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## **'Freedom in her Mind': Women's Prison Zines and Feminist Writing in the 1970s**

By Olivia Wright<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the under-researched and undervalued area of American women's prison zines. It discusses three publications created at the California Institute for Women, Frontera, during the 1970s, placing them in the wider contexts of prison reform and the women's movement. Through close analysis, it demonstrates the influences of, and connections to, the feminist print culture at the time and how groups such as the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project enabled their publication and influenced their ideology. Examining women's prison zines can contribute to conversations about women's liberation by offering new perspectives on what I call 'collective autobiography', and giving voice to an obscured and forgotten community of women.

*Keywords:* Feminism, prison, print culture

### **Introduction**

TO ALL THE WOMEN BEFORE,  
TO ALL THE WOMEN AFTER,  
FROM THE WOMEN NOW.

- 'Dedication', *no title at all is better than a title like that!*  
(California Institution for Women, 1974, p.14)

Confinement, prejudice, and social alienation render incarcerated women the most invisible members of American society. Yet for over a century incarcerated women have produced prison zines that shine a light on a largely obscured and forgotten world. I define these publications as zines because they are sub-cultural: independent collections of art and literature that represent thoughts, experiences and opinions otherwise ignored or misrepresented by the mainstream media. They have also proven to be an integral, if somewhat overlooked, aspect of the feminist movement in the last twenty years; building female networks and enhancing solidarity.<sup>2</sup> To make clear the role and impact of these zines, this paper focuses on the zines from one particular institution during the 1970s: The California Institute for Women, Frontera. It will situate the zines in the wider women's liberation and prison reform contexts of the decade, identifying women's prison zines as part of the feminist print culture at the time. I argue that through the zines, women are able to establish a feminist 'collective autobiography' that redefines the female incarceration experience against dominant media narratives, and seek authority through camaraderie.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, women's

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<sup>2</sup> See Alison Piepmeier (2009) and Red Chidgey (2011) for recent zine scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> In *My Generation: Collective Autobiography and Identity Politics*. (1998), John Downton Hazlett writes about collective autobiography in terms of the 1960s and 70s, but does so from the perspective of generational

prison zines can add to the complex tapestry of female voices of resistance at the time, and expand upon ideas of American protest literature more broadly.

### **(Prison) Zine Cultures**

Women's prison zines, although largely understudied and undervalued, worked in harmony with many of the social movements of the 1970s, with particular aesthetic and ideological ties to the women's liberation movement. Significantly, they played an important part in the underground feminist literary tradition for two main reasons. First, zines were intrinsically tied to the feminist print culture of the time because of the involvement of feminist organisations in their creation and distribution. The sharing and borrowing of material from other feminist publications influenced the content of the zines, and the feminist groups who were involved in founding them also inevitably shaped the women's visions and ideas. Secondly, as well as having their own, distinct perspective on gendered confinements, women's prison zines addressed issues faced more generally by women everywhere, and thus offered a new perspective on the women's liberation conversation. These self-created, radical publications were used for protest, communication, self-expression and creativity and filled a gap left by the mainstream press. They went beyond the statistics and stereotypes that pervaded popular perceptions of female prisoners, and beyond the popular autobiographies of Assata Shakur (1988) and Angela Davis (1974) who offered more individualistic narratives on female incarceration in comparison to the collaborative nature of women's prison zines.

In 1975, the Resources for Community Change<sup>4</sup> based in Washington D.C. published a booklet entitled *Women Behind Bars* in an attempt to educate communities about women in prison. In the introduction they note that "the problems of women in prison are often ignored because they are a minority of prisoners in a sexist system... there is little specific prison information and organizing material aimed at women; this booklet is an attempt to help fill that gap" (p.4). The booklet interviews a number of prisoners and ex-convicts, including Marilyn Isabel who describes the inherent ideological connections between women prisoners and the women's movement, explaining that "the women's movement [is] centered around prisons because that is a typical manifestation of the social phenomena that have been going on for women for a long, long time" (p.9). The booklet reflects an increased focus on women in prison in the 1970s as "new critical analyses of prisons emerged, prisoners' rights organizations and unions were created, and there were new communications amongst prisoners, academics and community activists" (*The Invisibility of Women Prisoners' Activism*, n.d. p.1). Leading the way were lesbian and feminist organisations who "targeted the prison as a site which represented and reproduced patriarchy, sexism and homophobia, while naming those systems as metaphoric prisons" (Berger, 2010, p.5). During the 1970s many zines appeared with the aid of external lesbian and feminist organisations, who began to notice distinct disparities between the male and female experience of incarceration. Karlene Faith (1996, p.66) found that in the 1970s when male prisoners were taking "the first initiatives in filing one court case after another to protest the inhumane conditions of the

