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by

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**Writing Their Way Through Motherhood: An Investigation of  
Writing’s Role in the Methods Incarcerated Mothers use to Mother  
While Behind Bars**

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Writing's Role in the Methods Incarcerated Mothers use to Mother  
While Behind Bars**

**by**

**Jazmine Ja'Nicole Wells, B.A.**

**Report**

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## **Dedication**

This Report is dedicated to:

My top 3 (Roy, Vicky, and Ja'Niece);

My life mentor Ernie Williams, who has instilled in me the value of higher education;

My Grandpa Roy and Mema Judy, for calling me every day to make sure I am studying;

My cousin and role model, the epitome of a successful woman, Shaniqua Sneed;

The man who taught me how to write like a Longhorn, my academic mentor, Dr. Doug

Eskew;

And, of course, to God. I pray that you continue to keep my family safe from racist infrastructures long enough for me to dismantle them. In what follows, I begin my role in changing the world.

In memory of Vincent W. Tanko and Benny Boom

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## **Abstract**

# **Writing Their Way Through Motherhood: An Investigation of Writing's Role in the Methods Incarcerated Mothers use to Mother While Behind Bars**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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According to those in the fields of sociology, criminal justice, and law, incarcerated mothers utilize the following common methods to mother while behind bars: establishing an identity as mother (Berry and Eigenberg 2003); participating in the placement of their children (Enos 2001); maintaining contact with their children (Berry and Smith-Mahdi 2006); and communicating with caseworkers and caretakers (Administration for Children Services). While reading texts written by incarcerated mothers, I made two noteworthy observations, which are especially significant to the field of rhetoric. One, incarcerated mothers did report utilizing the methods listed; however, they also referenced problems with parenting behind bars that caused them to create additional mothering techniques. Two, writing is notably salient in all of the methods incarcerated mothers use to mother while behind bars. Therefore, this project performs two major tasks: I explain each method for mothering behind bars, grouping them into four, more encompassing categories: Identity (re)construction, Contact,

Planning, and Activism; and I explicitly draw attention to writing's role in initiating and completing each of these tasks. In sum, this project maps out the necessity of writing in performing motherhood behind bars. To illustrate how women in prison mother and to articulate how pervasive in and essential writing is to incarcerated motherhood, this project analyzes 36 memoirs, narratives, poems, anecdotes, essays, and letters written by incarcerated mothers. In doing so, this project helps rhetoric scholars expand their understating of the performativity of writing. Additionally, this project also presents implications for the fields of literacy and motherhood.

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## *Introduction*

The devastating increase in female imprisonment has led to a rise in the amount of women who are forced to give birth, as well as manage motherhood, behind bars with limited and unreliable resources. According to the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2.3 million people are currently imprisoned in the United States (Levi et al 2010). The total number of women incarcerated in America is about 200,000 (Levi et al 2010). Between 1990 and 2009, the number of incarcerated women increased 153% (Levi et al 2010). On average, 6–10% of incarcerated women are pregnant, with the highest rates in local jails (ACOG 2011). At the time they enter prison, 80% of women already have a child, and 70% of women in prison are single parents and the primary caretaker of their children (Vainik 2008). Even though the amount of women in prison continues to increase, research still tends to focus mainly on incarceration's impact on the child (Poehlmann 2005, Dallaire 2007) rather than on the mother. Criminal justice scholars have filled this gap by shifting the conversation toward the emotional, sometimes physical, pain and sense of failure often felt by incarcerated mothers (Schlager and Moore 2014). Sociology scholars have spoken to the "bad mother" stigma Western society places on incarcerated mothers due to their prolonged absence from their children (Granja et al 2014). And law professors have contributed intensive criticism regarding the dehumanization of incarcerated mothers (Ocen 2012 and Ahrens 2015). But even still, scholarship in criminal justice and sociology seem to be focused on pregnant women in prison and a call to advocate for their rights rather than investigating how these women and others perform their roles as mothers in prison.

Although this work is extremely significant and has initiated improvements, society's view and treatment of women in prison will not shift until we (re)humanize them. Traditional ways of mothering, inextricably linked to access to resources such as money, time, health, and social support, deeply intersect with social class and status, resources incarcerated mothers no longer have or may have never had (Rafaela Granja et al 2016). A *Mother* is typically married, nurturing, makes extensive sacrifices, and spends significant time with the child to prepare him or her to be an asset to society. According to Brown and Bloom (2009) motherhood, for many

women, is central to gender identification, and this may be even more pronounced for incarcerated women who have violated societal norms and gender role expectations. Although imprisoned mothers still care *about* their children, intensive-parenting ideologies lead them to believe they are not good mothers because they are not physically there to care *for* their children. This forces women into a liminal space in which they are only considered a “good” mother if they meet these prescriptive role expectations. Thus, incarcerated mothers also feel powerless when they are unable to act on their children during the times they face difficult situations on the outside. For example, Israeli Social Welfare & Health Sciences scholars Shamai and Kochal’s study (2008) on the effects of incarceration on mothers found that many incarcerated mothers “experienced a sense of failure in their maternal functioning” (331).

Exploring the methods incarcerated mothers use to directly parent their children behind bars is extremely effective in helping incarcerated mothers shed the stigma of “bad mother.” According to those in the fields of sociology, criminal justice, and law, incarcerated mothers utilize the following common methods to mother while behind bars: establishing an identity as mother (Berry and Eigenberg 2003); participating in the placement of their children (Enos 2001); maintaining contact with their children (Berry and Smith-Mahdi 2006); and communicating with caseworkers and caretakers (Administration for Children Services). While reading texts written by incarcerated mothers, I made two noteworthy observations, which are especially significant to the field of rhetoric. One, incarcerated mothers did report utilizing the methods listed; however, they also referenced problems to parenting behind bars that caused them to create additional mothering techniques. Two, writing is notably salient in all of the methods incarcerated mothers use to mother while behind bars. For example, incarcerated mothers compose narratives, poems, and memoirs to reshape their identities and they write letters to correspond with children, caretakers, and caseworkers. Incarcerated mothers also write to construct plans and goals to show they are preparing to regain custody of their children. In other words, writing helps incarcerated mothers perform their role as mothers. Therefore, this project performs two major tasks: I explain each method for mothering behind bars, grouping them into four, more

encompassing categories: Identity (re)construction, Contact, Planning, and Activism; and I explicitly draw attention to writing's role in initiating and completing each of these tasks. By examining the ways that incarcerated mothers mother through writing, this study builds on and contributes to work in motherhood studies, criminal justice, and sociology. More importantly, this project will provide additional insight into how Rhetoric scholars understand the performativity of writing.

