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# “I am surprised they have allowed you in here to do this”: women’s prison writing as heterotopic space of narrative inclusion

<https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2024-0058>

Received February 19, 2024; accepted March 7, 2024; published online March 27, 2024

**Abstract:** The focus of this paper is the hidden world of women’s imprisonment as revealed in their writing produced in creative writing workshops. Proceeding from the perspective of narrative inquiry as a methodology to study lived experience, this study explores the juxtaposed spaces of the closed, exclusionary carceral world and the open, creative space of the writing workshop. Here we come to find the personal, situated within the wider carceral institution, in the marginalised voices of women in prison, writing their stories in their own words. The prison environment is seldom envisaged as a space that promotes literacy, education, the arts or creativity. This paper takes a relational perspective of creative writing workshops as a space which enables and facilitates prison writing, becoming a bridge between the enclosed prison space and the world outside. Following Foucault (1986. *Of other spaces*. Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacrities* 16(1). 22-27) the creative writing workshop and the textual space of writing may be seen as heterotopic spaces of play, empathy and inclusion that reflect the prison in the language of marginalisation. It gives the opportunity to women in prison to write about their inner lifeworld as a process to bear witness to their experience and work through the trauma of imprisonment. This writing in the textual space becomes a reflection of the repressive heterotopic space of prison and serves as a counter-narrative to the master narrative of punishment and prison. Therefore, whilst the writers in prison reach out to poetic and creative techniques to capture colours, metaphors and genres such as the fairy tale, the reader is constantly confronted by the harsh reality of their lived experience of confinement and their lives pre-imprisonment.

**Keywords:** prison writing; heterotopia; creative writing pedagogy; narrative inquiry; women in prison; cultural criminology

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# 1 Introduction – of hidden spaces and the restriction of presence

Confinement in institutions removes certain groups from the population and/or heavily restricts their movement and presence in wider society (O'Neill and Seal 2019: 137).

Prisons are hidden institutions. Closed worlds by default, they are “prone to secrecy and hard for outsiders to penetrate” (Aitken 2022: 478). As such, “by their very nature” they hide and obscure the people who work and live inside them (Lawston 2011: 1). In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1977: 8–9) writes that the emergence of the enclosed space of prison marked the reform of punishment with the gradual transformation of the “gloomy festival” of the public spectacle of execution turned into one of institutional punishment, becoming “the most hidden part of the penal process”. As a consequence, punishment and prison faded from the everyday world of perception into the domain of abstract concepts. In this paper, this observation is further refined to extend to the incarceration of women.

Removed from everyday life, these closed carceral worlds form part of the collective subconscious. The impassive prison wall, the outer border on the perimeter of the prison estate, is often described as a blank canvas onto which those on the outside project their fascination and fears, apathy or ignorance (Jewkes et al. 2017: 293; 303). Although the building itself mediates the relationship between those confined within it and the public, it is the state that defines the meanings ascribed to prison, and as such legitimises its own authority and functions, which in turn also shapes society's attitudes and responses to the incarcerated (Jewkes et al. 2017; Schept 2014). In addition, Lawston (2011: 1) observes that it is the obscurity, the “mystery that enshrouds the carceral that fuels the desire for outsiders to create representations of those inside prisons”.

Contemporary portrayals of women in prison often persist with the notion of incarcerated women as “hardened criminals” who need to be feared (Lawston 2011: 3–4). Their lives are depicted in a “flat and simplistic picture” which fails to contextualise the complexity of their lived experiences within social systems where economic, racial, gender and class discrimination are contributing factors to their disproportionate incarceration as marginalized, non-violent and often vulnerable women (Lawston 2011: 3–4). These one-dimensional socially-constructed perspectives of women in prison permeate our knowledge, often manipulating social understanding to maintain the current status quo. Thus, from the outside, the story of punishment, as told in the official language of statistics and headlines, erases the textured lived experiences and realities of those living and working within carceral institutions (Whitecross 2021).

