captive as well. She is unable to will her body's movement beyond the restraints that incarceration imposes, but the desire to do so remains strong and surfaces later in her text when is finally able, freely, to embrace him.

I do want to mention that incarcerated women sometimes conceive of their bodies as sites of pleasure, or at least as being capable of giving or receiving pleasure, though these references are far more infrequent. Buck's "Clandestine Kisses" is one example of struggling to hold onto

something, love in this instance, that is outside of the bounds of the institution's control. For Patrice Gaines the focus is more on what can happen when she is allowed to enter into a safe, women's community even momentarily. She writes in *Laughing in the Dark* of how women in the institution would nurture one another, and the delight she takes in sitting between the legs of others who would comb, part, and grease her hair. She describes in the following those rare moments when the women would come together and forge some sense of their own collective space within the jail's walls:

In our time together they would take their worn hands, marred from needles or from protecting their faces from some man's fist, and braid my hair into intricate patterns, as if I were their child. We cried when we talked about the children we could not see, the missed graduations, first words, and small hugs; we laughed—oh, how we laughed—uproariously, our wanting howls bouncing off the cold walls and escaping through the steel bars into the dark of the night, while the rest of the city slept (108).

The women Gaines writes of are able to take part in a communal act of self-assertion in this space, brought together through the intimate connections of both emotional closeness and touch. There is a sense of recovery and reunion conveyed in this passage, of forging communion outside of male violence or other forms of abuse. In "Dreaming Ourselves Dark and Deep," bell hooks writes of hair combing and braiding by other black women as a moment of tenderness and care, and stresses that this dimension of sharing in the care of the black female self is simply necessary (86). In a world wracked with racism, the women's act of caring for one another is not just an important affirmation of self, it is also one of the few moments where their bodily expression counters the institution's collective treatment of their bodies. The assumption that incarcerated women's bodies are not in need of, nor deserving of care runs counter to dominant beliefs in society about the care that one needs to impose on his or her body, the measures one should go to in order to protect the body and one's health. And as hooks goes on to say, care of the self begins with our "capacity to tenderly care for the body" (88). For incarcerated women,

any measure designed to care for the self or another is often met with resistance, or must otherwise be carried out in the secret spaces the women are able to create themselves. It is important to situate these moments of liberation within the wider context of the prison in which a communal, private space can be disrupted at any time via disciplinary power, but that does not discount the need for affirmation and female community that Gaines expresses.

Angela Davis too writes again of the desire to establish a physical connection so that she might be able to experience pleasure through the sensation of touch. When Davis is finally able to visit with George, she writes that “his first gesture was to try to reach out. An embrace. He had forgotten that his wrists were chained to his waist and that he could only move them a few inches. With my free hands—they had not cuffed me this time—I tried to make up for his chains” (311). In this instance, her body is attempting to transcend beyond the bounds of regime and succeeds in part, but the physical boundaries of chains, the very type of instrument that makes any transcendence difficult, reminds readers of the body’s inability to break all bounds within certain environments.

Once the pervasive association between fluidity and bodies is dismantled, the body can no longer be formed out of its boundlessness. Fluidity, subjectivity, privacy, all become constructions that the experience of incarceration renders problematic. This challenges not only the body’s assumed ability to always transcend, but the foundational status of other components that are often seen as connected with bodies themselves, including bodily resistance and expression, intimacy, and even humanness. When these are no longer considered inherent aspects of the corporeal, a fundamental challenge is posed to not just how we have come to think about each of these constructions and how they function, but how we think about the body in

general and the ways in which power can work to regulate and shape it. There are practices we have yet to even fully learn about, and others that we can surely come to know better.

Perhaps then in the end, it can be said that it is the bodies of certain individuals, those we are most fearful of, those whose seem to transgress the most rigid of boundaries, which are the ones left marginalized in the present discourse of the body. For like the bodies of any group that have been placed outside or relegated to positions of silence, fear, or suspicion, incarcerated women's bodies do not just challenge how bodies are thought of in society, they challenge the very meaning by which we can come to any consensus concerning the body politic. They are invested so heavily through procedures and practices that affect the body in dramatic and profound ways, that they render any definition of the body not grounded in the coercive environment of the prison simply inadequate.

It is from this context, one that stresses the multiplicity of factors by which bodies are formed, regulated, and asked to function within the environment of penal regimen that the an incarcerated woman's body can finally take its place in studies of the body, not as a necessary inclusion, but as a starting ground. I would like to think that the importance of doing so cannot be underestimated, not only because we may come to better understand bodily difference, context, captivity, and regimen, but for the tens of thousands of women currently incarcerated whose autobiographies have never been written, whose texts we have yet to read.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> As Bordo points out in *Unbearable Weight*, it was, however, feminism that originally discovered and uncovered the idea that the “definition of and shaping of the body is the focal point for struggles over the shape of power” (17).

<sup>2</sup> Jeanne Perreault, for instance, claims in her study of various feminist texts that the female body can be a “site and source of written subjectivity, investing that individual body with the shifting ethics of a political, racial, and sexual

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consciousness” (190). Her interest lies primarily in exploring categories of self, community, and identity in the texts she examines, as well as the ways they are revised.

<sup>3</sup> I will draw from and discuss Elizabeth Grosz’s positioning of the body, power, and subjectivity in *Volatile Bodies* in particular.

<sup>4</sup> Price and Shildrick, among others, have positioned feminist interest in the body in this manner.

<sup>5</sup> See Price and Shildrick’s introduction to *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* for additional discussion on this theoretical shift.

<sup>6</sup> Jocelyn Pollock also discusses how Pollak concluded that deviousness among women was certainly aided by a woman’s biology if not biological in and of itself, and used examples such as a woman’s ability to fake sexual response or conceal menstruation to help prove his theories on crime causation (131).

<sup>7</sup> This recalls Eisenstein’s point in *Hatreds* that bodies both “absorb and elicit meaning,” and that it is politics that “processes the definition” (33).

<sup>8</sup> Despite claims that many postmodern feminists have been engaged in an eventual move away from the lived body, Grosz does not seem willing to disband all extended involvement with what she considers the physical body to be. In her 1994 *Volatile Bodies*, she repeatedly affirms her desire to move away from any singular model of the body, and ultimately places herself with the company of Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Moira Gatens, Monique Wittig, and others for whom she says the body is crucial to understanding woman’s physical and social existence, even as the body itself is no longer understood as an ahistorical, acultural object. She maintains that they are concerned with the lived body, defined as the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures, and that the body that they invoke is “a body as social and discursive object, a body bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power” (18,19).

<sup>9</sup> Moira Gatens points out that power is not just reducible to what is imposed on naturally differentiated male and female bodies for instance, but is also “constitutive of those bodies, in so far as they are constituted as male and female” (230).

<sup>10</sup> Clearly public executions are handled far differently now than they were as Foucault presents them at the beginning of *Discipline and Punishment*. I would argue, however, that there are still elements of punishment as public spectacle at work in America’s current practice of the death penalty in many states.

<sup>11</sup> Bordo discusses this at far more length in “Feminism, Foucault, and the Politics of the Body.”

<sup>12</sup> Moira Gatens argues convincingly that various groups—enslaved individuals, immigrants, women, the conquered, children, the poor—have all been excluded from political participation at various points by their bodily specificity, causing her to ask whose “corporeal specificity marks them as inappropriate analogs to the political body?” (83). It is a question well worth sustained examination, and one that is reinforced explicitly in work of Davis and Shakur.

<sup>13</sup> I would like to add, however, that many feminists believe that women’s bodies are still designed to be looked at, and one only has to glance at the violent images that are regrettably far too often a part of the pornographic industry to find evidence of the female body as spectacle.

<sup>14</sup> I want to point out here again that the notion that one can have “freedom in one’s mind” can be troubled in light of how many women’s minds are encumbered through the frequent prescribing of psychotropic medications.

<sup>15</sup> See Price for further discussion on Haraway’s conception of the cyborg (11).

xiv Atwood’s collection shows distressing photos of women struggling to deliver while in restraints, as well as a woman whose hands are locked in handcuffs during a painful vaginal exam that took place right before she had a C-Section. Golden reports that women are now usually unshackled during their actual labor, but handcuffed to beds immediately before and after delivery. They have forty-eight hours with their baby and then must place it with a

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relative or the state (115). Bedford Hills is an unusual, and often highly regarded, exception to this because of its nursery facility, childcare center, and a provision that allows infants to stay with their mothers for up to eighteen months.

CHAPTER 5  
BECAUSE IT IS THE SUBJECT IT MUST BE NAMED: ABUSE IN WOMEN'S PRISON  
WRITING

“We have to understand that the goal of our antiviolenace work is not for diversity, and not inclusion. It is for liberation. For if we're truly committed to ending violence against women, then we must start in the hardest places, the places like jails and prisons and other correctional facilities. The places where our work has not had an impact yet”

(Beth Richie, qtd. in Smith 43).

I felt like my only alternatives were either to stay at home and deal with this man or leave and deal with the world the best way [I] knew how. And dealing with the world at that time seemed a lot better than to stay there dealing with this [reference to the sexual abuse]”

(Barbara G., qtd. in Arnold 141).

I know I am not alone in arguing that the time to respond to violence against women with all the attention, resources, insights, and developments it merits is alarmingly overdue. Despite the blurbs that occasionally flash on our television screens or that are featured in the few special reports on individual tragedies issued, it bears repeating that the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that one in four women will experience domestic violence during her lifetime and that one in five women has experienced rape or attempted rape.<sup>1</sup> These statistics are almost incredulous, but they are real and they are resisting decline. They are also pressing indications of how much work remains to be done if we are committed to ensuring women's safety and creating whole societies where women can indeed more fully realize and own their liberation.

As Beth Richie's quote above attests, correctional facilities are vital sites where advocacy work geared at eliminating this abuse and empowering women must take place. The costs of not doing so are simply too high in terms of both the effects this dismissal has on individual women and what it will bring to bare on our society at large. For incarcerated women, whose lives are disproportionably marked by violence even when compared to the highest national averages,

abuse in various forms comprises an all too frequent part of their pre-prison histories and has poised considerable threats to their subjectivity. How several women have responded to this violence in their autobiographical texts, even against the pressures of dismissal, erasure, and further repression that greet their status as imprisoned offenders, forms the subject of this chapter.

Presently and formerly incarcerated women's explorations of how violence has affected the range of options open to them, influenced major life choices, and impacted their understanding of themselves as subjective beings has enriched our collective knowledge of the often very harsh circumstances through which many women have come into contact with the criminal justice system. The writing under study here stands as a compelling exploration of the texture of violence, its permeability and ability to shift forms, its link to control and power via interpersonal relationship and state responses, and beyond. And yet, this work has the potential to do far more than it already has, particularly when we take seriously the claim that personal narratives are capable of offering a possible "reformulation of the available subject positions and cultural constructions that endanger women" (Apgar 51). I hope that this study is just one move of many in that direction, as we still have much to undo and rebuild when it comes to challenging constructs that uphold violence and ultimately circumscribe women's full range of freedom.

There can be little doubt that the violence marginalized women have experienced needs to be more fully integrated into our theoretical literature and our activist work if we are to continue to create the kinds of not just practical, but also progressive solutions such a complex social issue demands of us. Integration in and of itself, however, is an approach that will only take us so far. As I argued in the preceding chapter, dominant theoretical paradigms will not necessarily speak

to those situations that are outside their frame of reference, nor be fully attuned to dynamic intersections of race, class, and sexuality that present themselves within specific environments. If we can even begin to agree with filmmaker Cheryl Dunye's observation that "the most contemporary marginalized woman of color is a female who is incarcerated"—an impetus in part for the making of her latest film *A Stranger Inside*—then we find ourselves moving into important new territory (qtd. in St. John 329). This shift means that those women most vulnerable to being considered outside of dominant strategies and not included in traditional responses are instead placed at the center of analysis, and we are challenged in turn to be truly visionary in our work.

The newly edited collection, *Domestic Violence at the Margins: Readings on Race, Class, Gender and Culture*, with its multilevel analysis on women from diverse backgrounds and immigrant statuses who have enacted varied forms of resistance against their victimization, is an important step toward that goal. Recent studies focused on international experiences of violence, such as *Trafficking and the Global Sex Industry* edited by Beeks and Amir, and *Women, Gender and Human Rights* edited by Marjorie Agosin, are oriented toward this kind of reframing as well. When placed alongside readings of such specific forms of violence as honor crimes, dowry murders, and sexual slavery foregrounded in recent texts, it is clear that feminist, often transnational, work is inciting and contributing to new ways of thinking about gendered violence on a national and international level than has previously been the case.<sup>2</sup> Of the many important core ideas that have emerged from these texts, one most certainly is that our readings of violence against women and the communal, state, and culture responses that greet it (including how it is outwardly or quietly condoned), need to be context driven if we are to creating lasting, relevant change in the public and private sphere.