Thus far, rhetoric scholars have been active in exploring writing's role in improving circumstances for marginalized groups in *all* classrooms (Kynard 2008, Burzynski 2010, Pritchard 2014, Earle 2016), as well as in taking a transitional skills approach to articulate the ways incarcerated students can inform university pedagogies. In addition, rhetoric and composition instructors use their scholarship as a space to reflect on the ways their traditional pedagogical techniques served as methods for incarcerated students to mentally liberate themselves through their writing. Accompanied by those in literary studies, American studies and philosophy, rhetoric scholars have investigated how women in prison use writing to mentally liberate themselves, find a voice, and cope with traumatic experiences. Philosopher Julia Ward (1995) argues that writing allows writers to critically examine the value of their experiences, which assists in their recovery from emotional and physical pain (Ward). Literary scholar Wendy Hinshaw and rhetorician Tobi Jacobi find that writing also gives writers the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015). For Americanist Breea Willingham, this means writing becomes critical to incarcerated women as their narratives “offer a unique insight to interlocking patterns of oppression that contribute to their incarceration and how discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality extends into prison” (Willingham 2011).

In addition, literary scholar and activist Judith Scheffler (2002) finds that women in prison write to confirm their own sense of worth, which is essential for any woman writer, but especially empowering for the female outcast, relegated to one of society's most degrading situations. For the woman prisoner, she does not share with the male prisoner the luxury of verbal play with the word freedom. Instead, she records—perhaps for the first time—her

understanding that she is and always has been a prisoner (Scheffler 2002). In sum, scholars have confirmed that writing serves multiple functions for women in prison. However, we can elaborate on this work by also exploring how mothers in prison use writing as a tool to improve, continue, or establish relationships with their children. Scholars have looked at methods for mothering behind bars and how writing aids women in prison, yet none have looked closely at how writing and mothering in prison work hand and hand together. Because motherhood is an identity as well as a set of actions, I believe rhetoric scholars are fit to examine the ways in which incarcerated mothers perform motherhood while behind bars. Thus, this project analyzes texts written by women in prison in an effort to 1) illustrate how women in prison mother while behind bars; and 2) articulate how writing is pervasive in and essential to incarcerated motherhood.

To map out writing's role in incarcerated motherhood, this project analyzes 36 memoirs, narratives, poems, anecdotes, essays, and letters written by incarcerated mothers. All of the texts were acquired from four publications: *Letters From Prison: Voices of Women Murderers*, *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States*, *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison*, *Inside This Place, Not of It*, and *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings 200 to the Present*. Each text written by incarcerated mothers both directly and indirectly alluded to techniques and programs used to facilitate motherhood behind bars, and covered a range of themes including but not limited to parental rights, care takers, planning, separation, autonomy, dehumanization, contact, spouses/partners, foster care, violation of rights, pregnancy, and emotional strain. After reading each text, I organized the themes into four categories: Identity (re)construction, Planning, Contact, and Activism; to reflect the main tasks utilized to perform motherhood while behind bars. In what follows, I articulate the impact separation has on mothers in prison, illustrate how incarcerated mothers use writing to discuss and perform motherhood behind bars, and report the implications of this project in order to demonstrate the need to explore and give credit to the

ways incarcerated mothers fulfill their role even with limited materials and binding constraints. But first I begin with a note about the four publications listed above.

I chose to use texts featured in these four publications specifically because they published writings authored by women in prison rather than secondary essays about women in prison. All of these texts effectively reinforce the idea that women in general, but more importantly women in prison, deserve to and need to be liberated through their own voices. *Letters From Prison: Voices of Women Murderers* is a collection of letters written between her and twelve incarcerated women. This text features a series of correspondence between her and the women, and at times also presents letters the women wrote to their victim(s)' families. In these letters, the women discuss a range of topics, from their childhoods to inquiring about the collection to their crimes. Seven out of the twelve contributors wrote letters alluding to their children or their parenting techniques. I reference multiple letters written by these seven women. *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison* focuses on the viewpoints and social issues faced by African American women who are and were incarcerated in American prisons and jails. The featured narratives present the authors' life experiences, the events that led to their incarceration, relationships with their family, and their perspectives on the criminal justice system. I cite seven of these narratives.

*Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States* is a volume composed of texts written by women who are in or were in prison. The volume is divided into eight sections, each focusing on a prevalent theme in prison, such as rights, dehumanization, parenting, etc. I relied on nine texts in this volume, five of which were authored by incarcerated mothers and illustrated their ways of mothering and the barriers which make it difficult to do so. The other four were written by allies of incarcerated mothers and drew attention to resources for mothering while behind bars. *Inside This Place, Not of It* features narratives of thirteen women who are currently or were formerly incarcerated. To collect the narratives of these women, Levi and Waldman composed a team who fanned out across the country to meet with women in prison, halfway houses, and in their homes. Levi and Waldman also used court records, medical

records, and other external sources to fact check the stories. Six of the women in this volume shared their experiences with mothering behind bars. Similar to the other publications, Scheffler's *Wall Tappings* provides a space for American Women's Prison Literature. However, her anthology is a bit more inclusive, as she widens the scope to include writings (memoirs, poems, and letters) by women imprisoned in various countries throughout history. In my text I refer to seven of these "political, communal, and radical" writings by imprisoned mothers in Scheffler's anthology (XXIII).

### ***The Bond Between Incarcerated Mother and Child***

Scholars have credited mass incarceration for disrupting relationships, dismantling families, and destroying parent-child relationships (Ocen 2012, Purvis 2013, Haney 2013). Recent scholarship goes even further to argue mass incarceration allows prison visiting rooms to infiltrate the heterosexual relationships of women and imprisoned men, and may even be used to practice maternal control as well (Haney 2013). It is no secret that parental incarceration has devastating effects on children, one of which being intergenerational offending where the child, like his or her parents, serves time in a correctional institution. But there doesn't seem to be as much research describing the effects parental incarceration has on the parent's ability to parent. According to criminologist Mayumi Purvis, more often than not, the men and women who are incarcerated have often grew up in families where violence, substance abuse and other forms of abuse were prevalent (Purvis 2013). Incarcerated parents are also more likely to have been victims of economic and racial disparities before they entered prison. Once they are incarcerated their stressors continue. Incarcerated parents tend to suffer from separation anxiety, and stress regarding their children's needs, caretakers, and regaining agency and/or rights as parents. Women specifically, are prone to experiencing role strain, caused by the inability to fulfill their role as mothers in traditional ways, which can lead to serious psychological effects, causing incarcerated mothers to lose confidence in their ability to mother, and causing them to fear that they will lose their children's love (Berry and Eigenberg 2003).

Although children with an incarcerated father are likely to undergo negative academic and social outcomes, “research indicates that children with incarcerated mothers may face comparatively greater stress and more cumulative risks in their environment than children of incarcerated fathers” (Poehlmann et al 2010). Legal scholar Anne E. Jbara observes “children who fail to sufficiently bond with their mothers are more likely to suffer from developmental delays, an inability to connect with others, and a greater likelihood of being convicted of a crime later in life” (Jbara 2012). To help battle these obstacles, many prisons now offer parenting education programs for inmates, such as Parenting Inside Out, an evidence based, cognitive-behavioral parent management skills training program (*Parenting Inside Out*, and the Family Strengthening Project, a multi-faceted program that offers parenting and relationship classes, family counseling, and financial education among other things to incarcerated participants (*Correctional Education Association*). However, these programs vary in content and are only extended to only a minority of inmates (Loper and Tuerk 2011). The treatment goal for parenting programs is usually contingent on the group of parents being treated. In the case of short-term jail offenders, the program will focus on “behavior management, use of available local resources, and reinforcement for transitional planning that attends to child needs” (Loper and Tuerk 2011). But for offenders who are serving longer sentences, the parenting program will provide skill building for better communication with children and caregivers” (Loper and Tuerk 2011).

