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The language of women's prisons: Reflecting on violence and desistance

Abstract:

This article explores the use of language and narrative in the carceral system, demonstrating how language is used as a tool of control and violence to bolster the prison industrial complex. We explore how incarcerated women are using narratives to understand and share their lived experience. In doing so, these women's work contributes to the genre of "prison poetics" (Larson, 2010) which gives voice to the cruelty of the carceral system and thus advocates for abolition. We have chosen to integrate personal reflections throughout this article to highlight the lived experience of abolition work and the thoughts of Seeds' Advisory Group members on the language used in prison.

Biographical note:

Dr Katerina Bryant is an early career researcher whose work focuses on mental health, disability and non-fiction. Her book, *Hysteria: A Memoir of Illness, Strength and Women's Stories Throughout History*, was published in 2020.

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Suzie Anderson is a member of the National Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls. She is the Executive Assistant to the Seeds of Affinity Co-founder and Community Coordinator and enjoys helping women transition from prison to the community. Suzie is also a research assistant at the University of South Australia.

Dr Michele Jarldorn is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of South Australia and a volunteer at Seeds of Affinity. Her research uses an intersectional lens to connect structural violence with social problems such as criminalisation, addiction, domestic violence and poverty. She is committed to prioritising the voices of research participants by using participatory and inclusive co-design research methods.

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Keywords:

Formerly incarcerated women, narrative, language, violence, prison industrial complex

Introduction

Toni Morrison writes that “narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (1993, p. 8). Due to this radical nature, we argue that narrative can be a tool in dismantling the prison industrial complex. The prison industrial complex is more than just prisons, police, courts and the like. The prison industrial complex extends to the industries that are enmeshed within the criminal (in)justice system, which rely on the presence and growth of prisons for their business model to be profitable. Narrative conveys the humanity of those who are incarcerated, and in doing so, compels the non-incarcerated to consider the violence inherent in incarceration. As Larson writes, “prison prose attaches a body and mind to the abstractions of the law, revealing law’s violent practice” (2017, p. 28). Angela Davis discusses the long history of association between abolition and prison writing in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, saying, “the public recognition of prison writing in the United States has historically coincided with the influence of social movements calling for prison reform and/or abolition” (2003, p. 54).

This article will address the ways in which violence is seeded and enacted through language, but also show how language can be an act of desistance for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. This applies particularly to incarcerated women, as their words are “an archive of resilience and resistance” (Trapido Sims, 2020, p. 215). This is not abstract discussion for us as authors, especially those of us who have experienced firsthand the violent effects of the prison system. As Kilroy and Quixley write about the organisation Sisters Inside, our work adheres to the principle of “nothing about us, without us” (2022, p. 216). Because of this, we have chosen to integrate personal reflections throughout the article to highlight the lived experience of abolition work. Katerina will reflect on newly entering abolitionist work; Susannah on the relationship between tech and power in the carceral space; and Michele on how once carceral violence is seen, it can never be unseen. The article concludes with personal reflections from Seeds’ Advisory Group members, who participated in a discussion about their memories of the language used in prison. It is our hope that in writing this article, we are able to share the power of – and risks associated with – narrative.

Who we are

As co-authors, we come from very different disciplinary spaces and varied personal histories. Linda has a degree in psychological science; Hayley has a degree in management and marketing; and Suzie volunteers in her community and is studying to earn qualifications in disability services. Linda, Hayley and Suzie are also formerly incarcerated women. Michele has a PhD in social work; Susannah has a PhD in game design; and Katerina has a PhD in creative writing. Despite our differences, one belief that we all share is the importance of formerly incarcerated women’s ideas and views being heard, especially when shaping resources and services geared towards them. We came to work together – alongside the women of Seeds of Affinity, a community group co-founded by Linda which supports currently and formerly incarcerated women in South Australia – to create a chatbot aimed at providing vital information to women in the days and weeks after leaving prison (Jarldorn & Emery, 2024). Michele is the project lead, Susannah is the tech facilitator and Katerina is a research associate.

