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**The Available Means of Motherhood: Writing, Resistance and Childrearing  
Behind Bars**

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**The Available Means of Motherhood: Writing, Resistance and Childrearing  
Behind Bars**

**by**

**Jazmine Ja’Nicole Wells**

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## **Dedication**

Dedicated to my grandfather and best friend, Roy D Wells Jr., from the “little girl always playing on the computer.” This is the finished product.

## **Acknowledgements**

I want to take a moment recognize all of the mothers behind bars who continue to mother despite the constraints of their current circumstances. I want to give a special thank you to Lieutenant Anthony Hardee and the mothers at Caldwell County Jail in Lockhart, TX, this project would not exist without you.

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And of course, thank you to my parents, Roy III and Vicky, and my sister, Ja’Niece, for offering me unconditional support.

## **Abstract**

### **The Available Means of Motherhood: Writing, Resistance and Childrearing**

#### **Behind Bars**

by

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My dissertation, “The Available Means of Motherhood: Writing, Resistance and Childrearing Behind Bars,” focuses on various acts of writing in which incarcerated mothers not only (re)claim their right to motherhood and literacy, but, in doing so, (re)define what it means to be a capable and loving mother. Incarcerated mothers, who are largely poor and of color, recognize the need to improve their writing skills; at the same time, the fact of their imprisonment makes it difficult for them to do so. Responding to a call for literacy studies to investigate how and why marginalized groups improve their literacy skills, my dissertation examines the sacrifices incarcerated mothers make to become literate, the rhetorical moves they make to resist normativity, and the negotiations they make in order to tell their stories. Through my work in the prisons themselves as well as my research in the American Prison Writing Archive, I conduct a detailed analysis of these women's letters and poems, their narratives of crime, pain and identity, and their appeals to parole boards. My analysis reveals that these writers continue to develop literacy practices so that they can write through their trauma, demand change, produce counterstories about their incarceration, and establish relationships both inside and outside of prison. My dissertation offers a criterion for how mothers outside the white hegemonic archetype of motherhood use writing to (re)claim their right to motherhood and literacy.

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## **Chapter One: The Institution of Motherhood and the Criminalization of Incarcerated Mothers**

In 2013, my professor Dr. Colón generously designed and proposed a “Prison Literature” undergraduate course to our department chair. Upon approval, Dr. Colón invited me to participate in the course as a directed pedagogy and take on a teacher’s assistant role. His efforts were a result of his interest in literature composed by members of marginalized groups and my reoccurring concern for teaching a course closely connected to my research. At the time I started graduate school, I knew I wanted to study the rhetoric of prisons, with a particular focus on the writing produced in prisons. I also knew teaching a course related to one’s research was a benefit of becoming a professor. But I had never taken or heard of a college-level writing course about prisons. The Prison Literature course served to provide me with an example of what such a course would look like.

Students in the Prison Literature course were assigned five memoirs all written by authors during their incarceration or shortly after their release. While these memoirs drove the course, we also tapped into pinto poetry and Foucauldian theory to inform students’ understanding of prisons and prison writing as a genre. Taking place at a private institution, I wasn’t surprised when students in the course initially expressed distance from the texts. Most students admitted they did not have any encounters with prisons, aside from what the media portrayed. Students entered the course under the impression prisons contributed to society by keeping us safe from large hyper-violent black and brown men. Dr. Colón supplemented the assigned texts with lectures on the racial motivations of prisons, as well as information about the author’s lives before and after prison. Consuming this information, students began to move away from their negative assumptions and begin to feel empathy for people victimized by the system.



As the semester unfolded, students in our Prison Literature course were transformed by reading the memoirs written by men who were pushed into prison by way of poverty, racism, abandonment, and other factors outside of their control. Students grew to look up to Jimmy Santiago Baca, they praised Luis J. Rodriguez, and they formed a connection with Jack Abbott. Students went from asking, why do these “criminals” get to publish books in prison, to how could the prison system see these men as criminals when they never had a chance? Attempting to answer the latter question, students became more critical of the U.S. prison system, questioning the institution’s architecture, policies, and methods for rehabilitation. They never seemed to question the gender makeup of the U.S. prison population though. The assigned texts made it clear prisons predominately target black and brown men, which is accurate as 1 in 3 black men, and 1 and 6 Latino men are likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime compared to 1 in 17 white men (*The Sentencing Project*). The five assigned texts all written by men, gave the false—but common—impression that women aren’t victims of mass incarceration. And surprisingly, students never asked, where are the texts written by women?

The absence of women in a Prison Literature course pestered me. To supplement this gap in the course, I brought the voices of incarcerated women into the classroom. At the time, this was pretty difficult. I had to rely heavily on the website *Women and Prison: A Site for Resistance*, Judith Scheffler’s (2002) *Wall Tappings: Women's Prison Writings, 200 A.D. to the Present*, and Wally Lamb et al.’s (2004) *Couldn't Keep it to Myself: Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Institution*. These were three of the few sources that published texts solely written by incarcerated women. There were plenty of memoirs, collections of poetry, and anthologies dedicated to texts written by incarcerated men, but books written by incarcerated women just were not as commonly published or circulated. Nonetheless, I took the narratives,

letters, and poems I could find, and used them to expand the Prison Literature course. I wanted students to see the 200,000+ women in prison. I wanted students to see women's writing. I needed students to see the difference between women's experiences and those of the men we were reading. Like many people, students believed prisons were just for men, and in their defense, prisons were initially built just for men. For this reason, I also brought in criminology and sociology scholarship to demonstrate how these facilities do not accommodate women's needs. As expected, students were shocked. Students could not believe women were commonly separated from their families and transferred to other states because women's facilities are scarce, or that prisons limit the amount of hygiene products women can receive. Students' willingness to continuously be informed is what I appreciated most about this course. Students' lack of knowledge about women in prison is what was most productive about this course.

That Prison Literature course is a direct reflection of the way in which rhetoric and writing as a field has engaged with women's voices. Thus, similar to my role in the Prison Literature course my task here is to bring the voices of women. But this time, I'm bringing incarcerated mothers to the field. While women are overall less likely than men to be incarcerated, the women's state prison population is actually growing faster than the men's. Currently, there are 225,060 women incarcerated in state and federal prisons, jails, juvenile detention centers, and immigration detention centers (*Prison Policy*). The women's confinement population was 26,378 in year 1980 and rose to 225,060 in year 2017—this is a 750% increase from 1980 (*The Sentencing Project*). Many of these women are women of color. Black women are incarcerated at twice the rate of white women, and Latinx women are incarcerated at 1.3 times the rate of white women (*The Sentencing Project*). A large portion of these women are also mothers. As of 2016, 80% of women in jail are mothers to minor children,

and as of 2017, 60% of mothers in state prisons are mothers to minor children (*The Sentencing Project*). It is important to note that these statistics do not account for the possible amount of mothers in federal prisons, and two these statistics also do not account for women who are mothers to adult children. Meaning, there could be a lot more mothers behind bars who are not included in these numbers.

The writing produced behind bars serves as a popular site for research across many disciplines, but the conversations regarding this writing is consistently dominated by men. The texts published by incarcerated writers are widely written by men and the scholarship discussing the writing that takes place during and about incarceration too concentrates on men. Scholars in fields such as rhetoric, literacy studies, sociology, and law have recognized the need to draw attention to women in jails and prisons, however their work does not largely prioritize mothers. Research in rhetoric and literacy studies references the writing workshops hosted in women's facilities to present the ways in which women use reflective writing to mentally liberate themselves from their state of incarceration. Research in sociology and law highlights the increase in mothers behind bars to illustrate the effect of maternal incarceration on children. While existing scholarship in sociology does acknowledge that mothers use writing to communicate with their children, which I say more about below, this writing has yet to be analyzed. In order to supplement conversations regarding writing behind bars, this dissertation centralizes incarcerated mothers and their writing practices.

### **Making Space**

Almost three decades ago now, Lunsford (1991), Glenn (1997), Wilson Logan (1999), and Ritchie & Ronald (2001) paved the way for recovering the voices of women rhetors, and carved out a space for the field to include more voices from marginalized groups. Shortly after,

the women in our field produced publications drawing attention to the ways in which women succeed in the profession (Baliff et al. 2008), have taught rhetoric (Enoch 2008), and apply feminist research practices (Schell et al. 2010, Buchanan & Ryan 2010, Jones Royster & Kirsch 2012). Scholars like Buchanan (2103) followed up by contributing the rhetorical practices of mothers, Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015) added the voices and stories of underrepresented women of color, and Jacobi (2014, 2015) and Hinshaw (2015, 2018) went into the prisons and circulated writing from women. Because of these women's efforts to discover and recover the women rhetors who have been erased and suppressed, our field is now informed and shaped by the rhetoric practiced by women of color, women who identify as LGBTQ+, women with disabilities and exceptionalities, and women across different social classes. Our field has also begun to acknowledge that these women often times fit into one or more of these groups, which is significant when considering their writing practices.

Looking at writing composed by women in prison, in particular, moves our field towards an understanding of how one's intersecting identities informs their writing and their experience with writing. Kathryn Watterson's (1973) *Women in Prison: Inside the Concrete Womb* introduced scholars to the world of women in prison, prompting scholars to further explore women's identities and their connections to the prison environment and public perception. Scholars in rhetoric and writing continued Watterson's work by prompting women in prison to explore and construct their identities via writing. This scholarship further supported the unique experiences of women in prison that Watterson's work exposed readers too. For example, writing while in prison serves a different purpose for women than it does for men. Men, according to Scheffler (2002) have the "luxury of verbal word play with the word freedom," while through writing women come to realize they have never been free (20). Women, then,

write to confirm their sense of worth, to better understand themselves, to exercise their voice that's been suppressed by a male-centered society. Reflective writing, especially when shared in writing workshops, allows women to compose a self-representation that can counter existing narrow representations of criminalized women (Jacobi & Hinshaw 68). For black women in particular, writing aids in this recovery, as it "allows women to seek their own understanding of why they are in prison and confront any other personal demons they may have" (Willingham 62). In sum, writing for women in prison is empowering and rehabilitative. Knowing writing allows women in prison to better understand the layers of their identities and how these layers inform their experiences before and during incarceration raises the question, what does writing do for mothers?

### **Mothers in Prison**

The influx in mothers in prison has garnered attention predominantly from sociology, criminology, law, and recently rhetoric. Upon incarceration, mothers are reduced to criminals who betrayed their nation and put their children in danger. Not only are they physically torn from their children, they are also socially stripped of their titles as mothers. The stigma of incarceration erases these mothers efforts to mother their children prior to incarceration, as well as the societal pressures and discrimination that lead these mothers to commit crimes. Ignoring the reasons that the amount of marginalized mothers being sent to prison has increased, gives way for the criminal justice system and the public to accuse these mothers of being inadequate and willingly leaving their children. To stop the public from placing blame solely on mothers who are victimized by the criminal justice system, research has shifted focus from the strain incarceration places on the child to the systematic barriers incarcerated mothers face before, during, and after prison.

For example, Dorothy Roberts (2017) untangles the working relationship between prisons and foster care systems that thrust mothers and children into a continual cycle of poverty, Carolyn Sufrin (2018) looks at the reproductive injustice that takes place in jails and prisons, and Lynn Haney (2013) examines how mother-child prisons both help and hinder mothers who are raising their children behind bars. Phyllis E. Berry and Helen M. Eigenberg (2003) draw attention to the stress mother-child separation places on mothers, and Chandera von Weller et al. (2018) offer a platform for incarcerated mothers to share how they simultaneously and successfully work through incarceration, addiction, and motherhood. Additionally, Sandra Enos (2003), Phyllis Berry & J. Smith-Mahdi (2006), and Rafaela Granja et al. (2015) investigate the ways incarcerated mothers perform motherhood from behind bars, despite patriarchal ideologies of motherhood undermining the status of incarcerated mothers.

In all of the aforementioned fields, writing has come up as a tool used by incarcerated mothers to (re)claim motherhood. Through writing, mothers behind bars are able to establish an identity as mother, participate in the placement of their children, maintain contact with their children, and communicate with caseworkers and caretakers (Enos 2001, Berry & Eigenberg 2003, Berry & Smith-Mahdi 2006). Because writing serves as such a significant tool for incarcerated mothers, Sparks et al. (2017) designed a letter-writing workshop to help incarcerated mothers develop or reinforce their roles as mothers via letters to their children. The writing-group provided incarcerated mothers with writing prompts such as, “write about one or more activities that you have been doing while you have been in prison,” “describe a positive role model in your life,” and “ask your child(ren) how they view relationship...” and “write to your child(ren) about the reason you are in jail” (363). These prompts helped mothers to express feelings towards their children or at least prepare for conversations they wanted to have in the

future. As many incarcerated mothers often state, contacting or regaining contact with their child(ren) after separation is emotionally difficult.

Existing scholarship has been instrumental in debunking myths about mothers in prison, and asserting that incarcerated mothers' struggles to mother are not solely caused by incarceration, albeit still enforcing incarceration has detrimental consequences for mothers. Classism, sexism, and racism have all made it difficult for poor mothers of color to make a decent living, and they therefore have to find alternative methods to provide for their children. Poverty coupled with the low literacy levels and stricter sentencing laws support the trend in drug, property, and public disorder crimes women commonly commit. Arresting mothers for stealing food in order to take care of their children places blame on the individual and erases the structural forces oppressing mothers. Current scholarship illuminates these structural forces by presenting the ways in which prisons run off systematic racism and actively target black and brown people, especially poor mothers of color. To accurately expose all of the forces working against poor mothers of color, it is also imperative that we keep in mind that correctional facilities are a mere tool in a larger assemblage of power. The institution of motherhood, I believe, is the powerhouse orchestrating the war on poor mothers of color.

### **The Institution of Motherhood**

Adrienne Rich distinguished two meanings of motherhood: “the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13). According to Rich, the institution of motherhood is male-defined and designed to enforce a restrictive ideology of motherhood in order to control and punish women's bodies. This restrictive ideology of motherhood is what Lindal Buchanan refers to as the cultural code of motherhood. Buchanan

uses Roland Barthes's term 'cultural code' to explain, "a cultural code (such as motherhood) communicates but cloaks prevailing power relations; through constant repetition, it makes those relations seem normal, eternal, objective, self-evident expressions of the 'way things are' (Buchanan 5). In order to become enculturated in the code of motherhood one must learn the standards of motherhood. If mothers refuse to learn the code of motherhood, they are viewed as deviant and are punished. Using Richard Weaver's notion of god and devil terms, Buchanan creates The Woman/Mother continuum to visually communicate the code of motherhood. The mother—god term—has children, remains in the home, shows love, empathy, and moral, provides protection, nourishment, and altruism, and serves as a symbol for the reproductive body and the nation. The woman—devil term—is childless, works outside of the home, is self-centered, materialistic, immoral, exhibits extreme emotion, self-indulgence, and represents the sensual body.

To further demonstrate the difference between the woman and the mother, Buchanan traces the U.S. evolution of mother. Buchanan's historical context offers an explanation as to how the seventeenth and eighteenth century scientific paradigm shift from a one sex model to a two sex model led men to code sexual desire as masculine and sexual disinterest as feminine (Buchanan17). As motherhood evolved, feminine characteristics became linked to maternal instinct and sensibility (Buchanan 18). The eighteenth century also coded mothers as educators. In French philosopher Marie-Jean-Antoine Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet's proposal for universal schooling, he endorsed "the idea that women must be educated as natural educators of their children" (Levine et al. 2012). Around the same time period, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Treatise on Education* re-constructed childrearing as a task well-suited for mothers. Since the female body was responsible for creating life, and women were innately maternal, pure, and self-



sacrificing, mothers became responsible for producing the future male citizens. Nineteenth and early twentieth literature reinforced these mothering practices to ensure mother's raised literate children prepared for school (Richey & Evans 2013).

In creating strict maternal practices, such as serving as the child's natural educator, men are able to produce the institution of motherhood to regulate women's bodies. The institution of motherhood purposely ignores intersectional differences, such as race, class, and gender that prevent some mothers from operating according to the set maternal practices. For example, unjust circumstances have forced black mothers to work outside of the home, when white women had the luxury of being homemakers. In attempt to balance their responsibilities in the public sphere and the private sphere, black mothers invented other maternal practices, such as othermothering. While othermothering allows black mothers to both financially provide for their children and utilize their community in order to share the responsibility of raising them, operating in the public sphere and at times being childless, pushes black mothers from the mother side of the continuum to the woman side. For black mothers in particular, sliding from one end of the continuum to the other is punishable by jail time, which I say more about later. Enforcing these restrictions, motherhood is, according to Buchanan, "coded in ways that disregard intersectional differences, create institutional impediments for nontraditional women, and produce serious rhetorical consequences" (7).

Eager to dismantle the institution of motherhood, scholars have located the ways in which mothers challenge the patriarchal ideology of motherhood, as well as how marginalized mothers use intensive mothering practices to resist being labeled deviant mothers. Buchanan, for instance, analyzes three case studies to demonstrate how women use motherhood as a topos to gain access to the public sphere. What Buchanan observes though, is that the topos of motherhood does

provide women a persuasive means to resist and revise dominant cultural systems and gender codes, but it also reflects them. Buchanan's findings support Rich's notion that the institution of motherhood is both a site of oppression and liberation. Feminist maternal scholars in particular focus on identifying how mothers find liberation through their mothering practices. For instance, Blaire Wilson Toso's (2013) work with a Latinx mother who wanted to improve her literacy skills, used her new literacy knowledge to equip her daughters to resist future pressures from the institution of motherhood, even though she had to conform to some of them to do so.

Scholarship on the institution of motherhood consistently shows motherhood was never meant to include poor mothers of color. The expectations for mothers to be pure, wed, educated, innately nurturing, and designated to the private sphere are all damaging to poor mothers of color in particular because social and cultural restraints don't allow them to live up to these expectations. Mothers excluded from the institution of motherhood are automatically deemed deviant. When poor mothers of color take measures to implement maternal practices that enable them to perform motherhood against the norms, their mothering practices are labeled deficit. As a result, poor mothers of color are often criminalized for their inability or lack of desire to conform. The ways in which these criminalized mothers continue to mother despite being separated from their children is significantly understudied in the field of rhetoric and writing.

As mentioned above, the fields of criminology, sociology, and law have conducted ethnographic studies identifying how incarcerated mothers perform motherhood via letters, phone calls, and visits. The field of rhetoric has recently joined these fields in emphasizing the social and cultural barriers that put incarcerated mothers at a disadvantage when trying to enact mothering. All of this scholarship rightfully operates under the assumption that patriarchal ideologies structure policies, systems, and institutions in a way that "justifiably" punishes poor

mothers of color. However, we have yet to zoom in on how the institution of motherhood continues to punish and regulate incarcerated mothers while they are behind bars. We have come to a consensus that the institution of motherhood has produced strict maternal practice commonly referred to as good mothering—also referenced as intensive mothering by Sharon Hayes, patriarchal mothering by Andrea O’Reilly, and new momism by Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels—that renders the criminalization of non-white, non-upper middle class, non-religious, non-wed, non-educated mothers possible. But we also need to continue to track how the institution of motherhood continues to suppress incarcerated mothers while they are institutionalized. More importantly, we need to highlight how they both embrace and reject these strict maternal practices as an act of resistance.

Rafaela Granja and colleagues initiate this work in their article “Mothering From Prison and Ideologies of Intensive Parenting: Enacting *Vulnerable Resistance*.” Their work both explores how, “the norms implicit in ‘intensive mothering’ are intertwined and mutually support and coproduce the values, rationalities, and tenured practices of being a mother in prisons in Portugal,” as well as how these mothers enact a vulnerable resistance to penal policies by still taking a primary role in their children’s lives (Granja et al. 1213). In examining the mothering practices of incarcerated mothers with intensive mothering in mind, Granja et al. find that incarcerated mothers’ efforts to mother “reflect both the plurality of mothering’ experiences and the role of other kin in caretaking” (Granja et al. 1227). While Granja et al.’s work predominantly focuses on incarcerated mothers’ abilities to preserve their role as primary caretaker, it is extremely instrumental in that it illustrates the importance of investigating the effects of incarceration on mothers within the context of the institution of motherhood. In other words, existing research demonstrates how the institution of motherhood uses systems of racism,

classism, and sexism to punish marginalized mothers for not conforming to strict maternal practices, but how does the institution of motherhood continue to put pressure on these mothers once they are in prison?

Correctional facilities take mothers away from their children and place the mothers in an often distant space with little to no resources to perform motherhood. The patriarchal ideologies of motherhood then make even these few resources seem worthless or inaccessible. Being separated from their children immediately puts incarcerated mothers at a disadvantage, as good mothering practices assert mothering should take place in the private sphere and the child should be the mother's primary focus. This separation leads mothers to believe they are no longer allowed to view themselves as mothers. Building on previous scholarship, my first chapter demonstrates how incarcerated mothers employ a rhetoric of motherhood to (re)establish their identities as mothers, as well as use phone calls, letters, and visits to maintain a bond with their children. In my second chapter, however, I demonstrate that the cost of phone calls continues to increase and many correctional facilities are moving to a new visitation system which requires families to pay a fee, which disrupts motherhood by monetizing it. Incarcerated mothers are then left with letters.

Letters are the cheapest and least surveilled means of communication behind bars, but low literacy levels lead mothers to contemplate whether or not they should write to their children. While the high price of incarceration does create barriers for mothers, a lot of the times their families manage to pay the fees necessary for mothers to communicate with their children. However, low literacy levels conjure up more of an internal battle for mothers. The many unrealistic expectations the institution of motherhood sets for mothers have all directly and

negatively impacted incarcerated mothers, but it is the requirement to be educated, that most viciously disrupts mothers' abilities to perform motherhood behind bars.

### **Literacy and Incarcerated Motherhood**

Deborah Brandt characterizes literacy as a resource, a means of production and reproduction, which produces and reproduces the ability to write one's way into opportunities, such as higher economic brackets and social privilege (2009). Up until a few years ago, literacy was thought to be one of the main barriers preventing socioeconomically disadvantaged people, people with disabilities, people of color, women, the incarcerated, and other marginalized populations from earning a livable wage, pulling themselves out of poverty, receiving promotions, and other social advancements. While becoming literate or improving one's literacy skills might grant some entry into higher education, better job opportunities, or an upgrade in social class, these privileges associated with literacy are, well, usually only given to the privileged. For those who are illiterate or are functioning at low literacy levels and are also a part of a marginalized social group, literacy does not guarantee them upward mobility. Writing by and about mothers in prison confirms they have a long history of being oppressed by literacy, among other things. While incarcerated, mothers are often reintroduced to the literacy myth.

Aware of the toxic, yet essential relationship marginalized groups have with literacy, scholars are now asking not what literacy learning can do for people, but what do people do with literacy. Existing scholarship examines the personal reasons for becoming literate, as well as how literacy learners use literacy to resist, get acknowledged, and explore their identities. Literacy studies has also shifted from focusing on literacy sponsors and the requirements of literacy, to the those attempting to learn literacy outside of traditional educational institutions. Listening to the literacy experiences of marginalized groups, scholars (Deborah Brandt 2009,

Lauren Rosenberg 2015, Eric Pritchard 2017), have identified two major flaws in this “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” way of thinking: 1) racism, classism, sexism, stigmatization, and criminal backgrounds are also barriers that factor into poverty and poor social circumstances and; 2) literacy is a means to liberate because literacy sponsors first used it as a tool to oppress.

Institutions and ideologies work to maintain standard English as the dominant discourse, viewing anyone who doesn't use it properly as uneducated or unworthy. However, these same institutions and ideologies control the form of, as well as the amount of literacy learning to prevent certain groups from learning standard English. Not having access to education or literacy learning programs works to keep minority groups in a liminal cycle of poverty and criminal activity. Systematic regulations such as segregation, institutional racism, and the school-to-prison pipeline then furthermore police literacy learning in marginalized communities. Not reaching a certain level of literacy learning then becomes a punishable crime. Feeling as if they are not cognitively capable of becoming literate, when in reality literacy sponsors intentional make literacy unattainable, leaving poor and minority populations internalizing the inferiority being imposed on them (Rosenberg 4).

While scholarship in literacy studies does investigate the practices of marginalized groups, those groups still have access to community literacy centers, programs, and/or workshops. These options are not always available in correctional facilities, even with a growing population of women with lower literacy rates. It is not uncommon for women to confess they turned to drugs, prostitution, or theft to survive because they were devalued and/or pushed out by the education system. These women therefore felt ill-prepared to obtain a job or a legal way of earning wages. The school-to-prison pipeline and the current war on immigration forces Black and Latinx girls and women, in particular, out of traditional education institutions and into penal

institutions before they've fully accumulated necessary literacy skills. There have been multiple occurrences where black and brown women were sterilized because they were coached into signing a consent form they did not understand either because of their low literacy levels or a language barrier (Jessica Enos 2005, Carolyn Sufrin 2017). Even if women have a high school diploma or GED, it is difficult for some women to understand their legal documents because they don't have the necessary context to interpret the material. Knowing that literacy has been used to regulating their reproductive rights, their ability to pursue higher education or a higher paying jobs, and the knowledge needed to break out of the prison industrial complex, it's hard to advocate for women in prison to pursue literacy as a method for erasing this damage. Nonetheless, reading and writing are essential to survival in correctional facilities because literacy acts as the primary means of communication, rehabilitation, and mothering. As a result, many of the women behind bars, especially women of color, have to make the choice to navigate literacy learning on their own.

