Submitted to Shauna Butterwick and Pierre Walter

Living sentences and writing lines:

Peering over the razor wire and through the opaque windows to examine themes in prisoner’s writing in Canada

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Introduction to prison writing

“I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every drifting cloud that went
With sails of silver by….

He does not sit with silent men
Who watch him night and day;
Who watch him when he tries to weep,
And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him lest himself should rob
The prison of its prey.”
(Wilde, 1896)

Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” written about an execution he witnessed in 1896 while he was incarcerated for homosexual offenses, is part of a long history of prison writing. Out of need and necessity, people write while they are incarcerated. Phone calls are expensive and there is no access to internet services. Inmates write letters to friends and family members and they write to colleagues incarcerated in other facilities. They write pen pal letters to inmates in other facilities in search of romance or friendship. Letters are filled with handwritten poems, stories for their children, and some of the raunchiest and most provocative stories I have ever read. Prisoners write accounts of daily living and their life stories, and spend hours writing out their Steps for A.A. and N.A. Where there is no access to paper, phrases are found emblazoned on walls and tattooed on body parts. There seems to be an urge and a sense of necessity to write, to explain, and to explore personal stories. These stories are the focus of this inquiry.
Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine, through narrative analysis, published prison writing, focusing on how the authors of these writings describe their lives both before and in prison and how, through such writing, prisoners articulate a sense of their identities. The goal of this study is to highlight the value of these narrations to gain a deeper understanding of prisoners’ experiences.

The sources of the writings analysed included prison anthologies and inmate newsletters.

Using the following guiding questions, I identified and explored themes within the narratives and reflect upon the ramifications:

a) What is the author’s purpose? Is the writing directed at personal, societal and/or prison reform?

b) What is the orientation of the writing e.g. self-reflective (looking into the past); redemptive (looking to the future) in nature; making sense of current circumstances; or something else?

c) Who is the intended audience?

Additionally I explored differences in narrative themes when they are published in anthologies vetted by those outside the prison system as opposed to prison newsletters, edited by those who are themselves incarcerated and whose audience is inside the walls. If there are differences, I will seek to understand what the implications are for whose voices are shared and for what purposes.
My connection to and interest in the topic

I am currently a Surrey School District teacher at Surrey Pretrial Services Centre (SPSC). SPSC is an adult, maximum security correctional facility operated by the British Columbia government. Most people housed in remand centres have been charged with a crime and are awaiting trial. Given that most people who are charged with a crime await trial in the community, residents of SPSC are, thus, considered too dangerous to be in the community, are considered a flight risk, or are too poor to afford bail.

I have worked with students at SPSC for the past nine years. Along with working with students through basic numeracy and literacy to high school completion, I have worked with local writer Ed Griffin facilitating writing programs with students. It was during these workshops that I witnessed the power that writing held for the students.

A brief history of incarceration in Canada

Incarceration is a fairly recent practice. Great Britain’s Transportation Act of 1718 sent British felons to its colonies as a supply of cheap labour (Cressey, 1982) Once in North America, those who found themselves in conflict with the law faced corporal punishment such as publicly administered flogging or branding (Correctional Service Canada, 2010).

Penitentiaries, conceived by Quakers and etymologically rooted in penance, were considered more humane than physical punishment. But penance for those in conflict with the law was constituted by brutal and punitive practices. For example, the first penitentiary in Canada was built in Kingston in 1835 and was initially designed to house men, women, and
children. At best a stay at Kingston Penitentiary ensured physical labour during the day, confinement to a cell when not working, a limited diet, identification by number only, and absolute silence. Communication between residents was punishable. A break in silence meant corporal punishment or isolation. Even children housed at Kingston Penitentiary were not spared from flogging; prison records indicate an eleven year old was beaten for speaking French. Thus, corporal punishment did not end; it was just obscured from the public gaze. As Foucault was to note, with penitentiary reforms in the west, public punishment was replaced by solitary and secret punishment (Cellard, 2000).

The first penitentiary under provincial jurisdiction in British Columbia opened in 1878. The British Columbia Penitentiary (B.C. Pen) housed only men. As with Kingston Penitentiary, cells were without water or electricity and an absence of talking was strictly enforced. According to prison records, even talking to oneself inside a cell could lead to a diet of bread and water and no access to light (Murphy & Murphy, 1998, p. 17). Further punishments for violation of prison rules included “lashes with a cat of nine tails,” isolation, loss of bedding, wearing a chain, and deprivation of tobacco. Sending letters was a privilege (Murphy & Murphy, 1998, p. 19).

In the 1970’s, in response to escalating violence within prisons, a number of reforms were initiated. For example: flogging ended, prisoners began to be referred to by last name rather than number, and unlimited letter writing was granted (Correctional Service Canada, 2010).

Who is incarcerated in Canada?

In a column written in the Province newspaper, Grenada (2011) writes:

It is a sobering and cautionary experience to walk through any of Canada’s federal penitentiaries or provincial jails today,’ writes Correctional Investigator (CI) Howard Sapers in his 2009/10 critique of our prisons. This column will take you on that walk.
Through the eyes of those who live and work here you’ll see what Sapers has seen — over-representation of Aboriginal prisoners, mass-imprisonment of the mentally ill, and the deadly results of prison overcrowding. You’ll also see men and women conquering the enemy in the mirror. You’ll see incarcerated parents doing their best to raise children in the prison visiting room.

People who are incarcerated in Canada are housed in both provincially and federally operated systems. Remand facilities are under provincial jurisdiction and house those awaiting trial, bail, or sentencing. Provincial prisons also house people who have been sentenced to a prison term of less than two years. The federal system houses those sentenced to terms of incarceration of over two years.

The latest data available indicates that on an average day 163,000 adults are in the correctional system in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013). Of those, 23% are held in custody (Sapers, 2012). Approximately ten percent of the prison population are women, and Aboriginal men and women are greatly over-represented (Statistics Canada, 2013). While only three percent of the Canadian population are of Aboriginal origin, they comprise forty percent of people who are incarcerated (Martin, Buxton, Smith, & Hislop, 2012). Statistically, those who struggle with addiction, socio-economic disadvantage, have experienced physical and sexual abuse, have physical or intellectual challenges, broken families, and/or mental illness are over-represented amongst the people housed in Canadian correctional facilities (Martin, Buxton, Smith, & Hislop, 2012; Sapers, 2012; Matheson, 2012). The low level of education that is typical among inmates is considered a contributor to a criminal lifestyle, a hindrance to vocational options, and a barrier to accessing programs while incarcerated (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2007; Ministry of the Attorney General, 2003).

It is important to remember that, beyond the statistics, inmates are individuals with their own struggles and their own stories to tell.
**Prison Programs**

People confined to either provincially or federally operated prisons have access to institutionally sanctioned educational programs while incarcerated. The majority of programs offered are developed, implemented, and delivered by corrections staff. In describing programs Correctional Service Canada (CSC) states that they are “evidence based (programs) designed to make offenders accountable for their criminal behaviour, change criminal attitudes, and to significantly reduce the risk they present to Canadians when they are released back into society” (Correctional Service Canada, 2013).