Implicit in my argument, then, is the belief that incarcerated women's experiences with abuse need to be situated within the complex matrix of social repression born out of varied forms of violence, racial injustice, poverty, gender subordination, and inadequate familial and institutional support. Independently of one another these factors have the potential to constrict the opportunities available to anyone in a society where meritocracy is highly esteemed and communal support is not always offered, but most incarcerated women and juvenile girls must instead deal with their cumulative effects. We need not lose sight of the fact that women of color are the fastest growing population group entering our nation's correctional institutions, that an estimated 50-80% of juvenile girls and adult women have experienced abuse prior to their imprisonment, or that the majority of those who ultimately end up incarcerated come from dire economic situations and possess limited educational levels when compared to national averages. As Richie suggests, women's prisons constitute nearly "perfect examples of the consequences of the multiple subjugation and the compounding impact of various stigmatized identities. The convergence of disadvantage, discrimination, and despair is staggering" (2004, 438). When these women and girls are placed within penal environments that do little to advance their recovery or the rebuilding of their lives, working through past abuse and other obstacles they have faced can be extraordinarily challenging to say the least.

Glorian Killian's poem "Forget me Not" speaks well to this consortium of disadvantages and the ways in which they are culturally read as personal deficiencies in our socio-political world. It was written while she was serving a 32-to-life sentence at the California Institution for Women for a crime that she did not commit and was later acquitted for 16 years after she was imprisoned. She is currently working on a book that details her journey toward freedom and justice, and writes openly in the beginning of this poem about the current and future costs of

incarcerating so many women who have otherwise already been largely cast out of the mainframe of social living:

We are the forgotten, the marginalized, the dispossessed,  
the abandoned  
The disposable refuse of a throw-away society  
But the consequences of our repudiation have been  
overlooked in society's haste  
To hide its social and moral problems behind barbed wire  
and bars of steel  
For we are the mothers of the future generations (1-8).

The consequences of this repudiation are still unfolding, and will likely only keep doing so as the number of incarcerated women continues to soar. Killian's poem is a potent reminder of the fact that when we address "the" issue of incarceration, we are more often than not also reductively responding to some of the most complex and deeply entrenched social issues facing our nation today, including concentrated poverty, homelessness, unequal educational systems, unemployment, and widespread abuse. While my intention when writing about incarcerated women and their work in general is not to erase all personal accountability in making certain choices that led to their imprisonment, I would be equally remiss to not continually try and draw attention to the great disparities and difficulties that have marked the majority of their lives, of which violence and a history of continued abuse has been an alarmingly frequent component.

Research by Elizabeth Comack and others has consistently pointed to how the ways in which abuse plays out in a woman's life can be "conditioned and contoured" by factors such as one's age, race, and class positioning that mark her structural position in society (41). As I will examine throughout this chapter, abuse provided the catalyst for many girls fleeing their homes and for a number of adult women coming into contact with the criminal justice system when other safety nets and resources were not always readily available. What I want to do here in response to this phenomenon is two-fold: first, to place incarcerated women's experiences with

abuse in a context that speaks more to the specificities of the multiple subjugations that have comprised many of their personal histories than what dominant readings of violence otherwise might. Second, I wish to examine how some of their specific works explore the dynamic processes by which they have struggled to assert agency and position a more stable subjectivity against the exacting backdrop of violence enacted against them.

These texts by incarcerated women support Laurie Vicroy's claim that representations of trauma and traumatic events inevitably involve "explorations around the constitution of self and the relational and situational properties of identity" (22). Trauma has been defined variously by theorists such as Laurie Vickroy, Leigh Gilmore, and Suzette Henke who have authored book-length studies on the representation and confrontation of trauma in women's life-writing and literature.<sup>3</sup> There is wide consensus among most scholars and the wider public, however, that being the victim of violence in and of itself is inevitably a traumatic event that can resound throughout a person's life in diverse and unexpected ways, sometimes hindering one's best efforts to progress toward full self-actualization. Writing, in turn, has frequently been invoked as an activity that can help restore one's sense of self. Henke, for instance, suggests that all genres of autobiography have in common an author attempting to "fashion an enabling discourse of testimony and self-revelation," and Apgar asserts that personal narrative offers a space to "make sense of, and subsequently diminish, the psychological damage" that violence can do, and also "(re)inscribe a positive sense of self-identity" (xvi, 57). We are nonetheless reminded again, however, of the complex subject positions that can result from the additional challenges posed to women's sense of subjective agency by the prison system itself—a realization that can impede, though not necessarily destroy, the kind of unproblematized self-positioning that has a potential to surface in these critical studies.

## **Naming Violence, Positioning Subjectivity**

I am convinced that we cannot arrive at a thorough or complete approach to studies of women's subjectivity without examining how violence can work to destabilize one's identity and subvert one's attempts at selfhood and wholeness. As I argued in "To Build a Nation: Black Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Violent Reduction of Wholeness," female writers have called attention in valuable ways to the challenges that violence poses to women's identity and understanding of self, particularly in social environments that marginalize women's experiences with abuse and victimization. Wholeness in Alice Walker's formulation, one that draws in part from her conceptualization of womanism, is based on the integration of one's intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of human existence in a manner that fosters dignity, self-acknowledgement and respect, and ultimately, works to promote freedom.<sup>4</sup> Violence clearly has the potential to rupture this more holistic sense of self.

Studies focused on women's experiences with abuse have also made important contributions to our social understanding of how trauma affects one's psychic development and sense of self amidst the breaks and fissures of identity that trauma can evoke. Scheffler and Smith point out that trauma has been understood largely through psychoanalytic frameworks of interiority that describe it as "self-altering and self-shattering," with acts of traumatic remember played out as "fitful, incomplete, and belated, caught in a dialectic between dissociation and compulsory repetition" (19,20). Judith Herman suggests in her landmark study *Trauma and Recovery*, that traumatic events "shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others," and claims that they also "undermine belief systems that give meaning to human experience" (51). The demands waged against one's sense of self are often both concentrated and acute, and can intervene not only on one's understanding of self, but also upon one's positioning of herself within her community and the larger socio-political world.

The fracturing of subjectivity that can result from abuse usually surfaces most centrally for victims and survivors of violence of course, but the threat of assault, the awareness of outrageously high statistics, and the knowledge that violence against women remains an issue far too often not spoken about or integrated into social policy, has some bearing on how many women move through the world even if one has not had violence perpetuated against her personally.<sup>5</sup> Decades of feminist activism and research have revealed time and time again as Shulman puts it, that “some form of gender-related violence is present in the autobiographies of what may be a majority of women around the globe” (167). The effects of this widespread abuse on women’s subjectivity more generally, in other words, is a productive area for scholars and activists to continue to explore as a mark of our commitment to creating whole societies where all members have equal claims to opportunity, justice, and autonomy.

Moreover, as Diane Shoos rightly points out when discussing Joan Scott’s frequently cited essay “Experience,” it may be particularly crucial to examine the compound discourses that constitute subjectivity in the case of a underreported form of violence like domestic abuse that is less likely be to the topic of open discussion and whose victims are “psychologically and often physically isolated from society” (61). Even though victims and survivors of violence “cannot claim unmediated access to our experience,” as Brenda Daly poignantly argues in *Authoring a Life*, they must still “claim the authority to name and theorize” those experiences (17). Doing so often signals a reclamation of subjective status in the writings I examine here—the shift from an objectified self or objectified body that was acted upon to a more self-defined construction of identity that resists the impulse to silence or isolate the effects of abuse. That isolation is rendered most intense many would likely argue when women are literally removed from the

“free” world while imprisoned, where barbed wire fences and iron gates speak as much to the environment that they are placed in as they do to what they are separated from.

A section of my title is drawn from Gloria Yamato’s increasingly anthologized essay “Something About the Subject Makes it Hard to Name.” Here, Yamato points to the complex character of racism, illuminating both the varied forms that it can take and the sheer difficulty that people seem to have naming, recognizing, and certainly sufficiently working toward eliminating it. The very pervasiveness of racism and the manifestations that it gives rise to get articulated as simply a part of life in her formulation, or for the naïve optimist, as something that can “be merely wished away” or combated in a single workshop or discussion (20). While I am always cautious of making ostensibly neat comparisons between complex forms of oppression, I do want to acknowledge a long history of how violence has been used to establish and uphold racial injustice, as well as how violence itself, and violence against women in particular, can also dangerously be reduced as something that “just is” in our society and our world. There is a seemingly unending bend to the parameters of violence, what Yamato might term a “spill over” quality, that makes the abuse that occurs in intimate or family relationships especially difficult to name, represent, or forcefully respond to even as we are faced with its mounting reach daily, knowingly or not.

The social and economic costs of intimate violence, its effects on such areas as healthcare spending, workplace productivity, community services, and the justice system reinforce its very uncontainability and the ways in which it continually transverses the boundaries of any home, relationship, encounter, or moment of assault.<sup>6</sup> The devastation it can bring to an estimated 4-6 million of girls and women each year may be its most damaging and identifiable corollary, but we would all benefit from acknowledging and responding to the full reach of violence against

women. How we do so, the future measures that we take in combating its severity and lessening its prevalence, will continue to mark our commitment to ensuring women's security in this country and across the globe. A integral step toward this end is taking women's own accounts of their histories with abuse seriously, and positioning them within a larger framework attune to the varied forms of marginalization that they have experienced.

All of this underscores the importance of focusing on writings produced by incarcerated women in which incidents of abuse and primary effects of victimization *are* named, how several women write about the abuse that has occurred both in the pre-prison lives as well as within correctional institutions, and the effects this has had on the construction of their subjectivity. If, as Laura Wexler suggests, many kinds of violence are naturalized and thus rendered invisible, we are encouraged to question how we “render that violence visible without creating states of numbness and denial” (37). Several women who are, or who have formerly been, in prison have written autobiographical pieces that detail and respond to the violence that has been inflicted onto them as children and teens, as partners in intimate relationships, or that has otherwise continued throughout their adult lives—abuse that has sadly often been minimized or has otherwise been naturalized by intimates and the wider public. By named, I mean for my purposes here that these events are instead recognized, put into print, and claimed as an important part of their personal histories. They are also overwhelmingly positioned as foundational in some significant way when it comes to processes of self-understanding, self-definition, and self-development.

I believe we can align many of these texts with the larger body of trauma narratives that call attention to “human-made traumatic situations,” and provide implicit critiques of the ways “social, economic, and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma” as Vickroy

positions them (4). Certainly, it is the penal environment that is most regularly the subject of critique in the analyses that incarcerated women provide (as put forth by Bunney, Buck, and Hanrahan in particular as I will examine), but most writers are also extremely attuned to how racist and/or gendered responses to the violence that they suffered under failed them as well. These texts, in turn, carry out another significant aim of trauma narratives that Vickroy identifies, that of attempting to “reshape cultural memory through personal contexts,” drawing from characteristics of testimony to “prevent and bear witness” to the horrors they have undergone and hope to not see repeated (5). The attention many incarcerated women bring both to some of our most hostile social situations and to the disabling climate of the penal environment itself is an intervention into common readings of violence and subjectivity worthy of our notice and sustained examination.

### **The Discourse of Abuse**

It is important to point out that questions have always swirled around the linguistic issues that have presented themselves when even trying to describe and categorize what is usually termed family or intimate violence, tensions that have surfaced in incarcerated women’s writing on abuse as well. I bring this up in part because I believe, as Kathleen Ferraro does, that the language we use to discuss this problem carries “theoretical significance,” capable of drawing attention to or away from the gender of the victim, the perpetrator, and the institutional responses that meet what for so long has been considered a private matter (136). At times it seems like we have still not moved that far away from the socially licensed, closed door response that has historically made innumerable women feel as though the abuse that they suffered needed to be concealed or otherwise “worked through,” especially when revealing it to others was met with its own new set of negative repercussions.<sup>7</sup>

Thirty-year old Carolyn's account in Beth Richie's *Compelled to Crime* provides one of many examples of the destructive fallout from this deficient response. She details how she was forced to tell officers that she was okay following a particularly intense incident that prompted neighbors to call the police on her abusive husband of twelve years. The officers quickly left after she mustered a weak smile through tears, against the background, that is, of her children screaming and her obviously disheveled state. She draws attention to how power operated in and through that incident on multiple fronts, as well as to the personal consequences she faced when the abuse was made known but not sufficiently responded to. "As soon as they left," she states, "he started beating me again, and that's when I learned that it was better not having people involved because when they didn't help, all that did was to make him feel more powerful. He said, and I'll never forget this, 'See, everyone knows that this is between you and me, and since you are mine, you'll do what I say'" (qtd. in Richie 93). The terms of ownership dictated to her by her husband and the manner in which the severity of the incident was diminished served as potent reminders to her of where domestic violence registers on our collective social conscious. As "his," her subjectivity was implicitly challenged, and that disavowal of her full personhood was reinforced when the dangerousness of her situation was essentially ignored by local officials.