When it comes to incarcerated mothers, improving their literacy skills creates a paradox though. As I layout in chapter three, incarcerated mothers not only feel they need to improve their literacy skills to enhance their chances of obtaining jobs post incarcerated, they also feel the need to complete GED, college, and/or parenting courses in order to learn how to be a mother. Existing scholarship in feminist maternal research confirms this literacy paradox pushes mothers into a compromising situation where improving their literacy skills does come with advantages, but also thrusts them back into mainstream maternal norms. Additionally, research conducted in women's prisons shows that materials used in parenting courses behind bars reinforces to participants that they are not good mothers and will not ever be. Incarcerated mothers seem to

believe correctional facilities will rehabilitate them by providing them with resources that assist them to become better mothers, but the few resources they are given actually work against them.

Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to expose the intricate relationship between the institution of motherhood and correctional facilities. While it is correctional facilities that separate mother from child, it is the institution of motherhood that doubles down on separating women from their identities as mothers. Examining changes made to methods of communication in prisons, I identify the ways in which correctional facilities use digital tools to surveil and regulate incarcerated mothers. Selecting texts from the American Prison Writing Archive and circulating surveys in a county jail, I conduct a detailed analysis of incarcerated mothers' letters and poems, their narratives of crime, pain and identity, and their appeals to parole boards. My analysis reveals that incarcerated mothers continue to develop literacy practices so that they can write through their trauma, demand change, produce counterstories about their incarceration, and establish relationships both inside and outside of prison. My dissertation offers a criterion for how mothers outside the white hegemonic archetype of motherhood use writing to (re)claim their right to motherhood and literacy.

The research questions driving this project are: How does the institution of motherhood oppress incarcerated mothers? How are mothers using writing as a tool to perform their role as mothers? How does using literacy to form an identity as mother help shape the actions of mothers? What types of writing techniques do incarcerated mothers employ in their letters (word choice, audience, narratives, supplements-drawings, poems)? What types of literacy normativity are incarcerated mothers faced with? How are incarcerated mothers using literacy to counter literacy normativity?



My dissertation is organized around three questions. In my first chapter, I ask: who gets access to motherhood? In this chapter, I examine 64 narratives written by women in prison, most of whom are mothers, many of whom are transgender, Latinx, multi-racial, Asian-American, and African-American. I look at their narratives for instances where these women are expressing what I define as institutional normativity and engaging in what I call restorative writing. My archival analysis reveals mass incarceration has both deprived women from acting as mothers to their children and has prevented some women from having the choice to become mothers. Furthermore, these narratives present many instances of the penal system, as well as educational and medical institutions alike, using literacy to regulate motherhood. As a result, many mothers make extreme sacrifices to improve their literacy skills in order to persuade themselves, the public, and the courts that they are, in fact, good mothers.

In my second chapter, I ask: how do prisons treat motherhood? In this chapter, I look at the correlation between the rising population of black and brown mothers being sent to prison and the concurrent replacement of in-person visits with video visitation. This chapter builds on existing scholarship characterizing surveillance technology's role in criminalizing poor mothers of color, and considers the ways in which surveillance technology is used to normalize these mothers during their incarceration. Applying a Foucauldian framework this chapter explores how adapting video visitation—a Skype-like video chat software—enables correctional facilities to extend the role of “watcher” and expand the panoptic gaze, which prompts mother-to-mother surveillance, and intensifies self-surveillance. Analyzing its cost and structure, I argue that correctional facilities use video visitation as a surveillance technology to regulate motherhood and to enact punitive measures for acting outside of the dominant paradigms. The chapter

concludes by drawing attention to VV's structure and its ability to expand correctional facilities' surveillance to children of incarcerated mothers.

In my third chapter, I ask: how do incarcerated mothers perform motherhood? Drawing from the surveys I circulated in Caldwell County Jail in Lockhart, Texas, I shift the focus of my dissertation from examining the structural barriers put in place by the institution of motherhood to oppress incarcerated mothers, to locating the agency in incarcerated mothers' mothering practices. In this chapter, I argue incarcerated mothers both accept and ignore good mothering practices in order to perform their role as mothers while behind bars. Because incarcerated mothers are oppressed by the institution of motherhood, as well as by the intersections of poverty, race, gender, sexuality, age, and criminalization, I recognize their choices to adapt and/or reject institutionalized mothering practices as acts of resistance. To assist incarcerated mothers in their continual fight to challenge the institutions and ideologies restraining them, I propose a maternal feminist approach to facilitating a letter writing workshop in women's correctional facilities. I conclude my dissertation by reflecting on the limitations and struggles that come with trying to conduct research in penal institutions. Drawing from my personal experience, I provide insight for building trust with incarcerated mothers, as well as penal staff. Additionally, I offer advice for being mindful about the materiality of our position as researchers from another oppressive institution.

## **Chapter Two: “WE ARE WORTH A SECOND LOOK”<sup>1</sup>: An Introduction to Incarcerated Mothers’ Efforts to (Re)claim Motherhood Through Literacy**

At the age of 16, Meagan Adams was sentenced to life in an adult prison. In her narrative titled, “An American epidemic,” Meagan calls for the criminal justice system to reconsider the way juvenile offenders are prosecuted so they are not forced into adult facilities. Meagan notes that at the time of her arrest, by law, she was not old enough to drive, smoke, or drink, yet she was expected to have the same level of maturity as an adult. She goes on to explain, “Nothing in my meagre 16 years of life experience prepared me for every form of abuse, extortion and manipulation I was subjected to upon reaching the unit I was to call home for the next 5 years” (Adams). At the very end of her narrative, Meagan writes in capital letters, “WE ARE WORTH A SECOND LOOK!”

What is most striking about 31 year-old Meagan’s narrative is that she references herself as a child; “Somehow the children, like myself, have to wade through the muck and chaos of prison to figure out who we are and how we will rise above” (“An American epidemic”). Meagan’s characterization of herself as a child in the present tense, rather than the past tense gives the impression that growing up behind bars stunted her ability to perceive herself as an adult. Being retained in prison for the rest of her life before she was able to experience most of her life, I imagine, accelerated Meagan into an adult, without having the chance to grow out of being a child. Meagan’s school-to-prison reality sheds light on incarcerations ability to hinder one’s development, especially as women and mothers. For instance, entering prison before one finishes high school means women have to develop their literacy skills behind bars, a process

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, Meagan. “An American epidemic.” *American Prison Writing Archive*. [https://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/search/catch\\_all\\_fields\\_mt%3A%28meagan%20Adams%29](https://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/search/catch_all_fields_mt%3A%28meagan%20Adams%29) Accessed Jun. 2, 2019.

Meagan was obviously able to navigate. Also, receiving lengthy sentences, like the one Meagan was given, prevents some women from developing into mothers either by erasing their choice to become a mother or removing the resources needed to mother existing children. Listening to narratives like Meagan's reveals the reproductive injustice correctional facilities commit against the women with marginalized identities, as well as how these women use literacy to fight against this injustice.

Scholars in our field examine writing by women in prison, but they haven't yet zoomed in on the various identities that impact writing behind bars. In this chapter I examine how age, race (Rogers 2018), gender & sexual orientation (Pritchard 2017), criminal background (Berry 2018), and literacy levels contribute to or disrupt motherhood. Thus, my research serves as the second look Meagan calls for. Considering mass incarceration is increasing the amount of mothers being sent to prison, I situate their writing as a research site to investigate how one's intersecting identities impact their literacy learning experiences behind bars and how these experiences inform their writing practices. To do this, I conduct a detailed analysis of the narratives, letters, poems, and appeals to parole boards submitted to the *American Prison Writing Archive (APWA)* by incarcerated mothers. Positioning these texts as a site for research, I reveal the layers of marginalization women are writing their way through to (re)claim motherhood.

Here, "writing through" has many meanings. For writers like Meagan, it means writing their way through their childhood and into adulthood because they were locked up at the tender age of 16. For writers like Tandy, this means writing through limitations stemming from a lack of access to literacy ("A day before my 18th birthday"). For writers like Stephanie, this means writing their way through the pain and trauma experienced before and during their incarceration ("My Name is Six"). For writers like Sylvia, this means writing their way through their life

sentences and into reunification with their children (“Addendum to #32392 Commutation Application: Sylvia Boykin”). For writers like Linda this means writing their way through the projected identity of a violent murder because she did what was absolutely necessary to be a loving and protective mother (“Life without children”). And for all but 11 of these writers, this means writing their way through the distance separating them from their child(ren) and into motherhood.

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This chapter, then, has two points: 1) to demonstrate how prisons uphold and regulate the institution of motherhood by denying young “delinquent” women and LGBTQ+ members the choice to become mothers, and; 2) to draw attention to mothers’ attempts to use literacy to secure access to motherhood. Using literacy to establish ethos as a mother, incarcerated mothers disrupt and reject discursive norms about motherhood, and at the same time preserve antiquated notions

about motherhood. In what follows, I layout the tactics mass incarceration and correctional facilities use to block women from motherhood, followed by a series of sections describing how mothers use literacy to establish themselves as fit mothers, reference motherhood to engage in activism, and (re)appropriate their bad behavior. To help my reader gain a better understanding of who these mothers and women are, I first present my data set and method.

### ***The American Prison Writing Archive: Description of Method and Data***

The primary texts discussed in this chapter were collected from the *American Prison Writing Archive*. The APWA characterizes itself as “is an internet-based, digital archive of non-fiction essays offering first-hand testimony to the conditions experienced by incarcerated people, prison employees, and prison volunteers” (APWA). The APWA is the result of incarcerated writers continuing to submit their work to be published in the *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison to America* book project well past the August 2014 deadline. Recognizing incarcerated writers’ eagerness to respond to a call for them to tell their stories, Doran Larson started the APWA. The APWA uses a prisoner-support newsletter and an ad in the Prison Legal News to solicit non-fiction essays written by anyone with first-hand experience in US correctional facilities. These writers can include correctional employees, volunteers, and residents. The call for essays includes a permissions-questionnaire—sort of like a consent form—which explains the APWA’s purpose, the type of writing they are looking for, and their intended audience.

The permissions-questionnaire informs writers their submissions will contribute to building a space “where the public, policy makers, students or researchers can benefit from the first-hand experience of incarcerated people and prison workers” (APWA permissions-questionnaire). With the aim of helping the public understand prison conditions and the “prison’s practical effects and place in society,” the archive asks writers to submit non-fiction essays

describing “sources of stress, ways of coping, health conditions...education, employment conditions...challenges of physical and psychological survival,” and other issues that matter to incarcerated people (*APWA* permissions-questionnaire). The permissions-questionnaire also notes that the archive will not offer editing or legal services and clarifies that the archive is not currently accepting poetry or and fiction. They will also not post previously published work, work addressed to third parties, or work submitted under nicknames. The final page of the document is a questionnaire requesting demographics and information about the contributors’ facility. This information is later used to create searchable keywords in the archive.

I used the keywords “woman,” “mother,” and “transgender” to search through the archive and locate texts relevant to my topic of interest. When I started my research in June 2019, the archive featured 93 submissions by women. This number includes women who submitted more than one piece of writing. Of these 93 submissions, 53 were written by white women, 18 by African American women, 9 by Asian American women, 8 by multi-racial women, and 5 by Latina/Hispanic women. The archive also featured 4 submissions by transgender women; one of whom identifies as white, one as African American, and two as multi-racial. Of these 93 submissions made by women and 4 made by transgender women, I selected 64 for my data set. I chose to include all submissions by transgender, Latina/Hispanic, and multi-racial women.

I chose 7 submissions by Asian American women and 16 submissions from African American women. The submissions I did not include from these sample sets did not reference literacy or motherhood. Also, my project prioritizes mothers and I did not want to include more submissions from non-mothers than mothers. I only chose 26 submissions from white women to make sure my data set featured at least an even number of voices from women of color; so not to recreate societal norms by presenting another conversation dominated by white voices. Thirty-

eight out of the 64 submissions I review are written by women of color. Fifty-two of these submissions were written by mothers. Again, I want to note some women wrote more than one submission. All of these submissions were composed by a total of 34 individual writers: 1 Asian America, 8 multi-racial, 11 African American, 2 Latina/Hispanic, and 12 white. Out of these 34 individual writers, 23 are mothers and 11 are non-mothers.

To examine the narratives, I performed a discourse analysis; analyzing each text for areas where the writer “rejects, challenges, and questions, or accepts and accommodates” structural forces put in place to normalize mothers (MacDonald 2017). To identify these instances, I borrow and alter Pritchard’s two concepts: literacy normativity—the use of literacy to inflict harm, and restorative literacies—literacy practices that are employed “as a means of self-definition, self-care, and self-determination” (20). Because my data set included a variety of narrative types, I expand Pritchard’s two concepts to institutional normativity—instances where educational, medical, and penal institutions have used their power to suppress women’s voices and actions, and restorative writing—writing practices that are employed as a means of self-definition, activism, and creating counternarratives. Because the *APWA* solicits non-fiction texts that must be informed by first-hand experience, the narratives they collect from women in prison are an ideal site to learn about how these women perceive motherhood and literacy, the role motherhood and literacy play in their incarceration, and how incarceration has changed the way in which they approach literacy and motherhood.

The fact that women from various facilities across the country submitted multiple texts to this archive, speaks to the active and essential role literacy continues to play in their lived experiences. I approached each narrative with the intent of listening to what it could tell me about their literacy practices and perceptions of motherhood. I listened for instances of literacy



being learned or forgotten, examples of literacy betraying or punishing them, and signs of how they use literacy. I also listened for descriptions of motherhood or references to themselves as mothers and mentions of children. After reading each entry, I created key terms to describe the focus, purpose, and/or topics that came up. I then used these key terms to assign each entry multiple tags, establishing a list of overarching themes, such as prison conditions, relationships, requests for resources, and advocacy. I organized each text under one or more themes and revisited each theme, asking, “what do these texts written about [x theme] tell me about literacy and/or motherhood?” The sections below serve as the answer to these questions.

### **“Prison is punitive at best and dysfunctionally abusive at worst”- Meagan**

The many entries submitted about prison conditions paint a heartbreaking image of the reproductive injustice committed before and behind bars. Looking at both entries written by mothers and non-mothers, I find that mass incarceration aids in (re)constructing institutionalized motherhood by both denying some women the choice to become mothers and preventing others from acting as mothers to their current child(ren). Reproductive injustice, as Sufrin describes it, refers to the structural forces applied to deny all people the right to have children and the right to not have children (Sufrin 56). Mass incarceration, according to Sufrin, is one of the structural forces disrupting mother’s ability to parent their children. She positions mass incarceration as a reproductive technology “that prevents poor mothers of colour from parenting,” by separating them from their children, providing inadequate or harmful prenatal care, and promoting normative paradigms of motherhood. In other words, reproductive injustice is the 23 mothers in my study being separated from their child(ren). Reproductive injustice is Tandy being released long enough to conceive and birth a baby and being re-incarcerated and ripped away from her daughter (“Lost Hope”). Reproductive injustice is Rojonah suffering a physically excruciating

and emotionally taxing miscarriage because prison medical personnel refused to take her concerns seriously (Rojonah Harris, no title). And reproductive injustice is Meagan being sentenced to life at such a young age that she not only couldn't have a child, she still refers to herself as one in her writing ("An American epidemic"). Drawing attention to the methods mass incarceration has in place for preventing women from becoming parents before they enter incarceration, I extend Sufrin's work.

We've known for a while now the devastating toll mass incarceration takes on families, making it difficult for incarcerated mothers to feel and be seen as mothers while separated from their children. What's less obvious, however, is mass incarcerations direct effect on women's ability to become mothers. Out of the 34 writers in my study, only 11 are non-mothers. These numbers align with national statistics, which state 60% of women in correctional facilities are mothers to minor children (*The Sentencing Project*). While existing scholarship traces the negative consequences maternal incarceration has on children, and the stress that is placed on the mother, studies have yet to detail mass incarceration's role in preventing motherhood. In the space below, I present commonalities between my 11 non-mothers and connect these characteristics back to mass incarceration. It goes without saying that any of these 11 women could have very well chosen not to be mothers because they simply didn't want to. Because two of these women were incarcerated as juveniles, three were given life sentences, and ten identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, I find it necessary to speculate that mass incarceration's target on non-white, non-heteronormative groups may have prevented these women from being able to choose whether or not they wanted to become mothers.

Rich's early work on motherhood confirms the "mother serves the interests of patriarchy" (45). The patriarchy's narrow and limiting interests exclude not just women who are perceived to

produce bad citizens, but also women who choose not to reproduce (McCullough). Non heterosexual cisgender women and young “delinquent” women are among those who are predicted to be unfit mothers. My dataset reveals incarceration as a tool used to prevent women, who do not serve the interests of the patriarchy, from having children. Two of the methods used are locking women up during their prime reproductive years (Sufrin) and incarcerating them for lengthy sentences. For example, at age 17, one year after her mother passed, Jammie entered prison (“Hope”). Other than sharing she was hurt, angry, and caring for her two younger sisters, Jammie doesn’t say much about life before prison (Jammie McLean, no title). She does, however, mention she learned to read and write while incarcerated. From this, we can imagine the difficulties a teenage, Latinx, mother-figure with low literacy skills faced when attempting to find a way to feed her family. It’s not uncommon for limitations, such as Jammie’s, to influence young women to find any means to provide; even if it is illegal. In both of her narratives, Jammie expresses guilt and frustration for leaving her sisters at such a young age. For Jammie, imprisonment prevented her from being a mother-figure to her sisters, but also becoming a mother to her own children, if she wanted that option.

The age at which one is incarcerated and the length of their sentences could make it impossible for some women to become biological mothers. And while there are fortunately other options for reproducing, a criminal record makes it difficult to access employment that pays enough or provides insurance coverage for assisted reproductive technologies (ART). Take Chastity for example. She doesn’t have children and has already served 10 years at the time she sends in her submission (“Left Behind”). She doesn’t disclose her age, but depending on when she started her sentence and how long her sentence is, Chastity could have been arrested before she had the chance to birth children and very well may be released at a time in her life when her

body is no longer capable of carrying children. In Chasity’s case, incarceration disrupts her ability to reproduce biologically and with assistance.

What’s most destructive about the reproductive injustice taking place in prisons, is that it’s intentionally pushing back on reproductive technology advancements created to give certain groups the option to raise children. In the free-world, Randy (no title), Ebony (“Safety and Security”), and Jennifer G. (no title), who all identify as transgender—could become mothers. Because of their incarceration though, this right and option disappear. A quick Google search brings up two options for transgender women to reproduce: 1) sperm cryopreservation (freezing) or usage via intrauterine insemination (IUI) of a cisgender female partner and; 2) in vitro fertilization (IVF) using partner or donor eggs or sperm and/or the partner's uterus or gestational carrier. But as Sufrin points out, medical units in correctional facilities don’t have the resources to carry out a resident’s IVF, which means they probably can’t conduct a sperm cryopreservation procedure either. In fact, in her entry titled “Safety and Security,” Ebony states, transwomen in prison are even denied gender affirming clothing and hygiene products.

Unfortunately, Ebony’s narrative and the many organizations created specifically to fight for transgender rights in prisons confirm facilities won’t give these women their hormones, so it is safe to say they’re not willing to give them access to (ART) either. Unlike Randy, Ebony and Jennifer G. aren’t serving life sentences and could pursue motherhood via ART or adoption after release. I’m concerned, however, that the stigma of their incarceration will continue to put up barriers to motherhood long after they’ve gone home. As my introduction lays out, sexuality and incarceration contribute to the “bad” mother stigma. The out-of-date institutions that uphold these values believe incarcerated mothers will birth future criminals, and that LGBTQ+ mothers shouldn’t be reproducing. These problematic views make it difficult for Ebony and Jennifer G.,

as well as for women like April (no title) and Amy (“No Excuses. Reasons”) who are also a part of the LGBTQ+ community, to become even adoptive mothers post release. The intersections of their criminal background with their gender and sexuality make motherhood seem inaccessible.

The image of motherhood my data set illustrates closely resembles that of institutional motherhood Rich condemned decades ago and that many feminists since her have continued to criticize. The institution of motherhood uses the prison as an assemblage of power—which I say more about in the following chapter—to help regulate motherhood. This section serves to display how correctional facilities regulate motherhood by hindering some women from having babies. The next section exemplifies how incarcerated mothers use literacy to recover motherhood after mass incarceration exiles them from the institution of motherhood by way of making them feel inadequate.

**“I never thought of myself as criminal while in prison. I identified with being a mother without her children.”- Sylvia**

According to Saavedra and Preuss (2013) the publication of Ellen Key’s *The Century of the Child* placed women under the “medical, psychological, and educational gaze,” as they became responsible for shaping the nation’s children. Decades later, these three subtexts continue to come up in women’s definitions and conceptions of motherhood (Saavedra and Preuss). The subtext of education, specifically literacy knowledge, heavily diluted incarcerated mothers’ conversations about motherhood. Much of what has been said about literacy and motherhood, focuses on and critiques the push for mothers to become literate in order to teach their children; everything a mother does is supposed to be for the good of the child, including becoming educated herself. Incarcerated mothers too talk about their literacy skills as a benefit to their child. Because incarcerated mothers are perceived as ‘bad’ mothers, their use of literacy

seems to be more of a second attempt to align themselves with motherhood. In my study, incarcerated mothers often turned to their literacy skills or efforts to improve their literacy levels as a means to establish their ethos as mothers and as evidence to persuade parole boards they deserve to be released.

Anastasia, who is a white mother with a PhD located at a federal prison camp, uses motherhood to show she is entitled to be released. Anastasia's move to position her educational background as evidence of her credibility as a contributing citizen and diligent mother exemplified both restorative writing and institutional normativity. In her text titled "MASS INCARCERATION-WHAT IT IS COSTING OUR CHILDREN," Anastasia advocates for residents held in federal prison camps to serve their sentences via ankle monitor because these residents are, "non-violent, first-time offenders, either 'white-collar'... or people with low-end drug-related charges" (Bogomolova). Anastasia supports her argument by explaining federal camps are not fenced in, so residents are technically already "out of custody" and are "trusted by the government" (Bogomolova).

Essentially, the US Department of Corrections places offenders into a camp, either in a minimum, medium, or maximum state or federal facility, which is based on the crime that they commit. Those who commit violent crimes are supposed to go to max, and those who commit petty or non-violent crimes go to camps or minimum. This system could serve as an effective safety measure separating violent offenders from vulnerable ones, but it is flawed. There are women who have used drugs in max and women who have committed murder in camps. And even though white collar crimes usually financially and emotionally harm more people than blue-collar crimes, those who commit white collar crimes are usually allowed to go to camps. Looking at the racial demographics of the facility every contributor is held in is beyond the scope

of this project, yet I think it's safe to say there's probably more white women in Anastasia's camp than women of color. Our society operates on the premise that literacy levels, and of course race, trump crime—awarding educated white women privilege even behind bars.

Anastasia also reasons, "Instead of having M.D.s working in the kitchen, M.B.A.s raking leaves, accountants cleaning the showers and Ph.D.s cleaning the bathrooms in camps, the government could have used these people to perform valuable and free services for the community" (Bogomolova). Anastasia later goes on to explain home confinement would also be more beneficial to children because mass incarceration is "separating us from our children" (Bogomolova). There are a couple noteworthy things happening in Anastasia's text. Anastasia's text is one of the few that references outside sources to provide evidence and statistics for her argument. And while her argument is well supported, it's centered around the idea that Anastasia and mothers like her don't deserve to be incarcerated because they are educated. Anastasia is definitely advocating for mothers, however, she's also recreating institutional normativity. Anastasia's argument closely echoes the ideologies upholding institutionalized motherhood. Anastasia uses the camp's lenient security measures with residents, and her & her peers' higher levels of education as evidence to argue this particular population deserves to serve their sentences from home with their children. Whether it's intentional or not, Anastasia is conveying that motherhood should be reserved for certain types of mothers, such as white, middle to upper class, educated mothers.

Entering prison with a PhD awarded Anastasia with the privilege of asserting her right to motherhood. Sylvia, in contrast, did not enter prison with a college degree and felt compelled to seek out education in order to be acknowledged as a mother. Sylvia is a multi-racial mother incarcerated in a minimum-security prison. In what seems to be a document intended for the

parole board, Sylvia attempts to persuade the board to amend her life sentence (Boykin: “Addendum to #32392 Commutation Application”). At the time she is writing this document, Sylvia has already served 23 years and explains she is rehabilitated. To support this claim, she uses this document to show remorse for her crime, presents a long list of courses, programs, and jobs she has completed, and details a reentry plan.

On the surface, this document seems like its purpose is to grant Sylvia an early release, but Sylvia says something that gives the impression her goal is actually to reclaim her right to motherhood. Sylvia talks about her crime and motherhood simultaneously and says on the same day she committed her crime, “I committed another unimaginable act, I abandoned my three daughters” (Boykin). And later she says, “I never thought of myself as criminal while in prison. I identified with being a mother without her children (Boykin). Sylvia then goes on to use this document as a way to exemplify her efforts to mother her three daughters from a distance. Sylvia says she has used her faith to learn to be a “good listener, provide encouragement, and celebrate success” (Boykin). She adds that she’s gone to her two counselors Ms. Dixon and Ms. Scarborough for support. She’s participated with organizations like “Kids and Kin,” and “Project-Impact,” and explains, “My role as a mother consisted of mail, phone calls and visits to teach and guide them” (Boykin).

Two things really interest me about Sylvia. One, she feels she has to prove she’s been a mother to her children in order to be released. Instead of illustrating how she’s been a model resident, stayed out of trouble, and perhaps improved the atmosphere in the facility, Sylvia instead focuses on her ability to perform motherhood. Perhaps because she did not identify as a criminal, but did feel guilt for abandoning her children, Sylvia believed her prison sentence was punishing her for her mistakes as a mother, rather than for her crime. The other thing that



interests me about Sylvia is that she uses the things she's learned and the resources she's accumulated in prison as evidence to prove she is a good mother. Along with articulating her efforts to be a mother to her children in the body of her document, Sylvia also includes a sort of resume that lists all the courses, volunteer work, and jobs she's held while incarcerated. The dates next to each task confirm Sylvia completed these roles during her sentence and not before.