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autobiography. He chooses to write about individual works of literature that represent a generational community, as opposed to women's prison zines which are written and produced as a collective and do not allow one voice to speak for all.

<sup>4</sup> Resources for Community Change was a non-profit organisation run by women and men out of Washington D.C. It was an organisation focused on radical change and frequently published informative pamphlets for the general public on a variety of issues.

institutions in which they were incarcerated”, female prisoners were, paradoxically, filing “gender discrimination appeals in the courts, pleading for reforms on the grounds that they lacked equal rights with incarcerated men”. Indeed, Nicole Hahn Rafter remarks that women in prison “have fewer opportunities for job training and work-release; they have less access to social services, visitors and lawyers; [and] they are more likely to be treated as children” (2004, p.xxxi). In addition, women in prison are generally single parents, unemployed or even homeless, have had some experience of sexual abuse or trauma and have high rates of mental illness.

Yet one of the primary focuses of prison reform groups was the lack of diverse and stimulating educational programs. Although both male and female prisoners received limited access to higher education, the courses offered by women's facilities were shaped almost entirely by sexist preconceptions that limited female education to practical, vocational courses such as hairdressing, secretarial school and kitchen training, which one prisoner in *Women Behind Bars* described as “a joke” (1975, p.4). As a result, during the 1960s and 1970s prisons offered women alternative educational opportunities beyond the limited vocational courses offered previously, and higher education options for both sexes. According to Lee Bernstein, “between 1965 and 1973 the number of college level programs in U.S prisons increased more than fifteenfold to 182”, reflecting this rising trend (2010, p.76-77). Most of the programmes were established in collaboration with universities or with well-known writers or poets who would work with the women for a designated period of time, sometimes for credits or qualifications, and most of the time initiated or orchestrated by feminist groups. Sadie Reynolds, founder of *Inside Out Writing Project*, has argued that a substantial portion of these programmes were flawed in that they were designed with rehabilitation in mind, and wrongly assumed that the inmates taking part were deviant in some way and in need of a form of “moral or psychic transformation” (2014, p.100). That being said, Reynolds argues that if the rehabilitative element is removed from a programme, it can do the exact opposite:

By striving to create with participants free spaces in which all present are affirmed as thinkers, writers, and human beings, it poses fundamental challenges to predominant correctionalist discourses and practises that would strip people of their agency and humanity. By sharing critical knowledge with participants it is extending a potentially revolutionary tool to a group that, overwhelmingly, has been systematically denied access to education (2004, p.100).

Successful educational programmes therefore seem not to be concerned with rehabilitation, but rather focus on providing a platform from which women can learn freely and connect with one another.

The first programme to establish university level courses within women's prisons in America was the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project (SCWPP) at the California Institute for Women, Frontera (CIW) in 1972 (Law, 2010). The project was created by PhD student Karlene Faith after she discovered during her time teaching political science at Soledad Maximum Security Men's institution in 1970, that the male prisoners she was teaching “knew nothing at all of women in prison, not even the location of the one state facility for women” (1996, p.174). This ignorance towards the female experience led Faith to focus her efforts exclusively on women behind bars, and in 1972 she began conducting interviews over a five-month period with more than one hundred inmates from CIW. From these interactions, the women at the facility requested that Faith establish

university-level courses within the prison in the hope that they might acquire skills valuable to them.