Programs offered within the federal system include: crime prevention, violence prevention, family violence prevention, substance abuse management, and sex offender programs. Completion of assigned programs can be a condition of release from incarceration. Prisons also provide high school completion programs. Chaplains and Native Elders provide spiritual and cultural support. Volunteers from the community lead A.A. and N.A. meetings.

Programs which differ from institutionally delivered programs are initiated by volunteers from the community and require institutional support. At present I am aware of one writing program at one of the federal institutions in British Columbia, as well as a theatre program and *Out of Bounds* prison magazine at William Head Institution in Victoria.

**Arts Programs with marginalized populations**

There is a body of research, alongside anecdotal accounts of program purposes and successes, which indicates that arts programs delivered to vulnerable, at risk, and marginalized
populations in the community can divert criminality, be utilized as a therapeutic tool, empower participants, build self-esteem and self-confidence, develop social skills, develop literacy, and lead to further educational success (Humphries Weiz, 1996; Lipe, et al., 2012; Randall, 1997; Sandelowski, 1991). It is also acknowledged that arts programs for those housed in prisons can increase self-confidence and self-esteem and lead to engagement in educational programs and lower recidivism rates (Nugent & Loucks, 2011). It is important to recognize, for the purpose of this inquiry, that there is a very small body of literature that speaks of positive therapeutic outcomes of theatre, music, and dance programs offered in correctional facilities internationally (Gutnick, 2013; Lamb, 2003; Moller, 2003; Silber, 2005; Williams & Taylor, 2004).

While this research into the positive influence of arts based programs is both compelling and valuable it neither sheds light on nor chronicles Canadian prison writing. I was unable to find current analysis of writing by those who are incarcerated in Canada, as most of this writing, like much of what happens in prisons, stays inside the gates. While there is some dated information about prison writing programs (Coda, 1978; Gaucher, 1989) or historical accounts of American programs (Samarco, 2005), there has not, to my knowledge, been any recent scholarly work addressing this topic.

**Prison Writing Programs**

*It is funny the things you think of when you’re handcuffed and shackled in the back of a van, you’ve just been gassed, and are waiting to be attacked by a mob of angry jail guards”* (Jon Brown, Ten hours in the valley, Prison Voices, p. 105).

As with other creative outlets, there are a few programs in prison that encourage purposeful writing in prison nurtured within structured and institutionally sanctioned programs (Weinstein, 2005). Prison writing, however, also happens spontaneously and this separates it from institutionally sanctioned programming. If choirs, theatre groups, or dance groups (which
are institutionally sanctioned or initiated) emerged spontaneously, they would be considered suspect by prison authorities in the controlled and carefully monitored world inside prisons. Writing, while just as creative and with just as much potential to pose a challenge to the institutional norm and discourse, can and has slipped beneath the radar.

While prison writing has a long tradition, prison writing that steals its way past the prison walls into the world of what is seen within the prison as “straight” society, is both rare and recent. This is perhaps because that the writing produced while incarcerated “involves a statement of self in opposition to the inscriptions which the prison would impose, ready-made” on those housed within prison walls” (Murphy & Murphy, 1998, p. 112). Recent civil suits against the correctional system in Canada, however, along with inquiries into deaths in prisons, have given public exposure to the closed and secretive world on the other side of the razor wire (Bolan, 2012; CBC News, 2014; CBC News, 2013). Despite a great need for what goes on in Canadian prisons to be exposed, in the current political climate there are growing controls over what information gets out and in what form it takes.

What the small number of narratives that document prison life underscores is the need for further accounts of what it is like to live incarcerated.

**Research Methodology: A Narrative Analysis**

I will engage research questions through the process of narrative analysis of a collection of prison texts (Smith, 2000). This collection of texts was authored by prisoners at a time of physical containment and amidst internal and external turmoil. They capture a specific moment of reflection and flux and, thus, lend themselves to narrative analysis as a research methodology (Sandelowski, 1991).
Narrative analysis is commonly used in the exploration of text, especially those involving stories or other accounts of self. Language, and the way that it is taken up to tell of experience, of history, of burdens and of aspiration, can reveal much about cultural conventions as well as self-perception, empowerment, disempowerment and social location. As Smith (2000) notes, narrative texts can be the expression of identity; individuals may disclose pieces of the self that they do not wish to speak out loud or that are not yet articulated in the conscious mind. Narrative texts can provide insight into the way that individuals socially construct and reconstruct reality and interpretations of the world. As Martin (2014) posits “narratives, especially transformative ones, tell a thousand statistics” (presentation “Health Beyond Bars: Towards Healthy Prisons in Canada” February 20-21, 2014, University of British Columbia).

Rather than conceiving of text as static and representation of an objective truth, a narrative approach views the individual as dynamic and text as a performance of self. Spence (1982) and Smith (2000) define narrative texts (collected for the purpose of narrative analysis) as accounts of personal experiences or the experience of others or fictional accounts such as folk or fairy tales, stories or myths. In either case, there is no expectation that the text should represent or render the truth (as may be the criteria in other methodologies). Interpretation, rather than adjudication of veracity, is the primary goal.

Within a narrative approach texts are analysed for the purpose of gaining insight into the individual’s perspective, context and frame. Perspective is a point of view of what is happening, what is significant and important as well as a belief about what the audience needs to know (Gee, 1991). Context and frame refer to external influences on the narrator, the way the narrator constructs the narrative and characteristics of the resulting text. In describing external influences, Gee (1991) describes external forces as, not only the historical, cultural and political context but
also the immediate physical surroundings and social conditions (Tannen, 1993). Tannen (1993) also describes how narratives frame expectations of the world based on prior experiences, against which new experiences are measured and interpreted (p.17).

While a narrative analysis holds a focus on a thematic exploration, the contribution of content analysis takes a more detailed examination of language use. Content analysis is often used to compare texts, and through a careful reading of chosen words and phrases, can reveal the assumptions and understandings of various speakers (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). It is often done by analysing transcripts: coding, classifying and charting with great deliberation to minimize, to the greatest degree possible, overwriting premature reader interpretation (Stone, Dunphy, Smith, & Oglivie, 1966).

While narrative and context analysis have distinct epistemological roots and methodological approaches, they can also be used in tandem to explore texts (Smith, 2000). For the purpose of this paper, I will primarily be employing a narrative analysis- looking at emergent themes in prison writing. I will also pay attention to the language that writers use and the frequency of word use, taking up strategies of content analysis.

