“Grinding the Walls To Dust”: Feminist Media Praxis

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

Rachel Amy Raimist

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Edén Torres, Lisa Albrecht

January 2010

© Rachel Amy Raimist

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This could not have happened without the love, support, and generosity of so many. Most important are my children Tiana and Joseph. I thank you for your unending patience, support, and help with so much! Thank you to my big brothers Scott and Andrew who have allowed me the time and space to grow since our parents died more than a decade ago. So many others have helped through the this difficult journey, but there is only one place to start…

None of this would be without the Stillwater Poetry Group, specifically my best friends David Doppler and LaVon Johnson, and Steven Glaze. SPG members: Ja'far Rahotep, Ezekiel Caliguri, Tony Burgess, David Islam, Harry Hill, Vino Britton, Joe Davis, and all of the other poets who participated in hours of workshops, I am honored to have worked with all of you. Pauline Geraci - you represent the hope and possibility that humanity and quality education is possible inside the walls. Twin Cities artists reggie harris, Desdamona, J. Otis Powell, Ed Bok Lee, Emmanuel Ortis, Mankwe Ndosi, Douglas Ewart, TruBoy, John Passi, and e.g. bailey, you made this a beautiful and life-changing experience.

Jan Mandell – you are awe inspiring, visionary, and a much needed mentor and friend. To all of Jan's students past and present – you rock!

I could not have accomplished this project without the academic support of my mentors Edén Torres, Walt Jacobs, and Lisa Albrecht. Walt, you get a special shout-out for all mentorship you've provided well above and beyond this dissertation. Edén, your vision and craft with language is truly inspirational. Lisa, thank you for making this dissertation come alive in ways that I could not have predicted. My feminist dream team - Jigna Desai, Sonja Kuftinec, and Gwendolyn Pough – your insight, dedication, and support has helped me grow as a scholar and as a woman. I am forever indebted to all of your intellectual generosity.

Professor Deborah Appleman, who donated her sabbatical from Carleton College to the students of Stillwater Prison, and opened the doors of Carleton to me (as an Instructor) – abundant gratitude and thanks. Our many lunches filled with tears and tissues have helped me formulate many of the ideas that fill these pages. I now know what kind of faculty I want to grow to become!

Tara Joy Yosso – Compañera, I would NEVER have gone to graduate school if you hadn't recognized my academic abilities, and brought me to MALCS in Minnesota all those years ago. My PR+J hermana, your work truly inspires, and reminds me that we Latinas can achieve *whatever* goals we set our eyes on…. Just sometimes we need funny drawings of critical lenses to help us see what is right in front of us.

The Kitchen Table Collective – Kandace Creel Falcón, Alex Mendoza Covarrubias, M.L. Hedgmon, and Yeonbo Jeong – has been more than a writing support group. Without the K.T.C. this would have been the loneliest and most isolating experience ever. Kandace – you are truly my best study buddy! Alex – you are already the scholar you say you want to be. Your insight and eye for detail helped this project materialize. I will read your entire dissertations and do my best to give back all that you've given me, although that really isn't even enough to repay all your support and dedication.

helen crump and Ayana Weekly – being a grad school triplet in those early years saved my life in more ways than I will express publicly. Please know without you two, none of this would have been possible.

To the GWSS babysitting crew – Heidi Schumacher, Charlotte Albrecht, Katie Bashore, Ryan Li Dahlstrom, Jessica Giusti and Elakshi Kumar – you have demonstrated that it definitely takes a (graduate student) village to raise a child. My children were blessed to spend time with you all. We greatly miss each and every one of you.

Candance Doerr-Stevens – Yes, cyborgs can dance! You are a treasured friend. I thank you for your endless encouragement, ideas, and writing support. Our book is next!!!

The Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies Department – your support of my feminist media work is (beyond) overwhelming. How is it possible that I had a room named in my honor before I earned my doctoral degree? I hope that GWSS continues to be a space that values radical work and realizes the value of media theory and practices to Feminist Studies. Allowing me to develop and teach my dream courses, such as "Feminist Media Making" and "Digital Storytelling In and With Communities of Color," has helped materialize my dreams of being a teacher, media maker, and feminist scholar. Next: an endowed media scholar faculty position!

Jen Mein, CLA OIT, and the Infotech Fees Committee - without the funding support you granted the Feminist Media Center (numerous times!), there would be no Rachel Raimist Feminist Media Center at the University of Minnesota. I feel so honored and accomplished!

Beretta Smith-Shomade – Watching you command the halls of UCLA and then work the classroom as faculty at Arizona (and reading *Pimpin' Ain't Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television)* has shown I am blessed to consider you a friend & colleague.

Richard "Sonny" E. and Linda Espinoza – our time at UCLA talking, making, and curating Chicano/a and Latino/a film has helped me to realize and believe that our rasquache flicks have the power and the ability to carry the message, and build a real movement for social justice. Sonny, I wish I had a professor in college who I could have followed out of the institutional walls in protest. ¡Sí se puede!

Vicki Callahan, my cherished professor of "Feminist Film Studies" at UCLA - you exposed a very resistant (and much younger) Rachel to work that (eventually) changed my life. I'm sorry I was such a difficult student. Please know that if you hadn't pushed me to write on the SPG for your book, I may never have written this dissertation. Your legacy certainly continues with me…

To the B-Girl Be Community – Rebecca "Bfresh" McDonald, you remind me of myself (too many) years ago, and that's a compliment! Tish Jones, Desdamona, Theresa Sweetland, Deanna Cummings, Leah Nelson, Chaka Mkali, and so many more artists, organizers, activists, and friends I've worked with over the years, I thank you for you who are and the work you do!

This dissertation is dedicated to the source of all that I am, my parents:

Ana Mercedes Indart Raimist
(1944 – 1998)

and

Clifford Joseph Raimist
(1925 – 1998)

I work and meditate daily to be as good of a person and a parent
as I was blessed to have for my first 23 years of life on this planet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.......... i

DEDICATION.......... iii

TABLE OF CONTENTS.......... iv

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS vi

PREFACE viii

INTRODUCTION: What I want *our* words to do to you 1

CHAPTER 1 - ACTION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE FRAMEWORKS OF FEMINIST MEDIA PRAXIS AND THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

1.1 Traversing the School-to-prison Pipeline, Camera in Hand 10

1.2 Situating the School-to-prison Pipeline in the Prison Industrial Complex 22

1.3 Confronting Hegemonic Media Images of Schools 37

1.4 Confronting Hegemonic Media Images of Prisons 50

TAKE 1 - The SPG Disclaimer 66

CHAPTER 2 - FEMINIST MEDIA MAKING METHODOLOGY: FILMING IN A ST. PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOL AND A MINNESOTA PRISON

2.1 Social Justice Media Praxis: Aims of a Feminist Filmmaker 68

2.2 Methodological Meditations 76

2.3 Holding the Gaze: Looking, Seeing, and Filmmaking Practices 79

2.4 Filming in the Blackbox: Challenging the “Barriers to Entry” 92

2.5 Positioning Positionality: (Being an) Outsider Inside and an Insider Outside 97

2.6 Theorizing the Space: “Shooting” a prison classroom 105

TAKE 2 - CTT Rap “The Remix” 119

CHAPTER 3 - CRITICAL CONTENT: Understanding CTT in Theory and in Practice

3.1 Making Sense of CTT.......... 121

3.2 Understanding Central High School & the (Safe) Space of the Blackbox 125

3.3 The Blackbox Theater is (By Design) a Safe Space 127

3.4 Jan Mandell Resists the Hegemonic ("white teacher" as Savior) Narrative 138

3.5 The Supporting Cast of Characters 144

3.6 Beats + Boal = Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogies 148

3.7 Framing the Students at the Center: Creating "Barriers to Entry" 153

3.8 Traveling Beyond the Basement: Barriers to Entry 157

3.9 Filmic Re-Telling as Counter Narrative 161

Take 3 – I am not a color 165

CHAPTER 4 – CRITICAL CONTENT: PRISON POETS (W)RITING RESISTANCE

4.1 Project History: From Within the Belly 168

4.2 Ms. G Flips The Script: Complicating the Military Trained ("white teacher") Narrative 171

4.3 Engaging Praxical Resistance: Prisoners Humanized as Learners 174

4.4 (W)riting Resistance 180

4.5 Acts of Resistance: Words in Action 195

Take 4 – 15 minutes 204

CONCLUSIONS - MEDIA RUPTURES AND ARTS-BASED EDUCATION CAN SLOW THE PIPELINE'S FLOW

5.1 Journeys, Pathways, and Intersections 205

5.2 A sage on the stage: CTT is More Than a One-woman Show 206

5.3 Educational Lockdown: What happens when education *really* becomes the practice of freedom inside prison walls? 207

5.4 Chopped and Screwed?: The Quagmires of Editing and Distribution 209

5.5 My (Filmic) Conclusions: Power Sharing and Power Building 215

BIBLIOGRAPHY 218

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CTT – Central Touring Theater

SPG – Stillwater Poetry Group

DOC – Department of Corrections

MNDOC – Minnesota Department of Corrections

PREFACE

It is not our responsibility to interpret, translate, or disseminate . . . knowledge to a larger audience – but to use it as a gift – for healing, for validation, and for understanding of who we are so that we will not only survive, but create our own kinds of rebellion. *– Edén E. Torres*

I am a storyteller first and foremost, and for this I make no apologies. This dissertation tells my story as a woman of color documentary filmmaker and shares some of the stories of teachers, artists, poets, and thinkers that I have worked with during my time in Minnesota. Many of them too often go unacknowledged by the academy, mainstream media, and local press because of their marginal statuses in society as people of color, women, and prisoners. I share these stories as examples of efficacious social justice work, as creative inspiration, as food for thought, and because I believe that theory happens in many ways – especially through our experiences, in our everyday acts of resistance, and in the expressions of our lives. Our theory lives "in the flesh," as women of color feminists remind us.[1]

I don't always feel "full" after reading dense theoretical texts, which is not the most popular thing to say as an academic. Much of what I've read as a graduate student is valuable and informative, for the most part, but I have too often felt immobilized by what I read. So much of the work I read about social justice tended to be an isolated experience – one woman sitting with a book, envisioning justice in the "real world." I read many texts that spent so much time framing, couching, explaining, and treading lightly (seemingly in fear of critiques from other

---

[1] Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1981). In "Theory in the Flesh" (1981), Moraga writes: A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives-our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings-all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience.
We are the colored in a white feminist movement.
We are the feminists among the people of our culture.
We are often the lesbians among the straight.
We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.

academics) that I felt disillusioned and left asking myself, how, literally and materially, this work produced the feminist activism and social justice that it proclaimed to center.

Too much academic writing didn't speak to me in ways that touched the depth of my being, and usually didn't directly inspire me to act. My acts are simultaneously critical, creative, and conscious. I know now that they are my intellectual and activist interventions in the world. I found that when I did "too much" thinking I got paralyzed creatively. Too often in graduate school I felt inadequate; the first few years of graduate school undid the trusting relationship I had with my instincts and forced me to question my role in the academy. But doing creative work – video making, photography, creative writing, working with youth, and organizing events in the community like B-Girl Be – inspired tremendous ideas and *theory*, and helped me survive the monotony of scholarly reading and writing.[2] It was listening to artists like Desadmona, Tish Jones, Sarah White, Mystic, and Invincible that I got "unstuck," and was able to "produce" as a graduate student. I found that for me graduate school survival required me to simultaneously think (engage many kinds of theoretical articulations) and do (creative making, mentoring, and teaching). I have learned that academic work doesn't have to fit a certain form and that what I do can be of value to scholarship, teaching, learning, and creative work. I no longer allow other academics' investment in "high theory" and dense writing to cast negative reflections on my desire to theorize everyday stories and vernacular. My investment is clearly in the simultaneous and mutually informing modes of thinking (theory), doing (creative and activist practice), and critical reflection that centers work for social justice through storytelling. This project reflects this multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multi-modal approach to research, knowledge production, and practices of feminist media making.

[2] B-Girl Be: A Celebration of Women in Hip-Hop is a (nearly) annual event in Minneapolis that I co-founded with Desdamona and Theresa Sweetaland in 2005 at Intermedia Arts to "influence and inspire leadership to change the perceptions and roles of women in hip-hop for current and future generations". See the event archives at http://www.intermediaarts.org/.

I am trained professionally as a director, camerawoman, and editor. I have worked as a teacher, filmmaker, magazine writer, event photographer, manager of music and clothing related street marketing teams, and mentor to many youth across the country. I decided to return to graduate school in 2002 to pursue a doctoral degree in Feminist Studies. My path, very generally, has been to do (photography), study doing (film and television directing), do some more (make music videos, films, and documentaries), study thinking (Feminist Studies), and now to find ways to simultaneously study, think, and do. This dissertation is less about "research" (as in systematic inquiry to establish "facts") but rather, is a reflective project that seeks to find theory, practice, and method in work in which I have invested time, energy, and my life's blood. I hope it inspires you as much as it continues to inspire me.

INTRODUCTION: What I Want *Our* Stories To Do To You[1]

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.[2]

I would like a nation of schoolhouses that actually look like schoolhouses and not detention centers where even now, today, too many first graders are walking into their schools and their initial encounters is with cops and sometimes metal detectors, and so in case those children didn't know it before, they know by the time they've walked through years of detectors, been watched by years of police officers, seen years of bars on windows, that whatever anyone told them, dreamed for them, they know their real destiny in this world is to one day be a prisoner.[3]

I desire to move our media driven imaginations about inner-city schools, prison life, prison culture, and the realities of lives of people of color past what we've been fed by mainstream outlets. In most instances mainstream media images — films, television programs, music videos, and documentaries — too often, tell the story of white people who embed themselves in situations to "save" brown people. Often, this action takes place in an institution of socialization like a school or a prison. This phenomenon consists of a "based on a true story" narrative, told primarily through the point of view of the "white teacher" (usually positioned at the center of the narrative), who works to "save" (brown) students or prisoners from their own ignorance, poor choices, and their potentially destructive "home" communities. My project works to counter these hegemonic narratives that posit the "white teacher" as savior, and the brown students as "saved" through media-making practices and larger theoretical frameworks set against the context of Minnesota's schools and prisons.[4] Our understandings of institutions of inner city schools and

[1] I deliberately point to Eve Ensler's 2003 documentary, *What I Want My Words To Do To You* here. As *the* most celebrated feminist film about education within prison walls, I want to convert Ensler's "My Words" into a collective "our stories."
[2] Richard Shaul, Introduction. Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000.
[3] asha bandele, *Something Like Beautiful*. New York: Harper, 2009.
[4] Here I reference the title of a digital story made by one of my students in the fall 2008 course, "Digital Storytelling In and With Communities of Color," co-taught with Professor Walter R. Jacobs at the University of Minnesota. Our auditing graduate student, Candance Doerr-Stevens, produced a digital story, "White Teacher," about her experiences as a white, Midwestern woman who responds to a NY Times advertisement that proclaimed, "Make a Difference, Teach NYC!". Doerr-Stevens thoughtfully considers her naïveté as a new (white) teacher in (brown) Brooklyn once centered her hope to "help" these students,

prisons are thoroughly intertwined with the media – through the media the "real" and the "constructed" get mixed up. My task as media scholar is to encourage critical viewing of texts, to tease out reality and media fictions, and highlight that the implications of failing to do so, because media representations (which are most often re-created media fictions), become reality and inform everyday understandings about students and prisoners.

Through the filming and editing of my own mediatized narratives, I create feminist counter-stories of Minnesota's school-to-prison pipeline.[5] The school-to-prison pipeline is a "nationwide system of local, state, and federal education and public safety policies that pushes students out of school and into the criminal justice system, " which "disproportionately targets youth of color" and is the result of contributing factors such as "school discipline, policing practices, high stakes testing, and the prison industry."[6] This pipeline refers to the national trend of criminalizing, rather than educating, our nation's children. It encompasses such practices as "zero tolerance" disciplinary policies, school-based arrests, disciplinary alternative schools, and secured detention for juveniles. All of these methods tend to further marginalize at risk youth, deny them education, and acculturate them into systematic or institutional control.

My aim for this work—academic, activist, and creative—is to understand the relationship

---

and how, at that time she wasn't able to recognize the privilege of her "whiteness". Reflecting on the experience year later, how, she now understands how cultural and community differences impact learning, and she understands that white teachers in brown classrooms need to de-center themselves and their ways of knowing. I use "white", the racial identity markers of the teachers, in quotations to point to how race and the privileges of "whiteness" are wholly constructed and reinforced in society and within the educational system. The video of "White Teacher" can be viewed here:
http://blog.lib.umn.edu/afroam/storytelling/2008/10/white_teacher.html

[5] I use the term "mediatized" from Knut Lundby's *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media* (Peter Lang: New York, 2008), which discusses (new) media making practices that center democratic potential of digital media. Mediatization is defined as a "process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity assume media form." This term was introduced in media studies, to move beyond the filmic constructions and limitations of form seen as traditional documentary practices, to account for new modes of media-based storytelling with ditigal media tehnology such as handheld dv cameras and video editing software on personal computers. See Lundby, Knut, ed,. *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories* (New York, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 10.

[6] See the New York Civil Liberties Union School to Prison Pipeline Toolkit - http://www.nyclu.org/node/1449 (accessed March 2009).

between feminist and media theory and my own feminist documentary production methodologies. I am concerned with how I negotiate space with my camera, including the way the footage is filmed, how the edits I distribute are constructed, and how this work can be used as a cultural weapon of resistance. Through an interrogation of my filmic practices and pedagogical practices, I consider various representational strategies such as "passing the camera" (which is a tactic that grants filmic subjects the agency to hold the camera and film the filmmaker and the other subjects), and working as a co-participant along with my filmic subjects, to demonstrate that collaborative methodologies can trouble the views of academic as the sole "expert." I am interested in how to better understand the value of everyday epistemologies, transformational pedagogies, and ways that media praxis can serve as a potential model for social justice education in public schools and prisons.

I witnessed how the public school students and the imprisoned students with whom I've worked, spent their everyday schooling in classrooms taught by (primarily white) teachers who could have easily reinforced their power and privilege as "white teachers" (noble do-gooders "helping" the less fortunate), but instead who engaged radical teaching and learning methods that prioritized critical and feminist pedagogies. These methods and practices resist the increased standardization of public education, the exclusions from critical education of under-achieving students, increased school campus policing, and decreased educational opportunities inside prison facilities.

I collaborate with a multi-racial and anti-racist collective of students, teachers, artists, activists, and prisoners, and we work to fight the increasing criminalization of young people of color that too often occurs through school policies and practices that result in increased prison populations serving longer sentences.[7] We work to trouble the seeming divide between the "free" community outside of prisons and those imprisoned within the walls. The following pages reflect

---

[7] NCLU Pipleline Toolkit.

the ideology that the free/imprisoned and us/them dichotomies are not always, in fact, representing different positionalities; power is often blurred in the context of public schools and prisons.

My self-reflexive journey examines my feminist filmmaking media praxis that works in resistance to Minnesota's school-to-prison pipeline. Chapter 1 builds the frameworks of feminist media praxis, and examines the increasing flow of "bad" students in the school-to-prison pipeline in Minnesota. By introducing the concepts of feminist media praxis as a theoretical and practical methodology, this work counters the impacts of hegemonic media images of the "white teacher as savior" distributed by Hollywood and "alternative" media outlets.

Chapter 2 examines women of color feminist interventions in media making processes, traditionally white and western frameworks of feminist film theory, and my own engagement with feminist filmmaking methodologies in both a public school and a state prison. I work through purpose, positionality, subjectivity, transparency, and specific methods of filming like tactical framing, composition, camera movement, editing, and interrogate the violent and masculinist language of film production. This chapter maps out how theory and method are best intertwined in a praxical relationship.

Chapter 3 explores the critical content of the documentary I am making on the social justice theater program at St. Paul's Central High School, focusing on the Central Touring Theater (CTT) 2005 performance of "Barriers To Entry." Through the merging of traditional theater techniques with critical educational practices, teacher Jan Mandell engages a radical approach to teaching (primarily) students of color. She subverts banking models of education, engaging Freire's ideas of "education as the practice of freedom," in the basement of this stratified (read: segregated) public high school.[8]

---

[8] In Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), he argues against the "banking concept of education" (where teachers hold all of the relevant knowledge in the form of facts that they deposit into the students), in favor of radical, "liberatory" education that centers dialogical methods of

Chapter 4 examines a collaborative critical poetry workshop, and the documentary media that I produced about the program, that occurred inside the men's close-security prison facility at Stillwater Prison. Literacy teacher Ms. G formed the Stillwater Poetry Group (SPG), in order to humanize her students. Through collaboration with Twin Cities artists, these workshops created the space where prisoners could be just students, at least for a few hours, and work to write in resistance to the dehumanizing practices of institutionalization. The SPG workshop was a site of transformation and community building, and demonstrates that critical education is a tool for social justice within and beyond prison walls.

Chapter 5 interweaves instances from the CTT and SPG projects to demonstrate how students, under the mentorship of critical educators whose pedagogies center dialogic workshops, can collaborate with guest artists and utilize diverse facilitation methods to ultimately use culture as a tactical weapon to combat systemic oppression. For my mediatized narratives of these workshops I theorize how, through the distribution of these stories as media texts, feminist documentary can be used as a counter-hegemonic narrative about students of color in schools and in prisons. By considering different modes of feminist distribution, from traditional public television broadcasts planned for the high school students, and free Internet-based distribution planned for the prison poets, I illustrate how there isn't a singular mode of "best" feminist media practices.

It is important to note that this dissertation is performative on a number of levels. It is academic, it is activist and it is creative, equally and simultaneously. I interwine frameworks, methodologies, and writing practices to center the filmic subjects (literally in the center of the film frame) but also narratively re-center their voices, stories, and knowledges. I point to scholarly material as critical support to the many ways that we, individually and collectively, can

---

teaching and learning. Freire's critical pedagogical practices center learning circles rather than classroom where teaching occurs only through lecture formats. This form of critical education is designed to teach students they bring valuable knowledges with them, and works to raise individuals' consciousness around oppression, and to in turn, transform oppressive social structures through education.

know. Scholarship, justice, and storytelling are central and significant to the content and the form of this project. Therefore, I choose to use footnotes to point to much of the theory and critical work around the topics discussed, rather than use inline citations, that physically place academic theorists at the center of the text, along with the prisoners and students as a tactical mode of centering the subjects as co-producers of scholarly knowledge.

Embedded in the pages of this writing are image grabs that sometimes appear as single images or a strip of images, with explanatory captions below, that may reflect an edited sequence from the video footage, or a grouping of images that form montage of images on the printed page. I have filmed all of the images of CTT and the SPG on digital video and share digital image grabs to give the reader a sampling of the raw footage, and demonstrate some of the ways the media is being edited. Additionally, there are image grabs from work that I analyzed and considered when filming my own media images, such as promotional videos disseminated by the Minnesota Department of Corrections and mainstream media stories.

Intercut between chapters are "takes," or excerpts of key transcripts with accompanying image grabs that give the reader access to the "data," the source material (video tapes) studied for this project. These takes share moments on screen such as poetry readings, live theatrical performances, and key moments captured on tape that are included in this text to enhance the reader's understanding of the theoretical and methodological arguments as conveyed by the filmic subjects themselves.

By design, this dissertation aims to bridge media theory and feminist practice using digital media technologies to transform feminist media studies and modes of interdisciplinarity, using a methodology that equally prioritizes critical inquiry and creative making. As a result, this dissertation does not necessarily conform to traditional formats and modes of academic research. I study my own archive of video tapes, write about creative work, and prioritize the media making piece of this work as much as the textual analysis about its significance. While I

acknowledge and respect the brilliant work that has come before me, and I contend that 21st century literacies, digital media technologies, and complex ways of knowing cannot be (fully) analyzed, argued and disseminated within the confines of the printed page archived on the library shelves. My desire here is to engage a feminist media praxis project to affect education, feminist media making, and material change within schools, inside prisons, and beyond the academy.

CHAPTER 1 - ACTION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE FRAMEWORKS OF FEMINIST MEDIA PRAXIS AND THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

Theory, I believe, is most useful as a framework – a means to an end, not the thing itself. To the extent that it allows us to speculate on meaning, test our ideas, *and* articulate our objectives, it may very well help us to develop various methods for actualizing our desire for change.
– Edén Torres, *Chicana Without Apology*

It is necessary for me to keep in mind that one cannot really theorize about film, but only *with* film.
– Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*

1.1 The Context: Traversing the School-to-prison Pipeline, Camera in Hand

Pictured on the left is St. Paul Central High School, circa 1908 (Image by *T. W. Ingersoll)*, and on the right is the Minnesota Department of Corrections, Stillwater Facility in the 1990s. (MPR Photo/Dan Olson)

Since 2004 I have travelled a literal school-to-prison pipeline in Minnesota, with a digital video camera in hand. I've traveled through sterile hallways and down stairwells to St. Paul's Central High School's basement Blackbox Theater and through sterile corridors to the basement educational unit inside the men's close-security prison at Stillwater Prison. St. Paul Central High School is St. Paul's largest public high school.[1] It was erected in 1883, and enlarged in 1888, with an average daily attendance of 1,300 pupils. Stillwater Prison in Stillwater, Minnesota was built in 1914 as an industrial prison, and houses an average daily count of 1400 prisoners.[2] Both

[1] The website Sheldon Aubut's CityHistory.US shares Saint Paul History, in particular, "photos and historical information from the Margaret Marriott Collection." See: http://www.cityhistory.us/stpaul/marriott1.htm

[2] According to "Opposing Outcomes of the Industrial Prison: Japan and the United States Compared" by Elmer H. Johnson, "The industrial prison first emerged in the early 1820s as the Auburn system in New York State, combining the characteristics of the machine-based factory and the custodial prison. Unprecedented demands were placed on the skills and dedication of both prison staff and inmates. Political opposition gradually deprived the industrial prison of its early prominent place in American penology."

spaces, aging state institutions built of brick thirty-one years apart, are filled with racially and ethnically diverse populations. In both the classroom spaces of the school and the prison, I encountered students listening intently with pencils and pens gripped tightly, jumping at the opportunity to write and share their stories. These students challenged every media image of rowdy and out of control Black and Brown people that too often saturate mainstream media outlets. These students, unlike the many I teach in prestigious college classrooms, seemed to have a genuine excitement to shift their repetitious schedules and daily structures, and have the opportunity to learn, to write, and to share their stories with teachers, mentors, and peers in "non-traditional" ways.[3] In both the high school and the prison classrooms, the students wrote to stake their claims in the world, to examine the complexities of their lives, and to try to write themselves into better everyday existences. This process occurred under the guidance of artists and teachers invested in "education as the practice of freedom," producing original CTT plays conceived, developed and performed by the high school students and volumes of creative writing and poetry by the SPG.[4] Under the watchful gazes of cameras – both institutional surveillance technologies and my digital documentation – we built a sense of community across many barriers and differences.

In both the space of school and prison, I constantly negotiated the interactions between my identity as a (relatively young) woman of color, my aims as a feminist filmmaker, the desires of program participants, and the official rules of the institutions. With pen and pixel, I

International Criminal Justice Review, Vol. 4, No. 1, 52-71 (1994), Accessed through http://icj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/4/1/5.
Also, see the daily inmate report, for accurate numbers of prisoners housed in the facility, see the Minnesota Department of Corrections website for the daily inmate report: http://www.doc.state.mn.us/facilities/stillwater.htm

[3] Most students in St. Paul Central High School classrooms sit for hours a day behind a small desk, they are not allowed to speak unless they are spoken to by a teacher or school authority figure, and are pushed to memorize facts, formulas, and data on standardized tests that rank them. This mode of learning does not allow for dialogic learning, or account for the student's best learning style or subjectivity. See discussions of the "banking" model of education by Freire and others in *Pedaogy of the Oppressed*. In the prison classroom, admittedly students are excited to be in the *only* air-conditioned space in the facility, and many are excited to finally have the privilege to learn and focus on bettering themselves.

[4] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York and London: Continuum Publishing, 2003).

documented what I experienced; what I captured in my camera's frame was far from a neutral process. Through analysis of the video footage and the notes I've taken during and following the filming process, I have worked to find a representational strategy that considers the larger framework of the school-to-prison pipeline, the prison industrial complex, and how media texts can work to counter mainstream hegemonic images of people of color who spend their days inside schools and prison walls.[5]

I filmed inside each program for eight months. I have examined over one hundred hours of video footage, contemplating the meaning of this journey, and how to best use the video footage toward my aims of creating critical public school and prison educational programs that support engage education and articulate a framework of social justice, and create mediatized counter-stories of schools, prisons, and people of color.[6] For this written reflection, I watched and reviewed the footage, took detailed notes, made critical observations, and I use these understandings to produce knowledge about pedagogy and documentary media making processes that can be accessed through simultaneous critical reflection and creative media making. I am interested in how knowledge is generated through the collaborative process, and in examining the negotiations between academic theory, filmic practice, and reflection, and desire to engage a critical feminist media praxis.

Feminist media maker/scholar Alexandra Juhasz defines media praxis as "the organic and necessary integration of theory (thinking) and practice (doing) if one's aims are political

---

[5] According to the non-profit organization Critical Resistance, the prison-industrial complex is, "The prison industrial complex (PIC) is a complicated system situated at the intersection of governmental and private interests that uses prisons as a solution to social, political, and economic problems. The PIC depends upon the oppressive systems of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. It includes human rights violations, the death penalty, industry and labor issues, policing, courts, media, community powerlessness, the imprisonment of political prisoners, and the elimination of dissent." See: http://criticalresist.live.radicaldesigns.org/article.php?preview=1&cache=0&id=58

[6] Critical pedagogy is the theories and practices of teaching and learning the works to subvert the power dynamics of the teacher as the holder of all knowledge in a classroom. It works to help students develop critical skills, lenses, and consciousness. See the works of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter Maclaren, Jonathan Kozol, and bell hooks.

(changing)."[7] Engaging critical and feminist theoretical frameworks, media making practice, and critical reflection, is a way for me to apply Juhasz's conception of feminist media praxis to explore the tensions I feel between studying social justice theory and doing social justice work (through teaching and media making).[8] This process involved negotiating my aims as a filmmaker (why I tell these stories and why I decided to film in both the school and the prison) with the subject's aim (why they asked to be filmed, for the teachers, and why they agreed to be filmed, for the students) with what the footage "tells" me (what I actually captured on tape, considering the aesthetics and technical parameters of the footage, considering how the footage looks and sounds). Throughout this process I constantly considered the processes involved in making a story that is engaging and entertaining, and I considered all of the above during and after filming in Central and Stillwater.

While much feminist research urges transparency in research methodology, the truth of media making is that it is a wholly subjective process.[9] This process, often made invisible by "celebrated" products of films and video documentaries, erases the methodology of representations, meaning making, and impact on audiences.[10] Most filmmakers do not write scholarly reflections (or desire to academically theorize) their media work, and many academics

---

[7] See Alex Juhasz's *Media Praxis: A Radical Website Integrating Theory, Practice and Politics*, published as her "first book on the web": http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/proposals for project explanation, accessed January 2009.

[8] I began my academic career in a professional film program at UCLA, where my work prioritized creative making over critical analysis (although I did engage in some film studies coursework), and continued in this vein for my Master's degree. For my doctoral program in Feminist Studies I met with lots of discussion around social justice, arrived at through theory and written about in jargon heavy Eurocentric models of change. I found the split between theory and practice paralyzing, and it wasn't until I picked up a camera to film in Stillwater Prison that I was able to feel engaged in knowledge production - theoretically and in terms of media making practices.

[9] See discussions on feminist research and key interventions around issues of transparency and reflexivity in works such as: Janice Lynn Ristock and Joan Pennell, *Community Research as Empowerment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (London: Sage Publications: 2003), Marjorie L. DeVault, *Liberating Method* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Alan Bryman and Tim Futing Liao,*The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (London: Sage, 2003): 381.

[10] As an independent filmmaker, I am paid upwards of $1000 for a screening and short question and answer session, by academic departments such as Women's Studies and Media Studies, to present my films and discuss my work, which I am considering as a celebration (sometimes uncritically), of my film work.

who theorize media don't typically make media texts. One example of the tensions that arise in study of the theory and practice of media is in in the analysis of films. How can one measure the understanding of a filmic text against the intentionality of filmmaker and the impact of the images on audiences. One such example of this friction is illustrated in film scholar Janet Holtman's discussion of prison documentary films. In her article, "Documentary Prison Films and the Production of Disciplinary Institutional 'Truth," she seeks to encounter "truth" and "counterdiscourse to a discourse" through "one of the most 'authentic' discursive forms" of media, the documentary, that offers "a type of truth-production" and can "perpetuate humanist values such as the movement toward prison reform." However, she astutely notes that documentaries "rely on similar strategies [of Hollywood productions]," and Holtman builds a framework of understanding power by using the competing theoretical ideas of Jameson, Marx, and Foucault to understand discourse and disciplinarity and "the manner in which discipline shapes subjectivities." She notes that, "popular discourses such as film and television documentaries necessarily continue to take part in the production of subject positions within the social body," and notes "how power works through certain modern media productions today."[11]

She develops her understanding of theoretical power and the potential impacts of media on public understanding of value, through a negotiation of "truth." She critiques Liz Garbus' *The Farm: Angola USA*, for "governing the production" for a reliance on the interview as Foucauldian confessional and as resembling the "psychiatric/criminologic interview." She notes that it is "not surprising that conventional documentary films such as *The Farm*, while portraying the harsh realities of prison life are, nonetheless, welcomed by prison officials and social administrators."[12] As a filmmaking scholar, this seems to be an unfair and harsh critique that doesn't appear to consider the context and very parameters of production.

---

[11] Janet Holtman, "Documentary Films and the Production of Disciplinary Institutional "Truth," *Postmodern Culture*, 13 (September 2002).
[12] Ibid, 15-16.

How could Holtman criticize Garbus for use of the documentary interview, just as she theoretically, pins its formality as the drives of "social scientific 'truth'" of the genre's form? Furthermore, she critiques Garbus for developing a three-year relationship with the Louisiana Department of Corrections, the very officials who approve or deny requests to film within the prison's walls. Holtman claims that "filmmakers like Liz Garbus, who may believe that their films are transgressive due to their sympathetic portrayal of rehabilitated-yet-still-imprisoned inmates, are puzzled [because administrators support her film]." She goes on to explain, "it is not difficult to see how these significatory documentaries are easily compatible with, and appreciated by, a society and bureaucracy that places value on the reform of delinquents and the accumulation of individualized knowledge about them, [and that…] attempts to subvert the institution of the prison by enacting its own discourse of reform and employing the disciplinary tactics of information-production."[13] Holtman's framework seems to prioritize Western philosophical analysis over mediatized pratices as *the* way of knowing. Her argument seems dismissive and lacking what could be gleaned from Garbus' mediatized texts.[14]

There is a scene in *Angola* in which Garbus powerfully layers a historical image of a plantation worker on a horse in a slow dissolve over the image of a prison guard on the horse. In two shots with a transition, she visually communicates the prison's roots in slavery, plantations, to the idea that prisoners are modern day slaves; an astute and radical idea that does not uphold the idea(l)s of the DOC, as Holtman suggests, theoretically. Garbus is an award-winning filmmaker who is fully capable of engaging a complex jargon-filled discursive battle with the academic Holtman. But, Garbus prioritizes filmmaking, and doesn't just articulate "theory" through her imagery (as suggested by the horse dissolve sequence). In the film she deploys a

---

[13] Ibid, 16.
[14] See Lisbet van Zoonen's *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994) for a discussion of feminist reception studies and interpretive strategies that examine the significance of the media as a site for the expression of - or challenges to - existing constructions of gender, power, and everyday realities.

critical lens through which she views the historical and contemporary workings of prisons as sites of (slave) labor. With her media text, she raises questions, presents complexity, and promotes a critical consciousness by (literally) and visually connecting images from our nation's plantation past with images of our prison present. Garbus has, in fact, been a media maker whose work about prisons has helped to raise awareness and impact prison reform movements that Holtman seems to desire, in theory.

How does one negotiate or measure the "value" of Holtman's theoretical wordplay against the impact of Garbus's film, which was dubbed "the strongest documentary of the decade" in the *New York Press*?[15] As both a media maker and a feminist media scholar, I seek to bridge the spaces between the "high theory" of academia and "popular discourse" such as documentary films. I am interested in bringing the critical insights of media studies into conversation with the practices of media making, and blurring the (false) binary of theory and practice through examination of the CTT and SPG projects.[16]

Intellectual work too often reaffirms dichotomies of thinkers / doers, theorists / practitioners, academy / community, and frameworks about us (researcher "experts") and them (subjects valued for "subjugated" personal knowledges). Academics in epistemically (and everyday) privileged positions over subjects and who "do" work "on the ground," become celebrated thinkers and are heralded by society, while the everyday "knowers on the ground" continue to serve as subjects of scholarly research. I seek to discover how meaning is made through collaboration, by working in the mutual engagement with theory with practice, and in a project with the simultaneous goals of exercising equally significant academic and activist aims.

In the traditions of feminist filmmakers like Michelle Citron, Alexandra Juhasz, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Carroll Parrot Blue, who turn their theoretical and ground glass lenses back on

---

[15] See http://www.moxiefirecracker.com/about_us/liz_bio.php.
[16] See Michille Citron, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Carroll Parrott Blue, and Alexandra Juhasz as filmmakers who do write academic reflections and theorize their film work.

themselves, I desire to examine what can be seen and understood through analyzing the footage I filmed of St. Paul Central High School's 2005 Central Touring Theater (CTT) and The 2004 Stillwater Poetry Group (SPG).[17] I want to make sense of each of the critical workshops, individually and as interconnected sites that can be read as working in resistance to the school-to-prison pipeline.

I did not enter these spaces as a researcher, with plans on dissertating on my experience. The decision to write a dissertation on these projects came years after filming, as I was reflecting on the possibilities of feminist filmmaking praxis, and my own decision-making in the storytelling and editing processes. I wondered why things that I had filmed years earlier still resonated so powerfully in my psyche and wanted to know what I could understand, intellectually, about my filmmaking process, through analyzing the footage. It is not that the textual analysis of and theoretical writings about schools, prisons, and social justice work did not equally resonate for me, but there was something I needed to work through that was not polished, not always clear, and required conversations with prisoners, poets, professors who teach in prisons, and those who understand and know beyond scholarly books. Studying the work of scholar and activist Angela Davis, I grew to understand modes of knowledge production grounded in experiential modes of knowing and understanding. Davis' analysis of the prison-industrial-complex comes directly from her first-hand experience as an imprisoned intellectual.[18] Although I cannot know from directly inside (as a CTT student or SPG prisoner), I understand the experiential understanding gleaned from documentary filmmaking could be invaluable to study.

In articulating this process, it should be clear from the start that I am intimately connected to many of the subjects in both the school and the prison projects, and I now consider them close

---

[17] Ibid.
[18] See Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Open Media, 2003), The Prison Industrial Complex [AUDIOBOOK] (CD-ROM), (Okland: AK Press, 2000), and *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1989).

friends. Some of the workshop participant / filmic subjects are now part of my everyday life and community, and they are certainly all allies in the arts and social justice activism world.

Chicana feminist Edén Torres reminds us that, as women of color, what we gain from our experiences, our ways of knowing, are subjective, reflect our emotions, and center particular epistemologies and theoretical frameworks. Torres explains the limits of types of distanced inquiry, pointing to the work of anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, that "the importance of subjective emotions in the analysis of culture" demonstrates that we must consider the weight of the "emotional force" that one may encounter doing "fieldwork". [19] She notes, "the sheer force of internalized behaviors based on emotion [are] central to individual personalities within the community, and the way they understood their place in it."[20] Torres extends Rosaldo's ideas to consider how rejecting analyses, which dominate academic institutions, focus solely on process – and . . . subvert any paradigm which ignores the centrality of emotion to the subject, or dismisses its importance in the study of culture," noting that "the academy has a tendency to reject and devalue interpretations based on these categories." Torres emphasizes that this work "can be more accessible to those outside the institution," which in itself is subversive. She emphasizes this form of discourse because it "represents a shift from conventional objectivity to a resistant position that uses both explicit information and subjective expression – thereby bridging the oppositional space between logic and emotion, and using the tension creatively rather than destructively."[21]

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks argues that:

> The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained. To some extent, we all know that whenever

[19] Using the term fieldwork to describe this project would imply that I readily accept the framing of this project of my role as researcher/expert doing research outside of the laboratory; that I am framing this work as studying participants "in the field." But, this project troubles the categories of researcher – participant through my simultaneous roles as filmmaker, teacher, and workshop participant and I wouldn't map the methodologies of anthropological or ethnographic fieldwork onto this project.
[20] Torres, Edén. *"Caras vemos, corazones no sabemos": Their faces we see, their hearts we don't know: Chicana writers in context.* Diss. University of Minnesota, 1998: 5).

[21] Ibid, 18.

> we address in the classroom subjects that students are passionate about there is always a possibility of confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, or even conflict. In much of my writing about pedagogy, particularly in classroom settings with great diversity, I have talked about the need to examine critically the way we as teachers conceptualize what the space for learning should be liked. Many professors have conveyed to me their feeling that the classroom should be a "safe" place; that usually translates to mean that the professor lectures to a group of quiet students who respond only when they are called on. The experience of professors who educate for critical consciousness indicates that many students, especially students of color, may not feel at all "safe" in what appears to be a neutral setting. It is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement.[22]

Potts and Brown center anti-oppressive research and teaching content critically, a centering that "involves making explicit the political practices of creating knowledge."[23] They argue that:

> It means making a commitment to the people you are working with personally and professionally in order to mutually foster conditions for social justice and research. It is about paying attention to, and shifting, how power relations work in and through the processes of doing research.[24]

They question the assumptions that are the foundations of "traditional, positivist research" and discuss experimentation with various "alternative" research methodologies.[25] They advocate for "the art of asking questions, building relationships through collaborative work, seeking answers, and coming up with work questions" that relies on "a personal commitment to action" and "your capacity to act and alter the relations of oppression in your own world."[26]

These ideas become salient and grounding when I consider that I began these projects as an outsider-filmmaker but quickly became a filmmaker-participant in both the school and the prison workshop. [27] This trajectory shift from outsider-filmmaker to participant-filmmaker guided

---

[22] bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 39.
[23] Karen Potts and Leslie Brown, "Becoming An Anti-Oppressive Researcher" in *Research As Resistance*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005), 255.
[24] Ibid, Potts and Brown, "Anti-Opressive Researcher", 255.
[25] Ibid, Potts and Brown, "Anti-Opressive Researcher", 256.
[26] Ibid, Potts and Brown, "Anti-Opressive Researcher", 256 – 260.
[27] I explicate the process of moving from outsider-filmmaker to filmmaker-participant in both the school and the prison projects in the methods section of Chapter 2. But, in short, both project facilitators – Jan Mandell (CTT) and reggie harris (SPG) push (even require) all of those involved as participants and co-facilitators with the students and prisoners. Additionally, I work to trouble the "fly on the wall" framework

my negotiations and informs my emotional, critical, *and* intellectual reflection that produce my understandings of applied feminist media praxis. I realize that I need more than intellectual distance and rigorous academic research methodology to really understand, interpret, and make sense of this experience. I believe that it is a creative, academic, and intertwining of ideas, methods, and creative writing that will help to unravel the significance of my own media praxis work.

I must consider why I enter into these types of oppressive institutional spaces such as public schools and prisons, to do work for social justice. A friend recently asked me to think about why this is the case. She suggested, "For you this probably doesn't feel like a choice, it's just a given that if someone asks for you to go to prison to teach or to film, you just go, but most people never even consider going inside." She is right; I never thought it a choice, just part of my life's work. I always try to make explicit my desires to use media as a tool for social justice and community organizing.

I choose to create certain kinds of films and scholarly work that has aims of bettering the lived realities in communities of color. I use media making, story telling, research, activism, and teaching to address issues I believe need critical and creative interventions. I see that there are injustices in prisons, in schools, and in communities of color so my intervention is to pick up a camera and write in resistance to these realities. It is my aim that my camera be a weapon of humanization, power, and a distributor for stories of those working to better lives and communities such as inner-city public schools and state prisons.

In pursuing a critical inquiry of this project and my filmic process, there is much that will be exposed. Through this project readers / viewers will hear stories of some men who have transgressed society and committed many inhumane acts, and some may feel torn about the man

---

of documentary practice, where none of the subjects ever really "forget" the existence of the camera, but rather, learn to trust me as a the storyteller behind the camera.

and the stories he may share. I will also be exposed as an ally, an activist whose investment in prisons is not aligned with the authority of the Minnesota Department of Corrections, and as someone who identifies with her filmic subjects rather than the official institution. To reveal my critical subjectivity involves a re-counting sometimes painful experiences, and complicated people: risk-takers, rule-breakers, and dangerous work embedded in the process of finding spaces of freedom in places that too often run counter to the goals of social justice. In the process of this re-telling, I am exposing all of us involved in this personal and painful process. Like Richa Nagar and the Sangtín collective, I am *Playing with Fire* on many levels.[28]

In her text Nagar exposes the limits of traditional academic critiques as she, writes collaboratively with the the Sangtín activists, undertaking a collaborative process to "intervene in the politics of knowledge production," expand conversations around what counts as "research," and who counts as "knowledge producers."[29] These writers share a set of concerns around publishing their writings, stating that they "wondered what consequences of publishing this book may be for each author and whether we were ready to face those consequences individually and collectively." They expose their life stories both at home and in their work for NGO organizations. By critiquing the institutions they work for, they could have literally jeopardized not only their work but also their physical safety.[30] Nagar notes the tension that resulted from speaking such dangerous truths that critique NGO work, pushing back against elitist academic knowledge production, and the risk of sharing personal narratives that have been purposefully silenced by oppressive systems. This writing collective reconsidered the value of sole academic "experts," "the politics of documentation," and the reactions that "some people [are] considered worthy of presenting their viewpoints and some are invited for exhibition."[31] It is precisely this

---

[28] Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar, *Playing With Fire*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006: xxi.
[29] Ibid, Nagar, *Playing With Fire,* xxx.
[30] Ibid, Nagar, *Playing With Fire,* xl.
[31] Ibid, Nagar, *Playing With Fire,* 5.

methodology of resistance, through storytelling and personal narratives as knowledge production, that will work to counter state authority, resist academic elitism, and shift power in systemic oppressions. I use Nagar's methodology for insight and inspiration, and it serves as a reminder that often resistance work, rebellion, and changing power structures is powerful and dangerous.[32]

I would argue that working inside Minnesota's prison facilities can be equally if not more dangerous. There are tremendously great risks to working with imprisoned communities, but beyond the concerns about violence, I have concerns about the emotional and intellectual damage teachers, visitors, and resources (prison volunteers) can do within the prison classroom. The nature of imprisonment and Department of Corrections (DOC) policies often prevents continued work with the prisoners, and the nature of high school students as a temporary group who graduate every year prevents me from replicating Nagar's method of long-term collaborative knowledge production. Yet it does inspire me to trouble the dichotomies of academic knowledge production including critiques of positionality as an academic and activist, in addition to the critiques of theory, practice, and method, and the nature of individual credit and collaborative work.[33] I want to trouble the bounded framings of researcher / subject, expert / subject, and theory / practice by developing a methodology of feminist media praxis.