Meeting at the weekends, so as not to interfere with the women's prison jobs and the volunteers' own careers, SCWPP ran for four years working with several hundred inmates at CIW, before finally coming to an end in 1976. One of the courses offered by the SCWPP was a creative writing and literature workshop. In her book *Unruly Women*, Faith describes the course:

The first section of the course focused on writing skills in the genres of informational articles, poetry, short stories, plays, essays, and autobiography. Tutors offered critical feedback and the students shared their writings with one another and discussed and evaluated one another's work in a supportive classroom environment. The second section of the course introduced students to literary analysis and criticism in a variety of workshops, with such foci as the interpretation of modern fiction, which explored writers of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and primal myths, a study of pre-literature stories of gods and goddesses with themes such as metamorphosis, matriarchal and patriarchal cycles, initiation, rebirth and death (1993, p.193).

This description highlights the eclecticism of genres and themes discussed during the course. It emphasises the necessity of the course being broad and experimental in both language and form in order to encompass a vast range of women's experiences. From these extensive classes on creative writing and literary analysis, one of the workshop coordinators Debra Miller established a one-off, self-published collection of the women's poetry, short prose and artwork. Faith writes how "after what seemed like endless debates on what to call their book, they settled on *no title at all is better than a title like that!*" (1993, p.193). The ambiguity of the title hints at the women's own desire to reject stereotypes and labels forced upon them.<sup>5</sup>

Published in 1974, the A5-sized zine consists of 22 pages of mostly art and poetry by 22 women from CIW who participated in the programme over the four-year period. Although the poetry covers a variety of topics, some of the more poignant pieces deal both explicitly and subtly with ideas of prison and confinement. One poem by Mara Reves Moryas describes a woman's acquisition of a fish, a fish bowl and tropical snails, which die overnight. Moryas ends the poem by writing "It's evident these snails require more than a simple fish bowl" (p.8). Arguably, whether the story of the snails is true or not (and it seems unlikely given prison restrictions), the significance of the final line is primarily symbolic; the death of the snails acts as a metaphor for the women in prison who themselves require more than the basic care provided by the facility in order to survive, both physically and mentally. Moreover, the fish bowl analogy also accurately captures the claustrophobic environment of prison and the constant surveillance of the women. Several other poems within the zine describe prison's constricting environment—the cells are "cages"—and vividly portray the cacophony of sounds that echo throughout the prison. One poem depicting inmate Pat Williams' first night at CIW describes "the sound of sobbing" and "the banging of the drunk down the hall" punctuating "that endless night" (p.2). Interestingly, 'First Night' and many of the other poems in *no title at all* are written in the third person, describing the events and feelings as detached from the author. This is an important distinction as it sacrifices the individual

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<sup>5</sup> A copy of the zine can be found here:

[http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510\\_scans/Prisons\\_Women/510.CIW.no.title.at.all.V1.N1.1974.pdf](http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Prisons_Women/510.CIW.no.title.at.all.V1.N1.1974.pdf)

experience in favour of the communal. This is a feature of much prison writing, and prison zines in particular. Authors emphasise the communality of female incarceration and demonstrate that their "individual experience is not unique or even extraordinary, but typical and representative" (Franklin, 1989, p.250). This is also reflected in the use of "we" in prison zines; the plural pronoun gives the writing a multidimensional voice.

A further example of the use of third person in the zine is the poem 'Lights Out!' by SuSun Young, which depicts an inmate and a guard engaged in a dispute over a contraband light in the woman's room. Young refers to the guard as "she" throughout and the inmate as "her", which leads to a disjointed style, representative of the scene which Young is describing as the two women argue over the lamp. By using different pronouns for guards and inmates, Young captures the rift between them and creates a language divide suggestive of "us and them". She writes, "There were lots of hers. No shes", suggesting an innate difference between them that is almost biological. Moreover, Young describes "her" as mechanical and robotic as the inmate talking back "put a clot in her mechanical nuts and bolts bloodstream" (p.10.) This not only separates "her" further from the women as she is not seen as human, but also emphasises the guard's lack of humanity; she is unable to comprehend human emotion and is programmed to only understand the prison guard-inmate relationship. This is emphasised by the poem's accompanying image of a man staring down at a tiny indistinguishable person in his hands in a threatening and controlling manner which again reflects the authority of prison staff against the small, powerless person in his hands, who he could destroy with one squeeze.