Across the project, formerly incarcerated women – including our co-authors – have undertaken various (paid) roles in the project, including as workshop facilitator, researcher and Advisory Group members. The chatbot project feeds into our greater research and advocacy for supporting women as they leave prison through a “non-reformist reform” (Faith, 2000), and more broadly, fighting for abolition. Through our collaborative discussions during our work on the chatbot project, the overlaps in and departures from our disciplines raised questions about the (mis)use of language in prisons. This led to the foundations of this article. We considered how language can be used either as a powerful reclamation of voice, or to further bolster the prison industrial complex. While on the surface language may appear to be a less pressing factor in countering the prison industrial complex through an abolitionist lens, we realised that it underpins incarcerated women’s daily interactions. As Toni Morrison writes, “oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge” (1993, p. 6). As we will show in the following sections, the impact of language should not be underestimated.

Reflection: Katerina

When I first came to work with Michele, Susannah and the Women of Seeds, I thought I possessed a basic understanding of the carceral system in Australia. I had read Angela Davis’ work and learnt about mass incarceration in America. In Australia, I knew about #FreeHer, the Sisters Inside movement that campaigned against Aboriginal women being incarcerated due to unpaid fines. I felt I was aware of the human rights abuses in a carceral setting. I didn’t expect to be shocked by this work, but I was and continue to be.

With every detail I read or was told by Michele, Susannah and the Women of Seeds, I was taken aback by the contempt and cruelty of the prison system. From officers making bets on when women will return, to the inhumanity of constant strip searches (so much so that many women choose not to have their families visit because they cannot undergo the trauma of another search), it is abundantly clear that no-one in the carceral system could possibly think it is rehabilitative. It is about enacting punishment, in the harshest of terms.

Another shock for me came when I learnt that not everyone in prison has been sentenced. This is especially true for women, with over a quarter of women in South Australian prisons being remanded in custody. For some in this group, by the time their matter is heard in court, they are granted “time served” and released immediately into the community, often without any planning or support. Those women who are sentenced are mostly imprisoned for minor offences, receiving stronger sentences than men with equivalent offences (Quixley: 13). They also often have a less serious “criminal” history than their male counterparts (Quixley: 10).

This is not to say that the current carceral system would be just if all offences were “serious” and sentenced; that will never be the case. The reason why I have shared these statistics is because they vastly contrast the media’s, and therefore the public’s, understanding of who is incarcerated and why. They are another piece of evidence that show that how incarcerated

people are spoken of influences whether or not the prison industrial complex will continue to flourish.

I would like to end this reflection by saying that I believe that from the shock and disgust related to the carceral system, action grows. Just as Larson discusses the connection of reading prison poetics to emotion and then to praxis, I hope that by voicing the hopelessness of the prison system – and centring those with lived prison experience in these discussions – the prison industrial complex can be dismantled.

Violence through language

The carceral system is built upon violence. In sustaining this, prisons use language as both a tool of violence and a way to conceal the ongoing violence of the prison industrial complex. Often, this can be as overt as how prisons are named. In South Australia's only dedicated women's prison, the Adelaide Women's Prison, units are named after gemstones. The high security unit is known as "Opal" and the mental health unit is "Ruby"; other unit names include "Coral" and "Pearl". Similarly, the Melaleuca Prison, a women's prison in Western Australia was named after the melaleuca plant. In a 2016 press release, the Western Australian Corrective Services Minister Joe Francis said that "I believe that the resilience of the melaleuca will instil a sense of hope for the future in female prisoners, and that the healing properties of the plant will reflect the culture of rehabilitation at the prison" (Government of Western Australia, 2016). This softening language used in naming prisons and units – while not an unusual practice – is telling. References to gemstones imply preciousness, care and value; while the melaleuca brings to mind resilience, growth and healing. Decades of research shows that this is not what prison is for incarcerated women. Throughout the criminal (in)justice system, women experience "a state-sanctioned system of structural violence, gendered in its nature, that treats women differently and more harshly than men" (King et al., 2022, p. 158). Similarly, Kilroy, Lean and Quixley write that "overt violence by prison officers is intrinsic to the functioning of women's (and children's) prisons and is repeatedly reported by women prisoners, civil society organizations [*sic*], prison staff and investigative bodies" (2022, p. 192). In naming prisons after gems or plants, this language is purposely used to obscure the violence of the prison industrial complex. And in the case of the Melaleuca Prison, three years after Minister Joe Francis said the prison would "instil a sense of hope" for women, a report was published that found that Melaleuca was not complying with the Women's Standard in September 2018 of reducing strip searches as it had previously agreed to (Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services, 2019, p. 14). McCulloch and George write that "the failure to perceive routine practices of strip searches within prison as sexual coercion and institutionalised violence fits with a broader tendency to see crime and violence as residing almost exclusively within the realm of individuals as opposed to the state and its agents" (2009, p. 109). There is a resounding body of evidence which demonstrates that strip searching in women's prisons is deeply harmful, racist in nature and does not achieve a reduction in contraband entering prisons (Kilroy & Lean, 2024). Despite this knowledge, sexual assault of women by the state continues.