Once selected, I viewed texts individually. Narratives were read line by line and sorted by overall theme using a system of colour coding. Texts which contained either multiple themes or sub-themes were also noted. I extracted exemplar quotes from each narrative and grouped narratives by both emergent themes and by exemplar quotes. I then identified and named themes (see methods section for further details on the identification of narrative themes).
Writing Sources

For the purpose of doing a narrative analysis, I chose five separate publications that contain the writing of inmates while incarcerated. I selected these publications because they represent a variety of different prison settings and are differentially situated with respect to the formality of the publication and editorial control. Using collections of narratives— in the form of newsletters, publications and anthologies — provided me with a coherent body of work from which I could identify (to the greatest extent possible) the author and the physical space from which the narrative emerged. In addition, knowing the overall purpose and objective of publication facilitated my understanding of why certain narratives came in the form that they did (i.e. formal versus informal). A detailed description of each publication is reported below:

a) *Prison Voices:* an anthology of writing by residents, both male and female, of federal penal institutions published by the John Howard Society in 2005. Funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada with acknowledged support from Correctional Service Canada (CSC), *Prison Voices* is a compilation of writings by and interviews with people serving sentences within federal penitentiaries.

Following an open call for submissions, the writings of twelve contributors were selected based on “quality of writing” (Weinstein; Jaccoma, 2005). The criteria for quality are not defined. In the book’s introduction the editors’ note that “the very fact that this book exists gives evidence of a justice system more humane, more rehabilitative, more civilized than many” (Weinstein; Jaccoma, 2005, p.1).

b) “*Works great on blood stains*”: a self-published anthology of the Matsqui Write Club. This anthology was compiled by participants both from the community and those housed at Matsqui Institution during a weekend long writer’s retreat in 2011. Matsqui, located in the Fraser Valley
of British Columbia, is a medium security federal penitentiary for men. Writing retreats at Matsqui were coordinated by Ed Griffin, who was the founder of the Surrey Writer’s Festival and facilitator of the writing program at Matsqui. Matsqui was host to several writing retreats between 2005 and 2011. Citing security concerns, prison officials stopped granting permission for community members to participate in writing retreats. The writing program at Matsqui no longer exists.

c) The Surrey Remand: SPSC newsletter. Second issue, March, 2008. The Surrey Remand was an inmate initiative, with institute support, and included male and female contributors. Published monthly, the newsletter served as a creative outlet for SPSC residents and a conduit for program information within the Institution.

Produced by an inmate committee, the Surrey Remand was edited for content by SPSC program officers and for writing mechanics by the teachers at SPSC. Contributors, who did not wish to be anonymous, were identified by initials. Submissions could not promote “hate, discrimination, violence, addiction, or crime”.

The final edition of the Surrey Remand was published in 2012.

d) Cell Count: No. 71, Fall Issue 2013. Cell Count is published by PASAN (formerly known as Prisoners’ HIV/AIDS Support Action Network). PASAN is a community based HIV/AIDS organization which provides education and support services to prisoners, youth in custody, and their families. PASAN began its work with people with incarceration experience in 1991. As an organization, PASAN advocates for social change, an increase in safety protocols regarding HIV and Hep C transmission within prisons, and an end to discrimination for those with HIV/AIDS
and Hep C. To accomplish these goals, PASAN is involved in community development, support services, as well as outreach and education.

*Cell Count* falls under the mandate of outreach and education. It is published quarterly and, according to the publication, is primarily written and edited by those who are currently incarcerated and by those with incarceration experience. *Cell Count* provides an “uncensored forum for prisoner and youth in custody to explore and share their own experiences, ideas, and fears about HIV/AIDS” (p. 2).

e) *Out of Bounds* prison magazine Vo. 22, no. 3, Fall, 2005: a quarterly newsletter produced by the prisoners at William Head federal prison in Victoria, B.C. The purpose of the publication is to “change the mainstream media’s often distorted portrayal of crime and punishment. By educating people on both sides of the barbed wire we hope to effect change” (Love, 2005) p.1). *Out of Bounds* is one of the longest running prison publications in Canada. Edited by those incarcerated at William Head, contributing writers make submissions from correctional institutions across the country. The open existence of the periodical and its access through subscription indicates that *Out of Bounds* has the support of William Head Institution. However, Correctional Service Canada does not endorse the views expressed in the publication.

*Citing the writing*

In places where I am citing or quoting portions of a work published in one of the anthologies or newsletters used for the purposes of research I cite the newsletter or anthology in which it is located, i.e. *Cell Count* p. 17. I also include the author and the title of the piece being quoted.
**Locating myself in the Research**

All research, and especially research on text that is a step away from engaging with a subject, should be reflexive about the way that the researcher’s social location, politics and life experience play into data collection, analysis and conclusions. This is particularly relevant in the consideration of exploring the issue of prisons and those that reside in them.

*Insider/ Outsider*

A number of scholars have reflected on the issue of insider/outsider status of researchers, holding a myriad of opinions about validity, authenticity, justice and (dis) empowerment. As Alcoff (1991) and Kelly (2000) have argued, those of privilege who write about those who are marginalized are in danger of discursively contributing to this marginalization, and positioning themselves as the legitimate authority. Those who are educated and more socially powerful risk creating meanings about the lives of others that will shape the very institutions that will, in turn, govern the lives of the marginalized. Authors such as Jane Mansfield (1997) argue that the only way to avoid doing such violence is to only do research on and speak for one’s own “group”. She maintains that, insiders to a population are the only individuals qualified to speak because they have experienced the unique forms of socialization in their own social and cultural context that allows them the insight to assert knowledge. With some contingencies, Mansfield (1999) states women, for example, should speak for women.

Other scholars, such as James Banks (1998) contests the notion that one must be an insider do to authentic research. He makes the point that one does not hold a monopoly on knowledge simply because one can claim insider status. An individual can have certain insights because of the nature of her/his insider status but this insight may also be shaped by factors such as
loyalties, feuds, and biases. In agreement, Iris Marion Young (1997) makes the point that just because one is of the same or similar identity to those whom one represents, there is no guarantee about the nature of the actions that this representative might take on behalf of them. As Banks (1998) argues, less important than being an insider or an outsider is taking a research position that is caring, committed, and aware of the research process being one of justice seeking and of rectifying the power imbalances that have been so evident in the social, political, and economic history.

My social location

When I reflect on the issues implicit in the balance of insider/outsider in research, I come to the conclusion that I am both an “insider” and an “outsider”.

In most ways, I am an outsider to the prison. People who are incarcerated represent vulnerable and marginalized populations. Those in prison are isolated not only physically but experientially as often their lives are infused with poverty, ill health and violence. Thus they are experientially isolated from mainstream Canadian society. I occupy a space in the world with different conditions. I am a white, middle aged woman, from a middle class background. I have had the good fortune to be educated and to be able to use that education to provide me with a reasonable standard of living. I have always had the support of my family and friends and have never lived with the ill effects of addictions and the cost of satisfying it. Beyond any other markers, my ability to leave my workplace at my choosing forever locates me in the position of an outsider to those who are incarcerated.

In a few important ways, I am, while maybe not an insider, a non-outsider. As a non-Correction’s presence at SPSC I am, at least visually (because I do not wear a uniform) a
foreigner to the institutional hierarchies and safety protocols. Like the inmates, I am considered a security risk. In the library, where school is taught there is no official Corrections presence. Hired by the Surrey School Board, I am accountable to Corrections. Unlike prison guards, I am called by my first rather than my last name, affording some humanity that exists in only small amounts in the jail.