Nevertheless, first-person narration is used in some of the poetry, particularly when expressing agency and protest. For instance, one example reads:

Three-fourths of the gum chewed in Amerika is bubble gum. Someone needs to pop the bubble. Not someone, me and my sisters – I don't know why I want to bother though – I don't like Amerika, can't find peace of mind here, or the freedoms the liberals talk about – please release me, USA – I promise never to come back (p.1).

In contrast to the previous poem, the use of first person here exhibits agency as the author suggests that she is willing to take control of her future and pop the idealistic "bubble" that surrounds society and separates it from women in prison, with the help of her "sisters" inside. Yet even then she admits that she does not know if she wants to be a part of American society, as she does not experience more freedom outside prison. Here the author describes feelings of disenchantment with America as the promised ideals of freedom are not realised. What is more, the use of radical language, form and spelling seen in the zine demonstrates the influence of the political and cultural climate on prisoners and their cultural production throughout the 1970s. The use of the word "sisters" or "sistas" to describe their fellow inmates is particular to womanist/black feminist culture that was popularised throughout the decade, and in using the term, include incarcerated women in the tradition.

Despite often being viewed as a nadir of political activism and overlooked in favour of the radical 1960s, the 1970s was a period of thriving political engagement and protest, as the Black Liberation Movement, the advancing feminist movement and the prison reform movement made waves culturally, socially and politically. It was during this period that the feminist, black feminist, womanist and lesbian protest movements were at their most influential. Described by Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon as "the largest social movement in the history of the United States"

(2002, p.414), the woman's movement fought for liberation both in the public and private spheres with debates ranging from the Equal Rights Amendment to abortion and education. As well as making waves politically, the women's movement also produced a creative impact through art, literature and criticism, and, in particular, a successful and extensive print culture through the creation and dissemination of zines. Publications such as *The Amazon Quarterly* (1972-1975) and *Off Our Backs* (1970-2008) became a central element of feminist print activism in the 1970s and worked to "spread their opinions, [elicit] support, [create] networks among like-minded individuals, and attempt to establish cohesive group identities for the larger world" (Schreiber, 2013, p.1). Creators of zines worked to articulate their particular concerns, beyond any mainstream media filter; they redefined the underground, and replaced the white, male, middle-class objector of the 1960s with a distinctly feminist community and aesthetic. Similarly, as the prison became a new site of protest, incarceration literature was produced and consumed in ever-greater numbers. Indeed, in 1978 H. Bruce Franklin noted how "the literature emerging today from the prisons of America constitutes an unprecedented phenomenon. The quantity itself is so large that it makes for the first qualitative distinction: this is a coherent body of literature" (1989, p.223).