In addition, the rationale behind creating parental incarceration programs is that “inmates (both fathers and mothers) realized the need to rebuild their relationships with their children upon release” (Purvis 2013). Participants learn to adapt new attitudes about affection, discipline, family roles, communication style, and communication frequency. Through these programs participants gain self-esteem, parenting skills, adjustments in their institutional behavior and conduct, as well as lower their chances of recidivism (Purvis 2013). Nurseries and housing projects have been implemented in an effort to maintain the bond between parent and child. As of 2009, seven states have prison nurseries for incarcerated women. Other institutions have decided to implement residential facilities to house incarcerated mothers and their children. The

federal government and eleven states operate mother/child prisons. These programs house anywhere from 20 to 15 inmates and their children for the duration of the mothers' sentences, and are often located outside of traditional penal institutions in 'community' settings" (Haney 2013).

Even though studies have shown that keeping mother and child together decreases stress for both parties and increases long-term benefits, only a limited amount of states host prison nurseries and residential facilities. And even in the programs available, only women with nonviolent crimes are allowed to participate (Jbara 2012). Furthermore, in the case of prison nurseries, children are only allowed to stay for a permitted amount of time. In some states that child can stay until they enter school, while in other states children can only stay with their mothers up until their first birthday. While the value of prison nurseries and residential facilities is recognized, there are still many moral and safety concerns that prevent all prisons from adapting these types of mothering programs. Because children with an incarcerated mother are considered to be one of the most vulnerable and at risk populations (Dallaire 2007), it is essential to look at the other methods and resources incarcerated mothers use to establish and maintain a relationship with their children. Even with the help of resources and programs, parenting behind bars is especially difficult for women.

### ***Methods for Mothering Behind Bars***

Although there are some resources and programs out there, mothering behind bars is still difficult. Not all incarcerated mothers are given the privilege of taking parenting classes or granted access to nurseries. As a result, incarcerated mothers create other means of performing their motherhood. Constructing a motherhood identity and managing motherhood through their child's temporary care provider (Enos 2001) are a few ways. Arranging visits, phone calls, mailing letters, reading self-help books, and improving themselves spiritually (Berry and Smith-Mahdi 2006) are others. Reading the selected texts by incarcerated mothers confirmed that the techniques above are key to mothering while behind bars; however, I also came across a few additional methods. Incarcerated mothers also collaborate with their caseworkers and caretakers

to make plans to regain their parental rights and for their children's future living conditions, as well as take an activist approach in ensuring their parental and human rights are no longer violated. Taking these other mothering methods into account, I created the following four categories: Identity (Re)construction, which consists of constructing or reconstructing one's identity as mother, battling emotional strain, and regaining autonomy; Planning, which involves communicating with caseworkers and caretakers to find temporary or permanent placement for the child, as well as establishing future plans for the child's well-being; Contact, which consists of making phone calls, arranging visits, and mailing letters in an effort to maintain a relationship with one's child; and Activism, which encompasses the actions an incarcerated mother takes to protect herself and others from dehumanization, un-honored agreements, and a violation of rights.

#### **IDENTITY (RE)CONSTRUCTION**

A significant portion of incarcerated mothers describe an insecurity with motherhood. They either do not feel they are adequate mothers, or often do not refer to themselves as mothers at all. Often times, their texts illustrate a transition into motherhood. Scholars refer to this progression as identity construction (Enos 2001). I refer to it as identity (re)construction because some incarcerated mothers have never felt like a mother and have to construct this identity for the first time, while others have lost their identities upon incarceration and have to reconstruct it. Nonetheless, the exercise is an essential function to mothering behind bars. Literacy scholar Enos (2001) believes that women cannot demonstrate fitness as a mother without claiming a positive mother identity. Enos points out "how a woman views her parenting role is dependent upon a development of self-identity and how this role compares or contrasts with that of others she views as good mothers" (34). Not only does an incarcerated mother need to arrange and manage caretaking for her child, she needs to manage and balance a motherhood role in the context of imprisonment.

When incarcerated mothers choose not to take on an identity as mother, it makes it impossible for them to perform role as mother. Women like Suzan, Carol, Marilyn, and Shirley

rarely, if ever, refer to themselves as a mother. As a result, they hardly ever mention their children and in such cases, they do not speak of their kids with intimacy or affection—they just reference them. Letters written by these four women give the impression that their relationship with children is still in need of mending, and they do not feel comfortable calling themselves mothers until their children approve. For example, Shirley makes few references to her children, and it is only to recount her crime and demonstrate how they abandoned her well before she would even consider herself a bad mother. However, Shirley asked Furio many questions about her children and often mentioned other mothers. When Furio asked Shirley questions about her children, who were deceased, Shirley wrote, “my dear, Jenny, my children are fine. It would be best if you and I both pray that yours would be fine, if ever you felt such torment” (191). In the texts I read, it was not uncommon for the incarcerated mothers to wait for their children to accept them in order to (re)construct their identities as mothers. For instance, in letters to Furio, Carol mentions her sons only a few times and says:

“They chose to let me go so they could live ordinary lives out of my shadow... I hope someday they’ll want to see me, but they have to heal a lot.” (Carol 172)

Similarly, some mothers only feel like a mother to some of their children. Marilyn admitted that because her youngest daughter was born while she was in prison, Marilyn really feels more like her surrogate mother: “I wasn’t there to raise her as I raised my other children” (Marilyn 125). In other cases, mothers chose only to acknowledge one child, perhaps the child that is most approving of them. Although Veronica had a son and a daughter, in her letters to Furio she only discusses her daughter. In fact, Veronica frequently expresses the stress and pain she undergoes not being able to care for her daughter but never mentions her son. In these cases, it appeared that the children were either heavily affected by the mother’s crime or may have even been victims of the crime, which made the mother feel like she no longer had the right to identify as one.

In strong contrast, there are some incarcerated mothers that do not need to (re)construct their identity, because their identity is solely defined by their success as a mother. For instance,

Betty writes in a letter to Furio:

“I worked very hard all my life at doing the right thing. My children are my work product—they are lovely!” (Betty 156)

Consistent correspondence from Betty’s children serves as proof of her ability to mother. In addition, Betty reinforces her confidence as a mother by signing each of her letters, “Radical Mom.” Although Betty admits she always wondered if she was a good enough mom, she also proclaims, “to a person like me, there is no such thing as good enough” (158). Betty refers to herself as a “Super Mom” in this same letter. Out of all of the texts I read by incarcerated mothers, Betty appears to be the only one who maintained her *confidence* in her mothering before and during incarceration. In all three of Betty’s letters published in Furio’s book, Betty not only references her children but gives praise to how well she raised them. DonAlda does by opening her narrative with announcing she has three children, who serve as her motivation to survive, but she just credits them for being inspirational children, rather than describing herself as a good mother who raised them as such. Likewise, despite undergoing exile, Chilean political women prisoners still identified themselves as women, workers, mothers, housewives, and party militants (73). However, unlike Betty, DonAlda and Chilean mothers hold on to their identity, but do not draw attention to nor praise their mothering skills.

