

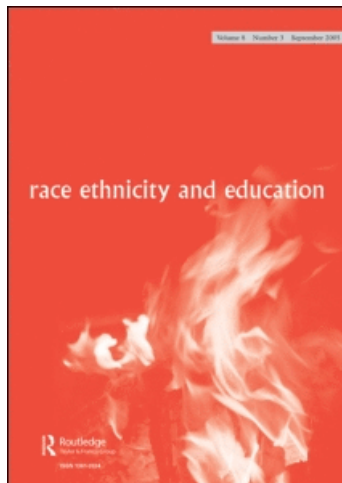
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‘Our side of the story’: moving incarcerated youth voices from margins to center

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This study examines the ways in which playwriting and performance provide tools for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls to prepare for their lives beyond detention centers and probation. In a three-year multi-sited ethnography journeying through regional youth detention centers (RYDCs), a multi-service center serving formerly incarcerated youth, and a public theatre housing a women-focused theatre company in the urban southeast, this study raises questions about the gendering of the school/prison nexus and interrogates the role of programs. Ultimately this study urges scholars, activists, and youth advocates to combine efforts in coalition building to meet the needs of girls in under-served and under-resourced communities and schools.

Keywords: gender; school-to-prison pipeline; literacy; urban youth; ethnography; theater

On 2 August 2008, one of my colleagues convinced me to take a break from writing and see *The Dark Knight*—the highly anticipated Batman film promising an edginess that was previously unseen in Batman movies. About three fourths into the movie when I thought I had seen all of the Joker’s cruel tricks, he masterminded a plan to load two Gotham City ferries with explosives. One ferry was transporting prisoners identified by their bright orange jumpsuits while the other held so-called ‘civilians’. Each ferry received an awkwardly wrapped gift box that contained a detonator that could be used to blow up the other ferry by midnight. When the Joker revealed his plan over a loudspeaker, the ferry containing the ‘civilians’ became chaotic. Civilians passionately stated their desire to blow up the ferry that transported the prisoners. ‘Those men made their choices’, declared a balding white man wearing a gold band on his ring finger. Others nodded in agreement that the ‘murderers and thieves’ on the other ferry deserved to die more than the seemingly innocent men, women, and children. On the prisoners’ ferry, a strange quiet hovered over the passengers. The prisoners sat solemnly and reflectively as the law enforcement and administrators convened without seeking their input. One of the prisoners, a towering Black man with a tattooed neck wearing the typical Hollywood prisoner scowl, walked toward the law enforcement officers. Asking for the detonator, this prisoner unveiled his plan to detonate the explosives on the civilian ferry. Additionally, the prisoner suggested the authorities make up a story saying he overpowered them. The prisoner knew that if the law enforcement officers said they were forced by prisoners to detonate the civilian ferry that it would make for a believable story given people’s fear of the incarcerated.

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Looking at each other incredulously, the officers gave the prisoner the detonator because they did not want to be the first to die. However, once the prisoner got the detonator in his hands, he declared he would do 'what should have been done a long time ago' and tossed the detonator into the river along with any hopes to survive the joker's scheme to have one group obliterate the other. Some of the prisoners stared blankly while others buried their faces in their hands. They did not argue or rebel. Perhaps they believed exactly what the civilians on the other ferry believed: that they deserved an ill fate for their crimes. Meanwhile the civilians organized a vote, placed their tallies on a piece of paper, and revealed that an overwhelming majority of them voted to blow up the 'bad people'. The leader of the pack eagerly volunteered to push the button but could not follow through with it in spite of his previous rants. As both sets of passengers watched the clock strike 12:00, they embraced themselves for the worst; however, nothing happened. Neither group could bring themselves to push the button thus foiling the Joker's plan.