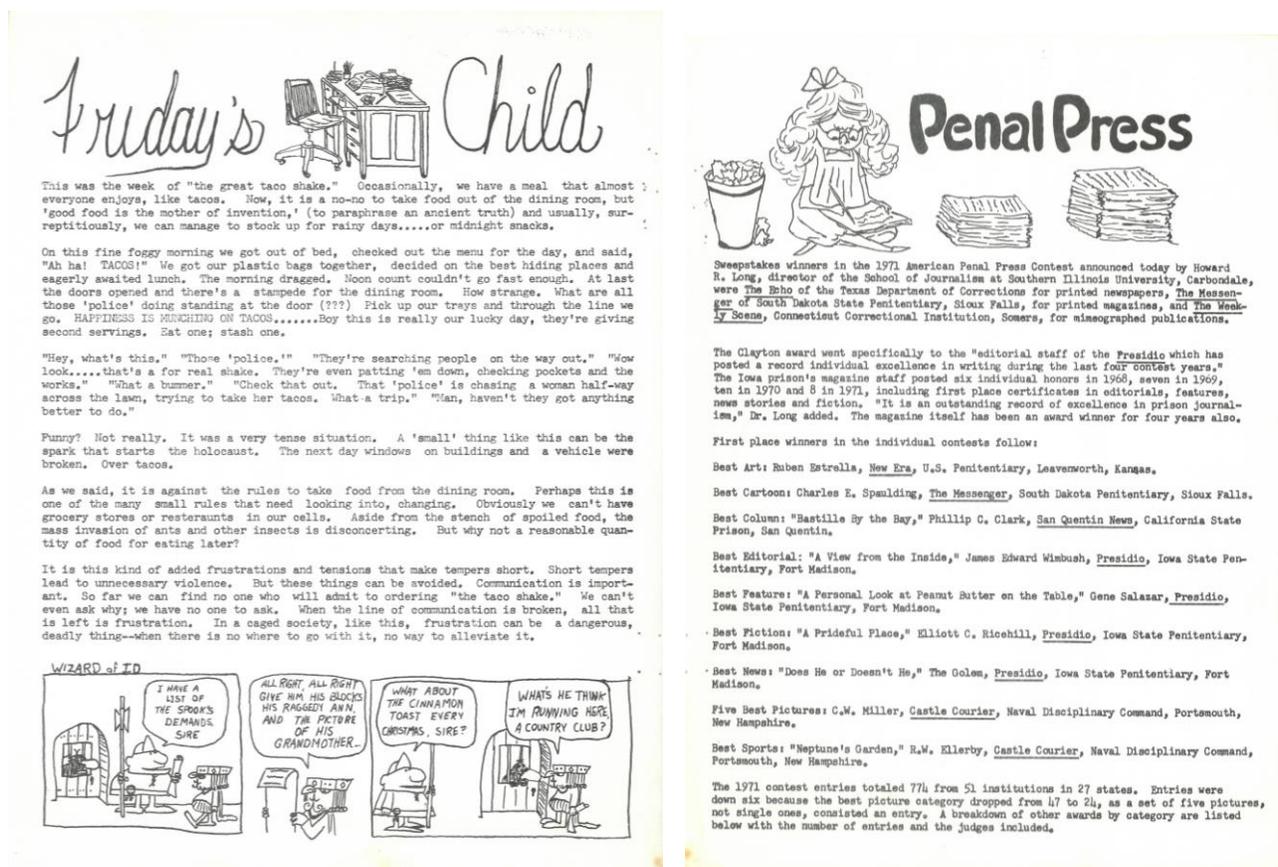


Figure 1: From inside the Jan/Feb 1972 edition of *Clarion*. Each edition regularly included hand-drawn titles, pictures and even cartoons, although sometimes borrowed from external sources. Both editions referenced were printed on coloured, A4 paper. The California Institution for Women at Frontera, California, Jan-Feb 1972, (Reproduced with permission from Special Collections Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library, Special Collections Library), 6.

In addition to *no title at all is better than a title like that!*, the participants of the SCWPP writing workshops also contributed to CIW's own in-house prison zine *Clarion* as an alternative

space to exhibit their writing. Described by one of the zine's founding trustees as "a medium of self-expression" whose purpose was "to encourage self-improvement", *Clarion* was established in 1937 at Tehachapi Women's Prison in California and was, according to Kathleen Cairns, the only prison publication in the US to be printed onsite (2009, p.106). Produced monthly, it had a circulation of 1,300 readers, including members of the public, and charged one-dollar for an annual subscription. Over the years the zine altered slightly, including a location change in 1952 to CIW, but the role of the zine as a space for the women to articulate their experiences and concerns remained constant into the 1970s.

Much of *no title at all* and *Clarion* was made up of articles about issues directly related to the women's own situation as prisoners at CIW. The Aug-Sept 1976 issue of *Clarion* contains an impassioned opinion article which outwardly encourages support and protest for carceral issues and critiques child custody: "the whole point of this article is to wake you up, to ask you to support other women in prison. ... Thanks for reading this, now it's your turn to start discussing it, writing letters and articles, and to get involved" (1976, p.13). Similarly, *no title at all* includes a poem by Donna Hansen who writes about one of her acquaintances, Cupcake, who has been abused by the system. She writes: "Now - - with Cupcake on my mind my pen seems helpless to save her - - but that's all I want to do. I want Cupcake and me and you to be free" (p.17). This rhetoric, which encourages action from the readers, suggests a more radical element to the zines. H. Bruce Franklin has suggested that part of the significance of prison writing and collective prison writing in particular, is not to "sit around admiring the authors, but to get up and put their message into action" (1989, p.251). For *Clarion* and *no title at all*, this is an important part of their protest literature aesthetic and distinguishes them from other newsletters or periodicals as they encourage engagement and action from their readership.