For the incarcerated mothers who do need to (re)construct their identities, they “must undergo a specific mental change and reorganization, constructed in part by a society that tends to identify femininity with motherhood” (Shamai & Kochal 2008). The social construct of parenting turns parents, especially women, “into the sole parties responsible for the children’s well-being and development, which allows them to be held accountable for their children’s underachievement” (Granja et al 2015). This means that mother’s identity and effectiveness tend to be evaluated on the wellbeing of her child and their behavior. For example, “research shows that, despite some changes in fathers’ involvement in child care, mothers are generally considered the experts regarding children and the work of taking care of children is still

primarily done by mothers” (Cowdery et al 2005). As a result, many incarcerated mothers did not refer to as or consider themselves “good” mothers:

“I disappointed my family, my kids. Me being in prison caused a lot of hardships for my mother...My son is rebellious. He feels that if I was just trying to pay some bills and take care of them, he and his sister at the time, then I shouldn’t have my whole life taken away.” (Rae Ann 105)

In comparison, the incarcerated mothers interviewed by Shamaï and Kochal’s referred to themselves as garbage and questioned “Who needs such a mother?” (330). Furthermore, Berry and Smith-Mahdi (2006) found that the incarcerated mothers in their study defined “mother” as “someone who is their child’s friend, someone who teaches or disciplines her child, a provider, and a person who sacrifices for her child” (113). Not surprisingly, only about one-third of the women in their study “implied that a mother was someone who was present to help a child grow up and become self-sufficient” (113). Whether or not incarcerated mothers define “mother” as a woman who is present to help a child grow, they all feel emotional distress from being absent. The majority of the women in Berry and Eigenberg’s study (2003) reported that they frequently missed out on the pleasures of being a parent, and worried their children may not be receiving the amount of attention they needed while their mother was in prison. The texts I read confirmed these concerns. It appears that even when incarcerated mothers do have contact with their children, the constraints of the prison challenge their autonomy by not allowing them to be hands-on mothers. For instance, after a guard repeatedly yelled at her 7-year-old, which resulted in her child not returning for another visit, Kimberly Burkes wrote a personal narrative which including the following:

“I’m still hurt, angry, and humiliated because I wasn’t able to protect my child from the hate within these walls.” (Kimberly 72)

The constraints of prison make it difficult for women in prison to identify as mothers because they are not always allowed to exercise their role as mothers. However, contrary to Kimberly’s experience, some mothers articulated a sense of discomfort with motherhood until

they were actually separated from their children. After interviewing incarcerated mothers to better understand how these women experience the identity and role of motherhood during imprisonment, Shamai and Kochal found that meaningful interactions in prison can trigger change, which coaxes these mothers into (re)embracing their identities as mothers. The mothers in the texts I read made similar claims, admitting, “prison has made me a better woman” (Rae Ann 105). Others testified to using prison as a space where they can hold onto to their mother identity by practicing other types of mothering:

“It seems like prison turned my life all the way around because I’m not used to dealing with people like this. But I’ve helped a lot, too. It’s like being a role model for someone, because there are babies in here. It’s just like being a mother figure to them.” (Mamie 86)

“My young guard tried to hide his face so that I would not see the tears welling up in his eyes...I felt like hugging my guard and calling him ‘son,’ for he was only seventeen years old.” (Abeba Tesfagiorgis 188)

With limited resources and a loss of autonomy, it is imperative that incarcerated mothers find an available means to (re)construct their identity. Many of the texts written by mothers in prison mentioned outside organizations that helped the authors in prison maintain contact with their children. As a result of physically bringing the children closer to their mothers, these organizations also aided in identity (re)construction. For example, multiple women who contributed pieces to *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States* wrote about the impact the Storybook Project had on their relationship with their child. The Storybook Project implemented in prisons, such as Bedford Hills in New York, allows inmates to select books for their children, record themselves reading the books, and mail the tape and the book to their children. Some of the participants feel like this program gives them a sense of motherhood for the first time:

“It’s [the Storybook Project] like it gives you definition as a mother. You don’t really know the impact of reading to your child until you do it, and I never did it on the outside.” (June 100)

Organizations like The Storybook Project who assist women in maintaining contact with their children through literacy, demonstrate reading and writing’s impact on incarcerated motherhood. A few incarcerated mothers admitted they didn’t have the time to read to their children before they were incarcerated, but it is now something they engage in with their children often. Both reading and writing play a major role in performing the role as mother while behind bars because those functions allows the women to still participate and contribute to the education development of their children. A number of women in the texts I read reported their efforts to better themselves through courses. Cynthia took sociology and Afro-American classes (74). Mamie has taken a range of classes from domestic violence programs, GED classes, to 12-step classes so that she’ll be “prepared for anything” when she goes home (Mamie 87). Before incarceration DonAlda studied graphic arts. While incarcerated she continued to write and create art:

“Right now, my project is pillowcases. I sell pillowcases, usually for children...I took a course of study from the Children’s Institute of literature...I’d like to write Children’s stories.” (DonAlda 59)

Literacy scholars, such as Brandt (2001), argue that literacy produces and reproduces the ability to write one’s way into opportunities. Not only does literacy help to advance oneself socially, but literacy also serves to establish oneself personally. As mentioned earlier, scholars such as Scheffler, Hinshaw & Jacobi, and Willingham credit writing as a method of recovery for women in prison.

In fact, writing did prove to be one of the main way mothers in prison (re)construct their identities as mother. Through his time as a prison composition instructor, rhetoric scholar Patrick Berry (2014) has observed, “by carefully attending to the literacy narratives written by the incarcerated, we can see narrative framing used to chronicle a process of becoming (145). He goes on to reference Mikael Bakhtin, who writes, ““Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a

method of portraying the whole of an individual's life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing how an *individual becomes other than what he was,*” (145). In a letter to Furio, Terri admits she is having a difficult time with her son's birthday coming up. She kindly asks Furio to “please pray with me that this year will be easier” (34). In another letter, Terri expressed that writing poetry helps her get her feelings. But in the following sentence, her relationship with writing quickly shifts:

“Writing has triggered things, too...It has made me realize that I am scared of this place, this system had the power to hold me.” (Teri 37)

Again, another shift immediately takes place when Terri also admits that she wants people to know her story, and therefore, encloses a few journal entries she would like Furio's book. Although writing about their traumatic experiences forces women to re-live them, it also helps them to move forward and retain as well as exercise their voices. As we have seen in this section, and will continue to see throughout this project, composing narratives, poems, letters, and memoirs allows incarcerated mothers to undergo mental liberation from their current restraints and regain their agency as mothers.