1.2 Situating the School-to-prison Pipleline in the Prison Industrial Complex

Recognizing that there are many successful and amazing prison arts programs that emphasize writing, poetry, and theater that work within the system, and some of these programs

---

[32] I am pointing to the very real dangers of filming within prison walls. It is dangerous both to the prisoner and to the visitor for many reasons. One particular day, I lost my visitor I.D. card and this simple mistake could have caused the program to be shut down, the prisoners to be sent to "the hole" (segregation unit) after undergoing full body cavity searches. Thankfully my identification pass was found by a guard in the main hallway, and it was realized that I hadn't simply dropped it, but the clip on the tag had broken. Still, what would have been the residue from my actions—cancellation of the program (for suspicion that my pass was stolen), expulsion for some of the group members, revocation of permissions for me to enter the facility, and education lockdown where all of the entire unit is shut down for all classes, etc.

[33] In the forthcoming text, *Reconceptualizing Collaboration: Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (forthcoming, SUNY Press), Richa Nagar and Amanda Swarr who write, "all academic production is necessarily collaborative, notwithstanding the individualized manner in which authorship is claimed and assigned and celebrity is granted to academics as isolated knowledge producers."

work to push back against the system (the institutions of schools and prisons), I propose here not a singular approach to critical education and social justice arts-based work inside state institutions, but rather one example of transformative pedagogy and media making methodology.[34] There are many teachers, activists, and community folks that go into the spaces of schools and prisons, and their work is studied extensively.[35] Many of these teachers develop programs that run with state funds and are state sanctioned for as long as they follow all of the institutional protocol. Some of these programs are long-running programs, and impact those who participate as teachers and learners. Other programs are valued by students and prisoners alike, as simply activities to break the monotony of their daily routine; there is much monotony and repetition in both the lives of both high school students and prisoners. There are many teachers and volunteers who do this work for short periods of time, but choose not to return to "difficult" and dangerous spaces such as these for various reasons ranging from funding to the personal cost in terms of the emotional labor involved with working inside these environments.[36] This work and its exhausting call for performative masks operate in classrooms such as in prison, when your social justice goals and your desire to teach Freirian critical education that promotes "education as the practice of freedom" collide with the realities of students who will literally never be physically or mentally free of imprisonment.

---

[34] See this selected list of arts-based prison projects: Rhodessa Jones' Medea project: http://www.culturalodyssey.org/medea/, Shakespeare Behind Bars: http://www.shakespearebehindbars.com/, Minnesota Women's Prison Book Project, Prison Performing Arts: http://www.prisonartsstl.org/ and the scholarly texts that discuss this work, such as: *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, edited by Michael Balfour, *The Proscenium Cage: Critical Case Studies in U.S. Prison Theatre Programs*, *Art Therapy with Offenders*, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, *Writing For Their Lives: Death Row USA* by Mulvey-Roberts, *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women by Rena Fraden*; full citations in the bibliography.

[35] Ibid, Medea

[36] My colleague, M.L. Hedgmon, is applying Hochschild's work on "emotional labor" to labor of the teacher in the college classroom. This application of Hochschild's theories have helped me think through teaching in prisons. Hochschild (1983) writes of the emotional labor of teaching in such that a teacher wears a mask for the sake of the student, and seeming self-preservation. In prisons, teachers and volunteers must mask and perform a particular kind of teacher, more in lines with the banking model of education. There are levels of emotional labor and performance for prisoners, for the guards, the other teachers, and for the state authorities who peer into the classrooms through video surveillance technologies.

Wearing a performative mask in schools, and particularly in prisons, is a form of emotional labor that extends beyond the management of one's emotions in the space of the teaching classroom. In prison entering and exiting the prison building and walking down the long prison corridors (heavily surveilled and policed spaces), is emotionally difficult. In my experiences in Stillwater Prison, I learned that if I smiled "too much" (or even at all) before or after our workshop sessions, I was meticulously searched. The correctional officer behind the desk would uncap every pen, touch every surface of my camera, batteries, and tapes. But if I walked silent and expressionless (or at least was not smiling), the search of my camera bag would be quick, easy, and uneventful. I discovered that the managing of my emotions—like smiles, laughter, or conversation—made teaching and filming inside prison walls much less stressful.

This project does not trace the successes of teachers, or how they manage the difficulty of teaching in difficult spaces or with particularly challenging students. This project does not excavate the limitations of a broad range of programmatic workshops that have occurred in schools and prisons globally. Instead, this work aims to examine the ways that a group of artists, teachers, and thinkers worked in resistance to harmful systems of oppression. [37]

This dissertation doesn't desire to academically theorize or explicate all of the many ways that schools and prisons are alike, but is grounded upon these important theoretical ideas and contextual foundation, that accept recent research. The research that finds there are increased racial disparities in school achievement, on standardized tests, increased criminalization for minor infractions, increased juvenile certification, increased sentencing of juveniles of color, and increasing populations of juveniles serving long sentences in adult prison.[38] My project is situated in this school-to-prison context, and seeks to, on one level, understand how this "norm" can be resisted, challenged, and disrupted through critical arts-based practices of theater and

[37] See NYCLU School To Prison Pipleine Toolkit produced by the NAACP available at schoolstoprisons.org.
[38] Ibid.

poetry, and on another level, consider the ways that we can achieve moments of disruption from punitive institutional practices through small but transgressive acts that work to transform individuals, institutions, and communities.

In "Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline," Wald and Losen examine "the troubled educational histories and subsequent arrest and incarceration [and] the flow of students into the criminal justice system", noting the "vast inequalities" across race and class that plague the public school systems and state prison facilities and connect them to the "educational trend" that tracks the data of minority student that are "heavily overrepresented among those most harshly sanctioned in schools," mirroring the "get-tough approach" to treatments of youth in the criminal justice system.[39] They note that "terms such as *prison track* and *school-to-prison pipeline"* are used to describe the increasingly punitive practices in the public education system such as, "being taught by unqualified teachers," increased standardized testing (often "tested on materials they never reviewed"), often being held back in school, being repeatedly suspended, and frequent "banish[ment] to alternative outplacements before dropping out or getting pushed out of school altogether."[40]

In recent years, there has been increased policing on public school campuses, with community safety officers stationed on school grounds, and security front desks (often forcing students to pass through metal detectors, and some only allowing students to carry clear plastic backpacks—the same ones used by prison teachers and guards to carry their lunches and personal items inside prison facilities). In both public schools and state-run prisons, the teachers and artists who work within these institutions as educators and volunteers are subject to intensely monitored classrooms, subject to institutionalized classroom structures, "top-down" rules, and punishment for deviance or rule-breaking. There are many rules that control student movement in school

[39] "Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline", Wald, Joanna and Daniel J. Losen. *New Directions in Youth Development*, No. 99, Fall 2003, p. 9 – 11.
[40] Ibid, 11.

hallways, not unlike the "coordinated movement" within prison hallways, as prisoners move to "chow" or outside for time on the yard. Both in schools and in prisons, there is intense disciplining of bodies that is set against the context of the prison industrial complex, where prison industries directly impact the financial gains of the state and the Department of Correction, through the workings of a localized prison industrial complex.[41]

The prison industrial complex refers to correctional facilities most concerned with operating as profitable business.[42] Prisons contract with construction companies, surveillance technology vendors, corporations (who sell goods like phone service, food, and clothing) and industry shops (employing prisoners for .25/hour and selling products at street values. These industries generate great amounts of revenue for prisons but provide little material benefit to the prisoners. Instead, the prison-industrial complex relies on increasing populations of the incarcerated as cheap labor sources. [43]

Without education or skilled trades, students such as those who drop out or are forced out of St. Paul Central High School become part of the flow of human capital, directly increasing numbers of workers in prison industries, as some of the men who participate in the Stillwater

---

[41] See Dylan Rodriguez's *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime,* which traces the genealogy of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, in which he discusses the "disciplinary society" and the ways in which the body is itself is invested in power relations. Also important to note is that in this text Rodriguez explores how incarceration shapes the ways in which insurgent knowledge is created, disseminated, and received, under and despite these disciplinary systems of oppression. See also Rebecca M. McLennan's *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal State, 1776-1941* that discusses the penal system and the impact on punishment on "the criminal's mind and body", and Alyson Brown's *English Society and the Prison: Time, Culture, and Politics in the Development of the Modern Prison, 1850-1920* which details, "discipline established within the context of prison rules and regulations enables prison staff to construct an internal authority and hierarchy".

[42] See writings on the prison industrial complex such as Julia Sudbury *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial* Complex (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), Ruth Gilmore, Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2007), Angela Davis, *Are Prison's Obsolete?* (New York: Open Media, 2003) and numerous others.

[43] See MINNCOR's profit reports at: http://www.minncor.com/documents/2008AnnualReport.pdf and the specific language used. See also this promotional video used to attract new businesses to the profits of the prison industries: http://www.minncor.com/partnershipvideo.wmv.

Poetry project have experienced. [44] Here, on a localized level in Minnesota, MINNCOR Industries runs the prison industries and advertises on its website that MINNCOR "provides services that benefit the community by operating a dynamic ad profitable business."[45]

While there may be numerous benefits to employing prisoners in industry shop such as job skill training, reducing idle time, and building a work ethic, I would argue that the prisoners themselves benefit the least from the economics of the system, and are instead exploited through larger system processes as outlined in the idea of the prison industrial complex.[46] I would further argue that "the community" named in MINNCOR's mission statement are private business owners, the Department of Corrections, and the wardens and other prison employees who are stakeholders in MINNCOR Industries. Businesses may benefit from access to MINNCOR labor or products, but a consumer still must pay average street prices for products ranging from

[44] I am aware that a number of SPG poets attended St. Paul public schools and one in particular, is serving a 125+ year life sentence for a 1995 gang-related murder in St. Paul. He was, in fact, a student of Jan Mandell in the blackbox theater classroom in the mid-nineties, and was arrested in front of Central High School. He literally went from high school to prison at the age of 17, and he will never return to classrooms outside of Stillwater Prison's education unit, or to the world beyond the walls of prisons.

[45] http://www.minncor.com/about/mission.htm

[46] See note 50 for additional reading on the prison industrial complex.

furniture and ergonomic chairs to boat docks (where as they cost just a percentage of the street price to produce), where as they cost only a percentage of the street price to produce.[47]

According to MINNCOR Industries 2008 Annual Report, they sold $35.8 million in products and netted $2.63 million from the production of license plates for the state of Minnesota, the sign shop, and the canteen (which pays prisoner-employees starting wages of 25 cents per hour and has these same prisoners purchase these products for inflated street values), and other industries such as manufacturing spaces in Faribault, Oak Park Heights, Moose Lake, Rush City, Shakopee, and Stillwater prisons.[48] MINNCOR's website explains the "benefits to growing business," posited as a pro-American answer to the global factory, using prison industries such as those run by MINNCOR as the "new, American workforce." They offer a short, promotional video to outline the cost benefits of using prison industries to grow American businesses.[49] The video interestingly, opens with the title, "Cutting Through the Perceptions."

What perceptions do they suggest? The perceptions of prisoners as "bad?" Inmates and offenders are most often in the mainstream imagination perceived as less than human waste whose only purpose is to pose a threat to public safety. Could the video be addressing that perception of inmates as hyper-violent men who are no more than public threats and human

[47] See the prices on http://www.minncor.com/productsandservices.htm.
[48] See http://www.minncor.com/documents/2008AnnualReport.pdf
[49] The video was once featured accessibly on the site's homepage, but now requires a password. Still, the old link to the QuickTime version of the video continues to be viewable by visiting the direct video link's web address, viewable here: http://www.minncor.com/partnershipvideo.wmv.

waste, requiring total management by armed officers? Or, does the video work to counter the perceptions that there is nothing of value to "the community" behind the guarded walls of prisons? If you consider the target viewer of this video–perspective business owners who can hire MINNCOR–it seems that the apparently humanizing mission of the video is really just an attempt to continue "profit over people" power moves as articulated in slogans by anti-prison activists.[50]

The video, produced by the National Correctional Industries Association, whose board of directors is made of up primarily white men and women representing state and federal prison industries (including some prison wardens) opens with a montage edited to sound bytes from what can be understood as MINNCOR employees (non-prisoners), and happy business owners that have contracted the prison labor. [51] The video, used for marketing to increase private business contracts, clearly centers the interest, positionality, and capitalist desires of the institutions and "American businesses" that are seeking "A Bold New Solution to Growth," (as articulated in the second title which posits prison industries as private business "solutions" to economic growth). As such, the worker is "branded" by the message – his body marked by the desire of capital in the still frame (pictured below).

---

[50] See Noam Chomsky's 2003 *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism & Global* Order for a discussion of economic principles of the "new global democracy" and organizations such as Critical Resistance (http://www.criticalresistance.org/) who fight the prison industrial complex on their social justice wiki: http://socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/Critical_Resistance

[51] http://www.nationalcia.org/ and see http://www.nationalcia.org/?page_id=12 for current board of directors.

The image of a brown-skinned prisoner wearing safety goggles is literally mapped as the "bold" and a "new solution" to globalization. The brown-skinned man, washed in a blue overlay, and whose face stands as this visual representation, does not make eye contact with the viewer but instead he looks off screen, presumably at the products he's hard at work producing for pennies an hour. The voice-over (v.o.) describes, "a workforce that does not have car problems or babysitting problems, etcetera." This is an allusion to containment and control – these bodies are restricted, have no freedom to make their own decisions, beyond "choices" such as: if you want out of your cell, then you work for prison industries. They are a captive workforce, in essence, this is modern day slave labor.

In the next image, we see a white woman working diligently and looking down on her industrial sized sewing machine. She receives a reprieve from the blue, possibly because she seemingly represents the model worker (and a non-threat because of her white skin privilege), and therefore is posed as the hope for businesses to find non-threatening and "good," productive workers. Interestingly she is stamped with the affirmation of being "reliable" in the overlaid titles.

The v.o. continues, "They are always here and are always willing to come to work." Ironically, they have little other options – they can sit for twenty-three hours a day lockdown in a 6 x 9 cell, or they can come to work, where industrialized factories are only steps away from the doors to their housing units.

The titles brag that the workers are “always here” and “always willing” to work as seen in the following screenshots:

Another voice chimes in on the v.o. track to celebrate the shop’s productivity stating that, “we are literally running at 94% or 96% productivity everyday.” It continues, “When we have available, skilled labor, we can ramp up in a very short amount of time,” to reemphasize the strengths of a labor pool literally held captive only steps from their job sites. “The situation here,“ the v.o. indicates, “allows us to control our costs, far more than we could in the past.”

What the video doesn't reveal is that in February of 2009 the State of Minnesota's Office of the Legislative Auditor released an evaluation report on MINNCOR Industries in "response to legislative concerns." The document reveals that "MINNCOR has generally done a good job in achieving high levels of inmate employment and generating enough revenue to cover its costs. Some of its practices though, especially regarding its labor arrangements with private businesses, lack transparency and have placed the state at risk. Financial reporting and oversight need to be improved."[52]

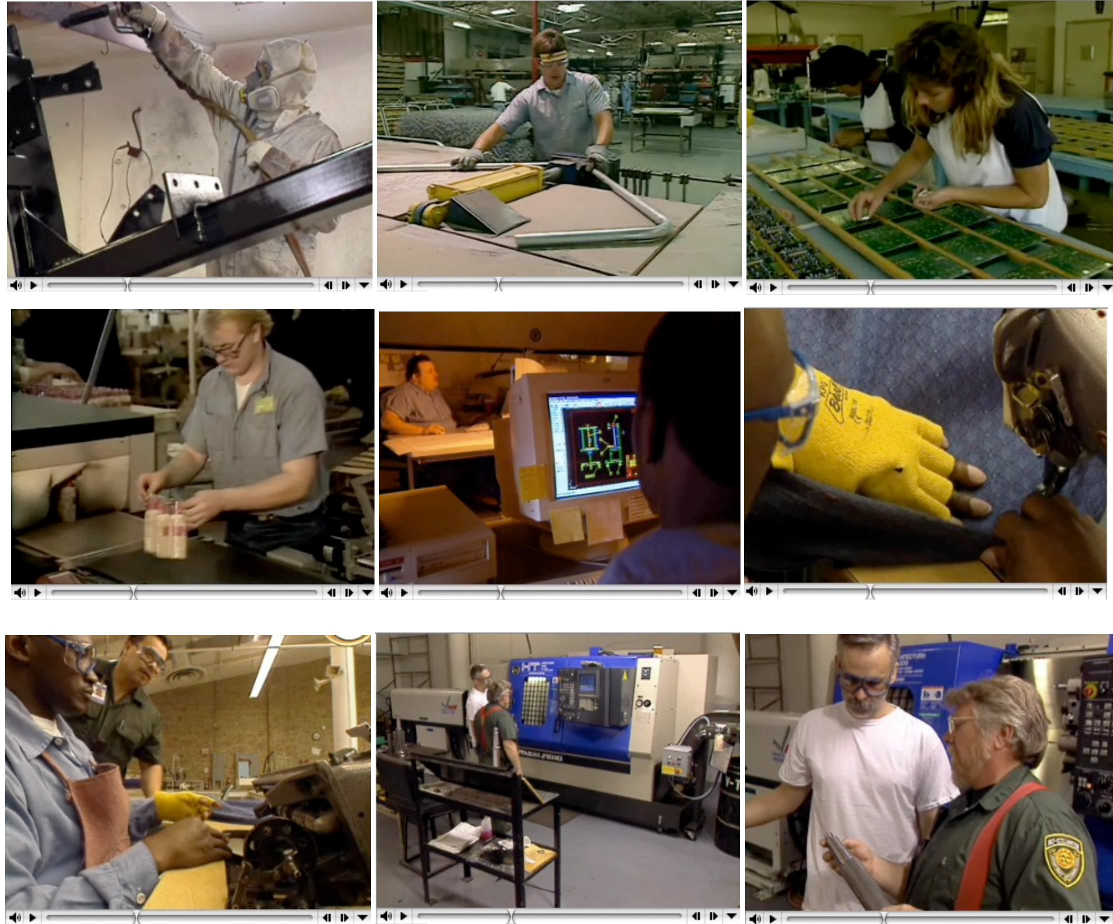
But the video's v.o. track cajoles: "It's a win-win situation for everyone," ignoring the actual laborers, Minneosta's prisoners, who earn a starting wage of 25 cents per hour (roughly to 12 or 13 cents an hour after percentages of a worker's wage is taken to pay for cost of confinement and restitution). This is the reality of state owned and operated "correctional" industries.

[52]https://www.onbase.com/English/IndustrySolutions/Government/GovDeptDivisions/CriminalJusticeInfo/CaseStudies/LawEnforcementCaseStudies/MINNCOR, accessed May 4, 2009.

"Bring your business to our labor!" the v.o. urges, "Benefit from industrial space that is built for production. If you are looking for a dependable labor pool with diverse capabilities, look no further. A select group of energized, motivated inmates are eager to work."

The video continues, explaining, "these competitive advantages" as Joan Lobdell, founder of Inside-Out Incorporated (a woman who "pioneered private business industries working in prisons" which in 2004, was declared unconstitutional by the Washington State Supreme Court, deemed these business practices exploitative) states, "There are not a lot of folks who will do this type of work in this country, so therefore we are bringing back this industry that has been starkly going back out of this country, and we're putting it inside the walls and it's an absolutely a perfect idea."[53]

[53] See http://www.kitsapsun.com/news/2002/feb/10/a-thread-of-hope-inside-out/ for discussion of her 20 plus year career, profiting from women's labor in Washington Correction's Center, and the May 27, 2004 article I discovered re-posted on prisontalk.com: http://www.prisontalk.com/forums/showthread.php?t=62769.



The montage, illustrated by the series of screenshots above, demonstrates a new face of the American prisoner (who appears primarily white).[54] He or she is clean, hard working, and serious; this image counters nearly every image that we see of prisoners when we turn on the television or watch mainstream films, (this is discussed later in this chapter).

[54] It is important to note that this representation of prisons as a space of white workers is kind of the opposite strategy of the University (or most colleges, which seek to represent themselves as diverse and as such, overrepresent the faces of people of color in their brochures, news magazines, and websites. Here, MINNCOR seems to over-represent the white (prisoner) worker.

The v.o. track proclaims that, “Hard-working and reliable inmates show up for work everyday voluntarily,” and that, “Inmates receive on the job training and supervision. In many cases offenders have received vocational training to operate sophisticated equipment; these are job skills they can’t put to good use once they are released.” Thus, it is clear that job training is intended for the profit gained from prison labor alone, rather than the noble claims of rehabilitation that promise to help the person be a healthy citizen, and a good worker upon release (to a job market that has little or no openings for felons, even those with such job experience).

The video goes on to describe the details of the private business and prison industry partnerships and poses American prison labor as the alternate to global factories overseas, ironically “humanizing” the inmate by portraying him/her as a “good” worker. This could be read as a positive re-framing of the inmate, if it wasn’t understood in the context of the material realities that prisoners are merely valued for their below minimum wage labor, accessibility, and reliability because they have little or no control about their schedule or even control of the will and desire of their own bodies. These images of “positive, hard-working inmates” are set against the mass distributed, hegemonic images of both schools and prisons that demonize young, people of color in high school classrooms and in prison environments. The same bodies, “offenders,” as they are officially labeled by the language of the State, are transformed from “human waste” to productive workers, so long as they are on “good behavior” mentioned in the MINNCOR promotional video as outlined above. Similarly, in the case of the high school students I worked

with, if they sit silently at prison-made desks, in prison-assembled chairs memorizing important facts and dates and are not classroom "disruptions," they are deemed "good," or at least tolerable by teachers and administrators. The categorization of their value, such as the literal hierarchy on the floors of Central, seems to produce the "worth." These practices could be damaging to student psychologically.

Within St. Paul Central High School specifically, there is achievement-based segregation, which most often runs across color lines. This is quickly apparent walking through the hallways and moving up the floors of the school. The faces of low-test achievers on the basement and first floor levels are primarily brown. As the student's test scores increase, the faces literally whiten, which puts them on higher floors of the school building. This is not that unlike the segregation that exists within Stillwater prison. Within housing units, yard, and chow halls, prisoners stay "with their own kind" (read: self-segregated across racial lines), and it is only in the prison's education unit that individuals integrate, and negotiate their differences through critical dialogue.

My concerns about the ordering and controlling of bodies in schools and in prisons within the context of a hyper-mediatized society is that media watching seems to create a popular "way of knowing," a seemingly neutral spectatorship, which is actually a very constructed experience. Viewers often believe that they "know" and "understand" difference because they have watched it in films and television. Without critical media literacy tools that consider the context of a media narrative (such as who produced the image, at what point in time, from what subject position, for what aim, for how much profit, etcetera), the content and the filmmaker's relationship to the subjects and the subject material, and the form (such as aesthetics, use of color, camera angles, camera movement, and editing). Viewers are left too often as passive receptors of powerful media messages. What results is that "the public" too often perceives constructed narratives as the only "truth" of the everyday realities of life inside the walls of inner-city schools and prisons.

This “understanding” is often confirmed when the same (or similar) narratives about these people, spaces, and places, circulate across films, genres, and media outlets. And, if students, teachers, and administrators at schools see brown folks subjugated at the lower levels, and see white folks above them on higher floor (with more entitlements), why would they ever question this representation in the media?

1.3 Hegemonic Media Images of Schools

What is happening inside America’s schools? We think we know because most of us were students at one point in our lives, and because we watch films and television. We see images of uncontrollable kids of color, so unruly that no teacher can control them until one comes along who is willing to try. These narratives saturate the media. For example, there are many Hollywood images of inner-city classrooms, going back to 1955’s *Blackboard Jungle* in which a high school teacher struggles to maintain his idealism as the students, according to the film’s synopsis, “drink, smoke, steal and cause mayhem.”[55] The theatrical poster for the film’s release shows an illustration of a near hysterical white teacher while a “bad” student, drawn in black shadow reaches out to grab her. My discomfort is not in an isolated film from decades ago, but in the repeated narratives and imagery produced by Hollywood’s blockbuster machine that recycles the same images and stories that perpetuate stereotypes, demonize Black and Brown youth – students and prisoners – and fulfill hegemonic framing of gendered and racialized stereotypes. These narratives often coincide with historical periods of containment and Americanization, wherein Hollywood produced and distributed images of “good” Americans, particularly stories of “good” brown folks who smoothly assimilate into American culture, and also promote the dominant (hegemonic) ideologies.[56] As Rosa Linda Fregoso points out, “[W]hat determines

[55] http://www.netflix.com/Movie/Blackboard_Jungle/60010155

[56] See Chon Noriega, *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1992), Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Cuture*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Chon Noriega, *Shot in America: Television, The State and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of

whether or not a film is reactionary or progressive depends on the configurations of power relations operating at any given historical moment."[57]

I focus here on a few Hollywood films, both narrative and documentary texts, that continually (re)inscribe dominant ideologies about race, representation and difference as a challenge to "good" American citizenship, particularly stories focused on the stories of teachers, their inner-city students and imprisoned peoples. In the poster for the Hollywood film, *Dangerous Minds*, the "danger" lurking in the shadows becomes the background for the white teacher who gets transformed (assumed through her military training that has prepared her, physically and emotionally, to work with these "problem" students). Even the review from the popular magazine *Entertainment Weekly* acknowledges the regurgitation of these ("white") teacher as (only) hope for these students. The reviewer summarizes the film like so:

> LouAnne [the white, female, teacher] a former Marine, has never had a full-time teaching job. The only reason she's landed this one is because her students are the trouble-makers no one else wants to touch. Rude, taunting, rap-generation delinquents who don't know much about history or English or math or anything else, they think that school is a sham and that no hoity-toity teacher could possibly help them escape their impoverished, crime-addled, no-future backgrounds. Of course, the moment LouAnne stares into their hostile faces, you know she's going to disarm their cynicism and ignite the fire in their bellies. You know it because of the eager gleam in Michelle Pfeiffer's eye. You know it, as well, because you've probably seen *Blackboard Jungle* or *To Sir, With Love* or one of the many other movies in which soulful, dedicated teachers wander into a war zone of unruly "bad" kids, only to wake them up to the glories of knowledge.[58]

The movie poster illustrates that LouAnne's story is central. The film's narrative communicates that she is the savior for these students (of color) who stand as the literal

---

Minnesota Press, 2000), and Martha J. Hamilton and Eleanor S. Block, *Projecting Ethnicity and Race: An Annotated Bibliogaphy of Studies on Imagery in American Film* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishing, 2003).

[57] Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Cuture*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xix.

[58] It is significant that she is trained by the U.S. military. The increasing regimented disciplining within schools and prisons, both which can be argued as part of U.S. industrial complexes, addressed earlier in this chapter, and she can be read as functioning as a disciplinary arm of the U.S. military industrial complex, by extension. See http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,298327,00.html for the film review that aptly argues, "There's a patronizing middle-class naïveté to the idea of knowledge put forth by *Dangerous Minds*." Ms. G envokes her military training whenever she needs "order" or "control" of her room. She relies in literally showing her battle wounds and the shrapnel she carries in her chest, when she wants to "impress" (or warn) her prisoner-students.

background to her (and her white privilege). In particular, the war symbolism is important because it signals periods of American history where Americans (read: white citizens) feel under attack and threatened by people of color. The media narratives clearly communicate that the expected position of the viewer is with the (white) subject. Every viewer, regardless of subject position, is supposed to identify with this central figure and see themselves in that subject position however alike or unlike Michelle Pfeiffer (LouAnne) they are. This is one of the ways that media creates horizontal hostility among people of color.

The movie posters, as well as the films, television programs, and commercials of the past and the present both demonstrate that Hollywood most often posits the "white teacher" literally and symbolically at the center of the frame. These media texts utilize cinematic techniques, the formal elements of framing, composition, lighting, color, etc. that cue and inform reception, identification, and understanding of the storylines. This imagery operates as cinematic shorthand; the audience already knows what to expect.

In the 1995 film *Dangerous Minds*, Michelle Pfeiffer's character's military training seems to give her the confidence to "transform" (and discipline) these "bad" students. Is it the scared white teacher pictured in the above left movie poster for *Blackboard Jungle* who mutates into the

bold and brazen savior "white teacher" as demonstrated in the *Dangerous Minds* movie poster? This film does represent a shift in gender expectations for white women, but the racial relations to power remain the same. The updated version of this narrative, also allows the students to come out of the shadows, although they still but stand only as the backdrop to their leather jacket wearing "bad ass" teacher-savior.

The 2007 Hollywood film *Freedom Writers*, based on an autographical book by inner city high school teacher Erin Gruwell, and her inner-city students (called "The Freedom Writers") centers another "white savior" as teacher narrative. This film, while based on a true story, still uses all of the conventions of the Hollywood fantasy machine, deploying cinematic techniques such as framing, composition, camera movement, angles, and lighting to manipulate the audience and attempting to align viewers with the main character, the teacher. The point of view of the hegemonic Hollywood machine (mostly concerned with capitalism and promoting assimilationist American stories), presents the noble do-gooder teacher's perspective as *the* perspective of the story. It becomes her perspective on the "truth" of what happened. This pattern of white savior at the story center (and framed literally at dead center of the frame) is not just a convention of film but also in literature, and memoirs in particular. But what film does so well is use filmic techniques such as lighting, music, and camera movement to create and (visually) cue meaning and identification – it envelops the viewer in a heightened sensory experience. Music, for instance, is a powerful cue for what viewers should see and feel. One example is the constant framing of the teacher character at dead center of frame in the "T-zone," the area of the frame that media scholars analyze as the space of the frame that holds the characters in the most (visually) dominant position of the frame. What makes film so important to study is that it travels globally, functioning as a message machine that signals "the truth" about (American) people of color, and their saviors.

Erin Gruwell, the teacher, is in the dominant subject position in the T-zone of the frame.

"By the time you are defending a kid in a courtroom the battle is already lost, so I think the real fighting should happen here in the classroom," says Erin, the noble, idealist teacher during her first meeting with a school administrator, in one of the film's opening sequences. Erin, the "white teacher" in this case, desires to teach in this inner city Long Beach High School, "ruined" by the forced integration policies of the district. In her orientation/interview meeting Erin states, "Actually, I chose Wilson because of the integration program. I think what's happening here is very exciting, don't you?"[59] The school administrator gives a fake smile and a nod in response.

The scene concludes when the administrator comments on the new teacher's idealism and complements her pearls. She warns, "I wouldn't wear them to class." Immediately, before Erin enters even the (brown) classroom, she (and the viewer) is warned that the students are bad, delinquent, and nothing more than criminal. The student's badness is connected very directly, to property ownership – i.e. capital. They are the enemies of a smooth running machine and they must be brought under control so the political economy can keep running smoothly. This is a

[59] Richard LaGravenese, Director, *Freedom Writers*, 2007.

phenomenon, and the dramatic question (asking, can *these* students be saved from their bad environments, bad parents, and misguided selves?) that saturates these hegemonic media narratives.[60]

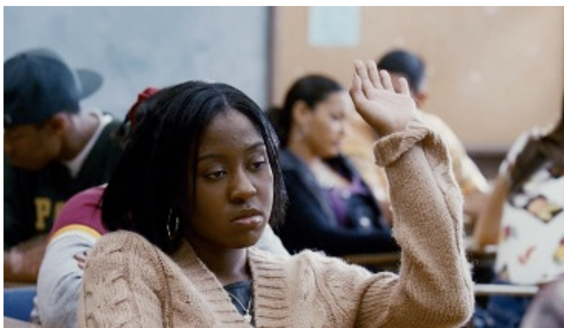
Freedom Writers quickly makes the connection of the impact of (bad) schooling on students of color, and this idealistic teacher's wish to fight the school-to-prison pipeline at the beginning, and reminds the audience of the threat of incarceration with intertwined narratives about these student's experiences behind bars, and being the children of imprisoned parents.

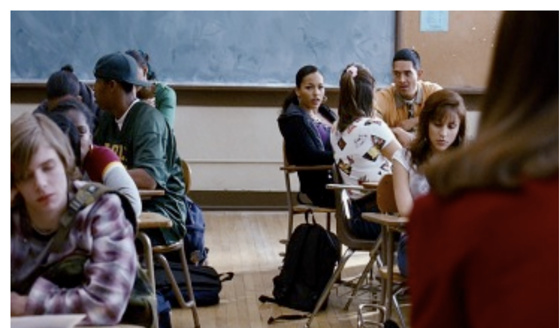
The film's opening montage of the school grounds reinforces stereotypes of Black and Brown juveniles as law breaking, hypersexual, deviant, and "bad." This sequence is edited to Naughty By Nature's "Hip-Hop Hooray," a party rap song of the time the film's story took place. This soundtrack accompanies images of graffiti tagging and kids on the yard, images of (self-) segregated students, and teachers policing bodies on school grounds. In the opening scene of the teacher in her classroom we are reminded of the "types" of students with whom she is confronted.

The nervous teacher sees, in a montage sequence, as students enter "her" classroom, a Latina student wearing ankle monitoring device, a hooded African-American male student looking like a menace, and various disengaged and bored students of color. These students are loud, rude, disrespectful, and wild, and seem to be better suited for prison than for her classroom. The school's administrator will not authorize books for these students because they only "ruin"

[60] See Ilene S. Goldman, "Crossing Invisible Borders: Ramón Menédez's *Stand and Deliver* (1987) and other essays in Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, editors, *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

and “destroy” them, so the teacher gets two part-time jobs, in addition to teaching, to buy books and materials for class.

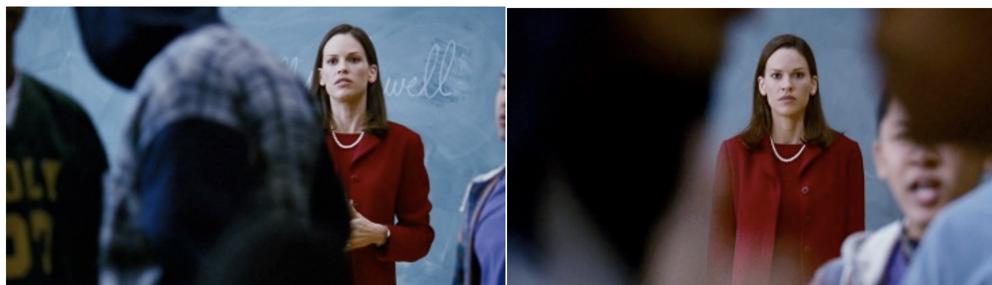




It is significant that the teacher always commands the frame, as demonstrated in the above screen grabs, even in the moments that she does not command the attention or respect of her

students. She is always centered as the main character – this story isn't *really* about the ensemble of students transformed into brilliant writers but rather it is, the story of the amazing work of this white teacher, and it offers hope that not all Black and Brown students should (immediately) be locked up.

Nearly every sequence that is supposed to be centered on the student's lives, is intercut back to their teacher (at home, in the classroom, or going about her daily life). The brown student's lives are *always* read and understood relationally to their teacher and her understandings of their lives. When the student's appear on screen it is always through the dominant gaze of the teacher, the subject position that *all* viewers are supposed to identify with. She is always at center of the frame and never given a voice-over track to share her internal monologue. The students, on the other hand, are often over-dubbed with what is supposed to be the sound of their internal monologues. These "thoughts" are often brief, obvious, and point directly to stereotypes. When the Latina and Cambodian characters are featured on screen without their teacher, they are dressing, intercut with each other (which reflects the building plot narrative of a court battle between their gangs). They dress almost ritualistically, bopping to the beat of "urban" music. Most often the students of color are framed on the left and right thirds of the frame, to leave ample room for their "white teacher" at center. As illustrated by the screen grabs (below), Erin's face is *always* framed in the T-zone of the frame: the center or the dominant position.

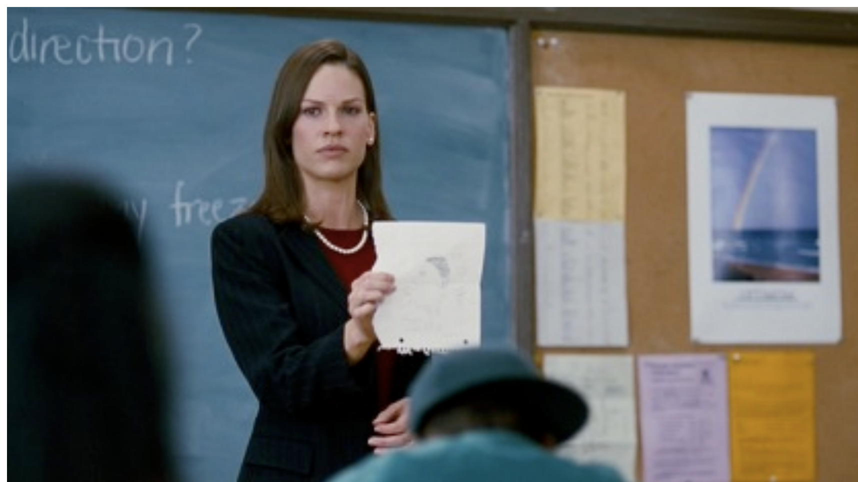


Prompted by an offensive drawing of an African-American student that a Latino student passes in class, Erin discusses race, hate, and oppression. She relates the history of the Jews and

the Holocaust, which until then, was unheard of by all of the students in her class. She states, "It's starts with a drawing like this, and then some kid dies in a drive-by shooting never even knowing what hit him."

To this, Latina student Eva responds by saying, "You don't know nothing!" The teacher (as pictured below) stares back at Eva defiantly, and says angrily, "Close the workbooks!" She continues, "I saw a picture just like this once in a museum, only it wasn't a Black man it was a Jewish man, and instead of the big lips, he had a really big nose, like a rat's nose . . . and these pictures were put in the newspapers by the most famous gang in history."

Her words are intercut with close-ups of the brown-bodied students who do the "hood hand shake" mumbling, "that's us dog!" The teacher continues, "*You* think you know all about gangs, you're amateurs! This gang would put you all to shame. And they started out poor, and angry, and everybody looked down on them. Until one man decided to give them some pride, an identity, and somebody to blame." It would seem that she is stating very specifically that not only are these students bad "Americans" but they are also bad gangsters, in her efforts to argue her point.



"Take over neighborhoods?" she asked. "That's *nothing* compared to them!" she informed. "They took over countries. You want to know how? They just wiped out everybody else."

The student loudly shouts, "Yeah!" as she continues screaming back at them. She said,

"Everybody they didn't like, and everybody they blamed for their lives being hard. And ones of the ways they did it was by doing this."

She fails to discuss, at least in this filmic re-telling, the Nazis in this country, or about German racism toward people of color. She doesn't explain (in the film's narrative) that the Unites States wasn't too concerned with German racism or anti-Semitism and didn't fight them on this basis (we only entered the war when Germany began to threaten our access to resources). Her explanations seem to only frame a clear us (as bad, ineffective gangsters) and them (really bad, ineffective gangsters), and those worthy of being saved and at center of this hopeful narrative.

"You don' know shit, homegirl!" African-American student Marcus screams. You are right, I don't, so why don't you explain it to me?" Erin responds. But, she doesn't allow them the time or space in class to share their stories, or their everyday experiences, instead she has them read *The Diary of Anne Frank.*

Erin then teaches about the Jews and the Holocaust, using *The Diary of Anne Frank* (a book that the school administrator does not want to loan "those" students, because they will "ruin" them), to give the students role models and heroes to look up to, and seemingly to give them a context to understand hate and their everyday realities in the violently segregated streets

(and school hallways) in Long Beach, California.[61]

Erin requires each student to keep their own journals to chronicle their readings of the book, and to share parts of their own life experiences. She tries to create a 'safe space" for them to do this by explaining that she will only read their writing if the student wants to leave their journal. She created safe space for their journals by locking and unlocking a metal cabinet in her classroom. On one hand, she exposes her students to a critical part of history, and to the healing and transformative power of writing, and if you follow the trajectory of this "true story" delivered via Hollywood three-act narrative structure, you learn that they ("bad" brown students) write themselves to "freedom," but only because their teacher (a "good" white teacher) gives them the hope and the writing skills. The film pits the "good" white teacher, Erin (who creates the conditions for them to transform into "good" students who are valued and "worth" buying books for), against the "bad" white teachers who won't give them books and in numerous scenes blame "those" students for ruining the school (at the hands of district desegregation).

A key scene involves an African-American student who has spent time in prison for a false conviction for shooting another young, Black male. He reveals that he has never had a role model before reading about Miep, the woman who hid Anne Frank. There is a striking image of his large Black frame, walking the frail, white Miep down the inner-city classroom hallway, after Erin's students fundraise to bring her for a visit from Germany. Why has he never had a role model, particularly a male or Black role model before? Also troubling is that despite fundraising thousands of dollars to bring Miep from Germany, there has been nothing done to help the homeless students who are in her class. The students are taught, through this experience, to privilege "other" struggles with violence and oppression (such as bringing European outsiders), instead of working to help themselves, their families, their neighborhoods, and instead of

---

[61] It seems significant that the term "ghetto" originated during the Holocaust but that fact is completely erased (as well as most of the context of this story), in the classroom. It seems to appear that these Black and Brown students become completely enthralled with the story of saving "white" womanhood.

focusing on the struggles that are salient among their peers.

Why does Erin always have to stand at center in the classroom and in the T-zone of the frame (as pictured above)? Why must she always stand looking down on the students that sit, lining the sides of classroom? Why can't they sit in a circle? I also wonder why these students cannot understand the changing contexts of constructions of race, and places like the ghetto (the only place for their Black and Brown bodies to be housed by the state, and illustrated in many sequences of the students "at home")? Why doesn't Erin have them read books that tell diverse experiences, such as *Native Son* or *Always Running*, or any texts or poems (beside her mispronounced "TooPack" mention) that tell the histories of U.S. Black and Brown struggles? Why must hope always come in the form of white women's "oppression," or in the case of Anne Frank as perceived "whiteness?" Why can't the stories be told from the perspective of the students, where audiences get their voices and stories prioritized over the point of view of their ("white") teacher?

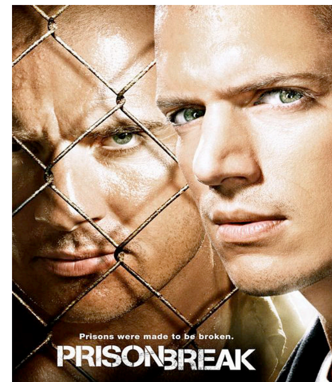
There are moments in the film *Dangerous Minds*, when race is at the forefront, such as when students joke about LouAnne being "white bread," and when the students correct Erin's pronunciation of rapper names but it does not acknowledge the experiences, point of view, and

class privileges of the teacher. This occurs because paying movie-going audiences are primarily white and will identify with the white teacher characters and because everyone is supposed to identify with her subject position. Thus the subjectivity of the heroine and is marketed and received as the "universal" experience, the dominant or starring position in which we are all encouraged to see our "best" self (which in hegemonic media texts, cannot mean the subjugated or oppressed position).

In the end, Erin can be read as the great rescuer who saves her unfortunate and misguided students from racism (of the school that won't give them books), from their parents (who kick them out or go to jail and don't raise them), each other (due to identity-based gang politics), and the community at large. However, it is significant that none of the class's fundraising efforts go directly to their schooling – not for books, not for shelter (for her students are homeless), or for any other thing except bringing in guests and going on field trips to white institutions like museums. The trouble with *Freedom Writers* and the numerous other hegemonic texts is not that heroine is racially white, but that she uncritically centers herself and her experiences and understanding about race, violence, and gangs and de-centers her students, the very people she is working to teach to about freedom and oppression. It is telling that, following the montage of students (set to "urban" music, of course) typing their journals into book chapters, the ending sequence features Erin typing the title page, "The Freedom Writers." This is her story, and her students seem to function primarily as the means by which she becomes a better teacher. In the film she states, "When I'm helping these kids make sense of their lives, my life makes sense to me." This reveals a great deal about the aim of the teacher (and probably of the film). Erin's statement shows that the film, and her work as a teacher (for three years, working with this one group of students), is all about her growth and transformation, and the "good" students who she helps to produce and save, are the bonus to her clarity on her own life, and thus the viewer's life.

1.4 Confronting Hegemonic Media Images of Prisons

As is the case with the ways in which mainstream audiences consume Hollywood images of schools and students of color, their perceptions of prisons are colored by the assumption that they understand what is *really* happening inside America's prisons because they watch "real" images of prison life and culture daily in media such as films, news, and cable television programming, in popular media such as these:

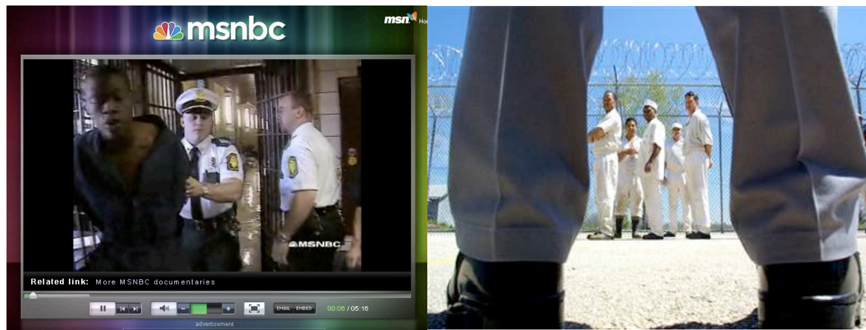


If one watches the many programs that show stories of life inside prison walls, one sees repeated imagery of hyper-violent inmates, covered in tattoos, lurking in the shadows, and ready for the next violent yard fight or prison riot. For many, prisons exist as a distant place, far from our everyday lives. They are sites that viewers know only through mainstream images: news programs reporting on violence, crimes, and gangs, television documentaries, Hollywood prison films, and cable programs which are repetitiously viewed on television, in theaters, heard on the radio, and streaming on the Internet.