These tensions with law enforcement agencies can clearly be exacerbated along the lines of race and class as detailed in chapter three, particularly when there is already distrust between communities of color and the police. As Kim, a thirty-seven year old African American woman who was also battered by her husband for twelve years puts it in Richie's text, "Call the police? Never! Everyone I knew spent all of our time running from the police! . . . I just never could really trust that they would help me and not just use my 911 call as one more excuse to beat up a Black man . . . I learned early in my life that the cops were dangerous to my people" (95). The

racial dynamics that make themselves apparent in a situation like this need to continue to be closely examined if our response to battering and violence against women of color in general is to be holistic in its approach and effective in its implementation.<sup>8</sup> Richie suggests further that a “collateral consequence” of mass imprisonment is that relations between law enforcement and the community have become even more strained, with women having lost “faith and confidence in the very societal institutions that should be addressing their needs” (2002, 144). This has some bearing on how women of color in already disenfranchised communities especially might conceptualize their subjectivities as well in terms of their position to the dominant social order.

Violence against women continues to occur, we must remember, within a social climate where a sizeable proportion of onlookers is still quick to rest on the question, “why doesn’t she just leave?” It is beyond the scope of this piece to fully go into that tangled response here so many reasons are there, but I do want to note that the framing of the question is predicated on the assumption that leaving ensures safety, and that it shifts the responsibility for the abuse most squarely onto the shoulders of one who chooses to stay. I am hopeful that we will one day reach the point when the question might be posed as, “why are so women being abused,” or “why is there so much violence enacted against women,” but until then, it would likely serve as well to glean as much insight as possible from those who have lived out the difficult constraints that abuse imposes. I draw attention to this in order to highlight the role that language plays in structuring our reality, what Gilmore refers to as the “controlling metaphor for the emergence of identity” (2001, 172).

For the majority of writers who compose the Wally Lamb’s edited collection *Couldn’t Keep it to Myself: Testimonies from our Imprisoned Sisters*, it is clear that the question “why does she stay” dramatically reduces the complexities, fear, and limitations that surface in most abusive

relationships. Their collective testimonies repeatedly expose the fallacies inherent in such a linguistic formulation, and call for a renewed understanding of the dangers many women face when attempting to break away from their abusers.<sup>9</sup> By extension, this often also signifies a break from their objectified status in the move toward self-determinism. As Bonnie Foreshaw asserts, “When you live in fear that your husband may come at you again and crack your eardrum with a hard slap, cut you with a knife, or sink the teeth of an Afro pick into your neck, it alters your perspective. Makes you question and fear all kinds of things. By my early thirties, I felt beaten, tried, lonely, and lost” (190).<sup>10</sup> Her account, like those of so many women, stands in direct confrontation to the prescribed ease of “just leaving,” and testifies to the considerable effects that traumatic events can have on what Herman classifies as the “psychological structures of the self” (51).

Subjectivity is taken to mean a “process of movement through various discursive positions” for Amina Mama, who argues that individuals may adopt different positions in discourse simultaneously since “various subject positions are available to a given individual at any given moment” (99). But in situations of domestic violence and other forms of abuse, these varied positions are not always so easily accessible. They are also, many would argue, tied to language and one’s location in relation to the dominant discourse. Alcoff reminds us that our relationships to those with whom we are speaking and our sense and knowledge of ourselves and our experiences is infused with power and will be “changed by the structural arrangements of the discursive event” (202). In instances where one’s experience of violence is positioned amidst refrains of “why not just leave,” or when other references that shift the greatest share of accountability onto the recipient of violence are invoked, one’s selfhood can be unduly

compromised in ways that have certainly not been very productive for many women already living on the margin.

Diana Bartholomew's stirring, frequently painful autobiographical essay in the collection stands as a powerful corrective to most conventional responses to abuse as well. Her account "Snapshots of an Early Life," is replete with past traumas that have been enacted against her, including being sexually molested by her father, raped by a boyfriend, and abused physically, sexually, and emotionally by her husband of twenty-four years. It details in no uncertain terms the effects cumulative, continuous abuse can have on a person's sense of self, and how one might, in turn, situate herself relationally to others. Raised to believe that "pain is a part of love," and that she was largely responsible for whatever harm came to her, Bartholomew's writing demonstrates that she later became equally attune to how familial and institutional responses to the violence she endured failed her (314).

When describing one particular incident with law enforcement after her mother reported that her father tried to run her and her sister down with his vehicle, she calls attention to both the lack of protection that was available to them and the shortsightedness of policies that greet far too many offenders and their victims. Hearing the officer explain how restraining orders operate, she writes, "I listen hard for some sign of comfort or reassurance in his voice, but I hear none. All my life, I've been promised that if someone's in danger, the police will help. . . . And what 'something else' do we have to wait for Dad to do: kill one of us? How are the police going to help us then? Dial the coroner's number for us?" (302).

Bartholomew's understanding of the events that transpired in her life was clearly influenced by cultural and familial responses that undermined the gravity of what she experienced and that circumscribed her opportunities for personal growth and healing. Only through writing and

counseling was she able to come to terms with several of the difficulties that she faced, what she calls “facing my past in print,” but that important move toward self-awareness and emotional recovery was clearly hampered early on by others’ near indifference to the trauma that surrounded her. When one feels wholly responsible for abuse because she “chooses” to stay, or is left with very few options as a young girl to end the violence that she might be experiencing, the challenges that are posed to women asserting a stable or whole subjectivity as Walker conceives of the term can be enormous.

That these beliefs of self-induced trauma can be reinforced through discourse, signals how important it is to consider the influence of language in shaping our reality and impacting our notions of selfhood, as well as how women have worked to examine its relevance in their life writing. Discourses “carry the content of subjectivity” as Moya asserts, which makes the rhetoric surrounding abuse a key factor both in how some women might see themselves and in how they position the violence they have endured (98). For Bartholomew, the personal transformation she has undergone has been restorative, and it has now been shared. As she states, “I’m going public with my story . . . in hopes of raising awareness about violence within the home and helping to bring change to an American justice system still in its primitive stage of understanding the issues surrounding abuse” (333). Her story lends credence to Apgar’s claim that a woman can “use her writing to empower both herself and others,” as she works toward “(re)formulating the metanarratives” that can gradually “transform the culture” (51,57). I certainly agree with the transformative possibilities that this kind of writing possesses, particularly if it finds a receptive and conscientious audience. Lane is also quick to point out, however, that her story should not be understood as a triumph. “My husband lost his life and I lost my freedom,” she writes, “in situations of domestic violence there simply are no winners” (333).

In short, we need to continue to ask what public and private uses the terms and questions that swirl around violence against women are put, as well as how they too work to construct women's subjectivity in specific ways in instances of abuse.<sup>11</sup> For Leeann Marie Nabors, who underwent years of battering from a partner and is currently serving a sentence of fifteen-years to life in a California prison, claiming a sense of subjective agency that was denied to her has meant in part seeing herself as a survivor rather than as a victim of the abuse she suffered under for so long. While I use the term victimized on various occasions in this chapter, it is to underscore the prevalence of violence against women and the fact that thousands of women are indeed harmed by and through it on a daily basis, not to discount the significance of repositioning of one's identity as Nabors details here:

**Strength to carry on after**  
**Unspoken life of terror**  
**Refusing to be**  
**Victimized**  
**I live today with a greater sense of self-worth and**  
**Valourously I now am able to tell my story.**  
**On this path of healing I travel...I have**  
**Retrieved my stolen identity (1-8).**

Nabor's poem also points to the grammar of victimization that Leigh Gilmore exposes in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. She argues that in a sentence such as "she was raped by her father," we are compelled to ask what the subjectivity of the grammatical subject is, given that one no longer uses the active voice, but instead shifts into the status of one who was acted upon by others or by external events (67). This grammatical situation as she envisions it, and that Nabors clearly attempts to revise, reveals what she terms a "significant dimension of trauma and its relation to self-representation" (67). Nikki Lee Diamond, incarcerated for twenty-eight years after being forced by gunpoint to participate in a crime orchestrated by her boyfriend, also takes the rhetorical dimensions of violence to task in her

poem “Is it Battery or not?”<sup>12</sup> It is, in fact, the refrain repeated again and again as she details the sexual molestation, physical violence, and psychological abuse that she encountered through virtually every stage of her childhood and adolescence. As she vividly describes the scene of her crime and the “young man I knew I had learned to fear intensely,” she returns back again to questioning whether or not any of it constitutes “battery or not,” and readers are left with the abiding sense that very little of it unfortunately did in society or a court of law (67-68).

These debates over language have certainly not gone unnoticed by incarcerated women, several of whom have been subjected to others’ interpretations of whether or not what they experienced counted as abuse or battery or could be classified under the umbrella term of battered women’s syndrome.<sup>13</sup> Many are likely familiar with the discussions that have centered around if “battered woman” is a productive or damaging term, equally capable of drawing attention to the gendered character of violence as it is of overshadowing other parts of a woman’s identity. Flozelle Woodmore, who has been incarcerated since 1986 and endured years of abuse from a boyfriend prior to her imprisonment puts it this way in her poem “The Lost and not Found”: “I am now afraid, confused, and shattered / Still to this day society asks, “What’s / battered?” (18-20). Hilda Riggs’s poem “Untitled” offers its own reading of the term and its uses. Writing first of the strength and perseverance that a battered woman has juxtaposed against the moments in which she releases some of the emotional strain and anger that she has been carrying, Riggs concludes with the telling lines, “A battered woman wasn’t born / A battered woman was formed” (17-18). The poem is a succinct interpretation of the cultural, social, and interpersonal dynamics of battering and the role they play in constructing the subjectivities of abused women. It also indicates, like so many texts under study throughout this project, that a stable “I” is often desired by many women who are or who have been incarcerated and subject to

any number of violent events, no matter how destabilized that autobiographical positioning has been in recent decades.<sup>14</sup>

### **Writing the Boundlessness of Violence**

Despite how we define linguistically what is happening to millions of girls and adult women, it remains clear that each term that we use only partially speaks to the full scope of violence, the range of its effects, and the social and economic costs that it carries. As Ann Jones declares, “we are stuck with a vocabulary too flimsy for the subject, a vocabulary powerful only in this one respect: its insidious subversion of our understanding” (86). Indeed, if there were any doubts about not just the pervasiveness of violence against women by intimate partners but its very severity, one need only read the opening chapters of Jones’s text *Next Time She’ll be Dead*. There, readers find case after case, account after account of women who were brutalized and the insufficient, even negligent responses, with which their assaults were met. While tragic cases like Tracy Thurman’s or Pamela Guenther’s might register on a wider public scale, most are likely far less familiar with women like Andrea Sims or Charisse Shumate who endured years of abuse prior to their imprisonment. Jones asserts that we label this violence “domestic, as if it were somehow tamer than the real thing, but newspapers and newscasts list casualties” (1). My home state of Florida reported a 65% increase in the number of individuals seeking emergency shelter in 2003-2004, and 184 murders were part of the over 100,000 reported domestic violence incidents (NCADV 1). I can think of very few of these homicides that received statewide, not to mention national, coverage.