In reconsidering this small but relevant scene in a popular film, the stand-off between so-called prisoners and civilians best illustrates America's tenuous relationship between the incarcerated and those who have limited, if any, knowledge about the men, women, and children who are behind bars. This is especially true when it comes to the policing and imprisonment of children or what Meiners (2007) referred to as 'the making of public enemies'. In the United States, the incarceration rate has reached 1 in 100, that is, 1 out of every 100 Americans is behind bars. This phenomenon has impacted children and teens as well (Pew Center on the States 2008). Arguing that particular youth – Black and Latino – are ushered from schools to detention centers, jails, and prisons, some educational researchers and policymakers have begun to generate movements to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline (Duncan 2000; Tuzzolo and Hewitt 2006–2007; Meiners 2007; McGrew 2008; National Association of the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense and Educational Fund 2006). Additionally, policymakers have further argued that the lack of resources such as access to pre-school have produced a 'cradle-to-prison' pipeline (Children's Defense Fund 2007). As the literature on the school-to-prison pipeline continues to grow, there is still a lack of scholarship on the increasing numbers of girls being arrested and detained in the juvenile justice system (Fisher 2008; Fisher, Purcell, and May 2009). There are few, if any, studies that examine the policing and subsequent jailing of Black girls (Winn, forthcoming). The ongoing focus on boys is largely due to the fact that they still represent the largest numbers in arrests and detainment in the juvenile justice system. However, studies are demonstrating that girls are often arrested for 'less serious offenses' than boys and more likely to receive more detention time because of probation violation (Simpkins et al. 2004, 56–7). Black girls, like Black women, are overrepresented in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. According to the Pew Center on the States report, the incarceration rates for Black women have also hit the 1 in 100 mark. Simpkins and others posit, 'Among individuals with criminal records, Caucasians are more likely to be sentenced to probation whereas African Americans are more likely to be incarcerated' (2004, 60). Once girls are released from detention centers they still have to return to conditions in schools and communities that induced vulnerability and avenues toward crime. Running away, fighting in school, and prostitution are only a few of the reasons girls are arrested. Educators, researchers, and policymakers must ask difficult questions about why girls – primarily from under-served schools and communities – are running away and willing to take their chances on the streets rather than staying at home or in schools. The purpose of this article is to

illuminate the voices and stories of formerly incarcerated girls through their writings and performances of plays created in regional youth detention centers (RYDCs) in the urban southeast. More specifically, this article examines the aforementioned issue through the lens of one play, *Meditations of our Hearts*, written and performed by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls. *Meditations* emerged from a Girl Time workshop; Girl Time introduces incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls to ensemble-building, playwriting, and theatre techniques. Housed in Our Place Theatre Company, Girl Time focuses on issues impacting girls and women in alignment with the theatre company's commitment to producing the work of women playwrights or plays with compelling roles for women. *Meditations* confronts issues plaguing incarcerated girls as they prepare for re-entry to their communities and schools. This article addresses the following questions: *What can educators, policymakers, and school administrators learn from Girl Time and the writings of girls that can help disrupt and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline? And, in what ways can lessons from Girl Time help build institutions and opportunities to help girls including access to education, healthcare, childcare, and housing?* Here I argue that the telling of the stories of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls through the medium of playwriting and performance begins to disrupt and dismantle the stereotypes people have of incarcerated youth and re-educate people on the critical issues that lead a nation to jail its children. Ultimately this study argues that girls need multiple opportunities, tools, and platforms to tell their stories about miseducation and incarceration and communities need more forums where these stories can be heard and people can be moved to respond, organize, and act. I also want to advocate that formerly incarcerated girls need various resources – art alone will not solve all of the problems impacting their lives. This work cannot be done in silos and requires dialogue across disciplines.

Background of the study

This study took place over a three-year period from 2006–2009 in an urban southeastern city. Girl Time, a playwriting and performance program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls, was created by a team of women teaching artists who work for a woman-focused theatre company. Initially the program began as a one-day exchange of voices and stories among a cast of African American women in a play about a girl-gang set in the Bronx and incarcerated girls with real-life gang experience. Both the actors and the girls reported that the opportunity was transformative and Our Place Theatre Company decided to continue the program and cultivate its community-outreach efforts. There were no political agendas and perhaps no in-depth knowledge of the school-to-prison pipeline when the artistic director, Anne², established Girl Time. In fact, Anne, a self-described 'white girl who grew up in a town where the only two Black children had been adopted by white families', described the program as evolving organically, taking a life of its own, and becoming one of the most important components of Our Place. Because of her inexperience working with incarcerated youth, Anne hired Kaya to direct Girl Time. Kaya, originally from the south-east, was an actor and teacher in the California Youth Authority teaching playwriting and theatre techniques to incarcerated boys. Together, Anne and Kaya assembled a diverse team of teaching artists. While I do not report on all of the teachers in the context of this article, the larger cohort of core teachers were interviewed for the larger study.