MSNBC's cable television documentary series *Lock-Up* purports to investigate "what goes on behind the bars, and inside the minds of prisoners and guards [...] providing one of the most comprehensive examinations ever produced about life behind bars in America."[62] The program repeatedly shows footage of bloody prison riots and brutal assaults. Each and every episode displays narratives about the "challenges" to maintain facility security. This show, like many

[62] http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3036750

other popular programs about life "inside," claims to present an "exclusive insider's view" using prisoner interviews presented as intimate narratives, in episodes like "Lock-up: The Inmate Diaries." Through the repetition and saturation of these images (numerous images of ominous looking men in shackles, repeated low angle camera shots that force the viewer to look up into the prisoner's menacing eyes), and the narrative structures that reinforce that redemption comes only through Christian and other state sanctioned faith-based programming permitted inside prison facilities. These shows do little more than reinforce long trajectories of racialized and gendered stereotypes about race, class, gender, crime, power, and incarceration.



Angela Davis argues that programs such as HBO's *Oz* have "managed to persuade many viewers that they know exactly what goes on in male maximum-security prisons."[63] She notes that "even those who do not consciously decide to watch documentary or dramatic programs on the topic of prisons inevitably consume prison images, whether they choose to or not . . . , it is virtually impossible to avoid consuming images of prison."[64] The saturation and repetition of this programming reifies and reaffirms the common stereotypes about prisons, seemingly rehearsed and recited by the prisoners themselves as they speak in interviews from the inside. What results are strikingly repetitious examples of prisons *only* as sites of hyper-masculine violence, rape, exploitation, and pain.

Though we are all supposed to identify with the mainstream position of media texts in an

[63] Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete,* 18.
[64] Ibid.

ideological or political sense, certain groups are simultaneously learning behaviors and stereotypes deemed appropriate for their race, ethnicity, class, and gender, as well as the material conditions of their lives. Even if individuals don't actually behave in this way away from the cameras, when they have the lens in front of them they know that they are supposed to do so.

Rose M. Brewer and Nancy A. Heitzeg support Davis' claims, arguing that, "hegemonic media coverage and misrepresentations about the reality of crime and criminal justice must be countered by multiple voices."[65] The multiple voices pointed to here are the voices of the prisoners themselves, artists, activists, scholars, and film and media makers like myself. That is what the media component of this project is: my answer to these limited misrepresentations.

In order to counter the dominant media and scholarship on prisons, tactical strategies must be invoked by those informed by an "oppositional consciousness."[66] As I've said, the saturation of hegemonic images of prisoners and prison life creates an indelible mark that is embedded so permanently in audience's psyches that many viewers think that they know and understand prison.[67] New work, from a multiplicity of voices and perspectives (including the

---

[65] Rose Brewer and Nancy Heitzeg, "The Racialization of Crime and Punishment: Criminal Justice, Color-Blind Racism, and the Political Economy of the Prison Industrial Complex," 639.
[66] In "US Third-World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World" Chela Sandoval outlines politically effective means for challenging and changing the dominant orders of power. She writes of ideologies that promote "equal rights", "revolutionary" ideas, "supremacist" thinking, "separatist," and "differential" ideological forms that work together and against each other in movements for ideological and social change. Her thinking about revolutionary, differential and oppositional thinking could be effective, theoretically and methodologically, to resist hegemonic powers, such as the prison state as it appeared in *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991): 75-99.
[67] See Jacquelyn Bobo's "Black Women as Cultural Readers" where she discusses that Black women are oppositional viewers that "are well aware of their heritage of reprehensible treatment in mainstream media." (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 27. Her understandings of identity, representation, viewer subjectivity and race demonstrate the experiential understandings of oppositionality, particularly in response to visual and media texts.
In terms of m work specifically, there have been multiple showings of the SPG work-in-progress video, talks at conferences, on campuses and in undergraduate level classrooms, as well as reading public Internet posting sites that have revealed this naivety and lack of understanding about the realities of prison life and culture. When asked about their understandings of prisons and the incarcerated, they use examples from film, television and pop culture like rap videos.

voices of prisoners), must invoke theories and practices of prisons (re)imagined as sites for education, transformation, and social justice.[68] Prisons are one of the main civil rights issues today; incarceration affects millions of Americans on a daily basis.[69]

The millions of people currently imprisoned in this country are connected to a network of many millions of family, friends, and community members who utilize the cheap products they produce employed in prison labor. The community pays for prisoners' hygiene products, medical care, phone time (to talk to their children), clothes, and canteen needs (at inflated prices). There is also the stigma our society has about loving and supporting someone who lives behind prison bars. Prejudice about imprisoned people, and directed at the people who love them, has increased with the "lock them up and throw away the key" mentalities during the 1990s created by the rhetoric about getting "tough on crime."

Davis warns that we must make the prejudiced processes of incarceration and imprisonment visible, stating:

> The real human beings, designated by these numbers in a seemingly race neutral way, are deemed fetishtically exchangeable with the crimes they have committed . . . . The real impact of imprisonment on their lives need never be examined. The inevitable part played by the punishment industry in the reproduction of crime need never be discussed. The dangerous and indeed fascist trend toward progressively greater numbers of hidden, incarcerated human populations is itself rendered invisible.[70]

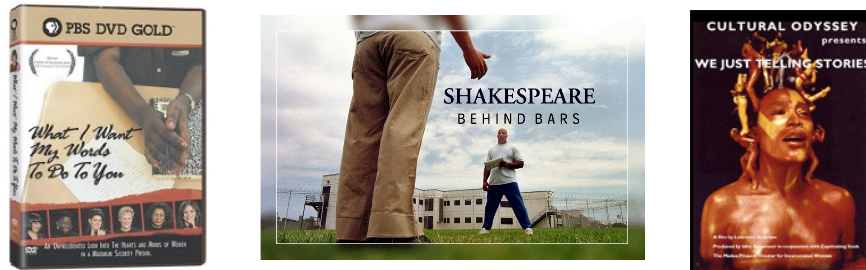
What do the "alternative" images of schools and prisons suggest about inner-city students

---

[68] I certainly understand the need for and role of prisons as sites of punishment, but I also believe that imprisoned peoples have and deserve civil rights. I believe that prisons should be the site of rehabilitation through education, mental health, medical, and cognitive behavioral treatments. I believe that the prison system as only site of punishment will produce more violent, more criminally-minded, and people less sensitive to humanity and society's codes and laws. Prisoners should be released from prison better able to cope with and adapt to life outside the walls, if we don't want them to commit more crimes.

[69] See the work of Angela Davis, Joy James, Julia Sudbury, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and organizations like Critical Resistance (http://www.criticalresistance.org/)

and prisoners? There are so many "alternative" media not produced not by big budget Hollywood studios or production companies) media images of prison life and culture, such as films like Black lesbian feminist Cheryl Dunye's *Stranger Inside, Shakespeare Behind Bars*, and Rhodessa Jones's The Medea Project documentary, *We Just Telling Stories*.



As a feminist filmmaker, I think most of Eve Ensler, probably the most celebrated feminist playwright (*The Vagina Monologues)* in the public sphere, and her role as facilitator of a women's prison writing project and as executive producer of a documentary about the project, *What I Want My Words to Do to You.*[71] The documentary, noted by the filmmakers as an "unprecedented look into the minds and hearts of the women inmates of New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility," tells the story of Eve's writing workshop with women prisoners, which garnered critical acclaim and won numerous awards including the Sundance 2003 Freedom of Expression prize. Ensler's work is significant to examine because she is a feminist whose work is taught in college classrooms, whose work is shown on public television, and whose name is often printed in the media, as a feminist who is known for being a "do-gooder."

Ensler's film, *What I Want My Words to Do to You,* begins with stark titles: white text on black screen. They frame Ensler as the main character who will guide this "meaningful" journey for the "inmates":

---

[71] Judith Katz, Director, *What I Want My Words to Do to You*, 2009.

Since 1998, playwright Eve Ensler has led a writing workshop at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, a maximum security prison in New York State.

A series of writing exercises challenges each inmate to address her crime, reckon with her past and envision a meaningful future.

The film shows the prison's exterior dissolved into this shot of a prison corridor framed by steel bars. We, the viewers, are in the position of perpetual outsider, peering into the hallways that house prisons, through the prison bars that contain them. Only visitors are allowed inside. Viewers gain access to this space with Ensler acting as our "tour guide."

The film's public television website portrays the film as primarily a social service rather than as a social justice project. The discourse of the synopsis celebrates Ensler's good will and volunteerism for this project by explaining: "While she had long devoted her artistic and activist energies to helping homeless women and survivors of violence around the world, she had never before come into contact with women in prison.[72] The "History of the Writing Group" section of the film's website describes Ensler's workshop (and the filmic process) explaining, "The writing group members confront the lives they've ruined, the families left behind and their own lives as

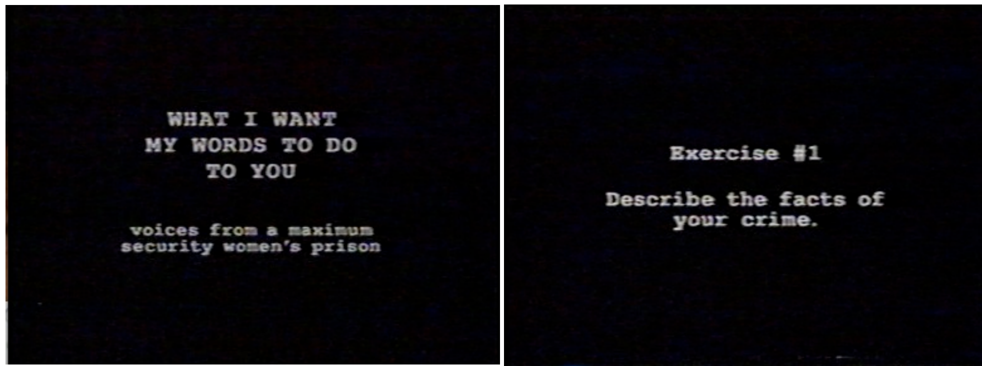
[72] http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/whatiwant/about.html

they might have been," which further posits the women as "ruined" and "worthless."[73]

The film's website explains that, "Ensler's method is not to distract the prisoners from their situation, but to ask them to go deeper into its causes, details and consequences . . . to reveal how much the women grapple with their own guilt," which can reinforce their institutionalization rather than humanize them. Ensler is not trained in prison healing practices, reform, or preparation for re-entry, she simply appears to want to evoke the most provocative stories, and to have Ensler's Hollywood actress friends read the prisoner's writings in the prison performance, and while on tour throughout the country.[74] I believe the decision to perform the prisoner's words exemplifies Ensler as good samaritan whose missionary work allows for these prisoner women's words to travel the globe.

The film opens at the performance inside the prison, with Ensler describing her assumptions and working with women in prison facility. Then it cuts to the prisoner audience only for reactions to her words. Titles frame the project, and introduce her first writing assignment: asking each woman to write the details of her crime.

[73] Ibid.
[74] Noted on the website is that the writing from these workshops, run for over five years, "has given rise to several theatrical performances of the inmates' writing, arranged by Ensler and playwright Gary Sunshine, that have been presented at the prison and at various other venues, including a benefit at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall. A group of the country's top actors, including Mary Alice, Zoe Caldwell, Glenn Close, Ruby Dee, Hazelle Goodman, Marybeth Hurt, Phylicia Rashad, Rosie Perez and Marisa Tomei have donated their time and talent to these performances, some of which have raised significant funds for the prison's college education program". http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/whatiwant/about.html



This first assignment, pedagogically and in terms of the documentary narrative structure, (re)inscribes the prisoners as societal offenders, forever marked by the details of their crime, and puts them on display for Ensler and for the documentary's viewers. This is the first thing that she wants them to explore in their writing, seemingly because she wants to know the details of their offenses but is not necessarily prepared (she's a playwright not a psychologist) to deal with the depth of the pain and life circumstance that brought each women down a road that took them to prison. This seems to be a salacious practice that adds to the voyeuristic experience of the audience who gains a gaze inside of this women's prison. This assignment seems to be more for the creation of "good" drama that benefits the touring play's audience as well as the viewers who watch this filmic re-telling. It doesn't appear to be beneficial to the prison writers themselves but rather seems to expose them from the first moment we seem them in the film's frame.

Kelia Pulinario discussing the "facts" of her crime appears disturbed by Ensler's questioning.

This does not appear to be a consideration in the design of the class or in the structuring of the film's narrative, which centers the Hollywood actor's performance of these women's words. Throughout the film it is clear that Ensler runs the learning circle, eschewing the

principles of feminist pedagogy that values de-centering of one's authority (to the extent that it's possible).[75] She sits with her hand pressed against the side of her face, staring at the woman writer, but in almost every shot that cuts back to Ensler, she seems to be fidgeting with her hair. She also often touches her face or covers her face with her hands. Ensler has worked within Bedford Hills prison for years and should, by the time of filming, be comfortable teaching within the walls. Her physical actions seem to demonstrate that she is most pre-occupied with herself – her appearance and her body.[76]

The classroom scenes repeat numerous shots of Ensler facilitating the sessions. For every assignment and discussion, like LouAnne in *Dangerous Minds* and Erin in *Freed*om *Writers*, she is always framed dead center.

Significantly for the prison performance, Ensler has convinced the prison to allow, for the first time in the facility's history, a gathering of the general population (seated together in the dark) to watch the performance. She hires Glenn Close, Marisa Tomei Rosie Perez and others, to "perform" the women's words for them. As if she's at a Broadway opening, Eve prances around the prison, open arms, welcoming her famous friends.

In one particular sequence Puerto Rican actress Rosie Perez reads the painful words of

[75] See the work of bell hooks such as *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) and Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, Adela C. Licona (editors), *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward (A National Women's Studies Association Journal Reader), (Baltimore:* The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).
[76] Ensler's struggles with her own body acceptance, indicated by her body language in this film, are discussed in her writing, specifically in her play (and book) *The Good Body*, (New York: Villard, 2004).

Kelia Pulinario. As Perez "performs" the painful recounting of Pulinario's crime – murdering the boyfriend who raped her, the sequence intercuts images of Perez "acting" with Pulinario's watching her words being performed.

The camera holds a beautifully lit close-up of Perez while doing a dramatic slow, zoom in onto the author, who begins to cry but sits trying to listen intently to the performance.

The performance sequences intercut shots of the actor's performance with the imprisoned author seated in the audience, watching her words and her life story being read back to her. At first, it seems a great honor for the writer to have her work read by someone famous and "important," but quickly I wondered why these women's powerful words could not be read or performed on stage by the women prisoners themselves. Why do these privileged women get to perform and the prison writers do not? Ensler's workshop process is never explained in the film or on the film's website. Her pedagogy and teaching methods are just presented as the documentary's narrative, and are not explained or justified. I am left wondering, what is it that a Hollywood actor can portray that a prison writer cannot? Are Ensler and the filmmaker, Judith Katz, afraid of what will not come across to the audience, or what will? What was Ensler's intentions for bringing in the actors

for the perfomances? Was Ensler already planning to tour the prisoner's words nationally (as she's done with all her other writing and plays), and needed to cast, or did she just think it would be a great cinematic moment, to bring her famous friends into prison?

Ironically, Eve Ensler's writing and body of work stand as ("the most") feminist in the popular sphere. She frequently tours this performance, and has garnered distribution on PBS and other international avenues of distribution through its release as a DVD. Ensler's work, produced by filmmaker Judith Katz and her Borrowed Lights Productions, can be read as a hegemonic feminist text that homogenizes difference, and presumes to speak for all women. Ensler's process is masked in this particular film. It is unclear if she's edited the women's words, or if she allows them to be performed as they were written. But, her plays such as *The Vagina Monologues* and *The Good Body,* written by Ensler, were celebrated as "the stories of many women."

Ensler's writing process is troubling. She conducts unofficial interviews in the field, takes no notes, and returns home to write.[77] This methodology relies on her memory for "truth," impression, and most probably stereotypes and caricatures, and although not explicitly explained in the filmic text, this "method" seems at work here too, particularly in the poetry workshop performance scene. Ensler's method insures that everything (all of the women's narratives) that reaches audiences has been sifted through her perspective, a white filter. Ensler is limited by her own subject position and worldview; she cannot see, hear, feel, or understand from the

[77] Personal interview with Eve Ensler following her performance of "The Good Body" at the Ordway Theater, St. Paul Minnesota, 2004.

positionality of her subjects. This documentary, and other independent and "alternative" films rely on the same sorts of narrative structures as the "Hollywood" film, such as framing Enlser in the "T-zone," that (re)produces white (feminist) women as the only hope for inner-city communities, both in schools and in prison facilities. All of the narratives offered to audiences to consume (and subsequently inform the viewer's understandings and worldviews) offer "new" stories of the same old missionary work. *What I Want My Words To Do To You* enjoys the gloss of an indie feminist project, which bestows a certain cache of progressiveness and lefty insiderness to it. As such, it may feel more genuine or authentic to mainstream and feminist audiences when in fact it is not making any critical intervention in the mainstream narratives of prisons.

When members of the SPG poetry group viewed this film (shown by a visiting professor teaching inside the facility), nearly five years after the SPG workshop was filmed, they were angered.[78] I received phone calls from very angry imprisoned writers and poets who couldn't understand why the women would, "just sit there and let those Hollywood ladies read their words back to them." The two SPG writers that I spoke to about the film were infuriated that Ensler so thoughtlessly provoked painful thoughts and memories about the crimes committed for the very first writing exercise.

In summation, these films can be read as damaging to the complex and complicated lived realities of these students and prisoners. Repeated inscribing of the colonial and imperialist narratives of "poor brown" people who need "saving" by white folks is a disservice to the transnational social justice work, and the work being done locally here in Minnesota. What becomes most striking is how visual media is used as a tool of the State (The Department of Corrections and MINNCORR), Hollywood capitalists, and community storytellers (filmmakers, teachers, artists, etc.) alike.

---

[78] David Doppler and LaVon Johnson, Personal communication (phone), March 2009.

Inside institutional buildings such as schools and prisons, video cameras are increasingly present as tools of state surveillance. They function as witnesses, evidence, and serve as a threat as the eyes of the punishing institutions. Ironically, in schools such as Central High School, video cameras and video production classrooms also function as critical and creative tools in public for student use. Similarly, there are cameras within Stillwater's educational unit that serve to document special programs and classes, aired on the prison's closed circuit television channel. But, my concern here, is what can happen when and if culture, such as video cameras and distributed media texts informed by popular and critical educational practices, become "weapons" of the people commonly surveilled?

In "Making Community," grassroots media organizer Thenmozhi Soundararjan reminds us that within communities of color, "there is a long history of trauma with the camera and technology in general […], technologies have particular legacies of colonialism, and military and police intervention."[79] Soundjaran's organization, Third World Majority [http://cultureisaweapon.org] is:

> a new media training and production resource center run by a collective of young women of color and our allies dedicated to developing new media practices that affect global justice and social change through grassroots political organizing [… that] support organizing for social change and global justice in real, representational and virtual worlds where communities of color are centered in the production, distribution and educational processes.[80]

Soundjaran argues that, "For us to take our struggle to the next level we need to produce our own media, we need to be the ones that define what our own media images are like, because all throughout history other people were defining who we were. Much of our building a base of resistance included both the fight to reclaim our civil rights, like in the U.S. but also within our

---

[79] Joe Lambert, "Making Community: A Conversation with Thenmohzi Soundararajan," *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives Creating Community* (Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press, 2002), 3.
[80] http://www.cultureisaweapon.org/about/mainframe.php, accessed May 9, 2009.

own culture."[81] Third World Majority's methodology of training communities of color with media technologies is efficacious but has not been attainable within the prison environment. I aim to enlist her frameworks of reversing the institutional gaze of control, and reframe images of prisoners and inner-city students as those that re-tell and thus intervene in the stereotypical narratives of these communities.

I wonder how the teachers would react if their students resisted? This reception is a combination of what the film's techniques aim for, *and* what is already understood about power relations and dominant ideology by the viewing audience. If the students or prisoners responded to the savior with defiance or resistance, they would be seen as ungrateful, self destructive, stupid, unworthy of the heroine's attention, and thus unworthy of the audience's empathy. Additionally, these students and prisoners would be removed from their classrooms, if they challenged the teacher's authority. The filmmakers who want to create different films must not only create different narrative and dispense with all the images that audiences have seen before, but she must also somehow subvert what the audience accepts as "normal" in terms of power relations.

It is also true that multiple viewers watching the same film can read it in multiple ways. Most of the media stories about schools and prisons replay the same narrative where audiences are directed to identify with the white characters. Many of these films are about the "white teacher" as "our" only hope of keeping "our" communities safe from "them." Audiences are, through the "magic" of filmmaking, coerced into identifying with the benevolent liberator who selflessly gives to her students. Audiences see the Black and Brown students themselves identify with the white teacher.[82] Through this process both students (and prisoners), the filmic subjects, become participants in the logic of hegemonic institutional systems, and in turn, they become "saved" people, transformed into "good students" who can now learn from teachers in

[81] Lambert, *Digital Storytelling*, 4.
[82] See Jacqueline Bobo's *Women As Cultural Readers*. (New York: Columbia University Press), 1995.

"traditional" classrooms, and make society better overall.

What is at stake here is significant. Media images can directly impact individual, community, and institutional understandings of people of color by tracing power and Black and Brown bodies traveling the school-to-prison pipeline, and by dictating whether they can succeed in "traditional" banking-model classrooms. These institutional models and expectations for the people who inhabit them (Black and Brown students) also create the false assumption that if they succeed they are able go to college or, on the flip side, if they are poor they go into the military (with the hope of going to school after "serving" their country). "Bad" students are pushed out or drop out and are too often end up in the prison industrial complex. I wonder, where are the films that document this part of the process? Where are the films that document the many failures of the system and its saviors?

This pipeline flow of people of color demonstrates systemic racism and oppression that is often based on race, class, and gender of the students. When these realities are set against the narratives circulated in our hyper-media society such as the "white teacher" stories inscribed and remade by Hollywood for over fifty years, supported by white feminists like Ensler, and circulated as "true" stories we, viewers, are expected to "buy into" and celebrate their savior actions. When *all* of the accessible media texts portray privileged ("white teacher") positionalities and (almost always) demonize people of color, feminist media praxis must work to counter these message machines in theory and in practice.

For many years I felt a split between my institutionally educated mind and my feminist filmmaking creative self. I knew that I valued so many storytellers, poets, painters, media makers, musicians, and activists (many who are not validated by an institutional diploma, or stamp of approval as an important intellectual), whose critical contributions to knowledge haven't always been recognized by the academy. There are so many who have significantly contributed to

the political consciousness of the masses without having been recognized as scholars because of their level of formal education.

In recent years, I've developed an embodied praxis that has taught me to see through feminist critical lenses focused on representations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and the lived realities of communities of color in media texts and in "reading" everyday acts of resistance. My scholarly mind cannot simply focus on questions of knowledge and knowledge production, concerned with philosophical questions only. My filmmaker self cannot rest only on the written-word academic theorizing and teaching of this knowledge, I must also offer critically produced media text. So I embark on this journey with laptop, video camera, and technological tools used as a weapon to re-frame people of color. I aim to tell our stories that center our voices as people of color; we are far from voiceless.

Take 1 :: THE SPG DISCLAIMER ::

[From Video Tape Log Notes]
Before performing the pieces for the Intermedia Arts' "SPG Inside/Outside Joint fundraiser" David "Dopp" Doppler calls some of the "inner core" SPG members: Marcus Shannon, Ezekiel Caligiuri, LaVon Johnson, Ja'far-Rahotep, and Jose Seals, to stand with him at the front of the room.

Performances by:		Special Guest:	Video work:	Video poetry by The Stillwater Poetry Group Artists:			
Ahanti Young	James Williams	Will Power	Ampharanh	Vincent Britton	David Doppler	Maxxe Jackson	Ja'far Rahotep
Carolyn Holbrook	Jon Passi		Rachel Raimist	Tony Burgess	Derrick Dukes	LaVon Johnson	Jose Seals
Desdamona	Leigh Combs			Ezekiel Caligiuri	Eugene Fain	Abdullah Mansoor	Marcus Shannon
Douglas Ewart	Mankwe Ndosi			Dan Cooprider	Harry Hill	Mauvati Mckenzie-	Juan Smith
Ed Bok Lee	reggie harris			Joey Davis	David Islam	Bey	Carl Wesley
Emmanuel Ortiz	Trueboy			David Day	Oshea Israel	Sarith Peou	D.Williams

For the past eight months, reggie harris and the "in the belly" collective of poets, musicians, and performers have been working with the Stillwater Poetry Group (SPG) inside Stillwater Correctional Facility. In a series of critical interdisciplinary workshops designed to promote positive reconceptualizations of self, community, and social justice, the artists use poetry to address themes like manhood, fatherhood, american dreams/nightmares and the value of a man/woman. The workshops, co-facilitated by both inside and outside artists, produce spaces of potential and possibility, where all can expand their critical thinking and work to affect change both inside and beyond the prison walls.

Donations can be sent to:
Intermedia Arts c/o in the belly
2822 Lyndale Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55408

The Metropolitan Regional Arts Council generously funded a series of Critical Interdisciplinary Workshops to be run for three months. All proceeds from this fundraiser will be allocated to the in the belly collective to continue creative work in Minnesota Prisons.

Des, Ms. G and I are heard laughing loudly; We display a nervousness, unsure of what is about to happen, not always the most fun in a prison environment.

Doppler says, *Y'all be quiet because we have a serious message to get across*.

Ms. G, being her goofy self, sings "YMCA", thinking they are going to do something funny, and gets up to adjust the chairs to make more room. We are all *really* unsure of what is going to happen.

[Transcription]
Dopp: *Check it out right.*
Dopp: *This is the SPG disclaimer. We would like to take this opportunity to expose you to the truth. Something many people spend their lives trying to obscure. Like the State and many levels of government which creates jobs for these people in order to keep society's beliefs in check.*

There are people who would have you believe that prisoners in America are the most violent, criminal minded, psychotic hustlers; that we are over privileged and that the highest budgets are spent on our safety, security, and health care. These lies are set forth by the authorities in order to have society believe that we are some form of lower level human beings. And that the little we have, is too much. It's the same brainwashing the Nazis laid down about the Jews. That we have goals and objectives, most of which are to deter society from forming alliances or support groups with prisoners, and controlling the level of education that a prisoner is allowed to receive. The first reason being is that if they truly allowed anyone or any group to form an alliance, or true relationship with any number of prisoners, the prisoners would be able to expose their true selves. Their methods of mis-information would crumble, and the news of their being human beings in prison would spread across the globe causing mass panic. There would be a common feeling of wanting to help. The State cannot afford to have anyone feeling this way, including, the family members of prisoners. Their jobs, businesses, well-being, and all around objectives to give all poor people a number would be at risk. It is not hard for them to maintain this form of control, because most inmates have been brainwashed, and carry the same beliefs. In effect, doing the authorities' job for them within the correctional facility, and upon their release. They too, would have you believe that people in prison are less than human. So please, whatever you do, do not form relationships, establish alliances; do not have love for, do not teach, do not have any form of contact, most of all hugging with any inmates, or you might run the risk of being exposed to the most intense forms of feelings, dreams, talents, views, intellect, and love. Therefore, causing you to become a threat to the security of all correctional facilities.

(pause)

That's a disclaimer for ya.

Someone starts to clap but abruptly stops. Then, dead silence as they walk back to their seats.

CHAPTER 2 - FEMINIST MEDIA MAKING METHODOLOGY: FILMING IN A ST. PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOL AND A MINNESOTA PRISON

Breaking the silence, Dopp says, “Who’s up?” (he calls the first SPG to read his poem).

An intellectual history of feminist film theory seems as “lived” as it is “written” as it is “to be written.”[1]

Of course, theory becomes a mere accessory to practice when it speaks from a safe place, while practice merely illustrates theory when the relationship between the two remains one of the domination-submission and of totalization. I see theory as a constant questioning of the framing of consciousness – a practice capable of informing another practice, such as film production, in a reciprocal exchange. Hence theory always has the possibility, even the probability, of leading the other practice to “dangerous” places, and vice versa […] I am constantly questioned in who I am, as its making also transforms the way I see the world around me.[2]

2.1 Social Justice Media Praxis: Aims of a Feminist Filmmaker

In the 1960s and 1970s there was a growing base of feminist film theorist-makers such as Laura Mulvery, independent filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, and media making collectives such as Women In Media, the Women’s Film Project, New Day Films, and the Women’s Film Coop, that worked to “combat the problems of classic cinema and produce a “counter-cinema,” which worked in conjunction with critical feminist film studies. According to “Feminism in the Sixties”:

> Women’s struggle against the current system of representation took a threefold form. Women either entered the existing system with ambitions of breaking it, proceeded to make films outside of the commercial system, and women developed a feminist film theory - the overlap and interrelatedness of all three measures being obvious. Their challenge was to the traditional representation of women in cinema, and the aim was the displacement of patriarchal dominance in the cinematic world […]. Here was an obvious way to extend women’s conjoined interest in art and politics, acting as particularly visual communicators of feminist thought.[3]

It is the feminist work (critical studies and creative making) that has become foundational to my work today. I certainly appreciate the rich history and decades long work of feminist scholars and filmmakers but here choose to highlight a few filmmakers whose work has directly

---

[1] Jane M. Gaines, “Feminist History and the Two Presents of Feminist Film Theory”, *Cinema Journal 44*, No. 1, Fall 2004.
[2] Trinh T. Minh-Ha*, Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992): 123.
[3] http://www.bristol.ac.uk/Depts/History/Sixties/Feminism/

impacted my own feminist media making. Over the past few decades, feminist filmmaking has extended its concern for women and film beyond simply analyzing women's bodies onscreen, or merely developing alternative counter-cinemas. As a feminist filmmaker who equally emphasizes the need for a praxical engagement with feminist theory and feminist media making, I believe that the constant negotiation between what I think (the theoretical framework), what I do (film and edit), and what I aim to do (impact mediatized narratives of schools and prisons) is the necessary mode of media making praxis.

As I say in the *Women's Movement Today*, I articulate feminist filmmaking as work produced by a filmmaker who claims a feminist ideology, vocalizes the role feminism plays in one's filmmaking in challenging codes, modes of production and distribution, and makes films that explore intersectional issues of race, gender, class, age, sexuality, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and movements for social change.[4] I believe that although the sites that I explore for this project are not centering women inside the video's frame, as a feminist behind the camera, I explicitly aim to use feminist theory and feminist media making traditions to help challenge hegemonic images of schools and prisons, and use the media texts I produce — written and visual—as tools for critical education and social change.

I am working specifically in the trajectory and frameworks of feminist filmmakers such as Michelle Citron, Carroll Parrot Blue, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha who all produce filmic texts—experimental, narrative, documentary, and mixed genre films—and written manuscripts that (re)present theoretical and framed understandings of their media making techniques and methodologies. In her book, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, feminist filmmaker and scholar Michelle Citron performs an analysis of her family's home movies through analytical essays that run down the left hand side pages, and personal narratives with screen grab stills from

[4] Rachel Raimist. In Leslie L. Heywod, Ed. *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism* [Two Volumes]. (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing: 2005).

her films on the right. In one chapter, in an image that runs at the top right of the personal essay page, the static images becomes a motion picture, an embedded flip book, showing an excerpt of one of her father's home movies, as readers flip through this section of pages. On the left side of the page of the chapter, "What's Wrong With this Picture," Citron explains her theorization of her family's home movies:

> By watching home movies in this [critical] way, retelling our story, my family created yet another level of necessary fiction, a fiction that could help us cope with older, deteriorating bodies in a less-than-ideal and fractured present. The home-movie images allowed us to believe that the sunny side of life did exist, if only in the past, and thus they gave meaning to otherwise difficult lives.

On the right side of the page, in the "more academic" analysis essay, Citron theorizes:

> In home movies we often connect directly to the person behind the lens, a relationship found in portrait photography but rarely in commercial narrative film. Home movies represent how the person behind the camera chooses to film the way the person in front of the camera presents his or her "self." As cultural theorist Roland Barthes has written about the photographic image, "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art." With parents and children, husbands, and wives, the image often reproduces the power dynamic existing outside of the frame.

Citron simultaneously analyzes the context of production, to produce "visual evidence" of her family, "a sense of history of themselves" while interrogating the camera work, the positionality of the cameraman (her father), the powers exchanged in glances and theorized gazes, and the multiple layers of meaning of these images across contexts. She analyzed when the piece was filmed and the significance of it being stored in her family archives. She analyzed these old films from the present, and considered the images' multiple meanings through her subjective readings, and the impact of her editing the footage today. Citron's work weaves film history, feminist theory, feminist filmmaking, and theorizing through personal narrative and performative texts (moving images and printed media texts) to blur the lines between theory, practice, and feminist (re)tellings of story.

The Dawn At My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing: a print and CD-Rom based

media piece by Caroll Parrot Blue, a documentary filmmaker, photographer, writer, and educator, uses performative theory, images, historical documents, video, photography, and personal narratives to trace her journey to become a photographer and filmmaker. She interweaves personal family history with strongly popular images of Blacks and uses them to theorize and illustrate how popular images affected the lives of African Americans. She examines race and representation in popular television programs such as *Amos and Andy* and films such as *Imitation of Life.* She interweaves memories of viewing these programs with her mother, and examines the impact these images have had on growing up as a Southern Black woman in America. Her work is critical of media images (a theoretical project) and at the same time tells a story (through printed and media reflections). Her work blurs the boundaries between theory, practice, and disciplinary boundaries of history, media studies, and media production.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *Framer Framed* offers the scripts and meticulous storyboards of her three most critically acclaimed films, *Reassemblage*, *Naked Spaces – Living is Round*, and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam,* as well as a section of interviews with the filmmaker to elucidate the (lack of) space between critical approaches, theoretical frameworks, and creative critical film practices. She troubles the theory / practice binary in her printed text retellings of moving images by using still photos, drawings, texts, and hand-written notations explaining particulars of framing, composition, camera movement and different typefaces to indicate different voices or layers of audio tracks. In interviews, she has articulated her stance on the separation between theory and practice.

> There is a tendency in theorizing *about* film to see theorizing as one activity and filmmaking as another, which you can point to in theory. This is an important question for me because I teach theory partly to people who come to school – in a university department of cinema- primarily for film production. There's an antitheory tradition that runs deep among "production people." The way I try to teach it by promoting "bridge" course and by emphasizing the indispensability of their mutual challenge can actually be summarized in an old statement by Marx: that theory cannot thrive without being rooted in practice, and that practice cannot liberate itself without theory. When one starts theorizing *about* film, one starts shutting in the field; it becomes a field of experts whose access is gained

> through authoritative knowledge of a demarcated body of "classical" films and of legitimized ways of reading and speaking about films. That's the part I find most sterile in theory. It is necessary for me to always keep in mind that one cannot really theorize about film, but only *with* film. This is how the field can remain open.[5]

Minh-Ha clearly sees the false schism between theory and practice within academic departments and in turn, the disciplinary production of knowledge that impacts teaching, research, tenure, and creative work by scholar-makers. She works to trouble the dichotomy and resist theory as a fixed idea, bounded by forms and privileges of particular academic investments. She sees theory as "a constant questioning of the framing of consciousness- a practice capable of informing another practice, such as film production, in a reciprocal challenge. Hence theory always has the possibility, even the probability, of leading the other practice to "dangerous" places, and vice versa."[6]

In the nearly twenty years since Minh-ha (re)printed this statement, the issues and challenges posed by this "dangerous" blurring of policed boundaries is still little explored in contemporary feminist filmmaking. I see my work as honoring and taking up the projects invoked by Citron, Blue, and Minh-Ha. My project is not so much based on the content of the previous work of these feminist filmmakers, but on their work as a form of methodological inspiration. I seek to push their crossing of boundaries and expanding frameworks. In my role as a feminist filmmaker, I apply praxical understandings, what I have come to know through doing, to the contexts of production in the form of feminist documentary storytelling media texts (in terms of style, aesthetics, and production concerns) as well as in the task of pushing forth a project negotiating the re-telling of "true" stories in order to produce feminist media texts – written and visual.

---

[5] Trinh T. Minh-Ha*, Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992): 122.
[6] Ibid, 123.

The Stillwater Poetry Group, 2005, pictured in a black and white image that is a reprint of a scan of a photo printed from a prison inkjet printer. It is the only photograph of (most) of the SPG, taken by the prison's newspaper photographer. The version I was used for the fundraiser event.

I am editing a documentary about the Stillwater Poetry Group (SPG) and specifically about the 2004 critical poetry workshop, which paired imprisoned poets with artists in the Twin Cities. I am also organizing and rough cutting the footage of St. Paul Central High School's Touring Theater's 2005 CTT Group for a larger documentary on the 30 year program history on CTT's teacher and mentor, Jan Mandell.

Jan Mandell and Central Touring Theater, 2005

In making these projects I have had to work through the constraints of low budget video production, the ethical dilemmas of the politics of representation, and the social justice aims of

feminist filmmaking praxis. Documentary filmmakers, feminist or not, constantly make choices on the spot, in the moment; a filmmaker is always deciding when to film, what to film, how to frame, and how much to film. Some directors like to have very "directed footage," meaning they plan their shots and then capture a "reality" that reflects their scripted or pre-visualized desires, while others capture events as they unfold, negotiating framing and camera movement on the spot, and privileging the construction of the story's narrative in post production. The connections between the "realities" captured on tape and the constructed realities of non–fiction narratives edited for screen have always been embroiled in debates around filmic construction, representation, and filmmaker responsibility.

Many documentaries purport to take a "fly on the wall" approach to filming. Feminist film theorists have taken this to task, saying that this approach still relies on filmic re-telling and reconstructions of the narrative that happen in the post-production (editing) phase. Still, many filmmakers suggest that they are able to be "invisible" and that their cameras present events seen candidly, as a fly on a wall might see the action unfold. Fly-on-the-wall documentary-making purports that the filmic project can *not* disrupt or affect what happens in front of the camera lens, if it's filmed in a particular way. In this "style" of working, the camera crew's interactions with the subjects, or their attempts to have a lack of interactions leads to creating a strange ignoring or instances where the camera person will not directly address the filmic subjects. While working unobtrusively may seem ideal in documentary situations, it also seems ridiculous to think that the mere presence of a camera and a cameraperson in a room could have little or no impact on the filmic subjects. The reality is that no matter how one attempts to work unobtrusively, the subject is also aware (in varying degrees), that they are being filmed. However, it is still also common for these types of documentaries to center on a filmmaker / subject interview where the interviewer is still revealed through an off-camera voice. It is impossible to physically be inside of a space with a camera lens pointed at a subject and go "unnoticed." There are certainly levels

of disruption and interruption to the "actions" unfolding in the "scene" that occur during the documentary filming process such as when something happens such as a microphone breaking and falling off of the top of the camera, or the possibility that I might bump into a subject because my eye looks only through the camera's lens.

In the chapter "Filmmaker/Subject: Self/Other" of *Feminism and Documentary* (the introduction), Waldman and Walker present arguments about feminist realist documenatary traditions and 'realist debates' around methodologies and they contend that, "American direct cinema and cinema verité traditions downplay the role of the filmmaker in the production process (the filmmaker as fly-on-the-wall theory). Feminist filmmakers have thought long and hard about the politics of people filming people.[7] They call for "recognition that filmmakers are co-participants, along with subjects, in the power dynamics of direct cinema filming."[8] In all of my documentary work to date, I have strived to "record reality" without affecting it, as much as possible. Still, when a filmic subject looks at me, speaks to me, or asks me a question, I will always respond, most often from behind the camera. I usually decide, in the editing process, if these moments will appear in the final film, and how much of these "filmmaker interactions" are shared in the film's final form.

I do deploy strategies when interviewing, such as asking interviewees to repeat at least part of my question to form their answer, or asking a subject to repeat a particular line or phrase in a more complete or cohesive way. What I am most concerned with is doing more justice to the complexities of a subject's reality, than simplifying for the sake of an "entertaining" narrative.

---

[7] Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, Eds. *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[8] Ibid, 14.

2.2 Methodological Meditations

The SPG was a group of 25 male prisoners who met weekly inside the walls of the Minnesota State Correctional Facility, Stillwater.[9] CTT is a group of advanced student actors that are selected annually to be part of a touring theater that creates original plays about issues critical to their lives, and tours them throughout the state of Minnesota. Filming these workshops began as two separate projects and will be edited and distributed as such, but when examined relationally, they reveal feminist practices through feminist media making methodologies, tools, and techniques that elucidate a developing framework of engaged feminist media praxis. I am particularly concerned with strategies for filming "oppressed" communities, grappling with filmmaker/subject relationships, and the politics of representation embedded in documentary storytelling. The impact of the director's positionality, larger ideological aims, and their control of shot by shot construction of the story, is made especially salient during the editorial process. When you edit, you are (re)constructing the "realities" of what has been captured within the frame. An editor shapes the footage into cohesive narrative(s). I feel that these filmic practices would benefit from more theoretical interventions such as critically examining the content of the story's topic, of filmic subjects, and pondering of the (potential) impact of the edited and distributed piece. I strive, for both the CTT and the SPG projects, to connect my filmic practice with theories of feminist praxis to share instances of resistance and the potential for personal and social transformation.[10]

---

[9] I use the term prisoner or incarcerated to discuss those living in correctional facilities, those sentenced to serve time in correctional facilities. The state institutional language identifies them as offenders or inmates, defining them by their offenses against the state. My choice of language is a politicized decision; the terms to name this group of people is not interchangeable. See Sudbury who discusses the terms deployed by criminologists, stating, "I prefer to deploy the insurgent discourse used by those committed to the abolition of prisons" (xii).

[10] Feminist film/media scholar and maker Alex Juhasz articulates feminist media praxis as "artists committed to social transformation have engaged in a media praxis: the using and theorizing of film (and its later-coming, sister forms, video, the televisual, and the digital), towards world- and self-changing" and "to promote the circulation, archiving, and creation of a living media praxis". http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/proposals

As I sat with the footage years after filming, I grew concerned with "adequately" representing these groups of complicated individuals working for change within themselves, within the groups (that I have become a part of as both a teacher-participant and filmmaker), and within the institutional walls of public schools and prisons.[11] I wondered: *How do I, as a woman of color holding a small digital video camera, negotiate what I know theoretically about mainstream representations of people of color, particularly the racist, sexist, and classist narratives about students and prisoners, with the realities of working within these institutions? How can I, in terms of everyday filming practices, negotiate the theory and process of social justice and feminisms? How can feminist theorizing around identity politics and the complex interactions between identities inside institutional walls inform the way that I (re)construct the film's narrative? How do I harness the potential for social transformation of particular communities, using feminist media making? Is justice possible inside these spaces and places? Can telling our stories make society more just?*

I am still concerned with these and other ethical questions regarding power, transformation, privilege, conscious and unconscious negotiations (such as the choices I made during filming), filmic exploitation of the subjects, and negotiating the politics of re-telling the story of what I experienced (and filmed) in 2004 and 2005. I hope by revealing my thoughts, actions, and negotiations during the filming and editing stages of these projects, I can expand the conversations and acts of resistance to the school-to-prison pipeline. I also hope to emphasize the value of critical arts-based education, and demonstrate ways of expanding pedagogical practices,

[11] The timeframe for filming and completing the edit of a film varies greatly by project. For the SPG and CTT projects, shorter video edits for promotional and conference uses were completed nearly immediately after finishing the production process. However, I always saw both projects as part of larger frameworks that would need further unpacking, study, consideration, and time for post-production.

that will contribute to reshaping the views and representations of students of color and imprisoned intellectuals.[12]

I write this meditation, not as speculation that this project will serve some significant place in the history of feminist filmmaking (and thereby command recognition), or to propose that my personal archives of tape will someday be significant for future scholars to study. Rather, I offer my ideas, insight, and praxical theorizing, as it unfolds in the processes of filmmaking, to attempt to understand the negotiation of the seeming theory / practice split within feminist theory and documentary studies.[13] I see this work as a continuation of feminist documentary traditions that challenge codes of representation, push for counter and alternative narratives about gender, race, class, sexuality, and the lived realities of oppressed communities. I believe this work stands relevant as part of the feminist film theory/history "continuum" of which Jane Gaines writes.[14]

The documentary and this dissertation share real names, biographical information, and the writings of the film's subjects, by design. When you are a high school student, you are often shuffled classroom-to-classroom, teacher-to-teacher, year after year, and students become blurred into one another. The students in CTT each share very personal stories and insights about their lives, families, communities, and experience as a Central student and want credit and recognition for their ideas. Within the SPG, the prisoners fight the effects of incarceration where all the men are required to answer to a number, wear an identification tag clipped to the front of their shirt, wear the same state issued uniform, share a schedule regimented to the minute, and have little

---

[12] See the work of Joy James for discussion of "incarcerated intellectuals".

[13] Michael Hames-Garcia in *Fugitive Thought, Prison Movements, Race and The Meaning of Justice*, maps out a theoretical framework engaging concepts of "praxical resistance" to exploitative academic theoretical projects, aiming to build an epistemic space that is reciprocal for research, and I argue filmic subjects, that is not exploitative; a theorizing of "freedom-in-struggle", where there is "room for the role of subjectivity in knowledge-generating practices for the unobservable (yet casual) aspects of reality" (xxv).