Elizabeth Ward’s dream of safety, security, and self-determinism captured in the following two stanzas from her longer work *Father-Daughter Rape* is one shared by many who seek to envision a world in which abuse no longer has the power to constrict and contour the daily lives of countless women. It names as well the connection between women’s physical bodies and the

physical spaces that they are able to move most readily and safely within, and prompts us to consider how the freedom to move in and of itself can inform our sense of subjectivity as well:

I dream  
a world where the very bodies  
that we live in  
do not incite violence against us  
I dream  
a world where we can walk the streets  
or country roads, on the darkest nights,  
lit only by the stars  
and our own freedom to move. (15-25)

Almost nowhere is this freedom more constrained, or the distance from this dream more pronounced, than in a women's correctional institution, where movement is inhibited and the body retains its place as an object of particular scrutiny as I examined in the previous chapter. One of prison's most pernicious features for victims and survivors of abuse is the manner in which it can continue to fracture one's sense of autonomy and reinscribe one's objective status. Marilyn Buck speaks directly to this in an interview with Joy James that can be found in the collection *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*. When asked how she has been affected by the last fifteen years of her imprisonment Buck responds with the following:

Imagine yourself in a relationship with an abuser who controls your every move, keeps you locked in the house. There's the ever-present threat of violence or further repression, if you don't toe the line. I think that's a fairly good analogy of what happens. And imagine being there for fifteen years. . . . To be punished, to be absolutely controlled, whether it's about buttoning your shirt; how you have a scarf on your head; how long or how baggy your pants are—all of those things are under scrutiny (262).

Buck's characterization of the penal environment recalls passages by writers like Barbara Saunders and Norma Stafford presented in chapter two, and speaks well to how social injustice can be "encoded in the body" as I have attempted to highlight (Flores-Ortiz 348). Her comments also reinforce the correlation many incarcerated women make between their experiences in

abusive relationship and the austere climate of the prison, a connection that is examined at length by Marcia Bunney. As her autobiographical account “One Life in Prison: Perception, Reflection, and Empowerment” suggests, coercive conditions within penal environments can continually “reinvoke memories of violence and oppression, often with devastating results” (30). Bunney is incarcerated at the Central California Women’s Facility, the largest correctional institution for women in the United States, where she has been serving a 25 years-to-life sentence since 1982 for killing her abuser. She did not have a criminal record, a history of breaking the law, or a history of violent behavior prior to her arrest and trial, and writes that it took six years for her to fully recognize and validate the extent of the abuse that she suffered.<sup>15</sup>

For Bunney, beginning a “conscious course of specific healing” from this abuse was a task rendered more difficult by what she terms the “inherently hostile, demeaning, and abusive nature of prison life” (19). It is an environment that has also spawned her own budding activism and commitment to advocating for others. In addition to facilitating domestic violence workshops for battered women and writing, she serves on advisory boards of the National Network for Women in Prison and Catholic Charities’ HIV/AIDS in Prison Project. She is also a staunch proponent for healthcare reform within women’s correctional facilities and for recognizing the connection between abuse and women’s criminal conduct. Unsurprisingly, these activities have not gone without notice by employees at the prison; she has been faced with losing her position in the law library and has been threatened with being transferred to another facility. She remains compelled to write in the face of this institutional pressure.

Interpersonal violence in the context that Bunney establishes simply does not end inside of prison walls, but instead shifts and changes forms, derived in part from the processes that are frequently imposed onto their bodies in penal environments as detailed in the previous chapter.

At its farthest extreme, this reenactment of violence occurs when women are sexually and physically revictimized once incarcerated—a devastating reality for innumerable imprisoned women given how challenging these cases can be to bring to light and prosecute. It is a violation, or sometimes even a series of such, that can clearly compromise many of their best efforts to claim ownership over their bodies and lives, what we all might position as a central component of subjective agency as it is usually conceived by any number of feminist theorists (Bordo, Bartky, Collins, hooks, and more). Bunney writes that the “fostering of dependency and maintenance of a climate in which abuse can continue to occur virtually unabated is not merely cruelly ironic; it reinforces the very role we are striving to escape” (1998, 70). I think many of us can only begin to imagine how incredibly difficult it would be to achieve a new level of self-awareness and self-assertion when one is victimized yet again in an environment where one’s vulnerability to further abuse has been amplified. These assaults also signal for many a transfer of violence from an intimate to the state, and support Herman’s assertion that traumatic events violate one’s autonomy “at the level of basic bodily integrity” (53).

The most coercive features of correctional facilities are especially pronounced in scenarios where officers use punitive measures to regulate the daily lives of incarcerated women. At its extreme, the access that some male officers have to monitor their activities has the potential to go from watching women dress and shower and searching them—oppressive surveillance processes in and of themselves that are continually critiqued in women’s prison writing— to exposing women to possible further (re)victimization.<sup>16</sup> Labelle and Kubiak, for instance, point to the Nunn lawsuit in 1996 in which nearly 500 women in Michigan prisons joined together in a class action suit to report sexual misconduct by male staff. A 2000 settlement involved a substantial payment in compensation for psychological damages and several extensive changes in the

operation of the state's prisons were called for, and yet they report that fewer than 100 of the nearly 10,000 officers had their assignments altered (420).

This abuse on a legal and moral level compromises the personal rights of incarcerated women, and in so doing can clearly fracture their struggles to achieve wholeness and assert their full subjectivity as individuals who are able to claim bodily autonomy. It is not surprising in the context of this personal and institutional abuse that Christy Camp, incarcerated since 1989 for a 16 years-to-life term for the death of her abusive husband, titles her autobiographical essay "Sleep with One Eye Open." The threat of physical harm underlies not just "everything else," as she puts it, but also resonates throughout her essay as a whole as a marker of the challenging conditions in which more than 150,000 incarcerated women currently find themselves. Her poem "My Fair Ladies: The Bridges we Must Cross" directly confronts the debilitating nature of prison life and the abuses to which women can be exposed in its first stanza as well: "It's about strip searches and a life of violations and indignities that only a woman who's been there could ever comprehend" (1-2). We find in her work, and in that of many others under review here, evidence of Ann Stanford's claim that these women are in conditions that would "break most of us on the outside in a fraction of time that they have endured them" (299).

Arturo Aldama's edited collection *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender, and the State*, is oriented around how discursive and physical violence on the body "affects, injures, and traumatizes the interior psychic formation of subjects," and explores, in turn, how the "materiality of violence attempts to script and determine interior psychic space" (6). This is a useful way to approach incarcerated women's writing in the context of the physical, psychological, social, and institutional forms of violence presented in their texts as well, particularly since the merges between coercive conditions inside and outside of the prison are

brought into such sharp focus. When we scrutinize how certain forms of violence can reinforce already existing structures of oppression, we are encouraged as he does, to consider the “exclusionary matrix” conceptualized by Butler—in which the formation of subjects is positioned as being dependent upon the “simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet subjects, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (qtd. in 5). The following account from Hanrahan’s *Conscience and Consequence* describes well how these attempts at constituting abject beings are carried out in correctional institutions, and the effects on one’s subjectivity that they can have:

Fighting for one’s rightful dignity is hard work here. We are intimidated and subjected to verbal abuse and the intrusion of male officers on duty in our sleeping quarters. I see now, more clearly than ever, how abuse continues because it can, because women allow it—out of fear of reprisal and further abuse. I have allowed too much to be done that is a violation of dignity in my life. Dignity is not granted—it must be demanded. And once again I cooperate (190).

It is important to note here that this passage is put forward in reference to Hanrahan being asked once again to strip so that the officers can perform a “visual” body search. And yet, clearly no matter invasive she finds their recording and surveillance of her physical body to be, the demands waged against her physic interiority, her sense of herself as a rightful holder of dignity and as a self-governing individual are just as great. She draws attention as well to the continuum of violence that asserts itself when abuse is allowed to go on uninterrupted, and to the susceptibility to state violence that imprisoned women in particular face.

Perhaps the most widely cited source on the subject of custodial abuse, the Human Rights Watch publication *All too Familiar: Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. State Prisons*, reveals that the Department of Justice maintained no system for recording complaints of sexual misconduct, nor did it monitor the number or type of complaints in a systematic fashion at the time of its publication (9). As the study rights points to, incarcerated women are already “largely

unaccustomed to having recourse against abuse,” which makes it all the more necessary for the state to make the available means of recourse known and accessible (64). Hanrahan, reflects on this as well, suggesting that they will “believe the sky is green or purple before they believe what an inmate says” (156). Their research into the scope and nature of abuse in eleven state prisons demonstrates that some prisoners in particular—the young, the mentally ill, lesbian and transgendered individuals, and first timers—are more vulnerable than others to this breed of violence.<sup>17</sup> As Davis suggests, sexual abuse by officers is often dangerously “translated into the hypersexuality of women prisoners” (2003, 68). Once again, we find confirmation that we cannot divorce the marginalized status that many imprisoned women have from the specificities of identity that make some women especially vulnerable to coercion.

Like Camp, Marcia Bunney clearly reveals that there is “much to be said on the subject of confining victimized women in the brutal environment of the prison” in her autobiographical essay (1999, 19). She writes of the debilitation she experienced at the beginning of her incarceration, and of how she was received into the institution, offered a menial job, and then left to find her “own way to cope” (19). Although there have sadly been women who have credited their imprisonment for saving their lives from abusive partners, Bunney is quick to refute such a notion, suggesting on the contrary that the abuse had “not stopped.” She asserts that “It has shifted shape and paced itself differently, but it is as insidious and pervasive in prison as ever it was in the world I knew outside these fences. What has ceased is my ignorance of the facts concerning abuse—and my willingness to tolerate it in silence” (30). That any woman would credit imprisonment with keeping her safe from abuse, understanding as it might be, is nonetheless an alarming indictment of the lack of safeguards we have to better enable women to move out of violence. Bunney’s text stands, on the whole, as a testament to her desire to no

longer remain silent on the forms and effects of this abuse, and as an implicit critique of the ways the trauma of violence can be reenacted in our most punitive social and political structures.

Bunney is also very direct in addressing her process of self-evolution over the course of her incarceration thus far, what we might think of as an assertion of and a progression toward subjective agency. She writes that her experience of prison is “best defined as a journey through a maze; the evolution of a battered woman from victim to healed individual to peer counselor/activist/journalist” (1999, 17). No matter how damaging in other words the abuse that she suffered under was or how difficult it has been for her to work through her own crime, hers is not a static condition. The brokenness that she describes in various parts of her essay is palatable, but so is her refusal to not be fully resigned to the institutional forces that threaten to determine her identity or her capacity to move forward in the direction of self-awareness and mutual accountability. She is, as Daly might position her, an author now who is now a “collaborative subject” in her own right (22). For Bunney, having a community of women around to support and encourage her has been central to the process of self-transformation that she recounts throughout “One Life,” as has her own work advocating for others. She writes of this early on in the essay:

Mine is a story of the critical role of women as a cohesive support entity in adverse circumstances; of finding the courage to take small, determined steps into self-esteem and empowerment; of learning to trust, to allow oneself to be guided and mentored—and of coming full circle to do the same for other women in turn. Above all, it is a story of invaluable lessons in the art of doing time as a constructive and affirmative course of survival (17).

Bunney speaks well here to the importance of forging a transgressive space that situates itself (at least to the extent that it can) away from the otherwise coercive climate of the prison, and figures it, along with the community that she was able to create, as integral to her progression toward self-actualization. Her essay also calls to mind Crawford’s claim that liberation is an “existential

transition,” one that “marks the movement into personhood from varying degrees of subhumanity” (34). Like Henke, Apgar, and to some extent Vickroy, he suggests that it is very often the act of writing that “provides conditions that make possible the successful shift into a more continuous subjectivity,” but goes further in asserting that the ability to “produce a narrative that accounts for oneself” is a necessary requirement of both self-consciousness and personhood (34, 35). We see a subject in process throughout Bunney’s writing, one that is actively engaged in the struggle for a kind of selfhood that retains a sense of autonomy, psychological wholeness, and stability even as it is positioned as being heavily invested in the relationships she shares with fellow incarcerated women. As I argued in chapter two, these varied components of subjectivity do not have to be thought of in mutually exclusive terms. Instead, they can intercede upon one another and ultimately work together to inform one’s sense of self in the social world and influence what feels possible for that individual. As Bunney puts it, “I doubt that experts fully appreciate the difficulty experienced by women prisoners in their attempts to develop a sense of self-worth” (16).

Abuse is often relational even at its most vexing, capable of bringing with it what Vickroy labels a “radical sense of disconnection and isolation as bonds are broken and relationships and personal safety are put into question” (23). This rupture can occur on numerous fronts: in intimate partner relationships when abuse has shattered a sense of what was “known” about the relationship or the abuser, when violence devastates the image of family or a parent an adolescent has had confidence in, or when the survivor of a violent assault like rape feels disconnected from her own personal sense of space or self through her bodily memories of violation.<sup>18</sup> Bunney seems to have been able to work against this sense of disconnection over the long course of her incarceration in large part because she has found herself so deeply entwined in

a supportive community of women. She has attempted, in other words, to reconfigure some of the most disabling aspects of the harmful relationships she has been in by creating new relationships that are far more sustaining and that contribute toward the kind of wholeness that Alice Walker, I believe, hopes far more women might one day possess.