For three years I have been a participant observer in Girl Time. My role has been fluid based on programmatic needs. Initially I observed RYDC workshops, teacher

meetings, teacher trainings, and the summer program activities, while participating in all ensemble-building and playwriting activities side by side with teaching artists and students. Once I completed teacher training I became more actively engaged as a teacher in the RYDC workshops and during the summer program for girls who have been released to group homes, foster families, or back to their own families. As a researcher, I employed a community model often used by archaeologists and anthropologists in the field; I reported preliminary findings to the teachers, provided relevant reading, and invited ongoing dialogue. Together, we listened to interviews with girls and collectively brainstormed ways to best support girls in future cohorts with developing relationships with peers, teaching artists, and by working on specific theatre skills. This work has transformed me as well. While much of my work has been youth-centered (Fisher 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2009), working with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth, and girls in particular, has prompted me to interrogate the racing, classing, and gendering of the school-to-prison pipeline. As a teaching artist with Girl Time it was impossible to ignore the fact that nearly all of the 'celled' youth I encountered were Black and Brown (Fisher 2008; Fisher, Purcell, and May 2009; Winn, forthcoming).

This three-year multi-sited ethnography (2006–2009) is a journey through urban southeastern regional youth detention centers (RYDCs), a multi-service center serving formerly incarcerated youth, and a public theatre space. RYDCs are supposed to be transitional facilities; youth wait for their juvenile court dates to learn where they are going next. Therefore these spaces are often contentious as youth prepare to serve more time, be released into the custody of a group home or foster care, and in some cases released to their families. Girl Time conducts two-day playwriting workshops in the RYDCs in which girls learn how to build-ensemble, write plays, and put a play 'on its feet'. At the end of the two-day workshop, girls perform these plays written by their peers in front of other incarcerated youth, junior correctional officers (JCOs), RYDC administrators, and their families who all participate in a community dialogue about the plays, characters, themes, and issues around incarceration or related topics. During the summer, Girl Time invites formerly incarcerated girls (mostly girls who participated in the RYDC workshops) to prepare a summer performance in which 8–10 plays written in the detention centers are staged in a public theatre. It is during the summer program that I interview formerly incarcerated girls about the role of playwriting and performance in their lives as well as the tools they use from these experiences. In the following section, I examine the role of the cast meeting in the Girl Time program. Cast meetings are intimate meetings in which formerly incarcerated girls cast in particular plays have an opportunity to talk through the actions of their characters and the themes in the plays. First, I offer an analysis of the play *Meditations of our Hearts* in order to demonstrate the ways in which plays written by incarcerated girls can be tools of inquiry for interrogating the prison industrial complex and school-to-prison nexus. Next, I provide a pedagogical portrait of the cast meetings, which have become forums for formerly incarcerated girls who perform these plays. Last, I share the voice of one of the Girl Time participants and cast members from *Meditations*, Jada, to examine the ways in which the process of preparing for performance provides formerly incarcerated girls an opportunity to speak back to their peers.

'Why am I here?': formerly incarcerated girls acting out

In the first scene of the play, *Meditations of our Hearts*, written by incarcerated girls in a Girl Time RYDC workshop, three characters, Heaven, Lyric, and Aniya, sit

around a table while chatting, listening to music, and playing cards. This table is not in one of the girls' kitchens or dining rooms – rather it is 'on the female unit' in a youth detention center. As the music carries the girls away to life and loved ones beyond prison walls, the girls share their desires, fears, and 'meditations' with each other. The playwrights skillfully weave their characters' stories together; as one character share her thoughts, the other characters freeze in place. Heaven puts down her cards, steps onto a block and begins to speak:

Why am I here? Why am I here? I'm here but I still have a heart full of fear ... Why am I here? I shouldn't be here. I'm a wonderful person in disguise or is it just a thought ... or maybe a lie? Why am I here?