The naming of prisons also corresponds to the greater trend of deploying feminist language to obscure carceral violence. This clearly shows the distinction between carceral and anti-carceral feminism. As Gina Dent says, “any feminism that is really worthy of the name, that is really about the liberation of all, can’t be a feminism that’s attached to carceral policies” (Phifer, 2022). Mon M writes about the influx of “feminist”-branded prisons in America, writing that “those who care about gender justice should be wary of projects and policies that deploy carceral feminist perspectives, and how they mask the expansion of the prison industrial complex with the language and strategies of radical, liberatory, anti-carceral, feminist movements” (2022). While Mon M is referring specifically to a proposed prison in New York called “Women’s Center [*sic*] for Justice”, using either feminist or feminine language to soften the image of prison is part of the same prison industrial complex toolkit that is being deployed globally.

While these prisons use flowery names (sometimes literally), inside women’s prisons in Australia, language is used violently through both dehumanising language and the hyper-scrutiny of incarcerated people’s language. In *Prison Discourse: Language as a Means of Control and Resistance*, sociolinguist Andrea Mayr analyses interactions between officers and incarcerated people. While Mayr looks at male prisoners in the UK, her research is illustrative of broader patterns of control and violence through language within prisons. After all, “the most ordinary uses of language so effectively transmit the social structure, the values, the systems of knowledge, all the deepest and most pervasive patterns of the culture” (Halliday, 1973, p. 450; Mayr, 2004, p. 56). Mayr writes that “through their grammatical choices, the officer and the inmates take up roles in the conversation, constructing relations of power through talk” (2004, p. 107). In looking at one interaction, the study found that the officer speaks more, interrupts prisoners’ speech regularly, initiates exchange and frequently uses interrogative clauses (Mayr, 2004, p. 109–113). Mayr lists the strategies this officer uses to show power and dominance in the conversations with incarcerated people. These include:

Topic control, thereby defining what is talked about and questioning the relevance of some questions asked by the inmates by ignoring them; formulation to shape the meanings the inmates are trying to make into the forms that he wants; and demanding explicitness, thereby attempting to get the inmates to disambiguate their utterances. The officer’s questions are designed to steer the inmates to the desired answer by incorporating what has been said and at the same time indicating by further questions that more or different information is needed. He elaborates considerably on the inmates’ rather brief answers, and his meaning is the one that is heard last. (Mayr, 2004, p. 116)

These strategies are deployed to silence thought and expression, in addition to shaping what is said and when. Mayr concludes that “the prison officers are replacing overt with covert forms of control, which are more difficult to oppose” (2004, p. 138). Of course, prisons also limit incarcerated women’s voices in overt ways, both when communicating within the prison and when trying to communicate with those outside. Inside, paper and writing materials are a limited resource. Carolyn Beasley writes that writing materials are in high demand due to the isolation experienced by incarcerated people, with letter writing being “a main source of contact with the outside world” (2015, p. 9–10). While running writing workshops, Beasley is

informed that giving incarcerated people “unauthorised materials” like paper is considered trafficking and if an instructor is found to do so “they will be considered a risk for eventually trafficking more significant items and will be monitored closely or have their ability to move around the prison curtailed” (2015, p. 9–10).

While paper is limited, even the use of technology does not mean increased freedom. South Australia is the only state in Australia which doesn't allow incarcerated people access to email. Within the prison walls, the Kiosk EXpress System (or KEX) is an electronic device that controls how women seek information and submit requests (South Australian Government, 2016). As expressed by the Seeds of Affinity Advisory Group, the KEX system effectively limits women's voices. Replacing human interaction with the KEX system, means that incarcerated women can only find information about their visitors, phone credit or lodging a complaint via one 25-character request at a time. It can take months for a request to be addressed, and no additional requests can be submitted during that time. This effectively limits incarcerated women's voices to 25 characters every few months. To put that in perspective, this sentence contains 64 characters. A Seeds of Affinity Advisory Group member said that the existence of KEX was utilised by officers as a silencing technique:

Something else they do with their language is – and I understand that the officers need to behaviour manage – but they do it at all times. They'll use something like ‘put it on the KEX’, repetitively as a block. You could be in a distress state [sic] or you do actually need an answer and they'll just repeat like you're a child.