The privileges education awarded Anastasia were consistent across white mothers, and the need to use prison resources to improve literacy skills were consistent across mothers of color. Bev, a white mother who also entered prison with a higher level of education was also awarded some privileges. In her narrative titled "Bloom Grown From a Crack in the Wall," Bev discloses that she entered prison with a college education, which she refers to as an "advantage." Bev explains she used her prior teaching background to get tutoring jobs in prison and tapped into her previous volunteer experience as a secretary in order to take on the role of secretary in her prison's NAACP Chapter. In this same narrative, Bev says she was also able to participate in the PEN prison writing program in which, "The writing course taught by the novelist, Catherine Palmer, also inspired me to write" (Jaynes). Bev notes that in her free time she had the freedom of watching T.V., typing, and listening to music in her room. In Bev's narrative titled "A look in on the Prison Performing Arts Theater and Poetry Class," Bev writes, "I wish you could be witness to the enrichment and achievement the intellectual stimulation and the soulful creative expression going on during the prison performing arts theater and spoken word class." According to Bev, this class puts on performances in the facility gym for residents, staff, and family members. Bev's narratives exemplify how literacy begets access to more literacy in correctional facilities.

Tandy's narratives, on the other hand, demonstrate how the prison industrial complex is raising the stakes for poor mothers of color to improve their literacy skills, while simultaneously making it more difficult to do so. Tandy, who describes herself as "a highly intelligent kid," was sent to prison the day before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Going to prison just shy of 18 is potentially enough time for Tandy to complete her high school education, but she doesn't mention it. Rather, she credits her dreams of being a lawyer to what she learned from watching "The Practice" as a child, and the only other literacy experiences she references are the courses she completed while in prison ("A day before my 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday").

Improving one's literacy with resources provided in prison was another common theme. Women like Tandy, Keisha, and India often utilize prison libraries and courses to gain knowledge and skills that could help them obtain jobs post-release, and at the very least make their time go by faster. Tandy's literacy experiences in prison, however, reveals how prison education courses are actually counterproductive to rehabilitation. Acting as a literacy sponsor (Brandt 2009), the prison put up barriers to make literacy inaccessible to Tandy. In order to enroll in the courses her facility offered, Tandy had to steal a cookie to get fired from her job. In her facility, the incarcerated aren't allowed to both work and go to school, and work trumps school ("Lost Hope"). Along with having to commit a crime in order to take a course, Tandy also had to consent to being strip searched before and after classes, as well as take less showers. The sacrifices she had to make in order to improve her literacy skills speaks to the prisons priority of cheap labor over reducing recidivism.

Despite the prison's attempt to deny her access to literacy, Tandy completed a history course ("A Professor Once Asked Me") and an office assistant college course ("A day before my 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday"). After her release, Tandy used her accumulated skills to obtain a job and her own

apartment. But soon after her release, a check-cashing place refused to cash Tandy's check. Her co-workers advised her to open a bank account, which she attempted to do so, but was denied there as well. Discouraged by the barriers denying her access to the money she earned, Tandy reverted back to illegal activities that granted her access to cash, which resulted in her recidivism. Returning to prison as a mother, Tandy completed an office administration 30 credit program, graduated 3rd in her class, and took the Cognitive II and Bridges to Life, yet she was still denied parole ("Lost Hope"). Despite her continual efforts to improve her literacy skills and demonstrate that she has rehabilitated, Tandy has been failed by multiple institutions. Tandy's narratives serve as evidence to debunk the literacy myth; becoming literate or functionally literate—which means—decoding and producing essays, as well as take on the identities associated with these practices—still doesn't guarantee women access into the public domain or upward mobility (Kagitcibasi et. al 472). Moreover, experiences like Tandy's exemplify that American prisons approach literacy instruction in a way that emphasizes assessment and literacy rates. This then places the blame on the individuals, rather than the system when they fail to advance in society (Kling 2015).

Anastasia, Sylvia, Bev, and Tandy's texts are examples of how some women get to use motherhood as a rhetorical strategy and how other mothers have to do the work of rhetorically situating themselves as mothers. For both types of mothers, literacy and race play a major role in making these moves. Fortunately, for Anastasia and Bev, they were awarded with more freedoms because of their educational backgrounds. Whether it be a facility with less surveillance or a facility that allows for more recreational activities, Anastasia and Bev experienced a different type of confinement than Sylvia and Tandy. In addition, Anastasia and Bev did not express doubt regarding their roles as mothers or their positions in their children's lives. On the contrary,

Sylvia and Tandy's narratives were centered around their efforts to gain literacy. Sylvia's text talked more directly about the close ties between literacy and motherhood, but in Tandy's narrative "Lost Hope," she does question why after completing so many classes she was still denied the right to go home to her child.

**"I am an activist" –Jennifer G.**

Another way in which incarcerated mothers make themselves visible is by using the *APWA* as an available means to preform activism. Going beyond detailing the poor conditions in their facilities, these mothers submitted letters and narratives in which they campaign for change to their current conditions and use their personal experience as evidence to get policies reformed so they can prevent other women from being in prison. Whether writing to political leaders, the public, or other women in prison, many of these mothers used a rhetorics of motherhood to persuade their reader. In doing so, these mothers demonstrate that activism is a part of the incarcerated motherhood culture. Being a good mother in prison means making personal and institutional changes that will get you home to your child(ren) faster. These mothers demanded change on a number of issues from sentencing reform, to lifting parole restrictions, to better healthcare conditions. Some women even noted that they had sent copies of their letters to senators, members of congress, and even the president.

A few writers tapped into their status as mothers for evidence to support their calls to action. Beginning her untitled letter with, "As an incarcerated mother of a minor child, I urge you to take a fresh look at the existing law and weigh the benefits of punishment..." Anastasia argues it is not right for first time offenders with non-violent, non-drug related charges to get so much time because it punishes their children too. Referencing the amount of money it takes to house people in prison, Anastasia says it would be cheaper and morally better to send mothers home

with an ankle monitor so that they can fulfill their parenting duties. She urges the 32 members of congress who received this letter to consider the damage caused by mother/child separation when approaching sentencing reform. Nycole, who is serving a four-year sentence for a non-violent crime, also references the suffering mothers and children experience. Nycole begins her letter addressed to the APWA with, "Texas parole sucks! Toward the Women;" and later clarifies that men get out of prison way faster than women (Moore-Ethridge). Nycole mentions she has also written to Governor Greg Abbott and to Donald Trump in regard to the parole board in Texas, in which she declares "We are the mothers & Grandmothers to the kids but we suffer drastically in the Texas Dept. of Corruption" (Moore-Ethridge).

Lily too uses the urgency of maintaining mother/child relationships to demand there be a new house bill that would stop Texas from denying first time aggravated offenders the opportunity to parole ("The Gift of Freedom for Texas Children of the Incarcerated"). In a separate text that is not titled, Lily explains aggravated offenders is a term that the criminal justice system uses to describe individuals who will likely not offend again. Aggravated offenders tend to go unnoticed while serving their sentences. Since they aren't perceived to be reoccurring offenders, the criminal justice system feels they don't need to be monitored or rehabilitated. In "The Gift of Freedom for Texas Children of the Incarcerated," Lily argues this lack of attention excludes aggravated offenders from opportunities that would allow them to get back to their families faster. Lily supports her point by saying, "So many hurt children, without their mothers, looking for a way to relief and cope with their pain." Not giving these women parole forces them to have their children raised by older siblings and familymembers or strangers. This hurts the children and continues the cycle of incarceration" ("The Gift of Freedom for Texas Children of the Incarcerated").

Both of Lily's texts advocate for aggravated offenders, but the text that is not titled takes on a new audience and persuasive strategy. Aside from making changes to parole, Lily also requests more programming for aggravated offenders. This time writing to her "fellow Americans," she seeks "help/advocacy from our fellow humanitarians to establish Housebills, Laws, Assistance, Programs and such for 1st First Time Aggravated Offenders - (that are more likely to never Re-offend)" (Archuleta). Using the "America" trope, Lily attempts to establish unity with her readers, emphasizing that helping one of their own is the patriotic thing to do. Although Arline doesn't use the "America" trope directly, her request regarding a new program that will give back to the homeless demonstrates her commitment to being a "good" citizen. In her text titled, "Employment," Arline campaigns for supplies in order to start a program that would make garments for homeless people. Arline explains she already participates with the Linus Project that comes in to make blankets for veterans, and another program where she stitches pink and white scarves for people with cancer. She says a new program focused on the homeless would be incredibly useful, but the prison won't provide supplies. Thus, she asks her readers to refer an existing organization that would provide the necessary equipment.

The aforementioned women took to activism to demand institutional change, but there were a few women whose intentions were, at the very least, to get other women to take care of themselves. Rojonah's narrative details the events that led to her miscarriage. Entering prison and aware that she was pregnant, Rojonah attempted to seek accommodations. She was given a pelvic exam by a prison doctor, which only resulted in pain and bleeding. Having had multiple pregnancies before, Rojonah knew something was wrong, but her concerns were continuously ignored by multiple staff members. After bleeding "large clots" for three days, the prison doctor

told Rojonah she had miscarried. Rojonah fell into a deep depression after her loss, and says she started a vocational course, as well as enrolled into a trauma program to ease the pain.

Rojonah confesses, "being confined is one thing, but to Experience an emotional breakdown in prison is another," and advises women, "in any event of Trauma, please Talk to someone or meditate in silence to receive clarity" (Harris). Jammie also references her state of depression stemming from shifts in her health to "Help others Just by my words" ("I hope"). Since Jammie has been in prison, she has been diagnosed with breast cancer, which is scary for anyone, but especially alarming for Jammie as her mother passed away from breast cancer shortly before Jammie entered prison. Jammie uses this letter addressed to "Dear fire inside"<sup>2</sup> to encourage women to go to medical and get checked. She cautions her incarcerated peers, "Do Not let medical tell you your to young. Do it For your Self," reassuring them not to be afraid of the outcome" ("Hope").

Referencing motherhood in general as well as their personal experiences as mothers, incarcerated mothers tapped into the public sentiment to preserve family values. Presenting themselves as mothers who are prepared to do better for their children and take action to contribute to their country both aligns incarcerated mothers with the institution of motherhood and challenges it. Women in the public sphere often use motherhood and mothering as a source of political ammo, promising to care for the nation as a mother cares for her children (Buchanan 2013). Children are at the center of the activism incarcerated mothers engage in, which helps to reinforce that they are able and willing to fulfill their roles as mothers and protect the nation even from behind bars. The centrality of children though, also substantiates the patriarchal ideal that a mothers' sole focus be her child and therefore, she has no identities that exist aside from being a

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<sup>2</sup> Fire Inside is an incarcerated workers organizing committee.

mother. Engaging in activism does allow incarcerated mothers to reject and dismantle the common narrative of the incarcerated being a drain on the system. However, their approach to activism is also helping to normalize them.

### **“I AM NOT A BAD PERSON AT ALL” –Airline Lawless**

Even though the *APWA* solicited submissions from individuals who had first-hand experience with the criminal justice system, many of these writers felt the need to still establish their credibility. The need to prove oneself as reliable or honest, despite being perceived as an expert in this situation, I think stems from the stigma that people who get caught up in the criminal justice system are just “bad.” Media outlets deem those who are simply arrested as dishonest, con-artists, who just can’t be trusted. Incarcerated women and mothers, in particular, are especially used to feeling discredited because society tightly associates their identities with binary gender roles and committing a crime is a direct violation of femininity. Aware of these barriers, these writes applied a few different strategies for establishing their credibility, such as positioning themselves as good mothers, using SAE, (re)appropriating their “bad” behavior, and affiliating themselves with programs in prison. With these strategies, writers created pieces of restorative writing that serve to disrupt dominant discourses about mothers and women in prison.

It was common for women to justify their crime in the name of being a good mother. For example, Linda uses her crime to prove she is a mother that has her children’s best interests in mind. Linda confesses, "My children were abused by their father, orphaned by me, and abandoned by the judicial court system” (“Life Without Children”). While she spreads the blame to the children’s father and the government, Linda makes sure she takes responsibility for her children being without their parents. She goes on to explain that “After 13 years of heartache, we now have a governor who doesn't want to hear any circumstances of why a murder was



committed. He believes we should rot in prison. While I cannot justify my actions, no one is beating my children anymore" ("Life Without Children"). This gives the impression that Linda murdered her husband because he was harming her children, and she wanted to protect her daughters; like any other mother would. Based on mainstream definitions of motherhood, Linda's incarceration makes her a 'bad' mother, but the maternal instinct Linda is displaying shifts her back to being a 'good' mother. Winterhalter (2013) explains, "the legitimating discourse of woman as protective mother allows her to posit even violent action as acceptable, perhaps even obligatory" (256). Using her status as protective mother, Linda positions her actions as a motherly duty, instead of a violation of the law.

Other mothers and women turned to their literacy skills to help improve their credibility. Writers like Jane ("A Lot Has Been Written"), Anna ("My Crime: The very simplified version of my life"), and Bev ("In the Killing Chamber") employed (SAE), cited scholarship as evidence to their points, structured their papers in a MLA-like format, and made handwritten edits to correct spelling and grammar errors, and/or add clarity. For example, in Anna's typed "My Crime: The very simplified version of my life" she used pencil to write, "in California," above the sentence "I was transferred to CIW, then CCWF and VSPW: where I totaled 14 years." Beverly, who discloses entering prison with a college education, indents her paragraphs, uses dashes, and strategically repeats words to construct smooth transitions ("Bloom Grown From a Crack in the Wall"). Her essay "In the Killing Chamber (revised copy July 2014)," in which she explores whether or not there is gender bias in the death penalty, is structured like a research paper. This writing style gives the impression that they are conforming to the dominant discourse. However, their content serves to disrupt the dominant discourse shaping a negative image of incarcerated mothers.

Beverly's "Protection or Destruction" not only uses a similar writing style to her other two texts mentioned above, but it also demonstrates the move of (re)appropriating one's "bad" behavior to establish her credibility, to demand political change, and to argue for stricter gun control policies. In this essay, Beverly boldly uses her own crime as evidence to support her call to block Missouri's "firearms deregulatory law" ("Protection or Destruction"). Pushing for stricter gun control, Beverly explains when she purchased a gun she was documented as mentally ill and told the salesman she wanted the gun "to protect myself or kill myself" ("Protection or Destruction"). The salesman then proceeded to sell her the gun she used to fatally shoot her husband two times. She admits she planned on killing herself too, but another woman intervened. Like her other essays, Beverly does reference existing scholarship, but her strongest use of evidence is her confession to being an example of what lenient gun control policies lead to. She indicates that a letter with this same information has been sent to the legislator.

Referencing her status as a lifer, Jane Dorotik (re)appropriates her "bad" behavior to convince the legislators to adjust parole procedures. Jane admits upfront she has not yet been to the parole board, but she reassures her audience that she's been in prison long enough to witness many people's experiences with the parole board. Drawing from her expertise as a long-term witness, Jane presents case studies to persuade her reader. In "A Lot has Been Written," Jane shares Doris's story, which she uses to analyze how one small infraction in a California Prison can lead to a longer prison sentence, denial from the parole board, and cost the tax payers much more money ("A Lot has Been Written"). Jane describes Doris as an older, smaller woman doing life who is falsely accused of harming a guard. She explains this infraction is the only one Doris has received during her 28 years in prison, but she is still punished harshly. She takes a similar approach in her "Most of Us Believe the Parole Board" to convince the reader to demand "that

legislators fix the dysfunctional Parole Board” (Dorotik). Using Louise and Helen’s stories, Jane calculates and projects how much money taxpayers have paid since the parole board continues to deny these women parole.

Other writers also used their incarcerated status as a source of credibility, referring to their affiliation with programs or services in prison to demonstrate good character and professionalism. Writers mainly included their credentials at the end of their texts. For example, Jennifer G. states she is a member of the Black & Pink Leadership Circle—a family of LGBTQ prisoners and ‘free world’ allies after signing her name (Gann, No title). Jennifer J. (“The Dreary Weapon”) and Stephanie (“My Name is Six”) both give their contact information and reference previous work they’ve published. Arline aims to position herself as a changed person, one who can make change possible for others. As mentioned in a previous section, Arline’s essay “Employment” notes the number of programs she’s participates in to give back to the less fortunate in the free world. She also uses this essay to solicit resources for starting a new program for the homeless. In the closing of this essay, Arline writes, “LAST THING THAT I WOULD LIKE TO SAY IS THAT I AM NOT A BAD PERSON AT ALL. I HAVE A BIT OF TIME LEFT AND ALL I WANT IS TO HAVE SOMEONE RECOGNIZE THAT ABOUT ME” (Lawless). Arline’s plea reminds us that these marginalized mothers are not only trying to make themselves visible, but are attempting to be seen as people, rather than their crimes.

**“We look forward to hearing from you” -Iliana “Lily” Archuleta**

Despite guidelines for submission, multiple mothers submitted poems, texts previously published, work addressed to third parties, and texts requesting legal service or aid. While I expected to see traces of resistance to societal and prison norms in these mother’s texts, I was both surprised and fascinated by how many of them challenged the submission guidelines laid

out in the permissions-questionnaire form. Incarcerated mothers resisted APWA guidelines by submitting documents that made requests, promoted their other writing, took the form of poetry, and solicited advice.

As shown in previous sections, writers like Bev makes requests by submitting “a call to action,” describing the action they want their reader to take. For example, Chanell’s essay requests action from her peers. Noting that most women in prison, including herself, were victims of abuse prior to incarceration and now have to deal with abuse from the correctional officers (COs), Chanell encourages women to unite and fight for better treatment (“End the Suffering”). Lilly Patmos demands rehabilitation programs for aggravated offenders—offenders who are likely to never re-offend. She concludes her letter with, “We need help/advocacy from our fellow humanitarians to establish Housebills, Laws, Assistance, Programs and such for 1st First Time Aggravated Offenders,” prompting her reader to take action (Iliana "Lily" Archuleta). Jennifer G’s letter features a header addressed to “Harvard Solitary Confinement Panel January 2013:” (Gann). In this letter, she urges “the esteemed panel members and audience to please join the struggle to ABOLISH CONTROL UNITS in the United States” (Gann). Additionally, Jennifer G. requests someone contact her about getting moved to a women's facility.

Jennifer G was also one of the writers who took this opportunity to promote her other writing. At the end of her letter, Jennifer G. mentions she is a member of "Black & Pink Leadership Circle," which is a family of LGBTQ prisoners and free-world allies. She includes a scan of a letter she sends to new black and pink members. Similarly, Jennifer J. ends her essay with “If you would like to read more writing from Jennifer Johnson go to her blog <http://betweenthebars.org/blogs/1092/>” (“The Dreary Weapon”). At the end of Anna’s essay “My crime: The very simplified version of my life,” she inserts an “About the Author” page.” In this

section, Anna shares she has “published in Books Poetry Unbound and Yellow Medicine Review. Published in Tenacious, and countless other prison zines” (“My crime: The very simplified version of my life,”). She’s also been an editor of a prison newsletter. Stephanie ends her submission with an author bio, in which she states, “I am a published poet. I hope to inspire others like me, to write as the alternative to self-destruction...My message is ‘write on’” (“My Name is Six”).

Stephanie was also among the writers who showed resistance by exercising creative freedom. Stephanie’s submission consisted of about 12 poems, each describing a different stage in her life. The title of each of her poems begin with “My name is...,” (my name is love, fear, pain, etc.). Brittany too submitted a number of poems on similar subjects, such as hate, pain, and confusion. Taking a similar approach, Chasity submitted a short story. Her story, like the above women’s poems, does tell of first-hand experience, but it’s more focused on detailing an experience she witnessed. Chasity tells the story of her friend Rosa, who committed suicide just days before her release. Taking a creative, but totally different genre approach, Rosalinda submits what reads like a blog post. Rosalinda Hunt is a mother of 6 and wife "of a institutionalized convict." She explains she was always by her husband’s side when he was previously incarcerated, but now that she's incarcerated, he calls her names and talks down to her. She asks her readers, "Do I? or Do I continue my everyday living and act like what he says doesn't affect how I feel? ...What would you do?" (Rosalinda Hunt, No title). Other women, like Lily, concluded their letters with salutations such as, "We look forward to hearing from you," making it clear that a reply was needed and they wanted to start a conversation about initiating change (Archuleta, No title).

It is apparent from their submission that the women see this archive as an opportunity to express themselves how they see fit. In an archive like this, what Jenny Rice would characterize as an “archive of awfulness,” this resistance is both appropriate and necessary (Detweiler). I characterize the *APWA* as an archive of awfulness, both because of its content and design. The invention of *APWA* stems from evidence that “once invited, incarcerated people would not give up the chance to tell their stories” (*APWA*). Inventing a space where oppressed individuals can circulate their truths without judgement and retaliation is in theory an ethical gesture. However, the *APWA*’s guidelines raise an issue, for they recreate the restraints of penal institutions and the exploitation of educational institutions. The *APWA* states that the archive is “intended for researchers and for the general public, to help them understand prison conditions and the prison’s practical effects and place in society” (“permissions-questionnaire”). Therefore, they solicit essays documenting first-hand experiences from anyone who has had encounters with correctional facilities. But their strict guidelines limit the ways in which individuals can share their first-hand experiences.

A section of the *APWA*’s “permissions-questionnaire” reads, “The *APWA* is not currently accepting poetry or fiction. We do not post material addressed to third parties, such as legal documents or grievances. Again, we do not offer editing, promotion, or legal services. All content should be formed into first-person essays addressed to a broad readership” (“permissions-questionnaire”). This guideline alone is exclusionary because it privileges types of writing and writing strategies that are not common among people in prison, women in particular. Incarcerated individuals most commonly produce poetry and narratives. As noted earlier, women in prison benefit largely from composing reflective writing to engage in self-definition. This reflecting allows literacies to emerge, but “on its own, it also perpetuates...isolated modalities of

literacy development” (Kling 70). Reflective writing doesn’t necessarily take the shape of an essay, nor does it always take the form of reader-based prose. But this shouldn’t matter when one is invited to tell their story. The way in which truth is formatted shouldn’t determine how true it is. By requiring incarcerated individuals to write their stories in a format they are not familiar with or trained to write in, the *APWA* is overlooking the fact that women tend to have lower literacy levels than men (Kagiticbasi et al. 472). In doing so, the *APWA* accidentally engages in institutional normativity, in which they punish the individual for their low literacy rates, rather than the system.

Dictating how individuals tell their story for the benefit of researchers and the larger public also serves as institutional normativity. Let me be clear, I am obviously one of the people who greatly benefit from this archive, as my dissertation wouldn’t be complete without it. And I am not against creating an archive reserved for writing produced in prison. I do, however, believe we need to be careful of how we manage this space. The *APWA*’s mission of collecting, scanning, and posting written or typed texts mailed in from people in prison, in order to make prison issues available to everyone “who has internet,” raises the concern of exploitation. What does it mean to be able to contribute to an archive and not be able to consume it? Our educational institutions have a habit of using marginalized groups for our own gains, and not giving them anything in return. Researchers already know that prison is a dreadful place. Therefore, we don’t need incarcerated individuals to tell us that in an MLA essay formatted way, nor do we need a whole archive dedicated to it. We also already know the impact mass incarceration has on society, and we should be turning to these writers to better understand how society has generated mass incarceration. Most importantly, we should be considering what the

archive can do to counter mass incarceration. This should be a space where writing is promoted, legal and writing advice is solicited, and conversations are started.

It's not clear why the submissions resisting guidelines were posted, as the *APWA* doesn't note any changes or exception to submission guidelines. However, I can speculate and hope that perhaps curators have too seen these submissions as contributors reclaiming a space for writers to speak out in their own way and made the ethical choice to publish them despite not meeting guidelines. These submissions serve as examples of how incarcerated women, specifically mothers, use their literacy practices to disrupt norms. In answering the *APWA*'s call for submissions with texts prohibited in the guidelines, these women are agreeing to help inform researchers and the public of prison conditions and experiences, but on their own terms. The many submissions requesting change, resources, or advice challenge the traditional function of the archive, which is to collect and preserve texts, rather than to exchange dialogue. What we are witnessing here is incarcerated women negotiating the function of the available platform to document a conversation, while simultaneously starting one.

**"Thank you for reading me. The Small Voice in the Box." – Jammie**

A number of narratives in my data set supported new notions in literacy studies, such as becoming literate as a means of self-reflection (Berry 2018), self-fulfillment (Rosenberg 2015), and recovering/retracing their past (Prichard 2017), rather than for pragmatic reasons. For example, in Bev's, "A look in on the prison performing arts theater and poetry class," she mentions the poetry part of her performing arts theater and poetry class course focuses on transforming students into poets who can use specific poetic devices to "come to know what their values and feelings are, from the poem they wrote, now knowing more about themselves and the around them" (Jaynes). Many other women reference changes in health—both physical



and mental—and said they used writing as a method for coping with these changes and the pain it brought them. Being diagnosed with cancer (Jammie), suffering a miscarriage (Rojonah), or losing a loved one (Amy) while incarcerated definitely increases one's need to write. These particular narratives speak to Vieira's (2019) idea that the spaces in which we practice literacy can help us heal. Other narratives, like Tandy's and Anastasia's aligned with Hinshaw's, claim that the spaces in which we write in shape individuals as writers (Hinshaw 2018), but also add the intersectionality of race, class, and gender too influence how we get to write and what we write about.