Heaven's meditation (abbreviated here) repeats a question that everyone wants to know and understand: why are so many children being incarcerated and how has the growing number of girls being incarcerated manage to occur without sounding an alarm? In a study examining the impact the school-to-prison pipeline has had on girls, Simkins and others (2004) assert:

Despite an overall drop in juvenile crime, girls represent the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population; reexamination of girls in the juvenile justice system, therefore, is becoming an issue of national importance. (56)

While scholarship on juvenile justice has largely focused on boys in the school-to-prison pipeline, one in four juvenile arrests is now a girl's. Scholars are beginning to ask the difficult questions about the 'celling' of children and Black and Latino youth in particular (Duncan 2000). For example, Polakow (2000) challenges educators committed to social justice by asking, 'Whose children do we see when we construct the meaning of childhood at the dawn of the new century in the United States? Which young lives matter and which young lives do not?' (2). Furthermore, questions about the gendering of the school/prison nexus must be raised. In a study of drama classrooms in urban high schools overwhelmed with policing, surveillance, and zero-tolerance policies, Gallagher simply asks, 'Are "the children" "our future" or are they not?' (2007, 4). All of these questions echo the character Heaven's question, 'Why am I here?' As incarcerated youth contemplate this question they often embrace an 'incarceration discourse' (Winn, forthcoming) – that is, they degrade themselves and sometimes each other while searching for shortcomings in their moral fabric (see Poole 2010). This phenomenon, 'the privatization of public issues', among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, according to Meiners, does not hold public policies, schools, and government accountable for failing to protect children (2007, 140). Individualizing failure has also gone global. Muncie (2005) demonstrates how the shift from understanding the 'social contexts of crime' to 'prescriptions of individual/family/community responsibility' has been exported from the United States to other countries (37). During one of the Girl Time workshops, the teaching artists inquired as to why the walls were decorated with student-designed German flags. The RYDC administrator proudly shared that the facility hosted a team from Germany hoping to replicate aspects of the American juvenile justice system in their country. This 'global lockdown' (Sudbury 2005), has been debilitating for women of color who not only overwhelmingly fill up jails and prisons in the United States but also in countries such as Australia and Italy.

Privitizing public failures in the context of American public schools is dangerous because it often substitutes the dialogue on what needs to be done to create and sustain

a college-prep curriculum and robust learning opportunities for urban youth. Duncan further posits that many formerly incarcerated people do not have the tools to critique the injustices they endure due to poor-quality educational experiences or 'urban pedagogies' (Duncan 2000). That is, many incarcerated youth were never introduced to critical literacies and a rigorous curriculum that would enable them to engage in a discussion about school-to-prison pipeline issues. Focusing on personal failure also oppresses the stories and testimonies of youth pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline. Many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth are led to believe their plights are solely the outcome of their poor choices. Youth learn that they are unworthy and undeserving of a college-prep education through the process of 'dispossession' (Fine and Ruglis 2009). In an analysis of autobiographical writings of formerly incarcerated high school students, Meiners and a co-teacher found countless examples of the 'redemptive genre' of writing in which students moved from 'I made the wrong choices' to 'My life is now on a better track'. Through this examination, Meiners found that the culture of incarceration 'requires that the experiences and the lives of those harmed by institutions and policies be transformed from concrete, potentially revolutionary, evidence into private, individual failures' (Meiners 2007, 140). Elsewhere I found that formerly incarcerated girls in *Girl Time* described happy, playful childhoods yet reported they 'turned bad' upon entering their teens and especially as they entered middle and high school (Fisher 2008). This ominous timing when girls reported they 'turned bad' was seldom, if ever, contextualized in a larger discourse of becoming teens, transitioning from middle to high school, and the hypersexualization of the Black female body (Willis and Williams 2002). Some scholars suggest the ninth grade as a 'critical juncture' for girls, and the movement from eighth to ninth grade in particular, as a vulnerable time when girls are 'dropping out or acting out' (Simkins et al. 2004, 65). The omission of sex and sexuality education for girls only exacerbates problems that arise during this transition which makes many of them targets for abuse (Fine and McClelland 2006).