[14] Jane M. Gaines writes that "historical work was 'interrupted', [and] to understand the work of feminist film theory and history as a continuum and *contemporary work* as a continuance" in her essay "Feminist History and the Two Presents of Feminist Film Theory", *Cinema Journal 44*, No. 1, Fall 2004.

power or agency in their everyday lives. One SPG poet, LaVon Johnson, who is the literal connection of Minnesota's school-to-prison pipeline, was a student at Central High School, was arrested on the school's front steps and is serving a life sentence of 99 years plus, in Stillwater. As a result, he now calls himself only by his offender identification number (OID); he goes only by Mr. 187406. If this project were to abstract each participant, such as Mr. Johnson, from his words, this would further dehumanize these actors, writers, poets, and artists.[15] I have been granted permission, through personal release forms and D.O.C. media releases, to identify all of the participants in my films. In fact, all of the SPG requested to be named in all of the work produced in conjunction with this project. This project serves to share faces, stories, and truths of these communities, and to complicate understanding of the experiences of these groups. Still, I cannot theorize through this process without acknowledging that filming anyone involves sharp schisms in power. Filming with my camera, I literally hold the power of "the gaze" in my hands.

2.3 Holding the Gaze: Looking, Seeing, and Filmmaking Practices

Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," which focused on scopophilia and the gaze cast on female bodies onscreen in narrative (Hollywood) cinema produced important foundational ideas in feminist film theory.[16] In the essay, Mulvey interrogates cinematic techniques and narrative structures that create pleasurable spectatorship as theorized for a male gaze(d) reception. In the thirty years since initial publication, Mulvey and numerous other key thinkers have considered questions of the gendering of the gaze, the racialization and classism embedded in cinematic gazes on screen, as well as the complex gazes of the viewers. It is useful here to honor Mulvey's early work as a feminist

---

[15] I had each program participant sign, "An Offender Media Release," a release form that grants permissions to distribute this work through the DOC, and on my release form, articulates desire to be identified by their real names. The form Ms. G, their literacy teacher, had all of the men sign is required if an "offender" is to appear on any video taped recording or photograph, outside of prison surveillance: downloadable at: http://www.spj.org/prison_pdf/mn_offender_agreement.pdf

[16] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

theorist and filmmaking practitioner, and to build on this gaze theory to analyze the gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized interactions of "looks" that occurred simultaneously in these spaces. By holding "the gaze" in my hands as the filmmaker, I controlled the look of the camera (Mulvey's "cinematic apparatus").

Mulvey, and other key feminist film theorists such as Molly Haskell and Claire Johnston, pushed for an alternative or counter cinemas to remedy the representations of women on screen and as makers behind the camera, presenting the idea that women's cinema, or films made by women, can function as "counter cinema." Through consciousness of the means of production and opposition of sexist ideologies, they argued that films made by women have the potential to posit an alternative to traditional Hollywood films using alternative representational practices, which numerous feminist filmmakers have continued to engage in their filmic processes.[17] But none of the feminist film theorists really provided makers with the practical *and* theoretical framework—a theoretically informed technical blueprint, so to speak—on how to negotiate this. We know now that feminist change doesn't necessarily happen just because a woman is active behind the camera; it is the *feminist* woman behind the camera that can work to complicate the politics of production, the modes of representation, and navigate the many levels of gazes that are exchanged during the making of a film.

In bell hooks's introduction to the essay, "the oppositional gaze: black female spectators" in her feminist text *reel to real: race, class, and sex at the movies,* she poses another kind of gaze linked to subjectivity and positionality as a receptor of powerful gazes. She discusses being punished as a child for staring. She writes, "those hard, intense, direct looks [are] looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority."[18] Hooks opens up questions about receptors of a gaze, such as a camera's gaze or an institutional gaze, that Mulvey

---

[17] Claire Johnston. "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema." *Sexual Strategems: The World of Women in Film.* Patricia Erens, ed. (New York: Horizon Press, 1979): 133-143.
[18] bell hooks *reel to real: race, class, and sex at the movies* (London: Routledge, 1997): 197.

and others have not. Hooks explicitly demonstrates the power that flows in looking, being looked at, and in looking back to the gazes of the authoritative, institutional powers, in more of a Foucauldian understanding of power as productive.

Thinking through both the gazes of the framer, the onscreen gaze of the framed, the glances exchanged amongst onscreen subjects, and the return of the subject's gaze to the camera, camerawoman, and (potentially) the viewer, I can begin to understand, in practical terms, how to negotiate in spaces such as inner city schools and prisons. In schools, particular students hold (perceived) power in hallways and classroom spaces, based on popularity, group affiliations, and memberships in gangs and such. Negotiating school hallways and classrooms is not unlike negotiating prison corridors where you are to look someone in the eye, smile, and nod a brief hello. But, one should not look for too long, or it might provoke unwanted reactions like kids screaming confrontationally at the camera. Within prison walls, unspoken prison codes where simple glances are read as powerful and often as challenging looks and seen as disrespecting gazes; staring too long is deserving of (often violent) punishment.

Filming all of these complex interactions of looks, which theoretically have to be understood as more than just many gazes or layers of gazes in a classroom, but rather need to be understood as the exchange of levels of power at work in each look. While some of the power differentials of participants are obvious (Ms. G, the teacher holds a body alarm and radio that could bring an armed s.w.a.t. team at any moment) among the participants, "the guys," the power differentials such as gang affiliation and inside status amongst peers was more difficult to understand and negotiate.

Additionally, the modes of filmic practices such as framing camera angles and negotiating camera movement work to reinforce or counter these powerful moments. For instance, if I held the camera at a high angle looking down on the subjects, I seemingly aligned my camera's gaze with the state surveillance cameras, and in turn the viewers experience, to the

top-down power model of understanding, and reinforced the state power and minimized the prisoner's agency. This footage could be "backed," or even intercut, with the school's or prison's surveillance images themselves, to reinforce this sort of understanding of power. Of course, when I needed to establish the space of the classrooms or particular important moments (thematically), like the circle of students on the floor or the circle of poets sharing their work, an occasional shot from a high angle is not read as damaging or reinforcing oppressive powers, but rather gives viewers more of an "insider's point of view," by allowing them to look from almost inside the circle.

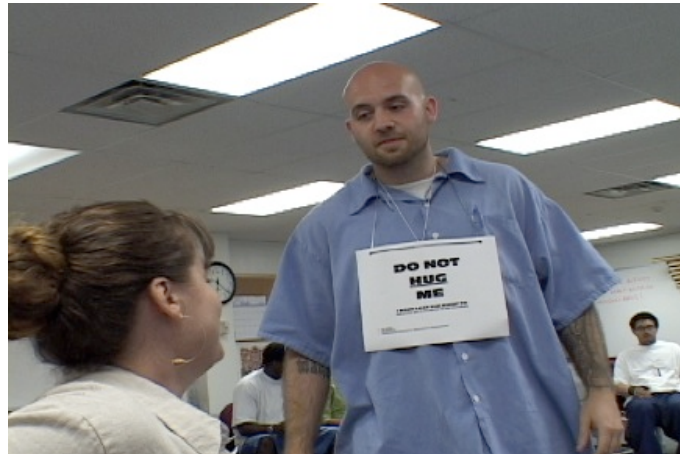
CTT chants the call-and-response pre-show ritual, "CTT - respect. Respect – CTT!" before every performance.

The Stillwater Poetry Group building with Twin Cities artists in 2005 workshops. The SPG poets with e.g. bailey (L), Douglas Ewart (middle), and Truboy (right)

If, for instance, I seek to even power dynamics (as much as is possible when putting a camera with mounted shotgun microphone atop of it in someone's face), I can hold the camera at eye level. I can also choose to film from a low angle, filming up into the eyes of the subjects, making them appear dominating in the frame which may be appropriate for the student actors but not necessarily for the prisoner students. It is a dance, an on the spot improvisation of camera, movement and angle, moving through literal and embodied gazes within the school and prison

classroom spaces. There are times when I feel that I have the dance "right" and others when I miss or don't adequately capture the moment (like the poems in each other's pockets). But, in the editing process, I have the opportunity to patch, correct, re-envision, and re-tell the story. Sometimes there are details that are revealed in the footage (good and disastrous) that went unnoticed before the footage was logged or edited.

One thing becomes clear in both the production and post-production phases of media making: there is no outside to the power and privilege invoked and maintained through a complex set of looks that are exchanged simultaneously among students, teachers, facilitators, and with and within the camera's lens.



SPG "inside" poet David Doppler exchanges a look with Twin Cities poet Desdamona, after a "no hugging" policy was instituted for the group, 2005.[19]

Stillwater prison, specifically, is a site of many interacting and complex gazes. These gazes are gendered, sexed, classed, racialized, aged, gang–affiliated, attached to "out dates" (projected dates of release), institutionalized, forced, and all of these gazes hold varying degrees

---

[19] See the TAKE 1 SPG Disclaimer, that follows this chapter for the "inside" SPG's take on the "no hugs for thugs" policy that was discussed in a poem written by Jose Seals that called the workshop participants, "a plantation of huggers" when we received a memo and strict talking to for having physical contact with inmates. reggie or other "outside" artist would give an "inside" artist a celebratory hug after reading a powerful poem, or having some breakthrough. In the disclaimer, written by Dop and "performed" in solidarity by the SPG "inner core" members", he stated that "*please, whatever you do, do not form relationships, establish alliances, teach; do not have love for, do not teach, do not have any form of contact, most of all hugging with any inmates, or you might run the risk of being exposed to the most intense forms of feelings, dreams, talents, views, intellect, and love. Therefore, causing you to become a threat to the security of all correctional facilities."*

of power. Within the Lit3 classroom, there are many levels and exchanges of looks. I look at them and they look at me. They stare, not menacingly but rather instensly curious, at any new "guest artist from the outside" that comes to co–facilitate. These gazes are met, in varying degrees from shyness to curiosity, when the guests return the looks. Looks exchanged between teacher before the SPG critical poetry workshop were probably the most humanizing. A prisoner could be seen as a student (and treated more humanely as a student) during his time in the classroom. Yet one ring of a panic button or signal on a radio alarm could return the space to prison quickly, and that occurrence was always a possibility for students and teachers in a prison classroom.

The SPG "inner core" disperse after reading the SPG disclaimer
in front of the classroom's hallway window.

The classroom has one wall of windows on the education unit's hallway. This window is often filled with the gazes of passersby, such as other offenders, teachers, guards and prison officials. On more than one occasion, I caught the face of a man sticking out his tongue, in a sexually suggestive way, in the hallway window. One of the SPG members would return a menacing gaze causing him to quickly disappear down the hallway.

Dop walks through the surveilled education unit's hallways.

In prison, every space is always under the watchful eye of cameras. There are cameras mounted in the corners of every room – some are obvious and others are absolutely hidden. From what I was told by SPG members, the cameras can zoom in to read the fine print on a document.[20] Behind those cameras, in the guard bubbles, unknown and unidentified eyes watch and record; they hold the power to alert institutional authorities of our activities at any moment.[21] One of the educational tutors, Shabazz, sat behind a video camera on a tripod during every session. His insider gaze also constructed a document of our workshop that was aired weekly on the prison's closed circuit TV, The Step Channel, which gave all of the prison's 1400 residents access to our sessions. I learned early on that the reason that prison officials allowed me to bring a camera to film the workshop sessions was the result of the teacher, Ms. G's role as Step Channel programmer; they wanted "better" footage of the class to show on the Step Channel.

The realization of the outsider spectator access to our sessions could have been devastating. The sessions often revealed very intense and emotionally charged topics such as negotiating manhood and grappling with sexuality in a place where a photograph of a girl in a

---

[20] See studies of the prison panopticon studies here: Bentham, Jeremy. *Panopticon (Preface)*. In Miran Bozovic (ed.), *The Panopticon Writings*, (London: Verso, 1995): 29-95.

[21] In fact, one evening watching cable television, I saw some of the SPG members on a television documentary about the Minnesota supermax prison Oak Park Heights, engaged in race riots and fights with prison guards. I was bothered that the cable station has access to the recorded prison surveillance footage.

bikini is considered contraband and is a security threat to the institution, and dealing with the pain they feel for the children some of the young “lifers” will never have. Having all of this personal discussion and writing shared on everyone’s television screens (and shown repeatedly for all of these eyes to see) could have put some SPG “inside” poets in danger because of their candid exposures. As an “outside” SPG artist, the impact of this access became clear early on.

When we walked the main prison corridor one week, men shouted my name and asked about my daughter, screamed demands about also being in the class, and one even boasted to masturbate to my image. All of us “outsiders” were literally caught in these complex exchanges of looks and subjected to “offender,” guard, and institutional gazes.

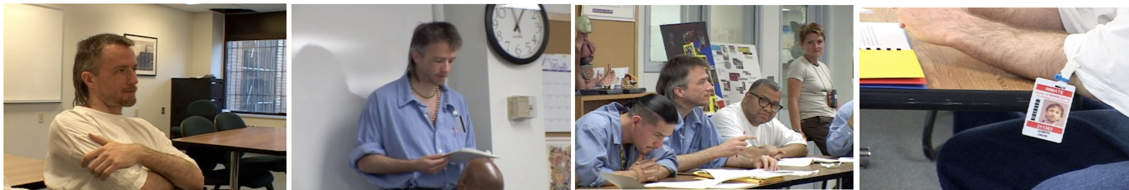
Still, SPG members seemed comfortable and at ease in the classroom. Carl Wesley showed his vulnerability in one session, coming to tears explaining that he had to tell his growing son that he was no longer permitted to sit on his Dad’s lap in the visiting room.

Carl Wesley (left) and reggie harris (right)

In a pre–SPG anthology, Carl wrote: “My life may be considered dismal – locked down for twenty years. / Taken from my wife and children, I fight back the tears. / But my soul refuses to die as I uphold my dignity each and every day. / I wade through this time behind bars, while clinging to the important things in life along the way. / I educate myself while maintaining a deep–rooted desire to be free. / Even in this place, I realize it’s never too late to be the very best

that I can be."[22]

Carl, a talented artist, has a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master's Degree in Education from Harvard.   Before his incarceration, Carl worked professionally doing illustrations, and made "lots of money," he explains one session. He reveals that his social anxieties, background, and affinity for being high got him involved with drugs, which led to violence and his conviction, a twenty year prison sentence. His wife brings their children to visit often, and his artwork continues to appear in galleries and publications in the Twin Cities, and nationally.



A montage of images of Joey Davis

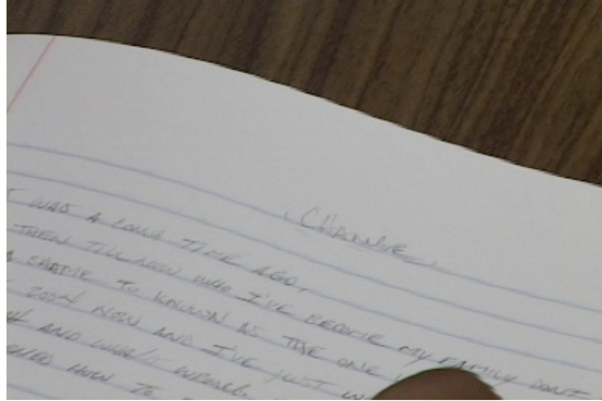
Joey Davis, a tall white man with a mullet, expressed his anger to the group, because he heard that the women prisoners at Shakopee, a nearby women's facility, get to have overnight visits with their children. Joey wants to organize and gain more rights for imprisoned dads. Joey's anger then angered another inmate, serving a life sentence, because he knows that, at that time, Joey had only five years remaining on a seven–year sentence. He will be able to return home to his family, while the younger inmate who has been incarcerated his entire adult life, will never have the privilege to return home or to have children. Debates amongst SPG members are messy and complicated.

---

[22] *It's Never Too Late, A Literary Project by the Inmates of Stillwater and Shakopee Prisons*. (Bayport, MN: Pauline Geraci, MCF–Stillwater, 1995).

The SPG understands institutionalized living conditions such as confinement to an 8.5 by 11 cell, for sometimes 24 hours a day for weeks on end during a unit lockdown. They live together, eat together, and have little time for solitude because the cellblocks are extremely loud and unruly. Because of their circumstances, this community is unlike any other. During the initial filmed sessions the guys scattered around the room, but physical distance between each man in subsequent sessions SPG students decreased as participants began sitting shoulder to shoulder. The became a tight-knit learning circles, who wrote and shared intimate details of their lives.

For much of the workshop, many of the SPG members carried each other's poems around in their pockets, a rarity even amongst men outside prison walls.



Mr. 187406, known by the group as “G.F.” writes a poem called “Change”

“Do you have GF’s poem on American Dreams?” one SPG member shouted to another across the room.

“Yah, I got it,” he replied, pulling a rolled piece of paper out of his state–issued jean pocket.

These men looked each other in the eye, listened to each other patiently, and showed respect for each other’s differences. This seemed a contradiction to prison stereotypes of prisoners as predators, and even in contradiction to the everyday realities they revealed about life just outside of the educational unit’s doors.

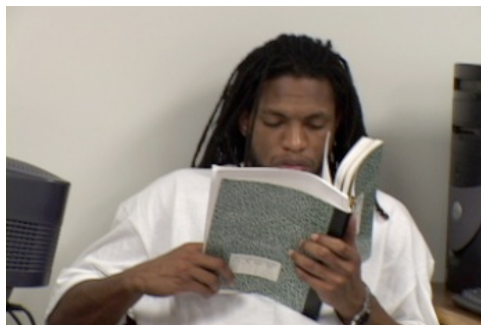
“As far as what’s going on in here,” stated the SPG prison cameraman Shabazz one session, “that can’t happen on the block.”

Shabazz, the "inside" cameraman also participated in the workshops from behind the camera.

He claimed that the SPG members' ability to bond despite differences could not be replicated in the cellblocks. "As far as him going over there and being able to hang with these guys and they accept him," he explained further, "that's just never going to happen."

A heated debate about change and how they can live their transformed lives in the rest of the prison ensued. Some nodded in agreement while others offered instances of the positive effects of the poetry group. For example, they shared that violent conflicts had been quelled in lines at the chow hall because of SPG member interventions. Some in the group noted their shift in judgment about a gay inmate who was so tortured that he committed suicide on Christmas some years back.

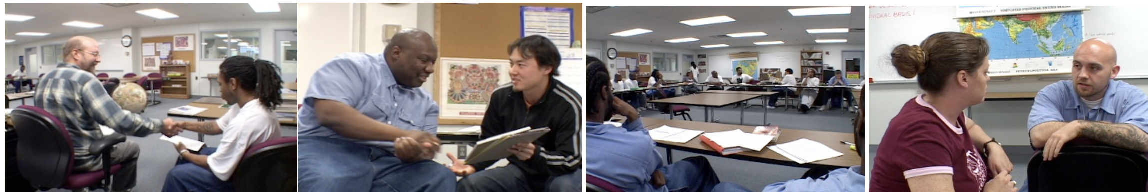
Others talked about how one of the members was preyed upon because he's a "neutron," which means he is not plugged into a gang for protection or support (like being loaned soap or toothpaste when he runs out or becomes exploited for anything he has). Many discussed this common practice as "not cool," brainstorming on how to change this exploitation.



Mr. 187406 prepares to read his poetry for the SPG workshop.

SPG writings, plays, essays, and poetry were shaped by these instances, and many other experiences, that most of us living outside the razor wire can barely imagine. As a filmmaker

documenting these sessions, I am responsible for creating thoughtful videotapes that accurately captured what happened. This seemed a daunting task to a achieve shooting with single camera video style. At one point in the planning stages there was a young man, new to filmmaking, who was slated to work with me to film the workshops. But, he was unable to commit to the project. In truth, I believe that he felt uncomfortable working with (read: for) an experienced woman filmmaker; he seemed unwilling to take direction from a woman, and his absence meant that I would be filming solo. Shooting single camera meant that I couldn't film a wide shot of the class on a tripod, and film the same moment from another angle to give "real time" footage to intercut. Ideally, I would have a wide shot and also direct another camera to move handheld throughout the space, which would give me the options and "coverage" of the action. I could not have multiple shots of the same moment, which would have helped to edit more dynamic scenes, which would be more representative of what occurred in the space.



This series of images shows the "outside" artists working with the "inside" artists:
(on the far left) John Passi and LaVon Johsnson, (second from left) David Islam and Ed Bok Lee,
(third from left) the SPG circle, and (right) Desdamona and David Doppler.

The "inside" and "outside" facilitators would have to prepare, in advance, and send their materials through the teacher, Ms. G., who would do her best to give the materials to the intended party with at least a day or two to read. I, however, would have no idea about the content or the structure of the session so filming was always an active challenge. During the sessions, both "inside" and "outside" facilitators would lead, speak, and encourage the session's participants to read their pieces or discuss the ideas that were presented, and the facilitator who was speaking would often move around the circle, presenting a physical challenge and the challenge of being able to capture *every* moment. The structure and format of the teaching, learning, sharing process

(with each participant sharing in roles, responsibility, and shaping how the workshop would function) was a key element of the process that I desired to reflect in the footage and the distributed edits. As a result of my desire to distribute this work beyond the prison's Step Channel, this circle was special, and it is significant that these moments can be shared through our videotaped documentation. This is sometimes a heavy burden to bear.

2.4 Filming in the Blackbox: Challenging the "Barriers to Entry"

I first met Central's visionary teacher Jan Mandell at the University of Minnesota, in "Introduction to Social Justice," a 2005 course pioneering the social justice minor at the University of Minnesota, that required students to study organizing theories and do a practical service-learning internship. We sat around a classroom conference table. Students eager to put theory into practice, and representatives from local feminist and social justice organizations presented their work as possible sites for student placement. We introduced ourselves and shared our interests. Then the visiting folks went around the table mostly discussing opportunities to work with organizations tutoring students and flyering neighborhoods. But, when Jan talked excitedly about her students and their original plays, I got excited. I proposed a different sort of service learning activity; I wanted to film her classes and arts-based social justice workshops. I shared my background as a filmmaker, my interest in theater, study of Augusto Boal and *Theater of the Oppressed*, and my willingness to document her social justice work. She was quick to emphasize that her students do more than put on high school plays; they write, improvise, and

produce original work on issues most important to their everyday lives, This, Jan insists, is social justice education using theater as a method.

Jan also mentioned that many had come into the Blackbox with video cameras, but with a few exceptions, most of the videotapes were never edited or screened. I wondered why? What could be so difficult about filming youth theater performances?

What I didn't know then, but what I know now, is that both the Blackbox classroom and the larger context of the public school is a very complicated space, and not easily captured by a single camera moving about the space.

Before you can reach Jan's Blackbox basement theater classroom, you must ascend a long set of old cement steps leading to the main doorways. All of Central's doors remained locked to the outside during the duration of the school day, for security purposes, and visitors are forced to enter only through Central's main doors. When you reach the front glass doors, you arrive at a security desk with a hall monitor, and (often) a police "peace" officer greets you. You must present identification and get a visitor's pass before you can enter the school. Once inside, Central's hallways and stairwells can be a confusing maze, particularly during breaks between classes when students quickly and loudly move from place to place. Once I descended the proper set of stairs, and traveled two levels down, I reached Jan's classroom.

The best way to describe the Blackbox theater is to think about a space of choreographed chaos. It is loud, filled with diverse students busily moving about. You always hear singing, rapping, a poem, an argument, and there are often students dancing and literally bouncing off of

the walls. Jan understands youth, their energy, excitement, apathy, desire to engage, and how to motivate them when they resist structure.

Jan invited me to the class to meet the students, and asked me first to come without my camera. I entered the classroom, as the first exercise was about to begin. Students were gathered in clumps across the carpeted floor. Another visitor, an African-American playwright who desired to work with the students, was also embedded in the exercise. We jumped right in to improvising scenes with students about drinking at parties, peer pressure, and getting home safely. I felt awkward, uncomfortable, but finally let go and had fun with it. At the end of the day's exercise, a student Jeremiah, that I later came to know well, gave me a smile and nod, acknowledging that I had done a good job.

Jan then had the students "circle up" in the center of the room. I was asked then, only after the intense community-building exercise to introduce myself, talk about my filmmaking and academic work, and answer the student's questions about going to college. I quickly discovered that as I was "studying" Jan, her methods, the students, and their interactions, the students were in fact, studying me for their newest play, "Barriers to Entry." The play explains the many barriers that students face trying to get to college (if that's the path they are on). These students face economic barriers, racism, standardized education that doesn't meet their needs, and other issues that are soon revealed as they develop the performances that become the touring show.

I returned the next class day with my camera in hand, now understanding the process, at least a little bit, from more of an insider's positionality. I had to stand, improvise, and act my way through prompts that Jan shouted from the sidelines, a difficult task that her students do every class period. Jan requires that everyone participate in every role, especially guest visitors. She clearly understands that before students become the studied or filmed subjects, outsiders need to really understand what it is that they do, how difficult it is, and that they must bring the utmost respect to participating in and filming their process.

I filmed Jan's beginning, intermediate, and advanced acting classes, in addition to performances and special events that she attended with her students. I filmed, letting the camera run in long takes, and "passing the camera" to students as I occasionally participated in the workshop as well.[23] I focused filming primarily on the advanced acting class, which forms the touring theater company, Central Touring Theater (CTT). By focusing on this cohesive group, I have attempted to follow the process from brainstorming, improvisation, workshopping of an idea, development of a play, the touring of the work, and ending each performance cycle with student reflections on the process.

The many moments, energy, and the overall creative process focuses primarily on the advanced CTT students who have been working in Jan's classes for at least two years, and are comfortable with both Boal's practices and Jan's teaching style. They are comfortable in the room, familiar with the Theater of the Oppressed techniques which are the foundation of Jan's work (like image, newspaper and forum theater), are invested in the creative process, and have

[23] "Passing the camera" is a technique sometimes used when the filmmaker is both camerawoman and subject, sharing both filming and on-screen time with the subjects. See Jennifer Fox's short "Passing the Camera" at http://www.flyingconfessions.com/pass_Pass.php.

the maturity to critically reflect on the process.[24] The student's ideas, energies, visions, as well as critical and creative work, are always at the center of the curriculum; the aim is to use theater as way to create social justice.

Integral to this praxical research and my feminist filmmaking process within Central are both methods of close observation and participation.[25] Initially at Jan's request, I participated in improvisation exercises and often put down the camera to free-write when the students were given writing prompts. I filmed, following the students around the space, trying to allow their verbal and physical cues to command the camera. I kept a small notebook in my back pocket, noting themes, powerful moments, or ideas on how to shape the larger documentary project, attempting to develop a theoretical frame through filming practice in action. Primarily, I tried to stay connected with the action happening in front of the camera, and as a result, framed the shots according to the action and reactions, and the emotional level of Jan and the students.

---

[24] See the body of work by Augusto Boal, including *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), *Legislative Theatre* (1998), *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (1992), *The Rainbow of Desire* (1995), and the body of work written by scholars and practitioners of Theater of the Oppressed (TO).

[25] A feminist filmmaker "claims a feminist ideology, vocalizes the role that feminism play in filmmaking in challenging codes, modes of production, and distribution, and makes film that explore intersectional issues of race, gender, class, age, sexuality, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and movements for social change", cited from Raimist, Rachel in *The Women's Movement Today: AN Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, ed. Leslie L. Heywood, Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2006, 154-55.

The creative and collaborative processes—between Jan and the students, between Jan and me, between me and the students, and among the family members that visit the Blackbox, other students, teachers, CTT alumni, and other community members who often visit—are difficult to capture on tape, and prove complex in the reframing (editing) of the video footage. Overall, I hope that my videotapes of the many students that worked with Jan in 2005 will help their stories well beyond the confines of the basement theater classroom.

2.5 Positioning Positionality: (Being an) Outsider Inside and an Insider Outside

Within Stillwater prison, SPG members resisted institutionalization by using writing and poetry to imagine for themselves new possibilities of existence and feelings of freedom beyond their physical place. Within the prison walls, life becomes institutionalized by order and control. Behavior is policed by complex systems of power and by day-to-day exercises of hierarchical power interacting in this place. There are complications of race, class, sexuality, age, gang affiliations, religions, types of employment, housing units, lengths of incarceration, and codes of beliefs about particular kinds of crimes. Prison is a space of intense gender performance, and at the onset of the SPG critical poetry workshop, one of hypermasculinity.[26]

[26] I theorize much of the behavior of the men I've encountered at Stillwater Prison as hypermasculinized. Hypermasculinity is an exaggeration of gender–stereotyped behavior that equates a performed masculine with being a man. This behavior is typified by brooding, stern "gangster" looks, literally bumping chests with each other, and referring to most women as bitches. The SPG writers refer to this form of masculinity as being "mannish". I believe that they are performing gender beyond having the characteristics of a man but rather perform a hypermasculine identity. I will discuss this further in the essay as they allow me to see

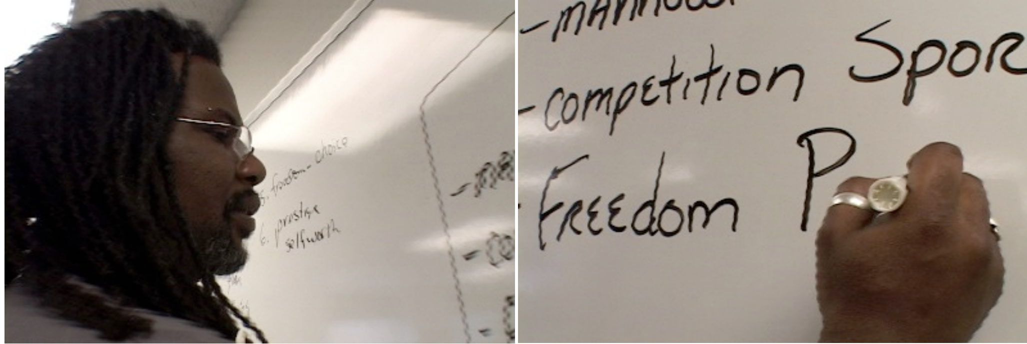
Being a woman, feminist, and non–offender complicates how I conducted myself physically. Within the space I am acutely aware of my own gendered, racialized, classed and various identity performances.[27] My status as a visitor with a camera, under the protection of the teachers and the correctional officers (guards), gave me levels of privilege and power, and always a complicated sadness that at the end of every class period, I would leave, exit with the doors locked behind me, and go home to my life, while the SPG "inside" poets would return to their cellblocks, and the monotony of prison life. My choice of words, tone of voice, smile (or lack of), and movements inside the walls were under constant scrutiny of many watchful eyes.

I am an outsider on many levels – a woman inside a male facility, a camerawoman with the rare permission to film inside prison walls, a non–poet, someone who gets to leave the facility as I please, and a feminist. I considered my positionality very critically and decided to implement specific methodological tactics to "capture" and "represent" this space on video. As a feminist, I have particular investments in working toward social change by challenging systems of power, normative social constructions, and the stereotypes that mainstream media perpetuates about this vulnerable population.

---

beyond their "mannish" ways. They admit to the discomfort and the nervousness to be so physically close to a woman (because they could be physically closer to me in the classroom space than they can to their own wives, mothers, sisters, and girlfriends in the visiting room).

[27] I am of the "hip–hop generation". I am a Nuyorican who came of age in hip–hop, under Rockefeller Drug Laws, and have too many personal interactions with the police and the criminal justice system. Being hip–hop immediately gave me a level of authenticity, a level of street credibility. My stories of a career working with name rappers in the music industry before moving to Minnesota for graduate school brought interest and attention to my presence. My ability to be "down" (authentic) complicated what they perceived as a Women's Studies PhD student and a feminist.



reggie lists the top thematic categories as chosen by the "inside" SPG members
so that they may sign up to facilitate the workshop sessions.

In the workshop on April 19, 2004 reggie, (the Critical Poetry workshop founder, poet, and executive director of the non-profit "in the belly" collective), explained the genesis of the project, influenced the facilitation process, and impacted my approach to filming. In the first session of filming, he said:

> One of the main reasons I started this [project] was because I got tired of going in doing missionary work. I got tired of going into spaces like this, *bringing the truth* to you all, telling you all what you need to be focused on, or what you all need to be doing to get you out of this situation. I got tired of doing that especially because I didn't have any of those answers. I didn't have any of the answers that kept you out [of prison], that got you out, freed your mind, or any of the rest of that. I didn't have any of that. I thought well, what if we bring in artists and let them tell their stories, and you all can glean from these artists and get some insight into your own struggles.[28]

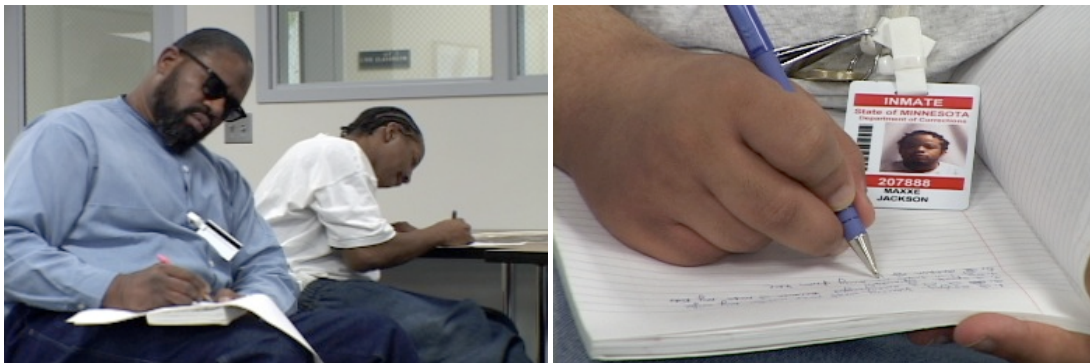
reggie speaks as both an insider and outsider; he has experienced incarceration first-hand and has been mentoring imprisoned populations for many years. He was deliberate in explaining the theory behind the workshop to all of the participants. He is most interested in exposing the methodology to the "inside" SPG members, who are not just participants, but collectively determine the course of the workshop and share power in the process through session co-facilitations with "outside" artists. He explained the workshop as a space and place to "break down walls" and "stretch the (identity) boxes" in which we frame ourselves, and each other. He discussed the literal and metaphoric idea of the wall stating that, "Even though we are in here - where we build up walls - I think we started building the walls out there, deciding who and what

[28] Quote pulled from first SPG workshop on April 19, 2007, SPG tape 3.

we were, and what we're going to keep out. In here we can break the walls down."[29] As a feminist filmmaker, I see my role in line with reggie's vision. I want to (literally) stretch the box (read: the video frame), to create more complex and nuanced understandings of prisons and people of color.

As I would in Jan's classroom a year later, I entered the prison classroom without a camera to first observe the environment, meet the students, and to sit in the circle as a visiting participant, rather than immediately turn the lens on subjects that I had never looked in the eye or talked to. From this first visit, I consciously thought about the approach to filming wondering how I, an outsider and woman with a camera, would frame this group. I did perceive them to be a group but learned within the first workshop session that they were far from a cohesive group; building a community of respect was something that the workshop itself worked hard to build.

By design, the pedagogical practices asked participants – as both "inside" and "outside" SPG members – to stretch, pull, and (re)frame ideas of self, identity, difference, and community. The SPG workshops used writing, study, dialogue, and processes of community building to resist the oppressive, and de-humanizing conditions of institutionalization and imprisonment.



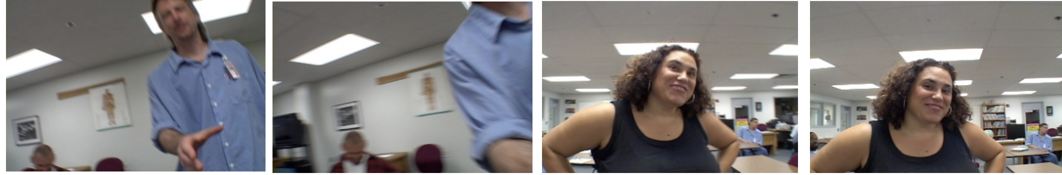
[29] Ibid.

In the weekly workshops, power and authority over knowledge was shared through co-facilitation methods and other critical education practices.[30] In this workshop, all of the participants were valued as contributors to learning; all the knowledges present in the room were shared, discussed, and debated. All participants had the opportunity to read and to speak in the sessions. This pedagogical model also acknowledged the power and privileges of each participant involved in the workshop, whether they were an imprisoned writer, or an artist from the Twin Cities, participating as a prison resource.[31] This workshop method allowed for power-sharing rather than just extending the power over banking model of education, and not positioning only the workshop facilitator as sole authority, expert, and the keeper of the knowledge.[32]

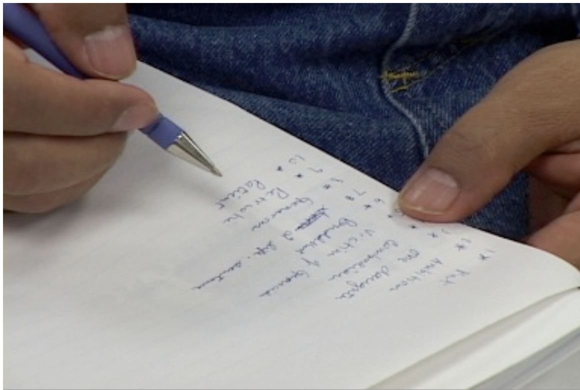
As a documentarian I spent most of the time behind the camera but also co-facilitated during which time I chose to pass the camera to an "inside" poet or visiting artist to film. So I am documented and was subjected to the gaze of my own camera, as well as the institutional cameras.

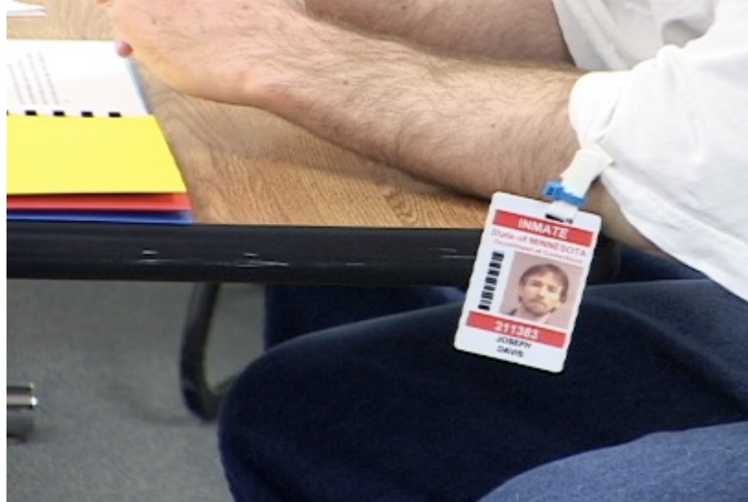
---

[30] See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).
[31] Administration and guards watching, teacher part of the institution, reggie as project leader who is simultaneously insider/outsider, and award-winning Twin Cities "outside" artists.
[32] See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

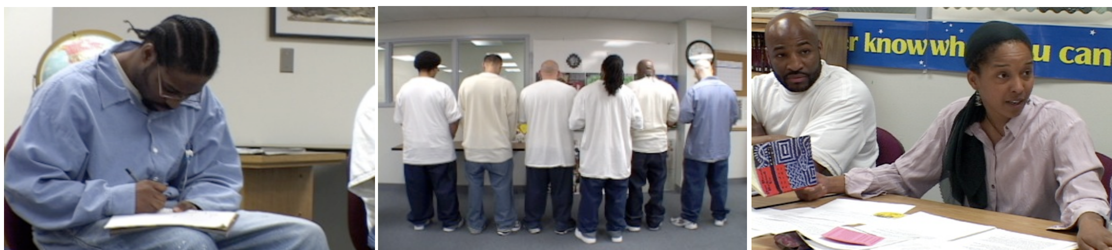

I pass the camera to “inside” SPG poet Joey Davis, who films me smiling.

Because I was filming groups of people who are oppressed, subordinated, marginalized, and often exploited by the media, I deeply considered the representational politics and my responsibility as the filmmaker from the first day of filming. I was not interested in hallways shots that show rowdy, seemingly out of control kids running the hallways, or shots capturing bars and razor wires that mirrored prison imagery. From the start, I was more fascinated with the CTT student’s faces and interactions, and pencils gripped tightly in SPG hands; in both spaces I worked to capture their smiles, tears, and complex interactions.





Within Stillwater prisoner I thought, and noted in my production notebook (kept during filming in my back pocket with a spare battery): *Do I point the camera in someone's face and start asking questions? Do I hang back by the wall? Should I try to be a fly on the wall or will they take that as offensive? Do I interact and affect what's happening in front of the lens? Do I put the camera on a tripod or circulate through the space, working only handheld? Do I zoom or physically move closer to frame the shots? Do I focus on the details – the prisoner I.D. tags hung on each man's neck, the dry crackling hands that write furiously across the paper, or do I worry about getting all the wide–shot interactions of members of the group? Do I just film and not worry or do I think through every movement?*



Questions about my filmic process and theoretical approaches could have overwhelmed the process in both spaces. Theory, too much theory, can cause paralysis on the actual doing, so I just picked up the camera and started to film, following my gut instincts. In Jan's classroom there could be 150 or 200 students moving about the space at any given time. Although the CTT touring group is made up of fewer than 50 students Jan teaches 200+ students in intro, intermediate, and advanced acting throughout the day. Often students spend much of their "free" periods in Jan's classroom, participating, observing, and just "kicking it." So filming a classroom of 100 students, who I couldn't identify by name, proved challenging. I decided to shoot handheld and kept a tripod on the side of the room, opting to use it only for isolated moments, like impromptu in-class performances or on in-class guests. If I pulled out the tripod, inevitably I'd end up fumbling with the tripod and missing too much of the action. But, how could I move through the space without being distracting? I am aware that as much as one might aspire to be "a fly on the wall," both the students and prisoners are keenly aware of the camera's position, regardless of how you move.

Ashley "Younique" is one of "the stars" of "Barriers to Entry."

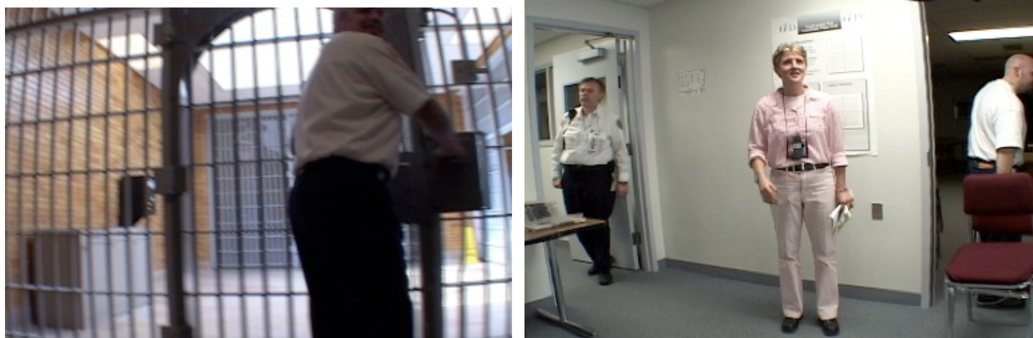
There were obvious classroom "stars" in each space. In Jan's classroom, Ashley "Younique" was clearly the standout performer. Ashley, an African-American woman who grew up in a single mother household, is an incredible writer, poet, rapper, and can hold a tune brilliantly. She was emerging as the unofficial star of "Barriers" and I had to resist the temptation to position her as the only "star" in my frame. Similarly at Stillwater, there were obvious "star" poets, favored by Ms. G and the visiting facilitators, but to truly understand and capture the entire classroom and even the most silent of participants, I was committed to telling a more nuanced and complex story about the SPG, and not just focusing on the most literate, engaging, and talented students.

In watching, logging, and making notes about the CTT and SPG footage, I emerged with an understanding about my process of filmmaking. As I filmed, I actively negotiated the classroom spaces, deciding how to hold the camera, where to film, what to film, how to frame each particular moment, and how to equitably cover *all* the student participants. It may seem like a simple negotiation, but the truth is that feminist filmmaking is an active and difficult negotiation between theory, embodied epistemologies about race, gender, class, sexuality, power, privilege, and justice, and the material practices of framing, composition, and editing.

2.6 Theorizing the Space: "Shooting" a prison classroom

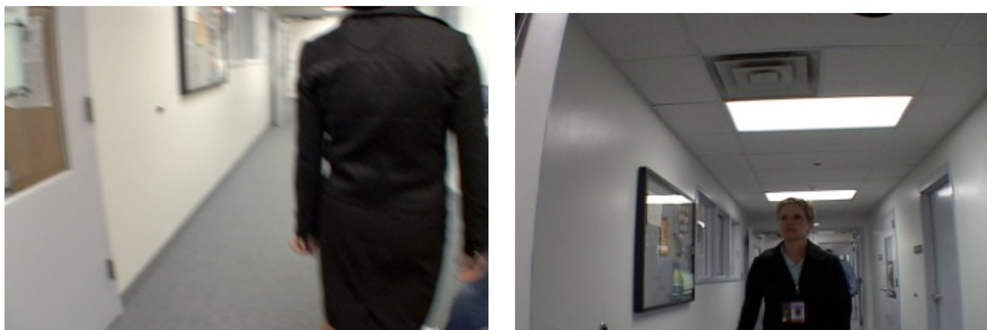
Before entering the prison, I knew nothing of the SPG poets beyond the fact that they

were men in prison, had been found guilty of a crime, and had voluntarily enrolled in a poetry writing class. I didn't know their crimes. I didn't know their races, ethnicities, religions, ages, length of sentences, or how receptive they would be to the camera. So, I first went to meet the SPG writers without a camera, and traveled a familiar path captured on tape the very next visit to Stillwater.



A guard lets us into Stillwater's main corridor (left) and a guard calls for the prisoners to return to their cell blocks, and Ms. G stands by the door trying to facilitate that as quickly as possible, to avoid conflicts with the guards.