As you can begin to see, my data set itself is a narrative, which was collaboratively written by 23 mothers and 11 women behind bars. Together, these writers expose the structural forces mass incarceration produces to regulate access to both motherhood and literacy; forcing mothers in prison to seek alternative methods for becoming literate and acting as mothers. While the answer remains the same, white, wealthy, wed, cisgender women get to be mothers, thus the methods for preserving that white hegemonic paradigm of motherhood is expanding. Systematic racism and sexism still suppress some groups of women from gaining or improving their literacy skills, as well as informing the public about their experiences. The era of mass incarceration, the prison industrial complex, and the school-to-prison pipeline have made it particularly difficult for poor mothers of color to circulate their voices, as well as perform their roles as mothers. As shown above, mass incarceration has separated some women from their children, while denying other women the choice to have children. This directly echoes the social sentiment that motherhood is reserved for those who mother inside the white hegemonic paradigm. Yet, despite having their voices suppressed and being cut off from resources, these mothers still manage to

gain or teach themselves literacy practices and use all available platforms to (re)claim their right to motherhood.

In these narratives, mothers and women in prison face depression, sexual assault, and abandonment, all issues they deal with through writing. Beyond helping them discover their identities and come to terms with their crimes, these women are using writing to build support networks, incite action, and request resources. For most scholars, literacy is accepted and used as a form of mental rehabilitation, which writers in my dataset proved to be true. Amy, for instance, used her writing to trace her connections with prison; coming to the realization that her father wasn't traveling with the circus when she was little, but rather was in prison. Her discomfort, yet familiarity with prisons came from a family history of incarceration, including the grandmother who gave birth to Amy's father while she was in prison. Tandy, Tammy, and Kiesha used writing to "critique how culture operates and how they have been positioned" (Rosenberg 8). And for them, finally understanding that they were not solely responsible for the factors leading them to prison served as their rehabilitation. Using writing to both establish and assert their identities, writers like Sylvia, Lily Anne, and Jennifer G. also supported existing notions of using literacy to regain identity (Bathina 2014). But the writers in my dataset also illuminate the significance of conceptualizing writing as a tool to perform an action, such as resistance, activism, and mothering. Yes, literacy establishes an identity, but it doesn't stop there. It's more than that, it is performative.

If women in prison can use their writing to reshape themselves and their surroundings (Jacobi 2015, Hinshaw 2018), and if we can use their writing to get to know them better as students and improve our classrooms (Berry 2018), then surely their writing can be used to perform the role of mother while behind bars. We know literacy is a tool for mothers to improve

their education, that of their children, and to strengthen family relationships (Flores, Al-Salmi & Smith), but incarcerated mothers take literacy even further than that. Literacy is particularly important for incarcerated mothers because it proves to be both instrumental and transformative. Not only do they locate and create their own literacy learning sites, they use literacy to heal, (re)appropriate their bad behavior, (re)claim their right to motherhood, and disrupt dominant discourses promoting normative motherhood. In sum, these mothers are using literacy to produce counterstories, which allow mothers and women in prison to resist the prisons efforts to deny them their rights. By (re)appropriating literacy, incarcerated mothers are able to (re)claim their right to motherhood. And for the women who may have been denied the choice to become mothers, literacy allows them to (re)affirm their presence and assert their existence.

To continue redefining literacy and tracing where marginalized groups become literate, we need to draw our attention to the literacy learning sites in which these groups locate themselves. For instance, in Brittany's poems titled "Confused," she references the board game Boggle as a site for literacy learning. The choice not to use periods, write in all caps, and withhold transitions between sentences aligns directly with the type of writing Boggle may teach a person. These mothers and their literacy practices are worth a second look, and it's our responsibility to look.

## **Chapter Three: “This video call may be monitored and recorded”: Video Visitation as a Form of Surveillance Technology and Its Effect on Incarcerated Motherhood**

Since 2014, 43 states have adopted Video Visitation (VV) in their facilities (Alexander 2017) and 74 percent of the 600 facilities in these states have used VV to either reduce in-person visits or eliminate them completely (Sims 2017). VV is similar to Skype or Facetime, in the sense that it gives families on the outside the option to use their mobile devices to video chat with their loved ones who are in correctional facilities. This video chat software is provided by various technology companies—usually the same companies that already issue phone, email, and commissary services to the correctional facility. Correctional facilities and technology companies promote VV as a modern communication method that will (1) lower opportunities to smuggle in contraband, such as drugs and weapons (Sims 2017); (2) cut down traffic on in-person visiting days (GT 2013); and (3) increase the number of visits. While VV does have the potential to make facilities safer and compensate for the distance between families and their incarcerated loved ones, this essay serves to acknowledge the ways in which VV acts to dismantle family relationships too.

Using a Foucauldian framework, I conceptualize VV as a new form of digital surveillance. I then argue that correctional facilities use a rhetoric of technology to legitimize their use of VV, which has especially detrimental consequences for the growing population of incarcerated mothers. Modes of surveillance in correctional facilities are of course not new, but advancements in technology have changed the way people in prison are surveilled, and have amplified the effect this surveillance has on them. Because prisons were designed to surveil and mothers have historically been surveilled by institutions, incarcerated mothers are often

overlooked when we discuss institutionalized motherhood. Institutionalized motherhood is a contemporary term rooted in Rich's (1976) two meanings of motherhood: "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (Rich 13). This institution refers to patriarchal ideologies sculpting "good" mothers as wealthy women who birth patriotic children in order to secure the nation (Fixmer-Oraiz 2019). Because securing the nation first requires domesticity, Fixmer-Oraiz argues that the nation has always relied on regulating maternal and reproductive labor through differential surveillance and control of women's bodies and behaviors.

Although, this surveillance initially occurred predominately through networks put in place by men, recent scholarship presents numerous social structures and practices used by mothers to reinforce institutionalized motherhood. According to O'Brien Hallstein (2018), institutionalized motherhood today is "premised on the contemporary hegemonic ideology of good mothering, what Sharon Hayes first named intensive mothering, Andrea O'Reilly calls patriarchal mothering, and what Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels call new momism" (3 O'Brien Hallstein). Responding to O'Brien Hallstein's call for mothering rhetorics, scholars take heed to the ways in which family meal discourse (Kinser 2017), exploited black maternal labor (Morrissey & Kimball 2017), and workplace practices (Buzzanell et al. 2017) contribute to regulating motherhood. The increase in social media platforms has also created a space in which surveillance occurs to both liberate and constrain motherhood (Orton-Johnson 2017). These studies demonstrate a shift from surveillance occurring on a structural level to surveillance occurring on an interpersonal level, where new pressures stemming from intensive mothering have caused mothers to surveil themselves and other mothers (Henderson et al. 2010).

Ideologies shaping motherhood tend to promote good mothers as those who are subservient to their children, naturally know best, and take on professional skill-level roles like pediatrician and therapist (Henderson et al. 2010). Failure to meet the standards of intensive mothering renders the criminalization of marginalized mothers possible (Fixmer-Oraiz 2019). We are currently witnessing this criminalization in the masses with a major influx in poor mothers of color being separated from their children, placed in penal institutions, and held until they are normalized; simply because they perform motherhood outside the white hegemonic paradigm. This influx is apparent in the 75 percent increase of women behind bars between 1980 and 2017, rising from a total of 26,378 in 1980 to 225,060 in 2017 (The Sentencing Project 2019). As of 2016, 80 percent of the women in jail are mothers to minor children (Sawyer & Bertram 2018), and as of 2017, 60 percent of women in state prisons are mothers to minor children (The Sentencing Project 2019). Ideologies condemning poor mothers of color have made way for stricter surveillance of marginalized mothers to be deemed appropriate, resulting in their incarceration in facilities where they are furthermore surveilled and punished. Regardless of incarcerated mothers residing in institutions designed to surveil, we must interrogate the ways in which advancements in technology affect these mothers too, or lest they suffer the insidious consequences of digital surveillance.

In this essay, I use VV to demonstrate how digital technologies allow individuals to use structural methods to surveil institutionalized mothers, prompting these mothers to surveil each other on an interpersonal level. I argue that VV perpetuates violence against incarcerated mothers and that correctional facilities' use a rhetoric of technology to mask this violence and promote VV as a tool for uniting families. True to the intent of panopticism, VV as a mechanism of control extends the role of "watcher" and forces mothers to perform motherhood under the

gaze, influence, and judgment of correctional officers (COs), peers, and other mothers. This increases opportunities for mother-to-mother surveillance and obstructs mother/child relationships. Mothering under this type of surveillance conditions mothers into internalizing the long running social stigma that incarcerated mothers are ‘bad’ mothers. Along with adding increased pressure to prove themselves to be ‘good’ mothers, VV also requires incarcerated mothers to pay to see their children, and takes away their opportunity to physically hold their children. Using a rhetoric of technology, correctional facilities glaze over the perils of this exploitative, oppressive, and cruel service, and gain buy-in from families by appealing to their interest in productivity, increased engagement, and convenience.

Correctional facilities and technology companies justify VV by using the same rhetoric of technology university writing instructors used when they pushed for computers in writing classrooms. The rhetoric of technology presents technology as a solution to issues like inaccessibility, low engagement, and lack of resources, but doesn’t quite account for technology failures, added expenses, and low or no digital literacy among users. Similar to writing instructors, correctional administrators claim VV technology will increase productivity, engagement, and convenience. And like writing instructors, correctional administrators fail to acknowledge that this same technology is also capable of making resources inaccessible, creating a decrease in engagement, and causing harm to a vulnerable population. The distance technology generates between incarcerated mothers and their children is also what is at stake for our field.

As I’ll discuss more below, we too have been overly optimistic about the benefits of digital tools in our classroom. This optimism causes us to lose sight of the students who are being pushed out of classrooms because they are unable to engage with or access certain technologies. Moreover, this optimism distracts from the panoptic gaze technology is creating in

our institutions—which have always too closely mimicked prisons—a gaze that influences our students to behave and perform a certain way. While the purpose of this chapter is to layout how the use of VV as a form of digital surveillance is legitimized through the rhetoric of technology, and negatively affects incarcerated mothers, it is worth noting that the similarities between correctional facilities and universities doesn't just stop with them using the same rhetoric of technology.

### **Panopticism in the Digital Age**

*WE TV*'s docuseries *LOVE AFTER LOCKUP* (Sharp Entertainment 2018) vividly exemplifies how VV acts as both a video call and a form of surveillance. In the episode "Prison Blues to Wedding Bells," when Caitlin opens her laptop to start her video chat with fiancé Matt who is in jail waiting for a hearing, she is immediately greeted with a robotic voice instructing her, "This video call may be monitored and recorded. It may be used as evidence in a criminal or civil proceeding." A few seconds later, Matt walks up to the screen, sits down, and picks up a phone. Behind him, you can see at least eleven other male residents and one CO. Some of these men are sitting down talking, others appear to be watching TV, and a few are just walking around. One man walks close enough behind Matt to see the fuchsia walls and the vibrantly colored portrait of a saxophone player in Caitlin's background.

In many facilities, VV takes place on monitors located in general population areas or on "institutionally issued tablets used in the housing areas" (Mann 2017), giving the incarcerated the means to view each other's families, listen in on conversations, and observe interactions with outsiders. Placing VV monitors in highly populated areas increases visibility, which is the intent of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. Bentham's system of control allowed for around-the-clock surveillance, as it placed one security guard in a center position so that they could 'watch' every



inmate in an institution. Reducing visitation to screen-time allows COs to surveil the incarcerated residents visiting, their visitors, and general population residents all at the same time. In Betham's panopticon, though, the inmates could not tell exactly when they were being 'watched,' and this uncertainty is what led them to internalize the gaze and constantly self-censor (Foucault 1995). This is where VV differs from the traditional panopticon, because it increases visibility and decreases uncertainty. The residents on the VV call, and their visitors, the general population residents, and the COs can all see each other. Although it may not be obvious since the intent of the video chat is to engage only with the resident who placed the call, everyone can see when they are being watched and has the ability to watch. By making everyone visible, VV interchanges the role of "watcher" and "watched," as well as expands the panoptic gaze beyond the prison and into homes. In this way, VV could be considered a "veillant panoptic assemblage," a post-panoptic term that Bakir (2015) coins to characterize "contemporary conditions of mutual watching" (20).

To account for the advancements in technology that mobilize, multiply, and mutualize surveillance, some surveillance scholars (Manley et al. 2012, Adams 2013, Nemorin 2017) have shifted from panoptic to rhizomatic structures to conceptualize contemporary forms of surveillance. Recent scholarship tends to draw from Haggerty and Ericson's surveillant assemblage, which Caluya (2010) explains works by "abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings into discrete flows that are later reassembled into data doubles" (623). Surveillant assemblage accounts for the rhizomatic expansion of surveillance that mobilizes the 'gaze' of the panopticon to extract information from separate sites through a system of networks (Manley et al. 2012). These system of networks commonly consist of closed-circuit television (CCTV), databases, phones, and biometric tracking among other technologies (Nemorin 2017).

This multiplicity of surveillance technologies enables citizens, retail and communications companies, and state agencies to watch each other (Bakir 2015). Digital technologies, then, allow for both multidirectional watching and mutual watching. Multidirectional and mutual watching levels the top down hierarchy exercised in the panopticon by interchanging the role of “watcher” and “watched.” This shift in hierarchy, though, is exactly why panopticism is a more appropriate conceptualization of VV as a form of digital surveillance than rhizomatic structures are.

Similar to rhizomatic structures, VV does allow for mutual watching and data collection, but VV does not shift power. When VV interchanges the roles between “watcher” and “watched” in regards to peer-to-peer surveillance, or VV caller to incarcerated resident surveillance, the hierarchy is leveled. In these examples, VV makes all involved parties equally more visible to each other. But if you consider these roles on a larger scale where the prison is the “watcher” and everyone else is the “watched,” you can’t level the hierarchy. The same is true in terms of data collection. As of right now, there are no reports of information shared in VV calls being used in court, but the recording at the beginning of every VV call makes it clear that information could be extracted. The technology company Securus has actually been caught tracking the location of people receiving calls from those in prison and is facing a potential lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) because of it (Coleman 2018). Again, in these examples of data collection the hierarchy isn’t leveled because incarcerated residents and their loved one’s cannot use VV to extract data from VV calls like institutions can. Unlike rhizomatic forms of surveillance, VV doesn’t increase the capabilities of modern watchers (Manokha 220, 2018), instead VV intensifies the top down hierarchy, exaggerating the need for one to surveil themselves.

Because VV enables mutual watching and potential data collection, it is post Bentham's Panopticon, but it is not post Foucault's panopticism. Caluya reminds us, "Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is a penal building, Foucault's panopticism is a machine of power that is generalizable across extra-penal domains" (625). The panopticon is a structure designed for one person to exercise control through a centered, constant, and undetectable gaze. But while the gaze is the source of surveillance, it is not the source of power. For Foucault, Caluya explains, "the principle of the panopticon is not the gaze but the automatised and disindividualisation of power" (625). The principle of power, then, is in "a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes" (Caluya 625). What is essential to Foucault's panopticism is not that the gaze be singular, fixed, or centered, but that the panopticon "be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 201). Therefore, in expanding the role of "watcher" to the incarcerated and their callers, VV does not distribute power to them, but rather allows the prison to extend its assemblage of power over them. Enabling incarcerated mothers, their callers, peers, and COs to surveil each other is a mechanism for the prison to induce control, not re-appropriate power. Thus, using a Foucauldian framework, I conceptualize VV as a mechanism of control within a system of institutionalized motherhood.

Placing incarcerated mothers under surveillance within a larger system designed to normalize motherhood is what makes VV as a form of digital surveillance detrimental. This new method of surveillance in the prison is not so much about extracting individual's private information, as it is about getting individuals to self-discipline. What makes the panopticon effective, according to Foucault, is that it ensures power is "exercised continuously in the very

foundation of society, in the subtlest possible way...” and functions outside “...sudden, violent, discontinuous forms that are bound up with the exercise of sovereignty” (208). Analyzing VV’s role in extending the position of “watcher” to other mothers and expanding the prison’s gaze to encompass children of incarcerated mothers, I show below how VV itself acts a form of surveillance, prompts mother-to-mother surveillance, and intensifies self-surveillance. Together, these modes of surveillance serve as mechanisms of control within the larger network of power distributed to regulate motherhood.

### **The Rhetoric of Technology and Its Three Appeals**

Following the introduction of computers in the writing classroom, Hawisher and Selfe (1991) distributed a survey asking writing instructors if they preferred to teach writing with or without computers, and coined their responses as ‘the rhetoric of technology.’ The rhetoric of technology speaks to the positive changes technology can initiate for learning, but usually neglects to mention the negative effects. Some of the explanations teachers gave were, “Students spend a great deal of time writing,” “Lots of peer teaching goes on,” “Opportunities for collaboration increase,” “Communication features provide more direct access to students, allowing teachers to ‘get to know’ students better” (Hawisher & Selfe 59). I characterize these teacher responses as the three appeals, because their responses all referenced either productivity, engagement, or convenience. These teachers, like many others, saw computers as a means to get students to write more, write together, and/or write during class. Because our field accepts and understands writing as a social practice, these three appeals make sense. It is ideal to have students composing within a social space where they can talk out their ideas and receive feedback. However, even with the current advancements in technology, our excitement for workshopping in class does overshadow the issues computers invite into our classrooms.

Hawisher and Selfe's classroom observations confirmed the instructors "enthusiastic language" (59) overlooked how computers in English composition classes were reinforcing "those traditional notions of education that permeate our culture at its most basic level: teachers talk, students listen; teachers' contributions are privileged; students' respond in predictable, teacher-pleasing ways" (Hawisher & Selfe 55). Many of the classrooms under observation consisted of students sitting in front of computers writing, with the only few exchanges taking place being those between the teacher and the students who asked for clarity. When teachers used technology, such as a projector, so that the class could critique a paper together, only a handful of students participated, which returned the classroom to a lecture-style lesson rather than a collaborative space. So while there was plenty of writing going on, students weren't writing together, nor were they discussing their writing together. Rather than increasing productivity, engagement, and offering convenience, Hawisher and Selfe found introducing computers in the classroom put some students at a disadvantage, "dampened creativity," and created a barrier between instructor and student (60). Hawisher and Selfe's research demonstrates there are real benefits of technology, but there are also disadvantages, and the way in which technology is described covers up the oppressions that happen.

Technology can offer a solution to common conflicts with face-to-face classes that cause at-risk students to drop out, such as irregular work schedules, unreliable transportation, and lack of childcare, but it cannot resolve irregular access to a computer or the internet, and limited computer/technology knowledge (Griffin & Minter 2013). There are also plenty of disadvantages we need to be aware of for our students who do have access to technology. The increase in screens and their advancements have changed the way in which students compose and receive information, as well as caused shifts in student behavior. When screens first entered the writing

classroom, they were limited to computer screens, which were used as another medium for students and instructors to compose. However, screens are no longer a direct parallel to print or speech, and we now have computer, cell phone, and tablet screens, all of which go beyond just displaying what we type; “we touch, swipe, pinch, and press them, and they respond” (Griffin & Minter 143). Consequently, “students can sign in to a class site from any number of devices via any number of platforms,” but these devices can often display information either in a different format from desktop software, or may not display some information or files at all (Griffin & Minter 144). Not all of our students with devices can afford a laptop, and therefore rely on tablets and other mobile devices. These students then may be limited to the type of websites they can access, the texts they can download, and the ability to annotate readings or complete other assignments. In other words, technology may be preventing our students from seeing and accessing all the same material.

Likewise, the information collected from their screens create an issue for students. Online classrooms and classrooms that use online tools have the ability to produce databases of student work. Griffin and Minter admit that these online records generate “a wealth” of information that can be useful in terms of assessing a course, but also acknowledge this data could result in “viewing students as sets of data points” (Griffin & Minter 154). Nemorin confirms the use of surveillance like closed-circuit television (CCTV), online monitoring strategies, smart cards, and biometric tracking does reduce students to “data points whose information was accessible to corporations...,” and also tracks and records teachers’ activities in the same way they do the students’ (251). Nemorin and Griffin & Minter’s findings speak to the consequences Hawisher and Selfe alluded too. Promoting technology solely as a means to accommodate students so that they can complete more work in class and interact with their peers and instructors on multiple

levels overlooks the way in which technology leads to uniformity. Technology is a learning aid, but it is also a form of surveillance that allows for schools to monitor students, as well as influence students to monitor themselves.

### **Using The Rhetoric of Technology to Legitimate Video Visitation**

Framing their reasons in concerns for safety and family unity, jails and prisons are using VV to contribute to our society's historical habit of taking resources away from low-income, minority mothers and continuously punishing them when they fail to meet the requirements of intensive mothering. This framing directly aligns with previous studies declaring correctional facilities are purposely structured and operated in a way that prioritizes security needs over family relationships, which impedes mother/child bonds (Michalsen et al. 2010). Correctional facilities are initiating video software as a strategy to connect the incarcerated with their families, in the same way writing instructors relied on computers to stimulate discussion amongst their students about their writing process. And like writing instructors, correctional administrators use a similar "enthusiastic language" that is reminiscent of the same three appeals that distract from the very real consequences of technology. But unlike writing instructors, I'm not sure correctional facilities are genuine when they use the rhetoric of technology and its three appeals. I say this because correctional facilities market this rhetoric to the families of the incarcerated more than to the residents in their facility. If the technology is supposed to be for the incarcerated and benefit them, I would think they'd want the residents full support first. With incarcerated residents being some of the first to say VV is a fluke, I find it odd that the technology still spread so quickly. Partnerships with and advertising through technology companies is one of the main reasons VV took off so fast.

The rhetoric of technology and its three appeals are often featured in materials created by technology companies for families with incarcerated loved ones. Companies such as Securus, JPay, and Encartele take on a family centered approach. For example, Securus' pamphlet targets families with busy schedules asking, "Do you want to see your loved ones more often? Stop missing out on: / Watching your favorite TV show. / Singing Happy Birthday. / Reading a bedtime story... Never miss another moment" (Sims 2017). JPay proves their commitment to keeping families together in a blurb on their website's homepage, a part of which reads, "helping friends and family of inmates stay connected to their incarcerated loved ones through a variety of corrections-related services offered in more than 30 states across the country" (*JPay*). Their video visitation page, again, serves to connect, "there's nothing quite like seeing your loved one in person. Visiting them at their correctional facility, however, can be often difficult" (*JPay*). Other technology companies show their devotion to productivity, engagement, and convenience by advertising the quality and reliability of their video visitation software. For instance, Encartele's website claims to be "transforming the corrections industry from the inside" (*Encartele*), while City Tele Coin's promotes that the company, offers "State-of-the-Art technology, applications, products and services to law enforcement officials, correctional facilities, and the general public" (*City Tele Coin*). Telmate even assures families that VV "saves you time and money from driving down here" ("Skype' for Jail"). While these companies on the surface claim to be empathizing with the families, what they are really doing is inflating the ways in which VV is easier and better than in-person visits, and disregarding how VV deprives users of privacy and the ability to physically interact with their loved ones.

According to technology companies, VV permits visiting to take place almost anywhere at any time. Both technology companies and correctional facilities feel this new sense of freedom



and convenience will increase visitation. Even though in-person visits do not cost, the price of the commute to correctional facilities is too high for many families. Incarcerated mothers tend to receive fewer visits than incarcerated fathers because of distance, lack of transportation, fear of the prison setting, the greater instability in their children's lives, and the caregiving arrangements that came into place upon their incarceration (Thompson & Harm 2000, Michalsen et al. 2010). It is common for female offenders to be transferred to other states at the time they are sentenced or sometime during their sentence because female facilities are scarce. Also, many of the families visiting incarcerated loved ones consist of parents or caretakers of small children, who may not want their children exposed to the uncomfortable security process or the strictly monitored visiting rooms. VV's remote location would allow incarcerated parents to remain a part of their child(ren) life, including witnessing school functions, and could serve as a safe substitute for driving when road conditions are hazardous (Alexander 2018).

Visiting from a remote location also benefits correctional facilities because in-person visits require a number of COs to gather incarcerated residents who have scheduled visits, search them, escort them to visiting areas, as well as send family members through security and escort them to visiting areas. Along with walking through a metal detector, undergoing a pat-down, and having their personal items inspected, all visitors must be wearing approved clothing and have proper identification documents or they will be turned away (CDCR 2018). COs are also responsible for monitoring visiting areas until visitation is complete to prevent the exchange of contraband, unapproved touching, and inappropriate behavior. Correctional facilities claim conducting visits via screens will reduce the number of COs needed to monitor visits, eliminate the exchange of contraband, and cut down the long process for visiting. By offering visitation without physical contact, correctional faculties drastically cut down the amount of outsiders

entering the facility. This means family members no longer have to be inconvenienced by lengthy and invasive security measures, and COs are allowed to better serve elsewhere because they are no longer needed to escort, search, and monitor visitors (Sims 2017).

Despite its promise of convenience, VV will prove to be especially inconvenient for incarcerated mothers because it is not user friendly for the population that needs it the most. During their incarceration, over half of children end up with their maternal grandparents (Berry & Eigenberg 2003, Thompson & Harm 2000). A lack of access to and knowledge of technology creates a barrier for older caretakers relying on VV. Disadvantage groups—including minorities and older people—are typically less likely than their more advantaged counterparts to have internet access, and older adults have noted being upset by the utilization of technology for social interactions and frequently expressed the “feeling that technology is too complex for them to fully understand” (Van Volkom et al. 2). Cresci et al.’s 2010 survey demonstrates only 11 percent of older adult African Americans and 21 percent of English-speaking older adult Hispanics are using the internet. This racial discrepancy is especially critical in terms of VV because 30 percent of women in state and federal prisons are African American and 16 percent Latinx (Pariona 2018). Complications such as these are stressors for the caretaker that often times result in their limiting the child’s visits with their parent and other forms of contact (Poehlmann 2005). With older adults reporting feelings of anxiety when using technology (Van Volkom et al. 3), and statistics showing there’s a digital divide between both elders and young people, as well as elders of color and white people, it is reasonable to argue that video visitation is not benefiting the large group of grandparents that serve as caretakers or the incarcerated mothers they are supporting. This means VV could directly hinder incarcerated mothers’ ability to maintain contact with their children.