In many ways the play, *Meditations*, reifies the notion of 'incarceration discourse' and 'the privatization of public issues'. Heaven, Lyric, and Aniya question themselves and their histories, hoping this knowledge will help them understand how they found themselves and each other behind bars. Absent from this line of questioning is any discussion, analysis, or wonder as to why most of the girls in the detention centers are African American and why so-called crimes (e.g., running away) are punished by jailing girls. Another glaring omission is a discussion of the conditions in which these girls and their families are forced to live in prior to incarceration, including injustices such as being relegated to prison tracks in failing public schools. While Heaven's character asks, 'Why am I here?' Lyric's character ponders, 'What is my place in this world?' Lyric's meditation begins with telling the story of her mother:

My mom was born in the Bronx ... At 13 my mom was active. She ran track, sang, and made sure she stayed on top and in the spotlight ... Slowly but quickly she strayed away from that path ... Hung out with the wrong people and got raped ... I grew up with her and she with me. So to see her get beat and hurt, hurt me just as much ... Why am I in this world? My job now is to make sure I quickly stray away from HER LIFE...

Lyric's story of her mother mirrors the stories of women in Richie's (1996) study of incarcerated battered Black women. Richie found that many of the women she interviewed in jails and prisons reported being active, doing well in school, and experiencing adoration as young girls in their families prior to entering abusive relationships.

Upon becoming involved with abusive partners, these women were 'compelled to crime' or forced into compromising situations. How institutions are able to depict these women as criminals as opposed to victims, according to Richie, must be challenged in light of the abuse they endured. Once the women are criminalized, Richie posits they are prohibited from the social service they desperately need. While Lyric shared that her mother was raped as a teenager resulting in an unwanted pregnancy, Lyric's 'Meditation' does not acknowledge how the violence and post-trauma of being raped may have impacted her mother and subsequently her mother's slow yet steady disengagement with Lyric's life. Lyric believes she has to 'quickly stray away' from the life that becomes a signifier of her mother's experiences and struggle and shifts the focus from the violent act committed against her mother to her pressure to persevere. The voices of incarcerated girls in 'Mediations of the Heart' seeks to make sense of complicated lives fraught with poverty, abuse, and miseducation. And while this was a play, the characters' stories are based in reality as most incarcerated girls and women have experienced sexual abuse (Fine and McClelland 2006; Simkins et al. 2004; Chesney-Lind 1999) and that abuse is often the 'gateway to the pipeline' (Simkins et al. 2004, 60). During a lunch break at a Girl Time workshop, a couple of teaching artists and I had a conversation with an RYDC administrator. The administrator, a male, explained how difficult incarcerated girls were because of their 'neediness' and 'promiscuity' and how much easier it was to work with boys. The notion of promiscuity was never linked to sexual abuse and violence perpetrated against girls. Most alternative opportunities in detention centers are male-centered; therefore further marginalizing girls. The young, African American playwrights, LaLa, Ciara, and Kim, who created Heaven, Lyric, and Aniya, participated in a two-day playwriting and performance workshop, Girl Time, while detained. On the first day, the girls experienced the creation of ensemble using techniques used in theatre and co-authored plays (and sometimes choreo-poems) with the support of teaching artists. In the summer months, Girl Time extended their work by hiring girls who were released from detention centers, sometimes with probation to act in plays written by incarcerated girls. As a culminating activity, the girls staged a public performance in a theatre with seating capacity for nearly 300 audience members. *Meditations* was the grand finale in the summer 2008 public performance; this powerful act in storytelling compelled the audience to raise questions about who these girls were and why they had been herded from schools to jails. Part of the process of preparing for the staged performance was the cast meeting with the members and a teaching artist who served as a director for the play. While every teaching artist brought her own knowledge, experience, and style to the process, every teacher engaged the girls in explicating the play and analyzing characters. The cast meeting for *Meditations* became an opportunity for the girls to draw from their experiences while incarcerated:

- Kaya: What do you like about the play?
 Jennifer: How the girls are locked up and trying to get their minds together.
 Jada: At least they got their stuff together. They are trying to get their stuff together and they all got together and prayed. They've all had their bad times – their down times.
 Megan: I like they are speaking and trying to express [themselves] to each other.
 Kaya: What rings true for you? Anything you identify with in this play?
 Jennifer: I wanted to know what I would be in life when I was locked up.
 Jada: When I was locked up I kind of had Aniya's personality. Because I missed my boyfriend, I was pregnant, and I was thinking all kinds of bad thoughts and trying to stay positive with it but [asking]: 'When is this gonna happen?'

Or 'When do I go to court?' 'What are they going to say?' And all kinds of thoughts. Eventually I prayed on it. I did pray. Everybody prays when they go to jail.

[The cast laughed]

Kaya: That's really great. That's going to help you with this character to draw on those parts. I think when we play different characters if we can draw on parts of our life – we don't have to be exactly like that other character – that helps us embody that character and step in that character's shoes and bring that character to life.

Getting one's 'mind together' or 'stuff together' were admirable qualities according to the cast members of 'Mediations'. Getting one's 'mind together' indicated pulling away from life, getting focused, and slowing down in order to think about the future. Jennifer and Jada illuminated this quality in their responses. Once again the ability to persevere during adversity was embraced by this community of formerly incarcerated girls. Jada, who was originally cast as Aniya, saw much of herself in Aniya's on-stage personality. Carrying her first child while jailed at a youth detention center, Jada was young, in love, and in trouble. With limited opportunities to build with other girls and participate in any meaningful and meaning-making experiences, Jada lacked a productive place to process her emotions. Kaya encouraged the cast to use their life experiences while also pointing out that their lives did not have to mirror their characters' lives precisely. Building empathy, one of the salient characteristics of theatre and Girl Time, became important to the girls for many reasons. Building empathy provided girls with the knowledge that they were not alone in their stories and experiences. It also enabled the girls to explore themes in the plays and question, challenge, and complicate the characters. The character Aniya was relatively quiet until the end of the play when she gave an explosive narrative about who she was after another character asks her, 'Man, why you always acting crazy?'

Aniya: Why is Aniya the way she is.....? Man I just don't understand why I am the way I am. My attitude is whack and the way I treat others is reprehensible. All my life I have been a devil in disguise and I just don't understand why I want to do wrong.

Aniya's 'meditation' (abbreviated here) makes no apology for who she was as evident in her final declaration, 'So I do what I got to do'. However, Aniya tries to understand her actions through the lens of personalized failure. Jada, who was in her third year of participation with the Girl Time summer program, compared herself to Aniya during a one-on-one interview following the cast meeting. Jada believed that at one point she shared Aniya's unpredictability and quick temper. Like Aniya, Jada had similar questions while she was incarcerated and had to confront and learn to contain difficult emotions. Having an opportunity to release these thoughts through acting provided participants with a tool to mediate inevitable tensions that arose while being locked away from family and loved ones at such a young age. Additionally, this process offered shared experiences and collectivity – in doing theatre – through telling stories and processing these stories individually during interviews:

Author: You're in *Meditations of our Heart* ... Tell me about that play.

Jada: I play [Aniya]. Aniya is kind of crazy, get mad all the time [and] got a real short fuse. Aniya really remind me of me when I was just – Aniya is sitting at the table with two other girls trying to get their stuff together but the only thing on my mind is 'Where my boyfriend at?' Basically I don't care. I'm

heartbroken ... then when they get the talking and what am I really in here for ... And I step back and thinks, 'Well, they got a goal. What am I really in for? I know I got a short fuse and I know I've done the wrong thing. I feel like I'm never going to gain nothing 'cause I ain't never had nothing.

Author: Are there parts that ring true? Do you think it's a realistic play?

Jada: Yeah I do.

Author: And how do you think it's going to be received when you take it back to the detention center and other places?