As an outsider to those in my classroom, and a member of the dominant white, English speaking, settler society, along with other markers of privilege noted previously, and as a teacher privileged to encourage, guide, edit and help to record the stories from the inside, I have what I believe, is an ethical responsibility to become a conduit (Banks, 1998). I have the opportunity, through this research, to not only give “official” voice to these stories in this paper, but also to help to expose some of the conditions that give rise to these narratives.

Telling Tales – looking at the writing

Sample Selection

I came to this research with an understanding that I would be drawn to some narratives more so than other ones. If I had gone through and selected the narratives to include in this analysis there is an excellent chance that they would be ones that I found pleasing, are congruent with my political leanings, what I believe to be ‘suitable content,’ and are consistent with my personal literary taste. To consciously select narratives for analysis, however, would result in a collection that obscured and excluded certain voices and topics and result in a thematic analysis that is, not only narrow, but did not represent the fullness of the prison experience. In order to reduce my research bias I used a system of random selection from the content of the anthologies and newsletter issues from which they were drawn. Within the five volumes selected for
analysis I wrote out the titles of each of the 108 narrative pieces on index cards and created five piles, sorted by volume. I shuffled each pile and randomly selected a number of titles proportionate to the overall number of narratives as well as the number of contributors within each volume. For example, both *Prison Voices* and *Works Great on Blood Stains* had single authors contributing multiple submissions. For those publications I examined thirty-four percent of the published submissions. I selected and examined fifty-seven percent of the submissions from *Cell Count* as fewer of the authors submitted multiple texts. In Table 1 below I list the publications included in this study. In total, I chose 47 narratives, a number I felt confident to be large enough to include a good diversity and not so extensive as to be overwhelming for the scope of this analysis.

**Table 1: List of Prison Writing Publications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Source</th>
<th>Number of Contributors</th>
<th>Number of published contributions</th>
<th>Contributions included in research sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prison Voices</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works great on blood stains</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Bounds</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell Count</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey Remand</td>
<td>Unknown – submissions are anonymous</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of texts in research sample</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analytic Approach**

I examined the texts and grouped them into inductively derived thematic categories.

Through this process seven themes emerged: life situations which led to incarceration, “criminal culture” description of life inside prison, seeking/finding lost self, spirituality, love, and life after
prison. While in what follows, the writing is discussed in relation to each category or dominant theme, incarceration is both a dominant and, often, common element across all categories. For example, a poem published in the *Surrey Remand*, entitled “Papermate,” is a rhapsody of newly discovered love found through pen pal writing during a period of incarceration. Forming a love attachment through a purely written connection is a common phenomenon in prison. The inter-relation of themes provides a tapestry through which a more holistic narrative is told.

**Categories defined**

*Prison life*: writings which describe life while incarcerated. The description is the primary theme of the writing sample. This can be a third person or a first person account. Some writing is a simple description of an event or series of events. Some of the writing also includes a critique of the prison system and descriptions of behavioural codes of standards.

*Life situation leading to incarceration*: this encompasses any event, or sequence of events, which occur pre-incarceration that the writer discerns as having a causal relationship to incarceration. Events can range from the description of the commission of a crime to childhood experiences.

*Addiction*: of parent, partner, or self – its damage, along with the ways to feed it, is a common thread in this narrative category.

*Seeking/finding lost self*: incarceration as a time to take personal stock. Utilizing the break in life during incarceration to examine and retrieve a more pure and innocent self. Writing can be a description of that journey of retrieval or a description of the causal events of the loss of innocence.
**Spirituality**: giving life’s journey and direction to a higher power. Direction and purpose is attained through the discovery of a spiritual *other*, beyond and greater than one’s self.

**Love**: love of a child, a partner, a lover whether lost, found, or extolled.

“**Criminal culture**”: criminal lifestyle with its structured chaos, strict, brutally enforced hierarchies and codes of behaviour and business practices. “**Effervescent Hunger**” describes violence “pulled from dreams of conquest. Blood spilled with vengeance. Fields littered with flesh.” (Mike Myers, *Works Great on Blood Stains*, p. 14). Participants in this lifestyle view incarceration as the cost of doing (criminal) business and bring the rules of the street with them when they enter prison.

**Life after prison**: writings about life after incarceration. Whether returning to a criminal lifestyle in the community, re-uniting with family, continuing education, or trying to stay clean and sober, plans are made and written about.

Table 2 below shows the frequencies of various themes found in the different publications examined.

**Table 2: Frequencies of Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme*</th>
<th>Life situations which led to incarceration</th>
<th>“Criminal Culture”</th>
<th>Describing life inside prison</th>
<th>Seeking/finding lost self</th>
<th>spirituality</th>
<th>Love</th>
<th>Life after prison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prison Voices</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works great on blood stains</td>
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*some writing samples contain more than one theme

** secondary theme of the narrative

**The Writing:**

So, like most writers, I write because I can’t stop. Heartstring notes to my children, writing-class poetics, un-mailed rants to the Op-Ed page — the stuff just bubbles inside my head. Yet for the past sixteen years, writing has been more than a way to pass time. It has changed my life. Writing — and reading the writing of others — put me on common ground with those who walk a spiritual path. Writing gave me the tools I needed to serve my fellow prisoners for six years as a mediator and advocate. It is helping me to live my apology to the family of the man I murdered. Most importantly, writing has been the vehicle in my journey from anti-social egomaniac to dignified human being. Now I’m opening that vehicle to others. I hope that you’ll come along for the ride (Grenada, 2011).

**Prison life**

**Prison is a place: where you learn not one person on this miserable planet needs you.** **Prison is a place: where one can go for years at a time without the touch of a human hand; it may even be several months without hearing a kind word laced with love or affection.** Myles Bolton “Prison Ain’t Much of a Place” (Prison Voices, p.19).

People who are incarcerated write about the experience of being incarcerated. Twenty-one of the forty-seven narratives describe prison conditions. For five of the volumes, prison conditions were the focus of over fifty percent of the works examined.

Prison is described as a brutal environment. Incarceration is variously described as frightening, humiliating, isolating, a mental health facility, and a crime school. Violence is frequent and met with indifference from fellow prisoners, corrections officers, and medical staff. As Gary Cormier writes in “The Joint” (Cell Count, p. 15) the prison is a “man-made hell” filled with students in a “criminal school”.

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Byron Raptis, in “Lockdown” (Works Great on Blood Stains, p.2), describes the indifference, even the pleasure which prison authorities and fellow inmates display on the occasion of the beating and humiliation of a prisoner in what Raptis calls “the hate factory.” He writes: “I want to feel more than the numb knot I feel right now. Honestly, I do feel for the victim. He has people who love him; he showed me pictures. I’m surprised by the lack of concern on the paramedics’ faces, other than the look of Not-Knowing-What to Expect. …Have some fucking respect! I want to yell at the pigs, for their snickering glances. …This is all accompanied by heckles and jeers as the body is wheeled past us on a stretcher. ‘What happened to ‘im? ‘The Pen happened to ‘im!!!’ echoed down the hall, as the stretcher snaked its way down the stairwell. Lockdown.”