In addition, not all correctional facilities offer remote visitations, and when they do families are still required to submit pictures of photo IDs to the technology companies in order to be approved for visitation, schedule visits in advance, have payments processed before visits, and use the computer software supported by the technology company. Even after all of those items are taken care of, the video at times just doesn't work. One user said, "sometimes I could hear my interviewee, sometimes not. The line crackled; the picture was grainy" (Alexander 2018). Unfortunately, the common response to these glitchie videos is that the facility doesn't own the software, so they can't maintain it (Alexander 2018). Facilities usually advise families to use the Video Visitation Center on-site, if one is provided. Rabuy and Wagner assert, "burdening individuals with extensive travel only to visit an incarcerated loved one by video screen is particularly counterproductive" (Rabuy and Wagner 6). It would only make sense that if one has to commute to the facility, they should be able to see their loved one in person.

There have also been reports that the video's poor quality makes it difficult for the families to calculate how their loved one is doing, feeling, and responding with body language. The position of the video monitor further limits intimacy because it's usually placed too high for the incarcerated to look directly into the screen. This inhibits incarcerated residents' from making eye-contact, which most people agree is significant for human communication. VV doesn't seem to be stopping contraband either. For instance, a study conducted by the Grassroots Leadership and the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition found that "disciplinary cases for possession of contraband in Travis County, Texas increased 54 percent after the county completed its transition to video-only visitation, and that between 2009 and September 2013—after VV was implemented, the number of visits in Travis County fell from 7,288 to 5,220 (Rabuy and Wagner 16). Of course, the statistics from one jail cannot be used to generalize the

entire impact of VV, but they can be used to draw attention to what this rhetoric of technology is really legitimatizing.

In the same way schools claim these nuanced digital resources will also increase “modes of discipline, measurement, and control of school populations,” correctional facilities claim VV will help them provide better security and safety (Nemorin 240). But VV isn’t about safety, nor is about increasing visits or repairing family relationships. VV is about surveilling and monetizing incarcerated motherhood. I agree, VV would be an excellent addition to state and federal prisons where men and women who have committed violent crimes are held for longer sentences, and contraband is a larger issue. I also believe VV could serve to make-up for the physical distance between state and federal prisons and communities. But VV isn’t being implemented in state and federal prisons, it is being widely adapted in jails where people are only held for a few months to a year because they could not make bail (Rabuy and Wagner 6). Offering VV as a substitute, rather than a supplement, 74 percent of jails are banning in-person visits when they implement video visitation (Rabuy and Wagner 11), which has not increased visits or stopped contraband, but rather created more barriers for incarcerated mothers. Although VV fails to increase convenience and engagement, VV has carried out correctional facilities’ commitment to productivity by means of acting as another mechanism of control.

### **Surveilling Incarcerated Mothers Via Video Visitation**

Because incarcerated mothers have broken the law, they are often perceived as a liability in society; a mother’s violation of morality means she isn’t capable of raising a child with an honorable character (Gilad & Gat 371). Correctional facilities then use panopticism to discipline and punish these mothers by separating them from their children and normalizing their mothering practices. Power represented by Foucault’s panopticism requires “mechanisms that

analyse distributions, gaps, series, combinations, and which use instruments that render visible, record, differentiate and compare” (Foucault 208). What is significant about these mechanisms is that they create “a physics of a relational and multiple power, which has its maximum intensity not in the person of the king, but in the bodies that can be *individualized* by these relations” (Foucault 208). VV is one of these mechanisms, as a study conducted by the Institute for Law and Policy Planning confirms, “With this technology [VV], staff involvement is reduced while increasing control” (Cunningham 2018). By enabling both structural and interpersonal surveillance, VV amplifies the need for mothers to self-discipline. As of right now, studies accounting for the VVs effect on parenting are still developing, so I draw from scholarship on surveillance, mother/child prisons, and incarcerated motherhood to conceptualize VV as a form of digital surveillance that works to reaffirm normative motherhood.

According to Fixmer-Oraiz, governmentality has recently taken a similar approach to exercising power. Fixmer-Oraiz explains in our post 9/11 homeland security state, governmentality “turns our attention from centralized, sovereign structures to more dispersed locales, as myriad forms of authority are enlisted alongside disciplined citizenry to manage responsibilities once considered public, from health and welfare to the security of the nation” (17 Fixmer-Oraiz). This addition of dispersed and interpersonal surveillance to the already existing fixed and structural surveillance creates ubiquitous surveillance in which mothers, poor mothers of color in particular, are constantly under the gaze both outside and inside of prisons. Michalsen (2019) notes mothers have always changed their mothering in reaction to state involvement, such as child welfare system and parole, because these systems “reproduce systematic violence in the form of surveillance and separation, regulation and punishment” (507). Along with formal institutions contributing to intensive mothering, mother-to-mother interaction serves to regulate

motherhood too (Henderson et al.). When mothers do not adjust to these regulations, they are criminalized and are furthermore branded as “bad mothers.” This criminalization marks a turn in the penal system where “something other than crimes, namely, the ‘soul’ of the criminal” is now being judged (Foucault 19). As a consequence of this judgment, mothers self-blame and internalize the factors suppressing them from performing motherhood both inside and outside of correctional facilities.

Visitation has always been a means of regulating mothers’ parenting practices. COs are required to monitor the incarcerated and their visitors during glass, lobby, and contact visits. Glass and lobby visits are non-contact visits where incarcerated residents and their visitor speak to each other through a phone on either side of a Plexiglas partition or video monitor in the facility lobby. Of these, contact visits suffer the most scrutiny because both mother and child are perceived as vehicles for contraband (Aiello & McCorkel 2017). Even though contact visits are held in rooms reserved just for the incarcerated and their visitors, they are deemed to be the most stressful of all visitation modalities because they are uncomfortable, unsanitary, lack child-friendly play areas, and are usually disrupted or terminated when one person displays bad behavior (Tartaro & Levy 2017). Contact visits also require that visitors be institutionalized, resulting in what Aiello & McCorkel call “secondary prisonization.” Secondary prisonization requires visitors to discipline their bodies, abide by specific spatial parameters, and regulating their emotions. For children, this translates to knowing how long you can hug your mother, learning what areas you can enter to access her, and not getting too upset when the visit is over. Mothers are of course expected to enforce these rules, and when their children don’t abide, COs often intervene to publicly shame the mother (Aiello & McCorkel 2017). While VV won’t stop

children from being surveilled by correctional facilities, it could prevent them from secondary prisonization. However, that's not as positive as it sounds.

In a study comparing glass, lobby, video, and contact visits, the majority of visitors said video visits were most convenient, but they preferred contact visits because they are “more personal,” and “there’s just stuff you can’t say over the phone” (Tartaro & Levy 578). Scholars (Aiello & McCorkel 2017, Tartaro & Levy 2017) have noted incarcerated mothers confessing to purposely scheduling fewer visits if it meant seeing their child through a partition. Mothers reported that glass visits were difficult and traumatizing for their children because they weren’t able to touch their mothers. This sacrifice is a result of incarcerated mothers being conditioned to be “selfless.” During in-person visits, Aiello and McCorkel often observed COs calling incarcerated mothers “selfish” when their children became visibly upset at the end of visits. There has yet to be a study conducted on VV’s emotional effect on children or their mothers, but it is important to note that some onsite VV areas are setup similar to the glass visits. When facilities don’t offer remote VV, visitors are required to come to the facility and speak to their incarcerated loved one through a phone while viewing them on a video monitor. In a digital age, this could potentially be comforting to children or it could have the same traumatizing effect as glass visits. For mothers, nonetheless, video visits will cause them to undergo even more surveillance than contact visits.

Allowing correctional facilities to record each individual visit is one of the ways in which VV increases surveillance. Because VV eliminates outside traffic coming into the prison, and therefore the risk of contraband, it seems unnecessary to monitor visits. In fact, one of the main benefits of VV—which I say more about in the following section—is the ability to reallocate the staff normally responsible for monitoring visits. Rather than reducing staff to give visitors and

their incarcerated loved ones privacy, correctional facilities use the technology to surveil each visit more closely. Both visitor and incarcerated resident are warned their video is being recorded and can be used in as evidence in a criminal or civil proceeding. While there are no reports of this happening yet, it is likely these recordings could be referenced in a parental termination rights proceeding.

During these proceedings, courts base their decision on two things: (1) the evidence showing the parent is unfit; and (2) whether or not terminating rights would benefit the child (Kennedy 2012). Mothers who have lengthy sentences are often faced with efforts to terminate their parental rights, and the courts often review their efforts to obtain assistance prior to incarceration, their reason for incarceration, and their efforts to maintain contact with their children during incarceration (Kennedy 2012). Failure to maintain communication with their children could serve as evidence that terminating a mother's parental rights would benefit their child (Kennedy 2012). Analysis of VV recordings could provide courts with evidence detailing how much communication mothers have with their children, as well as how they engage with their children. Because analysis of video footage is so commonly used as a disciplinary mechanism (Manley et al. 2012), it would not be surprising if VV footage was used to punish mothers.

In addition to recording each individual visit, VV also helps to localize the prison population back to one room during visits; where the incarcerated can help the COs monitor each other. With at least 60 percent of women in jails and prisons being mothers and intensive mothering now being enforced by other mothers, what we can imagine here is a room full of mothers surveilling other mothers. Henderson et al.'s research with mothers found, "the pressure to be perfect is most powerfully perpetuated mother-to-mother through interpersonal interaction,



or in Foucauldian terms, surveillance” (233). As a consequence of this interpersonal surveillance, Henderson et al. explain, “The mothers are not blaming ‘the media’ or their immediate support systems...for their guilt over shortcomings in motherhood; they are blaming themselves” (240). This self-blame is extremely common among mothers in prison, as the intersection of being convicted of a crime, being a drug user, being poor, and being Black or Latinx gives these women the label of unfit mothers (Kennedy 2012). Their current incarceration and prison circumstances makes incarcerated mothers vulnerable to criticism from their peers and COs. Especially since intensive mothering exacerbates the need for women to focus solely on their children, which is supported by the evidence used in parental rights proceedings mentioned above. Such criticism is exemplified in studies conducted in mother/child prisons (Luther & Gregson 2011, Haney 2013).

Scholarship on mother/child prisons or prison nurseries confirms mothering in front of an audience behind bars often restricts and regulates motherhood. Prison policies and procedures limit mother’s ability to make decisions regarding their baby’s health, sleeping habits, behavior, and interactions with other incarcerated residents, which restricts their ability to direct the physical and social well-being of their children (Luther & Gregson 2011). These policies and procedures are often enforced by COs, but it’s also been noted that mothers too interfere with their peers’ mothering methods. Through a three-year ethnographic study in a mother/child prison she refers to as Visions, Haney (2013) noticed, “when she [a mother] made mistakes...there were hundreds of eyes watching, ready to point it out to her and to the prison staff” (116). Unfortunately, the children who were also a part of Visions took advantage of this surveillance, and used “the prison’s power dynamics to try to control their mothers, warning their mothers that they were ‘being bad’ or complaining about them to staff” (Haney 115). Mothers’

“bad” behavior was commonly noted by COs, and considered a factor when determining their release (Luther & Gregson 2011, Haney 2013). For example, a counselor at Visions wrote in a mother’s evaluation that, “She’s raising her son like a gangster from the hood,” as the counselor said they were “worried about what this says about her [the mother’s] mindset and how she’ll be on the outside” (Haney 117). Moves like this made it apparent to Haney that prisons uphold the damaging notions that incarcerated mothers don’t know best, and motherhood is not an entitlement for mothers in prison and needs to be made public (Haney 2013). In short, incarcerated mothers are judged by their ability to mother in a space that purposely makes it difficult for them to mother. This judgment is then used to determine their character.

Disregarding the circumstances that may have caused mothers to break the law, institutionalized motherhood locks mothers into a cycle of surveillance-motivated performance. As I hoped to have shown, VV enables opportunities for video surveillance and mother-to-mother surveillance, which heightens the need for mothers to demonstrate that they understand that motherhood is instinctual to women, and that good mothers are selfless, subservient to their children, and don’t harshly punish their children. As I demonstrated with mommy/child prison scholarship, prison policies and procedures are structured to reaffirm normative motherhood in a way that influences mothers to self-discipline, but also prevents mothers from ever being seen as “good” mothers.

### **Video Visitation in the State of Exception**

Conditioning incarcerated mothers into believing they do not deserve to be mothers, reminds us the penal system thrives within a state of exception where institutions are allowed to rip human beings out of their social context and gut them of their politics and identities (Morin 388). I don’t mean to say VV as a form of surveillance itself is what makes prisons a state of

exception; surveillance alone is not the problem as at times it is necessary. However, surveilling with the purpose of regulating rather than rehabilitating, or might I go as far as to say surveilling under the guise of rehabilitating, but actually punishing is the problem. The original purpose of the panopticon was to allow one person to discipline many at one time.

The watchtower architecture grants “disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade and constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising; and absolutely ‘discreet’, for it functions permanently and largely in silence” (Foucault 177).

Disciplining was all about organization, scheduling, keeping the body in a particular motion. In the sense that the panopticon prompted bodies to operate like machines, it could be accepted as a form of rehabilitation. Not an ideal form of rehabilitation, as it still led to uniformity, but rehabilitation in that the gaze removed any attempt of violent or ‘unorderly’ behavior without the use of violence or punishment. The gaze of VV is too “indiscreet” and “discreet,” but it’s effects are insidious. Rather than preventing a behavior, VV is instilling a behavior; a punishable act had it been performed outside of the prison.

Mason and Magnet’s findings, “the development of new technologies in North America historically has been due to, as well as has benefited, the prison industrial complex,” (110) attests to Agamben’s notion that the state of exception increasingly appears as a “technique of government, rather than an exceptional rule” (6). As we take a closer look at how the prison industry has adapted surveillance technologies to not only fill beds, but to overincarcerate women, the use of VV as a method to surveil and punish incarcerated mothers seems less farfetched. Police surveillance now includes technologies such as fingerprinting, photography, biometrics, and social media. With police inviting communities to upload and submit videos and

photos of criminal behavior to help make arrests, Mason and Magnet feel women and especially women of color at an even higher risk of being incarcerated. The elimination of assistance and aid programs propel women into criminalized behavior so that they can provide food and housing for themselves and/or their children, which if captured on camera could land them in prison. In addition, the discrimination and harassment displacing LGBTQ+ members from their homes subjects them to a life of crime necessary for survival too. So while the circumstances that lead women and minority groups to commit crimes are not captured and addressed, their methods for survival are allowed to be recorded and criminalized.

Mason and Magnet point out that if this surveillance technology was used for pleasure instead of the policing, it itself would be criminalized. They refer to an episode of *Criminal Minds* where a murderer “observes his victims through the webcam and then allows the videos of his murders to ‘go viral’” (112). Hacking into someone’s webcam is an obvious breach of their privacy, but the FBI must do the same in order to catch and arrest the murderer. We see this same state of exception practiced within the prison. I am not equating VV with hacking into someone’s webcam, but there is similarity in how the home is entered without the homeowner’s knowledge. When families use VV to talk with their incarcerated loved one, I doubt they are doing so with the awareness that the prison is too surveilling them. Despite the recording at the being of the call letting them know their visit will be monitored and recorded, I don’t think in that moment the family considers or understands they are now under the panoptic gaze. This accepted invasion of privacy is what I am referring to when I say the gaze of VV is insidious. Staying on the line after hearing the recording is an admission of the callers’ consent, correct? So whether they are aware they are being surveilled, they’ve agreed to it. And in the case that they

don't agree to it and they hang up, well then the prison has succeeded in cutting of another resource mothers need to perform motherhood.

The prison as a state of exception allows mothers to be punished in ways that in any other space would be punishable. Physically separating mothers from their children, cutting off contact between mothers and their children, limiting resources, are not procedures for rehabilitation or even discipline; they are methods of normalization. VV helps to create further distance between mother and child, while simultaneously monitoring the little interaction allowed between mother and child so that prisons can re-create the image of 'bad' mothers. Contrary to the way in which it is advertised, VV does not permit the incarcerated to socialize with their families more frequently and with ease, nor will it allow mothers to engage with their child(ren) freely. If mothers are already struggling to retain autonomy in prison nurseries, and have testified to the traumatic paternalistic-style surveillance they've had to mother under during in-person visits, imagine the scrutiny they will have to bear while mothering in front of these same COs, other mothers, and their peers. The bottom line is, VV will not bring families together. If correctional facilities actually cared about families, VV would be used as a supplement, and it would be free. Not only are correctional facilities using VV to control and regulate motherhood, they are also monetizing it.

### **Monetizing Motherhood**

Contributing to what Wang (2018) calls "offender-funded policing and punishment" (21), VV is a tool within what Morin refers to as "the neoliberal market economy, which has produced increasing numbers of poor, unemployed, and marginalized men and women who are contained and regulated by incarceration" (383). In the same way police directly generate revenue by "using fees and fines to squeeze money out of people who come into contact with the police,"

prisons monetize motherhood by putting fees on human interaction (Wang 21). The majority of the mothers who are locked up were committing crimes to provide for themselves and their children (Kennedy 83), which makes it clear that facilities are purposely obstructing mother/child bonds by asking these mothers to pay for a basic human need. Existing and operating in a state of exception, correctional facilities have the ability to refuse to pay people for labor or pay them very little, and at the same time force them to pay for services that would normally be free. In no other circumstances would it be legal to charge for human interaction. Even the Skype and Facetime apps on your mobile devices are free. More importantly, they are an option. People in the free-world can choose to use these devices, and these devices are not the only option for communicating with other people. In stark contrast, VV does replace human interaction and it does cost. In requiring incarcerated mothers to pay a fee to interact with their children, VV reduces—if not eliminates—engagement between mother and child. Incarcerated mothers are usually the sole caretakers of their children before they enter prison, which makes maintaining the mother/child bond an intricate part of rehabilitation. Not having consistent and positive interactions with their children can cause both mom and child to suffer from stress, and put a role strain on the mother—possibly causing her to lose her identity as a mother (Berry & Eigenberg 2003).

VV marks a shift from correctional facilities turning over to private providers to supplement facility services like commissary or waste removal (Greenbaum 96), to outsourcing human interaction. Since correctional facilities already use technology for their phone, commissary, and email services, technology companies offer bundle packages, giving facilities the option of maintaining what they already have, while adding VV for no extra charge. For example, Securus paid Wisconsin's Chippewa County jail's \$1,333,215.00 installation and start-

up fee for bundling (Rabuy and Wagner 2015), and Securus guaranteed Dallas County \$3.5 million if they revised their visitation policies to eliminate face-to-face visits and limit all visits to a 20-hour window (Texas Criminal Justice Coalition). This money is then replenished by charging families a visitation fee, either per minute or per visit. By digging up contracts between correctional facilities and technology companies, scholars and journalists confirmed both parties were expecting a profit after implementing VV.

Obviously technology companies are the biggest supporters of video visitation because it brings them revenue, but it is also important to note that some companies have lost money. Due to having to issue refunds, companies sometimes do not generate revenue. Montgomery Technology, Inc.—which serves Charlotte County jail in Florida—gave 35 refunds out of 89 total video visits (Rabuy and Wagner 16). This caused both company and the facility to lose \$8, which is not a big deal. However, because there is a chance companies could lose money, they've begun to introduce stipulations in their contracts that require the facility to meet a high usage quota before the facility can receive their commission. In other cases, companies are requiring that their “investments be recouped before they will pay commissions to the facilities” (Rabuy and Wagner 17). This commission also determines how much the family is charged. Some facilities receive zero commission, while others receive 10 percent-50 percent. The higher the commission, the more incentive for scheduling more video visits. Implementing VV has cut down costs for correctional facilities, and has increased them for the incarcerated and their families

The long lasting and deeply entwined relationships between correctional facilities and technology companies also serves as proof that money, rather than family unity is the main motivation behind VV. Take Texas for example. The technology companies GTL, Consolidated

Telecom Inc., City Tele Coin, Encartele, Pay Tel Communications Inc., and Prodigy Solutions are listed on the Sheriffs' Association of Texas's "2017 Master Exhibitor List." Aside from hosting booths during the Exhibit Show at the Sheriffs' Association of Texas Annual Training Conference and Expo, some of these companies are also sponsors for the Sheriffs' Association of Texas. Prodigy Solutions Inc. is listed as a "Silver Sponsor," which means they have pledged between \$1,000-\$2,499 to the Sheriff's Association of Texas, and Global Tel Link, who is a "Diamond Sponsor," has pledged *at least* \$4,000. Their contributions, along with their services make it clear these institutions are committed to supporting and sustaining each other's business. And rehabilitation is a threat to those businesses.

Public correction's motivation to profit from the oppressed and their poor families, is a critical part of the Prison Industrial Complex, which Dr. Patrice Fulcher describes as a "multimillion-dollar profiteering industry that is driven by the greed of private corporations, the federal government, federal, state, and private correctional institutions, and politicians" (Texas Criminal Justice Coalition). We've seen this for-profit move with the expansion of private prisons, and states like California who build more facilities to repair their damaged economy (Gilmore 2007). Another source of income is charging for services. Wang reports, "[T]he development of new communication technology has been a lucrative source of revenue for companies contracted by the state to provide services in prison..." (Wang 38). Wang goes on to explain that our current fiscal crisis has "led to the deployment of socially deleterious methods of revenue extraction that target vulnerable populations, particularly poor black Americans" (Wang 153). Greenbaum adds that a lack of access to legal assistance combined with racially biased policing and sentencing is what puts poor people of color in a helpless position of having fees,



finances, and surcharges sucked out of their pockets when they are arrested, convicted, and released (92-93).

Poor mothers of color are locked up because they cannot afford to live according to the ideals of mainstream motherhood, which are set by class-based and racial bias (Kennedy 82). Society claims these mothers are a drain on the system, but ironically prisons and jails profit from them. Before their incarceration, Black women on average made \$12,735 before their incarceration, Hispanic women made, \$11,820, and White women made \$15,480 (Rabuy & Kopf 2015). It is quite possible that many of these women were on parole, probation, or GPS monitoring and were required to pay weekly or monthly fees. When not paid, these women were thrown back into correctional facilities. On top of having to pay for commissary, phone services, and sometimes email services, these women are now required to pay for visits, the one service that used to be free. VV costs around at least \$10-\$12 per 20-30 minutes (Rabuy & Wagner 2015). With the ordinary prison worker only earning between 12 to 40 cents an hour (Katzenstein & Waller 642), their families have to pick up the bill if they want to stay in contact with them. Families of the incarcerated are some of the poorest people in the country, who are already suffering from “socioeconomic stresses, addiction, and histories of abuse” (Kennedy 2012 164). They can’t adequately provide for the child(ren) they are caring for without state assistance (Kennedy 2012, 173), let alone pay for VV. What we are seeing here is the newest contribution to our penal system’s historical trend of profiting from the poor.

Monetizing motherhood locks mothers into a cycle of debt and surveillance-motivated performance. Referencing Lazzarato’s definition, Wang explains, “debt should be conceptualized not only in terms of money and repayment, but also in terms of the disciplinary function of debt and the docile subjectivities produced by indebtedness” (64). The debtor is expected to also pay

back their debt in money, attitude, behavior, and conduct. The debt creates subjectivity, in which the indebted cannot repay until they become fully disciplined. By this definition, incarcerated mothers are indebted in two ways. It is likely that at the time of their incarceration, these mothers failed to pay for a fee, fine, rent, bill, or fulfill some sort of financial obligation. These initial payments, along with new court fees and fines, will still need to be paid soon after their release or they will be incarcerated again. While in prison, these women will be forced to do labor to work off their debt. Simultaneously, these mothers will use either the little money they earn or money from their family to pay for commissary, hygiene supplies, and communication services, leaving them with nothing left over. At the time of their release they will be in financial debt.

Furthermore, and as I mentioned earlier, it is also likely that these mothers were forced into incarceration because they failed to abide by the ideals of mainstream motherhood. Their undisciplined bodies put a stain on society and they now have to be rehabilitated in order to pay off their debt. Their debt will not be repaid though until they've proven to fit into the white hegemonic paradigm of motherhood. However, this is a debt that is not expected to be repaid; it can't be repaid. With the resources VV replaces and the surveillance it adds, incarcerated mothers will never be able to perform motherhood in an acceptable way. They will forever be indebted. Up to this point, I have shown how VV is advertised as a digital tool that unites families, but in reality obstructs mother/child bonds through increasing surveillance of incarcerated mothers. It is also important that I briefly acknowledge how this surveillance extends to their children as well.

### **Incriminating the Community**

When Caitlin spoke to *WE TV* producers regarding her short video visit with Matt, she explained, "I don't want to say too much because I know these calls are monitored and

recorded.” Perhaps she was being cautious not to say something that could be used against Matt, or maybe she didn’t want to implicate herself. Either way, Caitlin’s hesitation is evidence that VV is a surveillance technology that conveniently connects the incarcerated with their loved ones, while simultaneously connecting these loved ones to corrections. VV makes Matt and Caitlin both equally visible to the correctional facility, and both are being recorded. Caitlin’s decision to condition herself to “not say too much,” proves that VV acts as a mechanism of control within panopticism, and it exemplifies how VV extends control beyond the panopticon. Using surveillance technology, such as automation software (Wang 2018), and social media (Mason & Magnet 2012) to police and incriminate the community is already a popular trend. However, using technology within correctional facilities to discipline communities outside the facilities seems to be new. Securus’s early attempt to extract information from VV callers shows that technology companies have ulterior motives for providing VV to the community, and I am wondering whether correctional facilities have the same motives.