## **PLANNING**

Using writing to (re)construct their identity as mothers is just the first step for incarcerated mothers to mother behind bars. In addition, these mothers use writing to make the progression from identifying as a mother to performing the role of motherhood. Even before incarcerated mothers may have had contact with their children, they have to begin planning. Planning consists of choosing the child's temporary caretaker, corresponding with social workers, and keeping up with the requirements to maintain parental rights. Participating in the temporary placement of their child is an essential part of managing motherhood for incarcerated mothers (Enos 2001). Making arrangements for a temporary home for the child during incarceration is a part of the mother's responsibility to plan. Studies show that when a mother is incarcerated, “approximately 55% of children transition to the care of their grandparents, 20% to their fathers, 15% to another relative or family friend, and 10% transition into the welfare

system” (Dallaire 2007). The texts I read confirmed these statistics, as the majority of the incarcerated mothers confessed that their children were being raised by the children’s maternal grandmothers:

“My mom has my children. She’s raising my children, and my two grandchildren. I have a real supportive family, and that helps too...” (DonAlda 58)

Some of the mothers did make attempts to place their child with the child’s father, but many of them were abandoned by their partners before the baby was born or shortly after. For example, Kristine, who became pregnant while out on bond, was abandoned by the father of her child and had no choice but to arrange for her child to be placed with her mother. The same thing happened to Taisie:

“Shortly after [the child’s father disappeared] a woman from Children’s Services told me that my baby would have to go into foster care...I figured I had a choice—foster care of my parents...I asked them to please help. My mom wrote back and said she’d talked to my dad he’d said yes.” (Taisie 170)

Unfortunately, research shows it is common for children to make at least one additional change in living arrangements during the first year of their mother’s imprisonment (Dallaire 2007):

“My sons Tom and Timothy were bounced around between my mom, sandy and my sister for about six to eight month. Some family friends also agreed to take them after I was in prison. My mom convinced me that it would be better for them to stay together and not be moved around so much.” (Marilyn Sanderson154)

No matter who the temporary caretaker is, prison parenting programs make it a priority to encourage parenting alliances between incarcerated parents and child caregivers. Incarcerated parents who reported a strong co-parenting alliance with caregivers enjoyed more frequent child contact (Loper and Tuerk 2011). Because caretakers have the upper-hand while the parent is incarcerated, it is imperative for incarcerated mothers to thoroughly assess the caretakers and maintain a respectful relationship with them. Conflict with a child’s caregiver can limit a

mother's involvement in decisions about her child's care (Loper and Tuerk 2011). Unfortunately, a few of the texts written by mothers in prison revealed that it is common for caretakers to cut off contact between mother and child, or to relinquish their responsibilities as caretaker:

“When I was seven months pregnant, he [her husband] disappeared...when my daughter was four months old, my father died. Fifteen days later, an attorney called, telling me that my mother had given my baby to the state, saying she would not raise a half-black baby by herself.” (Kebby)

According to staff at the Administration for Children Services provides incarcerated women with manuals describing their rights and responsibilities for retaining legal custody of their children who are in foster care (74); however, most mothers described the process of retaining legal rights to be extremely stressful. In order to regain custody of her child, she has to show she is involved in her child's life and is planning for the future (Strickman et al 2010). This particular process requires the mother to do a lot of writing. Not only is she writing letters to her child and caseworker, but she is asked to “make a list of every visit scheduled, of every phone call you make to the caseworker, your child, your child's caretaker, and of every letter, birthday card, or other mail you send,” even if she doesn't get a reply (NYC Administration for Children's Services 76). The texts I read reflected this advice:

“Then, fifteen days later, I got a phone call from my attorney telling me that my mother had given my baby to the state, and that I had to be in court in the next three days. I went to court and tried to fight it. My attorney told me to do well in prison, go to school, take parenting classes, basically to do whatever I could.” (Taisie 173)

I went to court, but the jail had given me the wrong courtroom number...I went to my mom's house to pick the kids. She told me I'd just lost custody of my kids, that the judge had signed them over to her that morning in court because I hadn't turned up.” (Francesca 138)

Although the majority of the mothers used their texts to discuss the stresses of mothering behind bars and the dehumanization they suffered in prison rather than detailing the procedures they took before entering prison, a few did mention their plans to reconnect with their children. Even incarcerated mothers with deceased children made current plans to be with them again:

“Facing death doesn’t scare me. I’m ready. I’m ready to be with my lord and savior and my babies, eternal life.” (Christina 147)

Regardless of what the plan consisted of, most mothers had initiated plans to be with their children again. A major part of those plans consisted of making contact with their children.

## **CONTACT**

It appeared that, more than anything, incarcerated mothers looked forward to talking and visiting with their children. Maintaining contact not only gives mothers a warm satisfaction, it also helps them to prepare for post-incarceration (Enos 2001, Poehlmann et al 2010, Berry & Smith-Mahdi 2006). However, maintaining contact with children can prove to be difficult. On the one hand, “children are a source of hope and motivation in coping with imprisonment. On the other, women articulate mothering as a source of distress since detachment from their children fosters guilt and anxiety” (Granja et. al 2015). Extended periods of separation may “promote the mother’s increased anxiety, dismay, and alienation from the children” (Granja et al 2015). In extreme cases, periods of separation can result in challenges to the “biologization” of the mothering role, the process through which children may no longer recognize their own (biological) mother (Granja et al 2015). Establishing and maintaining contact is key in preventing the disentanglement between mothering and biology, and between mothering and legalities. If mothers want to resume custody of their children after incarceration, lack of contact disrupts the parent-child relationship and diminishes a mother’s authority to make legal and educational decisions for her child from prison” (Loper and Tuerk 2011). The texts I read provide evidence that incarcerated mothers do put forth an effort to establish and maintain contact with their children and do so using a combination of phone calls, visits, and letters.

## **Phone calls**

Phone calls are thought to be one of the more common ways for mothers to maintain contact with their children (Berry & Smith-Mahdi 2006). With a sick daughter, Veronica has no choice but to rely on caretakers and friends to keep her updated. In one of her letters to Furio, Veronica thanks Furio for calling up to the hospital and passing the information back to her. However, many women wrote about their struggle to keep contact via phone calls because they are limited in the amount and duration due to increasing costs. Some mothers admitted that the cost of phone calls made it harder for them to talk to their children via telephone, and forced them to rely on other methods or programs to contact their children:

“I think it’s [Bedford Hills Storybook Project] a wonderful program because I’m so far away and I can’t see my kids that often. Collect calls are expensive. I don’t get to call that much.” (Amorel 98)

Since the mid-1980s, single-carrier collect-call systems have become the “norm for telephone service in prisons across the United States” (Melodia & Dickerson 2010). MCI, one of the telephone companies that provide telephone services to prisons, charges sixteen cents per minute, plus a three-dollar connection fee. According to Melodia and Dickerson, “the average prison phone call logs at nineteen minutes” (347). MCI also has a contract with the Department of Correctional Services (DOCS), stating they will give DOCS sixty percent of the profits from the money made on phone calls. Since 1996, DOCS “has made at least \$200 million off its contract’s commission” (Melodia & Dickerson 2010).