A former prison social worker told us that “when a prisoner moves from one accommodation area to another, KEX requests don't follow”, meaning that these requests are never answered. They added that “there is no real process or governance around this though (perhaps in theory but not in reality) so KEX requests can, and are frequently just deleted/ignored”. It is these overt systems, in combination with covert control over discourse, that make incarceration deeply suffocating.

Many have linked this combination of suppression and control language and behaviour in the prison setting with coercive control. Tracey McIntosh calls coercive control “the operating mechanism of every prison” (2022, p. 171). Kilroy, Lean and Quixley write that the characteristics of coercive control – for example, emotional abuse, isolation, sexual coercion, intimidation, and diminishment of self-worth – “equally describe the routine treatment of women prisoners in the ‘care’ of the state ... Like any violent domestic setting, prisons serve to negate, criticize [*sic*], humiliate, control, shame, accuse, blame and isolate women – while concurrently denying the state's role as a perpetrator of violence” (2022, p. 193–194). Up to 98 percent of incarcerated women have lived experience with abuse, and incarceration effectively replicates this and is likely to retraumatise (Kilroy, Lean & Quixley, 2022, p. 185). In addition to emboldening officers to perpetrate violence against women, the prison industrial complex has the effect of teaching women “to better conform to the demands of their perpetrators” (Kilroy, Lean & Quixley, 2022, p. 191). Rather than “rehabilitate”, incarceration silences women and enacts the patriarchal violence they also experience on the outside. As

activist Marcia Bunney has written, “I do not feel ‘safer’ here because ‘the abuse has stopped’. It has not stopped. It has shifted shape and paced itself differently, but it is as insidious and pervasive in prison as ever it was in the world I know outside these walls” (cited in Cook & Davies, 1999, p. 28; Kilroy, Lean & Quixley, 2022, p. 183). While the perpetrators of violence change, the experience of violence nonetheless continues for incarcerated women. In considering this, King, O’Brien and Measham (2022, p. 155) ask:

How can you approach and begin to understand the violence and abuse that has been inflicted upon you when you reside in an institution that replicates that violence and those controlling relationships? How do you understand and learn how to be assertive in a system that shuts you down and punishes you when you try to have a voice?

Incarceration is not rehabilitative. So much so that Tracey McIntosh relates prison to “the intimate other”, with, for many women, the state being “the most long-term and sustained relationship across a lifetime” (2022, p. 171). Further, while violence is experienced by all incarcerated people, it is not experienced equally. Angela Davis writes that “the intersection of race and sexuality have had a profound effect on the representations of and treatment received by women of color [*sic*] both within and outside prison” (2003, p. 79). In Australia, Aboriginal women experience the highest rate of re-incarceration out of all populations (ABS, 2021). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up 32 percent of the prison population (ABS, 2022). When in prison, Aboriginal women report being targeted by officers and experiencing greater violence (Kilroy, Lean & Quixley, 2022, p. 191). To return to the Adelaide Women’s Prison, in this context, the names “Opal”, “Ruby” and “Pearl” seem particularly egregious considering the women within their walls are enduring such violence.

Reflection: Susannah

My PhD explored the use of technology to strengthen support networks for victim-survivors of domestic violence through sharing first-person stories from those with lived experience. Tech helped me break free from my abuser through sharing my story, and I feel very strongly about the way that we can use tech to amplify the voices of those who have been oppressed. That’s why it’s so hard to hear stories about the carceral system using tech in the opposite way, a way that effectively silences women and resembles the systems and processes of coercive control. Tech has a power, a power to change the world, and it does so through amplifying voices. But it can only amplify the voices that are using it, and to make the most of its power, we need to empower the right voices to be heard, and amplify these as loud as we can.