*Clarion* also reported on protests and riots in CIW, some of which were directly related to the SCWPP. Although some of the staff were encouraging and accommodating of the programmes, others were "unrelenting in their intolerance" (Faith, 1993, p.300). Faith describes how she "was frequently alerted by prisoners to ways that the project was kept under surveillance, with unfriendly guards lying in wait for someone to trip up and discredit the program so as to justify our expulsion from the institution" (*ibid.*). Teachers' vehicles and belongings were searched coming in and out of the facility and some teachers were even banned from entering (*ibid.*). However, the women did not readily accept the harassment. In 1972 when the programme was temporarily suspended because one of the SCWPP founders was banned from the prison, the students responded by organising a work strike and a sit-in in front of the warden's office. Similarly, in 1973 when the project was suspended again, the inmates responded by circulating petitions, holding work strikes, and organising meetings with the administration to protest the project's removal (Law, 2010).

In this sense, part of the role of the zine as protest literature is to encourage tangible action from its readers. But that is not all. By Howard Zinn's definition, protest literature "should move people to think more broadly, feel more deeply, and begin to act. ... [It] says to the reader have hope - you are not alone. And if it does nothing but that, it has done something profoundly important" (2006, p.517). This is a fundamental aspect of women's prison zines as protest literature: not merely the political and physical changes that might occur, but rather the vocalisation of a struggle/trauma/injustice that is then shared with others in order to educate, unite and ultimately resist.

This vocalisation and communication even expanded internationally. In addition to the personal and prison-related news, *Clarion* and *no title at all* also engaged with wider issues related

to incarcerated women as part of the SCWPP efforts to educate them about their status as incarcerated women in the US. One of the university level courses offered by the SCWPP titled 'women in society' was inherently gender-focused from the outset as they:

analyzed crime as a socially constructed condition, and criminal justice as a discriminatory system that criminalized people from the least socially empowered groups. [They] rejected patriarchal and class-based presumptions of fixed gender roles, [and] thus... did not accept the common view that women in conflict with the law de facto suffer from non-conformity to "feminine" standards (Faith, 1996, p.177).

In doing so, the SCWPP went beyond basic literary skills to arm the women with analytical and theoretical tools to be able to accurately diagnose and critique their situation, as well as discuss wider social and national structures of disempowerment.

Faith noted how the plethora of workshops aimed to "extend to women in prison the benefits of higher education and the empowerment that accrues from gaining political knowledge, recognising constructive life choices, (despite structural goal limitations), and acquiring skills to act on them" (1996, p.179). The classes acted as more than just credits for the inmates of CIW, few of whom had graduated from high school. The broad range of political and social studies courses offered the women a chance to learn more about the American penal system and American society at large, and to recognise their own place within it. One participant of the SCWPP explained the importance of groups like the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project: "what they're doing is making people politically aware that they're being used and that they put themselves in positions of being used as pawns in a fucked-up system. Our lives are very restricted prior to being incarcerated and we just didn't know what was happening" (*Women Behind Bars*, 1975, p.14). In place of vocational courses that limited the women to "sewing, hairdressing, office work or Grade 12 equivalency", the SCWPP initiated "the study of critical theory and substantive social issues affecting women's lives" (Faith, 1993, p.287).

### **Incarceration beyond Borders and Psychological Struggle**

With this focus on political and social education, the women were increasingly aware of current worldwide political issues such as the Vietnam War. In response to learning about the ongoing conflict, the women created a second one-off zine in 1975 titled *From Women in Prison Here to Women of Vietnam: We Are Sisters* comprising letters written to women imprisoned in southern Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> The cover image, designed by the short-lived organisation The San Francisco Women's Union<sup>7</sup>, shows the silhouettes of women, some wearing nón lá (traditional Vietnamese leaf hats), in a circle, holding hands with fists raised in the air as a sign of solidarity and protest. This camaraderie between the women is emphasised throughout *From Women in Prison Here to Women of Vietnam*. Typed and handwritten letters underscore the importance of the communal aspect of women's prison zines beyond the single facility and beyond the US, emphasising a