Jada: I'm a make it so [the audience] can feel where I'm coming from ... give them something to think about. Can I change when I get out of there? [Does] somebody care? Is somebody going to help me? Or am I going to try to look for a job and they look at my background and see I've done this and I've done that and really all I needed was a little bit of guidance ... I can take their stories and bring it through me and out of me and give it to somebody else.

When Jada spoke about the character Aniya, she used first person because of the way she related to the character. Filtering her character's feelings and story through her own, Jada understood the significance of her participation as the ability to take the stories of other girls and use her body, voice, actions, and prior knowledge to create an experience that was real and meaningful to other girls in similar circumstances. Using their stories as a mediating tool between past, present, and future lives embodied the Girl Time purpose.

Toward a pedagogy of power (not programs)

Girl Times' efforts to generate power as opposed to programming began with its expansion to work with girls in urban public middle schools. Girl Time's vision included working with younger girls and disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline by providing an outlet for creativity, writing, and performance for girls who never experienced incarceration. Participants in Girl Time's after-school program had similar backgrounds as the incarcerated girls in the Girl Time program. While the girls in the Girl Time middle-school ensemble experienced oppression in other ways (Fisher, Purcell, and May 2009), situating Girl Time in this time and space placed the power back into the hands of the girls rather than institutions that incarcerated them.

During a recent after-school session in spring 2009, Girl Time participants received a visit from a special guest artist Rhodessa Jones. Jones, who was in town for her show *The Love Project*, welcomed the opportunity to work with young girls. While Jones is widely recognized for her work with *The Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women*, she skillfully extracted exercises conducted with women in San Francisco County jails for a purposeful experience for Girl Time junior-high-school participants. Jones introduced herself through her 'Matrilineage' warm-up; she stated her name, her mother's name, her grandmothers' names, her daughter's name, and her granddaughter's name. 'And I like to introduce myself that way because I feel that women – we all have a place in the circle', Jones shared with the circle of giddy girls who squealed in delight when Jones said she was a grandmother of a girl their age so they better not mess with her. Leading the girls and teaching artists through an exercise, Jones asked everyone to find another person: 'We're going to make one big sculpture. We are going to connect in this room. We are going to take a chance with each other. It's about trust. We are going to make a sculpture in which we are all connected'. As the girls and women teaching artists formed their human sculpture, Jones asked them to shift by using their entire bodies. As human bodies shifted, the

girls and women allowed themselves to be transported by other hands. Asking the girls and teaching artists to begin with the phrase, 'I honor myself by...' and 'I am my best when I...' Jones invited everyone to complete these affirmations and created a performance piece around their declaration. The girls worked together as poets, writers, singers, and dancers to assemble their performances. An unexpected drummer appeared – he came to the school to teach a drumming workshop for boys; however, no one showed up – and asked the girls, 'What color do you want me to play?' Returning teaching artists, new teaching artists, and the girls pranced around the room sometimes in rhythm with each other and at other times moving to their own beat. Ultimately everyone was together. At the closing, Jones asked everyone to repeat after her:

When I was a little girl
I dreamed of my own life
I will learn myself
I will love myself
I will purge myself of ill feeling
I will drink deeply from my own well
When I was a little girl
I dreamed of my own life

As a member of the team of teaching artists in Girl Time I have grappled with the difficult truth that the program itself cannot solve the girls' problems. While Girl Time offers moments in time in which participants experience freedom and creativity through the workshops and summer program as well as skills and strategies when conflict occurred, there are also times when it seems the activities are simply not enough. Formerly incarcerated girls also need adult allies and advocates who can help them transition back into school, jobs, facilitate healthcare and childcare as well as safe, affordable housing. Like many public school teachers in under-resourced urban school districts, Girl Time teaching artists have attempted to assist in all of these areas; however it is unfair to assume teachers can carry the onus of the responsibility. In a study of 'Black girlhood' and programming, Brown (2009) asserts that girls, especially Black girls, need 'power' not 'programs':

...there is no magical after school program, girl empowerment intervention, or some kind of gender specific club that is capable of positively working for every girl involved. Especially Black girls ... Black girls marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality, and schooling rarely find themselves in the position of desiring to create the kind of programs that were responsible for inventing their own oppressive memories and meanings of Black girlhood. (25)