The purpose of this article is to conceptualize VV as a form of digital surveillance that dismantles mother/child relationships, as well as demonstrate how correctional facilities have used a rhetoric of technology to legitimize their use of VV. Appealing to users’ interest in convenience, engagement, and productivity, correctional facilities and technology companies have transitioned from contact visits in designated spaces to virtual visits on monitors placed in general population areas. This transition extends the role of “watcher” within correctional facilities, expands the gaze outside of facilities, and records conversations, making VV itself a form of digital surveillance, while also enacting mother-to-mother surveillance, and amplifying the need for self-surveillance. With the use of digital surveillance, panopticism is now able to exercise power in correctional facilities and communities simultaneously. This ubiquitous

surveillance directly obstructs mother/child relationships, as VV is a mechanism of control within a larger system designed to normalize motherhood. Unlike other forms of digital surveillance, VV doesn't enact mutual watching or data collection with the purpose of leveling hierarchies. In contrast, VV intensifies the top down hierarchy exercised in panopticism, using incarcerated mothers, their callers, their peers, and COs to discipline and punish mothers who fail meet the pressures of intensive mothering.

After paralleling the structure of VV with intensive mothering ideologies, it became apparent that both are working to reaffirm normative motherhood. Normative motherhood is centered on the idea that “good” mothers secure the nation by producing patriotic sons (Fixmer-Oraiz 2019), while “bad” mothers threaten the nation by raising “gangsters” (Gild & Gat 2013). Moreover, correctional facilities’ rhetoric of technology and its three appeals are often directed at the families with incarcerated loved ones, persuading them to pick screen-time over contact visits. If incarcerated mothers are thought to be raising future delinquents, is it possible VV serves to surveil and monitor their children too? Incarcerated mothers aren't limited to only visiting with their children, but I focus on their children here because existing scholarship shows the stigma of “bad” mother also has negative connotations for children (Gild & Gat 2013, Aiello & McCorkel 2017, Kennedy 2018). Similar to how Aiello & McCorkel observed children experiencing secondary prisonization during contact visits, I predict VV will begin to discipline children as they, like their mothers, are being surveilled. Due to a lack of space, I don't have the ability to fully interrogate the relationship between VV and children with incarcerated mothers; however, I do want to situate this relationship as a point of departure for future research. By putting a price on human interaction, VV financially contributes to the Prison Industrial Complex. Future research should investigate how VV as a form of digital surveillance is also

supplementing the Prison Industrial Complex by producing more prisoners. For this reason, I think it's especially important for future studies to focus on how VV enables society to re-imagine black mothers as "bad" mothers.

From re-presenting the black female body as site of labor production during slavery, to re-presenting the black mother as useless and unsuitable after emancipation, society has continually found ways to re-imagine black mothers in a way that soothes white discomfort (Cobb 2015). And so we come full circle. While actual pictures of mothers using VV won't circulate, at least not widely, the idea of VV does encourage our minds to imagine a childless mother sitting within a portrait of a screen, as opposed to embracing her child in a room active with other families. Replacing in-person visits stimulates our curiosities, causing our minds to wonder, "who is on the other side of that screen, and why are they not allowed in the prison, yet the prison needs to have access in their home?" These current mental and figurative snapshots of mothers leaving their children and producing future delinquents, are uncannily reminiscent of past images and ideas of black women as mothers who birthed the next generation of slaves, and lacked maternal instincts—failing to keep her baby or develop a relationship with her/him (Cobb 2015).

Because of the treatment of black mothers during slavery and attitudes of resistance after emancipation, black mothers did have very little access to money, leisure time, and other resources needed to mother. Decades later when we should have progressed from this, we're seeing the criminal justice take on the active role of instating stricter policies, more aggressive policing, and digital surveillance to take resources away from these mothers so they fail to mother, and afterward are punished for it. Moving forward, I plan to explore how digital surveillance like VV assists the prison in re-creating the circumstances historically known for

punishing black mothers, in an effort to re-present black women and the “bad” mothers the patriarchy has so long claimed them to be. In identifying the cynical impacts of VV, whether they be intentional or accidental, I hope to contribute to the larger movement of dismantling stigmas against incarcerated mothers.

## **Chapter Four: “I am a good mother...”: Identifying the ways in which Incarcerated Mothers Adapt and Reject “Good Mothering” Practices as an Act of Resistance**

The previous two chapters discussed motherhood as an institution, how incarcerated mothers were excluded from this institution and made efforts to (re)claim their entry into the institution. The previous chapters also drew attention to the penal system’s role in reinforcing the patriarchal ideals that make up the institution of motherhood. This chapter makes a shift from motherhood to mothering. One of Adrienne Rich’s most influential declarations is that motherhood is restrained by the patriarchy, but the practice of mothering can be a form of liberation. Feminist maternal research draws from this notion in two ways: 1) by tracing the ways motherhood as a “male-defined site of oppression” continues to impede on women’s bodies, rights, and identities, and; 2) locating the methods mothers initiate to transform mothering into as a source of power (O’Reilly 159). Building on this research, I look at incarcerated mothers’ experiences with mothering behind bars for strategies of resistance in incarcerated mothers’ mothering practices. Because incarcerated mothers are constrained by the institution of motherhood, as well as by the intersections of poverty, race, gender, sexuality, age, and criminalization, I attempt to recognize agency even in their adaptation of Eurocentric mothering practices.

Incarcerated mothers define and practice mothering in a way that embraces and rejects good mothering; I argue both acts are a form of resistance. For mothers of color who come into prison fighting against deficit mother discourses, conforming to good mothering ideals is their main means of countering lazy welfare queen and uneducated immigrant mother narratives. Mothers who enter prison admitting their children are better off with someone else while at the

same time still owning their identity as a mother more openly challenge institutional motherhood. This chapter re-presents the ways incarcerated mothers conform to and challenge good mothering ideals. Because the resources which one has access to mother with are limited, this chapter focuses on how incarcerated mothers use letters to perform motherhood. With communication being limited to three forms—phone calls, visits, and letters—and letters quickly becoming the cheapest and least surveilled, I assumed many mothers use letters in their mothering practices. The institutional review board-approved surveys I circulated to incarcerated mothers contrasted my assumption. Due to concerns prompted by literacy and good mothering practices, some incarcerated mothers do not write letters to their children. While not all incarcerated mothers write letters to their children, their choices to and not to write to their children also seemed to be a method for disrupting institutionalized motherhood.

### **The Institution of Motherhood**

The social construction of motherhood has shifted across time. While there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood, the definition of motherhood consistently prioritizes the white, heterosexual, middle to upper-class experiences of motherhood. In Andrea O'Reilly's introduction to *From Motherhood to Mothering*, she briefly traces the changes in motherhood. O'Reilly explains that the modern image of the 'good mother' as the married, stay-at-home mother who was isolated in the private sphere and relied on her husband to be the breadwinner came as a result of industrialization. Following industrialization, the Victorian period defined mothers as those women who were "naturally pure, pious, and chaste" (O'Reilly 5). World War II normalized the "happy homemaker" narrative of motherhood (O'Reilly 5). Through all of its transfigurations, the institution of motherhood has maintained an ideal of "good mothering." Good mothering has been referred to as intensive mothering (Sharon Hays), patriarchal



mothering (Andrea O'Reilly), and most recently the new momism (Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels).

O'Reilly points out, "in each of its manifestations, motherhood remains, at its core, a patriarchal institution deeply oppressive to women" (O'Reilly 5). What's most oppressive about patriarchal motherhood, according to Rich, is that it assumes mothering is natural to women and is their sole responsibility, and that mothers are not given any agency to determine how they want to mother their children (Rich). New momism best captures how the pressures and responsibilities of motherhood have drastically increased. Referencing the three core beliefs and values Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels say makeup the ideology of good mothering, Lynn O'Brien Hallstein states the "new momism requires mothers to develop professional-level skills, such as therapist, pediatrician, consumer products safety instructor, and teacher to meet and treat the needs of children" (O'Brien Hallstein 3). While the institution of motherhood expects mothers to take on more responsibility, with less help and resources, mothers are still not allowed to ownership over their mothering practices.

Feminist scholars in motherhood studies have examined the ways patriarchal motherhood is enforced through literature, family literacy programs, blogs, and the media. This scholarship points to limitless instances of mothers being instructed on how to mother their children properly, and only receiving credit in the form of blame when children make mistakes, fall ill, or don't advance in school; that is if mothers are even acknowledged. For instance, Amber E. Kinser's work on family meal discourses highlights how the food labor mothers engage in is often erased from these discourses, which suppresses maternal voices and experiences. This suppression has led scholars to further study mothering practices. Citing Rich's "monumental contention that even when restrained by patriarchy, motherhood can be a site of empowerment

and political activism for women,” Fiona Joy Green encourages scholars to locate the agency and liberation mothers practice through mothering (Fiona Joy Green 126; 2004).

For example, the self-identifying feminist mothers Green interviewed actively resisted institutional motherhood ideals by “teaching children to take responsibility for their own conduct, as well as respecting their choices and decisions,” and “engag[ing] their children in critical thinking” (Fiona Joy Green 134). Blaire Wilson Toso found Latinx mothers intertwined some intensive mothering practices with mothering strategies common in their culture to liberate themselves from both. For example, Wilson Toso found Olivia grappling with the Eurocentric mothering ideal that requires mothers to become literate to educate their children, and the Latinx mothering ideal that expects mothers to be submissive to their husbands. After taking GED classes to improve her literacy skills, Olivia did focus more on educating her two daughters, but as a means of teaching them to be self-sufficient so they would never have to be subject to a man’s rule. Having independent daughters also freed Olivia of some of her mothering duties, giving her time to “work in a community place,” or “climb trees” (Wilson Toso 154). In addition, increasing her literacy skills allowed to Olivia to expand power in the home. In recognizing the patriarchal structure of her culture asserted the man make all decisions about house hold, even though he didn’t contribute to household duties, Olivia began to “criticize her husband’s lack of participation” (Wilson Toso 154). Olivia decided to do embrace and alter ideals from Eurocentric and Latinx mothering practices with the intentions of preventing her daughters from having to conform to either forms of motherhood when they were older.

Green and Wilson Toso’s studies, like others, draw attention to a common technique of decentering the child as a means of challenging good mothering ideals. Because good mothering values are contingent on the mother dedicating her full commitment to the child, relinquishing

some of her responsibilities as a mother to the child or to the other parent allows mothers to have agency over how they decide to parent, and how often they will parent, as well as frees the mother up to create an identity outside of her role as mother. In this way, mothers like Olivia (Wilson Toso) and the feminist mothers in Green's study, are directly and consciously dismissing good mothering. Sarah Hayden's (2018) analysis of criticism surrounding Michelle Obama's "mom-in-chief" persona, however, indicates black mothers actually engage in good mothering as way to show resistance against patriarchal motherhood. Because black mothers have been historically shamed as mothers, and racial as well as economic inequality have prevented black mothers from dedicating themselves to their children 24/7, fully embodying the role as a mother first does more to dismantle "bad mom" discourses about black women.

The way in which mothers push back against the oppressive institution of motherhood will differ depending on how aspects of their identities have shaped the discourses in which they mother. For instance, discourses surrounding black mothers characterize these mothers as neglectful, among other things, so black mothers may counter this narrative by being heavily involved with their children and their children's activities. Nonetheless, all these mothers' experiences and practices deserve to be examined for traces of resistance, agency, and power. In this chapter, I analyze the mothering practices of incarcerated mothers for instances where they have both accepted and rejected good mothering ideals. As I mention in my introduction, incarcerated mothers are largely made up of a black and brown, lower-class population. Before incarceration, many of these mothers are already deemed to be bad mothers because they did not have the desire, resources, or time to conform to good mothering practices. This bad mother stigma intensifies upon incarceration.

The surveys I collected from incarcerated mothers aligned with existing scholarship, which states incarcerated mothers tend to internalize the bad mother stigma, and engage in self-blame. Through my research, I find that most incarcerated mothers' define mother by Eurocentric good mothering ideals, and do not change or alter their understanding of mother upon their incarceration. Holding on to an already unrealistic definition of mother, causes incarcerated mothers to see themselves as flawed mothers. Incarcerated mothers adjust their mothering practices, but not their definition of mother. In what follows, I illuminate the agency incarcerated mothers exercise when mothering behind bars in an attempt to challenge good mother ideals and credit incarcerated mothers for their efforts

### **Motherhood as a Site for Agency and Power**

This chapter is based on institutional review board-approved data collected from surveys circulated to incarcerated mothers at the Caldwell County Jail located in Lockhart, Texas. Caldwell County Jail houses both female and male residents. I chose this location as a research site because the jail's Lieutenant invited me to conduct research at this facility. I met Lieutenant Hardee while working on a separate project with the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA). Sometime after building a working relationship, Lt. Hardee asked me about my dissertation project. When I told him I was interested in examining the ways incarcerated mothers use writing to perform motherhood, he said he'd like for his facility to participate in my research. Lt. Hardee is a strong advocate for reentry programs, and when financially possible has offered programming for his residence. Lt. Hardee expressed he saw the results of my study as a resource for figuring out how to help incarcerated mothers maintain connections with their children, which existing research proves is instrumental in successful reentry. At the time I conducted my study, fall of 2018, Lt. Hardee was the sergeant of the facility. We initially

planned for me to conduct interviews with the incarcerated mothers, but the former lieutenant did not approve. Fortunately, I was given to permission to circulate surveys, after the lieutenant reviewed and approved a copy of the surveys.

At the time the surveys were circulated, there were twenty incarcerated mothers housed at Caldwell County jail. Eight<sup>3</sup> of these twenty mothers completed and returned surveys. The eight mothers who participated in my survey range in age from 19 to 45. Four of these mothers identified as Hispanic or Latinx, three as white, and one as Black. Only three of the mothers were from other states, the remaining five were from parts of Texas. The majority of the mothers have three biological children, with five children being the most and one child being the least. Only one mother disclosed having two step-children. All but one of the mothers was currently in contact with their children, whether it be direct contact or contact via family members. One woman shared that her children were with a foster family who was moving towards adapting the children, and had prohibited her from making further contact.

The survey was designed to inquire about incarcerated mothers' mothering and writing practices, and how those two practices might come together if they write letters to their children. The survey included five sections: demographics; children; letters; writing; motherhood. None of these sections asked mothers any questions regarding their current crime, criminal history, or their sentence length. The survey instead focused on asking mothers to describe themselves, their preferred methods of communication with their children, their engagement in personal writing,

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<sup>3</sup> I do acknowledge my sample size is small. However, I also want to note that for someone who did not have a prior working relationship with the facility, such as instructor or volunteer, this sample size is an accomplishment. Also, having to circulate surveys, rather than conducting interviews, deprived me of the opportunity to build rapport with participants. It is common and understandable for vulnerable populations to be skeptical about working with outside entities, which too limits the sample size. Lastly, writing abilities could have also deterred mothers from participating in this project.

and their definitions of and strategies for mothering. The survey included substantial space after each question to invite mothers to write as much as they wanted to, and the survey included two blank pieces of paper which they were encouraged to use if they needed more space to express themselves.

After receiving the completed surveys, I assigned each survey a number, which I thereafter used as an identifier to protect participants' confidentiality. To analyze the data, I read the responses through a feminist maternal lens across two different phases. In the first phases, I looked for themes, definition, and sentiments that mimicked, repeated, or embraced a good mother discourse. In the second phase, I read responses with the participant's age and race in mind in an attempt to locate signs of autonomy and liberation, regardless of if responses seemed to be aligning with core ideals of good mothering. Cynthia M. Saavedra and Cara L. Preuss (2013) are especially foundational in my method because they acknowledge that while research in literacy is intended to be about the empowerment of individuals, "much of this research actually further disempowers individuals (Delpit)" (185). Saavedra and Preuss point out that literacy education, specifically, tends to focus on reconstructing women as the "global West/North good mothers" (185). To avoid mistakenly mislabeling mothers' mothering practices as deficient, we must be mindful of the many discourses intersecting in their lives. We must also pay attention to how we as researchers are positioning these discourses when working with mothers. Following Saavedra and Preuss's lead, I aim to be reflexive about my research, being transparent as possible about how the wording of my questions, my status as an outsider with a relationship with the Lieutenant, and my assumptions may have impacted the mother's responses.

**"I don't consider myself a good mother, cuz I have been gone so much."**

Mothering from afar without consistent and frequent contact with children, and little to no resources is difficult, but incarcerated mothers still mother (Enos 2006, Weller et al. 2018). Establishing an identity as mother is the first step to performing motherhood behind bars (Berry & Smith-Mahdi 2006). Maternal separation, social stigmas, and gender mandates strip incarcerated mothers from their children and their identity as mothers. Because these mothers are in prison, according to Enos, they are perceived of as “violating gender mandates about femininity... Normative expectations are that mothers do not risk becoming separated from children as a result of their involvement in illegal activities” (Enos 77). In order to mother their children, incarcerated mothers must (re)construct their identities as mothers for themselves, which they often times do through writing (Berry & Smith-Mahdi 2006). For some incarcerated mothers, it is during their incarceration that they are establishing parental boundaries and routines with their children for the first time. The intersection of raced, classed, and gendered discrimination, met with the influx of responsibilities mothers are expected to take on, enhanced by the pressure to provide financial support has left many incarcerated mothers with minimal time to spend with their children.

Incarceration minimizes mothers’ normal workloads and gives them an opportunity to assert themselves as mothers. Incarcerated mothers’ definitions of mother and descriptions of mothering practices make it clear they are actively attempting to mother their children despite distance. Their definitions and descriptions, however, also make it apparent that the self-blame these mothers internalize and the strict parameters they’ve set for how they can perform mothering behind bars are not irreducible to their incarceration. Describing a mother as someone

who is “A protector./ A provider./ A Doctor/ A Nurse/ A Bestfriend...”<sup>4</sup> closely aligns with the Douglas & Michaels’ description of new momism. On the one hand, which I’ll say more below, this is problematic because it directly hinders incarcerated mothers’ abilities to see themselves as good mothers since they are unable to fulfill the role of mother they are describing from behind bars. On the other hand, their efforts to fulfill this role is equally empowering because incarcerated mothers, like other marginalized mothers, either have not had or been described as not having the opportunity to intensively mother their children (Hayden). In the rest of this section, I present the ways in which incarcerated mothers align with good mothering ideals. In the next section, I counter the idea of conformity by drawing attention to the agency incarcerated mothers are enacting by holding and attempting to abide by these ideals.

In her book, *Mothering from the Inside: Parenting in a Women’s Prison*, Sandra Enos identifies seven key assumptions included in mothering discourse:

“(1) mothers are completely engaged with their priceless children and totally absorbed by this work; (2) mothering takes priority over all other work and is the ultimate fulfillment for women; (3) mothers are all-powerful and direct the development and future of their children, and a failure here will place the future of children at risk; (4) only certain caretakers—namely, biological or adoptive mothers—can ‘mother’; (5) mothers face motherhood with adequate time and resources; (6) mothers qua mothers perform the emotional work necessary to maintain ‘happy’ families; and (7) with respect to mothering, race, and class account for little” (23).

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<sup>4</sup> Language quoted from incarcerated mothers has been re-presented in a way that most accurately reflects their original writing. It’s important to note, however, their original answers were handwritten, this typed version may dramatize their writing style. This is not to embarrass them, but to ensure I do preserve the idiosyncrasies in their writing. A limitation of circulating surveys is not being able to talk with mothers about how they want their words represented.



The assumptions Enos describes sheds light on how mothering discourse immediately puts mothers at a disadvantage during their incarceration. Mothering discourse fails to recognize financial, personal, political, and cultural barriers that prevent mothers from conforming to unrealistic standards put in place to oppress and regulate mothers. The limitations put in place by mothering discourse directly exclude poor mothers of colors from being consider good mothers. Because mothering discourse is widely ingrained in our society, many mothers, nonetheless, strain themselves trying to be good mothers. Incarcerated mothers' definitions of mothers reflected the influence mothering discourse still has on them.

The descriptions incarcerated mothers provided about themselves, motherhood, and mothering corroborate the assumptions in Enos' lists. When characterizing their personalities, incarcerated mothers used adjectives associated with motherhood. Adjectives such as trustworthy, caring, and respectful—or synonyms for these words—were the most common used by incarcerated mothers when they described themselves, which is common among incarcerated mothers trying to construct a positive identity. This positive identity is constructed through what Enos calls “identity talk.” Identity talk allows an individual to account for oneself while also deflecting negative identities. The imposition of incarceration immediately threatens incarcerated mothers' identities as mothers. Through identity talk, incarcerated mothers are able to deflect these threats using three different strategies: (1) “redefining the situation or by denying the situation is a troublesome one”; (2) compartmentalizing “the problem and attempt to draw boundaries around these concerns”; (3) attempting “to redefine the situation by attributing imprisonment to being sick and seeking help rather than to being punished for violating a law” (37 Sandra Enos).

While incarcerated mothers were not asked to talk about their crimes or how the activity they were convicted for intersected with their mothering, the mothers still took describing themselves as an opportunity to deflect from mainstream narratives about mothers in prison. People in prison are generally portrayed and perceived as manipulators, dishonest, violent, and morally flawed. Aside from using adjectives that directly opposed these views of the incarcerated, incarcerated mothers also noted they were “friendly,” “very godly,” “outgoing,” and “generous.” Having to constantly prove their credibility to facility staff, judges, caseworkers, and caretakers, it’s not surprising incarcerated mothers have universally embodied these main characteristics. While I’m not facility staff, I am still an outsider who has connections with two institutions that oppress incarcerated mothers and so it is expected that they may also question my views of them. What’s most interesting about incarcerated mothers asserting they are respectful, trustworthy, and generous is that these adjectives also align with the mainstream definition of a good mother. Good mothers are expected to secure the nation by raising morally informed children, particularly sons, who will go on to be contributing citizens. As Enos notes, good mothers are also “totally absorbed” by their children, which again sheds light on why incarcerated mothers use the characteristics they do.

The way in which incarcerated mothers explain what a mother is and does echoes the same sentiments they had previously expressed about themselves. Incarcerated mothers typically defined a mother as someone who put their child first, provided their children with clothes, food, shelter, manners, kept their children educated and healthy, and gave them lots of love and care. Immediately a connection is drawn; the characteristics these women personally possess and are proud of, are the same ones needed to be a mother. The stark similarities between words used to describe themselves and the words used to define a mother support the notion that mothering is

supposed to be natural to all women and mothers shouldn't have identities outside that of mother. The more incarcerated mothers discussed mothering, the more their perceptions mimicked Eurocentric mothering.

Incarcerated mothers also represented a mother as one who cared for, protected, and loved *all* of her children. One mother went further to clarify children could consist of both "biological and stepchildren." Some incarcerated mothers insinuated the mothers' role should extend beyond that of domestic duties. Along with needing to be the children's caretaker, mothers should also be "A Nurse," "A Bestfriend," "A counselor," "teacher," "hero," in short, someone who "can fix anything and makes things better." Incarcerated mothers also viewed the role of mothers as one that was supposed to "help their children get ahead in all circumstances." The essence of motherhood for incarcerated mothers, again reinforces that conveyed in mothering discourse; "mothers are all-powerful and direct the development and future of their children" (Enos 23). It is not controversial for incarcerated mothers to see themselves as or want to be mothers who put their children first, teach them, protect them, and provide for them. It also would not be irregular for some incarcerated mothers to have fulfilled all of these roles prior to their incarceration, as the majority of incarcerated mothers are the primary caretaker for their children. It is worth noting though, that their definition of motherhood is part of the barrier they are trying to work through.

Incarcerated mothers' explanations of what made them a good mother was not nearly as robust as their definitions of a mother in general. One mother even left this question blank and another mother confessed, "I don't consider myself a good mother, cuz I have been gone so much." By adapting and attempting to conform to patriarchal ideals of motherhood, incarcerated mothers felt they had fallen short. Another mother answered the question with a disclaimer,

“When I do see my kids, we have plenty of fun, and they know I love them...” While she is not necessarily classifying herself as a bad mother, she is implying she is only a mother or a good mother when she is in the presence of her children. Before I move on to discuss other responses to this question, I want to acknowledge that by asking what made them “good” mothers, rather than just “mothers,” I could have prompted the answers mentioned above. I purposely used the phrase “good mothers” because I wanted to convey to the mothers that I thought they were good mothers, despite their circumstances. The question was worded to build the rapport I could have established face-to-face had this been an interview. Reflecting on this question, I now see that the wording could be interpreted as exclusive. Mothers may have felt they needed to first evaluate whether they were a good mother or not, rather than assuming that identity.

Other responses describing what made them, or kept them from being a good mother indicated that distance is the main struggle incarcerated mothers face. Being away from their children makes it impossible to be “completely engaged with their priceless children” (23). Struggling to mother from a distance is what makes incarcerated mothers comparable to transnational mothers, as mothering from a distance extends mother-child separation and leads to “attenuated relationships, trauma, awkward visits, and difficulties in family reunification” for both types of mothers (Michel & Oliviera 228). Poverty typically drives both types of mothers away from their children and on a search for the adequate resources mothers are expected to have. While the entire country is not facing financial turmoil, the majority of mothers incarcerated in the U.S. do tend to face economic barriers. Incarcerated mothers are made up of a population victim to rampant race, class, and gender discrimination. This discrimination excludes them from finding employment that will provide them with enough wages to rise above the poverty line. Financial inequalities make it difficult for mothers in poorer countries to transition

their families from poverty into middle class (Michel & Oliviera 228 from Reassembling motherhood). So whereas transnational mothers make the sacrifice of moving to another country to earn a steady, incarcerated mothers usually turn to criminal activity to make extra money. Funding resources is an essential component of mothering, as incarcerated mothers noted furnishing their children with clothes, shoes, toys, school supplies, was a part of what made them good mothers.