Mike Oulton in , “Five Bucks’ll Getcha Burned” (Prison Voices, p. 121), powerfully expresses the way in which prison life cuts off even the most basic empathetic and humane responses. His fellow inmate in the next cell is in desperate need of $5. Our narrator is asked if he can lend his neighbour $5. He says no, assuming the money is needed for a drug purchase. The following evening, his cell neighbour is set on fire by another inmate, because he hasn’t been able to repay a prison loan.

While not particularly liking his neighbour, he is nonetheless unable to resist the urge to help him, particularly as no prison authorities are responding to the screams emanating from the cell, nor to the fire alarms going off. The narrator rushes into his neighbour’s cell and puts out the fire raging over the body, with his own blanket. He writes: “I sat back on my bed. The smell of burnt flesh cloaked my bare skin. My hands trembled. What had just happened? Where was I living? I’d never seen that before. It wasn’t every day that someone was lit on fire right next door to me. His screams replayed over and over in my head. The smell of burning hair lingered
around me. ‘Hey.’ I looked up to see a young Oriental con at my door. I stood up, ready for anything. ‘That was pretty brutal, eh?’ I expelled a lung full of nervous air. ‘Yeah’ “You should’ve just let it go. He had that coming to him. He owed money.’ I rubbed my face with both hands, trying to shake the disbelief from my eyes. ‘What? Really? How much?’ The con shrugged. ‘Not much. Something like five bucks. Don’t matter though. Five, ten – it’ll all getcha burned, man”….’You better watch out,” said the Oriental kid…”The guys that put out the hit are going to be upset that you helped him. You should’ve just let him burn.’”

Justin Primer, in “Disarming Skills” (Cell Count, p. 15) sets up in his narrative the juxtaposition of an image of himself currently in prison, with the image of his pre-incarcerated self: homeless, defenceless, the object of violence, while sleeping under a bridge in the Canadian November cold. He concludes, after reflection, that he yearns fondly for the latter: “In the evening before I close my eyes, my mind wonders to the bone-shattering cold of the Canadian winter; my heart longs for a sound ass-kicking and a train bridge to sleep under.”

Conditions within our prisons may be giving a mixed message to inmates. “If we are to be corrected then correct us, if we are to be punished then punish us, but why confuse us?” (“Freedom: the state of being free from constraints,” Out of Bounds, p. 13). Dustin Olsen, in this narrative, reflects upon the permanent “branding” of the status of deviant for the prisoner. It is a status that, according to Olsen, the prisoner is not permitted to escape or alter while incarcerated regardless of good behaviour, participation in programs offered through Corrections, and years served toward the completion of his or her sentence; the prisoner is still a deviant or has not been corrected. Directing his focus toward prison authorities and administrators, Olsen asks, “…why do you continue to treat us as if we were the same person that stepped through that gate years ago?” (Out of Bounds, p. 13). The recurring theme, repeating itself in many of the selected
narratives is one which points to Foucault’s notion of docile bodies as part of the carceral regime: programs within prisons are not designed to change the individual but rather to construct a prisoner self (Foucault, 1977).

“I’ve seen men broken time and again because they let the time do them.” Harry Gaucher “Prison Justice Day” (Cell Count, p. 14).

Factoring out descriptions of access to education, connection to spirituality and or Native roots, prison is overwhelmingly described as negative. Prison life and CSC staff and programs reflect, according our narrators, a hindrance to both rehabilitation and a positive re-entry into the community.

*The road to incarceration*

with time I proved myself and hardened. At the age of seven, I was already walking on the path that led me behind these bars….I learned to live in this world of lies, hatred, and crime. My new friends all lived in families where poverty was an everyday reality. Their idols were old criminals from the neighbourhood…I, too, had my first dreams, but they made way for the reality of my road. Mario Auger, “A child of seven years” Prison Voices, p.79.

There are no cries of innocence in jail. While prison may be described as brutal confinement, the reasons for confinement are viewed as a part of a path rather than a detour. Descriptions of childhoods infused with violence, homelessness, parental neglect, and addiction bear witness to and add human flesh to the statistical make up of those housed within Canada’s prisons. As Dr. Michael Ross reminds us most people who are incarcerated are victims of crimes themselves (conference notes, Health Beyond Bars: Towards Healthy Prisons in Canada, University of British Columbia, February 20-21, 2014).
For many who are, or have been, incarcerated the path toward incarceration begins within their early familial experience. For a number of the narrators, violence begins early and at home, and often at the hands of those in a nurturing role. James Wrigley in “Me, Myself, and the Other Guy” provides a provocative lens upon his early formative years:

…despite the beatings, the emotional abuse and riptides that tore through my family, I thought life to be normal. I of course knew little then and it wouldn’t be until I was fourteen that I would question anything of what went on behind the cold walls of my two homes (Prison Voices, p. 32).

Norms are contextual. Beatings and abuse may become normalized. This was a common narrative running through accounts of early childhood experience.

Equally as pervasive are narratives of the continuing cycle of abuse, addiction, crime, and incarceration. “I washed the rape out of my life with soap and water. And kept it out as long as I could with drugs and alcohol,” writes Roxanne Stevenson (“Little Lost Girl”, Prison Voices, p. 7). From Surrey Remand, an anonymous writer describes her cycle this way: “Each time one’s let out, one’s put in/They get out fat, they come back thin/With bruises, sores, a new disease/This way’s not working” (p. 4).

While individual accounts of violence and emotional trauma infused the narratives, the writers’ trod a well-worn path culminating in incarceration for a variety of crimes. Violence, family breakdown, and nascent exploration into drug and alcohol use are more conducive to life on the street than that of a family and a classroom where most young people spend their days. Leaving a fractured family, as well as removal from the structure of school life and societal connection which this entails, and finding oneself alone on the streets as a young person is a further step along the path. Masking pain, fear, and loneliness with drugs, alcohol, and questionable companions are tools of survival for the narrators. Maintaining the lifestyle through
criminal activity and violence, learnt at home, completes the picture. Justin Walker, asks himself what he could have changed along the way down his path to incarceration; recounting his life in sequential “what if”s” his writing moves back and forth from his actions and life events, moving from the mundane to the horrific: “What if I got better grades…What if I didn’t try to drown the cat in the pool…What if I could take it all back…What if my mother hadn’t hung herself…” (“What If”, Cell Count, p. 16).