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<sup>6</sup> A copy of the zine can be found here:

<http://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC57scans/57.Vietnam.FromWomenToWomen.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The San Francisco Women's Union was an organisation that ran from 1974 to 1976 and aimed to look at the impact of race, class and gender on women's lives.

universal female experience and community.<sup>8</sup> The introduction to the zine quotes the Vice Minister of Health for the Provisional Revolutionary Government in Vietnam as saying: “We’re part of a worldwide family of militant women. We here in Vietnam follow the women’s liberation movement in the US very closely. Your movement and ours are complementary. The oceans cannot separate our emotions of unity” (p.2). This quotation emphasises the relationship that existed between the women’s movement and the prison reform movement and demonstrates the zine’s role as a piece of feminist literature.

The comparison of incarcerated peoples in America and the Vietnamese population is not entirely unusual for the time. Tens of thousands of men who refused to be drafted between 1964 and 1968 were sent to prison along with protesters against the War, leading them to feel more camaraderie with the Vietnamese people than their own government (Franklin, 1989). For the women whose incarceration is not directly related to the war, however, their solidarity stems from a greater disillusionment towards American society at large, and the gendered and racialised prejudices that led to their imprisonment. As well as the letters, the zine ends with information on Thieu’s prisons and on CIW, and how the reader could aid both causes, again highlighting the protest and participation element of prison zines, although this time on a worldwide scale. This connection to Vietnam was also utilised in feminist print culture at the time. Agatha Beins (2017) argues that iconography and text relating to Indochinese women (and Vietnamese women in particular) were prolific in feminist periodicals across the US. Much as African American women such as Angela Davis and Ericka Huggins became symbols of black female resistance, Vietnamese women became signifiers of revolution to an American female audience. In doing so, Beins argues that the concept of a revolutionary woman was not directly related to place, but rather was “formed from an amalgamation of ideas and ideals about those fighting imperialist forces” (2017, p.128). The references to Vietnamese women both textually and visually in women’s prison and feminist zines are therefore a tool through which women can articulate the pervasive and interchangeable nature of the women’s liberation struggle and encourage a sense of international camaraderie.

*From Women in Prison Here to Women of Vietnam* demonstrates the desire of the women incarcerated at CIW to reach out to women in a similar situation to them and form a dialogue based on shared oppressions. Many of their shared experiences that are discussed in *Clarion* and *no title at all* are rooted in the women’s commentary on confinement, particularly the psychological struggle over the absence and creation of space. For instance, in the poem ‘Someday’, the writer laments:

There’s a better life  
for me and you.  
Greener greens  
bluer blues.  
Wide open spaces  
for us to see.  
Bigger places  
for us to be.  
(*Clarion*, 1976, p.10)

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the experiences of every woman are the same, even within the same prison zine, but rather the act of sharing (sometimes differing) experiences can encourage community and solidarity, particularly in this case if the shared experiences are rooted in gender-based confinements. .

Emphasising the struggle and desire for space, this poem can be interpreted not merely as a longing for physical and mental freedom from the confines of a prison cell, but also as a yearning for a better life on the outside, within society. The desire for “greener greens” and “bluer blues” suggests that the writer seeks a society that is greater than it is; the “wide open spaces” symbolise not only physical freedoms, but also a freedom of opportunity, void of discrimination and prejudice.