Indeed, Brown's declaration of 'power not programs' for Black girls mirrors Girl Time's experiences working with formerly incarcerated girls as well as younger girls who have a chance to avoid the pipeline altogether. In addition to providing a space to rewrite lives and perform possible futures; participants need access to rigorous learning experiences, safe housing, and other social services. What Girl Time teachers and educators in other contexts can do is instigate, share, and build possibilities for power by creating work and internship opportunities for girls (Girl Time participants receive a stipend during the summer program) and co-facilitate building bridges with others who have the resources they need for themselves and their families. Girl Time and other art programs can foster participation and processes that create learning opportunities where girls experience success and receive affirmation from other women artists, audiences and people who, perhaps, rendered them

incapable of persevering once they have been released (Fisher, Purcell, and May 2009). The role of arts in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline cannot be undermined. Poetry, prose, plays and most importantly the process involved in performing writing requires critical-literacy skills, considering multiple perspectives, the ability to create dialogue and build relationships by forging pathways toward freedom. For example, Black Out Artist Collective (BAC) understands that their ability to co-facilitate a forum with youth behind bars fosters the desire for incarcerated youth to claim their own freedom rather than the false ideology of giving someone a voice or empowering another person (see Green 2010). Theatre in prisons is a global movement. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TOP) uses theatre to change laws that unfairly target poor and marginalized people. For Boal, using theatre in prison is the essence of theatre as a 'representation of the real' (Boal 2006, 109). When an act is staged and thus visible to an audience, Boal asserts it is 'the best way of imagining the future and preparing for it' (114). Boal's observation can be said for BAC's work that focuses on poetry and lyrics. When youth who are victims or potential victims of the school-to-prison pipeline perform their art publicly, the audience is forced to grapple with difficult questions. In Jones' work with The Medea Project, she is keenly interested in how the performances of incarcerated women disrupt the notion of the audience:

Part of the drama is to make the audience ask questions: Why these women, why are more women going to jail, and how does the incarceration of women affect society at large? (Fraden 2001, 3).

In addition to these questions, Rhodessa Jones and her co-teachers also ask: 'But what is the problem? Is it personal? (What is her problem?) Is it structural? (What is the problem?) Is *she* the problem? Is *jail* the problem? Are they both problems and are they both responsible for a solution?' While the arts, and theatre in particular, are essential to encouraging incarcerated people to think and act for themselves, I have also learned that more stakeholders must be seated at the table (Winn, forthcoming). My involvement in Behind the Cycle (BTC), a collective focused on 'a integrative approach to criminal justice reform', has taught me that many voices and bodies of knowledge accessible before criminal justice, and juvenile justice, can be reformed. Educators, attorneys (both active and those who have left the field to establish advocacy groups for youth), judges, policymakers, politicians, and religious leaders were among the different bodies of expertise represented in BTC creating an agenda to disrupt America's role as an incarceration nation. Additionally, psychological health care advocates, doctors, and housing administrators had a role as well. While BTC is still assembling its platform, enduring questions about whether or not it is possible to dismantle, change and build from the inside out have emerged from my involvement. Does working inside the jail/prison infrastructure allow the kinds of reform and change that scholars-artists-activists seek? Even Jones is aware that her work with incarcerated women cannot be done alone; she works with a social worker and other health-care advocates in order to address the multiple needs of the women who are using the process of art to begin the healing. The 'audience' can no longer afford to be passive – including the readers of this journal:

The community needs to be not only bigger but transformed, changed from a passive audience that listens into a community that can perform by speaking back, creating different places for citizens to live and work. (Fraden 2001, 181)

Now the community – whether they consider themselves to be on the ferry carrying the prisoners or on the ferry carrying the so-called civilians – has to reach out and build with others. While the opening scene in this article was fictitious, it speaks to the Girl Time reality as well as the realities facing this incarceration nation. Enduring questions from the public may focus on personal responsibility – however, more questions must be posed about what can be done to ensure our youth receive access to education, healthcare, and housing that will enable them to live and thrive as citizens.

Notes

1. Formerly Maisha T. Fisher.
2. All names throughout the article are pseudonyms.

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