Seeking Self

Looking back seems to get harder with knowledge. I have been clean for years and I am still searching for that little girl. Roxanne Stevenson “Lost Little Girl”, (Prison Voices, p. 17)

While for some of the narrators, as has been noted, prison is the place which solidifies criminality and reinforces the dominant place of violence and hierarchical power, prison is also seen as a place that has the potential to break the cycle of abuse, violence, criminality, and incarceration. Prison can afford, for some, the potential for atonement, redemption, and the “space” for the recovery of what is often seen as a lost inner, childhood self. Throughout the search for what has been lost there is often the recognition of the acts of the criminal self and an awareness of feelings of self-loathing which are at the base of early development and experience. “The end of who I was began in prison,” writes Roxanne Stevenson in “Justice and Judgement” (Prison Voices, p. 5)

The experiences leading to incarceration do not necessarily begin with violence or abuse. For some it begins in early life with deep feelings of failure and self-hatred. For example, Mario Auger points to early failure in school and his need to find acceptance and sense of
accomplishment through less socially acceptable means as the initial step in his journey into criminality. Auger writes:

Spend a few minutes with me. I will lead you on the path of my childhood…my mother was tired of life. I was all alone with my failures. I grew up thinking that I could not succeed in school. No one took my hand to lead me toward classes that could have helped me pass my examinations…so I took my exams in the streets at night and I got good grades. (“A Child of Seven Years”, Prison Voices, p. 79).

The writing suggests that the feelings of despair, isolation and self-repudiation experienced in childhood are salient factors in shaping choices about one’s future. A profound longing for a sense of belonging and self-respect can lead to enmeshments into gang life which can, in turn, re-enforce feelings of self-loathing.

Prison can provide the potential for reflection and recovery. Benjamin Paul discovers hope in the “In Search of My Warrior” program within the prison system. Initially, Paul believed he would die in prison but through a challenging struggle which involved an honest look at his personal history, he is able to find the courage he needs. Paul writes:

Now I have found my Warrior and nursed him back to health I am ready for my next challenge. I am ready to battle my drug and alcohol addiction out in the world…I am ready to take care of myself and love myself…Being a warrior is not about winning or losing. It’s about helping your people become strong so that they may face the challenges that come in life. (“In Search of My Warrior”, Out of Bounds, p. 18).

Finding Spirituality

I rebuke the demonic hold Satan has on me…God get these demon’s out, out, out “To My Family.” (Surrey Remand, p.2)
A recurrent theme among the narratives is an appeal to a higher power as a source of strength and an attempt to discover community and a sense of belonging. It may also be a plea to be taken care of and directed. Michelle Bellecourt, in “Healing Journey” writes:

Knowing now I couldn’t do this alone…Because I found someone who is so caring/I suppose that they were always there./But being into myself I was unaware./Regardless, I’ve taken the first steps in healing./And with it comes so much feeling./I am thankful for the Creator each day./And know he is with me in every way. (*Prison Voices*, p. 59).

And an anonymous writer in the poem “Trapped”: “Breaking down/I surrender – on both knees/To someone greater than myself./I place my heart and soul.” (*Surrey Remand*, p.4)

Many also name what they term “darkness” within them (repressed memory, memories of violence and abuse) in the language of the demonic. I believe that in this *naming*, there is the accomplishment of a modicum of control.

It must be noted that across the prison system there are consistent services and programs: prison chaplains, A.A. and N.A., and Native Elders. Each of these programs focuses on a higher power and spiritual connection. For many in prison, the only community that has been relied upon and consistent is one connected through criminal activity. Those seeking an alternative community can find that through a spiritually based prison program. This still places one’s moral compass outside oneself and does not address individual responsibility for actions and the harm they may cause.
Love

There are times/sought to silence/I’d cry out/ It’s so beautiful/when you’re here/There’s no other/You’re all I need/all that’s truthful  Peter Williams “Fire My Heart” (Works Great on Blood Stains, p. 22)

Seeking love, family, and a sense of belonging are interwoven amongst many of the narrative themes found in the writing. My experience as an educator at SPSC, while it housed both males and females, provided unique first hand observations of the craving and the lengths to which those housed within the walls and cut off from the outside opportunities, would go in their quest for a love match. Notes were slipped into library books, toilets were emptied of water to provide a “pipeline” through which to talk, and any chance encounter through locked door necessitated a screamed “write me” to the passerby. Serious romance via jail mail was a common phenomenon. As the writer of “Papermate” explains, “It’s funny ‘I know’ to find true love when in jail. And more unlikely to happen, fall in love through the mail. Loves a permanent word, permanent ink’s how I wrote this,” (Surrey Remand, p. 5).

Some of the narrators, in their writing, reach out to re-establish relationship with family. Donny Neigum writes a love poem dedicated to his niece: “You are a melody/Very beautiful to me/In my heart is a rhythm/Every beat has a little of you in it/An army could not take away the love/I have for you/Wisdom will shine through, my little niece/CADENCE” (“Cadence, “Works Great on Blood Stains, p. 11).

Prison narratives focus on themes of loss and confinement. Those who are incarcerated are separated from society as punishment. But they are also separated from the nurturing aspects of life outside the gates. In “Our World, Far Away”, Joe K. articulates trying to cope with separation from a lover, “As castaways from the life we knew/We have been separated/By a cold, steel gate” (Out of Bounds, p. 46).
“Criminal Culture”

Silent is the blade/ Ear to ear parting skin in its wake/ No time for regret/ No time for pity Mike Myers ("Redespisito V2," Works Great on Blood Stains, p. 16).

Some of the narratives within the selection of writings express the clear determination to incorporate and then fiercely enforce a criminal sub-culture within the prison. The narratives tell us, that each new inductee to prison must negotiate their way through this sub-culture, which dominates prison hierarchy. As Mike Oulton wrote in “Five Bucks’ll Getcha Burned” the rules state that you do not save the cell mate next to you when he is been set on fire by a fellow inmate unless you want to be the next in line. The lesson Oulton learned that day was that he’d “never do anything to get [himself] involved in a situation that could possibly get him lit on fire. He writes: “[I] should’ve just let him burn up” (Prison Voices, p. 121).

Many of the narrative submissions to prison literature lay claim to the need to maintain, at all costs, the hierarchical criminal sub-culture and the ethics of street life, which are reproduced within the prison. In “Bucket”, Angela Duchene provides a vivid description of her expectations of appropriate prison behavioural expectations: “Man-up, buck-up, solid & straight up/I’ll do my own shit, & finish this bit” (Cell Count, p. 15). Also, succinctly expressed by Aaron Montgomery in “War Cry:” “My heart as always, filled with pride/For what does not kill/Will only make you stronger/So I say, as always/Show face, show heart/And put up a fight” (Cell Count, p.16).

Lower level gang members often refer to themselves and each other as soldiers. Gangs might be considered those who are entrenched in a criminal lifestyle who have organized themselves into teams. Further, those teams have a model with a paradigm and socializing
construct similar to that of the army. Members are dominated by a leader or leadership who expect unquestioned obedience to orders. Like army members on a war front, gang members live in constant fear for their personal safety, lead a high risk lifestyle which often leads to serious physical injury, and must act upon orders to commit acts of violence. To survive, these soldiers must lose autonomous moral decision making. Thus, like many who find themselves incarcerated those entrenched in criminal culture likely suffer the psychological effects and resultant behaviour of post-traumatic stress.

In prison the captives far outnumber the prison staff. At SPSC, on the living units, where inmates are housed, those ratios vary from eighteen to one to forty to one. As one of my students stated, “You decide if you come to work. We decide if you go home.” The narrative descriptions brought forward in this section describe the continuity between street life and prison life. Criminal culture, unlike family contact or continuity of access to healthcare, penetrates the concrete walls which confine the physical movement of the writers.