She writes of this in greater detail in her essay “Finding Self-Respect for Battered Women.” Discussing the value of the prison’s battered women’s group that she has taken part in, Bunney details how its purpose is to “assist these women in their efforts to overcome the effects of combined negative messages, to cope affirmatively as survivors rather than victims, and to foster growth that will enable them to avoid violence in future relationships” (67). It is important to point out that only two of California’s five state prison facilities for women had such support groups in place at the time of Bunney’s writing, a deficiency in programming that can regrettably be found in institutions across the nation. It is clear that these communal groups can act as a powerful corrective to the otherwise austere climate of the prison. Asserting again in this essay how the “physical abuse, emotional manipulation, and terror we suffered at the hands of our abusers is far from over,” Bunney remains resolute in her determination to see more of these programs in place and to continue to challenge the dismissal that far too frequently greets incarcerated women’s histories of abuse (69).

### **Why Gender, Race, and Class have Always Mattered**

As has now fortunately been increasingly documented in feminist studies of crime and criminology, repeated exposure to violence has been a primary reason behind many women eventually coming into contact with the criminal justice system, but that fact is only starting to be better understood on a national level. Angela Moe’s qualitative study of women at an emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence, for instance, reveals that women there typically committed crimes for three primary reasons, all of which were centered most directly

around the abuse that they had been exposed to: as a way of coping with abuse by a partner, to appease a batterer or keep a relationship in tact, and to survive economically upon leaving an abusive relationship (124). To take just the latter, striving to find new ways to survive financially after a rupture from an abusive partner can be a formidable challenge for most women, but these challenges are often intensified exponentially for those who lack marketable skills, have clear deficiencies in their educations, are not native English speakers, or who are struggling with mental or physical health issues or addictions.

Women may find themselves with few options to sustain themselves and usually their children in an economic climate where there continues to be pay discrepancies between men and women, where there is a heavy reliance on low wage service positions that many might see themselves as being most qualified for, and where gender and racial subordination in the workplace continues to stubbornly persist. And yet, far too often, the gendered and raced composition of the range of choices open to them, like the gendered nature of the abuse that they suffered under, remains separated from the larger discourse of violence in the public sphere. The dynamics of race, class, and concentrated disadvantages are too often discounted as well, resulting in an underdeveloped and unsynthesized social understanding of the potential intersections between prior marginalization and abuse. In simple terms, gender, race, and class all matter when it comes to incarcerated women's experiences with violence, and starting from that theoretical paradigm has already begun to enrich and clarify our approaches to understanding their subject positioning and the pathways that have led some to incarceration.

One of the most illuminating arguments I have read against the desire on the part of the wider public to limit the focus on gender in particular in considerations of intimate violence can be found in Nancy Hirschmann's *The Subject of Liberty: Toward Feminist Theory of Freedom*.

In it, she presents her reading of dominant theorizations of freedom in political philosophy against the contextualized reality of women's lived experiences, with focused examination on issues surrounding violence, veiling, and welfare in particular. She argues that while the effort to attain gender neutrality may be an important part of contemporary feminism, the "apparent" gender neutrality of arguments about violence that work to erase gender from consideration altogether can instead "discredit and legitimize feminist efforts to recognize that relations of gender are structured by and through power" (107). She goes on to suggest that not everyone who identifies as masculine wields this power just as some individuals who identify as feminine might access it, but that this "does not change its fundamentally gendered character" (107).

Hirschmann's focus on woman battering in one of her chapters is aimed at better enabling readers to examine how specific dynamics of power "operate through intimate relationships within the context of patriarchy" (108). As she suggests, it is a context that constructs women's and men's choices, freedom, and subjectivity in ways that perpetuate inequalities in power; as a result, these inequalities "feed into and set the terms of such constructions" (108). Her larger project in this particular section—to analyze the social construction of subjectivity and choice within the context of domestic violence—yields important insights into the pitfalls involved in eliminating gender from discussions of violence, as well as how women are (or are not) constituted as choosing subjects in and through various intimate relationships.

I have found this formulation helpful in my own teaching on violence against women when approached with why women's experiences of victimization receive the attention that they do. While it is never my intention to deny the reality that some women can be abusive toward men or that battering occurs in same sex relationships as well, when we think of how violence itself might be gendered, classed, and/or raced in a particular context, we are not just talking

about the specifics of any individual act or even the prevalence alone with which violence occurs.<sup>19</sup> We must also think about how this violence is “read” by individuals and even victims themselves, how it represented in the public realm of the media, how it is responded to in the justice system and other institutions, and who resides in positions of power to legislate change.<sup>20</sup> When we begin to think through these and other questions more steadily as a culture and social body, we will hopefully arrive at a place more prepared to grapple with the interventions and reformulations that feminists have long argued for and are still in the process of creating.

To take this discussion of how power can operate within a specific context one step further, women’s stories in and of themselves, as Romero and Stewart contend, cannot be comprehended in their fullness unless we consider the specific power structures (economic, political, and social institutions and dominant ideologies as they cite) in which they are developed and told (xiv). Certainly, this has some bearing on how we approach incarcerated women’s writing. The forms of mediation and subject positioning can be wide-ranging, as addressed in chapter two to this project via my analysis of Kaplan and Scott in particular. For my purposes here, however, I think it is useful to think about the fact that these testimonies are born out of specific instances of violence in which power was held by abusers and was met (or unmet) with a response from social structures that were (and are) certainly gendered, raced, and classed in their orientation. To take the gendered character out of any discussion of violence against women, and to ignore the power dynamics that operate through intimate violence and abuse more generally, is to also ignore the move that women who choose to write about it make as a measure of resisting this tendency. For some, the process of naming, and then revising, how their experiences have been envisioned can also signal a reclamation of subjectivity and personal agency.

We this see this exposed most vividly perhaps in Barbara Saunder’s brilliant poem “A Life Worth Living.” Saunders herself endured a series of traumatic relationships, but was able to later rebuild her life and go on to receive master’s degrees in art education and counseling psychology. Commenting on Hillary’s Clinton’s assertion that it “takes a village to raise a child,” she writes in her autobiographical essay “Counting Down the Days,” of how that child sometimes “survives in the body of a fifty-eight-year-old woman” (521). Reflecting on her own assertion that prison “saved my life,” she states that she meant it both “literally and figuratively.” “I’m a survivor,” she writes. “I know personally about alcoholism, domestic violence, women in prison, and incest. If I hadn’t gone to prison, an abusive, alcoholic husband most certainly would have killed me. . . . Now I have a good life, clean and sober, and free of abusive men. . . . Now I’m happy. Now I’m free” (521).

Despite the obvious positive changes that she was able to make in her life, that past abuse resurfaces powerfully in “A Life Worth Living.” Although it is focused in large part on the inordinately high rate of HIV and AIDS among female prisoners, it is the vectors of oppression and stigmatization that many of these women have faced that resounds most centrally. Excerpts from the following stanzas reinforce this sense of social alienation throughout the poem:

We have walked our own roads, kept our own ledgers.  
Risk is no stranger here.  
We must do what we must for our lives.  
We must make a life worth living.  
.....

We are women.  
Women stigmatized who when released from prison  
or singled out by our difference  
deny the existence of the disease  
in our community.  
Trying to make a life worth living.  
.....

We are women of color, already in crisis  
trying to beat the odds.  
Looking to make a life worth living.

.....

We are women used to domestic violence,  
social vulnerability and power differentials within relationships.  
Familiar with control freaks insulating and abusing us.  
For many it is the norm.  
Trying to have a life worth living (1-4, 7-12, 19-21, 31-35).

The poem also underscores the notion that testimony has the potential to document movement from what is considered an individual experience to a “collective archive,” a movement in other words from personal suffering to public memory (Miller 13). Whether or not this now public record will be embraced, discounted, or ignored depends on a number of interrelated factors since, as Apgar suggests, survivor speech possesses “great transgressive potential to disrupt the maintenance and reproduction of dominant discourses and curtail their sphere of influence,” but dominant discourses can also “subsume” this speech and thus “diminish its disruptive potential” (206). There is little doubt, nonetheless, that Saunders is intentional in her efforts to transcribe what many individual incarcerated women have endured onto a collective text. She is direct in naming how imprisoned women are considered by the wider public, the obstacles that many have had to strain against in their personal lives, and like Killian, the esteem with which they are sometimes regarded. The important thing here is that these stigmas and battles are called out, and the gendered, raced, and classed dimensions that compose them are revealed throughout the poem. In the context of abuse, Saunders appears resolute in her desire to redress how violence against women, and some women in particular, is sanctioned or otherwise condoned, as well as how power operates in and through our collective response to it.

## **Dynamics of Power and Change**

For Beth Richie, the various power dynamics that work to construct and constrict incarcerated women's lives contribute to what she terms "gender entrapment" in her study of poor African American women who have been physically battered, sexually assaulted, emotionally abused, and involved in illegal activity. Her use of the term refers to the extreme situations many of these women find themselves in when no good, safe way to avoid the "problematic social circumstances" that they are in surfaces, when they are unable to radically change their social position, and when they end up ultimately being "blamed for both" (1996, 3). The theoretical foundation that she establishes points to the social processes and practices that penalize women who are especially vulnerable to men's violence in their intimate relationships, and who have been negatively impacted by restrictive gender roles in ways that leave many women susceptible to "private and public subordination" (4).

By drawing attention to how threatening circumstances, unmet needs, and exceptionally difficult choices shape many women's daily lives, her work helps to explain why some women have engaged in illegal activities in response to the violence that they have endured. She argues that many have actually been "imprisoned at different points in their lives in other, more symbolic ways," whether through feeling constrained by social conditions within their communities, restrained by family circumstances, or severely limited by abuse in their relationships (5). As one twenty-seven-year old African American woman in her study put it regarding her current incarceration, "I am as safe from him here as I have ever been" (130). It is a safety, however, as Bunney reminds us, that is too tenuous in nature for a great many women struggling against the depleting conditions of prison life. I would suggest as well that characterizing the prison as a safe space suggests more about the terror of various relationships

on the “outside” and the scarcity of resources that far too many individuals have at their disposal than it does about the physical or emotional “provisions” that correctional institutions provide.

There is again a certain permeability and boundlessness to the violence that this woman describes and that Marcia Bunney and others here have examined as well—one that Carolyn Baxter takes to task in much of her creative work. Baxter, a writer, poet, musician, and National Endowment of the Arts grant recipient, spent two years in various correctional institutions before her eventual release. A former participant in the Free Space Writing Project at the New York City Correctional institution for Women, she continues to write and create music today, and makes frequent posts to her online blog “The World is a Ghetto.” There, she expresses her views on such topics as rap, crime, and prison issues from a self-described “afrocentric female writer’s point of view.” Her book *Platinum Dreams, Lead Reality*, was published by Harlem Books in the summer of 2006. Aimed at helping to deter street violence and crime, it contains prose, poetry, and vignettes centered on black and Hispanic male street life, and is informed by her own personal experiences and those of others she has been close to. As she shares in her post on the online forum Authorsden, “My basic motivation for writing was pain, humility, humbleness and the desire to share. Bad childhood, being on my own at 12 [and] seeing so many things as I matured, a public school miseducation, and serving a Prison sentence” (1). She is likely best known for her 1979 chapbook of poetry *Prison Solitary and Other Free Government Services*, which she started writing when she was just 18.

Her poem “Lower Court” from that collection is a striking example of how the permeability of violence can be structured and transmitted in a text, as well as how social and interpersonal forms of oppression can tragically merge for already marginalized women. Written about the cyclical life of a prostitute who is able to “cop out” of an offense only to be released back to the

hazards of the street, the poem begins with tangible violent items that literally spill forth from an unnamed woman: “She opens her mouth, a switchblade falls out, along / with a .22 automatic, a few shells, crumpled one / dollar bills, some change in attitude (she’s uncomfortable)” (1-3). The woman is immediately met with violence from her pimp who strikes her for reasons we are not expressly told—“see jugular vein separate from neck muscle”—and in that moment, Baxter’s circular depiction of violence is well established (5).