In contrast, broadening the scope of the story of punishment to not only focus on the individual, Carlen and Tchaikovsky (1996: 211) argued that in order to keep the “endemic secrecy” of the carceral machine in check, its inner workings should be opened up to the public gaze, in particular to monitor its tendencies to revert from progressive to regressive practices. Extending this focus, a recently published report of an unannounced inspection to HMP/YOI Eastwood Park women's prison by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons in October 2022 (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2023) highlights regressive practices. The last inspection of Eastwood Park in 2019 found that outcomes for women were “reasonably good”, but in 2023 the results were defined as “now poor” (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2023: 9). The report found that 83 % of the women held in HMP/YOI Eastwood Park suffered from mental health difficulties and “many were caught in the cycle of homelessness, drug or alcohol misuse and offending” (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2023: 3). The report described “cells with scratches and bloodstains on the wall” (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2023: 3).

Haarhoff (1998: 10) writes of a conversation between two South Africans, the writer Ezekiel Mphahlele and the psychologist Chabani Manganyi, who argued that “we see each other through keyholes”. This conversation about the prevention of access to the experience of others (Haarhoff 1998) resonates and can further be conceptualised as the call for a counter-narrative based on lived experience rather than the controlled mediated representation and politicised rhetoric about prison and punishment.

In this paper then, I focus on the research questions of how the development of creative writing workshops can create a space for writing in prison as a transformative learning experience from the perspective of reconceptualising the self as a process for the writer in prison and how the women's prison writing can contribute a counter-narrative to the master narratives about punishment and life in prison. This participatory arts-based narrative research underwent detailed ethical scrutiny and external validation by both the University of Sussex's Research Governance Sponsorship Sub-Committee and by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Services (HMPPS), previously known as the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

## **2 Contextual background – of prison writing and narrative neglect**

Stories – told, lived and talked about – establish “the ways in which we create meaning in our lives as well as how we enlist each other's help in building our lives and communities” (Clandinin and Connelly 2006: 44). Rankin (2002: 1) writes of

narrative's emergence "as a process primordial to human affairs", precisely because the struggle for recognition in cultural and personal narratives lead to an understanding and conception of actions, agency, intentionality and perceptions. In addition, Clandinin and Connelly (2000: xxiii) establish the "study of experience" as the starting point in the plotline of social science research due to its occupation with "humans and their relations with themselves and their environment". Proceeding from the perspective of narrative inquiry as a methodology to study lived experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), I explore the juxtaposed spaces of the closed, exclusionary carceral world and the open, creative space of the writing workshop.

Within the folds of the wider social context, the stories as narratives of lived experience written by women in prison "carry personal and cultural meaning" whilst "their telling has social consequences" (Narayan 2012: 8). Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 2) argue that people need to be understood as individuals "always in relation, always in a social context". This focus seeks to create a "metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" where the strands of temporal dimensions and temporal matters entwine with personal and the social as they occur in "specific places or sequences of places" (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 50). My paper takes a relational perspective of what the prison writing, as bridge between the enclosed excluded and marginalised prison space and the world outside, reveals and communicates of the unrelenting experience of incarceration. Prison writing as such is then a key to unlocking the experience of imprisonment.

The term prison writing denotes "writing produced by authors with experience of incarceration – largely, but not only, prisoners and former prisoners – and writing including fiction from beyond the prison, that seeks to engage the experience of imprisonment directly" (Westall 2021: 4). Crucially, prison writing is most often the "writing that emerges within prisons and rarely makes it beyond the prison walls or prison-linked education and journalism activities" (Westall 2021: 4). It is also concerned with the values associated with literature – the connections between prison writing and the institutional, and cultural frameworks that "inhibit but also shape such work and its reception" (Westall 2021: 2). As has been noted, prisons, despite their 'public' status, are viewed as hidden and sealed spaces beyond the comprehension of those on the outside. Consequently, bridges between the 'inside' and the 'outside' become important for any conception of prison and its effects (Westall 2021: 1). The study of prison writing then needs to consider "an appreciation of the complicated ways in which prisons can become sites of resistance and creativity" (Westall 2021: 2).