Life after incarceration – Next Steps

At this point freedom is a frail word on my tongue, but as I said the future is bright. Dustin Olsen “Freedom: The state of being free from constraints” (Out of Bounds, p. 13).

The narratives indicate that release from prison raises the spectre of whether (and how) to locate oneself in a community that is not a criminal community, or whether to return to the criminal and/or disenfranchised community that is often what is best known and understood. There is little doubt that the transition from prison, to outside prison is an intense challenge for all who have been incarcerated.

Roxanne Stevenson writes: “Into the real world these so-called cured women go; life’s poisons/remedies take over. Addictions blind the willingly weak. Within weeks they are back in
prison…she’s back reloaded with new tales of drunken jagged adventures” (“Justice and Judgement,” *Prison Voices*, p.5).

A pervasive theme in the narratives is the critical need to not be alone upon release from prison. The transition is fragile. The narratives raise the query: perhaps those who survive, shortly after release, are those who may once have been alone, but who now have found an “us,” whether this be family, recovery, community, or spiritual connection on a journey to discover or restore a positive concept of self and deep sense of belonging somewhere. As Randi Muhlfellner writes: “As I free my addictions/And I wipe my last tears/It’s a whole new world/As the smoke clears” (“As the Smoke Clears”, *Cell Count*, p. 16).

**Discussion**

These narratives illustrate that life while incarcerated is an often brutal existence. It is place of enforced hierarchies, violence, confinement and, often, dehumanization. While prisoners write about their experiences in jail, most of this writing never reaches the public eye, most of the time circulated only among others who are incarcerated. The writings explored here leave no doubt that negotiating one’s way through a prison sentence, on a day to day basis, is a perilous ordeal.

*The influence of writing sources*

While all prison writing is mediated through the individual narrator’s perspective, it is also framed by outside audience and external editors. The intended audience, who edits journal
content, the readers, and even who the writers are, strongly shape what gets written and how it is said.

The writing examined in this paper was selected from five separate publications. Publications differed in purpose, style, and publisher. Those factors had a bearing on the style, audience, and content of the narratives. In some respects, though beyond the scope of this paper, even the mechanics of the writing changes with each publication.

*Prison Voices* is a single edition publication by the John Howard Society of Canada made possible by grants through the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. It was published with the co-operation of Correctional Service Canada (CSC) which provided the editors with face to face access to the writers. *Prison Voices* is bound with a hard cover and filled with glossy photographs. In the introduction to the anthology, the editors extoll the virtues and rehabilitative purposes of the Canadian prison system. Two of those three narratives were produced within Ed Griffin’s writing class at Matsqui Institution.

*Prison Voices*, and the narratives therein, provide an interesting illustration of the ways in which editorial aims, which are influenced by broader objectives of funding bodies, shape the image of the phenomena. The narratives are very well written both from content and mechanical perspectives. While dark childhood narratives are detailed, many of the narratives describe incarceration as a turning point toward both a healed and rehabilitated self. Aside from three narratives, living in prison is described in positive terms. It was apparent to me that the overall aim of the publication is to further the notion of the inmate as having agency (taking control of their life which was previously “out of control”) and the prison as a space in which this empowerment and self-transformation is possible. From a critical stance, this may be viewed as
an act of subterfuge—obscuring the experience of many (if not most) of the inmates for whom imprisonment does not act as a jumping off point to a better life. In contrast, highlighting the stories of those who are able to engage in transformation can be an act of discursive empowerment, inspiring other inmates to find hope and strength and to shift the public image of the incarcerated.

*Works Great on Blood Stains*, was produced by the Mastqui Write Club. This anthology was the collective result of a writing retreat, initiated by Ed Griffin, hosted at Matsqui Institution involving writers from within Matsqui and from the community. While the community participants themselves were submitted to criminal record checks and searches for contraband, the writing itself moved freely in and out of the prison gates. These narratives were not subject to Institutional scrutiny and the audience was other writers in the community. In general, these narratives provide a critique of the institutionally accepted brutality of prison life and personalities who inhabit it. The writing anthologies were self-published and distributed by community members of the “Write Club.” It should be noted that in response to perceived security threats the prison writing program, the writing retreats, and Ed Griffin are no longer part of the programs offered at Matsqui Institution (Diakow, 2013).

*Out of Bounds* has been published out of William Head federal prison in Victoria for twenty-two years. While it is staffed and edited solely by those who are incarcerated within William Head, submissions for the publication are received, via the mail, from penal facilities across the country. As it is published within the prison there is Institutional awareness of and support for the publication. CSC, however, takes no responsibility for its content. *Out of Bounds*, available to the public through subscription, contains narratives of prison life and prison policies and programs. The narratives are mostly for the benefit and interest of others with incarceration
experience. The content, language, and criticism of the penal system would seem to indicate that the editors, who are incarcerated within the prison, rather than Corrections’ staff, edit the magazine for content. William Head also has a flourishing theatre program. The existence of the magazine and the theatre program both require commitment to and enduring support on the part of the Prison’s administration. The paucity of like programs within other prison institutions indicates such support is unusual.

*Cell Count* is produced by PASAN which is a community based group with the mandate to disseminate health information regarding HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. Geared toward those who are incarcerated and written and edited by those with incarceration experience, the narratives in *Cell Count* do not touch on health issues. The narratives tend to be gritty personal accounts that run the gamut of themes examined within this paper. However, articles in *Cell Count* focus on HIV/AIDS information and prison activism directed at systemic change related to incarceration.

Prison conditions did not factor into any samples from the *Surrey Remand*. *Surrey Remand* was initiated by an inmate with contents censored by Corrections’ staff. The heavily censored narratives were expected to be positive and without mention of criminal acts, gangs, or violence. This was broadly defined as an expectation that submissions would follow “decent decorum.” Critiques of Institutional practices or policies were edited out. Any mention of political action was forbidden. For example, Prison Justice Day is marked in all Canadian prisons. No mention of Prison Justice Day was allowed in the *Surrey Remand*.

The *Surrey Remand* was a publication during the period when SPSC was a co-ed jail. Men and women could write to each other via jail mail but were not to have contact through any
other means. This could provide insight into the preponderance of love poems to be found amongst the pages of the Surrey Remand. There were intense Institutional concerns regarding the illicit passing of information.

**Prison identity: How to locate oneself within the prison**

Vulnerable and marginalized populations are over-represented in prisons which makes negotiating the stay all the more perilous. Glenn Patterson, the Native Spiritual Advisor at Matsqui Institution, notes: “in an era where we talk about being tough on crime we must remember that most inmates are victims of crime. We send traumatized people into a dangerous environment” (Conference notes, Health Beyond Bars: Towards Healthy Prisons in Canada, University of British Columbia, February 20-21, 2014).