Desistance through language

While above we discuss how the prison industrial complex uses violence through language to silence incarcerated women, in this section we look at the effects of women writing – primarily as an act of desistance. For women, as well as men, the prison memoir is a long-established genre of writing. Doran Larson, by looking at prison writing systematically, argues that this genre can be a tool to expose the cruelty of mass incarceration: “by turning the tools of literary analysis to a comparative assessment of conditions of injustice, we begin to uncloak the prison, and begin to shed light on the punishment regimes that we hold up as systems of justice” (2010,

p. 143–144). Prison writing is powerful through its representation of a shared experience of incarceration to those on the “outside”. This is the political power of what Larson calls “prison poetics”: a genre with an abolitionist heart, one that seeks to destroy the walls that created it.

Larson (2010) identifies the two features of prison poetics: 1) a “dissociative turn of voice” that means the writer is able to represent a community larger than themselves, even when using first person language; and 2) an acknowledgement of the community they are a part of, either within the prison or within the history of prison writing. It is these two features, Larson argues, that “serve to dismantle the isolating power of the prison, in an effort that is at once personal and political: to recover agency through a willed, virtual relocation of the prison writer himself ... and from this space to publicly *reconnect* the prison cell, and the suffering that occurs there ... to the apparatuses of power” (p. 145).

In his analysis, Larson looks at historical and contemporary prison writing mostly from the perspective of the male prisoner. In contrast, Yıldız (2019) works exclusively with women's prison narratives: those who are “doubly marginalized [*sic*] due to being women in prison” (p.149). She argues that these works “allow us to rethink gendered space in terms of another politics emerging from the prison context” (p.149). Through life narrative writing, incarcerated women are able to both act as witness to, and protest, inhumane prison conditions. For female writers in particular, the connection of incarceration is often traced to their lived experience of gendered violence, both outside and within the prison setting – and in some cases, show the “justice” system to be an ongoing enactor of patriarchal violence in their lives.

In researching prison writing, there is a large body of literature that looks at the act of writing while incarcerated rather than the result, and in doing so, positions writing as therapeutic. Larson (2011) discusses running a writing workshop, saying “I have witnessed inmates taking control of their lives not only as members of the workshop, but also, through writing, as critical citizens of the PIC [prison industrial complex]” (p.5). This thought is repeated by incarcerated female writers, particularly in the collection *Women, writing, and prison: Activists, scholars, and writers speak out* (Jacobi & Stanford, 2014), in which Dionna Griffin says that “writing in prison saved my life” (p. 33); Crista Decker found that “writing is the mirror that lets me see my true self even when life has put me on a shelf” (p. 71); and for Taylor Huey, writing meant she was able “to bear witness, to stay sane, to keep our hearts pumping, to not be eaten up by the rage or the despair, to figure out how we got here, or to discover what truly matters” (p. 189). In teaching young women in detention, Suniti Sharma (2010) “saw the significance of autobiography as a tool, perhaps, an intervention for understanding the educational lived experience of students as counter-stories to the official stories about young women in detention” (p. 334). Writing life narrative allows women to dispute the institutional and sometimes public stories of their lives. It can be a reclamation, either in the personal realm or publicly. As Kilroy and Quixley write: “language has been used as a tool of oppression against criminalised women. The words ‘offender’ or ‘criminal’, for example, suggest a permanent state of being” (2022, p. 211). Women writing their lived experience desists the simplistic and derogatory use of language that can shape their lives. It can provide healing, growth and respite from daily violence.

The act of reading incarcerated women's writing is equally powerful, for both the incarcerated and non-incarcerated reader. Larson connects the act of reading to emotion, and then, abolitionist action: "reading witness texts, as we have seen, is animated by writerly and readerly emotion, even bodily sensation and response. And it is this affective mirroring that is the condition of possibility for moving from reading to praxis" (2017, p. 139–140). In this way, the written words of incarcerated people often, either directly or indirectly, advocate abolitionism.

Larson's connection of reading to praxis also relates to social policy analyst Elizabeth A Segal's idea of social empathy. She writes that "telling people's stories and hearing them tell their stories are forms of empathic efforts" (Segal, 2011, p. 273) and that these ways of fostering empathy are "the most effective way to change structural inequalities and disparities" (Segal, 2011, p. 268). And it is not just in the realm of literature or social work where the power of narrative and its link to empathy has been researched. Law professor Susan Ayres used narrative to aid her students in better understanding and having empathy for those who have experienced domestic violence. Ayres found that students "learn more – or perhaps *feel* more" when exposed to narrative, using the example of one student who was much more empathetic when reading poems about abuse in contrast with legal cases (2015, p. 333).