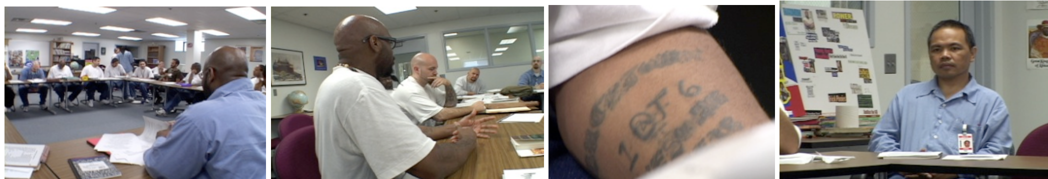
I first entered the prison with camera in hand, one late afternoon in April 2004. We were meticulously searched, required to wear I.D. tags and body alarms (a clunky box with a pull tab and a big, red button that you are instructed to press *only* in an emergency situation). We went through metal detectors and were buzzed through layers of huge metal doors. I inadvertently had pressed the record button and recorded "prohibited" images of entering the space, and panicked almost immediately, afraid to move my finger to the camera's trigger (the record button) because I feared being caught and removed from the facility.



Ms. G moves through the hallways of the educational unit.

After winding through hallways, corridors, and down stairwells, we finally entered the classroom in the basement of the facility. The education unit is carpeted and air–conditioned, unlike other parts of the prison accessible by inmates. Filming here looks no different than other institutional spaces. High schools and public university classrooms contain similar desks, tables, chairs, white boards, computers, maps and television monitors. But for the bars on the window, passing guards, ceiling mounted cameras, and particularities of the student body, this classroom could have been in any public school.

All of the stereotypes about prison and what inmates look like flashed in front of me - the skinhead, the gangbanger, the queer "bitch," the sociopath, and the religious enforcers. I literally had to shake myself to free my mind from these deeply embedded images, absorbed from television and countless films. I made a choice *not* to ask the question on many people's minds: *What are you in for?* I could already sense that many had been imprisoned for a long time, had not been around women (save for female guards and teachers), and that many of them barely interact with each other outside of this classroom.



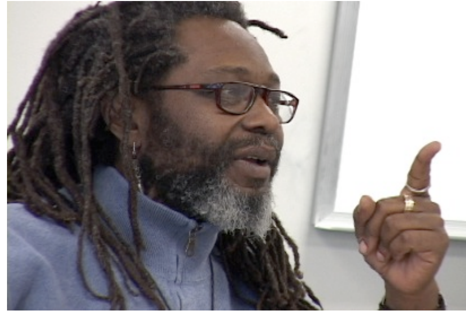
Differences clearly weighed heavily on the group, and would certainly factor in the shaping of the filmic re-telling about the SPG. There were shades of Black from dark to honey light, there were whites of differing Anglo descents, Native, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Latino, Asian, and a handful of men of mixed heritage. Many of these men are (or were) gangsters, pimps, and drug dealers. They are of different and often conflicting religious denominations—Catholics, Christians, Buddhist, Muslims (including Sunni, Nation of Islam, and Five Percent), as well as Hebrew Israelites. I could easily read the tattoos of gang affiliations —Gangster

Disciples, Maniac Disciples, Black Pstones, Piru Bloods, Crips, and more that I'm not literate in deciphering. They seem to range in age from early 20s to late 60s. Their eyes frequently caught the camera, but seemed unaffected by the camera's presence. These subjects are used to being under watchful gazes, they are accustomed to cameras—both prison security and news cameras (which often enter the prison for those cable documentaries that give "an inside" look at prisons).

Ja'far Rahotep (left) prepares for his lesson on African history, and
Ms. G (in her favorite lobster hat) shares her national award for
"Teacher of the Year" for Adult Basic Education, with LaVon Johnson.

I moved through the space to film, capturing a seemingly "typical" classroom, albeit with a quirky teacher, Ms. G, known for wearing a collection of silly hats. I filmed, framing various coverage shots of the room, filming wide-shots of the students seated behind tables in rows, a marked physical distance sits between each of them. The process of taking this fragmented classroom and building a physical circle of writers, where each man respectfully looks another in the eye, is a rarity in prison. As the depth of the writing shared in the classroom intensified and trust was built, participants gave critical and constructive feedback, and the circled community strengthened.

Reggie designed the workshops as sessions where one SPG poet (an "inside" poet) was paired with a guest artist (an "outside" poet/artist). Through co–facilitated sessions on themes generated by inside members, the prisoner writers explored topics of manhood, womanhood, history, fatherhood, and many other complex themes.



“Oustide” artist, J. Otis Powell (left) discusses voice in the universe,
while Douglas Ewart (right) plays a didgeridoo as Marcus Shannon claps to the beat.

“Outside artist” Truboy (left) discusses his work in the SPG circle,
while Mankwe Ndosi (right), seated next to Vino Briton, reads “Stations” by Audre Lorde.

This process pushed all of the artists to stretch seemingly fixed ideological frameworks about identity, stereotypes, and prisons, and produced moments of resistance and social change inside this community. These sessions were filled with emotions, tears, and arguments, all of which produced volumes of powerful writing that SPG members hoped would be published into a book distributed beyond prison walls. It is very important to the group that SPG members speak beyond their immediate conditions. They did not write poems simply dealing with prison yard conflicts, cellblock politics or guards. Instead they connected very deeply with “the outside.” They ask “outside” artists, “what’s going on in the world?” in nearly every workshop session.

They have access to newspapers, television, movies, music, books, and vivid memories of life before prison. They desire to make transformative changes, exemplified by SPG poet Ja’far’s statement to the group (he claims is a quote from the Holy Quran): Social change begins with the revolution of the mind; when people change what’s in their hearts, they will change their

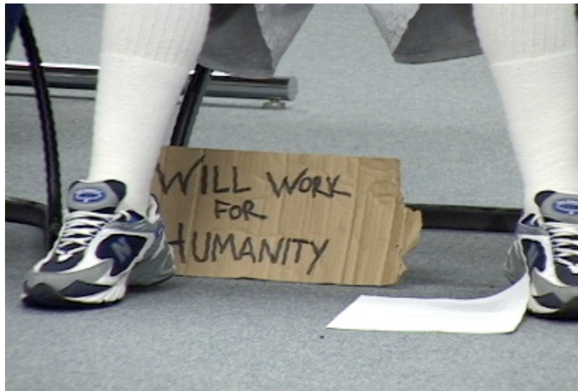
conditions. Many of their writings are social commentary pieces, personal narratives with moral lessons, which urge those behind them not to follow them, and ideas for changing institutional systems like schools and prisons.

Within Central High School there are glaring similarities to the SPG environment. The hallways are surveilled (although the cameras appear less obviously) by St. Paul police "peace" officers, teachers, adult hall monitors, and students who inform the administration of "happenings" amongst the student population. Additionally, there are codes of conduct about physical conduct like glares, stares or bumping another student in the hallway. These seemingly innocent acts, in come cases, result in fighting and other forms of physical violence and punishment. The students are segregated both by the institution (more on this later), and by self-selection. There are many similarities between the institutionalized day of a high school student and of a prison student (which I will explain more in the remaining chapters).

I learned quickly that there are strict prison cultural codes of interaction and behavior, and it was always best to listen and not to speak immediately. If an SPG asked that I turn the camera off, or not film something they wanted to discuss (which surprisingly didn't happen on too many occasions), I always obliged. Giving and receiving respect is paramount, (the exception being prisoners who are child molesters and rapists, who are looked down upon and considered less than human, by other prisoners). Behavioral codes dictate that you look someone in the eye who looks at you, but not for too long. Long stares are seen as a challenge and one always says, "excuse me," if you get too close to someone or need to cross in front of them or come physically near another person. There are unspoken rules about physical distance —you can maintain close proximity when you've been given spoken or unspoken permission. With the addition of the camera in my hands, while moving through the space, the negotiations became even more complicated.

There were also marked racial divides within prison culture; prisons are one of the most

segregated areas in the United States. Whites stay with whites (and within this Aryans stay with Aryans), Mexicans/Latinos group together, Asians group together, Natives group together, and Blacks associate with Blacks. Within racial and ethnic groups, there are further divides by gang affiliation. Still, when conflict between racial groups ensues, normally oppositional groups (like conflicting Black gangs) align against the common and seemingly greater enemy – members of a different racial grouping. The daily de–humanization by prison policies and procedures, film and television depictions of prison life, and interactions with prison visitors (looky–lous who peer at them through cell bars) reinforce the complexity of their incarcerated conditions.



Doppler responds to the memo and meeting that we no longer are permitted hugs or "long" handshakes, with a sign hung around his neck, and this cardboard sign stating, "Will Work for Humanity" propped at his feet.

What I learned in this process is that critical consciousness, can mean being as respectful as possible (saying things such as "excuse me" and "how's it going" as you move close to someone) and being honest when you don't know or understand someone else's differences. I quickly become an "insider" to prison culture while being an "outsider," since I was privileged to live outside of the prison's walls. In "the outside world," as the SPG so fondly call it, I encountered a strange fascination with prison culture by peers, professors, students, and community members alike; I never understood, until these moments, who really watched all those "inside" cable television tele-documentaries. There were intense reactions from folks who got tremendously excited when they heard that you go inside prison, wanting to know if it's true that

they don't have belts, or asking if it's really a code of conduct that you can't look anyone in the eye for longer than two seconds. When I mentioned the project to students, in my search for eager interns, I would get bombarded with students who were excited by the prospect of going inside prison walls with me, only to lose interest in the project when I stated that the internship is in editing alone, and they wouldn't actually get to go inside and *see* the prisoners.

I also reconsidered some of the common film language since filming inside Central and Stillwater because it is inherently masculine and violent. Instead of saying I have a "shoot" or will be "shooting" a particular show, I now say that I will be filming. It may not sound like a huge difference (semantics really), but when you are filming in communities ripped apart by violence, it seems disrespectful to the experiences of community violence to say, "I will be shooting you again tomorrow." Sadly most of the CTT students shared stories of violence, loss, and funerals for their peers and family members, and reinforced my reasons for shifting the language of production. Certainly in prison, many of this community have shot other people who in turn lost their lives, and it is uncomfortable to say "shoot," "shooting," and "shotgun microphone." It is inappropriate to say violent and masculinist statements such as, "I am shooting you now" or, "Tonight I'll shoot the workshop on American Nightmares." In short, filmmaking—the language of production, the processes of filming, and the editing and (re)constructing of the filmed footage—is constant negotiation of language spoken and embodied, of cultural and community codes, and methodologies imbued with power and privilege. Making documentaries is a far from simple task.

2.7 Stretching the Boxes: Frameworks of video frame(work)s

Admittedly, my camerawork is messy. I didn't hire a videographer, or work with a crew as I sometimes do. I worked as a one-woman operation, carrying all my gear on my body. I worried less about a perfect, settled, and framed image and tried to balance framing and

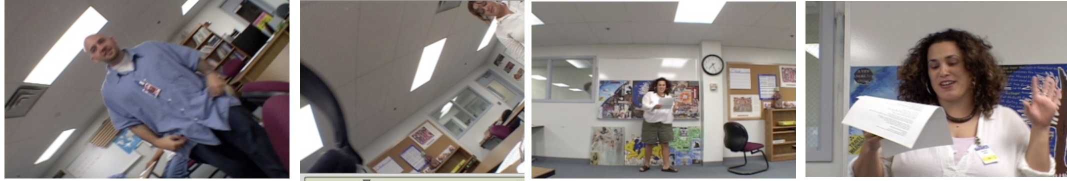
composition in the lens with being present in the SPG circle. There was no lighting beyond ugly overhead florescent lights, or an occasional spill of sunlight from the one barred window facing the prison yard. A single shotgun microphone was mounted on top of the camera recorded all the sound. Occasionally, as when I was filming poem "performances" later used for a fundraiser, I would put the camera on a tripod. For the most part, all of the footage is shot handheld, moving in consistent circles around the space.[33]

I filmed wide shots to establish the space to provide continuity pieces and group dynamics, catching conversations, debates, dialogues, and poetry reading(s). I consciously filmed each SPG member in close–up, as each deserved plenty of coverage. I tried to catch those small but meaningful moments, although I never did get a shot of one man pulling another man's poems from his pocket. Sometimes I was so physically and mentally present in the workshop that the camera lens pointed up to the ceiling while I offered my thoughts and opinions. It was a task to juggle being both an "outside" participant, and the camerawoman, but as a woman who wears many hats (student/teacher/scholar/researcher/mother, etc.), I embraced the facets of the responsibilities in each role. I made particular choices to share or "pass the camera" to the subjects to film me.[34]

---

[33] Hand-held camera has often been noted as a feminist filmmaking strategy to reproduce the "real". See Johnston, Claire. "Towards a Feminist Film Practice" in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*. Los Angeles: University of Californa Press, 1976; Kuhn, Annette. *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema.* New York and London: Routledge, 1982. *Kaplan*, E. Ann. *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. New York: Metheun, Inc, 1983; Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (eds.), Feminism and documentary. Visible evidence; v.5. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999; and Cheu, Hoi F. *Cinematic Howling*. Canada: UBC Press, 2007.

[34] Feminist documentarian Jennifer Fox discusses her method of making the six-hour documentary *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* as a method to "investigate the rhythm and quality of your own conversations. You might just want to pick up the camera with your friends to see how you and your friends talk to each other. You may use it in order to research a particular topic, or to explore how it feels to use a camera and to see yourself on film, or maybe just to make a record of a particular moment in your life. This technique is especially useful if your objective is to bring the quality of "presence" into the conversation. This "presence" is what makes conversations meaningful because it means you are totally in the moment - feeling, receiving, perceiving - and not in the normal daze in which most of us live our lives. Many people say that the camera used in this way makes them "wake up" and become more attentive to the moment. If done properly and with the right intention, "Passing the Camera" creates a space that often



I pass the camera to Dop to read my “Why I am An SPG” poem.

On one occasion, I gave the camera to inside SPG member “Dop,” the unofficial “inside” leader/facilitator of the SPG (he’s termed unofficial because inside no prisoner is allowed to be in a position presiding over other prisoners, but this wasn’t policed in the classroom, at least at the beginning). Dop instructed us *all* to write a poem on the topic “why I am an SPG.” He informed me that I was also to write, so I did. It is significant to note that in the first workshop, reggie offered Dop a copy of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* When reggie attempted to hand him the text, Dop replied that he had read the book a couple times already. His teaching and facilitation methods clearly reflected an understanding of critical educational practices.

While I read my “Why I am an SPG” poem, I felt uneasy under the many gazes “capturing” me. Many cameras were filming—his / mine, the SPG official step–channel camera, and the guards’ watchful cameras. I was happy to resume my position behind my camera quickly. I felt uncomfortable and exposed in that instance, unlike the SPG poets, who seem accustomed to the gazing eyes of cameras, guards, teachers, and other poets.

Despite their required institutionalized dress—baggy jeans that are either state-issued or bought from prison approved catalogs, white t–shirts, long sleeved blue button-ups or grey sweatshirts and sweatpants, and white sneakers—each of the men are different individuals. Desiring to understand every man on his own terms, I attempted to do small group interviews with each of the inside SPG poets.

---

gives both people the courage to ask questions they maybe normally wouldn't ask and reveal things about themselves that they normally wouldn't reveal.” <http://www.flyingconfessions.com/pass_Pass.php>

The “bad” interviews I conducted with Ja’far Rahotep (at left in the left image, and centered in the right image) with Lavon Johnson.

Two men at a time sat stiffly in chairs in the teacher break room, a space they are normally forbidden to enter. I felt a strange discomfort, and realized that for the two incarcerated poets who sat a few feet in front of my lens, this was the closest, physically, that either of them had been to a woman in over a decade. Both men were incarcerated in adult facilities before the age of 17; are serving life sentences for gang–related murder, and have done over a decade in prison each. It was awkward. The vulnerable emerging poets in the classroom appeared as hardened criminals in that moment. It seemed that the politics of space, specifically this being a “private” and restricted space normally occupied by teachers only, impacted our interactions. The hardness in their voices, their stiffened posture, and their stuttering to answer questions eloquently, were in sharp contrast to the well–spoken, quiet members of the group that I had filmed just minutes before. My questions were inadequate. Terms I used to these hip–hop generation young men, like “the block,” were confused in this context. I asked about the use of poetry and rap “on the block,” meaning in their urban communities back “home” (where presumably they will never return because they are both serving life plus sentences). They responded by referencing segregation in the (cell) “blocks” in which they reside in. This caused a weird and uncomfortable tension that I had not experienced in the larger classroom space.

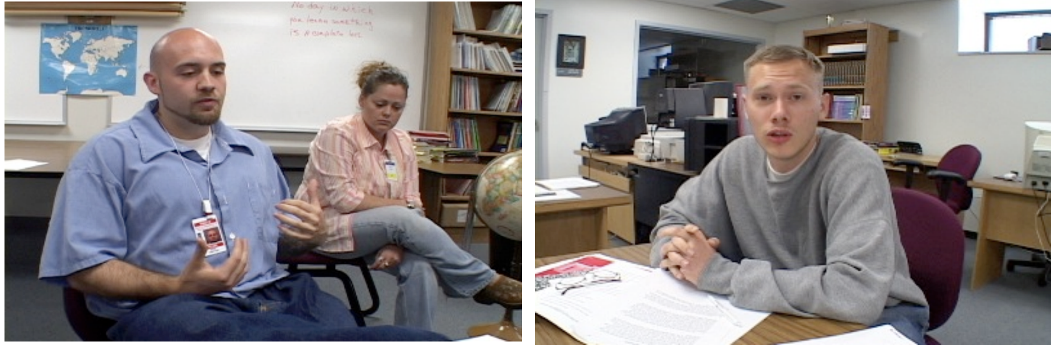
Jose Seals (left) and LaVon Johnson (right) in more of the “bad” breakroom interviews.

After a few of these interview sessions, I cancelled this approach. The filming felt uncomfortable on many levels, and I knew I would never include the footage of them (re)presenting themselves as “inmates” like we see on television. Their discomfort in the one to one interviews worked in opposition to the intentions of the program: to break the boxes and expand the ways in which we frame ourselves and others. Still, the remaining SPG members wanted their “screen time,” and asked repeatedly for their one on one interviews. I considered doing more of these interviews but decided against it; there were SPG members I knew that I didn’t want to be alone with (specifically an older gentleman who once pinched my bare thigh under the table). However, I still may use some of this interview footage in future pieces that I edit.

Ms. G (left) and Dop (right photo, seated left) with Ms. G.

The only interviews that seem to work in the edits, providing a context, a structure, and a brief history of the group are the interviews with Ms. G and Dopp. They had a working relationship as mentor and student, even calling themselves colonel and sergeant (because Ms. G

is, in fact, a Colonel in the U.S. National Guard reserves). It is built on an understanding of the role of education and a genuine respect for one another—a rarity amongst DOC employees and prisoners. Ms. G was an extraordinary teacher, and Dop an extraordinary student.



The "good" interviews, conducted in a large circle. Dop (left photo, seated left) with Desdamona, and Ezekiel Caligiuri (right photo).

Instead, I filmed short "interviews" in a large group circle inside the regular classroom space, filming each member, then moving around the circle. This method of group interviews, giving only prompts like "share your experience being an SPG" and "what do you want people to know about this group," allowed all of the SPG inside artists to get equal opportunity screen time, and to share what they deemed important to tell of this experience.

My active (feminist) decision-making throughout the filmmaking process is part of a feminist film history that, at the same time, writes complicated images of complex communities into our collective critical consciousness, both in theory and in practice. My path is not new: the theoretical and practical marriage of feminism and documentary has been critiqued, analyzed, and described for over a decade, and it is in the negotiating of this marriage that I see transformative possibility.[35] My resistance to producing stereotypical representations guides the choices I make

[35] See Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, eds., *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

as a participant and camerawoman. The critical decision-making process I have as an editor, and my considerations of modes of distribution are all part of working toward a symbiotic feminist media praxis—theory and practice that works to (re)think how feminist theorizing and documentary practices have been written into history thus far.

Take 2 – CTT Rap "The Remix"

[Central tape 24 // excerpt of video tape log and transcripts]

02:28 Ashley leads rap, end of the year performance in Central's auditorium, January 20, 2005.

Ashley: This is the intro to our show. This is a little rap we put together.
All: *Ceeeeeee T T, Ceeeeeee T T*
[set to Snoop Dogg and Pharrell's "Drop It Like It's Hot"]

CTT The Re-mix
Yah you know how we do
2004, 2005
keepin' it live for you
some artists from the past
and some of us are from the past
and some of us are new
so I'ma break it down for you
introduce the crew
[the rest of CTT skip on stage]
We got WINTA, Nadia, Anna, and JENI
TARA, KARIS, Ashley, and NIKKI
Cedric, Truman , Dennis and Emily
ERIC, MAGGIE, Michaela, and Josie

Before we finish out the crew
we can't forget Jan
The woman who puts up with us
does all that she can

We got Nehemiah, Lavelle, and Shawnta
Joann and last but not least we got Jay

THE BLACK BOX

Is where I strap on my imagination
And with no hesitation I strive for my destination
My destiny's to make it to be on silver screens
Big time, bright shinin' if you know what I mean

THE BLACK BOX

Where we write rhymes, spit em, and get applauded
The only place that's safe to get the actin' party started

See this is what we live, performances is what we give
Serving you up somethin filling that'll stick to ya ribs

THE BLACK BOX

Safe space generating fa sho
Feel the vibes, mad love when you step in the do'
One taste of this space and you're gonna want mo'
People takin' doggy bags when its time to go

THE BLACK BOX

The only place where the teacher clowns
Even custodians that come through be wantin to get down
Cause the music's blastin and you feel the beat
Go 'head and kick off ya shoes and relax ya feet
So we can party down to this black box beat
And get it crackin wit CTT
Cause the black box is the place to be
Where you can come in and set your mind free

[Ashley passes the mic to Kari then to Eric…]

All: CTT is on the stage, we 'bout to start the show.

[05:38: crowd screams, energy is up, & immediately they start beat for "Barriers"…]

[**!!! LOG NOTE:** Students articulate Jan as part of the crew, see bolded text]

CHAPTER 3 - CRITICAL CONTENT: Understanding CTT in Theory and in Practice

Most teachers end up feeding you dead scrolls instead of the living word.
- Marc "Bamuthi" Joseph, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*

The act of expression is an act of connection – through it we become positive, active participants in our lives and in our communities.
- Michael Rohd, *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue*

Telling the truth in a society that promotes a lot of lies and misconceptions becomes social justice work.
- Jan Mandell, teacher/mentor, St. Paul Central High School

3.1 Making Sense of CTT

CTT rehearses for a performance of "Barriers to Entry" at the University of Minnesota, 2005.

Making a documentary on Central Touring Theater and their 2005 production of the youth produced and performed show, "Barriers To Entry," has created a maze of possibilities for the filmic re-telling of this place, these people, and their transformative process. By reading my footage of Jan and CTT against hegemonic (Hollywood) images of white teachers working in inner-city schools in the mainstream media, such as Erin Gruwell in the cinematic re-telling of *The Freedom Writers*, I seek to propose Jan as the counter to the image of the "white teacher" as inner-city savior, and instead show that she is a critical, creative, and experienced teacher.

Erin Gruwell, the highly celebrated teacher of *Freedom Writer's* fame, left the inner-city high school where she taught only after one year as a student teacher and three as a full teacher, and became a distinguished teacher in residence at California State University at Long Beach. She has gone on to run a non-profit organization, speak frequently in the media, and lecture often

on "Education as the Practice of Liberation."[1] Jan has worked in the Blackbox for three decades, and has demonstrated a long-term investment in her students, developing her teaching practices, and improving this St. Paul community. It is important to note that she is a teacher invested in this neighborhood because it is also where she lives. Jan has received awards, some local media attention, and has traveled to the East Coast to conduct trainings for K-12 teachers and college faculty, but has yet to earn the much-deserved national acclaim for her sustained work with her students.[2] Jan, unlike Erin Gruwell from *Freedom Writers,* after nearly a 30 year career teaching at Central has demonstrated that she wil not abandon her students in search of her own recognition. Jan lives and works in this community, and demonstrates a true collaborative approach to teaching, learning, and social justice work.

Understanding Jan, CTT, and Central High School in the context of the larger school-to-prison pipeline and the methodological processes of the filmic process, I arrive at a juncture where I must draw out the significance of critical pedagogy and my feminist filmmaking through an examination of the content of the pedagogical method and performance work documented in the footage of CTT in my archive.

This chapter fuses Jan's personal narrative (taken from video footage and interview transcripts) with ideas, concepts, and frameworks of both critical and hip-hop pedagogies to demonstrate how the CTT and Jan's work are an applied example of effective praxical resistance to hegemonic media depictions and to the school-to-prison pipeline. I seek to create an understanding of the pieces of this CTT puzzle to create media texts that build connections amongst pedagogical, theoretical, and performative practices. Most significantly, I use this written reflection to help create a roadmap to my video documentary about CTT.

---

[1] http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/site/c.kqIXL2PFJtH/b.2286935/k.AD6E/About_Erin_Gruwell.htm
[2] Jan was honored by the Facing Race Initiative of the St. Paul Foundation in 2007. She was awarded the Facing Race Ambassador Award ($10,000) for her anti-racist work with Central's students.

Here I critically explore the content of the CTT project. I also explore the use of critical pedagogies as outlined in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with theater techniques, the beats (of hip-hop), and applications of Augusto Boal's liberation methodology in *Theater of the Oppressed* to understand and "translate" this experience and its significance to theory and a feminist documentary film practice. Freire's key principles of education value each student (and the knowledge they bring with them into the classroom). Freire sees students as subjects, agents in the classroom, and not objects of the schools and the world. Freire believed that, "The ability of humans to plan and shape the world for their future [and] the oppressed majority must be taught to imagine a better way so that they can shape their future and thereby become more human."[3] Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* methodology builds on Freire's frameworks of popular education to bring theater to the people. Boal believed that, "all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it."[4] Boal adapted "traditional" theater and took it off of elite stages and put it in the streets, in order to use theatrical techniques to foster democratic cooperation through problem-posing and problem-solving exercises.

Through close examination of Jan's teaching practices, informed by the theory and practices of Freire and Boal, I consider how to construct the film's narrative to demonstrate that a (white) teacher can be an effective teacher, and yet not be seen as a lone hero, the savior, or society's only hope to save brown students, brown families, brown communities, and inner-city schools. I strive to find a symbiotic relationship among the multiple levels of engagement with the work—theoretical, methodological, practical, and pragmatic—to push the feminist aims of feminist filmmaking in order to produce media texts that are beneficial to teachers, students, and audiences alike. Films like *Freedom Writers* have too much currency as the *only* stories of hope.

---

[3] See "The Educational Theory of Paulo Freire" - http://www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Freire.html
[4] Augusto Boal, *The Theater of the Oppressed,* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 122.

I believe that offering mediatized counter-stories that chronicle effective classroom practices—not just one teacher's tremendous personal sacrifices for one group of students—offers teachers, students, and the larger viewing public new models of critical education in theory and in practice.

My approach to understanding and (re)framing CTT's story follows the practical methodology I undertake to edit and (re)construct the filmic story. I am, in a sense, (re)creating the everyday processes of filmmaking by watching and re-watching the footage, logging it (taking detailed notes), ordering and re-ordering the shots, and editing sequences to "make sense." I must order a series of sequences that (re)tell this story in a cohesive, entertaining, and compelling narrative that demonstrates the efficacy of social justice theater, and resists the narrative of white teacher-savior as the only means of resistance to the hegemonic systems that make up the school-to-prison pipeline. What differs here from the "normal" processes of filmmaking is my desire to engage both practice and theoretical reflection.

This chapter analyzes my critical and creative examinations of the place of Central High School, the space of the Blackbox theater, the key players and supporting cast working within Jan's classes, and considers the key themes that are at the center of the filmic re-telling. What results is a theoretical, methodological, and praxical framework for writing about high school teacher Jan Mandell, critical hip-hop pedagogies, and how I (re)construct the story of CTT to show it to be an efficacious model for critical literacy and creative arts-based education within this public school.

3.2 Understanding Central High School & the (Safe) Space of the Blackbox

The entrance marker at the foot of the steps to Central High School's main entrance (left) and a student drawn "welcome" sign hung on the side of Jan's cubicle office in the Blackbox.

Central High School is located on Lexington Avenue, just south of St. Paul's main strip, University Avenue. Although there are many well-kept yards and beautiful older homes, this inner-city neighborhood, according to the local newspapers, is still dominated by crack in the 21st century.[5] Though it has a racially diverse student population, students are literally stratified by floors of the school's building. Not unlike prison environments, student movement is controlled and tracked by hall monitors and peace (police) officers. In fact, each student is assigned to a particular floor of the school. Their floor "ranking" is determined by a student's achievement on standardized tests, academic ranking, and their behavior. "The upstairs students," Jan explained are the "IB Quest, the gifted and talented students who are [literally] at the top of the school, . . . these kids tend to be the white kids, and there is a whole struggle for the kids of color who actually get in those classes."[6]

This stratification creates palpable divides among students whose only contact during the day is in Jan's acting class in the basement theater classroom space. There are racialized, gendered, and classed identities (usually in group formations) that often result in clashes between

---

[5] Local media often features news stories about drug arrests, drug addicts, and crackdown on drug sales in Central's surrounding areas, like the June 6, 2007 headline "St. Paul targets downtown drug dealing" (http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/06/06/stp_drugbust/), and numerous stories in the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* (http://www.twincities.com/archives).
[6] Jan Madell interview, by author and Pete DeLong, 2004, Minneapolis, video taped recording.

students and peer groups. In Jan's classroom, she allows that energy to channel into critical dialogue and often prompts students to work through conflicts in their theater work.

"The beauty of this work," explained Jan, "is helping [students] see the value of their lives . . . , to use your art as a way to build your self-esteem and communicate to the world about yourself. There are a lot of teachers that attempt to have students tell their stories. What's unique about this work is using safe space to create work that is deeper because with theater [techniques] we're heightening the moment dramatically. You can't just take it hand it in on a piece of paper. You and the teacher create an ensemble event; we become parts of each other's stories."[7]

Students work through scenes using Boal's image theater techniques.

To facilitate a respectful space that *feels* safe for students to negotiate differences and reveal the complexity of their lives, Jan enlists critical pedagogies in order to create a safe space in her classroom. Often, she openly discusses her philosophy to her students, every classroom visitor, and the audiences of her students' performances. She makes every student, even the lower academically ranked students, who often do not feel respected by students and peers, understand that they are necessary and valuable contributors to this learning community. Jan takes a student centered approach in teaching that helps students learn to trust Jan, themselves, and each other. According to Jan's critical teaching practices, trust across differences can be channeled into creative energy to produce material that can only be fostered in safe spaces.

---

[7] Ibid.

3.3 The Blackbox Theater is (By Design) a Safe Space

The Blackbox theater is marked as safe space for Central's students.

This room is clearly marked: This is a Safe Space. The bold black letters state this on one wall while colorful graffiti-styled letters illustrate it on a mural on the other. The Blackbox is not safe space because of the artwork; the posters on the wall are merely visual reminders of the principles practiced in this classroom. "When you build an ensemble you have to build it from the first person who decides they want to go into the warm-up circle, energetic and ready to go, to the person sitting over there saying I'm not getting into any fucking circle," Jan explained in her pragmatic book about her teaching practices, *Acting, Learning and Change.*[8]

> The concept of safe space evolved out of a vocabulary we developed here [in the Blackbox]. I didn't go to school to learn it. 15 years ago I went to New York, and visited the City Kids after school program for youth and they had a great big huge poster with the definition of safe space. It is the ability to work with group, respecting everyone in the group, working with the group making sure no one is left behind, and being able to share your work.[9]

Jan explains the day's tasks to sometimes resistant students (left), covers of student acting journals (right).

---

[8] Mandell and Wolf, *Acting Learning and Change*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann Drama, 2003), 48.
[9] Ibid.

On the cover of the student's acting journals, each student is asked to write his or her name on the top line and their "family" affiliation on the bottom. In the Blackbox each subgroup (intro, intermediate, or advanced) within the acting class is named as a family. This explicitly presents the framework for how the groups of students are to work. As a result, students become close-knit families just like many of the student's real families. They experience push and pull in "family" disagreements, struggle through the tension of trying to achieve mutual goals, and they are built on respect and a love of sorts. Jan reminds her students and her general audience: "Things that happen in the Blackbox are different [in] safe space. Work that is created is deeper, [and] because it's theater, we're heightening the moment dramatically."[10]

"Safe space" is both a theory and a practice of creating a learning environment that is conducive to learning for all types of learners, working at various skill levels. In *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue, Michael* Rohd defines "safe space" as "a working environment where participants feel comfortable playing and honestly sharing their thoughts and feelings."[11] In Mandell's book, co-authored with Jennifer Wolf, she describes "safe space" as a classroom that fosters students as "receptive minds" by "ensuring that a classroom environment is as encouraging as possible" and works on "getting past notions of a classroom as a place of judgment."[12] This work is not instant or easy to create. To create her public school classroom as a space safe for students to dig deep, to get the at the heart of what's going on in student's lives, Jan must work hard.

"Safe space is not a constant, we always have to work on it. It happens on levels – within yourself, you can come in here and take a risk by yourself, your ability to work with the group, respecting everyone in the group [...] making sure no one is left behind, and keeping the space

[10] Mandell interview, 2004.
[11] Rohd, 5.
[12] Ibid, 4.

neat – it's a way of treating the space, each other, and yourself," Jan explains.[13] "[T]he kids come down here and say this is the only space that is like this [at Central]," Jan shares.[14] Safe space is not a given or a constant, it something that Jan must negotiate among ever-changing student populations, and actively work to create and maintain. It has required Jan to study methods and practices from other high school and college theater programs, read pedagogy, do popular education training, and develop what works with her student populations.

Before the performance of "Barriers to Entry" CTT (with Jan and Desdamona), students warm-up in a circle. They hold hands and pass around a pulse of squeezes accompanied by repeated sounds.These exercises get the students working together as an ensemble.

High school is a site where young people are constantly discovering and negotiating their identities and "figuring themselves out." Part of this (self) identification development is a constant inscribing of gender norms. In most of the spaces of Central High School you will not find young men holding hands in public space. But in the Blackbox the male students (as pictured above right), are frequently asked to hold hands with each other for warm-up and community building exercises. In this image, you can see Jan holding hands with Ashley and visiting artist, Desdamona, (pictured above left) with all of the CTT students in a ring with hands held tightly. They squeeze a signal that gets passed around the circle and this helps them trust their instincts, and to learn to feel supported in the hand of the person next to them. In the image above (right) two CTT members, Eric (who is white) and Nehemiah (who is African-American)

---

[13] Ibid.

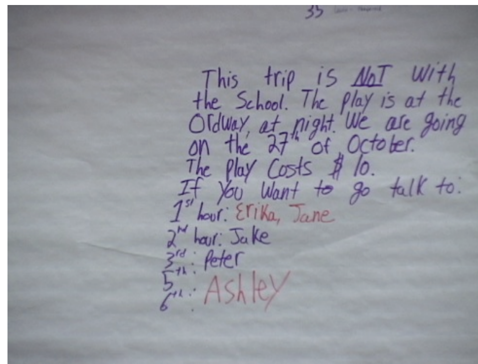
[14] See "Tracks" poem by former Blackbox student Tish Jones, performed at the Walker Teen Poetry/Video event, archived on http://blog.lib.umn.edu/raim0007/RaeSpot. In her poem, Jones describes how each floor of the school is composed of students in terms of placement and academic ranking, going from the low achievers (who are primarily students of color) on the lower levels, moving to the IB and AP "highest grade point average earners" on the top floor, who are primarily white and Asian students).

are pictured smirking with their hands clasped tightly. This is the norm for students in Jan's classes, for the CTT, and is acceptable because the safe space and the work demand it to be.

The students run into the Blackbox each school day, often very loudly and full of energy. Things seem chaotic, but Jan gets her students' attention instantly, with a perfected call-and-response method. She shouts "Ago" (Swahili meaning "Are you listening?") and the students respond with "Ame" (Swahili for "I am listening"). Instantly there is silence. It is an impressive method of quickly gaining the attention of often loud and "rowdy" teenage students, particularly when the room can be filled with well over a hundred students at any given time. As a high school teacher (with high enrollments in nearly every class), Jan must always maintain some level of control and (institutional) authority in her classroom. But, unlike the typical "white teacher" characters we see in mainstream films, she does not exercise a power-over method of teaching (or disciplinary practices in most cases), but rather engages the students in an active learning environment that gives respects to the students, and demands it in return.[15] Jan achieves this not through lectures or rules posted on the wall, but through the working process.

Jan's approach allows students to become accountable for what happens in the class and on the stage, and is central to producing theater centered on social justice. Students become accountable to the day-to-day workings of the classroom because Jan assigns all the students jobs. Students do everything, including taking attendance, cleaning the space, collecting permission slips, decorating the room with artwork, making handouts, booking transportation to their performances and all special events, and giving students the "power" to select and prepare music for the day's session.

[15] See chapter one.



The list hung on the wall, shows student's roles for organizing a trip, according to class period.

Jan's students write and improvise all of the performance material collectively. She usually begins the brainstorming with a writing prompt such as, "On the inside I am, and on the outside I am...," to get the students thinking. Students will spread out around the classroom space, and write individual responses. Next she'll have the students slowly move through the space, simultaneously reading their responses out loud. This makes for a chorus of voices where most of the student's words are indecipherable from the next student's. This step helps students to vocalize their words, and share their writing, simultaneously, so the risk of "exposure" (since it's often scary for some students to read their writing out loud to their peers) happens gradually. Next, Jan has students circle up and share their favorite words, lines, or passages from their writing, in a round robin method, so no student must volunteer or feel left out. As student's responses are voiced, particular sets of themes begin to take shape, and Jan pays close attention. She then will break the students into small working groups to discuss the writing and use techniques like image theater, to get the students moving and performing these ideas generated from their written responses.[16]

---

[16] See the book *Acting, Learning and Change* for numerous examples of Jan's exercises to create original plays with youth.

Image theater is a technique that Augosto Boal developed as part of the practices of *Theater of the Oppressed.* [17] Image theater requires no formal training, no acting ability, and is a very equalizing way to communicate using one's body. In image theater exercises a participant is chosen to silently "sculpt" and "mold" the other group members bodies, without physical touching, to produce an "image" or sculpture that presents an issue or problem that the participants want to engage. Usually used in problem-based working, a sculpture is created to represent people, places, and often the way in which power may be operating in the issue. Another sculpture may be called upon to re-sculpt an image into a more "idealized" image, and through dynamism (such as adding movement or a single line of monologue), participants can see "how" one can get from the problem to a better situation. This form of theater is very equalizing, in that anyone can participate as a sculptor, as the human clay, as the re-sculptor, or as the audience of the sculpture, everyone is often invited to participate in the "idealized" sculpting process. What results is a group of people engaged in problem solving, who are not stuck in their heads, but are able to communally think through, imagine, rehearse, and perform possible solutions, thereby rehearsing the change they'd like to see working against problems they deem important to examine.

Jan helps students work through problems they've identified through their writing exercises and group discussions, and uses image theater techniques to help them start thinking through possible solutions. As the work begins to take shape around particular themes, coming often from the everyday happenings at Central, news ideas, current events, and personal struggles, get and analyzed through the free writing process. Jan stays engaged as an active facilitator. She will then conduct a balanced interplay between writing, discussing, moving, sculpting, and creative problem solving through the exercises. She then may assign a more

[17] See Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) for detailed theories and practices of Boal's image theater techniques.

focused and directed topical writing assignment for the night's homework that the next day students will then use to continue improvising their ideas into scenes the next day. Collectively, they shape and work the scenes into a performance. Jan and the students work together to expand some scenes, edit them dramatically, and rework others to form each vignette into a larger collective performance. Jan will then start shaping the scenes, connecting each group's scenes to the next, to produce these vignettes into a cohesive show. All of the shows that CTT produces are clearly centered on themes and ideas that the student's theorize as relevant to their lives, coming directly from their writing and improvisational exercises, and discovered through theatrical play and Jan's workshop process.

Another effective technique for producing this work is Jan's use of newspaper or magazine clippings in order to spark student discussion of current (and specifically local) events. It is not often that these students see themselves portrayed positively in local or national media, but significantly, Jan gives the students the critical and creative tools to counter these images using narratives from their own stories and experiences. One case study discussed in *Acting, Learning & Change: Creating Original Plays with Adolescents* describes this process:

> Jan sees an editorial in the local paper complaining that the St. Paul community's perception of the students at her high school grows increasingly negative with each new report of adolescent misbehavior. Jan makes a copy of the editorial for each of her beginning acting students and brings it to class on Monday morning. [T]he majority of the class is angry with the paper and feels that it "gives in" to the negative stereotypes about teenagers rather than taking the time to look at who the students "really are." Jan encourages the students to bring evidence of their views to class the next day. As the bell rings, she [...] suggests that if this topic is of real concern to them, they can share it with their family and friends on stage.[18]

Jan's classroom is a community of learners that are assembled in a tight circle at the beginning and the ending of every class period. On this process of warming-up in a circle Jan

[18] Ibid, 74.

wrote, "When you build an ensemble you have to build it from the first person who decides they want to go into the warm-up circle, energetic and ready to go, to the person who is sitting over there saying, "I'm not getting in any fucking circle [...], You've got the whole gamut."[19]

Jan's methodologies work to both foster creative individuals, and to build a collective ensemble that values each member's contributions. Jan is conscientious to always balance writing and performative exercises. She never has the students spend too much time writing, talking, or just playing theater games. Rather, she successfully integrates each practice to move the students through the workshop process. She explained, "The activities allow for the process to be a dialogue. I listen to them. The whole process is about listening, listening to everyone to figure out what the next step may be . . . I give them an activity to spark them to open them up to teach me."[20]

For the most part Jan wants students to avoid spending too much time in the discussion and debate stage of working out an idea. She calls this, working "in your head." She has the students write using prompts and a stream-of-consciousness method, then they discuss their writing in small groups, and finally she has them respond to the conversations with their bodies, using techniques like image theater and exercises to "de-machinize" the body.[21] While the students still often watch her intently, looking for her reaction, and approval, she encourages the students to give feedback to one another.[22]

"I don't give a tremendous amount of feedback for a reason, because with students, they are used to waiting for approval from teachers: "Am I OK? Did I do it right?" There's a student in my class the other day who came in, in tears: "My teacher didn't like my poem because the end of the poem didn't rhyme." In this class, I don't care if the end of your poems rhyme. It's not

---

[19] Jan Mandell and Jennifer Wolf, *Acting, Learning and Change*, 48.
[20] Mandell interview.
[21] See Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors.*
[22] Ibid.

important. What I care about is that it's your voice. And if eventually you want the end of your poem to rhyme, we can work that out, but first I want to know how you feel."[23]

In our interview, Jan smiled as she recalled numerous instances of students reaching out to each other, offering numerous examples: a student phoning one boy with heavy absences, another group of students standing and cheering for another who graduated, although none of his teachers or his counselor believed that he could, and intense arguments the students had the previous week during conflict day, where they put their "beefs" out on the table in the "safe space" of the classroom. She stated, "Theater work builds an ensemble where we are only as strong as our weakest link."[24]

Through dialogue between student and teacher, and among students, new relationships emerge. Jan, as teacher-student, works side by side with her student-teachers. The students, while being taught, also teach, facilitate the working groups, and lead exercises. They become accountable and responsible to themselves, Jan, and each other in the process of learning and creating the original plays. There is shared power and responsibility, despite their presence in a high school / institutionalized setting where the teacher always has the institutional "authority" in the classroom. Still, Jan understands that her work happens within an institutionalized space. She does not see her role as "teacher" in the Blackbox as the keeper of all of the knowledge about producing great original plays. As a result, she does not lecture or dominate discussions and activities, but rather creates a space where student ideas, thoughts, opinions, and experiences are central.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire maps out the very conditions for libratory education that Jan engages. He wrote, "Teachers and students are simultaneously both teachers and learners. They learn from each other and help each other learn . . . teachers and students are

---

[23] Mandell and Wolf 2003, 5.
[24] Jan Mandell interview, by author and Pete DeLong, 2004, Minneapolis, video taped recording.

both subjects. This is committed involvement, not pseudo-participation. Students discover that reality is a *process* that undergoes constant transformation."[25] He furthers this idea by stating, "This requires abandoning the deposit-making model and replacing it with posing the problems of human beings in their relations with the world."[26] Spending time in Jan's classroom, this theory becomes alive. It is transformative to take ideas about teaching and learning, and see them living, put into practice with such a diverse range of students.

Year after year, Jan gets very excited about her beginning acting class event, the parent breakfast, one of the many family and community sharing events she described, where she has students perform poems about a person who inspires them. The morning ends with the parents writing their own poems, and sharing their poems back to their children. "Grown children sit in their parent's lap," Jan admits, "it's remarkable grown kids crying, cuddled by their parents."[27]

It is precisely these sorts of techniques that fulfill Jan's mission of social justice through building community – in her classroom, in the larger school community, in the student's homes, and in the larger neighborhood community. "Every play is different. You find the answer in the work. Sometimes the kids are really worried in the beginning about how it's going to end. And it's hard for them to let go of that because usually, we figure out the ending about a week before we're going to open. No matter what it is, all the pieces will line up and show us what the ending is," Jan explains in her book about the process.[28]

The Blackbox is a space for storytelling, healing, sharing, debating, dialoging, and building something out of those energies. Jan explains that she likes using theatre as a "device to bring families together and create a community. So we get together and we have potlucks and I show slides, [to show the families and community] what we're doing in class, and [as a result] the kids talk to their parents [about their experiences in the class]. Then we get up and do

---

[25] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 56-59.
[26] Ibid, 66.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Mandell and Wolf, 93.

improvisations in front of their parents and it really is a nice way for kids who usually don't even get along with their parents to work with them. We've even talked about the possibility of getting parents to do some on-stage theatre work. Sometimes we have parents emcee the performances. I try to make it, as much as possible, a family thing."[29] A lot of schools desire to involve parent's in their child's education but don't always know how to bring them into the classroom in a real, engaged way. Having a parent-teacher conference is a good start, but Jan demonstrates that bringing them into the classroom and on to the stage can be a transformative experience for the student and the parent alike.