The woman is next ordered to cop out of her offense by the legal aid lawyer; no further advice or direction is presented, and it can be assumed that she sees few other legal options open to her—a reality that greets far too many women without the economic and social resources that privilege and power can offer. The poem then concludes with almost prophetic lines indicating the constrained life choices, and many would likely argue life chances, that seem to greet her when judicial and social forms of oppression become so closely intertwined:

Another nite.  
Trapped between gavel/wood.      Making it possible for  
her to hit the streets.  
Sound of her heels cut grey morning air,  
/ recite her life back, (in the) same order (19-23).

This “trapping” between the courts, the violence of her pimp, and life on the streets where there is little protection from further harm has been well documented in studies by such writers as Lisa Maher, Richard Curtis, Meda Chesney-Lind and Neil Websdale who point to the “constellation of disadvantaged situations” these women live out that repeatedly expose them to male violence.<sup>21</sup> Their work on the victimization of prostitutes, still considered an impossibility in the minds of a great many, reveals both the intensity and the frequency with which women are met with violence in this often very dangerous informal economy. It should not go unmentioned that a substantial proportion of women enter prostitution after first fleeing their own abusive

homes as teens, and that this can present itself as yet another battle waged against their full subjectivity as adults attempting to envision renewed possibilities for themselves and often their families. Documenting precise numbers on a national level can be especially challenging in this environment, but it is clear that the struggle to survive on the street is an extension of trying to survive whole in their own familial environments as young adults or as partners in abusive adult relationships for an overwhelmingly majority of women. The number of young girls who are grappling to carve out a new way for themselves in these harsh circumstances is staggering.

Twin processes of victimization and criminalization combine to propel many adolescent girls into correctional institutions as Regina Arnold convincingly argues, and like Baxter's protagonist, the options available to them are often read as being far too limited and as merely reinscribing their objectified status. Structurally dislocated in Arnold's formulation from the three core areas of family, work, and education, these young girls are frequently institutionalized in group homes, labeled as status offenders, or ultimately placed in juvenile detention centers where they must struggle again to claim subjectivity agency and remain free from coercion. Their decision to resist the victimization they have experienced in their homes may result in turning to the hazards of the streets to try to make a new beginning for themselves, and possibly as a result, engaging in illegal, usually petty crimes as a mechanism to survive. Dorhn, for instance, cites a study in which an astonishing 80.7 percent of incarcerated girls reported having run away from home, with a study of Canadian runaways finding that girls were six times more likely than boys to name sexual abuse as their reason for fleeing their homes (307).

I have always been struck by the poignancy of Barbara G's quote in the epigraph, and have never forgotten it after first coming upon it nearly ten years ago. Inherent in her formulation of the range of alternatives that she felt was available to her (either to stay in a home where she was

being sexually abused or to go out into the world and try to manage it the best she could), is the reality there are usually simply too few good alternatives from which one can choose in a situation like hers. I understand the impulse to contest this, to reference instead the programs and services that are available, or to point out that she could have gone to the police for assistance, even if that meant eventually entering the foster care system or a girls' home. And yet, when I teach Arnold's article and ask students where the place is in our local community where girls like her can go for safety, safety that will be sustained and that will not decrease, they usually do not know. Their answers, with very few exceptions, are the same when I ask about their home communities: they are sure there must be a place like that somewhere; they just are not familiar with where it might actually be.

We expect much of these young girls, some of whom are only in grade school, when it comes to bettering their situations. They must face threats of further harm for even telling; risk being separated from their siblings, friends, and other significant people in their lives if they enter the foster care system; and struggle with the emotional and physical scars from abuse that have likely not adequately been responded to or worked through.<sup>22</sup> When placed in this context, their decision to run away or to enter into activities most would deem undesirable may not be excusable in the eyes of a great many, but it does serve to position their offenses within a broader framework more attuned to the challenges for survival that they have faced. As 15-year old Harriette puts it in Arnold's study, "I was in the street and I couldn't work. I had no skills. I was a kid with a record, so I started stealing, and I would steal for my food. . . . A lady introduced me to another way of making money. All I had to do was what had been done [reference to being sexually abused], have sex. At 16, I was arrested for prostitution" (142). The continuum between familial and street violence is pronounced in her brief, but indicting commentary on

how the struggle to simply survive can be precariously linked to the struggle to emerge whole as a young girl whose bodily autonomy and integrity seems to have never been able to be assumed.

It is important not to diminish the effects these violent encounters can have on one's interiority for someone so young, potentially contributing to what Vickroy terms a "psychology of oppression" that can emerge from "dehumanizing and conflicted situations, wherein a process of internalizing oppressions brings about social and psychic manifestations of trauma" (36). In addition to issues surrounding emotional restriction, fragmented identity, and dissociation that she identifies, there are additional demands placed upon one's self-knowledge that can clearly compromise one's basic understanding of self (36). Though I certainly would not argue that all victims of violence experience these same psychological dimensions of trauma, the point is that they can occur, and that they need to be addressed if we are to better understand how violence can fracture one's subjectivity or otherwise be self-altering.

Tracy Evans exposes the potential harm embedded in situations like Harriet's above in her poem fittingly titled "Prisons," a work that offers a poignant reminder of how confinement can take many forms and circumscribe the aspirations of even our youngest social members. Crafted as part of her participation in the writing workshop headed up by Hetti Jones at Bedford Hills, its last stanza is an affecting interpretation of the vulnerabilities familial violence can impose onto girls, and the limitations it can unduly place on adolescents who have few models for affirmative change accessible to them:

Little Mary is hiding in the cellar  
Doesn't want her daddy to find her  
Still hurting from last night's beating  
Can't figure yet why it happened  
Plans to run away as soon as she's grown  
Like Big sister who works for Big Eddie.

We stand alone in the prison of our space (19-25).

In a similar fashion to Baxter's "Lower Court," Evan's poem does not gloss over the bleakness of her protagonist's plans or the social and personal fallout embedded in their orientation. Instead, like Jan Warren's poem "Father," whose subject feels "saliva / bitter in [her] mouth / Blood / rushing against [her] skin, pounding off the bones / in [her] head" when her father approaches and questions where she has been, the control of her space by a violent other informs her very sense of what is possible for her in that space and beyond (1-6). Perhaps most important in the context of studies of women's subjectivity, the poems also beg the penetrating question Chasnoff asks in her review of the multimedia installation *Voices in Time*, an artistic recreation of a prison cell infused with women's stories of incarceration. That is, "how do homes of pain mark us?" (382). One answer in response to the work examined here is this: through measures that ask us to be intentional in our efforts to understand, respond to, and contextualize abuse if we are to ever curb its rising tide and the considerable threats it poses to women's autonomy and understandings of self. As we seek to channel our energies into explorations and investigations into violence against women that will create a downturn in the number of all women and girls abused each year, it is critical that we not lose sight of how our society's most marginalized citizens are impacted by the compounded vectors of oppression that they confront and how they have responded to them.

The abuse that the majority of incarcerated women have been subjected to is intense and sometimes debilitating, but that does not render those experiences incapable of being repositioned and better understood as many of the works under study here help to make clear. The process of writing about this abuse and trying to find the language to name it has been a central component for many women attempting to reenvision their status as individuals whose personhood and bodily integrity, like that of all people, should be assumed rather than violently

contested. In terms of the presentation of these writing selves, Linda Anderson argues that there remains a “political imperative” for women to “constitute themselves as subjects if they are to escape being never-endingly determined as objects” (90). She stresses that this does not have to indicate the return to the same masculine subjectivity “which saw itself as unitary and complete,” but instead imagines multiple subjectivities that are “without foundation but located, instead in particular times as places” (90). Sometimes, however, that particular place necessitates a firmer, more stable sense of self because efforts to diminish and alter it are so considerable, as the austere contexts of violence and imprisonment reveal. I do agree with her assertion that there are ways to imagine selfhood with the agency and coherence that it implies apart from how it was invoked in traditional studies of men’s autobiographies, as detailed in chapter two. We need not lose sight of the political, social, and personal need for agency and the sense of autonomy that many women in prison desire, lest we risk participating in yet another dominant discourse that can, at its furthest extreme, contribute to the considerable challenges to self-determinism that these women are already up against and must battle daily.

In her discussion of what the study of trauma teaches us about ourselves and the connections between public and private, the political, the social, and the psychological, Vicroy points to a larger project and service behind what it means to examine how trauma is positioned and how psychic wounds are expressed. She suggests that this examination reveals the “relation of the cultural to the psychological, the formation or disintegration of subjectivity, the nature of boundaries and excess, as well as making us face the unthinkable that happens in our midst” (221). We have witnessed how several incarcerated women have productively explored these tensions and their parameters in each of these areas at various points in their texts. The decision before us is to turn from this unthinkable now that it again has been named and made known, or

to find new ways to respond to the persistence of violence against women and that challenges it poses to women's full range of subjectivity, freedom, and liberation. May we be equally persistent in our struggle to achieve the latter.

As Ann Jones asserts, change doesn't have to come slowly, painfully or "only after the injury and death of thousands more. Things change when people stop being resigned to things as they are . . . when people in large numbers get a hold of a principle and begin to act as if they believed it" (237). Decades of feminist interventions into our body of laws, our use of gendered language, and constructions of identity that have the potential to mar and fracture have shown us that progress can come through sustained activism and the desire and willingness to challenge the oppressive social, political, and economic forces that inhibit the lives of all women, and women who are marginalized by their race, class, and sexuality in particular. The fact that more than one million women are currently under some form of correctional supervision and that a sizeable majority of them enter prison following years of abuse is a reality too critical in magnitude to be ignored or overlooked any longer. The time for renewed, visionary responses is now. Autobiographical texts by incarcerated women can help lead the way.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Additional statistical information about violence against women can be obtained through NCADV's main webpage: [www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *Sex Trafficking: The Global Market in Women and Children* by Kathryn Farr (2005), *Honour: Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence Against Women* edited by Welchman and Hossain (2005), and *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* by Yoshimi Yoshiaki (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Full references for these specific texts by Vicroy, Gilmore and Henke are provided in the bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> Walker's definition of womanism can be found at the beginning of *In Search for our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She elaborates further on her ideas surrounding wholeness and the threats violence poses to it in her epilogue to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* as well.

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Shniedewind point out that the fear of rape shapes women's behavior from girlhood by "restricting their movement and limiting their freedom" (445). Women might identify with or resist this assertion on varying levels, but the point is that the sheer pervasiveness of sexual assault and intimate violence are shaping factors for how many women literally move throughout the world.

<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that one out of every three women receives treatment in emergency rooms because of injuries sustained from domestic violence, that medical expenses for treating victims is between three and five billion annually, and that at least 50% of all homeless women and children in America are fleeing abusive situations (Berry).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Demie Kurz's reading of a North Carolina court decision in 1874 stating that it was best to "draw the curtain, shut out the public gaze, and leave the parties to forget and forgive" in cases where "no permanent injury has been inflicted, nor malice, cruelty nor dangerous violence [was] shown by the husband" (445). How the degree of violence was determined and by whom was not as clearly defined.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to recognize the class dynamics that can be at play in these situations as well. Charlotte Pierce-Baker's account of her own brutal sexual assault in *Surviving the Silence: Black Women's Stories of Rape*, reveals her belief that her middle-class status and her husband's high profile position at the university where he worked were partial reasons for the attention from the police and the positive treatment from the court system that she received. She writes that this knowledge "sickened" her, even as it also brought her comfort (44).

<sup>9</sup> As Susan Koppelman discusses, the word "stay" in the question why does a woman stay in an abusive relationship "inappropriately implies a static condition: in fact, the women in abusive marriages are never static: They are always in flux, always coping, hoping, and looking for an end to the abuse" (xxi).

<sup>10</sup> Foreshaw is currently serving a 45-year prison term at York Prison from her 1986 conviction; Lamb reports that her long history of physical and emotional abuse was not brought up by her public defender during the course of her trial.

<sup>11</sup> Nabors Ferraro's reading of the category "domestic violence" as one that forces "complex, multifaceted experiences into a uniform category that severs the lived experience of abuse from institutional responses" also calls for a term more encompassing in its orientation, even as she acknowledges how its usually repetitive nature intersects with "all aspects of women's lives" (135).

<sup>12</sup> Nikki Lee Diamond was paroled on November 11, 2004 after serving twenty-eight years in prison. More information about her case can be found at [freebatteredwomen.org](http://freebatteredwomen.org).

<sup>13</sup> See Osthoff for an excellent discussion of the stipulations that interject themselves into discussions of whether or not one is truly a battered woman.