The effects of narrative are also experienced by incarcerated people. When incarcerated women read material that reflects their lived experience, it can provide insight into the structures that shape their lives, both past and present. Megan Sweeney writes about incarcerated women's experiences of reading Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* and how through reading and discussing the book, they were able to articulate their own experiences which serves "as an essential first step toward performing a critical ontology of themselves – coming to know where they live, to begin the patient work of creating a space of movement and artistry within the structures of domination that so profoundly shape them as subjects" (2004, p. 464). This too encourages the act of moving from reading to praxis.

While the incarcerated female writer can experience fulfilment and community through reading and writing, writing in particular is not without risk. These risks span from threats made by prison officers persecuting women writing, to the women themselves reliving past trauma. Formerly incarcerated writer, Velmarine O Szabo, said that while she'd been "forewarned" about the consequences of writing while incarcerated, "that warning did not even begin to foreshadow the three-and-one-half-year wave of scorn and ridicule that I received from my fellow women prisoners, prison guards, prison staff in the system's education department and elsewhere" (Jacobi & Stanford, 2014, p. 197). Szabo writes of a time when an officer said, "you know, I don't think inmates should be allowed to write" and the retaliatory punishment enacted to inhibit Szabo from writing (p. 197).

Writing programs in particular can promote "romantic notions of writing-as-empowerment in *any* writing workshop through overstating the empowerment possible, even when the subject matter moves beyond disclosure" (Hinshaw & Jacobi, 2015, p. 76). While writing can be

therapeutic or empowering as well as political and abolitionist – the act of writing does not materially change the circumstances of life for incarcerated women. They remain subject to the violence of the carceral system. Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015) explicitly write about “the risks of representation” (p. 69) and argue that because of this, “program facilitators need to make space for writing that is less risky, as well as to create space for riskier autobiographical writing to remain private, as a deliberate move away from practices that expect public confessions that reify fixed-identity narratives for incarcerated writers” (p. 75). We posit that for writing instructors who are outside of the abolitionist space and who endeavour to work in prisons, connecting with activists who understand the extent of the risks of autobiographical writing within the prison setting would be a step forward in creating protections for incarcerated female writers.

Further, as Hinshaw and Jacobi note, if incarcerated people are attending writing workshops that encourage looking at structural rather than individualised understandings of crime, while perhaps being personally beneficial, this goes against the “justice” framework itself: “the reality [is] that such frameworks work against the discourses that prison programs and parole boards use to evaluate prisoners’ ‘progress’” (2015, p. 84). Navigating this is complex, as while discussions of, say, the school to prison pipeline (Meiners, 2011) may be rich topics for a writing class, classes should – at their forefront – be of benefit to participants. For the vast majority, this is leaving the carceral setting as quickly as possible.

Amongst these complexities, and if not enacted with care, writing programs risk becoming a reformist reform, meaning programs are “conserving, strengthening and legitimizing [*sic*] effects on the prison regime” (Russell & Carlton, 2013, p. 487; see also Mathiesen, 1974). The prison industrial complex may use these reformist programs to twist the women’s own written work into “evidence” of the rehabilitative effects of incarceration. Some life writing workshops may directly encourage this through a confessional voice or repentance from the writer. This can be “potentially harnessed to an institutional voice, including the reformist demands for personal responsibility, hard work, and transformation” (Trapezo Sims, 2020, p. 213).

Some writing programs clearly acquiesce to the prison industrial complex. For example, Beasley suggests writers publish anonymously to remove “the likelihood of public anger at inmates being given a voice outside the prison” (2015, p. 5). This “solution” does not prioritise the wishes of the writers themselves but rather a generic concept of the “public”. Other writing programs face a more complex task: working within the prison industrial complex while not strengthening it. Anderson and Bedford (2021) write of this complexity when working with prisoner radio. They write that:

Programming focused on improving lives inside and preparing for life on the outside is a reformist venture, rather than furthering an explicitly abolitionist agenda. Yet, the existence of a prisoner-led radio service is a significant step on a longer pathway to dismantling structures of incarceration. When run independently, by and for people with lived prison experience, radio is a powerful means of opening up the conversation

about the strategies that work, demystifying the prison experience and raising awareness about the realities of prison life. (Anderson & Bedford, 2021, p. 61)