## **Visits**

Almost all of the mothers wrote about times their children came to visit them, or how they felt when they were looking forward to a visit. At the same time, mothers also wrote about the realistic pitfalls of prison visits. In what appears to be one of her initial letters to Furio, Terri shares the excitement she experienced when her son came to visit her that day. Along with this letter, Terri encloses her poem, “Silent Truce,” in which she reflects on the visit. After describing his attire and mentioning some of the things they chatted about like “his best bud Bret” and

“diving into the swimming pool,” she writes, “Home.../you never ask anymore/afraid of the repeated reply;” (Terri 35). It was common for mothers to feel pain at the end of their visits, not only because their child was leaving but because they knew their child understood that their mother could not come with them.

Even more heartbreaking is that some women do not receive visits. Emily lost her visitation rights permanently from 1996 until 2002 because of two substance abuse tickets (Emily 114). In other situations, children just may not come to visit often:

“Now, a lot of the older ones [children and grandchildren] come to visit. Some of the other ones don’t come to visit, though. I Don’t know why they don’t come. Sometimes, the older grandchildren will come by themselves for Christmas. But they really don’t visit me like they should. I guess money is tight.” (Martha 122)

Many things may interfere with an incarcerated mothers contact with her child, including cost, distance, time, and atmosphere. Mothers have to rely heavily on caretakers to *want* to take time out of their schedules to transport children back and forth to the prison, frequently. If the caretaker becomes overwhelmed by the procedures of maintaining contact, their stress may result in their limiting the child’s visits to see their parent and other forms of contact (Poehlmann 2005). In other circumstances, the caretaker may just not be well enough of financial privileged enough to take the child to visit their mother in prison. Both mothers and scholars frequently report how female facilities are scarce and usually located far from the prisoner’s families, making transportation too expensive for caretakers:

“I am in prison for 14 years. My family can’t afford to come up and see me...” (Star 67)

“It’s so great just to spend some time with my babies (12 &14) I am missing out on so much of their lives that it’s a gift, this time we spend together.” (Dierdre 68)

In addition, visitations do not always serve the reconnecting purpose they should. A few mothers reflected on or reported their child’s disinterest and confusion with having to visit their “mommies” in an unwelcoming place:

“My mother brings my daughter to see me at the clinton correctional facility for women in new jersey, where i had been sent from alderson. I am delirious. She looks so tall. I run up to kiss her. She barely responds. She is distant and standoffish” (Assata Shakur 206)

Not only do policies at jails, as well as federal and state prisons, affect the level and types of contact children have with their incarcerated parent (Poehlmann 2005), they also determine the amount of authority parents have over their children. Although longed for, child visits can be associated with emotional distress (Poehlmann 2005). One mother wrote about her visitation experience in Maryland corrections department, which recently instated a rule restricting physical contact between inmates and visitors until the end of their allotted hour (Hricko 2016):

“I can no longer hold my granddaughter like that [in her arms] during visits. Worse, my fellow inmates who are young mothers are not allowed to cuddle their babies and young children.” (Kimberly Hricko)

New rules and polices are constantly changing, making visits less intimate and more stressful. Those who are incarcerated have voiced their concerns about transportation costs, security conditions, and worry that the visit will be emotional upsetting for the children. In many cases visits are upsetting, for both parent and child because guards assume authority over the “inmate” and their position as a parent. A few mothers wrote about how visiting with their children in prison made them feel like less of a mother:

The guard points her index finger at my son and motions for him to come to her...In a rough voice she spits, ‘you need to stay in your seat, or I will end your visit. Do you understand...when I asked my son if he wanted to come again to visit me, he hung his head and said no.” (Kimberly 71)

Fortunately, many mothers credited programs such as “Get on the Bus,” “Kars 4 Kids,” and “Forever Family” for taking care of transportation issues, as well as helping their children have positive interactions with them when they visit. Although these programs are highly valued, it appears that it will not be long before physical visits are nonexistent. Prisons are gradually taking away face-to-face visitations and replacing them with Skype-like phone calls. In spite of

how current video visits have proved to be far from flawless, video users are charged \$10 for a 20-minute virtual visitation, regardless of if it is fully successful or not. Prisoners and families of prisoners find this new system problematic for a couple of reasons. As prisoners anticipate the arrival of their friends and family, they look forward to making eye contact and holding hands (Smith IV 2016). Studies have shown “that prisoners with visits have a 13% lower rate of recidivism than ones who weren’t visited behind bars” (Bozelko 2016). Nonetheless, prisons are still moving towards an elimination of in-person visits. For incarcerated mothers, this means looking for intimacy in other forms of communication.

### **Letters**

Correspondence between mothers and their children not only demonstrates that there is a relationship, it also shows the mother and child’s initiative to maintain this relationship serves as a tool for both parties to perform and preserve their roles. Incarcerated mothers do have access to phone calls and sometimes visits, but access to and duration of those methods are limited in prison—the length of a letter is not. In the majority of the texts I analyzed, incarcerated mothers referenced letters they wrote or received from their children, or at least discussed their children in letters they wrote to others. For example, when describing her children in her narrative Mammie wrote, “They [her children] write to me, send me pictures” (Mamie 87). These incarcerated mothers’ frequent correspondence to and about their children align with the findings from multiple studies. In their report of studies assessing contact between child and incarcerated parent, Human Ecologists Julie Poehlmann Danielle Dallaire (psychology), Ann Booker Loper (education), and Leslie D. Shear (law), found that more letters were associated with less child depression and somatic complaints, and that even teachers noted benefits of mail correspondence for children with incarcerated parents (Poehlmann et al 2010). Additionally, a 2007 survey of state and federal prisoners in the United States revealed that more than 52% of incarcerated parents had mail contact with their children, compared to 38% who reported monthly phone calls, and 42% who reported having visits with their children (Poehlmann et al 2010, 578).

The same survey found that imprisoned mothers more frequently reported mail correspondence with children (65% vs. 51%) than did imprisoned fathers (Poehlmann et al 2010). In contrast to visits, Poehlmann et al's assessment found there were no studies that reported negative effects of mail contact. In fact, incarcerated mothers associated mail correspondence with lowering their stress and improving their bond with both children and caretakers. In a letter to Furio, Terri explains that although her son, who is 16 at the time of the visit, but only 2 ½ when she was incarcerated they are still close:

“I write to him all the time, though, and have done so since before he could read. He saves all of my letters and cards.” (Terri 30)

For other incarcerated mothers who also have children not old enough to read, they usually write letters to the caretakers inquiring about their children or really just anyone they write to in general. Many of the women who wrote letters to Furio told her about their children, even if she was just asking them questions about their crimes. Along with children and their caretakers, incarcerated mothers also write letters to keep in contact with their lawyers. While reading the letters in Furio's text, I noticed that the mothers discussed or referenced their children when writing to their lawyers. At times this was to advocate for their nurturing character; at other times it was because an incident involving their child was the reason they were incarcerated:

“First off, Tony, just as Trent is now, was my whole world...I should probably tell you that I do not feel responsible for Tony's death. But as a mother I feel guilt because I wasn't able to get him out” (Kristine 57).