Because institutional motherhood fails to take into account the economic barriers mothers face, incarcerated mothers are left in a situation where they are now not able to give their children resources or time, which furthermore blocks their ability to perceive themselves as good mothers. While mothers did not use past tense, it was apparent they were thinking of interactions with their children pre-incarceration when describing what made them good mothers. For instance, one mother wrote, “I usually try to spoil tHem Everyonce in a wHile. I give Lots oF Hugs to mY cHildren & I Read Them bedtime stories at NigHt...wHen my cHildreN do good tHings I Reward tHem witH tHings like going to tHe movies or sHopping or Take my kids out to Eat...” Rather than draw from current mothering practices, incarcerated mothers tended to reference the type of mothering they were able to engage in prior to incarceration; a time when they had the means to fully participate in intensive mothering.

Incarcerated mothers mothering practices matched their definitions of mother. Using phone calls, visits, and letters, incarcerated mothers do manage to still perform the emotional labor to keep their children happy, encourage their children’s intellectual development, and instill them with respect and manners. Mothers prioritized talking to their children about school, their health, and their behavior. Schooling was the topic that came up the most. Mothers’ keen interest in their children's schooling echoes the “First Teacher Narrative.” Stacey Crooks (2013)

explains the first teacher narrative situates the mother as a child's first teacher. Frequently appearing in family literacy materials, the first teacher narrative leads women to believe they are responsible for educating their children before they are old enough to attend formal schooling, and should fully support their education after they've enrolled in school.

The first teacher narrative, according to Crooks, is problematic for a number of reasons. For one, it assumes that women are innately mothers and teachers. In addition, this narrative is gendered in the sense that it assumes mothers should be the ones parenting and teaching their child. Lastly, the narrative erases the woman's identity outside her role as mother. Family literacy work focuses on teaching mothers literacy skills so that they are more equipped to teach their children, rather than teaching women skills that they can use for their own benefit or pleasure. The first teacher narrative sends a message to mothers to improve their literacy skills in an effort to make sure their child becomes literate. This creates a paradox where the mother is assumed to be the child's natural teacher, but also needs expert help to perform her role as a teacher.

Unsurprisingly, then, incarcerated mothers requested expert help to assist them in performing motherhood behind bars. Aside from asking for much needed free and frequent phone calls and visits, incarcerated mothers expressed more access to parenting classes and GED or college courses in their facility would help them mother. Requesting an increase of phone calls and visits is expected, as this would allow mothers to talk to their children "before they leave for school," and see them during the week and not just on the weekends. Wanting the courses named above, however, signal that incarcerated mothers may have bought into the idea that they are not good mothers and perhaps need to be shown how to mother their children. Parenting courses and GED/college courses outside of this context aren't necessarily a bad thing, and mothers and women in prison should always feel encouraged to take any and all available

courses. Taking these courses, or in other words becoming more educated, in relation to good mothering is what presents an issue. Crooks positions family literacies as a part of what suppresses motherhood by explaining, "Family literacy as a 'discipline' or 'institution' did not originate these regulating discourses but is formed by them (and, in turn, reforms, them)" (Crooks 112). What incarcerated mothers will learn from these courses, parenting courses in particular, may actually make them feel like even worse mothers or make them feel as if they'll never be able to mother their children "properly."

Existing research has identified ways in which parenting course materials reinforce the gendered nature/discourses of mothering. Analyzing literacy advice given to mothers, Suzanne Smythe (2013) shows advice in the 1870s and 80s centers around the idea that children belong to the nation and it is the mother's duty to bring their children up to serve the nation. Saavedra & Preuss confirm, "the notion that women needed to focus on generations of children for the progression of the superior man was crystalized after Ellen Key's publication of the *Century of the Child*" (187). Wilson Toso reinforces the paradox of literacy and mothering saying, "embodying the Autonomous Literacy discourse is one way of becoming acceptable in the public's eye," but this recognition also serves to "inculcate the mothering labor embedded in the Good mother and Autonomous Literacy discourses as valid entry points into American society and appropriate model behavior" (151). So while it's great that mothers are able to advance after improving their literacy skills, doing so causes them to fall into the trap of demonstrating mothers need literacy to be good mothers and that literacy does help one improve their life.

Along with assuming parents have the literacy skills and access to books to read to their children, Carolyn Sufrin (2018) points out parenting programs in prisons also fail to mention "institutionalized racism, poverty, lack of access to mental and medical health care, sentencing

laws, or other sociopolitical factors that have contributed to the mass incarceration of parents over the last four decades” (60). In not addressing the circumstances that factor into parents’ incarceration, parenting classes vilify parents by omission. Parenting classes could acknowledge systematic barriers and provide advice for overcoming those barriers, but instead leave parents to internalize blame. Additionally, Sufrin calls out parenting programs for not providing lessons on the “cultural stereotypes and policies that have vilified, in particular, black mothers who are over-represented in prisons and jails” (60). Rather than tackle the discourses that have disrupted parenting, mothering in particular, parenting classes reinforce them; giving mothers the false hope that if they engage in certain practices they’ll be good mothers.

Existing scholarship on motherhood collectively illustrates institutional motherhood is set up so that mothers don't make the rules, they just enforce them (O'Reilly 161; 2004). Parental books and guide's, medical experts, state agents, even father's make the rules, but not mothers (O'Reilly 161). This section draws attention to how incarcerated mothers are using their mothering practices to enforce the rules the patriarchy imposes on them. Defining mother as someone who is fully consumed by their child, serves as their protector, doctor, teacher, and cares for their child more than themselves, incarcerated mothers replicate mainstream understandings of motherhood. Additionally, incarcerated mothers use the few resources they have to engage in intensive mothering by checking in on how their child is advancing in school, behaving themselves, and keeping up with their household responsibilities. In the context of incarcerated motherhood though, I'd say these mothers’ intense interest and commitment to their children’s schooling, health, and advancement serves to embrace good mothering as a direct disruption to the bad mother stigma associated with parental incarceration.



**“What Makes me a good mom. Well For 1 I give my cHildren Lots oF Love I usually try to spoil tHem Everyonce in a wHile.”**

Incarcerated mothers are often thought of as failing our nation because if they do not possess the moral to live an honest life, which means they are maternally irresponsible and incapable of raising children who will lead a civic life. But similar to feminist mothers (Green 2004), Latinx mothers (Wilson Toso 2013), and Black mothers (Hayden 2018), incarcerated mothers use Eurocentric mothering techniques to ensure their children are independent, educated, and are equipped to overcome the barriers their mothers faced. Exploring mothering as a site for liberation, O’Reilly says, "mothering that invests mothers with agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, is better for children as well... in being 'bad' mothers--outlaws from the institution of motherhood--we become better mothers for ourselves and our children" (O’Reilly 172; 2004). In an attempt to credit incarcerated mothers for being O’Reilly’s version of bad mothers, the following section highlights the agency incarcerated mothers exercise in their mothering practices.

Green characterizes feminist mothers’ mothering tactics as either subversive or overt strategies of resistance. Green explains, some mothers “consciously use their socially sanctioned position as mothers in subversive ways to teach their children to be critically conscious of and to challenge various forms of oppression that support the patriarchy” and other mothers openly challenge and reject conventional standards of motherhood (Green 130). For instance, one mother in Green’s study who fit conventional standards of motherhood, “quietly raises a son who is consciously aware of social injustice caused by patriarchy, racism, homophobia, agism, class bias, and capitalism” (Green 132). Another mother, whose identity as a lesbian and single parent already directly rejects conventional standards, demonstrated overt resistance when she decided

to share her mothering responsibilities with another feminist mother as a way of dealing with her preteenaged daughter's behavior. Green describes this mother's choice as a solution for keeping herself from being seen as an "unfit" mother and also addressing the needs of her daughter.

Incarcerated mothers also engage in alternative models of mothering that challenge patriarchal models of mothering. I characterize incarcerated mothers' "unconventional" mothering practices as overt strategies, as incarcerated mothers do not fit into existing motherhood ideals and therefore cannot disrupt the mothering discourse subversively.

Like the feminist mothers in Green's study, incarcerated mothers also engaged in overt resistance by willingly sharing their mothering responsibilities. When expressing what made her a good mother, one incarcerated mother stated, "what really makes me a good mother is realizing when they [her children] would be better off with someone else." This mother is exercising power by willingly making the choice, rather than relinquishing her rights because she is being forced. Child welfare, family members, and judges typically make incarcerated mothers feel that they are unfit and then convince or coerce them that good mothers "concede their rights to make decisions about their children" (Enos 108). Here, the incarcerated mother is not expressing feelings of being unfit, nor does she say she's giving up on mothering, rather she's saying she knows how to meet the needs of her children and that means sometimes she can't do it alone.

Enos also points out that arranging child care upon their incarceration is a common tactic for supporting incarcerated mothers' identities as mothers. Transferring responsibility for their child "when a mother was not able to take care of children because of crime and drug problems," according to Enos, is "similar to arranging care when a mother was ill and poorly equipped for child care" (Enos 122). Incarcerated mothers who transfer their child care responsibilities often defend their identities by bracketing (Enos 80). Like the incarcerated mother mentioned in the

previous section who described how she was a good mother when she was present with her children, bracketing refers to the way mothers isolate events—whether it be the event of mothering or the events they did away from their children. Mothers incarcerated for drug use commonly defend their identity by bracketing when clarifying that they never did drugs around their children.

For example, an incarcerated mother declared, “I never lie to my kids so they know that I have a problem that I am a addict and I am bipolar and my oldest still graduated high school and they know that drugs are bad.” I characterize this mother’s approach as overt resistance because she is simultaneously debunking the myth that the incarcerated mothers are dishonest and incapable of raising morally fit children, while also conforming to the ideal that mothers should educate and support their children’s education. Rather than hiding her drug use from her children, this mother incorporated it into her mothering practices. Similarly, incarcerated mothers disrupt negative narratives about them by engaging in what Enos refers to as “defending identity by managing challenges” (Enos 80). By confirming “No matter what I'm always there aNd Never give up... StroNg miNded for a being a siNgle parent,” and “I always listen to my children,” incarcerated mothers again show they did not let other parts of their life interfere with the love and attention they gave to their children. It is assumed that incarcerated mothers were absent from their lives prior to incarceration because they were more focused on drugs and criminal activity, but this isn’t always true.

Race plays a major role in fueling the stereotype that mothers in prison weren’t present in their children’s lives or were unfit to be a mother prior to incarceration. The Welfare Mother discourse, and the Latinx Mother linked to an immigrant discourse are two discourses commonly juxtaposed against the good mother discourse to condemn mothers of color (Wilson-Toso). The

Welfare Mother discourse, “creates an image of a single woman who is too lazy to work and has babies to get a larger subsidy from the government” (Wilson-Toso 147). The Welfare Queen, a trope originally used to identify women who were “criminally sentenced for large-scale and sophisticated welfare fraud,” is now typically used in reference to Black mothers specifically (Kohler-Hausman). Latinx mothers too are “portrayed as coming to the United States to take advantage of the system by raising their children on Welfare” (Wilson-Toso 147). Furthermore, Latinx children’s lack of school success in the United States is attributed, by default, to the mothers” (Wilson Toso 147). In other words, mothers of color are seen as a drain on society who produce more babies than they can or are willing to take care of; they take from the system instead of contributing to it. These deficit discourses completely erase the violence, abuse, and financial inequality these mothers experience, which lead them to seek help, as well as ignore the promises of support systems like Aid to Families with Dependent Children offer, but do not deliver to women of color.

Scholars have indicated a circular relationship between the welfare and the penal system (Kohler-Hausmann 2015) and foster care and the penal system (Roberts 2017). Contrary to mainstream belief, these circular relationships do not stem from lazy unfit mothers having babies for the government to care for. Instead, it is a result of the government adapting penal rituals to monitor who uses and how they use family assistance. Waiving assistance and services in mothers’ faces and then criminalizing them for using the services has created massive distrust between mothers of color and government programs. For this reason, Black and Latinx mothers are less likely than white mothers to place their children in foster care upon incarceration (Enos). While Latinx and white mothers more often have the opportunity to place their children with a spouse or partner, Black mothers do not, and usually arrange for their children to stay with the

maternal grandparent (Enos). While maternal separation puts stress on both the mother and child no matter where the child lives, having a family network of support has multiple benefits for Black mothers. For one, placing a child with family rather than foster care increases mothers' chances for maintaining her parental rights. Also, because othermothering is common amongst mothers of color, particularly Black mothers, placing children with family causes less of a disruption to the child's life. And lastly, families of color typically were willing and happy to take in children, seeing it as a natural part of their responsibility instead of a burden, which put mothers at ease when thinking about their child's wellbeing.

For black incarcerated mothers, continuing to practice othermothering while simultaneously attempting to engage in good mothering while behind bars works to reject institutional motherhood. Many feminist maternal scholars have recognized Black motherhood serves as a counternarrative to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, as black mothering is a site of power for black women (O'Reilly 11; 2004). O'Reilly explains, "the focus of black motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete" (O'Reilly 11; 2004). Along with othermothering, Rich highlights two other traditions which serve to empower Black mothers; "Motherhood as Social Activism," and "Nurturance as Resistance" (O'Reilly 11; 2004).

In stating, "A mother is a caring. Loving. Always around when things get rough someone to love you even when It seems like noone will ever care someone to always be around and hold you make sure everything is okay to love and care unconditionally," this black incarcerated mother is illustrating nurturance as resistance. Examples of motherhood as social activism can be seen in chapter one. By declaring her unconditional and endless love for her

child while she is mothering from a far, this mother is engaging in mothering practices that are both unique to Black and Eurocentric motherhood traditions. This mother did not disclose who her child is residing with during her incarceration, but she did say she would be reunited with her child soon, which means she arranged for the responsibility of her child to be temporarily transferred—a practice distinct from Eurocentric mothering practices. Nurturance is seen as resistance for black mothers because black mothers don't innately get to prioritize their children like white mothers do. So when they do engage in practices associated with intensive mothering, it's looked at as resistance, not conforming. Hayden exemplifies this with her work on Michelle Obama. In her article “Michelle Obama, Mom-in-Chief: The Racialized Rhetorical Contexts of Maternity,” Hayden analyzes conflicting criticism from Black and white pundits who condemn and support Obama for engaging in intensive mothering. Hayden reads Obama’s self-proclaimed “Mom-in-Chief” persona and an act of agency. When black incarcerated mothers are portrayed as selfish, but instead go to great lengths to prioritize their children, they too are exercising agency.

Like Black incarcerated mothers, Latinx mothers also embraced some Eurocentric mothering traditions to reject deficit discourses. As mentioned above, Latinx mothers are closely associated with an immigrant discourse, which portrays them and their children as permanently dependent on the U.S. government due to lack of education. Latinx incarcerated mothers combat this discourse by embracing good mothering as a means to encourage their children’s academic success. The four Latinx mothers I worked with all used phone calls, visits, and letters to talk to their children about school; “How is school?” “Are you doing your school work?” “What are [your] grades?” One mother explained she used letters to praise her daughter for “how smart she is,” and remind her, “she can accomplish anything in life.” Because Latinx mothers are often

assumed to be immigrants who do not speak English, they face a great deal of discrimination. If they are not fluent in English, it makes it even harder for them to find jobs to pay a livable wage and provide for their families. Focusing their attention on their children's education can be seen as a means of disrupting deficit discourses and protecting their children from future struggles. Likewise, Latinx incarcerated mothers applied mothering practices that prioritized teaching their children responsibility. These mothers asked their children questions such as, "Are you showering?" "How is their health?" "Are they treating their uncles and aunts good?" "What are they doing at home, (chores)?"

Rather than asking how their caretakers were helping them with or making them do chores, keep up with hygiene, or teaching them respect, Latinx mothers asked their children directly, insinuating the child needs to be responsible for themselves and contribute to maintaining the household. Latinx mothers also asked children about their emotional health; "What is difficult in this moment?" Asking children what they are emotionally working through shows these mothers understand their incarceration has an effect on their children too. This concern for their children's mental health also teaches children to articulate their emotions and to advocate for themselves. In sum, Latinx incarcerated mothers exercise agency by mothering their children in a way that makes them self-sufficient.

Arranging care for children upon incarceration—whether this be via othermothering, leaving children with their father, or allowing children to enter foster care—is a means for incarcerated mothers to exercise agency over how they mother their children, as well as preserve their identities as mothers. While caretakers do serve as the primary authority figure over the children, incarcerated mothers also exercise agency by resisting the potential influence caretakers, and other audiences, have on their mothering practices. With phone calls being

recorded, visits monitored, and letters subject to being read, incarcerated mothers are aware that their mothering practices are being surveilled by caretakers and staff. In addition, these mothers are also expected to demonstrate fitness to welfare agencies and the court system, which can be accessed via methods of communication.

However, when I asked mothers how this surveillance impacts their mothering practice, via letters in particular, they all said it didn't; "I don't care iF anyone Reads tHis my words do not cHange..." Mothers were not concerned about any audiences other than their children when writing letters--which I say more about in the following section. The lack of need to consciously consider outside audiences indicates these mothers are confident in the way they mother. The institution of motherhood dictates that mothers need expert advice and guidance to mother their children properly. But at least in the context of their letters, these mothers refuse to be policed by husbands, grandparents, staff, and government agencies. Consciously disregarding outside audiences, as well as strategically applying good mothering techniques, makes incarcerated mothering a site for liberation.

### **"My spelling or the way I come across to them rude or caring"**

Scholars and researchers (Loper & Tuerk 2011, Celinska & Siegel 2010) who have worked with incarcerated parents have specifically encouraged letter writing as a key form of communication between child and parent because it's cheaper than phone calls and visits, and it provides a space for both parent and child to reflect and respond at their own pace. Because writing provides incarcerated mothers with a means to release their "strong feelings" and letters are the least expensive form of communication behind bars, I assumed incarcerated mothers would communicate with their children via letters more often than in visits and phone calls. Incarcerated mothers asserting their disregard for outside audiences' opinions when writing



letters seems to corroborate my assumption that letters are a site for liberation and power. Incarcerated mothers agree writing in general is empowering, but the concerns they have about spelling, interpretation, and penmanship when writing to their children implies they don't see letter writing in particular as a site for exercising power. Statistics show incarcerated mothers write more letters to their children than incarcerated fathers, which could be interpreted as mothers viewing letter writing as a tool to mother from behind bars. My research complicates this surface level interpretation by showing incarcerated mothers are more comfortable writing for themselves than they are writing to their children. Letters may be the most accessible form of communication behind bars in terms of financial burden, however, good mothering ideals make some incarcerated mothers feel letter writing is inaccessible due to low literacy levels and language barriers.

Like other women in prison, mothers engage in writing, whether it be daily or infrequently, because it helps them to release their feelings. Feelings that are bottled up can be released on a page that "won't judge them." Paper, for mothers, serves as a safe space where they can take "[their] mind to a different state." While not all incarcerated mothers recreationally write while behind bars, they all collectively agreed the act of writing is empowering. One of the mothers admitted the process of writing was productive for emotional reasons, but shared she did not often write for her own pleasure and did not write to her children at all. Some incarcerated mothers expressed joy in writing about things that include their families, such as plans for when they are released, and other mothers like to write about things that pertain to themselves and their own interests. For these incarcerated mothers, writing, whether it be journaling, recording scriptures, or composing goodbye letters to their drug addictions, made them feel a sense of progression; "You feel accomplished. Satisfied. 'Done.'" The mothers' feelings towards writing

and what they write about echoes the "inward" looking comments the women in Tobi Jacobi's writing workshop made about writing (2011).

The five years of data collected from Jacobi's writing workshop hosted at a women's correctional facility in Northern Colorado suggested the women joined the workshop with the same intent they have when participating in any type of programing; to "focus on individual change and often personal redemption" (Jacobi 45). Using writing as an escape is common among women in prison, as existing scholarship shows women in prison liberate themselves through their writing. Incarcerated women often write poems and short stories where they work through past pains, trauma, and crime to mentally liberate themselves from their confinement. They also engage in creative writing and situate themselves in spaces outside of the prison so they imagine themselves physically free. The mothers in my study didn't reference freedom or liberation in the sense that they were attempting to write themselves out of confinement, but they did allude to writing as a means of mentally freeing themselves of the stresses they are dealing with. One mother said writing gave her more "peace, patience, and above all...the ability to see things in another manner." Another mother said through writing, "it's easier to deal with my thoughts and emotions and even organized my ideas." Mothers agree with the common sentiment that writing helps you work through things, and it also buys your more time to do so.

While the majority of incarcerated mothers expressed value in writing and engaged in writing almost daily, not as many wrote to their children. Incarcerated mothers said they wrote for themselves and to their significant others more frequently than they wrote to their children. And the women who did write to their children expressed concerns regarding how their writing would be received by their children. When writing letters to their children, incarcerated mothers expressed they consciously thought about spelling, tone, interpretation, and language barriers.

These four concerns speak to a need for clarity that is particularly important in written correspondence. Incarcerated mothers noted they often use letters to apologize to their children and to show them they still love them, which enhances the need to think about how to word their content in a way that their children will understand, accept, and respond to. This critical thought, for some mothers, consists of prioritizing word choice so a distinct line can be drawn between when the mother was being "rude or caring." Bilingual mothers also have to prioritize which language they will write in. For instance, one mother shared her oldest child can read in Spanish, but her younger children struggle to read in Spanish. This mother has to make a choice between writing in Spanish, her first and preferred language, and having the oldest child translate, or writing in English.

The four concerns incarcerated mothers expressed also speak to a desire to demonstrate they are smart. Not only do mothers prioritize talking about schooling and education in letters, praising their children for being "smart," they also appear to equate writing ability with one's level of intelligence. This sentiment was reinforced by their writing style observed from survey responses. Mothers who said they were concerned about spelling in their letters, also scratched out and corrected words or 'errors' in their survey responses. Also, two mothers in particular who expressed concerns about their writing, seemed to go to lengths to make their writing appear neat and organized. When these mothers gave responses with more than one answer, they listed their responses in columns. Associating "clean" writing with intelligence is not uncommon amongst women in prison. Referencing Anita Wilson who asks educators to "examine our 'educentric' perspectives," Jacobi presents the differing literacy goals stakeholders in prison education have with prisoners in particular revealing, "a disconnect between an ingrained emphasis on neatness and handwriting-as literacy and literacy as representative and reflective of

their life experiences” (Jacobi 48). While educators and researchers find value in the content of one’s writing, women in prison tend to measure the value of their writing by what it looks like.

This need for mothers to be organized, neat, perfect, and to get it right, even with writing, can be linked back to the first teacher narrative. Education has long been a necessity of mothering. Universal schooling was proposed with the idea in mind that women needed to attend school since they were their children’s educators (Levine et al. 2012, 7). When a child does poorly in school, the mother and her assumed low education level is immediately blamed. While research does show the adult-child relationship women witness during their schooling does provides a paradigm for how they can transmit literacy skills to their children (Levine et al. 2012), merging intelligence with good mothering corrals mothers with less schooling or low literacy levels into a continuum of inadequacy. Being literate enough to write to their children shows mothers are trying to stay in contact with their children, but not being literate enough to model good literacy skills implies those mothers are bad mothers. Suzanne Smythe describes the double-bind that is the first teacher narrative as an “...irreconcilable contradiction between deficit and agency, expressing an unrealized social vision of women’s domestic literacy work as a lever for contemporary nation-building visions: educational equality, economic prosperity and global competitiveness” (Smythe 79).

On the one hand, writing letters could be viewed as a liberating means for incarcerated mothers to perform motherhood behind bars. Jacobi explains, writers can greatly benefit from using writing as an emotional release, but “there is equally as much to be gained from understanding composition and language use as tools for reclaiming control and power over one’s life and future beyond the usual rhetoric of individual responsibility and rehabilitation” (Jacobi 45). If incarcerated mothers were to conceptualize composition and language as a tool to

perform motherhood, alongside it being a resource to express themselves, they would be able to challenge the boundaries of motherhood and mothering. On the other hand, writing letters to perform motherhood could possibly preserve just as much as dismantle good mothering discourses. Incarcerated mothers could use their letters increase to the amount of contact they have with their children, as well as use the space to define themselves as mothers to their children in their own voices. But since some mothers seem skeptical of writing letters because they feel their writing will betray them, going through lengths to improve their literacy skills to use letters as a tool to mother would mean they are trying to conform to the institution of motherhood.

The dilemma for incarcerated mothers, like most mothers, is that good mothering ideals have given them the false impression that if they could just meet all criteria, they'd be viewed as good mother. What I imagine is most frustrating about this for incarcerated mothers, is that their efforts for meeting this criterion were criminalized and then they were separated from their children and deprived of resources, which made it almost impossible for them to mother. But they do mother. Writing workshops behind bars have offered incarcerated mothers a space to (re)define themselves as mothers and to once again own that identity. What I want now for incarcerated mothers is for them to own their mothering practices, regardless of if they meet good mothering standards or not. When mothers perform outside of mainstream expectations or instructions, they are looked at as deficit, rather than giving them credit for their individual types of mothering practices. By reexamining “deficit” mothers (Smythe 2013, Saavedra & Presuss 2013, and Wilson Toso 2013), we begin to give them credit for their mothering practices. What would be even more valuable though, is assisting incarcerated mothers in recognizing the agency in their mothering practices.