<sup>14</sup> Gilmore, for example, suggests that "while the subject of autobiography has come to designate a stable I anchored within a relatively stable genre, that definition has come at costs of dramatically narrowing the field of self-representation" (1999, 185). I want to reemphasize that the "I" to which I refer, does not center on the notion of a writer who sees himself as a superior individual reflecting back on exceptionality of his life or his conversion, but it does indicate that some sense of autonomy and psychological wholeness is desired by the vast majority of these writers, and that stability in the face of (usually a number of) violence encounters is needed.

<sup>15</sup> This is self-reported by Bunney in "One Life in Prison" (18).

<sup>16</sup> This is not, of course, to suggest that the majority of officers participate in the kinds of assaults that I am discussing here. Studies, law suits, and testimonies of imprisoned women themselves do, however, point repeatedly to the fact that sexual victimization is a reality for many women housed in correctional institutions. As Siegal reports, the stories are "too consistent to be ignored" (276). Her study of Washington D.C. prisons and jails reveals that many incarcerated women were "becoming pregnant in a system that allowed no conjugal visits" (276).

<sup>17</sup> See pages 1 and 2 of report.

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<sup>18</sup> Herman suggests that the damage done to relational life is “not a secondary effect of trauma as originally thought. Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self, but also on those systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (51).

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Girshick’s study *Woman-to-Woman Sexual Violence: Does She Call it Rape?*. I also want to note that more women in recent years have been charged with battery, but many cite that this upsurge is due not to dramatic changes in women’s violent behavior, but in how domestic violence cases are being classified. When women fight back in self-defense against their batterers, they are sometimes also cited for domestic assault in what most activists feel is a reductive move toward gender equity under the law.

<sup>20</sup> Understanding these aspects of intimate violence leads us to question, in other words, why the Violence Against Women Act was not established until 1994, or why it took an organized effort to ensure that it was renewed with the necessary provisions for immigrant women in tact.

<sup>21</sup> See Maher and Curtis’s “Women on the Edge of Crime: Crack Cocaine and the Changing Contexts of Street-Level Sex Work in New York City,” along with Websdale and Chesney-Lind’s “Doing Violence to Women: Research Synthesis on the Victimization of Women.”

<sup>22</sup> My intention here is not to deny the fact that there are many wonderful foster homes that do offer a sense of safety and stability to girls in a situation like Barbara’s. Those homes, as well as the superior community programs that are available to adolescents and teens in these circumstances are to be commended. But entering into even one of the best of these programs can still be a rupture in a young person’s life given that he or she will still likely be separated from other family members. It would also behoove us in addressing these complicated issues I think to not let those homes, centers, or programs stand in for the reality of all situations facing individuals in abusive situations. There are models out there, but thousands of girls are still left in very vulnerable situations.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD FROM HERE

The question of how to end a discussion on incarcerated women and the remarkable texts they have produced is almost as challenging as determining just where to begin. The importance of this body of literature and the social realities it speaks most readily to cannot be overstated given the complexities, and certainly urgencies, inherent in the issues surrounding the prison system and women's place in it here in America and across the globe. And yet, I hope that we are at a time now, situated as we are in the twenty-first century, where the critical and creative work under study throughout this dissertation truly does challenge us to begin again—to (re)envision, in other words, how our practices of incarceration might be revamped, implemented, and understood.

Our failure to do so brings it with costs that all social members bear, some of course, more directly than others. We see tangible signs of these costs in fiscal terms when state budgets for schools and service programs are cut at the same time that money allocated to correctional institutions in certain states increases exponentially.<sup>1</sup> The fact that California's prison system, now the third largest in the world, encompasses more of its financial resources than its entire educational system (like those of other states that have followed suit) is but one marker of how the rapid growth of corrections resists confinement by most financial, social, and even geographic measures.<sup>2</sup> It is also worthy to note here that California's prisons house twice the number of African Americans than do its four-year universities (James 1999, 24).

What I find curiously missing in much of the discourse in the public sphere surrounding incarceration is the recognition that we have been in the midst of a real change in our use of prisons as a response to crime and its perceived threat in the last twenty years. They just haven't always been there in the way that they are frequently invoked to have been in the larger cultural

imaginary. Marc Mauer of The Sentencing Project rightly asserts that the United States has come to rely on imprisonment to an extent that was “entirely unforeseen and even unimaginable just thirty years ago”(x). We are witnessing, in other words, a contemporary shift in the steady growth and use of correctional institutions, evidenced not only in the 500% increase in the prison population since the early-70’s, but in the corresponding amount of human, economic, and social resources devoted to the operation of these facilities as well.<sup>3</sup> And again, the position of California is telling; Angela Davis notes that not a single prison opened in the state during the later half of the 1960s or all of the 1970s, but that nine were built in the 80s and a startling twelve were constructed in the 90s alone (2003, 12). Prison literature simply helps us to understand these shifts, as well as their resulting effects on individuals and communities, better than we do at present.

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this analysis, all people are not equally impacted by the surge of correctional growth, even as they are touched in one way or another by it. The number of individuals, many of them people of color, permanently disenfranchised from the vote is but one example.<sup>4</sup> The fact that families of individuals who have been convicted of drug felonies are ineligible for federal aid, student financial aid and other programs is another, one that potentially has generational consequences (Golden 51).<sup>5</sup> Though most research on discrepancies in arrest rates, sentencing practices, and convictions has been directed toward African Americans, it is important to remember that members of other minority groups are also frequently overrepresented in our prisons and jails, and that their confinement too has origins not easily severed from a long history of racializing what was read as social deviance. Luana Ross, for instance, points to how the population of Native American women incarcerated swelled from 7% in 1943 to 25% in a period of assimilationist federal and state policies occurring from 1944

to 1966 (85). She goes on to argue that this increase indicates how relaxed policy regarding the confinement of Natives to their respective reservations through the demise of the pass system resulted in soaring incarceration rates, reaching a staggering 30% just a decade later (85). The sentencing project reports that the number of Latina women incarcerated grew seventy percent from 1990 to 1996 alone, and that they are imprisoned at twice the rate that white women are.<sup>6</sup> These statistics sadly support Huling's claim that the prison experience "threatens to become normal for whole segments of societies across the globe" (xi). It is a potential reality that should, I believe, give us all pause.

There are aspects of our history that we need to "interrogate and rethink" as Angela Davis puts it in *Are Prisons Obsolete*, the recognition of which could help us adopt more "complicated, critical postures toward the present and the future" (36). I have tried, alongside Franklin, Davis and others, to draw attention to the convict leasing system, black codes, and other historical precedents that contributed to the racial composition in prisons being so out of balance. We forget sometimes, it seems, that some of this critical analysis has been laid out for us in prison writing as well. Choosing to actively engage this work and deciding to move forward in undertaking the demanding but significant challenges that it offers, can help us to develop the kind of reflexive and progressive critical posture that Davis advocates in her work ever much as it can augment our theorizing. H. Bruce Franklin, for instance, reveals in *Prison Literature in America*, that he gradually realized over the seven years that he worked on the book that he was "not looking at some peripheral cultural phenomenon but something close to the center of our historical experience as a nation-state" (xxxii). The prison system is, after all, one of America's most enduring institutions, with crime and the treatment those incarcerated receive having long played important roles in how societies define themselves. We need to continue to assess under

what specific contexts, and for whose benefit, the rapid expansion of the prison continues, how representations of deviance and criminality continue to get reconstituted, and how the prison itself contributes to current discourses of fear, policing, and otherness expressed in American culture today.

A 1998 American Studies Association session titled *American Prisons and American Studies* begged a central question raised by panelist Angela Davis: “How is it possible,” she asked, “that penal systems could have expanded so rapidly and that corporate interests could have become so ensconced in punishment practices without a significant critical discourse developing?” (qtd. in Washington 1). The relevance of her question has continued to reveal itself in the years following, a time in which many issues the panel raised—racialized images of criminality, institutional inequalities, and the lack of dialogue among disciplines—remain important and challenging sites of inquiry. In fact, given the growth of our nation’s prison system in just the beginning of the present century, they are all the more pressing.

As Elliott Currie suggests in *Crime and Punishment in America*, we are placing the majority of our bets on measures we “know work poorly while shortchanging those we know could work well,” making it challenging to “think of another area of social policy, with the possible exception of welfare, where there has been such a startling divergence between understanding and action” (6). When I first began researching issues surrounding the criminal justice system, I vividly remember calls for preventative measures to reduce crime, study after study demonstrating the cost savings and reductions in recidivism achieved through rehabilitation and treatment programs, and fears that the number of people incarcerated would escalate exponentially if something did not change. That was eleven years ago, and in that time our prison population has grown by over one million people.<sup>7</sup> We have the opportunity as an academic

community to intervene into the breach of understanding that Currie identifies much more than we previously have through the courses we design, the conference presentations we give, and the critical dialog that we might help foster inside and outside of academic institutions. In turn, we can continue to examine how the prison system and the many important social, economic, and political issues it raises as outlined throughout this dissertation are part of, and indeed can expand, much of the work that we do.

Davis has said when remarking on the absence of a sustained scholarly discourse that it is almost as if prison issues are just “too tough to work through” (qtd. in Washington 2). Yet, she, like so many of the writers examined in this study, continues to do just that, bringing into focus the most damaging effects of mass incarceration on individuals, families, and communities alike, and providing insight on how we might change the course we are currently on. While the most urgent and persistent critiques are usually considered to come from writers like Marilyn Buck, Assata Shakur, Kathy Boudin, and other women widely classified as political prisoners, I would argue that writings by women such as Joyce Ann Brown, Jean Harris and Marcia Bunney foregrounded in the preceding chapters clearly contribute toward this renewed analysis as well. These women have also exposed repressive tactics of the state, identified core areas of the penal environment that can be particularly damaging to women, and urged a critical rethinking of how many women and young girls come into initial contact with the justice system. It was Harris, for instance, who asserted early on that it was “impossible to build enough prisons, because by their very existence they will be filled” (1988, 41).

For Davis, part of building a critical discourse involves moving prison studies into our university curriculums, exploring new terrains of justice, and scrutinizing our punishment practices. She encourages us to think about how we might integrate prison studies into courses

that are generally offered in social science curricula so that it might engage and complement those courses—classes in criminology, sociology, and social work for example. She also maintains that interdisciplinary prison studies can be integrated in to a range of courses in the humanities, which could help revise and reframe the interdisciplinary curriculum to make us theorize about oppressions that remains largely disconnected from current scholarship (Washington 5).

In my own essay, “On Teaching Women’s Prison Literature: A Feminist Approach to Women, Crime, and Incarceration,” prompted in part by Davis’s urgings and my own experiences teaching in a nearby correctional institution, I attempted to map out at least the beginnings of what a feminist, progressive approach to the study of women’s incarceration might entail.<sup>8</sup> I believed then, and I continue to believe now, that women’s studies is a field particularly well-suited to examine many of these issues considering its focus on the gendered meanings of varied experiences and its increasingly developed theorizations of intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. But that is just one example; criminology, sociology, history, and literary studies are all fields that can, and that increasingly have, undertaken the kind of interdisciplinary prison work that I believe Davis feels is possible.<sup>9</sup>

As I have tried to demonstrate repeatedly throughout this study, theorizations of female subjectivity—an area that has been centrally related to nearly all forms of feminist and womanist theorizing in one way or another from the start—can be not only enhanced, but also clarified and strengthened once we take the experiences of incarcerated women and their literature into account.<sup>10</sup> This pertains directly to our positioning and understanding of bodily integrity, autonomy, violence, autobiographical subjects, the politics of location, and public readings of

group identity. But it can also be said, I would argue, about understanding some of most deeply entrenched social problems that the escalating use of imprisonment helps bring into sharp focus. Addressing both the reach of the prison and the ways in which it reflects cultural assumptions and practices holds tremendous possibilities for our scholarly work in such areas as African American and ethnic studies, cultural and gender studies, and transnational research as the mounting reach of the prison increasingly becomes a global phenomenon. My focus here has been on writings produced by imprisoned women in the United States so that I could provide a detailed, contextually-driven analysis of their work. But I want to reemphasize that this is not to discount the reality that rates of incarceration are increasing in a number of world areas, as texts like *Global Lockdown* and *Barred* help to make clear. Nor should we assume that modes of displacement and transference are not occurring within national borders, as evidenced by reports that Texas alone is incarcerating over 5,000 inmates from fourteen other states due to overcrowding (Beckett 186). In addition to this, it is important to point out that immigration detainees now represent the fastest growing segment of jail populations, with the INS detaining an average of almost 20,000 non-U.S. citizens per day in 2001 (Miller 214). Prisons may operate through the construction of strict borders demarcating allotments of space and movement, but as systems in and of themselves, they cross over boundaries of nationhood, capital, and more.