"It's a process, I start out my classes asking them to create safe space," explained Jan. She understands that, "It's a leap of a faith to ask you to trust me [...] I'm a 55 year old white woman, you have no reason to trust me, first of all I'm old."[30]

Jan works from the first day of school to establish trust with her students and helps foster honest and critical conversations among the students (and student cliqués). She lets the students know that she is not the sole authority in the room, by de-centering her experiences and centering her students' stories and experiences. Jan is explicit in her teaching practices, and explains her methodology to her students. She also demonstrates that she is simultaneously teacher and learner, by having her students run rehearsals, facilitate warm-ups, and she participates in learning circles during the workshop sessions. Jan is constantly working to figure out how to negotiate differences and distrust amongst students (and clicks of students) as well as between teachers and individual students.

---

[29] Mandell and Wolf 2003, 63.
[30] Mandell Interview, 2004.

3.4 Jan Mandell Resists the Hegemonic (white teacher as Savior) Narrative

In one of the 2005 interviews I filmed with Jan, who has taught at Central High School for nearly 30 years, she spoke cogently about her vision for social justice in education, and the need for hope in the everyday lives of her students. She stated that by, "using arts as a way for social justice, learning is really a social event."[31] She sees social interaction as a way to break through barriers of difference, and works to build a community of learners who share a common respect for each other and an understanding that all of the members of the group are valuable to the process.

In many ways, Jan resists and subverts the model of teaching that posits the white teacher as the liberator of brown students. First, she has lived in the community for decades, and has worked in her classroom for years. Second, she has a bi-racial son who also attends Central and was a student in the Blackbox. Third, and key, is that she understands that her point of view and positionality as a racially white teacher means that her understandings are just one (albeit an experienced) point of view that may not experientially "get" what the students live in their daily lives. But she listens and responds to all of the experiences shared in her classroom. Her collaborations with the guest artists who offer what she can't—stories and methods rooted in experiential ways of knowing, derived from being people of color—demonstrates her willingness to share power and authority in her room. By placing her student's experiences at the center,

[31] Ibid.

sharing culturally relevant topics, and providing role models to inspire their performance work, Jan is able to resist hegemony, and becomes a partner with creative, thinking students, rather than a savior of poor, brown ones.

Although differently situated from her students, she understands the levels of her privilege as a white woman, and she is open about that. In the beginning, her students may look at her skeptically because of their differences, but she becomes a teacher they respect, and the Blackbox quickly becomes a place that the students don't want to leave.

Even during this interview, which continued well beyond the school day hours, students refused to go home. "Are you all still there?" Jan asked students mid-interview. She peered into the dark corners of the room at a group of students still there, watching and listening to our discussions. She laughed in this moment, noting, "Most teachers can't get students in their classroom and I can't seem to get the kids out."[32]

Jan Mandell sits for an interview after a long day of teaching.

---

[32] Ibid.

At many points during this particular filmed interview Jan got very emotional. This is understandable. This work is physically exhausting and emotionally intense. Jan reflects on some of the difficult times in the past. She recalled that in one class, “there were 5 or 6 funerals to bury classmates.” Jan believes that “this is a place to work with that grief.”[33]

“The beauty of this work,” Jan said, “is helping [students] to use art as a way to build your self-esteem and communicate to the world about yourself. There are a lot of teachers that attempt to have students tell their stories. What’s unique about this work is using safe space to create work that is deeper because with theater [techniques] we’re heightening the moment dramatically. You can’t just take it and hand it in on a piece of paper. You and the teacher create an ensemble event; we become parts of each other’s stories.”[34] This work is very much in line with Freirean ideas around building a learning community and with Nagar’s call for collaboration as a research method that is also actively creating resistance and to working toward social justice.[35]

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Sangtin Writers, and Richa Nagar. 2006. *Playing with fire: Feminist thought and activism through seven lives in india*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota.

The Blackbox is a space that is frequented by many guest artists and interns such as actors, directors, and University of Minnesota professor T. Mychael Rambo. Like the majority of the students, many of these invited visitors are African-American, (including poet Frank Sentwali and CTT alum, singer and performer Ahanti Young), because Jan believes that it is critically important for students to have role models and mentors.[36] She is also conscientious about gender, often bringing in poet Desdamona, dancer Leah Nelson, and playwright and performer Kimberly Morgan to share examples of women engaged in the arts. Many of the visitors are CTT alumni who give the students embodied examples of the potential of the work. By bringing in her former students, Jan demonstrates key examples of CTT graduates who are still using the skills they learned in Jan's class to create powerful work and lives rooted in social justice.

One such workshop example was when Jan brought in playwright and actor Kimberly Morgan.[37] Kim, a young African-American woman, who calls herself a "teaching artist" was, at the time, performing a one-woman show at a Minneapolis theater called "Hot Combs: Brandin' One Mark of Oppression" about black women's relationship with their hair.[38] As part of her work in the Blackbox, she discussed her work, shared her process, performed some of the characters, and improvised with the students around hair, race, and identity. The students got to attend her evening performance at the Pillsbury House Theater and attend a question and answer session. On her website, Kim articulates her philosophy as a teaching artist: "Every student has a story to tell, characters living within that want to speak." Speaking pedagogically, she states that she knows that "conventional environments don't always foster this type of creative expression, so it's the responsibility of the professional artist to bridge the gap between the arts and the

[36] When I use the word "diverse," I am not pointing to multi-cultural diversity policies of the late few decades that seek to "add" students of color to fulfill diversity quotas, but instead to the literal sense of offering diverse role models for the students. Jan brings in talented, creative, and diverse role models (in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, sexuality, and form of art such as theater, poetry, dance, etcetera).
[37] See http://www.kimberlymorgan.org/Welcome.html for examples of her work.
[38] http://www.kimberlymorgan.org/Hot%20Comb.html

traditional classroom learning."[39] Kimberly offered experience, acting techniques, characters in her play (primarily Black women negotiating identity, age, and hair style and the oppressions attached to each style) who voice Black women's experiences and mentorship and support *as* a Black woman actor. Following her work in the classroom, she often showed up for CTT rehearsals and performances in the community. Her attendance (and notes during pre-show rehearsals) showed that her investment goes beyond the paid teaching commitment she's offered within the classroom. She offers the students a mirror to view their lives in, acting technique, and tremendous support and feedback.

Jan shares the role of teacher/mentor with visiting artists and performers, (many who were literally in her student's shoes only a few years ago), and by doing so demonstrates a pedagogy that embraces Freirian ideas that emphasizing power-sharing and valued experiential learning among students, former students, guest artists, and college interns, all teaching and learning in the room together.

Frank Sentwali with CTT students (left) and a poet from YouthSpeaks performs (right).

There are moments in the classroom when Jan sits at center. These moments usually come at the beginning, middle, and the end of a "performance cycle," when students need Jan to set the topic and the pace of a process. When she needs to be active in the process, she is. Jan will also be there willing and helping to shape all the vignettes into a cohesive show. Jan may

---

[39] http://www.kimberlymorgan.org/Teaching%20Artist.html

stand at center to introduce the new work, present new themes to explore, or to ask question, but is also quick to step to the side to let her students "work it out." But when at center of the room, Jan may tell a personal story about her life and her own struggles with "traditional" education and banking model teaching practices.

One story that she tells often is about her learning disabilities and frustrations as an academically low achieving student. She explains, on many occasions, that it was one practical teacher who allowed her to write a poem and perform her writing in lieu of a final paper, and how that (transformative) act of a high school teacher willing to tailor the assignment to allow Jan to strive, changed her view of education. By realizing and supporting Jan's strengths as a learner, this teacher adapted the assignment to allow her to show her own strengths as a creative thinker. It is evident that she has been transformed by this early educational experience, and that she models her own teaching pedagogy after this student-centered approach. In fact, Jan simultaneously centers and de-centers her experiences, by both sharing her stories, and being silent during moments when it's more important to listen and hear her students' stories. Jan actively remains engaged, flexible, and aware of the dynamics of the many groups of students that enter the Blackbox classroom.

It is precisely Jan's willingness to both center and de-center herself and her knowledges, and to also use herself as a text in moments when it's relevant or potentially useful that her pedagogy and teaching practices become transformative. Jan knows, from her many years of teaching experience, when to step back and when to step forward and push and challenge the students to go deeper with their engagement with topics and (performance) work, and that is the beginning of social justice work in the high school classroom.

3.5 The Supporting Cast of Characters

The image montages in this section share just a few of the faces of Jan's students. I could write about each of them individually, detailing their backgrounds, family lives, and "issues," and connect their lives directly to the scenes that they performed onstage. I want to let the above images of the Central students stand as enough in this text – not to reduce them to their image, or demonstrate their diversity, because re-tellings and summations in text can't do them justice in theory or in practice; they must speak for themselves in the video.

I feel that if this section of writing were a detailed mapping of students, "character" portraits, this re-telling of their lives would function too much like the students that appear in Hollywood films with their lives on display for a voyeuristic audience. Too often, students of color on screen become reduced to caricatures that rely on negative archetypes such as "the slut" who is Latina, "the drug dealer" who is black, "the nerd" who is white or Asian, etc. Additionally, in *The Freedom Writers*, the filmmaker used overdubbed voices of the students speaking their internal monologues. These moments are awkwardly disconnected and disjointed, and seem to offer a strange access to the supposed internal monologue of the brown student, and

allows the audience to feel they have some sort of special insight into that student's life and mind. In my CTT documentary I will never have a voice-over speak for the students, or lead the audience to believe that have some special access or insight, or can possibly know everything about each student.

CTT students are primarily students of color, who face particular challenges on a daily basis such as being the only student of color in the academically high-ranking IB (International Baccalaureate) courses, being stereotyped by teachers and peers alike, and not having the money to pay for college (if they aren't sent down the school-to-prison pipeline first). [40] These students are tracked, literally, by age, race, gender, academic achievement, the economic status of their parents, and by their entanglement with school officials and the law, and they are fully cognizant of these institutionalized practices. [41]

---

[40] According to the ACLU, this is "a disturbing national trend wherein children, disproportionately children of color, are being funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children are the most vulnerable, with learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse or neglect, and should receive additional educational services rather than isolation and punishment, a disturbing national trend wherein children, disproportionately children of color, are being funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children are the most vulnerable, with learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse or neglect, and should receive additional educational services rather than isolation and punishment." (http://www.acluga.org/schooltoprison.html) See additional research on the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon by the Poverty and Race Research Action Council (http://prrac.org) work by the American Civil Liberties Union (http://www.aclu.org/crimjustice/juv/schooltoprisonpipeline.html), and others.

[41] See the poem "Tracks" by LaTisha (Tish) Jones, http://blog.lib.umn.edu/raim0007/RaeSpot/.

For many of these students, the basement Blackbox theater classroom is one of the few places where they are part of a dialogue, rather than simply being on the receiving end of a teacher's monologue. It is through the critical pedagogical practices that emphasize learning, literacy, and personal experience that diverse students can realize their vision, strengths, and they feel the value of their stories. Unlike many of Central's other classrooms, in the Blackbox student-centered learning literally becomes "education as the practice of freedom."[42] "When you give students the tools to create and the freedom to dream, amazing things happen," Jan explained.[43]

In *Daring to Dream: Toward a Pedagogy of the Unfinished*, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, (Paulo Freire's wife), explains that her husband's "epistemology convinces and invites us—especially those of us who are educators—to think and choose, to join in and take action in continually projecting the concretization of *possible dreams* whose nature is as ethical as it is political."[44] She continues, stating, "We must believe that we can make *apparently impossible*

---

[42] Critical pedagogue Paulo Friere wrote extensively about "education as the practice of freedom" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
[43] Mandell interview, 2005.
[44] *Daring to Dream: Toward a Pedagogy of the Unfinished*, xi.

dreams possible, so long as we live out that *existing*, truly. It is *dreaming* and *existing* that 'allows' us to keep making ourselves into beings who fight for liberation."[45] Her words speak to what is necessary to put critical pedagogical theory into practice. A teacher, such as Jan, must be able to envision, dream, and then institute a space for critical and creative work that helps students to actively transform their own lives, they become the actors on the stage, in the school hallways, and in the community.

Boal believed that, "in order to understand this *poetics of the oppressed* one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people, those who are "spectators," passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon, into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action."[46] The framework and the practices of Jan's work helps to create the conditions for the students to become active participants in the process. As a result, students begin to desire radical education, and experience their agency in becoming actors on the stage. Often, as a result of what they experience in rehearsal and performances, they become (active) actors in their community, working in resistance to the barriers that limit their lives. Jan's students become actors, agents in their own lives. Through this work they learn to problem pose and problem-solve. They learn to trust their own voices and to value what their life experiences have taught them. The students learn to identify personally and culturally relevant processes and ways of knowing. They learn that they can access a body of knowledge, experts and mentors, and ask challenging questions of the society around them. Jan's students also learn that it is possible to respect diversity, and to bridge differences in healthy and productive ways. Specifically, this work with students within the public educational system enables them to "make the transition from seeing themselves as objects (unconscious and acted upon by others) to subjects (capable of self-conscious action)."[47]

---

[45] Ibid, xi. Note: the italics are the author's emphasis, not mine.
[46] Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed,* 122.
[47] See Babbage, Frances. 2004. *Augusto Boal*, (London and New York: Routledge, 20).

Jan Mandell and her work in the Blackbox, in CTT, and in all levels of her classes, are strong examples of successful applications of social justice education and using theater as Boal's "weapon" (of the people). In this group of students who are racially, ethnically, economically and culturally diverse, Jan's use of poetry, beats of hip-hop, and other popular music allows her to focus discussions on the ideas that students bring with them when they enter the classroom.

University of Minnesota theater professor Sonja Kuftinec articulates, "In Boal's theatrical practice, learning emanates from the student's reflections on her situation and desire to act toward change rather than from static obeisance to authority." As someone who is a community partner and often works with Mandell and the Central students, she writes, "Boal's theater thus works as a space to image possible futures and rehearse for revolutionary change."[48]

3.6 Beats + Boal = Critical Hip-hop Pedagogies

Hip-hop cultural practice, not simply dumbed-down commercial rap songs played on mainstream radio stations, is an effective pedagogical method to work with many youth in the 21st century. In *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, Jeff Chang argues that "hip-hop has become one of the most far reaching and transformative arts movements of the past few decades."[49] As a result, there is significant work being done to use hip-hop as a creative and critical tool in the classroom. This work is primarily being done by individual K-12 classroom teachers, with the help of visiting (hip-hop) teaching artists, mentors, and teaching toolkits distributed by popular education initiatives of non-profit organizations. These folks use (and teach) hip-hop as a learning tool in the classroom. This work is multi-disciplinary and used for many subject areas including English, history, music, theater, and social studies.[50] One such non-

---

[48] Sonja Kuftinec,"Rehearsing for Dramatic Change in Afghanistan," 2004.
[49] Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*. (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), ix.
[50] See the extensive work by the non-profit organization, The Hip Hop Association (http://www.hiphopassociation.org) whose educational initiative, H2ED (http://www.hiphopassociation.org/initiatives_education.php) believes "that Hip-Hop, one of the most influential cultural forces today, has the ability to educate, inform and empower today's youth". They are "

profit that is invested in this work is the New York based Hip Hop Association whose educational initiative, H2ED, believes "that Hip-Hop, one of the most influential cultural forces today, has the ability to educate, inform and empower today's youth."[51] Many critical educators, like Jan, are now asking, "How can we utilize the energy and creativity of Hip-Hop music and culture to make schools and classrooms more engaging?" The Hip-Hop Association "advocates for education alteration and support educators that use Hip-Hop to reach the youth through Hip-Hop culture by combining a creative mix of standard educational formats and the popularity of Hip-Hop."[52]

Hip-hop performer and pedagogue, Marc "Bamuthi" Joseph argues that Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ultimately makes the case for the *creation* of literacy in our communities as a means of confronting the status quo, thereby becoming an avenue for liberation. Our public education system supports the opposite vision. It is a machine designed to promote a hierarchical class structure, and teachers are shackled by dysfunctional federal mandates in their attempts to incite the full capacity of their students."[53]

Jan also recognized hip-hop as both a literacy tool and as a problem-posing space (specifically hip-hop's use of the circle / cipher as the site for competitive battles, crew dances, celebration, and knowledge building), and as a form for social critique that many of her students relate to. "I remember seeing circles of kids standing around and just bouncing," Jan recalled. The circle, within hip-hop, is considered the universe – 360 degrees. It is both the physical space

---

advocates for education alteration and support educators that use Hip-Hop to reach the youth through Hip-Hop culture by combining a creative mix of standard educational formats and the popularity of Hip-Hop", through programming, conferences, youth workshops, and publications (Hip-Hop Education Guidebook Volume 1 and Volume 2, [http://www.lulu.com/content/656880]. The description for the books asks, "How can we utilize the energy and creativity of Hip-Hop music and culture to make schools and classrooms more engaging? The H2Ed Guidebook provides answers. The H2Ed Guidebook addresses the tenets of a critical Hip-Hop pedagogy, framing the issues of concern and strength within Hip-Hop culture by providing in-depth analysis from parents, teachers and scholars. And most importantly, the H2Ed Guidebook offers an array of innovative, interdisciplinary standards-referenced lessons written by teachers for teachers."

[51] See http://www.hiphopassociation.org/initiatives_education.php

[52] The Hip-Hop Education Guidebook Volume 1 and Volume 2, are self-published guides available online at http://www.lulu.com/content/656880.

[53] Ibid, 14.

where we do what we do—rap, dance, build, connect—and the space of hip-hop as one of community-builidng. It is a space where all are engaged as performers and audience, and who is in what role can and will change on the drop of a beat.

"As I was leaving, kids would be standing around and just bouncing. I was standing there just listening and they would go on and on with great big vocabularies. That's what struck me [is] that kids who were getting Ds in English were out there spitting a rhyme with big words. I see them with dictionaries, with books trying to figure out how to craft, crafting big words [with rap]."[54] Jan quickly acknowledged her outsider status to the culture, doesn't claim any mastery of the tools, and instead, positions herself as a learner to her students. She once asked the students to bring hip-hop – what they *know* and what they *do* - into the classroom. "That's where I became a student," she recalls.[55]

"Hip-hop started while I was teaching, [...] I had a bunch of kids and I said teach me and they set up stations – a dj area, scratching, dance, videotapes," Jan reminisced.[56] The students set up "learning stations" where they taught Jan about hip-hop culture and set up specific stations for her to learn the elements of dj-ing and dance.

The work is built upon call-and-response, a key idea in hip-hop's cultural sphere which can be traced back to traditional African cultures.[57] In pre-slavery African culture, the griot (storyteller) engages in call-and-response. Jan learns about contemporary hip-hop but also helps her students understand the legacy of call-and-response and its survival over the centuries, which speaks to the strength and resiliency of cultures and peoples. This helps students make connections between themselves, their musical / poetic expression and their own subjectivity as

---

[54] Ibid.
[55] Mandell Interview, 2004.
[56] Ibid
[57] See the edited volume by Patricia Liggins Hill, with Bernard W. Bell, Trudier Harris, William J. Harris, R. Baxter Miller, Sondra A. O'Neale, and Horace Porter, *Call and Response: The Riverside African American Literary Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) and the work by Maggie Sale and Norman Denzin.

historical actors. Hip-hop may pass, but call-and response as a communal process will arise in a new form.

Jan may issue a call, and the students will answer with a call that Jan hears, because she is actively listening, and she responds. Or Jan may get the students to issue calls and responses to each other. The teachers working inside of the "banking model" of education, where the approach suggests that students are empty bank accounts into which the teacher deposits all the expert knowledge that students must memorize and recite back to the teacher.[58] In the "banking model," students don't necessarily become active and invested learners, but merely the receptacles of ideas deposited by their teacher. But for Jan, learning is an active process requiring teacher and students to be engaged in constant reflection. This requires Jan to constantly refine her teaching toolkit.

This work, as Jan implements it, effectively transforms these students because hip-hop is relevant to their lives. She may hear the next group of students complain about "that crap called rap" and, knowing Jan, she will move with the times. She understands hip-hop is not a rhetorical strategy imposed on her "safe space" of the Blackbox, but rather, a creative tool valued and used by the students in their own theories and practices of their lived experiences. When it is no longer of value, she'll take from it what is valuable, the rhythm, the beats, the flow, the poetic stylings, for example, and she'll keep moving.

Most of the work Jan and CTT produce, such as the scenes, play and performances are collaged experiments. She pieces selections of the students' writing and improvisation, often structured on the students' use of rap, spoken word, rhythm and rhyme structure, hip-hop dance, beats, and beatboxing. Jan's curiosity brought the students' hallway 'fun" into her classroom as teaching and creative tools. This curiosity, now a mainstay, allows Jan to meet mentors for her

[58] See chapter 2 of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000.

students as she attends tons of hip-hop conferences to learn technique, history, and ultimately she tapped into a larger cultural sphere already embedded with many tools for social justice.

Jan reflects on her use of hip-hop as a creative tool in the classroom: "I think hip-hop made this work more hip to be around, it became cool through hip-hop. Expression through the arts became much more mainstream through the arts. [Also], when kids leave here there is somewhere for them to go. It wasn't like that 15 years ago . . . Hip-hop provides them with cafes, open mics. There is somewhere for them to go."[59]

Most of Jan's students consider themselves to be of "the hip-hop generation," or at least have grown up knowing and understanding hip-hop as an expressive cultural space.[60] Jan recognized hip-hop's potential, discussed later in this paper, and learned how to wield many of the tools of hip-hop from her students. It is here that learning becomes a process of the exchange of ideas, rather than the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to her students. Jan understands that hip-hop can be an effective methodological and pedagogical strategy for working with her current students. Hip-hop's cultural umbrella—rap, poetry, drums, dance, beats, and so much more—is dynamic and has much to offer many of Jan's students.[61]

Jan articulates, "I think hip-hop, at its best, also makes this stuff political, it gives it a context, it's not just something in the Blackbox [...], the hip-hop folks are today's Martin Luther

---

[59] Jan Madell interview, by author and Pete DeLong, 2004, Minneapolis, video taped recording.

[60] In *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), Bakari Kitwana outlines the "hip-hop generation" as those born in the birth years 1965 – 1984, but more than birth year demographic, works to represent a large, non-homogenous group of those deeply influenced and invested by hip hop as a culture. In *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York, Basic Civitas Books, 2006), Jeff Chang notes that "hip-hop has become one of the most far-reaching and transformative arts movements of the past two decades"; "the hip-hop arts movement has left its mark on theatre, poetry, literature, journalism, criticism, performance art, dance, visual arts, photography, graphic design, film, video, name your genre, not to mention the recombinant and emerging visions of any and all of the above" (ix). "[H]ip-hop is one of the big ideas of this generation, a grand expression of our collective creative powers," x.

[61] See Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Popular Culture* (Massachusetts: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), Jeff Chang's *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007), and the work of the Hip-Hop Association's *Educational Guidebook Volume I and II* (http://www.hiphopassociation.org/) for details of hip-hop's cultural space, history, aesthetics, and use as a teaching tool in the classroom.

Kings, the Malcolm X's, and the Angela Davises, with lots of venues, lots of peoples, and it's accessible."[62] Jan understands that her students explicitly seek work that is relevant and "useful" to their everyday lives. Hip-hop, in form, content, and cultural context, helps Jan satisfy the students' desire for applicable learning through theater.

3.7 Framing the Students at the Center: Creating "Barriers to Entry"

The students, assembled in a group onstage around Ashley, engage in this rhythmc call and response:

Barriers to Entry?
I'm getting' in!
Barriers to Entry?
I'm getting' in!

"Making the impossible, possible," announces Ashley "Younique" in the opening of CTT's show, "Barriers to Entry." She wrote this line to share her hope and vision of possibility despite the barriers she faces often as a young, Black woman fighting many levels of oppression in the U.S. In 2004 the University of Minnesota commissioned CTT to write a play about the barriers youth face in trying to get into college, to be performed during student recruitment events. The given topic is very real to CTT community, and relevant to their lives. The advanced theater students at the time were mostly seniors who were facing their own decisions about the

[62] Ibid.

future, wondering if they should try to go to college. The play that resulted, the performance "Barriers to Entry," delves into the barriers they face trying to get into college.

In preparation for "Barriers to Entry" the students asked all the visiting guest artists about their college experiences. The students ask questions and also take detailed notes of the responses. They asked: *Did you go to college? Where? What did you study? What did your parents think? How hard was it to get in? What were some of your barriers?* On one of my particular visits to film the CTT, the students circled around me. They hit me with a barrage of questions about my own experiences about college. Even my experiences served as source material for this play, such as scenes about race in the classroom, lack of money to pay for college, and discrimination many students face.

After many writing prompts, brainstorming, and improvisational sessions using Boal's Image theatre, de-mechanizing the body exercises, and other Boalian techniques, (which are always set to a soundtrack of hip-hop beats), and only after analyzing the countless interviews like the one they did with me, the scenes chosen to be in the final play began to develop and grow.[63] "Barriers to Entry" deals with complex issues like the experience of taking standardized tests, which many of these students were tackling the morning after their first performance, that prove a student's ranking (worth) for admissions. This play explained, very literally, what the students were going through during the writing, rehearsing, and touring of the show. The

---

[63] See Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-actors* and *The Rainbow of Desire* for discussion of the theories and practices of this work. Specifically, in the chapter "The Arsenal of Theatre of the Oppressed" in Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, he writes about a multitude of theories, practices, and methodologies that can be applied, work, and re-worked to fit the aims of using one's investment in using theater as a tool for the "oppressed". Boal articulates this work as an intellectual, "a cerebral game" that is also emotional and physical, which requires engagement with thinking and doing (the theory and the practice of this praxis work) Boal maps out exercises that work on the "physical, muscular movement (respiratory, motor, vocal) which helps the doer to a better knowledge or recognition of his or her body, its muscles, nerves, its relationship to other bodies, to gravity, to objects, to space, its dimensions, volumes, weights, speed, the interrelationship of these different forces, and so on." The games he discusses "deal with the expressivity of the body as emitter and receiver of messages [being a] dialogue".

economics and the inability of welfare to pay tuition, the affects of race, class, gender and so many of the "isms" that are very real barriers for this group, were prominent themes in the play.

By stomping beats on the floor (something that evolved from a Boalian exercise to create a machine of bodies that expresses an idea) and beatboxing the sounds of djs record scratches and featuring a scene equating the play of video games to the process of applying to college, the students used hip-hop tools to create a very effective and attention grabbing opening to the play. One of the show's key scenes featured the story of the educational segregation at Central. In the scene, a heavy-set African-American boy, played by Nehemiah (who improvised this scene directly out of his own experiences as the only Black student in an "upstairs" classroom), dumbs himself down in a classroom of the "upstairs" students. This scene elicited an emotional response from audience members, mostly university faculty, college students, and prospective students, in the post performance discussion at the University of Minnesota and in numerous other performances. The students received screams, shouts, standing ovations at the play's conclusion, and lots of calls from the audience during key scenes, such as "uh huh" and "yeah, that's right!"

The same scene with Nehemiah, later performed at an ArtsLiteracy workshop in the Blackbox that Jan co-hosts with professors from Brown University, produced a noticeable shift in participant interactions.[64] The performance completely changed how the workshop participants (who are primarily high school teachers at Central and in the larger school district) interacted with Jan's students (who participate as co-facilitators, and participants along with the teachers in the workshop). The youth, specifically Nehemiah, help lead exercises alongside the learning teachers, who were mostly new to the work.

---

[64] The ArtsLiteracy Project (ArtsLit) is dedicated to developing the literacy of youth through the performing and visual arts. Based in the Education Department at Brown University, ArtsLit gathers an international community of artists, teachers, youth, college students, and professors with the goal of collaboratively creating innovative approaches to literacy development through the arts. See the website for Brown's Arts Literacy project at http://www.artslit.org/home.html for further discussion.

It is important to note that Jan trains many of her students to participate in many of her ArtsLiteracy workshops like this one as participants, co-facilitators, and as co-leaders of workshop exercises. On the first day of this workshop, many of the participants (teachers primarily from Central as well as those from schools in neighboring white communities) acted as if Nehemiah was not a part of the learning circles, ignoring and discounting his suggestions during group circle work. When Nehemiah spoke he was ignored by most of the white adults, particularly by the teachers from Central. In fact, he revealed that one had given him detention that he believed was not merited (which he whispered into my camera's microphone).

Not immediately identifiable as an "upstairs" student (because he's Black), Nehemiah was not yet valued by this group of teacher-participants. Following the workshop performance of "Barriers," where he talks about being the only big Black student in the white classrooms on the 5th (top) floor, many of the K-12 teachers seemed to change their treatment of him almost instantly. In fact, Nehemiah's face made the center color photo in the *Pioneer Press* newspaper article the next morning.[65] On day two of the workshop, after seeing the cover story, nearly every adult in the room tried to get in the circle with Nehemiah, desiring to work with him, and just now realizing his value in their circle.

Months later the students in CTT still joked with Nehemiah before and after every show about this incident. "Why does Jan keep telling everyone *this* story?" he asked me. "That's not just my experience, a lot of us go through that, I didn't write that alone," he explained.[66] I try respond that it makes a good story for the newspaper and for the readers who have trouble seeing

---

[65] "LEARNING TO ACT OUT TEACHERS AND STUDENTS EXPLORE NEW WAYS TO LEARN THROUGH TECHNIQUES OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN A TWO-DAY WORKSHOP AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL", St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN) - November 12, 2004 - B1 Local. The online excerpt reads: On the stage in Central High School's Black Box Theater, some classmates pretended to teach Nehemiah Jett to read. In complete silence, except for the background music, they handed him imaginary books, pointing and nodding. By the end of the minute-long session, Jett was displaying the torment that reading and knowledge had brought to him, holding his head in his hands. To the uninitiated, that scene might not seem like the best way to start learning about the life of..." [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_action=list&p_topdoc=11]

[66] Personal interview with Nehemia, 2005.

him as a young, academically high achieving Black male (and as the big teddy bear that he is), because everything they've ever seen, heard, or read paints him (as a Black male) as a gang-banging, drug-dealing potential ball player. We both laughed about it. He gets it. It's been his life experience as a strong academic student for as long as he can remember.

The CTT audiences, like the teachers at the Brown workshop, don't necessarily understand the specific details of Nehemiah's story, but can relate because they probably had that one black student in class or were that one student. Clearly Jan understands this, offering this example to many visitors, journalists and non-journalists alike. As a result, students often teased him by mocking Jan saying, "Nehemiah, tell *that* story. Go tell that story to the newspaper reporter." The story still holds currency, and helps CTT book shows, get funded, and get photos printed in the local newspapers to this day.

3.8 Traveling Beyond the Basement: Barriers to Entry

"Theatre of the Oppressed does not open any doors. Its techniques are weapons requiring subjects to implement them, to extrapolate them from rehearsal to use in real life, " argues Schutzman.[67] She understands that these theories, methods, and practices are simply tools to be weilded and (re)worked by practitioners. It is in the efficacious application and (re)workings of these tools, that individual, collective, and community transformation can occur. These frameworks, in both Freirean and Boalian theoretical and methodological applications, reworked

---

[67] Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, and Activism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993, 152).

through Jan's pedagogical practices, are not aimed at creating performance that gives "voice to voiceless," as the popular rhetoric of social change claims. Rather, Jan aims to shape the Blackbox as a space ripe for action. It is through Jan's applications of this work that a "safe space" for the discussion of racism, sexism, misogyny, politics, relationships, difference, and all sorts of issues can occur. In the Blackbox, Jan's students are rehearsing their lives in resistance to hegemony, developing astute critical responses to top-down powers, and transforming individual, family, community, and school "problems." In the Blackbox, students become actors on the stage and in their lives. It is when students take this critical and creative "arsenal," and through poetry, movement, beats, and rhymes, share their life stories. The means to increase the volume, depth, and distribution of their voices becomes transformational and radical.

This work centers the students' narratives and spotlights their experiences. Jan aims to distribute their stories first within the Blackbox, and then to continue moving outward as the students tour the work. Jan teaches other teachers locally, primarily in the St. Paul and Minneapolis public school districts, as well as teachers and Boal practitioners nationally. Her goals for this work are many: she aims to give her students literacy tools and the critical theatrical techniques of writing, rehearsing, memorization, improvisation, and performance. She desires to put on a good show that pushes students to use the work to build self-awareness, confidence, trust, visions, and dreams for the future, and provides examples of hope and possibility for this community. Finally, she wants the work to exist long past her retirement as Central's theater teacher, which can happen as she trains both her students and other teachers as facilitators and teaching practitioners of this work.

Will *all* of the students leave Jan's class headed for professional stages? No. However, many of the skills that they have learned working with Jan will help them become powerful agents in their lives, with the potential to transform their everyday realities. For example, Jan explained what the everyday realities are at Central:

> In one of my classes, there were seven students who died all in one semester. There was a kid that had one friend shot, another dead, and another one killed in a car crash. We were able to survive a number of tragedies. We would talk about them in community circles . . . It was a place to grieve and heal. It was tough for me when I felt like I was too exhausted or old to teach, but you learn how to endure yourself. It's hard doing social justice in the country we've been living in for the past couple of decades . . . The tough times are sometimes daily in class when you see kids struggle with a lot of personal and emotional issues. As that happens they also have a place to put it. I really see the arts as a place for social justice, as a place for academics, and as a place to heal.[68]

Despite being often overworked, exhausted and under-paid as a public school teacher, Jan understands that change is a slow process, and that her students deserve her commitment regardless of the day-to-day difficulties. She tells both sad stories of former students who serve life sentences behind bars (with whom she has her students correspond with pen pals and who thus serve as inspiration for some scene work), and happier tales of former CTT students who perform at big theaters in the Twin Cities. She understands that every student has a particular set of circumstances and the ability to utilize the tools that they learn in the Blackbox. Through the fun, "deep," and physically and emotionally challenging days, Jan presses on because she knows the work is critical to her students' lives.

Jan has been working in the Blackbox for almost thirty years and has begun to focus on extending her work beyond her classroom. She adjusted her classroom teaching responsibilities so that she teaches Central students full-time for half of the year, then teaches workshops to other educators and community artists on how to do this work for the other half of the school year. While Jan flourishes as a facilitator teaching teachers and artists how to do this work in their classrooms and community spaces, the substitute teachers that have replaced Jan in the second half of the year have often struggled.

The problems associated with this work seem to lie with the teacher / facilitator as being the experienced holder of the workable tools. Jan's arsenal has been developed over the course of

[68] See Belle Lin's "Transformational Theater" [http://www.threesixtyjournalism.org/node/388]

three decades, and it is troubling to consider that Jan won't be able to do this work in the Blackbox forever. I worry about how this program will continue as social justice theater work, and not regress to the traditional high school theater model where students remake old plays about old topics. Many other teachers who are versed in theater, could come and take over, having students create original theater plays that model traditional theater, but are not centered on critical pedagogy and would not produce transformative theater or be social justice work. Indeed it is difficult to do what Jan does, but she continues to try to train others to do the work that she does in her classroom. She spends significant energy and time training both substitute teachers (and teaching artists) as well as student-facilitators, so that the work continues to go on both within the Blackbox classroom and beyond. Still, it has proven difficult for others to achieve Jan's successes at building a social justice theater program.

This work takes intense dedication to the process and to the students. It begins with dialogues that extend over long periods time, something Jan has obviously committed to this community. It all begins in one classroom, with one teacher who takes the time to listen and to value the beats that she hears flooding the hallways just outside of her classroom. She is not the hegemonic "white teacher" created in Hollywood's classroom, nor has she been created by traditional, institutional models of banking-style education. Instead, she is an invested teacher who has dedicated thirty years to teaching and learning with students and most recently training teachers, new and experienced. She is a critical educator who honors the value of her students, and learns from what they know. Social justice theater work within high school classrooms requires a teacher / facilitator who is as committed to social justice and is experienced in theater as well as in the theories, methods, and practices of Freire and Boal. This work helps this community of students realize what they already carry within them: their complicated and beautiful ideas that, when they collaborate, can be used to create work that people respond to. The ideas and creative energy flows in many directions in the Blackbox.

Jan's work will always be Freire's "practice of freedom," moving forward toward a space of social justice in the everyday lives of her students. Her work is integral to healing, recovery, and liberation now and for generations to come.

In the years since filming, all of the 2005 CTT members have graduated from Central High School. A few of them, including Ashley (above left), have gone on to study theater and creative writing in college.

3.9 FILMIC RE-TELLING AS COUNTER-NARRATIVE

I have filmed hundreds of hours of footage of the 2004 – 2005 school year. I filmed Jan, her beginning, intermediate, and advanced acting classes, and Central Touring Theater's field trips and touring performances. I have filmed multiple performances of "Barriers to Entry," and have edited small vignettes about the work, but am exploring options for a larger documentary narrative.

Still, somehow writing this chapter has felt productive in terms of understanding the theoretical framework of critical and hip-hop pedagogies, but less inspirational than the footage itself. The textual re-telling cannot speak as powerfully as the footage. There is a point where critique, stating, re-stating, and summarizing the key ideas and points becomes much less powerful than seeing it in action. When you see Jan command the attention and gain the respect of hundreds of youth in her classroom, you understand authority's (shifting need and) function in

the classroom. In the next instant, seeing Jan give a few instructions to student-leaders turns the room into an organized chaos of sound and movement that after thirty minutes, swiftly shifts and returns to a large group circle where each group has created scenes based on their "take" on a particular topic. You see a teacher who cares for her students, and students who act accountable to their teacher, and you see a space where education becomes materialized as hope and possibility.

There are many shots in my footage that place Jan very obviously at the center of the frame, like Erin in *Freedom Writers*. This is due, in part, to the material realities of filming in an open space with a teacher and hundreds of students that pass in and out of the classroom all day long. In order to "make sense" of the space during the process, I followed Jan. When you are filming you are not usually able to "understand" and "read" all of what's happening within the room, but you must film to capture as much as you can, and try to understand it in action. In the Blackbox, Jan is the key, and the only constant on a day-to-day, week-to-week, and month-to-month basis when filming over an entire school year. I did discover that much of my footage started with Jan at the frame's center but then moves, through pans, zooms, and handheld camerawork to show her in relationship to her many students. In the editing of my film, I am consciousness about framing and constructing the sequences that center Jan visually in the frame and only center Jan, in terms of the film's narrative. Unlike *The Freedom Writers* that cannot allow a sequence of the students to stand without frequent inter-cutting to their "white teacher," I have full sequences that hold for lengths of time on the students and their work, where Jan is either in the background or not present in the frame at all.

It is important to note that the image of Erin (top left) is shot from eye-line level so the audience looks her almost directly into the eye, while my image of Jan (bottom left) is shot from a low angle where the students look larger and dominate the frame over Jan who is framed at dead center. Jan may be in the T-zone of this image, but she shares this space with her students. It is my aim to move the imagery to convey that the circle (or hip-hop's cipher) is the foundation of this critical process. During filming and editing, I actively work(ed) to shift the teacher from the center of the frame (like the image of Erin in *Freedom Writers)*, and instead use shots and edit sequences that center the students, or show Jan as part of the circle with her students.

In the filmic re-telling about the work of Jan Mandell and Central's high school students, I could use the footage to work in service of the teacher as savior narrative, which is familiar to audiences. Instead I choose to work in resistance to these stories, counter these images, and subvert the hegemonic narratives of education, and above all, the belief that a "white teacher" is the only hope for inner-city student survival.

TAKE 3: I am *not* a color!

Dop, the emcee for the first-ever National Poetry Month Reading - April 2004, introduces each poet. He calls up Pauline.

- - - -

Dop [to the invited audience of other prisoners]: Don't write the judge if you are throwing it up to the camera. They gonna give it to the judge. [guys laugh]

Next up, we got Pauline Geraci.

Many guys yell: Ms. G!

Ms. G: I was telling these guys, I'm old, I need glasses now, and my mind's gone, so I can't memorize like these guys. And plus, I feel…

[guys laugh loudly]

Ms. G: I feel like nothing compared to these guys because these guys are really good.

[Dop, under his breath: C'mon man.]

Their work *really* impresses me a lot and…

[Marcus (I think): waah, wah, wah…]

Ms. G: Okay. They *forced* me, they forced me to write!

[One guy: Go Ms. G!]

Ms. G: Thank you for forcing me to write.

[Another guy: Do yo thing!]

Ms G: This one's about… Ever since I was a little kid, I don't know, elementary school, when you start the school year, you have to fill out forms. They want you to check the box of what color you are, if you are Caucasian, or white or whatever. That used to bother me because I'm Mexican-Italian, 'kay, but I probably don't look it, of course (sound of a few guys chuckling) so… I'm always really upset, like Why do I have to check a box? I don't understand that, I really bothered me so this is what came out of it.

Imagination.
Imagine a nation
Free of racist
ray-cist
free of hatefulness
hate
full of love

I am not a color!
I don't check the box white.
I'm not white, pale or light.
I'm a wonderful, wild, wacky woman.

I'm not a color.
I am a culture.
I am menudo, frijoles, and flan.
I am the granddaughter of Paulina Navarro of Chihuahua, Mexico.

I am not a color!
I am the world
I have travelled to many countries
Inhaling all cultures
Tasting all colors
I am not a color.

I am a soldier.
I wear the color
Olive drab
Red, white and blue.
I wear the rank of colonel.

I am not a color.
I am a teacher, a mentor, a coach.
I provide water to the thirsty.

I am not a color.
I am an author,
I write stories, books, and poems.
Writing is in my blood,
and blood is in my writing.

I am not a color.
I am a strong woman.
Amazonian, muscles.
Sinew. Strong on the outside and on the inside.
Suck it up and drive on.

I am not a color.
I am a child
playing, laughing, running.
I wear crazy hats and clown noses,
and hair of many colors.

I am not a color.
I am who I am.
The daughter of Nancy and John,
sister of Mary and Mike

Yo no soy un colór.

[loud clapping]

CHAPTER 4 – CRITICAL CONTENT: PRISON POETS (W)RITING RESISTANCE

4.1 Project History: From Within the Belly

In early 2004, I received a call from Twin Cities' poet Desdamona, who writes and works as an artist-in-residence in schools and prisons, to resist sexism, racism, and to complicate understandings of women in hip–hop. She asked if I would be interested in teaching in a prison poetry class. She, along with another local poet reggie harris, had received a Minnesota Regional Arts Council grant as well as a Department of Corrections Education grant to fund artist time for this project. "I'm not a poet," I replied hesitantly, but almost instantly agreeing. I assumed I was being asked to come in to teach about rap, and its connection to poetry, but I was wrong.

A few weeks later I attended the meeting of "in the belly," reggie's activist arts organization working in prisons and with at–risk youth in the Twin Cities. reggie asked how much I would need to film, and I instantly agreed to be a part of the project. As a documentary filmmaker trained in the art of interrogation and information gathering, I surprisingly didn't ask too many of the important questions about filming in prison in advance. As a light skinned Puerto Rican woman of the hip–hop generation, my interactions with the police and the resulting interaction with the corrections system has imbued me with an oppositional consciousness that fuels my work with activist organizations like Refuse & Resist and ArtSpeaks, which organize against the prison industrial complex.[1] Honestly, working with prison educators and as a prison resource was never within the scope of my politicized practices.

---

[1] Oppositional consciousness is a theoretical concept articulated by third world feminist Chela Sandoval in "The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World". Sandoval, Chela. *US Third–World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World*. *Genders* 10, Spring 1991, 75–99.
The prison–industrial complex refers to correctional facilities most concerned with operating as a profitable business. Prisons contract construction companies, surveillance technology vendors, corporations (who sell goods like phone service, food, and clothing) and industry shops (employing prisoners for .25/hour and selling products at street values) – generating great amounts of revenue for the prison, but with little benefit to the prisoners. Instead, the prison-industrial complex relies on increasing populations of the incarcerated for cheap labor sources. See works by and about Angela Davis: Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), Joy James, *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and*

At the helm of the Stillwater Poetry Group's Critical Poetry Workshop was poet reggie harris, a former "offender" who spent twelve years imprisoned in the California Correctional Facility Lompoc, for multiple felony convictions. reggie's last bid, an eight–and–a–half year term for drug offenses, changed his life. One day he reached into the book bin wheeled through the cellblock corridor, and picked out a tattered fragment of August Wilson's play "Fences."[2] Although he only had the pages of the middle act of the play, he connected deeply with the father–son conflict, he imagined and wrote the beginning and the end, to fill in the rest of the story.

"[I began] looking at my father's arguing and whippings differently, [and] poetry became the vehicle to explore that," said reggie in the planning meeting.[3] reggie deeply considered the context of the space of a men's prison from an insider's perspective. His experiences directly fueled his goals for this work, and as such, he required more than volunteerism from participants.

"I don't do missionary work," reggie often repeats in interviews. "I don't think it's possible in prison to rehabilitate," he said in an interview with a local paper. "Prisons are designed to oppress, dehumanize, control, and give us the illusion of safety, [but] art is a way to connect inmates with their humanity, but also to connect us to the humanity of the inmate."[4] It is within this praxical frame that we entered inside the prison gates.

Contemporary Prison Writings (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), and Joy James *The Angela Y. Davis Reader,* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

[2] August, Wilson. *Fences*. (New York: Samuel French, 1986).

[3] Lydia Howell, "Voices No Longer Imprisoned", 2004. http://pulsetc.com/article.php?sid=1273

[4] Ibid.

Within a few weeks of our “in the belly” meeting, I was sitting inside Lit3, a Stillwater Correctional Facility classroom, meeting “the guys.” Entering the room, led by Pauline Geraci, “Ms. G,” a prison literacy teacher. I realized I had not fully prepared to be inside or filming inside this a men’s prison facility.

Ms. G”, or “Momma G”, as the guys affectionately began to call her during this project, seemed to represent how “tough” you have to be (or at least purport to be, in such a hypermasculine space). Ms. G is colonel in the Army Reserves, a martial arts black belt, who is loved and admired by students for her demanding but supportive teaching style, her affection for wearing really silly hats, and for her real battle scars. Ms. G. sometimes shared a peek at a large scar across her chest from a stray bullet that hit her in combat, which is an impressive remnant of war. Ms. G’s classroom was adorned with butterflies, rainbows, smiley faces, knick–knacks, and toys that make music. She may look like a “white teacher,” but she is not.