Those who are incarcerated negotiate their stay in jail in various ways. The writing samples indicate that for some, the strategy is to identify with the criminal culture within the prison, and to establish a place to fit within that culture. Prison is not a neutral environment where its’ inhabitants can easily separate themselves from the culture they find themselves in. People who are incarcerated live in confined conditions with people who will prey on them or recruit them. Those who attempt to detach from this culture may do so through reaching toward alternatives such as education programs, arts programs, and programs focusing on spirituality. Others seek to maintain (or even rediscover) relationships with family and friends outside the prison. Some reach out to strangers both inside and outside the prison to find community, to find love (“Papermate”), and to find the means to break the ties to criminal culture both within and outside the prison. Regardless of how one positions oneself within the prison, it involves a
process of difficult negotiation not just with prison guards and other prison authorities, but also with fellow inmates.

Searching for community

A consistent narrative theme is a search for community. The narratives “Healing Journey” and “What Went Wrong” are examples of what elements may need to be in place to heal, to reconcile, and to move forward in a direction that includes a healthy “self”, able to return to community in a positive way. Bellecourt, in “Healing Journey”, reveals that facing her inner pain made the walls that she had put around her begin to shrink lowering the barriers between herself and others. Restructuring of one’s narrative from one of hurt and loss nurtures an ability to open up and start sharing. Pieces that narrated criminal culture also focused on the need for community connection. Perhaps the people who get out are the ones that were alone but have now somehow found an “us”. Whether family, recovery community, or spiritual connection on a journey of restoring a positive concept of self, the narratives that viewed a positive future were written by those who had found community; a sense of no longer t being alone.

Alone and in the dark

Prisons used to be places where inmates were not allowed to converse. Even though they are no longer literally silent they are shrouded. Even while lit by fluorescent tubes throughout the twenty-four hour prison day they are inhabited by darkness.

The title Prison Voices reflects a theme common in public discourse about oppression and those who are oppressed. Silence, “murmurs” (a la Foucault), and being muzzled is a common description found in academic literature when referring to marginalized populations. Writers and activists alike speak of the marginalized as being silenced. I was surprised to
discover that the language used in the narratives encountered in this paper make no mention of being silenced or living in silence, rather, they speak of darkness and loneliness. Myles Bolton refers to prison as a place “where the flame in every man burns low” (“Prison ain’t much of a place,” *Prison Voices*, p. 19).

Reflecting on the absence of a theme relating to silence made me wonder if this is not the experience of these prison writers. Perhaps there has to be a sense of having a voice or the possibility of being heard to be able to identify being silenced. It is possible that writers do not feel sufficiently empowered to talk about their silencing as to be silenced there would have to be a perception that you have a voice. The writers of the narratives in this sample were in the margins – alone and in the dark. People in the margins are in darkness.

*Who is missing from the conversation?*

But who are prison writers? Those with limited literacy cannot write. Those who are not comfortable sharing their thoughts don’t write. For those who are able and willing, writing can be risky. Public complaints about prison conditions can be met with censure such as transfer to another facility or time in a segregation cell. For this paper, choosing writing as the analytic variable excludes some of the most profoundly marginalized people who are incarcerated.

**Conclusion**

Prisons serve a number of functions. In its Mission Statement, CSC states that it “contributes to public safety by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control” (Correctional Service Canada, 2011). Federally appointed Correctional Investigator, Howard Sapers, adds that CSC has a duty of care to those confined within its institutions. Looking at both the statistics of
those who are incarcerated and the narratives examined for this paper, I see that CSC serves a broader function. CSC, and the prisons it operates, has become an unprepared and ill-equipped part of the social safety net. Michael Ross refers to prisons as the hospitals of last resort (conference notes, Health Beyond Bars: Towards Healthy Prisons in Canada, University of British Columbia, February, 20-21, 2014). Prisons find themselves responsible for the care of people who: are mentally ill, have been chronically unemployed, suffer from ill health, are impoverished, poorly educated, and have been mentally, physically and sexually abused. My own experience teaching in a prison suggests that many of my students represent the gaps in available services and the failure of the systems, family and societal, which should have nurtured, guided, educated, and supported them during their younger years. Jon Brown in “Ten Hours in the Valley” provides a graphic account of what the experience of confinement can look like:

His eyes are dead and locked straight ahead, another mental casualty in the argument against double-bunking prisoners. Clad in only a pair of stained underwear, he is covered from his short-cropped blond hair to his bare feet, smeared thick like some sick primeval war paint, with his own feces… I wonder if he has gained the maximum benefit from his incarceration (Prison Voices, p. 113).

Prisons house marginalized populations. The writings cast light on experiences within a system where vulnerable people are housed in crowded conditions with those who victimize. The writings also indicate that, for many, being confined to a prison is a time for reflection and an opportunity for society to rehabilitate; in broadly defined terms, prisons can become a road in for people lost in the margins of society. But for prisons to capitalize on this opportunity, they must have the mandate, funding, and institutional desire to provide access to high quality healthcare, therapeutic arts programs, and educational and vocational training. That is the challenge for both prisons and the communities they are part of.
Throughout the process of this research I have had the opportunity to bear witness to some of the most raw, heartfelt, desperate and, sometimes, tentatively hopeful stories and reflections of those who are incarcerated. While it is difficult and sometimes heartrending, I feel honored to have been able to attentively read them and adding my own thoughts and reflections on to this collection of narratives. I hope that I have been able to find the balance between offering my own insight and respectfully giving voice to those who are most often spoken to and about rather than listened to.

Recommendations

Over the course of this research I have become more convinced of the importance of listening to those who are incarcerated. They need to make being confined in jail a time of healing and growth rather than yet another experience of violence, entrenched hierarchies, and disempowerment. As Michael Ross has argued, people are sent to prison as punishment not for punishment and our social goal should be to return healthy people back into the public sphere (conference notes, Health beyond bars; towards healthy prisons in Canada, University of British Columbia, February 20 -21, 2014). In other words, being confined is the punishment to be served; being subjected to violence and other forms of ill treatment and abuse during confinement is being imprisoned for punishment. I believe that the narratives that were the focus of this inquiry were an opportunity to be reflexive and, if not solve and resolve problems, to identify them. Arts-informed programing, such as that which encourages structured writing, theatre and visual arts, has great potential to act as a conduit for the kind of reflection and transformation needed for people to make changes in their lives.
In a concluding recommendation, I am compelled to say that, without addressing the broader social determinants of health, as the narratives so clearly revealed, meaningful change will not happen. Even the most inclusive and high quality arts programs are limited in their potential to truly transform people’s lives. In its best form, “correction services” can address and adjust people’s behaviours but, without social justice, it cannot meaningfully deal with the factors that land people in jails. In profound contrast to the ideologically driven policies of the current government, getting ‘tough on crime’ actually implies reducing the child poverty that can result in undue stress on families, accessible mental health and addiction supports, housing and economic equality.

As long as there are prisons, prison narratives will continue. The final words I respectfully leave to one of the texts I encountered during this inquiry:

“Dear hunter’s, I cry for you alone in this cell pounding tiny keys to your mad song” Dustin Olsen (“death of a prophet”, Out of Bounds, p. 45).

References


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