In some instances, mothers speculated that their letters were never sent, but they still wrote them:

“I do not know, my dear girl, whether I shall be allowed to see, or write to you again. REMEMBER YOUR MOTHER. In these few words is contained the best advice I can give you. You have seen me happy in fulfilling my duties, and in giving assistance to those who were in distress.—It is the only way of being happy.” (Madame Roland 13)

Catherine Virginia Baxley kept a notebook in which she wrote letters and journal entries. Her journal entries included many reflections about her son, “her one and only child” (183). Alicia Partnoy, too, kept a notebook in which she poured out the thoughts dancing around her head, sometimes via poems other times via prose. The subject of her daughter was quite pervasive in most of her entries, as is the case with a lot of other mothers. Sometimes mothers would send these poems to their children, letting them know they were thinking of them even outside of the time they wrote letters to them.

### **ACTIVISM**

Scheffler (2002) makes the argument that, “all women’s prison texts are political, each speaking uniquely for silenced women behind bars and prison walls” (XXI). She goes on to add that “many women prison writers are political activists who speak for fellow victims of society’s repression” (XXI). I found this to be especially true of incarcerated mothers. Although scholars have not listed activism as a method of mothering behind bars, I am defining it as such here. While reading texts written by incarcerated mothers I noticed that a significant amount of mothers reported taking action or made plans to take action as a result of the way they were treated in prison. I found that women who were pregnant in prison appeared to be the most prominent activists because they immediately had to fight for their rights to be a mother since they gave birth behind bars. I imagine that in the future activism will be more widely credited as a form of incarcerated motherhood. At the very least, it will be acknowledged as a step in identity (re)construction, as it is a huge step to bettering themselves as well as improving conditions for themselves and other incarcerated women.

It appeared that a few women were imprisoned because of their activism, but it wasn’t something they were ashamed of or planned on stopping. Madame Roland who was imprisoned in 1793, took on an activist role in letters to her daughter, not defending on going into detail of her crime, but rather, encouraging her daughter to always stand up for her beliefs:

“Perhaps you are not fated, and I hope you are not, to undergo trials so severe as mine; but there are others against which you ought to be equally on your guard. Serious and

industrious habits are the best preservative against every danger...” (Madame Roland 14)

“The reason is so very simple:/I could not/keep from fighting for the happiness/of those who are our brothers our sisters.” (Alicia Partnoy195)

Other women not only used their writing to explain their activist choices but to continue them. As a victim of mental illness, Christina feels she can make a difference by using her story to educate other women of the dangers of undiagnosed psychological disorders:

“If you can show anything to anyone, show people that evil and illness are not the same thing.” (Christina 149)

While serving time behind bars, putting one’s story out can play a huge role in performing activism. For Christian, warning people of the role mental illness played in crime meant preventing the death of other innocent children. With this same idea in mind, Elizabeth takes this work a lot further. Not only does she use her acquired skills to help other prisoners with their legalities, she spreads her knowledge and experience to the public to joining advocacy groups and publishing her work:

“I became a member of the prison Advocacy Network, a South Carolina-based group several years ago. I coauthored an article for them entitled “Leveling the Playing Field... I want people to know what life in prison is like and some of the ways someone can end up here.” (Elizabeth 94)

With little money for legalities, all most incarcerated mothers can do is get their stories out in an effort to help themselves and others like them. Although these women take action to address a broad range of issues, all their efforts, ultimately, revert back to improving motherhood behind bars. Engaging in activism helps prevent other mothers from having to mother behind bars, as well as initiates the necessary steps needed to reunite incarcerated mothers with their children. Kristine, for example, engaged in activism via writing. In Kristine’s initial letter to

Furio she explains her intentions are to get her story publicly aired in order to get her case re-investigated (Kristine). Kristine articulates that her main motivation is her two sons:

“Ms. Furio, I am trying to fight to be able to mourn and grieve for my baby, Tony, to be able to visit his grave; and I am fighting to be with my other son, who needs his mom.”

(Kristine 51)

Unfortunately, like Kristine, many incarcerated mothers become activists as a result of their rights being violated. Many of the incarcerated women referenced in this project confirmed they had their human rights violated multiple times during prison:

“I don’t think anybody knows how demoralizing and how humiliating it can be to be in prison...I understand that what I did before was wrong, but I damn nearly died in prison, and truly I don’t think anybody deserves that.” (Anna 134)

Woman’s human rights activist and legal scholar Jenni Vainik argues “from their inception, American penal institutions have treated women differently than men...the punishment of women was typically implicated women’s reproductive and parental rights” (672). Vainik goes on to declare, “the manner in which penal policies have affected such rights has strongly depended on a woman’s race” (672). Although it has been many years since the first female reformatories were created that allowed the unequal treatment of incarcerated women, and we have implemented many policies and provisions to protect prisoners’ rights, Vainik reports female inmates are still routinely “denied the support necessary to achieve healthy pregnancies and maintain relationships with their children while in prison” (677). In addition to sometimes refusing to provide incarcerated mothers with prenatal care, penal institutions also deny mothers other resources, such as doulas or proper health evaluations that could aid in assuring they undergo a safe delivery:

“I requested the doulas to be there, and they weren’t. I didn’t appreciate that. When the nurse saw the doulas, she told them to leave or they would be arrested.” (Tabitha)

“I spent my first month in prison being sick. Health Care told me my ‘illness’ was a stomach flu and my other ‘symptoms’ due to stress, but then they said I was pregnant.”  
(Kebby)

“I was there about a month before I actually saw a doctor. I didn’t have vitamins there, and I had no prenatal care. I didn’t really complain if I was in pain or anything, because the infirmary was real nasty...Then one day, when I was seven months pregnant, the guards called me down. They shackled my stomach and my feet and took me to see an OB-GYN.” (Olivia 30)

Even worse, a couple of women reported being forced to give birth before they felt they were ready. More than one woman claimed they had been forced to either be induced or to have a C-section:

“They gave me a Pitocin, but it wasn’t working. Later, in the middle of the night, the doctor came in to check on me...Then he said, ‘Well, if you don’t move any more by tomorrow, we’re going to have to do a C-section.’” (Olivia 33)

As shown above, protecting the rights of incarcerated mothers becomes especially important for pregnant mothers in prison. For women who give birth while incarcerated, their first interaction with their child is limited. Women are given about 24 hours with their child before the baby is taken away from the mother or the mother is taken back to their prison. These initial moments are extremely precious for any mother and especially for incarcerated mothers who know it will be a long stretch before they are able to interact with their child again. Therefore, some incarcerated mothers take extreme measures to spend more time with their child:

“Refusing to eat gave me a total of three days with my baby.” (Kebby 90)

“But the next morning the guards told me that I was going to be leaving that night, that it was prison policy that a woman can only spend twenty-four hours with her baby before

she's brought back to prison. I stopped eating, because I wanted my blood sugar to be so low that they wouldn't be able to check me out of the hospital." (Taisie 172)

In 2005, the Young Mothers Organizing Project at the Center for Young Women's Development (CYWD) and the Girls Justice Initiative went to San Francisco's chief juvenile probation officer in hope of making the bill of rights a policy. Their goal was to break the cycle of incarceration by instating the Incarcerated Young Mother's Bill of Rights to keep families together.