A letter writing workshop that uses feminist maternal methods would do the work of helping mothers locate the agency in their mothering practices. I imagine the letter writing portion to be similar to Sparks et al.'s (2017) Letters to Children (LTC) project. Sparks, Stauss, and Grant created the LTC program to “help female prisoners reconnect with their children through the process of a letter-writing group” (349). For a total of six sessions over a 4-month period, sixteen mothers in LTC gradually were introduced to “writing techniques and style, a variety of letter-writing prompts, content brainstorming, and feedback,” from peers and facilitators” (358). Some mothers do not know how to explain to their children why they are not physically present, and others do not want to run the risk of being rejected. LTC’s guided prompts help mothers work through their emotional density. In addition, LTC helps mothers to brainstorm how to set boundaries with their children, something they may not have considered doing before incarceration. Coupled with conversations about the oppressive nature of institutional motherhood and encouragement to challenge good mothering ideals, I believe a workshop similar to LTC would be powerful for incarcerated mothers.

### **Rehabilitating Motherhood**

The purpose of this essay was to demonstrate how incarcerated mothers both draw from and resist good mothering practices in order to reject deficit mothering discourses. Incarcerated mothers’ definitions of mother and descriptions of mothering did demonstrate their desire to meet good mothering ideals. Given the context, though, incarcerated mothers’ efforts to prioritize their children, their children’s education, and their own literacy—all of which align with good mothering ideals—are ultimately all acts of agency and resistance. The letters incarcerated mothers do and do not write to their children, in particular, are a site for exercising power. Mothers who do write letters to their children are directly countering deficit discourses

which describe them as uneducated, lazy, and unable to raise productive children, as they use their letters to illustrate their literacy skills, talk to their children about their schooling, and teach their children responsibility. Mothers who choose to write for themselves and not to write letters to their children, can be perceived as challenging the notion that mothers need to become literate solely to teach their children. These mothers are creating an identity for themselves outside of mother, and all of the mothers in this study are helping to rehabilitate motherhood.

As I conclude, I want to note that using surveys as a method when working with incarcerated mothers creates a few different limitations, such as misinterpretations. If mothers did not understand questions, I was not there to provide clarity. As a result, mothers either answered how they saw fit, which may not have been a relevant response, or they left the question blank. Additionally, and as I acknowledged in an earlier section, the wording of my questions could have influenced the answers mothers gave. For example, one of my questions asked mothers if they agree with experts who say writing is empowering for women in prison. In reflection, I see that the wording of this question leads mothers to agree. If they disagree, they'd be going against experts and they may not feel comfortable doing that. Furthermore, survey responses indicated concerns about writing and literacy, which means requesting written responses probably limited the amount of information I could have received. I imagine if mothers were able to verbalize their answers to me, they'd expand on their answers.

It is also imperative that I take a moment to reflect on the connection between writing for the self and writing for mothering that I am making because it is in some ways problematic. When I originally designed the survey I asked incarcerated mothers about their personal writing habits and the writing they do for their children for completely separate reasons. I had read scholarship that says writing for women in prison is particularly empowering and I wanted to

hear what incarcerated mothers had to say about that. I asked about the letters incarcerated mothers write to their children because existing scholarship also says mothers write to their children more often than fathers do, and I wanted to know what they used those letters to say.

In addition, I wanted to know if mothers felt they could form a freer and intimate connection with their children via letters since phone calls and visits cause financial and surveillance related burdens. When I received the survey responses, I immediately and instinctively felt if mothers were comfortable and eager to write for themselves, then they would want to write to their children. While exploring this assumption did uncover significant reasons as to why mothers do not write to their children, I now realize my want to connect these two creates an alignment with the good mothering narrative I'm trying to challenge. As a result of this realization, I want to make it clear that choosing to write for oneself more frequently or instead of writing to one's children in no way makes any of these women bad mothers.

Good mothering has it that mothers should improve their literacy skills solely to educate their children. In thinking that mothers should want to use writing for their children the same way they use it for themselves, I too am reducing mothers' identities to just mothers. And so why I do find value in acknowledging literacy's role in mothers' concerns about writing to their children, I also want to retrace my steps and illuminate the agency incarcerated mothers are exercising by choosing to separate their writing practices. There is power in incarcerated mothers keeping something for themselves. Choosing to write for personal fulfillment and to children or choosing not to write at all pushes back against intensive mothering, and shows that mothers are creating an identity outside of being a mother. Ideally, incarcerated mothers should be offered tools to mother behind bars, along with the choice to accept or reject those tools; and that choice should not reflect poorly on them as mothers.



## **Chapter Five: A Word on Conducting Ethnographic Research in Correctional Facilities**

The purpose of this dissertation has been to contextual the environment in which incarcerated mothers are forced to mother in, and to draw attention to how these mothers use literacy to navigate this environment. Correctional facilities have created digital surveillance, increased fees, and limited literacy instruction to establish barriers that make performing motherhood difficult for mothers in prison. Previous research demonstrates incarcerated mothers use phone calls, visits, and letters to perform motherhood behind bars. My dissertation discusses the limitations of these methods, and goes beyond them to lay out the other ways in which correctional facilities punish and regulate motherhood. The U.S. prison system has constrained women's ability to mother by preventing some women from having the choice to become mothers and by separating other mothers from their children. Charging for phone calls and visits, the prison industry has restricted motherhood by monetizing it, making mothers pay to connect with their children—what use to be a free and basic human right. Adapting digital tools like video visitation, correctional facilities enhance the ability to regulate motherhood inside a structure already designed to surveil.

I transition from these structural barriers put in place by correctional facilities to the constraints initiated by the institution of motherhood—the cultural structure I argue is responsible for waging the war on poor mothers of color. The U.S. prison system does dramatically disrupt mother/child bonds, but is only a mere tool within the institution of motherhood. While the lack of resources behind bars make it difficult for incarcerated mothers to perform motherhood, it is the patriarchal ideologies of motherhood which are imposed on incarcerated mothers that make it near impossible for them to view themselves as mothers. To

counter these impositions, some mothers use their literacy skills to write themselves into an identity as mother, whether it be narratives for themselves or arguments persuading an outside audience. Some mothers use literacy to write to their children in an attempt to maintain a presence in their lives. For other mothers, the traditional belief that a mother should be educated mixed with low literacy levels deters some mothers from using literacy as a tool to mother. By exemplifying how various incarcerated mothers tackle the relationship between motherhood and literacy, my dissertation shows how incarcerated mothers can use literacy to mother, and how literacy is used against incarcerated mothers to keep them from mothering.

In doing this work, my dissertation illuminates the ways in which correctional facilities have failed to provide incarcerated mothers with the needed support and resources to fulfill their roles as mothers. Mothers behind bars face more scrutiny and attention from the criminal justice system and society due to their identities as mothers, yet this identity is ignored once they are placed in correctional facilities. To make up for their failings, correctional facilities should alter the structural design of their institutions to acknowledge and accommodate the growing population of mothers. Correctional facilities stocked with multiple forms of communication, including digital tools, should lower the cost phone calls and VV, and expand the timeframe in which mothers can use these devices. That way mothers can talk to children before and after normal school hours. Furthermore, correctional facilities should offer mothers a variety of free courses, including parenting classes that acknowledge non-normative maternal practices. I hesitate to offer courses, especially literacy instruction, as a solution for reasons discussed in chapter four, but the reality of incarcerated motherhood is that literacy is a form of capital behind bars. Letter-writing, in particular, is immensely valuable to incarcerated mothers and they need to be able to express themselves to others with clarity and confidence. The writing workshops

held in many women's facilities have been successfully in providing women with a creative outlet to (re)construct their identities, and exercise their voices, but mothers need to be exposed to several writing skills and techniques. While there is value in incarcerated mothers (re)constructing their identities as mothers for themselves by way of creative writing, they often need to exercise and defend this identity via letters, appeals, and applications to their children, case workers, attorneys, and or judges. Literacy skills are a method of survival for incarcerated mothers.

Black incarcerated mothers, especially, greatly benefit and deeply suffer when it comes to literacy. The archival data I used for chapter one and the survey data I reference in chapter three is predominantly comprised of responses from white women. The low response rate from Black women is surprising as Black women are incarcerated at a higher rate than white women. I believe there are two explanations as to why Black women were less likely to contribute to the archive and complete the survey. The first reason has to do with trust. Existing scholarship confirms a lack of trust between Black women and state agents, and for good reason. Black women may feel less compelled to share their stories or participate in research studies with institutions or representatives of institutions because there is a history of institutions taking advantage of and harming Black women, especially Black mothers. Dorothy Roberts' scholarship traces how Black women and mothers in particular are continuously betrayed by government assistance programs, the foster care system, and the criminal justice system. These programs consistently find nuanced ways to label Black mothers as deficit. As a result, Black mothers avoid participating in institutional programs.

The second reason has to do with literacy. Adults in prison tend to have lower literacy levels than adults in households and members belonging to marginalized groups tend to have

lower literacy levels than their white counterparts. Black incarcerated mothers belong to both of these populations. Additionally, the school-to-prison-pipeline heavily impacts Black girls. Black girls are five times more likely to be suspended than any other type of student. Young Black girls are being denied their right to an education and are later criminalized for it. I imagine Black girls and women accumulate functional literacy skills from their communities and surrounding environments, however, I predict learning “formal” literacy skills impacts their ability to participate in opportunities presented via writing. Furthermore, Black incarcerated mothers who have not completed the equivalent to a high school education may lack the confidence to respond to a call for papers like the one the *American Prison Writing Archive* circulated. A lack of confidence in their writing may also interfere with their want or ability to write letters to their children. In sum, the very object I am trying to study may be limiting the population I am able to work with.

Studying literacy via writing has been the biggest limitation of my methods. Incarcerated mothers’ personal views about their literacy skills and their level of confidence in their writing may be preventing them from sharing their literacy experiences. In the narratives I examined and the surveys I collected, women expressed concerns with their spelling, grammar, and the way in which their writing may be interpreted. In their narratives, women alluded to having to invent ways to improve their literacy skills since they were denied resources before and during incarceration. In order to continue to capture the literacy experiences of incarcerated mothers, especially Black incarcerated mothers, it is imperative I conduct interviews with them.

To learn more about literacy from incarcerated mothers and offer my scholarship as a platform, I must conduct research with them via a medium they feel comfortable with. Based on my previous research with incarcerated mothers, I believe interviews are the most effective

method to research with them. Conducting interviews with incarcerated mothers offers an opportunity to build rapport with them, gain clarity from each other, and to express one's self in detail. Of course, my experience has also taught me that a researcher's preferred method isn't always their choice. My original project proposed interviewing incarcerated mothers, but the institution I worked with was not able to grant me access to the mothers to interview them one on one. When working with correctional facilities, the researcher does not get to make many choices. With so few researchers in rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies conducting ethnographic research in correctional facilities it is important that we disclose how we have altered our projects to meet our goals and institutional requirements. Knowing what shifts other scholars have made, will help us to adapt to the constraints of our institutions quickly without compromising our research or harming the communities we work with.

### **From Original Dissertation to Current Dissertation**

The research I conducted for this dissertation has lead me to engage in an authentic process of discovery, and I am pleased with what I have learned, but I must admit that this dissertation is not what I imagined it would be. I wanted my dissertation to serve as a platform for incarcerated mothers to speak for themselves. Chapter three does that work, but the other two chapters rely on evidence-based implications. In order for my entire dissertation to serve as a platform, each chapter, like chapter three, would need to draw from ethnographic research. I originally intended on structuring my dissertation like this, but learned along the way conducting longitudinal ethnographic research was not possible as a graduate student working with incarcerated mothers. Scaling my dissertation back was the right choice, but it took me a long time to process this choice.

My original dissertation project was centered on examining the letters incarcerated mothers write to their children. I initially imagined that my entire dissertation would look similar to my third chapter. That plan obviously did not play out, and for valid reasons. I was advised early on to only rely on ethnographic research for one chapter because getting IRB approval to work with a vulnerable population is difficult. While my committee was able to help me work through the constraints imposed by my university, I did not have a model for how to work with correctional facilities or mothers in prison. Plenty of researchers in our field who conduct ethnographic research lay out their methods, but they tend to start with what they did once they were in contact with their population. Researchers rarely walk through the steps of how they fulfilled institutional requirements while simultaneously building rapport with a population that doesn't trust the institutions they are a part of. For that reason, I conclude my dissertation by briefly tracing my steps to this final product. My hope is that discussing the institutional approvals I had to receive, the relationships I had to build, and the timeline I had to follow will paint a wider and more accurate picture of what it takes to conduct ethnographic research in correctional facilities.

Many of the articles I read in rhetoric, law, and sociology drew from interviews with women in prison. These articles laid out why interviews were the most effective method for this population. Interviews were such a common method used when working with women in prison, I felt holding interviews with incarcerated mothers was an obtainable goal. And when my university and the external research review board in Texas quickly approved my research proposal, I thought I could feasibly collect enough data for my entire dissertation. Receiving IRB approval is not where research actually starts though. Most articles describe their research method, but researchers who work with vulnerable populations are rarely transparent about the

steps it takes to get access to that population. In what follows, I layout the preliminary work that must be conducted in order to start ethnographic research.

I entered graduate schooling knowing I wanted to study rhetoric and prisons in some capacity, but hadn't yet developed a subtopic. Towards the end of my second year of graduate school, I decided I wanted to research the rhetoric of incarcerated motherhood. At this time, I had taken a plethora of courses which exposed me to conversations regarding ancient rhetoric, new rhetorics, women's rhetorics, prison literature, and motherhood. None of these courses mentioned mothers in prison, their writing, or the rhetorical choices they had to make to continue to mother their children. Participating in the prison literature course made me aware that women weren't being represented in prison scholarship, so I shifted my attention to women in prison. After taking a women's rhetorics course and reading Lindal Buchanan's *The Rhetoric of Motherhood*, I remember thinking "there's a lot of mother's missing from this text." Buchanan carefully combed through three case studies, demonstrating how some women could use motherhood as a rhetorical tool, while motherhood was used against other women to condemn them. Obviously, Buchanan couldn't present a case study on every type of mother, but incarcerated mothers seemed like such an obvious example of how motherhood is used for and against mothers to maintain a status quo that I couldn't accept them not being a part of the conversation.

Incarcerated mothers are a part of multiple marginalized groups. As mothers who are single, working, socioeconomically disadvantaged, Black and Brown, and less educated than their white counterparts, incarcerated mothers are seen as criminals just for having children. Incarcerated mothers have always had to use rhetoric to establish themselves as mothers and request access to motherhood. From the time they give birth, incarcerated mothers have to

convince themselves, their children, and society that they are loving and fit mothers. Poor mothers of color go to great lengths to mother their children, but their efforts are often criminalized. Because incarcerated mothers are often criticized more harshly for committing crimes because they are mothers, even if their crime has nothing to do with their children, I was interested in how incarcerated mothers (re)claimed motherhood while in prison.

The preliminary research I had done to supplement the prison literature course I participated in revealed that mothers in prison rely on phone calls, visits, and letters to perform motherhood. I chose to focus on letters because I viewed them as persuasive artifacts. I wanted to know what incarcerated mothers were writing to their children, what they were thinking about when they were crafting their letters, what content they wanted to include in the letters but felt they couldn't, and how they thought their words would impact their children. Not only are mothers attempting to persuade their children to engage in correspondence with them, their content needs to persuade caretakers to allow the children to see the letters, and persuade correctional officers to approve the letter to be mailed. Incarcerated mothers must write in a way that appeals to a number of audiences before their letters reach their main audience. In order for their children to want to respond, incarcerated mothers must compose letters that build trust, make their children feel safe, and establish a relationship. I felt the rhetorical choices incarcerated mothers made when composing letters to their children would truly intrigue our field.

### **Seeking Institutional Review Board Approval**

Conducting ethnographic was not an option for reaching my research goals. Not an option has two different meanings here. I was in a weird situation where there were not many public texts written by incarcerated mothers available, but I also knew using a prison as a



research site would be difficult. Therefore, I had to conduct ethnographic research because I didn't have many other sources to draw from, but at the same time there was always a possibility that I would not be able to conduct ethnographic research because the prison could say no at any time. Moreover, conducting ethnographic research is a fragile process that takes a great deal of time. As a graduate student, time was not on my side, which is why my committee and I decided my dissertation would take a mix-methods approach. Relying on ethnographic research to compose my entire dissertation was a huge risk, but I did not have a solid backup plan either. As I noted in my introduction, there is not a cannon of texts written by incarcerated mothers that I can draw from. The *American Prison Writing Archive* was not initiated until I was a few years into my program. Up until that point, I was simultaneously looking for public texts and navigating the IRB process.

I started the IRB process early because requesting access to a vulnerable population always warrants a full board review. My original IRB proposal requested permission to conduct a series of three interview with 15 mothers incarcerated in a Texas prison. The first interview was meant to get to know the mothers, how many children they have, and their thoughts about mothering from behind bars. In the second and third meeting, I planned to read a letter the mothers had written to their children, and ask them questions about the content of their letter and the choices they made when writing the letters. A google search taught me that conducting research in the prisons requires that researchers also complete a review process for their state's department of corrections (DOC). Similar to universities, the Texas DOC review board requires a research proposal, a copy of interview/survey questions, and recruitment material. The Texas DOC was specifically interested in how I would market my project to my desired participants. I originally assumed that the warden would pick participants for me. I contacted someone at the

external research office to ask them questions about recruiting materials. Given their feedback, I decided it be best to create a flyer that could be hung up in common areas within the prison.

After completing both research proposals, I was still unsure if I needed to submit one before the other. Fortunately, the university pairs researchers proposing to work in prisons with a prison liaison. I asked my assigned liaison if it would help if I already had approval from a prison and asked the Texas DOC the same question about the university. Both institutions said they would review the proposal separately, but if the other institution said yes in the meantime, it probably would speed up the process. Contrary to expectations, getting IRB approval was the fastest part of my research process. Both the university and the Texas DOC approved my research proposal within a month. IRB approval from the university meant my institution had cleared me to start my research. IRB approval from the Texas DOC meant they were ready to solicit my project proposal to women's prisons in Texas. This is where the research process started to stagger. The high staff turnaround at the Texas DOC's external research office delayed my research project being sent to individual institutions. I frequently emailed the office to check the status of my project, but by the time I got a response there was a different person in that position and they were in the process of familiarizing themselves with my project.

My IRB was approved by the university and Texas DOC in spring of 2017, and in summer 2018 I had finally been notified that I would be able to start my research in the fall. The Texas DOC informed me that a women's facility was interested in hosting my project, but six months had gone and I never received a start date. Finally, I was told there had been a change in the facility's warden, and the new warden still hadn't been approved my project. At this time, I started to think very critically about changing the population I wanted to work with. I did not have the luxury of waiting another year to hear back from the prison, especially because I wanted

to reserve enough time to carefully examine my data. As a result, I entertained the idea of conducting research with previously incarcerated mothers instead, and searched for other ways to enter the prison.

### **Building the Necessary Networks**

While I was playing the waiting game with the Texas DOC, I was pulling together sources to draft my other chapters. I had also sought alternative ways to work with women in prison. I reached out to friends and family members who had either been incarcerated or knew women who were previously incarcerated. I spoke with a few previously incarcerated women informally, telling them about my project and asking them for advice. Talking with these women helped me craft my interview questions and build rapport with a group of women I may potentially conduct research with. I applied for an internship with the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA). TAASA was creating a unit called the Incarcerated Survival Advocacy Program (ISAP) dedicated to serving people in prison who had experienced sexual assault while incarcerated. My role with ISAP was to respond to women who wrote in requesting resources. I eventually went on to develop a survey to gauge why women reported less than men. About a year into volunteering at TAASA I was asked to serve on another project, where we would assist jails in making necessary changes to their facility so that they were in accordance with the Prison, Rape, Elimination, Act (PREA).

Interning with TAASA taught me how to ethically communicate and support women in prison. After completing my work with the ISAP project, TAASA welcomed me to access their mailing list of women in prison as a resource for recruiting participants for my project. Additionally, participating on the PREA project introduced me to a number of lieutenants and sergeants working in Texas Jails. Working closely with jail officials was significant for two

reasons. For one, jail officials are extremely protective of their facilities and resistant to outsiders and outside help. Through TAASA, I learned how to build a relationship with jail officials and create productive boundaries. Second, building a network of jail officials dismantled my outsider identity, which granted me access into correctional facilities. I worked with Lt. Hardee on the PREA project for five months. He then invited me to conduct my research project at his facility. His invitation did come with a few stipulations though. The captain at Caldwell County Jail did not allow me to enter the facility and conduct interviews. However, with Lt. Hardee's recommendation, the captain did agree to let me circulate surveys. Once I received a letter of support from the captain, I amended my IRB to include jails as a research site—my previous IRB only listed prisons—and resubmitted it to the review board at my university. The amended IRB was approved in less than a month, and I was able to conduct my altered research project.

### **Continuing Research Behind Bars**

Conducting ethnographic research is not at all linear. Most of the preliminary work that needs to be done to set up the research project will happen simultaneously. Conducting ethnographic research in correctional facilities, in particular, requires an extreme amount of flexibility. Proposals will need to be amended and materials will need to be revised more than once. In order to make effective changes, it is most important to build relationships with the community you are researching with and the institution you wish to access. I've heard researchers in other fields express resistance to forming any sort of relationship with correctional facilities because it makes them feel as if they are betraying the community they are working with. I understand this point of view, but in my experience cooperating with the institution is what protects the community and the research project. Had I not established a working relationship with Lt. Hardee, I may not have been able to conduct ethnographic research at all in

Texas. Also, the completion of research in correctional facilities is never guaranteed. If correctional officials change their mind about your project or disagree with the impact the project is having on the community, then they will end the project prematurely.

Researchers need to remember that once their research is complete, they have the option to leave the facility, their community does not. We must not disrupt their everyday lives with our research. Even though institutions may enforce rules or stipulations that limit our research projects, we must figure out how to work around them. The work we do in correctional facilities should serve to repair, not damage. Researching behind bars takes time, trust, and continual learning. Scholars interested in researching behind bars should be prepared to fully commit to this journey. I look forward to continuing this work.

## Appendix

ID# \_\_\_\_\_

### Motherhood Questionnaire

*Thank you so much for filling out this questionnaire. Your voice and your experience are valuable. It may seem like a long questionnaire, but that is because I tried to give plenty of space for you to write out your answers. If you run out of space, you can use one of the blank pieces of paper attached to the questionnaire, please remember to write the question number next to your answer. I look forward to reading what you have to say.*

Part 1-Demographics: The following section asks you basic information about yourself.

- 1) **How old are you?**
  
- 2) **Where are you from** (State or Country)?
  
- 3) **Which ethnic background do you identify with?** (Latina, Hispanic, African America, Caucasian, etc.)
  
- 4) **Please list some of your favorite hobbies?** (they can be current or past hobbies)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 5) **Please list three words that best describe you?**

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CHILD(REN): The following section asks you questions about how you currently communicate with your child(ren). If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 6) **How many children do you have?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 7) **How do you communicate with your child(ren)?** (Letters, Phone Calls, Visits, Other)

**8) How many of your children are you in contact with? (Some, A Few, All)**

**9) What do you believe are the advantages of communicating with your child(ren) using letters, phone calls, and/or visits?**

**10) What do you believe are the disadvantages of communicating with your child(ren) using letters, phone calls, and/or visits?**

**11) If you use a different form of communication to contact each of your children, please explain which form of communication you use with each child.** For example, do you write to one of your child(ren), but talk to the other one on the phone?

**12) If you have you ever participated in video visitation while incarcerated, will you please share a bit about your experience?** (what did you or didn't like about the visit, how did your visitor react?)

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*LETTERS:* The following section asks you questions about what you say to your child(ren) in the letters you send to them. The purpose of this section is to understand how writing can be used to build relationships between mothers and their child(ren). If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

**13) How often do you send your child(ren) letters?** (once a month, a twice a month, once a week, etc.)

**14) How long does it usually take your child(ren) to respond to you?**



**15) How long are the letters you send to your children?** (1-2 pages, 2-3 pages, 3-4 pages, etc.)

**16) If you ever send poems, pictures, or other things with your letters, please describe what you send and why you send them.**

**17) What are some of the things/topics you talk about in the letters you send to your child(ren)?**

**18) What kinds of questions do you ask your child(ren) in your letters?** For example, do you ask them about school or their friends, do you ask about their chores at home?

**19) What do you want your child(ren) to take away from these letters?**

**20) How does knowing your child(ren)'s caretaker, a CO, or the parole board may see your letter influence the way you write the letter?** For example, do you use different words or avoid certain topics because you know someone other than your child(ren) may read the letter?

**21) What differences have you noticed in your writing since you've been writing letters to your child(ren)?**

**22) What differences have you noticed in your child(ren)'s writing?**

**23) What are you concerned about when you are writing these letters?** For example, are you worried about your spelling or grammar, do you get nervous about how your child(ren) may interpret your words?

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*WRITING:* The following section asks you questions about the other types of writing you might engage in. The purpose of this section is to understand how writing can be a productive and liberating exercise. If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

**24) What other types of writing do you engage in?** (poems, short stories, memoir, class assignments, etc).

**25) How often do you write?** Including the time you write letters. (every day, twice a week, a few times a month, etc.)

**26) What do you like to write about?**

**27) Tell me about something you've written that you are especially proud of?**

**28) I have read that researchers say writing empowers women who are in prison, do you agree with this? Why or why not?**

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*MOTHERING:* The following sections asks you questions about being a mother who is in prison. The purpose of this section is to understand how mothers in prison fulfill their roles as mothers while behind bars. If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

**29) How long have you been mothering behind bars?**

**30) What do you feel is the most difficult part about mothering from behind bars? (Lack of contact w/ child(ren), lack of resources, caretakers, emotional pain, etc.)**

**31) Is there a particular prison policy or rule that constrains your ability to mother behind bars?**

**32) Tell me what your definition of a mother is?**

**33) How has the way you define mother changed since you've been incarcerated?**

**34) What resources do you believe should be given to mothers who are incarcerated?**

**35) What advice would you give to mothers entering prison?**

**36) Tell me all of things that make you a good mother?**



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