Scholars such as Faith have argued, however, that the presence of creativity, writing and artistry within prison can help to lessen these feelings of frustration and confinement. Throughout the Aug-Sept 1976 edition of *Clarion* the editors emphasise the role of art within prison and actively encourage it at CIW. Leslie writes in the editorial: “Anyone who has thoughts, or any poems, illustrations, jokes or other written works please feel free to stop by the Clarion office and contribute” (p.1). Additionally, page 12 includes a promotional article about the popular PEN writing competition for prisoners, accompanied by an image showing a woman writing in front of a window with the sun coming out from behind the clouds. This imagery implies a dreamlike, open space with clarity and freedom forged through writing, despite the writer herself being behind walls. Karlene Faith describes the creative writing class and the act of writing itself as a way to create and maintain “their [the prisoners’] sense of private space or ‘sanity’” against the confining environment of prison (1993, p.193). In a space that is limited both physically in the form of bars, cages, jail cells and solitary confinement, and psychologically through limited mental stimulation and subtle removal of identity, the opportunity to self-define and “escape” through creativity could offer some relief. Anita Wilson argues that the conflict between an “institutional space” that prioritises “institutional literacy”, and the prisoners own “personal space with contextualized literacies that carry traces of outside world practices and activities”, creates a “third space” whereby prisoners can “occupy their minds” in order to retain some element of their “outside” selves (2004, p.70-74). However, Faith has argued that, in her experience, the defiant statement that “they can take my body but they can’t take my mind or soul” is “more a battle cry than a statement of fact” and that “despite the prevalence of such testimony, for many women the body/mind/soul can’t be separated, and for such women one of the most devastating aspects of imprisonment is indeed losing control over one’s own body” (1996, p.167).

Nevertheless, Judith Scheffler has argued that women’s writing workshops such as the SCWPP are important not merely for their individual benefits, but also as a collective. She writes:

The words that a woman writes about her life story, crime, and responses to prison may serve as therapy for her own personal situation, but a workshop environment extends their reach... In the context of a writing workshop, they work to defeat those negative forces as they take responsibility for themselves and for each other (2014, p.181).

In *Resistance Behind Bars*, Victoria Law explained that “an unexpected result of the SCWPP was the emergence of a dialogue between groups of prisoners who might otherwise never speak to each other”. She quotes a prisoner involved in the programme as saying, “I witnessed something I would have believed [three years ago] was impossible. We had an [illegal] meeting where Black and White were united, under one common cause. There were women there who in the past would never have spoken to each other but here they were standing together, agreeing, touching shoulders” (Law, 2012, p.79). The creation of the SCWPP and the writing course, and the subsequent creation of the collective publication *no title at all* meant that women generated a space both physically and emotionally for a new self-defined prison community that invited discussion,

creativity, sharing and support, untied by their gender, and acted against the system's environment of isolation, separation and stereotype.

The final poem in *no title at all* reflects this sentiment as the author begins each stanza by saying what prison is about: isolation, barriers, restriction, pain and corruption. Yet the final two stanzas reflect a different side to prison, beyond confinement writing:

Prison is about the eternal attempt –  
to call out and be heard,  
to reach out and be felt,  
to act out and be seen.

Prison is about the loss of and the  
search for familyhood, togetherness,  
and love (p.22; emphasis in original).

This poem disrupts the anticipated role of prison as an environment of isolation, punishment and silence. Although it acknowledges this is still prison's primary function, it also suggests that the women are actively reclaiming the space for themselves in order to forge bonds, create a community and develop a voice despite adversity. Zines act as a space to "call out and be heard" and through the sharing of ideas, experiences and opinions, form relationships through solidarity.

### **Conclusion: Feminist Collective Autobiography**

Just as creators of zines in the women's movement used the print format to communicate freely with likeminded individuals, the women incarcerated at CIW wrote to form a community and encourage support. This pursuit of involvement from their readers adds to definitions of protest literature as the women write not only for catharsis or community, but also for tangible action. Women's prison zines demonstrate the important and complex intersection between the women's movement and the prison reform movement in the 1970s, both in the involvement of feminist organisations in their creation, and in the content of their art and writing, which discusses a broad range of themes from prison resistance to motherhood and sexual violence. Although it is their status as prisoners which forcibly creates the environment in which they collectively make zines, in large, it is their experiences as women that encourage them to write. In viewing them as part of the feminist writing tradition of the 1970s, we can add imprisonment imagery to expand discussions of gender issues during this period. Co-authored and subcultural, zines allow a more thorough, extensive perspective on women's experiences of incarceration; the frequent anonymity of the authors and use of third-person pronouns helps form a singular, coherent voice that speaks for an entire community of oppressed individuals. But the zines go beyond just writing for catharsis or community, and can even encourage tangible action from their readers. Together, these aspects contribute to understandings of the protest literature tradition, feminist writing and even American prison literature, expanding it from individual, redemptive, masculine life writing, to empowered, feminist, collective autobiography.

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