As mentioned in the planning section, mothers are encouraged to take measures to plan for their children's future, but even when they have done so their parental rights are still sometimes terminated. Termination of parental rights often resulted in the mothers taking action. According to a toolkit created by the Federal Interagency Working Group for Children of Incarcerated Parents, "if a child has been in foster care 15 out of the most recent 22 months, the child welfare agency is required by law to initiate termination of parental rights" (17). However, this time can be extended to 18 months if an incarcerated parent can show "there is a substantial probability that the child will be returned to them within the extended time period or they can show reasonable services were not provided to them" (Strickman et al 2010). If the parent fails to reunite with their child then their parental rights will be terminated and a referral of child for adoption will be filed (Strickman et al 2010).

"The social worker is recommending termination because I am here. I can't care for them like I want to from in here, so they are trying to terminate my parental rights." (Tabitha 87)

In situations like these, the mothers reported exercising their right to allow a relative, friend, or stranger to take legal guardianship of their child, which suspends but does not terminate their parental rights (Strickman et al 2010). But even then, agreements were not always honored. As a result, mothers wrote about being betrayed by both the system and her family members who "coerced" her into allowing her parental rights to be terminated:

"When I went to the agency to visit my son, I was told that my cousin and his wife wanted to adopt my son and that, due to the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families

Act (ASFA), my parental rights were being terminated...Intimidated by ACS and the long court process, and believing that ultimately I would lose my son and not be allowed to see him again, I agreed to an open adoption.” (Carole E. 85)

“My attorney told me that Elaine’s foster parents wanted to adopt her, and that they would let me have contact with her only if I gave up the appeal...Her adoptive parents haven’t let me talk to her since I got out of prison in spring 2010... I asked about their promise, they said that they didn’t think that I was ever going to get out.” (Taisie 174)

Un-honored agreements are not uncommon and neither is the feeling of having no agency over one’s own child. Many of the incarcerated mothers, especially pregnant mothers, described situations in where they were aware of their rights, but did not feel fit to dispute the unethical treatment they were experiencing.

“Today my sons are seventeen and twenty. I haven’t seen them since they were about two and five. I don’t see them because I think their adopted parents feel it’s better for them this way.” (Marilyn Sanderson 155)

“My resentment [towards ASFA and the child welfare system] has fueled my works as an advocate for other mothers who may not know their rights or know how to interpret the ASFA laws.” (Carole E. 87)

Due to the frequent violation of rights, dehumanizing treatment, and lack of advocacy on behalf of the penal institution, many incarcerated mothers use the few resources they do have to become activists during and after their release. Incarcerated mothers raise their voices, share their stories, and offer their assistance in making a change to prison conditions. Activism may not be a part of motherhood for traditional mothers, but it certainly central for mothers in prison. Their circumstances are much more detrimental to their relationships with their children, and if they want to uphold those relationships and secure their identity as mother they have found that they need to become activists for themselves and other mothers.

## *Conclusion*

Overall, this project demonstrates how mothers in prison heavily rely on writing to perform their role as mothers. In the case of incarcerated motherhood, writing is critical in maintaining one's identity as mother, communicating with children and caretakers, and providing proof that one is fulfilling her role as mother. In addition, it appears that incarcerated mothers have also used writing to invent other aspects of mothering. The 37 texts analyzed in this project prove that writing, as a tool, can overcome distance, time, and stigmas. More importantly, this project echoes and confirms previous scholarship, which argues that the relationship between rhetoric and motherhood is complex; as sometimes rhetoric is used against mothers to manipulate public opinion (Rousseau 2013), while at other times motherhood is used as a form of rhetoric to gain agency and favor amongst the same public (Buchanan 2013). Comparatively, my project reveals that incarcerated mothers have (re)appropriated the rhetoric used against them by writing to create or boost their credibility as mothers, which in turn places them in a better light amongst *their* public—correctional officers, parole boards, and judges. Uniquely, and simultaneously, incarcerated mothers also use rhetoric to gain acceptance in the private sphere. This is an area we have not investigated much, because women tend to have more agency and authority in the private sphere with their children than they usually do in the public sphere.

Although this project has helped incarcerated mothers shed the stigma of “bad” mother, it is still in question whether or not their writing has helped liberate them from the limitations of gender roles. Along with pointing out that motherhood as a rhetorical device gives women the available means to participate in public discourse, Buchanan states that this technique simultaneously reinforces damaging stereotypes. Likewise, communications scholars who study transnational motherhood (Uy-Tioco 2007, Thomas & Lim 2011, Chib, Arul et al 2014) have reported that mobile phones, mainly text messaging, help distant mothers maintain their spots in the realm of motherhood, while simultaneously repressing them into strict gender roles. For example, Uy-Tioco finds that by asking their children if they completed their homework,

reminding them to take their vitamins, and making sure they ate breakfast, transnational mothers utilize cell phones to engage in the traditional nurturing role. In other words, even though transitional mothers are now the breadwinners for their families, they are still expected to take on a feminine persona. As mentioned earlier, literacy is associated with upward mobility in terms of mental health and economic status, but can literacy help one advance past gender barriers?

Although incarcerated mothers do not leave their children for better job opportunities, like most transnational mothers do, incarcerated mothers do have a lot of similarities to immigrant mothers, such as being physically distant from their families, having to rely on caretakers, having limited communication with their children, and being forced to negotiate their role as mothers. The major difference is that incarcerated mothers do not have cell phones, however, they use letters in the same way immigrant mothers utilize text messages. Even though my project shows that incarcerated mothers use writing to also resist stigmas, and retain a spot in motherhood, it was not explicitly clear if they conformed to traditional gender roles. Most of the incarcerated mothers felt as if they had to spend more time (re)establishing their credibility as mothers, and therefore, focused on discussing their efforts to do so rather than sharing the exact conversations they had with their child. But I imagine that since prisons strip women of their femininity, autonomy, and ability to mother in a hands-on way, they may be one of the few distant mothers who are able to resist the repression of gender roles.

Moving forward, it would be of use to not only interview distant mothers like communication scholars have been doing (Uy-Tioco 2007, Chib et al 2014), but it would also prove beneficial to actually analyze the texts mothers directly send to their children, which has yet to be done. Rhetoric scholars have already investigated the positive effects writing has on women in prison, we can do the same for mothers in prison and their children. If we analyzed the letters written by incarcerated mothers to their children, we would provide an opportunity to see if using writing to mother from afar can in fact liberate distant mothers from traditional motherhood and gender roles. In performing such a project, we could also answer some questions regarding literacy, such as does the mother's confidence in her writing skills affect her

desire to reach out to her children via letters? Can an improvement in literacy skills for both mother and children be attributed to correspondence via letters? In what ways does letter writing carryover to other skills incarcerated mothers may need? Examining writing's role in performing incarcerated motherhood has already shown how a marginalized group of mothers wrote their way into motherhood, continuing this exploration has potential to demonstrate how incarcerated mothers can also write their way out of limiting gender roles.

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