We will be better off for critically readdressing the role of the prison in maintaining and fashioning contemporary societies, and for carefully interrogating why specific groups of people are largely the ones being locked up (and out) at record rates. I do not mean this in a utopian sense or as an end-all cure, largely because that would reduce the complexities of the socio-political considerations we are dealing with. Varied dynamics of oppression in my opinion require measures and methods acting in response that are equally diverse in their orientation and

focus. But I do think readdressing the use of mass incarceration would signal a shift in how we might respond to such social realities as concentrated poverty, escalating rates of violence against women, homelessness, and limited economic opportunities in a manner that is productive rather than reductively reactionary.

This could have material ramifications in the lives of our most disenfranchised citizens and communities, offering possibilities for change many of us hoped would have come far sooner. Consider, for instance, if the trend to invest more in correctional facilities than educational institutions and local development programs was reversed, or if women and girls knew they could move out of violence if they had to because those places readily existed even in our most rural locations. What kinds of “subjects” as a culture would we be producing then? How might some of our most celebrated aspects of self—autonomy, self-definition, and self-determinism among them—be less tied to those residing in positions of power and privilege than they are at present? In all my research, one quote is perhaps most suggestive of the possible effects this could have: as Pam, a former addict and mother of three puts it, “Who might I have become if my life were safe?” (qtd. in Golden 95).

To recall Harlow, there is indeed a “struggle waged over the historical and cultural record” that runs through prison writing (1987, 7), demonstrated through Davis, Shakur, and others who have employed the autobiographical to redress the historical amnesia and active forgetting that dismisses the foundation for, and varied forms of, their activism. But I would argue that the struggle for social justice and selfhood informs this literature just as urgently. Women and people of color have long turned to autobiography not only to document personal experiences, but also to resist those oppressive forces that have characterized them as less than full legal, political, or social subjects who carry with them all the rights of personhood that have been

historically denied. This impetus for writing is clearly at work in women's personal narratives from the prison. In addition to being denied state-guaranteed constitutional rights, incarcerated individuals are often "positioned beyond the boundaries of the citizen-subject" as Schaffer and Smith claim, and thus are often seen as being "outside the domain" of basic human rights as well (12). Their autobiographical texts complicate these easy divisions and help compel us forward as we respond to a system that contributes grievously to some of our most entrenched social inequalities. As Rotham suggests, "We need not remain trapped in inherited answers;" prisons are certainly not the only possible reaction to social problems, and were the invention of one generation to serve the perceived needs of that period" (qtd. in Reiriden 183). Incarcerated women's personal narratives complicate accepted separations between those incarcerated and others residing in the "free world" by taking to task the notion that prisons, including their presentation, operation, and sheer prevalence, are indeed an ever present part of contemporary society and American culture.

Kathy Boudin, one of the participants in a writing workshop led by Eve Ensler that the documentary *What I Want my Words to Do to You* centers on, speaks to the supposed division between penal institutions and the "rest of the world" quite directly. In response to fellow participant Pamela Smart, who feels cuts off from the larger society and laments the apathy with which she and others are greeted by those on the outside, Boudin suggests that, "It's not that reality is outside. We're just as real as the outside. How we are with each other, it's real. This is our life right now." Boudin admits that it took quite a while for her to even reach that point, so intense were her feelings of isolation upon first entering prison. Her efforts to come to terms with her sentence and the rigors of institutional life have been considerable, but a keen sense of alienation, one that is only fostered through protocols in the penal environment, remains for most

women. As Smart reveals, “I just want everything I know about everybody to matter outside of here, but a part of me knows that for so many people it just doesn’t.”

I would argue that the careful division between prisons and the “outside,” including the feelings of separation that this border inspires, are only amplified when incarcerated women are presented as women “without voice,” as they so often are. This pronouncement is made even in critical studies of prison literature, studies that I have a high regard for on the whole and that have clearly contributed to the analysis and proliferation of this work. Judith Scheffler, for instance, maintains that prison authors “epitomize the plight of silenced women writers” with political prisoners serving “as voice for their imprisoned sisters,” and Wally Lamb, editor of *Couldn’t Keep it to Myself*, argues that the essays within the collection are “victories against voicelessness” and “miracles in print” (13-16, 9). He goes on to suggest that “to imprison a woman is to remove her voice from the world” (9). I understand well that when the frequent phrase “they don’t have a voice” is uttered, one heard by students in women’s studies classrooms, various academic circles, and in a number of activist campaigns, one usually wants to call attention to the lack of political, social or economic power behind that voice. It is not a linguistic issue in other words, but an indictment of sorts of whose voices receive the most attention, become part of policy change, and have the most political currency.

I think though that we can take this matter of voicelessness even further. In the latter stages of my research especially, I was struck over and over again by how frequently incarcerated women were cited as “silent bodies,” even as I was in the process of gathering one text of theirs after another. These women, I thought to myself, are individuals who have much to say, and they are voicing it in print time and again. When I came across Judith Bradford and Crispin Sartwell’s “Voiced Bodies/Embodied Voices” early on in graduate school, I found their examination of the

intersection between voices, bodies and social identities to be enormously useful in light of these popular assertions about whether or not one “has” or does “not have” a voice. I have long been aligned with their desire to think through this issue by setting up a relational context between voices, bodies, and deployed expectations about those bodies. Voices, are “actually shaped twice,” in this schema: once when the body is trained in the right kinds of production, and once (or multiply) by how others hear and responds to them. Voices are “relations of articulation and reception in social contexts,” as they put it, and what gets understood or infused with meaning emerges through the interaction between them (194). Gayatri Spivak famously drew attention to this interaction in her frequently cited “Can the Subaltern Speak?” As Carole Boyce Davies points out in her reading of this essay, the subaltern woman’s speech is “already represented as non-speech” because of how she is “positioned, represented, spoken for or constructed as absent or silent” (21). Certainly the prison as a social, political and geographical location surfaces as a critical site to think about these relations of articulation and reception as well, including the kind of interpretive work that popular readings of inmates do in advance of anything these individuals might actually say.

The notion that one does not have a voice is problematic as Bradford and Sartwell suggest, because it implies that voicelessness is more about the speaker, his or her social position, and his or her suffering than from where he or she speaks or whether others are listening. Having a voice in the context they establish actually depends on three things: can one be in the physical position to speak to certain people, can one physically speak, and can one be heard in the way that one is trying to be heard without the expectations of others diverting what the speaker wants to get across (195). Like them, I encourage a shift in focus in terms of how we utilize phrases surrounding the “lack” of voice. There are assertions (sometimes presented in the form of

questions like the frequent “why does she stay” as discussed in chapter five), that become highly suggestive of certain social realities in ways that might not accurately reflect those realities or serve the purposes we envisioned they would.

When I read claims based on the supposed “voicelessness” of incarcerated women, I think of works like the following poem by Judith Clark. It was written in response to the central question poised in the title of the documentary *What I Want my Words to do to You*, and is presented here:

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 dialog  
disrupt your day  
I want them to leave you wondering  
why two million people in America today  
are locked up  
I want to leave you dissatisfied with simple explanations and assumptions  
thirsty for complexity and the deep discomfort of ambiguity  
I want to make you laugh  
I want to make you cry  
I want to make you wonder  
About your own prisons  
I want you to ask why (1-16).<sup>11</sup>

The body of literature that incarcerated women have produced, often times in spite of and against various forms of coercion, testifies to the fact that the problem of how these works are received involves much more than imprisoned women not voicing their concerns about America’s practices of incarceration or detailing what their own experiences within correctional institutions have been. If we are to adequately address how this work gets dismissed or ignored, including why some if it is currently out of print and difficult to obtain, it seems very necessary to scrutinize the contexts in which these women’s voices are not listened to. I think about Clark’s poem often, in fact, especially the way she positions public misreadings of incarcerated women, and her desire for people to think critically about what surely must go into the building up of a

prison system this large in size and scope. I also think about her appeal to those on the “outside” to recognize places in their lives where they might be unfree, and her hope that they will engage in a dialog that might intervene into social practices that have kept boundaries of entitlement, opportunity, and mobility more firmly established than we would like to believe.

And I return to what I hope for as well. That we will listen. That we will respond. That we will use what we know and be conscious of what we need to learn to finally say...enough.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Universities across Florida are currently in the process of making substantial cuts to their annual budgets, and though this has not been directly linked to our high prison population in the media as of yet that I have seen, it is clearly an issue we need to think through. The University of Florida alone is in the process of determining how best to deal with its 46 million reduction in funds from the state. The Florida Department of Corrections’ website reveals that the number of inmates in prison rose 20.1% over the last five years from 77,316 in June 2003 to 92,844 in June 2007. There was a 4.8% increase since last fiscal year. That state now operates 137 facilities when including its 60 prisons, 41 boot and work camps, and 30 work release centers. They operate one treatment center according to the site (<http://www.dc.state.fl.us/>).

<sup>2</sup> Duncan cites findings showing that California increased its investment in the correctional system by nearly 45% from 1993 to 1995 alone, and during that same time it decreased its investment in primary and secondary public education by over seven percent. For additional information on the geographical impact of prison growth in California see Ruthie Gilmore’s excellent study *Golden Gulag*.

<sup>3</sup> This statistic is reported in *Race to Incarcerate* and can be found in several other resources as well.

<sup>4</sup> Davis asserts in *Abolition Democracy* that seven states permanently disenfranchise formerly incarcerated persons, seven additional states disenfranchise certain types of formerly incarcerated individuals according to the type of crime committed, and thirty-three states disenfranchise persons on parole (13). H. Bruce Franklin’s “The American Prison in the Culture Wars” addresses the impact of this widespread disenfranchisement as well, and highlights its potential effects on close political elections of the recent past.

<sup>5</sup> Mauer and Chesney-Lind report in *Invisible Punishment* that TANF imposes a lifetime ban on individuals with drug felony charges. They discuss how a person convicted of armed robbery can qualify after completing his or her sentence, but that someone with a single felony conviction for drug possession cannot. Forty-two states have modified this some, but it remains an especially punitive measure for many families nonetheless (41).

<sup>vi</sup> See [http://www.sentencingproject.org/Admin/Documents/publications/inc\\_hispanicprisoners.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/Admin/Documents/publications/inc_hispanicprisoners.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> BJS reports that 1,182,169 people were incarcerated in America’s prisons and jails in 1997. See <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/press/p96.pr> for a press release issued for that time period.

<sup>8</sup> See Davis (*Women’s Studies Quarterly*).

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<sup>9</sup> In terms of literary analysis, the connection is quite clear. As Franklin argues in “The American Prison in the Culture Wars,” “just as we now assume that one cannot intelligently teach nineteenth-century American literature without recognizing slavery as context, one cannot responsibly teach contemporary American literature without recognizing the American prison system as context.” See *Prison Literature in America* for his extended discussion of the significant contributions prison writing has made to American literature, ways in which we might rethink the formation of the literary canon, and the influence of this work on American culture.

<sup>10</sup> Theories of subjectivity, as Mansfield positions them, need to be understood as important historical developments of our politics, language, knowledge, excitement and fear. “In short,” he claims, “the changing quality of our experience” (176).

<sup>11</sup> Line breaks were inserted by Davis, as Clark reads the poem aloud during the documentary.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Amanda J. Davis received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English, with minors in women's studies and political science, from Eastern Illinois University. She received her Master of Arts degree in English and a Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies and Gender Research from the University of Florida, and pursued her Ph.D. work there as well.

She has had the privilege of teaching in the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Florida throughout the duration of her graduate studies, and has also taught in the Department of English and at a nearby correctional institution for women. Courses have included transnational feminism, global violence against women, women's autobiographies, women and poverty, interdisciplinary perspectives on women, and incarcerated women.

Her articles and reviews in these areas have been published in such journals as *Frontiers*, *MELUS*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Aztlán*, *Women's Studies*, *African American Review*, and the *Labor Studies Journal*. She has also contributed approximately twenty essays to reference collections, including *The African American National Biography* and a number of encyclopedias centered on African American literature and history, world poverty, and Latina writers.

Amanda is married to Perry L. Montgomery, and together they have two daughters: Maya Jane and Aleeyah Faith Davis Montgomery. They currently live in Gainesville, Florida.