Working within the prison industrial complex requires reflexivity. Are writing instructors supporting incarcerated people to experiment with voice on the page? Is care being taken to communicate that writing can take any form, whether interrogating previous lived experience or creating a world unlike our own? Will the writer be at risk of abuse and retribution if they critique the prison? Entering the prison does not mean that a program will be reformist. Rather, it is the instructor's thoughtfulness, research on the circumstances of incarceration and attentiveness to incarcerated people's needs that will determine whether a program will bolster or undermine the prison industrial complex.

On the other end of the political spectrum, Doran Larson expresses concern over prison writing being used solely to further an abolitionist voice, with "progressives who effectively expect the incarcerated to serve as unpaid journalists and documentarians of the institutional abuses of the right" (2008, p. 30–31). He argues that incarcerated writers are writers in their own right who should not be cornered to "expect public attention only when they write directly about prison conditions, and when they write in the dour mood that we demand to confirm even a well-placed disgust with the prison industrial complex", as "by imposing that expectation, we are in danger of only adding on a prison industrial literary complex" (p.30–31).

While writing can manifest in risks in navigating the institution of prison, it can also create personal risk for writers. Writing about the past, and traumatic material, can be retraumatizing. When in a prison setting, there is no access to quality and consistent support and limited access to the support of loved ones who are "outside". Beasley has written about the risk of retraumatization when teaching incarcerated people creative writing. She writes that "to force students to move down pathways that they find distressing would be a breach of our duty of care towards our classroom and the individuals within it" (Beasley, 2015, p. 12). When writers choose to write about lived experience, Beasley says that "the unexpected realisation that others have suffered similar experiences can give them a new determination to avoid future victimisation and expose them to new strategies for change" (p. 12). This takes the view that "avoiding future victimisation" is within a person's power, solely resting on their ability to be determined. It presents a view of crime and incarceration as individualised, rather than an experience that is shaped by structural power. This view mimics that of the prison industrial complex and shows how some writing programs reproduce ideas of the prison system they operate within. Beasley shows this later, writing that by understanding and accommodating "high security regimes", "programs have a greater chance of longevity because they are seen as working respectfully within the ethos of the prison industrial complex and so considered by prison management to be a positive program" (p. 13).

Taking an alternative view while working with the writing of incarcerated women in Hawai'i, Trapedo Sims notes that "despite the institutional and programmatic assertions that writing heals and soothes, the women ultimately are unable to escape the trauma of their own experiences" (2020, p. 209). They go on to write that "trauma surfaces within the grammatical

intrusions, twists of memory, and aberrant uses of language”(p.209). It is important to note that for women experiencing incarceration, trauma is often not just an experience from the past, but a daily occurrence when living under the patriarchal control of the state. Writing may help to understand the past (see for example, Jarldorn & Deer, 2020), but it cannot protect women from daily violence. Fine and Torre, who have worked as participatory action researchers in prisons, have written on the violence of the prison industrial complex in allyship with incarcerated women, acknowledging that “few can speak the truth about prisons without enormous personal vulnerability” (2006, p. 255).

Of course, these risks are not reasons to limit the voices of incarcerated women. Rather, they serve as a critique of programs and their supporters who frame writing as a pure source of empowerment for incarcerated people without considering the harm that can occur. Incarcerated women's writing is a rich and diverse genre. Perhaps more so than other genres, prison poetics is a gift for readers and should be treated as such – without expectation or obligation, but with care and movement from emotion to praxis. As Breea Willingham writes: “writing allows imprisoned women to create their own discourse within an oppressive system and in an oppressive space. Though their writings may not dismantle the system, they create a space where the women find their voice and educate themselves” (2011, p. 57).