4.2 Ms. G Flips The Script: Complicating the Military Trained (“white teacher”) Narrative

Ms. G, appears the part of a strict but nice, “white teacher” standing perfectly straight at the head of the classroom. Always hung around her neck was her Department of Corrections identification tag and a body alarm. Ms. G is a prison literacy teacher who is known for being both a “hard ass,” and very silly. She is proud of her bi-racial identity as both white and Mexican-American, as she clearly articulates in her poem, “I Am Not A Color,” read at the SPG National Poetry Month event, April 2004.[5] She is trained by the U.S. Armed Forces, has served on active and reserve duty, and carries herself with confidence.

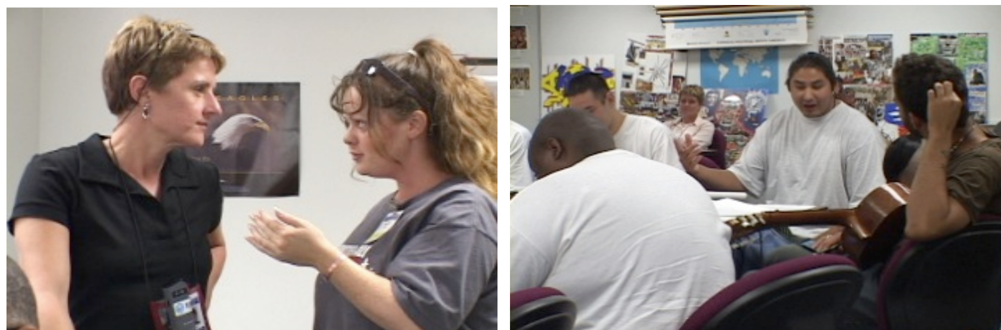
One day, Ms. G emerged from her office holding her “Best Teacher Award,” wearing a giant crab atop her head, and holding photos of the last prison book fair where she dressed as a bookworm, costumed from head to toe in a six foot worm suit. This caused disgruntled guards, unsure if the costume posted a security breach to the facility. But that is Ms. G, who pushes the limits of the institution to provide the best classroom community and learning opportunities to her students, regardless of the reason for their imprisonment. Ms. G is a dedicated, caring, and

---

[5] See Take 3 section of this dissertation, p. 165 - 167.

compassionate teacher who earned more than one Outstanding Adult Basic Education (ABE) statewide teaching award. It is clear that for Ms. G's laughter and an ethic of caring is embedded within her prison pedagogy.

Ms. G is clear that she was not a poet at the start of this process, but she recognized the value of the poetry to literacy and learning, and she immediately saw the excitement of the guys who would jump into a circle to rap (which she recognized as performing poetry), during breaks from her literacy class. One week she decided to read poetry to her students and later one of the men asked if he could read something he had written. Subsequently, students brought in so much poetry of their own to read that Ms. G began volunteering her time for a Tuesday evening poetry class.



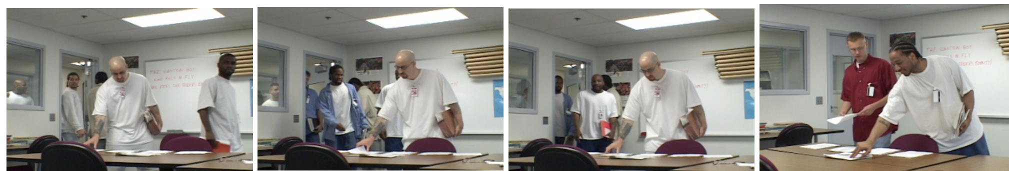
She realized her own limitations (an act of resistance which can be read against the *Dangerous Minds* "white teacher" character), as a poet but saw the potential for poetry and writing to be transformative. After meeting reggie inside Stillwater when he was a guest in a "Behavior Modification" class, she started brainstorming on fundraising possibilities and

planning the critical poetry workshop.

She hired reggie and his “in the belly” collective, to bring what she often acknowledged that she was unable to bring in the classroom – diverse experiences, mastery of poetry, and a man who had survived imprisonment and re-entry. Together. Reggie and Ms. G collaboratively devised the SPG critical poetry workshop. During the workshops, she mostly sat quiet in the circle, or just outside of it. She always stayed engaged but never felt the need to talk or “control” the space. But she is responsible for gaining permissions from the institution, fundraising, and hiring “in the belly.”

4.3 Engaging Praxical Resistance: Prisoners humanized as learners

They are conscious, profound, sometimes naive, and both hopeless and hopeful. Their work examined struggles with personal identity and larger group consciousness. In their writing they explored the complexities, contradictions, differences, and what change could mean for them, living behind bars. They grappled with self / group transformations and ultimately formed a strong circle, both literally in the classroom, and metaphorically.



Guys rushed into the classroom each week to set up the tables and chairs into circles (or very large rectangles because of the long tables). After the first session, which was set up more like a college lecture configuration, they always re-configured the classroom so that everyone faced each other. This mirrored the pedagogical processes where everyone worked simultaneously as teacher, student and workshop participant across thematic sessions. This sharing of power and responsibility is a direct result of the design of the workshop. The co-facilitation sessions mean that both the "inside" and "outside" facilitators (prison poets and Twin Cities artists) are equally responsible for preparing the session's outlines, schedules, readings, and goals. This is particularly striking because they cannot have direct contact before meeting for face-to-face five minutes before each session began.

Michael Hames-Garcia, in *Fugitive Thought, Prison Movements, Race and The Meaning of Justice*, maps out a theoretical framework that engages concepts of praxical resistance. He affirms, "the experiences of people of color directly brings freedom and justice to bear on those practices of resistance that are necessary both to survive in the present world and to attempt to transform it into a more humane one."[6] He calls for intellectual interventions within the academy, and notes the work of prison intellectuals and poets as examples of praxical resistance, a largely important epistemological and theory / knowledge-generating site. Hames-Garcia argues that prison writings are important political social theory, ideas as important as the "experts" who are considered the great thinkers of our society, like lawyers and philosophers. He examines the meanings of key concepts to prison work such as "justice," "solidarity," and "freedom" through analysis of the context and content of prisoner writing. He examines these critical concepts in the theories and practices of prison life. He constructs his book as a praxis site of transforming normative theorizing and the work of the academy as both space and place that are deeply connected. He contends,

> Constantly, I am reminded that, despite the great differences between the academy and the prison system, they are inextricably bound together: from the file cabinet in my office (made by prison labor) to the campus cafeteria (run by Sodexo-Marriott, one of the largest investors in the private prison industry) to the students in a class I taught on prison literature (nearly one third of whom had friends or relatives in prison).[7]

---

[6] Hames-Garcia, *Fugitive Thought, Prison Movements, Race and The Meaning of Justice*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 2004, xvii.
[7] Ibid.

Hames-Garcia aims to build an epistemic space that is reciprocal and not exploitative, a theorizing of "freedom-in-struggle," noting that there is "room for the role of subjectivity in knowledge-generating practices for the unobservable (yet casual) aspects of reality."[8] He demonstrates that prisoners, whose everyday lives produce experiential theories and methods to examine their world, are in an epistemically privileged position to articulate the meanings of imprisonment and in the understandings of humanity. It is through the daily rituals of imprisonment that thoughtful and complex understandings of justice can be produced. He examines prisoners' writings to "demonstrate that prisoners' intimate involvement with the injustices of positive law makes them valuable and concrete theorists of justice and that their participation in struggles for freedom makes them among the most important theorists of the material nature and possibilities for expanded notions of freedom."[9] He arrives at "a praxical view of theory (that is, of theory as arrived at through experiencing and acting in the world)," reasoning that it is "not merely the input of prisoners and dissidents that is *useful* in developing a critical theory of justice and freedom, but rather it is *necessary*."[10] These ideas reinforce the women of color feminist standpoint theory which suggests that knowledge arises from experiential ways of knowing that are distinct because of first-hand knowledge and experience.[11]

The most prolific and widely discussed political prisoner of today, Mumia Abu-Jamal, urges:

> [T]his world and life itself, is broader than the ivory towers of academia. Make external connections. Build bridges to the larger, nonacademic community. Build social, political and communal networks. . . . The word "radical" means from the roots – so, build roots! Touch base with real folks, and work for the only real source of liberty – life!"[12]

---

[8] Ibid, xxv.
[9] Ibid, xliii.
[10] Ibid, xliv.
[11] Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
[12] See Brewer and Hetizeg, 179-184.

Much of the academic work published on the imprisoned examines writings of prisoners whose incarcerations would be seen by the mainstream and its institutions as political. Scholar and activist Angela Davis, whose standpoint can be epistemically privileged because of her experience as a prisoner and as a leading Black feminist scholar, believes that all prisoners are political because prisons are unjust. However, Joy James argues that only prisoners who came to critical consciousness before imprisonment or due to their imprisonment can be considered political prisoners.

In *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, James traces themes of writing resistance across difference, hoping that they will transform the exchanges between "the so-called free world seeking personal and collective freedoms and those in captivity seeking liberation from economic, military, racial / sexual systems."[13] Sudbury astutely articulates that the framing of prisons, and the realities of prisoners' lives, are "intimately connected to global capitalism," and argues that "prison scholars would need to develop research agendas that generate cross-border, transnational knowledge" and believes that "scholars in the United States would need to develop strategies to challenge the global spread of the U.S. model of mass incarceration and U.S. corporate penal expansion."[14]

Much of the activist and academic work on prison reform argues that there is a line dividing the criminal and the political prisoners, but the contemporary conditions of the prison industrial complex make this distinction irrelevant to many.[15] Still, many center their examinations solely on prisoners whose incarcerations can be explicitly framed as political. What results is an epistemic gap; there is a silencing of many prisoners whose crimes can be theorized as redeeming to society. It then becomes a valuable project for me to read for intellectual value and acts of resistance in those imprisoned, not just for ideological stances and political actions, but for their decisions and circumstances.

---

[13] See James, 4.
[14] Sudbury, xii-xiii.
[15] See Brewer and Heitzeg 2008, Davis 2003, James 2000, 2002, 2005, Lopez 2002, Wilmott 2002.

The SPG prisoners that I worked with cannot be clearly ranked as "political prisoners" or "prisoners of conscious," under Davis' more rigid definition of "those were in prison as a direct result of their political activities."[16] However, a number of SPG members are examples created by the juvenile "justice" system that certified them as adults before the age of 18 and sentenced them to decades in adult facilities. This makes their imprisonment contextually political. Some numbers of the SPG were convicted under the war on drugs, resulting in the increasing criminalization of street drugs that are bought and sold in poor communities, and thus can be considered politically racialized criminalization.[17] Yet, according to Angela Davis, the nature of their incarceration, their "imprisonment is a function of a system of political repression as well as of economic exploitation and racist repression." Thus, they can be considered as political prisoners.[18] Still, there is not always a moral way to resolve some of their statuses as serious violent offenders. Many of the SPG are the people whose criminal pasts filled hours of local and national news stories. Some have been convicted of heinously violent murders, some are convicted of gang violence, drug sales, promoting prostitution, and numerous other offenses that

---

16
http://www.brown.edu/Departments/African_American_Studies/wayland_fac_seminar/interview/angela_davis.html#interview

17 The racist over-sentencing of primarily young men of color for crack offenses, in opposition of primarily wealthy, whites for cocaine offenses has been written about in studies like Keith Kitty and Alfred L. Joseph's *Institutional Racism and Sentencing Disparities for Cocaine Possession*, New York: Hawthorne Press, 1999 and numerous other texts, articles, and newspaper features.

18 Brewer and Hetizeg, 179-184.

cannot be redeemed by parentheticals of reformation, or categorizing them as the "new critical consciousness."[19]

This is not a project about fighting for better education for the wrongly imprisoned. Instead, it is about enlisting transformative pedagogies in confined spaces like prisons, filming them, and reflecting upon that process in order to test ideas like "education as the practice of freedom."[20] I see education within prison walls as working along a continuum, where prisoners gain critical consciousness through the process of education, critical thinking, and writing their realities. But at the end of the day, they are still (literally) caged, oppressed, and dehumanized. It becomes less important why they are in prison, but instead, asks the prisoner to produce his own subjectivity and be an agent of transformation through the realization of his critical engagement in the world, and ultimately, his humanity.

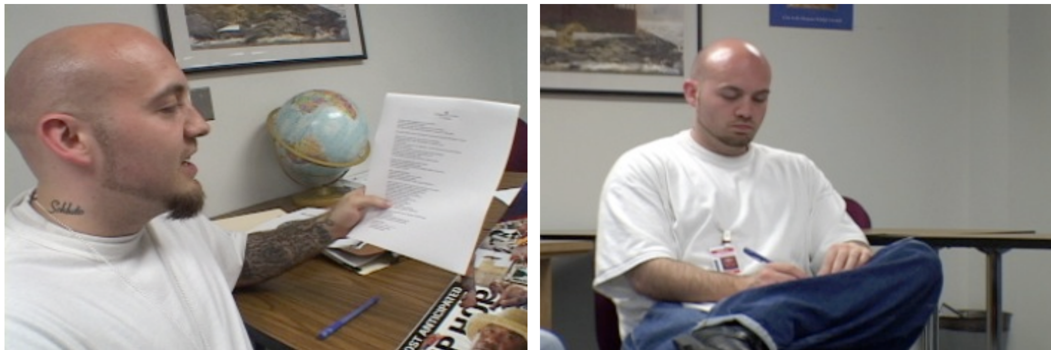
As those of us outside of direct incarceration are confronted with the often-ugly realities, histories, and complexities of the people sitting in the prison classroom, we can only examine the work as movement along this critical consciousness continuum, rather than rely on debate about the crime of which each was convicted. Convictions of criminal offenses, their acts of the past, do not negate their humanity, their role as intellectuals, nor determine their ability to produce knowledge. It is the goal of this project to produce the conditions for personal, social, and community transformation. I ask: who is more suited for self-realization and transformation through education than those who have engaged in criminal thinking and acted on those thoughts? Prisoners, in theory (and some in practice), are those who have devalued life and have defaced or discounted the basic rights of humanity, or have been convicted of those acts. I believe that prisoners are ripe for transgressive and transformative education, and the SPG critical poetry workshop is the manifestation of the desire to practice education as a humanizing process.

---

[19] James, 2003.
[20] See Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

4.4 (W)riting Resistance

"Prisons breed hate, anger, and unproductiveness," said SPG poet David "Dop" Doppler.[21] In the poem "Why You Hate" he writes, "I am the dirt in the corner, that everyone looks past."[22] He is young, articulate, understands the power of words, and chooses his carefully; he currently serves a life sentence, convicted at age 17.

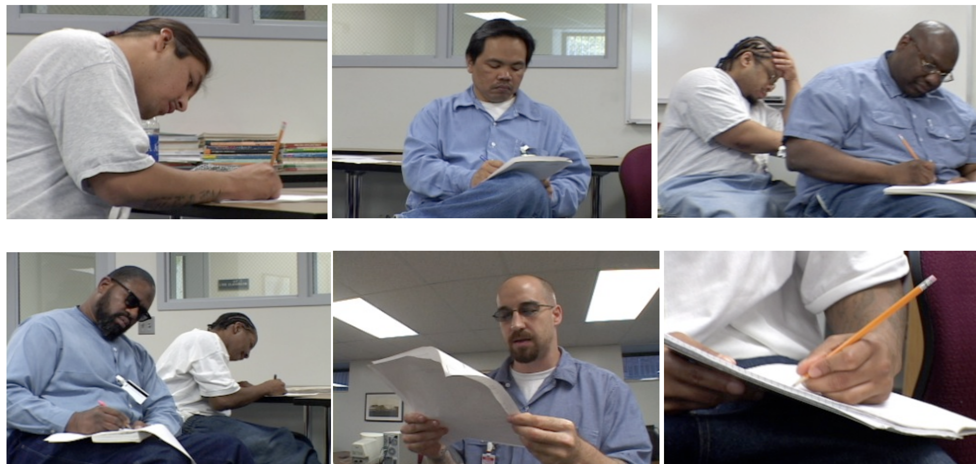


What does it mean to live a life believing that you are either dirt or invisible? Much of the writing explores themes of self-hate that festers from confinement and institutionalization. This seemed, early on, to be a key question of the SPG critical poetry workshop sessions.

---

[21] Video footage of 4/19/04, SPG tape 3.
[22] "Why You Hate", David James Doppler, 2004.

In his poem "Living in a Cage" Steven Glaze writes, "Living in a cellblock is like walking into a warehouse / young men, old men, stored away like canned goods," after a decade of imprisonment.[23] In the SPG group one poet would issue a call (in the call and response African-American literary tradition), and many would respond and write.[24]



The SPG imprisoned poets wrote ritualistically; through the writing they worked to find themselves, to find the satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs, as an act that strengthened their individual spiritual and collective emotional bonds, and for the pleasure of writing. Through

[23] In this chapter, I have delineated lines and lines breaks, where I heard the poet pause or break a line, although I don't have the text written in its original form; most of the poems only exist in memory, and on the videotapes in my archive.

[24] See *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, 1998, edited by Patricia Liggins Hill, Bernard W. Bell, Trudier Harris, William J. Harris, R. Baxter Miller, and Sondra A. O'Neale. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

this process writing became a rite, a ceremonious act, a rite of passage that marked an important stage in their lives. For many of the inside SPG poets, the process of self-articulation began in the literacy classroom, working toward general education degrees (GED). Many were illiterate when they arrived at the prison, but through peer tutoring, self-study, and education classes, learned to read, write, and examine the world through a critical and theoretical lens.

In the first Critical Poetry Workshop filmed session, Doppler articulates the desire to offer the SPG poets the "exposure to something better."[25] He urged "the fellas" (as they call each other) that, "we can put some of that anger and hate into our writing."[26]

For Doppler, he used his own writing as healing, as exemplified in his piece "Dust's dust", he writes: "My pen is my Prozac / My notebook my shrink / -N- as I do my time behind enemy lines / I take a minute to tell it how I think."[27]

Maxxe Jackson writes: "As I walk through this jungle, I see every sort of creature, animal, and beast. / Some must act like scavengers, just to eat. / Others are reduced to prey, and some creatures will never see their day. / While all day long the monkeys play their games in the

[25] Video footage of 4/19/04, SPG tape 3.
[26] Ibid.
[27] "Dust's Dust", David James Doppler, 2004.

trees, and pees on unsuspecting heads of jungle families." He tries to make light of living in a jungle by asking, "Is it right? No. But some times funny, it seems."

Through his jungle analogy, he makes an astute analysis of the system's bewildering complexity and brutal competitiveness, and in the end writes, "My heart does go out to the prey . . . I do admire the creatures I see, the real ones that deal with this jungle reality / take them all with me when I leave." Even amidst the chaos of the jungle he feels concern for the exploited, and acknowledges that he is privileged to, in a few more years, leave the caged jungle.

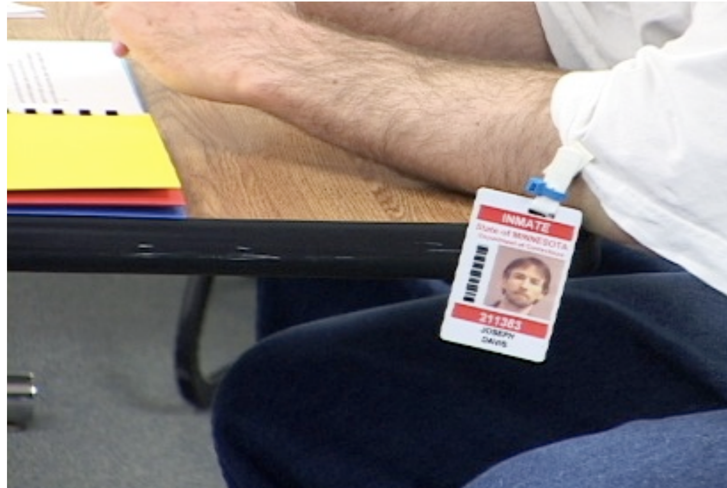
For the assignment, "Why are you an SPG?" Ezekiel Caligiuri writes, "In the orchestra of life's experiences, I stand in the most violent tornado with people I'm not sure I really know. / The anxiety twisting within them, the thoughts of the moment act to irritate the already uncontrollable shadow of themselves. / And it's just a pale abstraction, of my own injurious heart. / The injuries of my soul, the injuries of my mind / like a cold sentimental message that reminds me of a time when I fell to my last dime and lost control of my own time. / So then how do I run from a falling sky, the days go by and I'm still knocking on these walls, on one end of one-sided phone calls. / I see my days through frosted windows and sit in a cell with silent figures who give praise to bronze statues, and depth is only relative, and my relatives can't afford the gas to come out and see me. / These people know what they do. / Judges and lawyers meditate on corruption. To take away our limited abilities, like man's virility or women's fertility. / It's finite, it finds it's meaning at twilight, and that's why I fight. / So what are you fighting for? / To open new doors? / To bump your head on a glass ceiling? A powerful feeling? Now what you want me to do? / Ring a bell and I jump up like a monkey do? / And you, you want to fight me for price fixed squeeze? /

Then they try to appease me with cartoons on channel 3? / Every day I stand beside men who have enough years to fill bricks in that wall, and I've got just enough to build a cage around myself. / I live in a mental prison, inside of a vascular prison, inside of a concrete prison, and underneath a socio-economic prison, but I still got vision. / And it burns, it burns like hot coals under rotten souls, and somebody's payin' me to be here. / But after court fines and restitution, cost of confinement and re-distribution, I'm left with $12 bucks. And that's just enough for about four salamis and a bar of soap to wash the blood, sweat and tears from my face. It's like ants at a picnic. / So what are you fighting for?"

Caligiuri ends the poem comparing his incarcerated status to that of a young American soldier standing in the desert with an M16, stating, "So I stand before you in grandiose spectacular, we are all morally chaotic and infinitely dangerous. But through my dreary eyes, I can see a certain sunrise compromised of both sunshine and night time. / So I fight time so that the colors of history will come to visit me."[28] At the time this was written/performed, he was twenty-three, had served only four years of a twenty-two year sentence.

Ezekiel often sat quietly in the classroom. He did not share much about his personal history (in terms of his crime, length of sentence, or if and when he would be released). This is not unlike most of the SPG poets. Most spoke of internal and external struggles and selected moments in their personal histories to speak about, such as stories of abuse, struggle, suffering, and poor choices that resulted in their imprisonment.

[28] "Why I Am An SPG", Ezekiel Caligiuri, 2004.



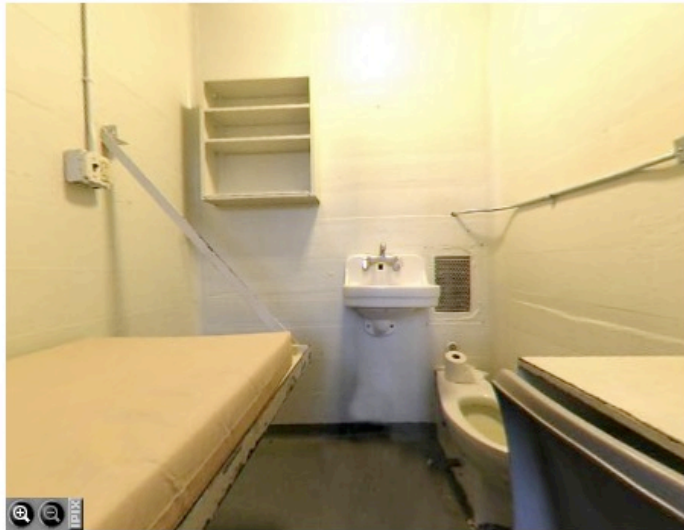
It is possible to look up all Minnesota offenders by name or offender identification number (OID) through the Minnesota Department of Corrections website but we chose to not look up the prisoner's information before or during the time of the workshop. What seemed most important at the time was to allow each man to be an agent on his journey. Each began at a particular space within himself and traveled the lengths he committed to. As a result, facts or data about personal and group transformations (as individuals and intellectuals), cannot be easily charted or mapped.

So much of the Stillwater writing and discussion was about living within the confines of walls. Each man spends most of his day locked into the cell. The DOC allows website visitors to take a "Virtual Tour" of the cellblocks, using technology that allows you to pan and zoom around the space.[29]

[29] Take a tour of MNDOC facilities at: http://www.corr.state.mn.us/aboutdoc/tour/default.htm

Virtual Tours

Stillwater Single Cell



The cells at MCF-Stillwater are 6 feet by 9 feet. Due to the small size and safety/security concerns, offenders are only permitted to keep two small footlockers of personal belongings.

Click and drag image to begin tour

Stillwater Single Cell

Stillwater Cell Block

The common area of the cell hall is called "the flag" because it is made of flagstone.

Inside prison it is grey, white, and a yellowed brown. It is a stark and uninspiring space. There is no color, nothing ever looks any different, and the days are filled with repetition: the same small space, an 8.5 by 11 foot cell is often the "house" for two grown men, who live physically and mentally cramped. They lack access to fresh air, except for one hour of yard a day. They cannot escape the smell of sickness that hovers over every inch of the space. All prisoners wear the same clothes – state-issued jeans and white t-shirts, made by fellow prisoners in MCF Moose Lake.[30] Prisoners hear the same sounds of footsteps on metal stairs, bells for count, the clanging of bars. Quiet rarely comes even well past the lights out, day after day, although this is a rule violation that is rarely enforced.[31] The SPG poets translate this experiential knowledge into poems, producing adept theories about their lives and the conditions that led to their incarcerations.

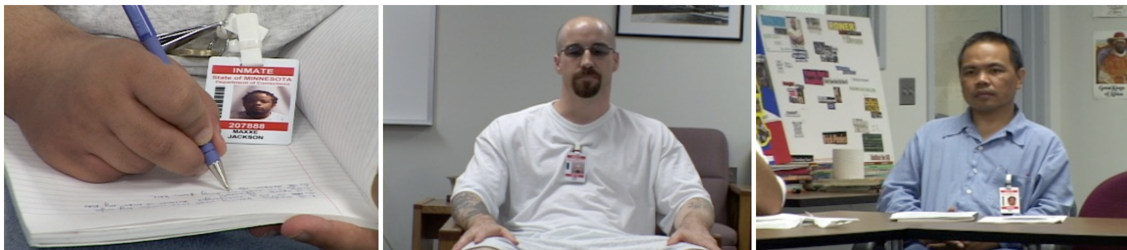
---

[30] http://www.minncor.com/facilitylocations/mooselake.htm

[31] Rule 020 ("DISTURBING OTHERS") in the 2005 Minnesota Department of Corrections Offender Discipline Regulations handbook states: NO offender shall create sufficient noise to disturb others. Discipline is 30 days LOP (meaning "Disciplinary Loss of Privileges"). Department of Corrections Handbook, 2005.

Prisons, by design, are sites of surveillance, order and control.[32] They erase humanity and pride themselves on power, control, and ownership. "I am Mr. 187406," said LaVon Johnson, performing at an inside poetry performance for National Poetry Month, in the prison's education unit.

"When I got here they told me you are 187406, remember that number," he shared, "I am no longer a name, I am a number."[33]



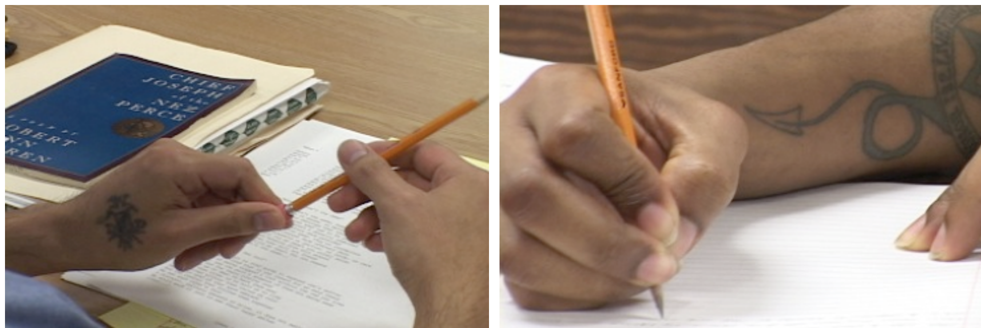
Inmate Identification tags hang around each man's neck or clipped to the front of his shirt. The stark white tags display the government name, offender identification number (OID), and the most recent prison mug shot photo. To remove the ID from one's neck is a violation of prison rules, and would result in disciplinary action.[34]

---

[32] History of prison as panoptican, and the impact on lived experiences of prisoners is discussed at length in *Are Prisons Obsolete* also See: "The New Surveillance", Marx, Gary T. in *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. pp. 258 – 273.
[33] SPG DVCAM tape 6, April 22, 2004.
[34] Rule 150 ("FAILURE TO CARRY/DISPLAY IDENTIFICATION CARD") in the 2005 Minnesota Department of Corrections Offender Discipline Regulations handbook states: No offender shall move from one are to another without his/her identification card on his/her person, or properly displayed (if required), after having been issued such a card. In the education unit, ID tags need be worn at all times. Discipline is 30 days LOP (meaning "Disciplinary Loss of Privileges"). Department of Corrections Handbook, 2005.

Most of the prisoner's actions are guided by prison regulations, from loitering to lying and misrepresentation and inciting/unlawful assembly/protest.[35] Rule 390 ("INCITING/UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY/ PROTEST (RSV)") states that no offender shall act in a manner that will likely lead to the arousal of emotions on the part of other offenders so as to create the possibility of their acting beyond the control of staff in charge. No offender shall assemble, organize or act in conjunction with two or more offenders in protest, demonstration, unauthorized meeting or in violation of any facility rule.[36] The rules are clear. Prisoners are controlled, and cannot even be allowed "arousal of emotions."

"I remember when the judge sentenced me and said something like, "*You are now property of the Minnesota Department of Corrections*,*"* Steven Glaze explained. Even more than a decade later, and years after release, he must fight this mental imprint.[37] The notion of being the State's property often revisited him while incarcerated. Years after conviction he was charged with defacing State property for a jailhouse tattoo. He marked his body with physical manifestations of his pain with hand scratched tattoos like the one on his forearm that reads, "Dying is the easy part."



[35] See the 2005 Minnesota Department of Corrections Offender Discipline Regulations handbook for Rule 010 ("Loitering"), Rule 240 ("Lying and Misrepresentation"), and Rule 390 ("INCITING/UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY/ PROTEST (RSV)") as examples of prison control of thoughts, actions, emotion, and physical movement. Department of Corrections Handbook, 2005.
[36] Department of Corrections Discipline Regulations Handbook, 2005.
[37] Telephone Interview, January 7, 2008, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Additionally, Glaze was threatened with disciplinary action for defacing property, a violation of Rule 270, upon his suicide attempt, which resulted in him being put into a "wet cell." A wet cell is a room where the toilet is a hole in the floor that is flushed when guards "feel" like flushing (only about twice a day). This is a confined space where the lights stay on 24 hours a day, and you are watched constantly through two-way mirrored glass; "What they call help," said Glaze, "is what we [prisoners] call getting in trouble."[38]

What he offers here is knowledge created experientially; he provides first-hand insight that prison scholars can't necessarily access. His experiential epistemology can, in turn, produce theory about the meaning-making practices of the prison, through the understandings of his first-hand account. He points directly to prison (and institutional policy) as the producer of meaning of treatment and punishment inside prison walls. He suggests that the very same act, being stripped naked and put into a "wet cell" is officially called "help." He understands that this "help," the act of further confining, isolating, and monitoring prisoners in less humane spaces than cells, is in actuality further punishment and is common practice by the state. By reading Glaze's testimony as a critical and complex understanding of the institutional practices of prisoners, we can begin to complicate the theoretical and practical understanding of "corrections" in prisons, and glean from the experiential value of prisoner's subjectivity.[39]

"Before the SPG there wasn't a person in that room that was alive," he continued, talking me through the past. [40] "Every emotion, every sense that lets you know that you were alive is disconnected [in prison]. You are disconnected from everything that makes you a human being. Prison disconnects you from yourself. In[side the walls], reality is daily survival, *Will I make it*

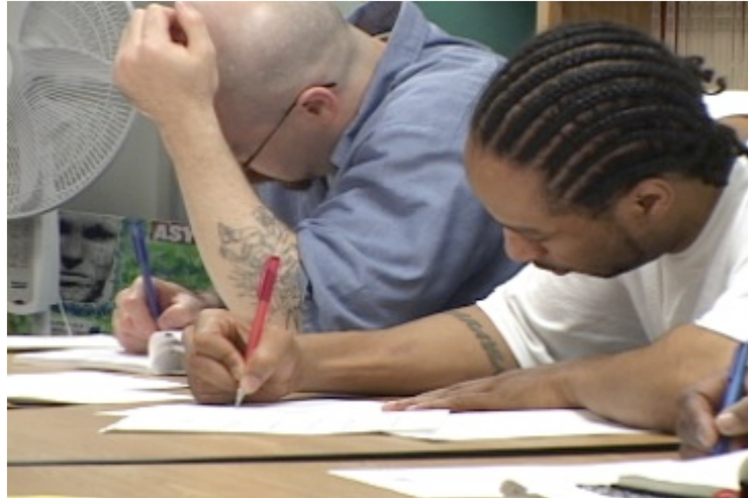
---

[38] Ibid.

[39] This is not unlike women of color feminism that argues that knowledge has been built (written) on the literal and figurative backs of people of color, and poor people, and prisoners are no exception, see *This Bridge Called my Back*: *Writings By Radical Women of Color* (1984) and *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* (2002). Rather than turning to the academic "experts", prisoners can (and do) articulate sharpened critical lens, and informed theoretical perspectives on prisons and the world.

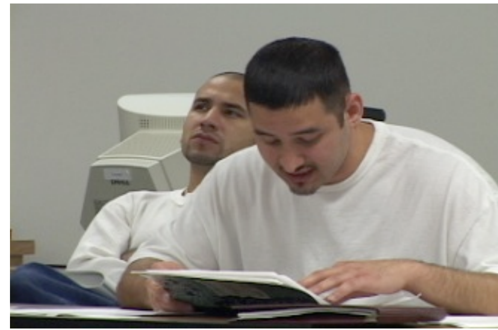
[40] Ibid.

through the day?," he expressed. "In the SPG, words become flesh [through] the power of writing. You can escape. You can find you again, get a chance to feel your soul," Glaze articulated.[41] He describes a space where words, written and spoken, become the lifeblood of the incarcerated body, and at the same time are embodied, (re)creating life in the most suffocating of environments .

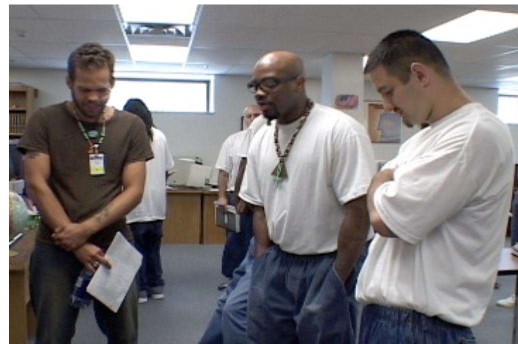


The desire to feel one's soul is about one's identity, spiritual, and internal self existing in a place where prisoners often express feeling like the walking dead. This is significant when we consider that academics (or privileged knowledge producers) have basic abilities to get up and stretch, browse the Internet, order a book from the library or the Internet, or engage in any activity to enrich, provoke, replenish, or inspire. The SPG poets are often confined twenty four hours a day, have no fresh air, feel no sunlight, have little access to books on topics they like to research, and must find inspiration in physical spaces that reek, are cold, alienating, dangerous, and suffocating. What does it mean, then, that words, poetry, writing, and creative/intellectual work becomes the way in which these men experience depth, soul, and life? They can imagine themselves as passionate, intellectual, agents of their thoughts and desires.

[41] Telephone Interview, January 7, 2008, Minneapolis, Minnesota.



Tony Burgess is a talented writer and graffiti style visual artist who produced a "Truth" self-portrait mural with pen, ink, markers, paint and a collage made from magazine images. Written in small black ink inside larger, bright yellow hand styled letters, he writes the truth about schools with phrases like "concentration camps disguised as public schools," reflecting on his schooling in the "free world," "that don't educate"; he feels he was pushed through the school to prison pipeline.[42]



Ja'far, a lifer who engages in serious self-study of African and Black History, frames the performance of his poem, "Niggas is Genocide," speaking to 70 other prisoners for the education unit's first and only National Poetry Month performance, arranged by Ms. G. He begins, "I write because I desire to teach, and I speak because I desire to inform, and whatever knowledge you get from what I say, you build your own foundation, [...] the reasons that I wrote this was because of the attitudes we have toward each other, the attitude we express toward each other is not a healthy attitude at all."

[42] DVCAM tape, April 20, 2004.

He performed the lengthy piece, flawlessly from memory, “If niggas were triggers, how many niggas would be dead? If niggas had true knowledge of self, they would be Black men instead. / But niggas don’t even know what being Black means. / It ain’t the jive in your talk or the act in between. / Black men got hung while white men sung, and Black kids seen their bodies on the trees as they swung. / And white women brought their kids ‘cuz to them, it was public fun. And I wonder how many niggas that seen this would stay and fight, or run. Niggas is genocide. / Niggas are the only ones that become OGs for destroying their own race, and now niggas wanna call themselves Americans, dreaming to be equal to their masters, instead of wanting something for their own, controlling their own space.”

The guys listened intensely as he recounted the impacts of slavery, Christianity, and racism. He explains in the piece that, “we exist to resist, and to find the beauty in Blackness,” calling for an incarcerated new Black Arts Movement, and continued, “but niggas ain’t contemplatin’, niggas ain’t thinkin’, they too busy shuckin’ and drinkin’ and talking that jive, and mentally sinking. Wisdom is like wise words that flows like water but niggas ain’t drinking [...] niggas die dead from their own self-hate.”

He stated that “niggas are manufactured by the media, video clones who fear to be themselves, because the scars of slavery have traveled this far . . . we’ve been de-programmed,

re-programmed, reconfigured, modified, and un-tuned, and bullwhipped by the poison that they put in your spoon. / Now your mind is in ruins, chains and whips, oceans and slave ships [...] we stolen to be the merchandise of the Americas. We became a commodity that enriched today's world economy."

Sarith Peou, an immigrant from Cambodia who has vivid nightmares about growing up under the Khmer Rouge, is a former social worker who is serving a life sentence; he was a shy member of the group. He never spoke in the workshop before Korean-American author and poet Ed Bok Lee shared his poem, "The Secret to Life in America," about being an Asian immigrant. Following that session, Peou became a vocal member of the group. Peou responded to the writing assignment, *Why are you an SPG?* with this short piece: "Compressed thoughts swell in my head/Hurt so much I wish I was dead/I want to release them, drop them like lead/I don't have the strength to live them so I change them into poems." The circle clapped passionately for Peou, who was often silent for hours or days on end.

"What I observe and feel touched by the most is that people get together," Sarith expressed in his group interview during the final filmed reflection session[43]. He said, "Since I joined this group, people will say hi to me, before I didn't exist here." Peou has moved from a place of invisibility and possible exploitation in the cellblock, to a member of this community.

During the critical poetry workshop sessions in 2004, David Doppler wrote a piece called reflecting on the media's (mis)constructions of prisons in "Don't Call A Horse A Mule," sharing: "They can cut and paste any angle on the 10 o'clock news/to having you believing that a horse is

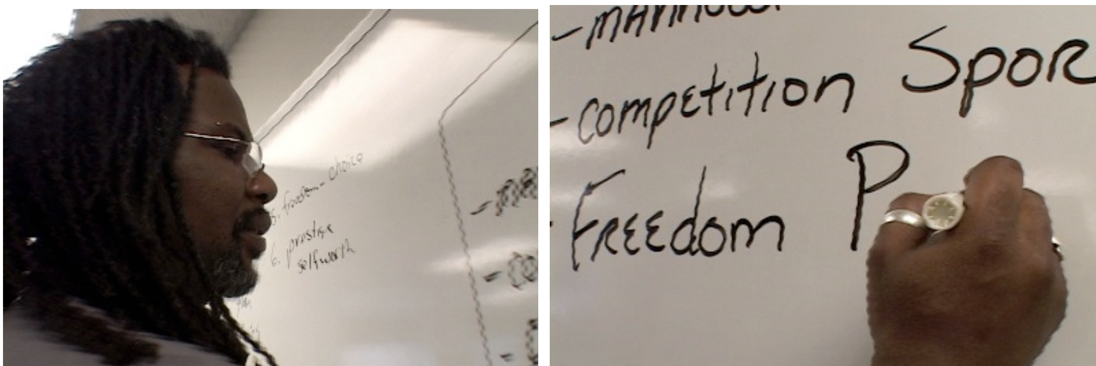
---

[43] DVCAM tape, August 2004.

just a mule," he wrote, sharing his critical analysis of the media that constructs the world's view of prisoners; something the SPG theorize and resist in their writings. "Why are we so quick to buy into a fabricated fantasy that someone else thought was cool?" Doppler asks in the same poem, read at the 2004 prison education graduation ceremony. This was the first time in Stillwater's long history that an "inmate" was asked to speak to the incarcerated graduates.[46]

There's a clip in the 30-minute trailer I edited about the SPG, created for a project fundraiser attended by Doppler's father and stepmother in late 2004. In the clip of his group reflection interview, Doppler discusses the workshop's effects upon him. "I've learned something from every single workshop," he says, "it's affected my life and how I deal with my family and everybody in here." Strikingly he says, "I used to look at a lot of things fucked up . . . before I met these two females," pointing to Desdamona and me. He said, "I used to watch TV and be like *bitches*. The video come on and it's like, *bitches*, all day long." After viewing this clip at the fundraiser, his father and stepmother approached me, hugging me tightly. "You've absolutely changed my son," his stepmother continued, "you've absolutely changed his views on women." Subsequently, Doppler reunited with his childhood sweetheart and they were married in 2007 inside the visiting room.

4.5 Acts of Resistance: Words in Action



[46] See Sudbury's 20905 discussion of naming language in *Global Lockdown* (London and New York: Routledge, xii).

How can education be “the practice of freedom” in prison?[47] How can prison education become an “enacting of revolutionary pedagogy of resistance” within the very walls that cage the prisoners? In most classrooms of Stillwater prison’s education unit, the often critiqued “banking model” of education is enacted, reinforcing “ritualized control” about “domination and unjust exercise of power,” as bell hooks describes in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.*[48] Classrooms all too often are sites that teach “obedience” and “authority,” which is particularly important considering the institutionalized space of prisons, but the SPG critical poetry workshop stands as model of pedagogy, “the most radical space of possibility,” in relation to hook’s education as the practice of freedom.”[49] Although hooks writes specifically about classrooms in the elite academy, her pedagogical theories and teaching practices (closely aligned with Freirean methods) demonstrate an engaged resistance that helps to theorize the SPG workshop.

The SPG is a clear example of hooks’ “learning as revolution,” where everyday resistances and writing become a rite, and radical educational practices works to resist the dehumanizing conditions of prisons. The SPG found humanity through writing, dialogue, community building, and in the hugs and handshakes from the visitors (“outside” SPG members). The prison authorities, viewing the workshop through surveillance cameras, passing teachers, and the bank of glass windows that run along the classroom’s main wall, quickly saw the humanity and banned hugs, permitting brief handshakes only.

As a performative and activist response, Doppler hung a cardboard sign around his neck that read, “No Hugs for Thugs: Will Work For Humanity.” He distributed a handout called

---

[47] In *Teaching to Transgress: education as the practice of freedom* hooks writes, “to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn” in (New York: Routledge, 13).
[48] hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: education as the practice of freedom*, New York: Routledge, 2).
[49] hooks 1994, 3-5.

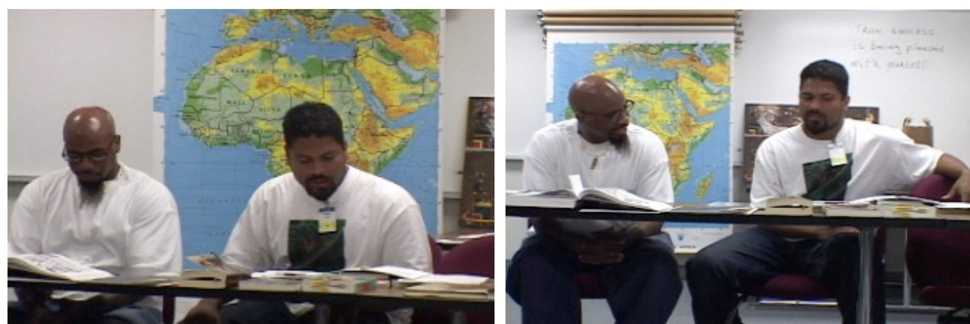
"Operation Recovery" following the reprimand. At the start of the session, Doppler organized a line of men who stood facing the wall, with their backs to the camera. White, black, brown, tall, short, thin, bulky; they stood representing all prisoners. They read the SPG disclaimer.[51] These acts of resistance are humanizing practices. They demonstrate the soul of the SPG.

The SPG logo, as illustrated by Doppler on his identity poem collage project.

"My vision for the SPG," said Doppler in a 2005 interview before the group members were disbanded and temporarily banned from the education unit for another prisoner's transgressions, "is for it to be the engine that powers social change, not just inside these walls but in a much more elaborate scope."[52] The SPG was initially a poetry class, but through critical educational practice, formed a collective against some of the most adverse conditions of incarceration. The students scattered across the classroom and formed a tight learning circle, and as I mentioned earlier, carried each other's poems in their pockets. Despite the "successes" of the group, Doppler struggled with tension among group members and responded by assembling an "inner-core" of SPG members to help the group to make collective decisions in 2005.

---

[51] See the "Take 1" Section. DVCAM tape, August 10, 2004.
[52] This incident is written about the in the conclusion section of this dissertation.