Reflection: Michele

I have been researching and writing about the experiences of formerly incarcerated women for over a decade now. I also volunteer with Seeds of Affinity and use my position within the University of South Australia as a platform to advocate for my community. You would think by now that nothing would surprise me when it comes to the violence and oppressive language of the prison industrial complex, yet once seen, it can never be unseen. For example, last month in a correctional services newsletter, I saw the promotion of a new program for Aboriginal “ex-offenders” to find post-release employment called “Road to Redemption”. The word “redemption” has religious connotations, especially within a carceral setting, or what Ellis describes as “shadow carceral institutions” (2020, p. 748). This language completely ignores the racism and colonisation underpinning the criminalisation of Aboriginal peoples in so-called Australia. If we further unpack the name of the program, it shows that there is an expectation that people “redeem themselves” despite having successfully completed their custodial sentence. While it could be tempting to say that “it’s just words”, I believe that the words we use when uttered without care create harm, making them more than just “words”. Language matters because it helps to create, not just reflect reality; it is a “practical consciousness” (Marx & Engels, 1843/1972).

Conclusion

We thought it fitting to finish with a series of quotes by Seeds' Advisory Group members, who participated in a discussion about their memories of the language used in prisons. Overall, the themes of our discussion touched on violence enforced by officers through language, and how it contributes to the stifling of women's voices in the carceral system. We have chosen to end the article in this way so as to leave the reader with formerly incarcerated women's experiences

in their own words. From our experience researching narrative in carceral spaces, we know how rare and important the final word can be.

The Women of Seeds remembered how prison officers taunted them for cycling through the system:

Just your absence from the prison is a win. The screws would often say to us, well if you don't like it, why do you come back all the time? Don't come here if you don't like it.

They also remembered the infantilising treatment they received when seeking to complete mandated programs:

A course I did in prison was called Road Maps and it's all dumbed down, like it literally has a stop sign, and that red means stop. It looks like Kindy stuff so what's going through your head when you're putting up with that shit? Because that's just assuming that every person who comes out of jail is completely dumb and childish which is entirely invalidating.

The "us and them" mentality of some of the prison officers reflects the ideas steeped throughout the history of human service provision through the trope of deserving citizens and non-deserving (non) citizens:

Another thing was one of the officers saying to me, the only reason he is there is because he's got a mortgage to pay. "Some of us actually are functional members of society and we have mortgages to pay." I literally had a mortgage at the time, but I was in there, so, there's an assumption.

The Women of Seeds remembered how treasured possessions, especially those that had the potential to take their thoughts outside the prison walls, such as books, were fair game in the coercive control used to run the prison:

Like they do this raid and it's like a total freak out over my books being taken. It sounds like such a small thing, but that it's all you've got. All you have is to control that little space and they come in and just take it all and that's what they do.

At the same time, when women are supplied with property items, there is judgmental language around what is "deserving". The prison supplies crop tops, not bras, which are unsuitable for many women, especially as women tend to put on weight when in prison due to a combination of poor diet, medication and lack of exercise. Linda, the Seeds Co-founder and Community Coordinator, reflects on a conversation with a prison worker while donating bras requested by incarcerated women:

I had an officer from the stores come up to me a few weeks ago and that woman looked at the bras I had brought in and said, can I talk to you about these? [She said] Oh no, we can't have these because they're too fancy. Yeah. So, then we're bringing in bras

because they're not supplying them and then when we bring them in, they're not good enough because they're "too good."

Many of group members also remembered how they were often sexualised by prison officers:

As they're putting handcuffs on to get the escorted out to the hospital or whatever it is, they continue to tell me that they have pink fluffy ones at home.

They also saw the contradiction in the way they were threatened with violence by the very same prison officers who paid "lip service" to violence prevention campaigns:

And then he started. He's telling the whole unit about how we're going to be taken out and put into the other unit and the other women are going to assault us. In different words; it's quite brutal. He took great delight in describing what that would be like for us and what we would experience. He went to each one of us, up to our faces and the whole time he was wearing a white ribbon [1].

Final remarks

We wanted to write this paper because we hope it helps readers to understand the layered nature of the violence of imprisonment. While some levels of violence are obvious, such as strip searching, there are other more subtle layers, such as being treated like infants, having minimal access to resources and being told by prison officers on the day we leave that we'll be back. Every aspect of the prison industrial complex is violent. While this violence can manifest interpersonally, it is the state sanctioned, institutionalised violence that permeates the prison that underpins the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women.

Notes

[1] In Australia, wearing a white ribbon on one's lapel signifies support of the White Ribbon Foundation, an organisation whose purpose is to "stop men's violence against women". Their vision is for "a nation where every woman is free from all forms of men's violence and abuse" (White Ribbon, n.d.; see also Seymour, 2018).

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