Ja'far-Rahotep, co-facilitated an engaging session about African history with outside artist e.g. bailey. "My poetry is the entrance into one world and the escape from the other," declared Rahotep in his packet of poems titled "Rahotep Speaks."[53] His work earned him the moniker "Professor" from fellow SPG poet and Harvard grad Carl Wesley, who announced in his reflections on the group that, "Ja'far's presentation was magnificent. It felt like I was back in a college classroom."[54]

In "Dust's Dust," performed at the SPG National Poetry Month performance, to 70 other prisoners, Doppler shared his mission for the SPG: "Sparking the flame that will ignite the fuel of the youth / to do more than just maintain or dismantle brains. / My bloodstains will paint pictures that scholars will attempt to decipher".[55] Doppler and the other SPG poets are hungry for more to read. They carry around anthologies of prison poetry and form learning circles outside of the classroom setting. They read, study, and engage in critical dialogues without teachers, in the cell block housing units. The SPG sees the educational unit as a limited and policed space (for most of the prison classes, they are right). It is their hope (and mine), that they inspire us in the "free" world to critically engage, theorize, and put incarcerated intelligence into action. The SPG are an exemplary poetic praxis where education is literally the practice of freedom, and inspire an active engagement with scholars who desire to work for social justice.[56]

---

[53] "Rahotep Speaks", sent to me by mail in 2005.
[54] DVCAM tape, August 2004.
[55] "Dust's Dust." David Doppler, 2004.
[56] My own academic career and scholarly enrichment is directly a result of Doppler and Johnson's resistance to prison rules. They both took a course taught in Stillwater from Carleton College Professor

4.6 WORDS IN ACTION

How do we go about evaluating, weighting, and enumerating the achievements?[57]

Like Bamabara in the 1980s, I wonder what the impact of our work in Stillwater, really is. She may be speaking directly about the work of radical women, but I think it is fitting to ask the same question about this project. *How can this work be measured, counted, valued? How can transformation be proven?* Must I argue (to academics) that they need to share (intellectual) space with prison poets? Or, can I just give maps of our journey, share work that we've done, reflect on some of the thoughts before, during, and after the SPG workshop ended, and offer some insights through video, images, text, and sound? What I do know is that it is a continuing journey for the SPG and larger prison movements. I ask myself and the other SPG: How can what we did (and some of us are still doing) resist institutionalization in prison, in the academy, and in the community? I offer this work to those who might also become inspired to write resistance to the many prisons that continue to lock up people of color, poor people, and marginalized people.

The SPG was once just a poetry class, a room where fragmented minds gathered to write, but through engaged critical and feminist pedagogical practices, dialogue, and community-building, we formed a transformative collective. Each inside member made sacrifices to be there, like missing the day's only hour in the sun, phone time to call loved ones, or their only appointment for the law library, but still they came every Tuesday night.

The Stillwater Poetry Group (SPG), complex, complicated, ugly and so beautiful, will

---

Deborah Appleman, who volunteers her time to teach college classes. In the literature course, she taught them to use a feminist lens of analysis; one chose to write his final paper using the feminist framework for his project. Both wrote my name, urging her to contact me. She did, through a google search. She since has invited me to guest lecture in her course, was instrumental in getting me a teaching appointment at Carleton, and plans to co-author writing on teaching prisoners. Additionally, Appleman has secured funding to release her from her teaching in the spring of 2009, and will offer two courses on language, power and resistance in Stillwater.

[57] Toni Cade Bambara, foreword in Anzaldua, Gloria, and Cherrie Moraga, eds. *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color; 2nd edition*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1984.

never exist as it once was, but the ideas, practices, and knowledge produced has impact. In its prison grays and state-issue shoes, rhyming rhetoric, beautiful smiles and soaring similes, these guys felt (and some still feel) freedom, if only for a few hours a week. Many continue to find freedom in thoughts, in ideas, in debates and dialogues, and most of all in the hope that poetry, that arts and that the SPG community offers. This project offers those of us who live beyond prison bars, moments of reflection on the SPG journey. It provides you a glimpse of the mutually beneficial exchange of labor, ideas, and transformation that is a necessary project of resistance to the ever-expanding prison industrial complex. It is my hope (and the hope that many inside SPG members have articulated), that this is only the beginning of many travels with the SPG. It is my desire that this work can spark a multitude of transformative praxis projects that work in service of social justice, in theory (thinking) and in practice (doing), both inside and beyond prisons.

I have learned so much in and through the process of the workshop, as a participant, teacher, and as a filmmaker. Ms. G represents a teacher who is embedded within the prison system, and is an absolutely necessary piece of this project's puzzle. It is precisely her "appearance" as a "white teacher" (as someone who follows the rules and serves the country, and the prison system), that allowed us permissions inside Stillwater Prison, particularly with cameras, musical instruments, books, CDs, and DVDs. Like Jan at Central High, Ms. G is a critical educator who de-centers herself in the classroom, centers her students, and sees the value of bringing in other educators and artists to collaborate.

I have reviewed and logged the footage, hundreds of hours of videotape. I have edited various cuts, screened, and discussed the clips and the process in workshops in community and college classroom spaces, and gained much from hearing viewers' responses. Still, writing this reflection has helped me immensely. Thinking through the content of this workshop, critically, and has helped me decide how I want to represent this space, these people, and our pedagogies. I believe that it is in the intersections of these academic and creative practices that feminist media

praxis exists. There is not a clear, traceable, and productive moment in and between theory and practice. There is an active process of theory (thinking) and practice (doing), as continually invoked in this project, which is simultaneous, mutually constituted, and equally significant to producing knowledge.

It is significant for me, as an academic/activist/filmmaker, to specify that knowledge must be mutually produced and exchanged, which means that I cannot just take the SPG writings and publish them for my sole benefit. I will not simply list this article as a line on my CV.

During the workshop process I showed the SPG the trailer edit, and discussed how I edited. I have taken all of their feedback into account before editing the "final" version of the film. During this writing process, I talked through my ideas with a number of inside SPG poets. I shared drafts with released SPG members. I mailed drafts to inside members who are still engaged in the SPG writing processes, working individually or in small groups in the housing units (although this is a violation of prison rules). I believe that a collaborative project is most beneficial to participants and can best re-tell what the SPG was about. For this project, success cannot be measured in statistics about recidivism or behavior changes inside, or post-release experiences of SPG members, but as an on-going personal and community discussion (through phone calls, letters, visits, poetry and essay writing, and the on-going desire to connect well past

the workshop's end) that will continue as I distribute this writing and the edited media texts.

Ms. G, now teaches in the Pacific Northwest, but occasionally emails to check on "the guys;" her status as prison teacher forbids her from communicating with the SPG inside poets directly. She sends updates on her continued work in prisons, and her unwavering desire to create liberatory prison education programs. Many of the inside SPG members write poetry as well as post-conviction legal paperwork, fighting for their freedom on many levels. Some have been released, and others will live under the Minnesota Department of Corrections for the rest of their natural lives.

What results from analyzing the SPG footage as critical content, is an understanding that the academy cannot be the sole producer and keeper of knowledge about prisons and prisoners. Prisons cannot be sites neutralized within the academy. We cannot simply discuss and theorize prisons in academic conferences and in scholarly journals, while living as academics at a safe and sanitary distance for everyday prison realities. Intellectual and activist communities must advocate *with*, *not for* the incarcerated, working directly with the bodies caged and engaged in struggles *inside* of the prison industrial complex. Hames-Garcia argues that "publishing and shifts in academic consensus do not necessarily translate into substantive social change."[58] He argues that there must be work done in alternate spaces to "shift public perceptions of prisons."[59] It is important to note that the whole concept of the military-industrial complex (while already

[58] Hames-Garcia, 254.
[59] Ibid.

known in policy and educational institutions) would never have gained influence in popular understanding (in and beyond the academy) , had it not been for Angela Davis' role as a public intellectual on the military and prison-industrial complexes. It is also very likely that Davis would not have attacked this work so passionately had it not been for her standpoint, derived from her direct experience of being imprisoned within the system.

Prison classrooms exist not as sites where education is a training ground for privileged students to earn degrees that they can use to gain salaries; they are instead sites of hope and possibility. These classrooms, taught by educators like Ms. G, hold the potential to de-center the conventional white teacher image, and even in small, subversive ways.

The learning within prison classrooms, and specifically in the SPG critical poetry workshop, is for personal and philosophical enlightenment, a concept that seems lost on many students in the corporate academy.[60] Through study, writing, and sharing this reflective piece, we—the inside and outside SPG—expose ourselves, our lives, and our struggles as examples of the radical educational and transformational work for justice, that is possible.

---

[60] See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003 for a discussion on the corporatization of the U.S. academy, and particularly its affects on feminist theory.

TAKE 4 – "15 Minutes" : A Poem Dedicated To Rachel Raimist from David Doppler

15 Minutes
Para mi pirma "Rae 1"
by D. dopp
8/1/04

your spirit shines colored light
through the cracks of my mind's prison
reflecting circus mirror images
of a time i believed

bandage my sight
for a moment i can see

exposing the imitation
of what they force me to consume

-soybean sincerity

is truth really so confusing
that when voices fade
an institutional grey-
and white box
is what i carelessly call home
causing me to fight for next
on a wire tapped phone
just so some1
any1
can tell me i'm human
while trapped in the middle
of so very few men
plated in chrome

would turn myself inside out
to show the world
who i am
(or would it be to hide from them)

is it your camera or my pen
that makes me feel worth while
while i'm incarcerated by more than
bars –n- razor wire

-believe me
that's why its so hard to dial
when i take off my gloves,
knuckle up with my fears,
and lay down all my rivals
cause i only got 15 minutes
for my soul to feel freedom
from the sound of your smile.

CHAPTER 5 – MEDIA RUPTURES AND ARTS-BASED EDUCATION CAN SLOW THE PIPELINE'S FLOW

5.1 Journeys, Pathways, and Intersections

The poem, "15 Minutes," illustrates how we (the inside and outside SPG members) were changed in this process. In the poem Dop asks, "Is it your camera or my pen / that makes me feel worth while?" These two lines demonstrate that it is *both* the writing *and* the work that I'm doing as a feminist media maker that produces a collaborative space of social justice. It is what Dop writes, what I write, and the images that I distribute about this process that humanity and justice can be fully realized.

Significantly, in the space of the Blackbox theater classroom in Central High School, and in the Lit3 classroom in Stillwater Prison, I took a similar journey. I began in each site feeling as an outsider holding a camera, lensing the faces of the students I filmed. I didn't once see my place as a distanced filmmaker or researcher seeking "the answers" to my documentarian questions, but rather as a traveler understanding that I was the visible evidence of our work. I felt that holding the power of documentation brought great responsibility, which was complicated by my role as simultaneous teacher, learner, and filmmaker. I never sought to discover or capture "the truth" of the inner-city student or the prisoner, but instead allowed the processes of critical education, poetry, writing, performance, and conversation to make a pathway to understanding our collective stories, and some larger meanings about schools and prisons.

In both Central and Stillwater the goal was to build individual and community understanding; in both spaces we centered the circle. I spent the course of two years filming with a handheld camera moving through circles of students. In both sites I filmed the teachers – Jan and Ms. G – in individual sit-down interviews to both understand their ideas and opinions about the work, and to have a narrative anchor and central character, if I couldn't find ways to collectively tell the history and methodologies of the work. In both sites, I chose to do collective

group interviews with the students (particularly after my "failed" sit-down interviews with pairs of SPG poets), which now after analysis, I see as functioning as a mode of communal storytelling.

By conducting interviews with both the SPG and CTT members in a large, collective circle, each student got to hear one another's ideas, comments, and reflections. Hearing each other's opinions and voices allowed for a larger critique of the process. Some folks agreed with one another, while others contested the value and meanings of particular moments. In the group interview circle, each person's answer helped to build a collective and communal story of "what happened" in the SPG and in that year of CTT, and illustrates each group's reliance on and the value of shared understandings and collective modes of knowledge production. This is not just a phenomenon that happens in schools and prisons, but is part of de-centering singular ways of knowing, and a vital aspect to feminist media making central to this project.

The two seemingly disconnected sites of Central and Stillwater, filmed over the course of two different years, become most "readable" and understood when compared, contrasted, and connected. It is in the two films produced as part of this project, that I will be able to use feminist media as resistance and as a tactic with which to critique Minnesota's school-to-prison pipeline.

5.2 A sage on the stage: CTT is a more than a one-woman show

Central Touring Theater is a collective and collaborative experience for Jan and for the students. CTT complicates the hegemonic media framings of students of color as a collection of stereotypes to be "saved." It is clear that Jan is an exceptional teacher who has worked many long years in her classroom, and it is her methodology and teaching practices that de-center the Hollywood tropes. Jan models a pedagogy that helps, not "saves," her students. Her teaching practices place her students and their stories, experiences, voices, and bodies at center stage.

Although Jan will retire in the next few years, her investment in teaching students as leaders, as well as teaching other teachers (K-12 and college faculty) to use this work, speaks to

her commitment to the work itself. Jan's insight to deploy relevant and relatable strategies, such as hip-hop, on order to create "Barriers to Entry," demonstrates a flexible approach to education.

I run into many of Jan's former students in the Twin Cities. I am "Facebook friends" with some who have moved away to college, and smile whenever they post a poem or a rhyme in their status. I've even gotten collaborative Minnesota State Arts grants to work with some of Jan's former students. I see, in a material way, the positive and transformative impact that Jan has on Central's students, St. Paul, and the Twin Cities arts communities. Jan calls me constantly, hungry for us to finish the film: she knows that it will help her work travel farther than she can.

5.3 Educational Lockdown: what happens when education *really* becomes the practice of freedom inside prison walls?

The Stillwater Poetry Group was a complex, complicated, ugly, and engaging group of students, writers, poets, and great thinkers who found freedom in thoughts, ideas, debates and dialogues, and most of all in the hope that their poetry affects others inside and beyond prison walls. They taught me about the value of a pencil, a quiet space to write, and the privilege of living beyond prison walls.

With more than 2 million men and women imprisoned in this country (this number increases exponentially each year), and the millions of wives, husbands, partners, lovers, friends, family, and children tangled in the webs of incarceration, I want the filmic re-telling of the SPG to offer a vision of hopeful life on the inside. I hope that the media pieces of this project help to mobilize organizers beyond the walls to work for and with the SPG and the millions of imprisoned globally.

The SPG was officially disbanded about a year after filming ended. Ms. G's tutors, who were not members of the poetry group, used her classroom computers to commit prison offenses such as breaking the firewall to download photographs of girls in bikinis and selling them to other

offenders. According to policy, this "pornography" compromises the security of the facility. Because of this security breach, Ms. G. was suspended indefinitely and she ultimately resigned. Stillwater's educational unit was "locked down" for six months; no classes were held during this time, because of the SPG's "violations" and the on-going investigations. The SPG was scrutinized for conducting gang-like activity because we had a logo of graffiti influenced letters, drawn by Dopp, and members claimed an identity as an SPG, not just as having membership in the SPG poetry group. As a result, the classroom computers were examined and completely erased. Most of the SPG poets lost all of their writings – essays, poetry, and even book–length projects. Some members of the group have been released, some have been transferred to other facilities, and many continue to write.

I have shared some of the footage at academic conferences and in college classrooms. At one such conference, named "Incarcerated Intellectuals" in its official title, the organizers asked that reggie and I shared our experiences. I offered to arrange a conference call with some of the most articulate SPG members, knowing the conference session fit well with their evening "free time," barring any prison lockdowns that would prevent them from using the phone. The organizer–academics seemed startled at the proposition of opening up the forum to the inmates. I suggested that showing the footage, sharing our experiences, and then allowing the audience to discuss the project with inside members would be a radical epistemological project. They were afraid that things might "be uncontrolled" or "get out of hand." I assured them that the SPG poets are responsible, respectful, and not like "the inmates you see on TV." However, the organizers decided that accessing prisoners through their writing and the video footage was enough for this event, because it seemed that real prisoners, speaking for themselves presented too much of a danger. Subsequently, I've had released members of the SPG attend classes and public forums with me and am considering co–editing sections with released members who are interested and willing to learn video editing.

What is left of the Stillwater Poetry Group is a binder of writings that sits atop of my tape archive, more than 50 hours of digital video footage and potential. What I choose to do with the footage, the writings, and published critical reflections of the SPG such as this, affect those transformative and liberatory possibilities. It is my hope and my intention to use these remnants of the SPG to show the changes in the prisoner participants, the need for critical prison education and the possibilities for art and writing to transform lives, inside prison walls and far beyond them.

5.4 Chopped and Screwed?: The quagmires of editing and distribution[1]

In the years since these workshops, I've sat with the footage, shared short edits in college classrooms, on my blog, and at academic conferences. The work is well received and many viewers have made amazing suggestions for the "final" version of the piece. Still, I continue to have tremendous difficulty making choices in the editing room. I edited a number or short (under 10 minute) clips of Jan's ArtsLiteracy workshops that are on the web, used to promote her upcoming workshops. I have edited a thirty–minute overview of the SPG group, explaining the history of the SPG group and shared some of the writing that I use for conference sessions, but for years I felt like I was editing in circles, fighting to break conventions of the documentary form. I continue to edit and mold the footage to resist even the conventions of the documentary format, broadcast lengths, and storytelling styles.

I ask many questions during the post-production (editing) process.

[1] "Chop and Screw" is a form of rap music where the deep pitch slurred effect and scratching of vocals. The phrase "Chopped and Screwed" hails from DJ Screw of Houston Texas and has been used by mainstream artists such as Paul Wall, Three Six Mafia, and Lil' Wayne. See: http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/269048/the_perfect_mixx_how_to_chop_and_screw.html?cat=33
.

Will I appear in the film? Will I use any voice-over? Will I use "found" music or have some original music made for the films? Some of these questions have answers, while others continue to be negotiated processes during editing.

I know that I will appear, maybe even in limited ways, in the CTT and in the SPG film. In CTT, there is footage when I, as part of a course on "Performance and Social Change" at the University of Minnesota, facilitated a workshop that merged Boal's newspaper and image theater techniques. In the SPG project, I frequently spoke and/or "passed the camera," so there is footage of me participating as facilitator and as writer. I do know that there will be no voice-over that overdubs the student's voices over close-up shots of their faces (as favored in *The Freedom Writers)*, or have other people's voices read the student's work (as Eve Ensler favors) but, I have not decided whether a voice-over by Jan could best structure the CTT film, although I will be careful to avoid re-centering Jan as an authority figure if I choose to use this filmic convention.

I am certain that I won't use rap music cut to the beat of "bouncing" black and brown students or gangsta rap over close-up images of SPG prisoners. There probably will be hip-hop beats and rap music in both the CTT and SPG films, but not to signal the entering of Black and Brown bodies to the (white) space of the classroom, or to signal St. Paul as "the hood." There will be music used to accompany and add meaning, not to signal blackness, marked bodies, or "ghetto" cultures. There certainly won't be inclusions of rap songs during key scenes of the films, placed only to help sell accompanying soundtracks. I will utilize cinematic tools such as cuts, rhythm, pacing, montage, voice-over, music, graphics, and titles to deepen the film's message and to retell this story that is truthful to what I've experienced and "read" in the raw footage. It is my hope for audiences that through these films, they too can witness the power of the work and see the value of artists, storytellers, and great thinkers whether they are young, old, brown, white, imprisoned, or in a college classroom. I do understand that the modes of distribution, specifically how and where I distribute these films will affect who has access to the

films.

Documentary films and videos function within a capitalist system of distribution. Public and cable television dictate standards (acceptable broadcast lengths are 56:40 or 26:40), offering per minute payments for airings. Films are edited down to lengths and structures deemed easily digestible for public audiences. Most independent documentaries are submitted to film festivals, seeking exposure and theatrical or home video distribution deals. Most documentary filmmakers do not generate tremendous wealth (though there are exceptions like Michael Moore and Ken Burns); they try to break even or generate some profit. These factors contribute to standardizations of documentary forms, aiming to achieve popular audience accessibility and avoid financial ruin.

When I keep these standard formats in mind as I edit both the CTT and SPG films, I find I spend most of the process trying to find ways to structure the footage. What happens is that I can only highlight a few "main characters" of the SPG inside artists, I can't share much of the outside artist's portion of the workshops, and there is little "breathing room" to share writings and poetry, beyond short excerpts. Every "character" selected to be included in the film becomes much more of a prison caricature rather than a real, dynamic, complicated intellectual. As a result, it becomes easier to equate SPG writers with incarcerated stereotypes, and rely on readily accessible images of prison, masculinity, and manhood to inform understandings of the SPG. Their bodies are marked with physical details of gang tattoos, stabbing scars, and apparent racial differences makes it easy to see them as "bad" and deviant, and not as the complicated and dynamic men that they are.

One example of troubled representation in the SPG project would be the editing of a "debate" between Joey, a white mullet–wearing short–timer, and Ja'far Rahotep, a Black, Afro–

centric, Five Percent lifer.[2] They often engaged in passionate discussion about the media's constructions of race on television and in Hollywood films. "You don't think that they make media to influence people's thinking?" proposed Jafar. "Yeah, but I don't believe it's so overtly racist," replied Joey.

This discussion happened over a couple of sessions, filmed in a range of framings: wide–shots, mediums, over–the–shoulders, and close–ups. I could edit this sequence in standard shot–reverse–shot edits, where the framing tightens with each heated statement. Joey (white) cut to Jafar (black), back to Joey back to Jafar, with repetition of quicker cuts. If this conversation is edited in a "Hollywood" construction, it reinforces the black/white dichotomy of racism ever–present in mainstream media.

Are there racial tensions between black and white inmates? Most certainly. Would this be an accurate (or more importantly adequate) representation of these two SPG members? Absolutely not. Joey and Jafar's differences in race, age, religion, gang affiliations, and length of sentence complicate their understandings of the world, and the way that the media constructs racial conflict. The substance of their debate is exactly what I'm grappling with as the filmmaker. How can Joey be represented as more than the "white guy with the mullet" who always argues with "the bald, militant, Egypt beard wearing, black guy"?

Somehow, neither the 26:40 nor the 56:40 standard documentary lengths will allow for such complexities, at least not at this point. The SPG is made up of 25 inside poets, over 20 outside artists that co–facilitate the workshops, plus visitors, teachers, and me. There were over 20 sessions with so many different themes. How can I tell the stories of this experience, share the

---

[2] Jafar–Rahotep is the chosen name for inside SPG member Ben Braylock. He has a complicated identity marked by his race as a Black man, a belief in Afro–centrism and as an avid student of Black Studies. He is also a lifer (meaning he is serving a life sentence of 99 years), and is a member of the Nation of Gods and Earths, commonly known as the Five Percent Nation (or the Five–Percent Nation of Islam). The Nation has stated goals of seeking freedom, justice, and equality from economic, political, social, educational, and religious injustices in the United States and the world over, but is sometimes seen as heretical to Islam, and too radical in many of its core beliefs.

words, thoughts and writings of each of the participants, explain the genesis of this group, reveal my influences over the process of documenting this on video, and do justice to the individual and group transformations that resulted?

It is not that I cannot technically edit an entertaining 56:40 minute documentary following the teacher and her “star” students, where the audience can glean the Hollywood message that “bad guys turn good” with the help of a good but tough white prison teacher (which sounds like many Hollywood narrative and non–narrative films). I absolutely can, and maybe I will. But the question is, do I want to? Do I want to share only the most polished writing, the most accomplished poetry, and make it comfortable to view and digest? Stillwater is not a comfortable or safe place for the SPG to live, it was not an easy place to film, and as a result, the film should not create a nice, smooth, and easily digestible narrative. However, it will be inevitable that I have to make a decision about the editing and distribution of this project.

Since the 2004 workshop, the SPG has been written about in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and discussed on radio shows and the Internet. Always, and rightfully so, the unofficial leader David “Dop” Doppler is the audience’s entrance in to the work. Dop, a white Spanish–speaking former gang member of a Latino sect of a primarily Black gang wears sleeves of tattoos, stands firmly, is strikingly serious, and has a commanding voice that the others respect. Still, should the viewer only get to understand the power of writing, the catharsis of communication in the loneliest and most isolated of spaces, through Dopp, an exceptional and extremely literate and charismatic character? More questions abound: Will audiences be entertained and enlightened if lessons are learned about prisons, manhood and the power of poetry, by giving the bulleted point versions of intense discussions happening in the thematic sessions? Should I be the sole author of the film and sell it to cable as my sole intellectual property for profit? Should I sell the film and use the profits for another prison program (because it is not legal for any of the SPG members to use their writings to generate income for

themselves)? How will the victim's families feel if there is not an honest and complicated story told here? I continue to consider many difficult questions as I edit this piece, and have worked to include reflections of this work as part of my feminist dissertation on art, pedagogy, and social change.

I don't believe that it is my role as filmmaker–author to produce the SPG documentary project as my sole production or intellectual property. I don't want to enter it in to the filmic-industrial complex (specifically aiming for broadcast for payment) with profit being the purpose. I am privileged to have received grants and donations (still a facet of the artist–industrial complex) that covered the tape stock and time spent filming. I am most interested in using my privilege to share the SPG with viewers and SPG family outside the walls.

I have decided, at least for now, to edit the SPG footage into thematic clips (which may at some point be packaged on a DVD for easier viewing, and for purchase by institutions for higher education classroom use), as well as edit small features on each poet (that actively participated in reading poems in workshop sessions and performances). I will not present a detached, distanced engagement with my subjects. I will appear in the footage, and make my process visible. I will share the edited clips on web pages, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. I want to include as much footage of the SPG poetic process in the online film, where viewers can navigate through the footage either by my guidance (maybe a chronological or thematic map of the workshop), or they can select the option to view all the clips of their favorite poet consecutively. Viewers can explore the writings in video, audio and text formats, and create their own interactions and reflections of the experience. By sharing more than my packaged, seamlessly edited narrative (re)construction of what happened inside Lit3 years earlier, I desire to change the power structure of filmmaking, at least for myself as a feminist filmmaker.

I am working closely with Jan and a local producer of the Twin Cities affiliate PBS, the Twin Cities Public Television station (TPT), on the CTT film. I will be giving them all of my

footage to edit into a larger film about Jan's thirty-year career, and the impact of her work on Central High School, St. Paul, and the greater Twin Cities. The program will certainly air locally, with the potential for national broadcast if it is picked up by national affiliates.

Our discussions about how to tell the story of Jan's three decade long career almost always center on structure – *how*, exactly, do we show (and tell) the power of Jan's work and the transformation that happens in her classroom, without relying on talking-head interviews. I've been working on a paper cut (an outline of the film's structure), that is inspired by the work I've done here. I know that the film cannot position only Jan as a central figure, re-telling this story in the mode of Erin Gruwell or Eve Ensler, but rather has to frame the students and the process at the center of the narrative, and the video frame. This is proving more difficult than I'd thought, but over the course of the next few years of shooting and editing, will result in (I hope) a film that illustrates the power of radical education, and gives Jan the credit she deserves.

Distributing the film on public television will probably reach "white teachers" and their brown students, and hopefully the film. Its accompanying program guide with discussion prompts for teachers and students, will transform their hegemonic ideas and practices into critical and potentially transformative modes of teaching, learning, and performance.

5.5 My (Filmic) Conclusions: Power Sharing and Power Building

As a feminist filmmaker, I think constantly about the politics of filming people. I acknowledge my subjective relationship to the material as both an insider and outsider on many levels. I readily reject illusions of this project as a normative narrative of "change" sold and packaged in Hollywood films, companion soundtracks, and books based on the movie. The reality is that it *is* far easier to theorize and romanticize moments of change, or possibilities for

social justice inside Stillwater or Central, than to note percentages of SPG and CTT members living transformed existences[3].

My feminist ideology cannot help me idealize what happened in the SPG or CTT circles; I understand the larger frameworks of schools and prisons that continues to criminalize, police, contain, and impact communities in Minnesota, despite our work. I cannot ignore that some of these men have committed additional crimes inside prison and upon their release or during and after the workshop, and that some of the students have gone on to college while others may be en route to prison. I cannot neglect to mention that some of the men have returned to the days of passing each other in prison hallways, without any acknowledgment of their former "SPG brother," and some of the students left Jan's class disgruntled.

Many of the inside SPG poets and CTT students still live compressed in the boxes we sought to challenge, and will serve their remainder of their days inside prison walls or working at prison wages. Nevertheless, these contradictions, tensions and acknowledgments politicize this project, and force a healthy and constant questioning about the aims of this project. I constantly negotiate how and why I include selected moments in the media texts I edit, and how these moments build sequences that must reflect the workshop design and significance. These are not projects built on the top-down "empowerment" model where one person gives all the tools of hope to change and save the oppressed. These are the stories of great teachers and critical pedagogies that *develop* power within and among students, and help students to deploy their power to transform their lives and their communities.

---

[3]Many documentary films, working within Hollywood's code of fantasy, attempt to end the film with "happy endings" that mainstream audiences have come to expect. Some examples would be the ending of *Dark Days* (Marc Singer, 2000) where the homeless tunnel dwellers that we have watched for the past hour plus are now living in temporary homes, saying that they will never return to the tunnels. An illustrative shot is when one character falls smiling, in slow motion, on to a bed.

As a filmmaker, I will continue to reject edits of these films that would present a hegemonic, mainstream narrative of success and equate the structure of change as a three-act (constructed) fairytale. I will continue to work as a storyteller who reveals my filmic construction, and will not hide the holes in the worn fabric of our lives. I will show our rough and tattered edges, shine the light on our work, and also sit comfortably within the shadows that aren't always intelligible. I will use media to speak the many truths that I experienced working within the SPG and the CTT circles that I filmed years earlier.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abu-Jamal, Mumia. 2005. Intellectuals and the gallows. In *Immprisoned intellectuals: America's political prisoners write on life, liberation and rebellion.*, 179. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Aldama, Arturo J. 2001. *Disrupting savagism: Intersecting Chicana/o, mexican immigration, and native american struggles for self-representation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Alarid, Leanne Fiftal and Paul Cromwell. 2006. *In her own words: Women offenders' views on crime and victimization*. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.

Alford, Fred C. 2000. What would it matter if everything foucault said about prison were wrong? "discipline and punish" after twenty years. *Theory and Society* 29, (1).

Amanda Lock Swarr, Richa Nagar, ed. *Reconceptualizing collaboration: Critical transnational feminist studies*. Reconceptualizing Collaboration: Critical Transnational Feminist Studies., ed. Amanda Lock Swarr, Richa Nagar. Albany: SUNY Press.

Andrea Mayr. 2004. *Prison discourse: Language as a means od control and resistance*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillian.

Anzaldua, Gloria, and Cherrie Moraga, eds. 1984. *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color; 2nd edition*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Babbage, Frances. 2004. *Augusto boal (routledge performance practitioners)*. London; New York: Routledge.

Balfour, Michael, ed. 2004. *Theatre in prison : Theory and practice*. Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect.

bell hooks. 1996. *Reel to reel: Race, sex and class at the movies*. New York and London: Routledge.

———. 1994. *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations*. New York and London: Routledge.

Billone, Nina. 2007. Performing civil death: The media project and theater for incarcerated women.University of California, Berkeley.

Blue, Carroll Parrott. 2003. *The dawn at my back: Memoir of a black texas upbringing*. Austin: University of Texas.

Boal, Augosto. 1995. *The rainbow of desire : The boal method of theatre and therapy / augusto boal ; translated by adrian jackson.* London; New York: Routledge.

———. 1995. *The rainbow of desire: The boal method of theatre and therapy*. London:

Routledge.

———. 1979. *Theater of the oppressed / by augusto boal ; translated from the spanish by charles A. & maria-odilia leal McBride.* New York: Urizen Books.

Boal, Augusto. 2006. *Aesthetics of the opressed*. London; New York: Routledge.

———. 1998. *Legislative theatre : Using performance to make politics / augusto boal ; translated by adrian jackson.* London; New York: Routledge.

———. 1992. *Games for actors and non-actors / augusto boal ; translated by adrian jackson.* London: Routledge.

Breedlove, Lois. "Empowerment Pedagogy: Using Media Making to Empower Students of Marginalized." *International Journal of Learning*. Volume 11.

Brewer, Rose M., and Nancy A. Heitzeg. 2008. The racialization of crime and punishment: Criminal justice, color-blind racism, and the political economy of the prison industrial complex. *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, (5) (01): 625-44.

Browdy de Hernandez, Jennifer, ed. 2003. *Women writing resistance: Essays on latin america and the caribbean*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

———. 2003. *Women writing resistance: Essays on latin america and the caribbean*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press.

Brown, Leslie, and Susan Strega, eds. 2005. *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous, & anti-oppressive approaches*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Bruton, James H. Warden. 2004. *The Big House: Life Inside a Supermax Security Prison.* Stillwater, MN: Voyager Press.

Carson, Fiona, and Claire Pajaczkowska, eds. 2001. *Feminist visual culture*. New York: Routledge.

Cheu, Hoi F. 2007. *Cinematic howling: Women's films, women's film theories*. Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press.

Chuh, Kandice. 2003. *Imagine otherwise: On asian americanist critique*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Citron, Michelle. 1998. *Home movies and other necessary fictions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Cohee, Gail E., Elisabeth Daumer, Theresa D. Kemp, Paul M. Krebs, Sue A. Lafky, and Sandra Runze, eds. 1998. *The feminist teacher anthology: Pedagogies and classroom strategies*. New York and London: Teachers College, Columbia.

Cohen-Cruz, Jan, and Mady Scutzman. 1993. *Playing boal: Theatre, therapy, activism*. London; New York: Routledge.

Danticat, Edwidge. 2003. We are ugly, but we are here. In *Women writing resistance: Essays on latin american and the caribbean.*, 27. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Davis, Angela Yvonne. 2003. *Are prisons obsolete?*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

DeShazer, Mary K. 1994. *A poetics of reisstance: Women writing in el salvador, south african and the united states*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Drew Leder with Charles Baxter, Wayne Brown, Tony Chatman-Bey, Jack Cowman, Michael Green, Gary Huffman, H. B. Johnson Jr., O'Donald johnson, Arlando Jones III, Mark medley, "Q", Donald Thompson, Selvyn Tillett and John Woodland. 2000. *The soul knows no bars: Inmates reflect on life, death and hope*. Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC.

Faith, Karlene. 1993. *Unruly women: The politics of confinement & resistance*. Press Gang Publishers ed.Vancouver.

———. 1993. *Unruly women: The politics of confinement and resistance*. Vancouver, B.C., Canada: Press Gang Publishers.

Fonow, Mary Margaret, and Judith A. Cook, eds. 1991. *Beyond methodology: Feminist scholarship as lived research*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University.

Fraden, Rena. 2001. *Imagining medea: Rhodessa jones & theater for incarcerated women*. Chapel hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.

Fregoso, Rosa Linda. 1993. *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the oppressed / paulo freire ; translated by myra bergman ramos ; with an introduction by donald macedo, 30th anniversary ed.* New York: Continuum.

Freire, Paulo, and Ana Maria Araujo Freire, eds. 2007. *Daring to dream : Toward a pedagogy of the unfinished*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Friere, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the oppressed, 30th anniversary edition*. 2000: Continuum.

Fuentes, Annette. 2003. Discipline and punish: Zero tolerance policies have a 'lockdown environment' in schools. *The Nation.*

Gaines, Jane. 2004. Feminist history and the two presents of feminist film theory. *Cinema Journal* 44, (1).

Gentile, Mary Catherine. 1983. Reel alternatives: Feminist film theory and practice.State

University of New York at Buffalo.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden gulag : Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing california*. American crossroads. Vol. 21. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Glann, Robert Howard. 2008. The vernacular web of participatory media. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, (5).

Goldberg, Marcy. 1995. Aesthetics and actuality: Documentary film and the everyday.York University (Canada).

Goodman, L., ed. 2000. *Routledge reader in politics and performance*. L: Routledge.

Gottfried, Heidi, ed. 1996. *Feminism and social change: Bridging theory and practice*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Hames-Garcia, Michael Roy. 2004. *Fugitive thought : Prison movements, race, and the meaning of justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Hayes, Sandra, and Lyle Yorks, eds. 2007. *Arts and societal learning : Transforming communities socially, politically, and culturally*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc Pub.

Heberle, Renee, ed. 2006. *Feminist interpretations of theodor adorno*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University.

Hinterberger, Amy. 2007. Feminism and the politics of representation: Towards A critical and ethical encounter with "others". *Joumal of International Women's Studies* 8, (2).

Holtman, Janet. 2002. Documentary prison films and the production of disciplinary institutional "truth". *Postmodern Culture* 13, (1).

hooks, bell. 2006. *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2006. *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2003. *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2003. *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York and London: Routledge.

———. 1996. *Reel to real: Race, sex, and class at the movies*. New York: Routledge.

———. 1994. *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

———. 1994. *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York and London: Routledge.

———. 1992. *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

———. 1989. *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. London: Sheba.

Horton, Myles, and Paulo Freire. 1990. *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*, ed. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters. Philedelphia: Temple University Press.

James, Joy, ed. 2005. *The new abolitionists : (neo) slave narratives and contemporary prison writings*. New York: State University of New York Press.

———. 2005. *The new abolitionists: (neo) slave narratives and contemporary prison writings* . Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

———. 2003. *Imprisoned intellectuals: America's political prisoners write on life, liberation, and rebellion*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

———. 2003. *Imprisoned intellectuals: America's political prisoners write on life, liberation, and rebellion*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

———. 2002. *States of confinement: Policing, detention and prisons* . New York: Macmillan.

———. 2000. *States of confinement: Policing, detention, and prisons*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Jeff Ferrell and Mark S. Hamm, ed. 1998. *Ethnography at the edge: Crime, deviance, and field research*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Johanna Wald, Daniel F. Losen. 2003. Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline. *New Directions for Youth Development* 99, .

Jones, David, ed. 2004. *Working with dangerous people: The psychotherapy of violence* . Oxford and San Francisco: Radcliffe Medical Press.

Joyappa, Vinitha, and Lois S. Self. 1996. Feminist research methodologies as collective self-education and political praxis. 29, (3).

Judith Mayne. 2000. *Framed: Lesbians, feminists, and media culture*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Juhasz, Alexandra. Media praxis: A radical anthology integrating theory, production and practice. 2008 [cited February 25 2008]. Available from http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/proposals.

———. 2001. *Women of vision: Histories in feminist film and video*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kanter, Jodi. 2007. *Performing loss: Rebuilding community through theater and writing (theater*

in the americas) . Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Kaplan, Claire N. 2004. Carrying it on: Post-graduation impact of feminist praxis on women's studies majors.University of Virginia.

Kerlee, Ime A. S. 2006. Theory and praxis: An introduction. *FemTAP: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Practice*(Summer), http://www.femtap.com/id11.html.

Kozol, Jonathan. 2005. *The shame of the nation: The restoration of the apartheid schooling in america*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Kuftinec, Sonja A. Rehearsing for dramatic change in afghanistan. December 2004 [cited April 7 2008]. Available from http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2004/12/rehearsing_for.php.

Landsman, Julie. 2005. *White Teacher Talks about Race*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Liebmann, Marian, ed. 1994. *Art therapy with offenders*. London and Bristol, Pennsylvania: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith. 1990. *Decolonizing methodologies; research and indigenous peoples*. Dunedin: Uuniversity of Otago Press.

López, José. 2000. Political incarceration. In *States of confinement: Policing, detention, and prisons.*, 303-311. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Maggie Humm. 1997. Practicing feminist theory. In *Feminism and Film.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Mandell, Jan, and Jennifer Wolf. 2003. *Acting, learning, and change: Creating original plays with adolescents*. Pourtsmouth, NH: Heinemann Drama.

Mark Brown and John Pratt, ed. 2000. *Dangerous offenders: Punsihment and social order*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mendoza, Louis. *Raul Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Pen is My Weapon*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

Minh-Ha, Trinh T. 1992. *Framer framed*. New York and London: Routledge.

———. 1989. *Woman, native, other*. Nloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Press University.

MINNCOR Industries. 2008. *2008 annual report.* MINNCOR Industries.

Minnesota Department of Corrections. 2008. *Minnesota prison population projections: Fiscal year 2008 report.* St. Paul: Minnesota Department of Corrections, .

———. 2007. *Master academic plan (2006-2007).* St. Paul: MCF/ML Print Production Class, .

Miodzinski, Linda C. 1993. Teachers, technology and patriarchy: Feminist discourse in educational technology.The University of Manitoba (Canada).

Moraga, Cheri. 2000. Out of our revolutionary minds: Towards A pedagogy of revolt. In *Loving in the war years.*, 170. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Morgan, Joan. 1999. *When chickenheads come home to roost : My life as A hip hop feminis*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Mulvey-Roberts, Marie, ed. 2007. *Writing for their lives: Death row USA*. Urbana and Chicago: University of illinois Press.

Myketiak, Chrystie. 2004. Corrupting the discourse: Cyberfeminist praxis.Dalhousie University.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, INC. 2008. *Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.* New York: NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, INC., .

Nancy L. Arnez. 1980. Black poetry: A necessary ingredient for survival and liberation. *Journal of Black Studies* 11, (1).

Naples, Nancy. 2006. Feminist activism and activist scholarship in the 21st century. *FemTAP: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Practice*(Summer).

Naples, Nancy A., and Karen Bojar, eds. 2002. *Teaching feminist activism: Strategies from the field*. New York and London: Routledge.

New York Civil Liberties Union. 2008. *School to prison pipeline toolkit.* New York: New York Civil Liberties Union.

Noriega, Chon A. 2000. *Shot In America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*. Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press.

Noriega, Chon A. and Ana M Lopez. 1996. *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Noriega, Chon A., ed. 1992. *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Representation*. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.

———. 1992. *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Oishi, Eve. 2006. Visual perversions: Race, sex, and cinematic pleasure. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, (3): 641.

Paul Marris, Sue Thornham, ed. 2000. *Media studies: A reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University

Press.

Pinnock, Don. Gangs: Fighting fire with fire. February 2008]. Available from http://tigger.uic.edu/~huk/Gang%20History/fightingfire.html.

———. Gangs: Fighting fire with fire. February 2008]. Available from http://tigger.uic.edu/~huk/Gang%20History/fightingfire.html.

———. Gangs: Fighting fire with fire. February 2008]. Available from http://tigger.uic.edu/~huk/Gang%20History/fightingfire.html.

Pough, Gwendolyn D. 2004. *Check it while I wreck it: Black womanhood, hip-hop culture, and the public sphere*. Boston, MA: Northeastern.

Pough, Gwendolyn D., Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Raimist, eds. 2007. *Home girls make some noise!: Hip-hop feminism anthology*. Los Angeles: Parker Publishing LLC.

Raimist, Rachel, and Peter DeLong. 2004. *Interview with jan mandell*, ed. Jan Mandell, ed. Rachel Raimist. Interview ed.

Rathbone, Cristina. 2005. *A world apart: Women, prison, and life behind bars*. New York: Random House.

Rhodes, Lorna A. 2001. Toward an anthology of prisons. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30, .

Rich, Adrienne. 1984. *What is found there: Notebooks on poetry and politics*. New York: Norton.

Rohd, Michael. 1998. *Theater for community, conflict and dialogue: The hope ios vital training manual*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann.

Rothman, Juliet C. "Prison Poetry: A Medium for Growth and Change." *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, v10 #3, Spring 1997, 149-158.

Sanchez-Flavian, Patricia. *Language and Politicized Spaces in US Latino Prison Poetry*. Bilingual Review, 2003.

Sandoval, Chela. 2000. *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

———. 1991. U.S. third world feminism: The theory and method of oppositional consciousness in the postmodern world. *Genders* 10, .

Sangtin Writers. Solidarity, self-critique, and survival: Sangtin's struggles with fieldwork. In *The global and the intimate.*, ed. Geraldine Pratt Victoria Rosner.

Sangtin Writers, and Richa Nagar. 2006. *Playing with fire: Feminist thought and activism through seven lives in india*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota.

Sawiki, Jana. 1991. *Disciplining foucault: Feminism, power, and the body*. London: Routledge,

Chapman and Hall, Inc.

Schoolhouse to Jailhouse. 2005. The real cost of prisons weblog.

Schoeman, Helena Johanna. 2008. Restorative witnessing: A contextual and feminist praxis of healing.University of South Africa (South Africa).

Skiba, Russel J. et al. *The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionally in School Punishment.* http://www.indiana.edu/~iepc/srs1.pdf.

Stanley, Liz, ed. 1990. *Feminist praxis: Research, theory, and epistemology in feminist sociology*. London: Routledge.

Sudbury, Julia, ed. 2005. *Global lockdown: Race, gender and the prison-industrial complex*. Abingdon: Routledge.

———. 2005. *Global lockdown: Race, gender, and the prison industrial complex*. New York and London: Routledge.

Swados, Elizabeth. 2006. *At play: Teaching teenagers theater*. London: Faber & Faber.

Thompson, James, ed. 1998. *Prison theater: Perspectives and practices*. London and New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Tocci, Laurence. 2007. *The proscenium cage*. Youngstown: Cambria Press.

Torres, Eden. 2003. *Chicana without apology = Chicana sin vergüenza : the new Chicana* cultural studies. New York : Routledge.

Torres, Edén Elma. *"Caras vemos, corazones no sabemos": Their faces we see, their hearts we don't know: Chicana writers in context.* Diss. University of Minnesota, 1998.

Trounstine, Jean. 2001. *Shakespeare behind bars: The power of drama in A woman's prison*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Tulman, Joseph B. 2008. Time to reverse the school-to-prison pipeline. *Policy and Practice of Public Human Services* (March).

Waldman, Diane, and Janet Walker, eds. 1999. *Feminism and documentary. visible evidence*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota.

Whitehead, Jaye Cee. 2007. Feminist prison activism: An assessment of empowerment. *Feminist Theory* 8, (3): 299.

Whitin, E. Stagg. 1930. An analysis of the prison problem. *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 20, (4).

Wilentz, Gay. 2000. *Healing narratives; women writers curing cultural dis-ease*. New

Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press.

Wilinson, William Richard. *Prison work: A tale of thirty years in the california department of corrections*, eds. John C. Burnham, Joseph F. Spillane. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

Williford, Miriam, ed. 1994. *Higher education in prison: A contradiction in terms?*. Phoenix: American Council on Education and The Onyx Press.

Willis, Holly Laing. 2002. Out of hand: Experimental media practices by women.university of Southern California.

Wilmott, Donna. 2000. It's time to bring our political prisoners home. In *States of confinement: Policing, detention, and prisons.*, 312-321. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Wink, Joan. 2000. *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the real world*. Second Edition ed. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Wolf, Jennifer, and Jan Mandell. 2003. *Acting, learning, and change: Creating original plays with adolescents*. Pourtsmouth, NH: Heinemann Drama.

Zimmermann, Patricia Rodden. 1984. Reel families: A social history of the discourse on amateur film, 1897-1962 (home movies).University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Zwerling, Philip. 2008. *After-school theatre programs for at-risk teenagers*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.