Scheffler (2002: xxxv) writes that for imprisoned women life-writing serves as a means of bearing witness to their experience and working through the trauma of their imprisonment. Yet, incarcerated women's writing stands neglected and unexplored because it is not viewed as a necessary element in theorising punishment on the grounds of either not being cerebral and/or theoretical enough (Scheffler 1984: 65).

However, Crewe and Liebling (2017: 890) observe that “prisoners are sensitive and well-informed evaluators of their own predicament” and articulate in their descriptions of “how power feels” in prison, how it impacts on their well-being and psychological security, and what it means in terms of their opportunities for self-determination.

The exponential rise in the female prison population over the last three decades, in the UK and worldwide, has increased the need for a critical concern with the experiences of women in prison (Mullen 1999). Malloch and McIvor (2013: 208) have highlighted the “limitations of evidence-based research” in this context and called for “innovative ways of ensuring women’s voices are represented”. They argued that “greater status [should] be accorded to qualitative studies that prioritise women’s voices in capturing their experiences”, emphasizing participation as a crucial element of a human rights-based approach (Malloch and McIvor 2013: 208).

In the US, a body of published critical, creative and autobiographical women’s prison writing has steadily been growing (Davis 2004: 262). However, the UK suffers with limited critical engagement and analyses of women’s prison writing. The scarcity of published prison writing is of significance because voice, self-representation and identity are considered cognate and related terms which bear a “relationship to the construction of knowledge and the circulation of power” (Baker 1999: 365). Historically, while incarcerated men’s writing has a well-established tradition (Scheffler 1984: 57), “the knowledge and experiences of the vast majority of women in nineteenth century prisons remained unrecorded, owing to a number of factors – illiteracy, and the generally low cultural capital among female offenders, but also the cultural sanctioning of certain forms of knowledge over others” (Schwan 2014: 4).

Whilst women in prison benefit from arts initiatives, such as music, drama and visual arts, platforms and avenues for the publication of women’s prison writing predominantly take the form of entering writing competitions and submitting to charity magazines like *Ready Steady Go!*, the magazine for women in prison produced by the charity Women in Prison. In the UK, this is compounded by the lack of documentation of “how many such programs have existed, where they happened, how long they lasted, and what sorts of creative work they produced” (Lucas 2011: 194). With this paper, I aim to document my creative practice and methodology working with women in prison.

It is widely acknowledged that creative writing with prisoners can increase and help the cultivation of inner resources, such as personal autonomy, increased self-confidence and well-being that serve to encourage desistance through its continued rehabilitative effects (O’Neill and Seal 2019: 57). Godbee (2012: 171) writes that there is “much power in sharing writing, hearing it affirmed, and bearing witness to lives of others”. Through their work with male prisoners in HMP Durham and HMP Lewes, O’Neill and Seal (2019: 57) show how the prisoners’ imaginative

writing presents “an important lens through which to view both the experience of imprisonment, the boundaries between the inside of prison and the outside of ‘freedom’, individual biography and emotional subjectivity”. Similarly, through the lens of women’s creative writing in prison, we begin to encounter a narrative, which departs from the master narrative about prison and punishment, moving towards critical engagement to expand beyond the notion of writing in prison as purely rehabilitative in purpose.

In England and Wales, the prison service, across both the female and male estates, is in crisis (Albutt 2023; Howard League for Penal Reform 2017). Penal Reform International (Pope and Sa-ardyen 2021: 2) observe that “When people in prison are forgotten, neglected and exploited the impact on individuals and on broader society can be disastrous”, precisely because “problems with prisons often reflect wider societal problems”. This is of significance in terms of the female offender population as Coles et al. (2018: 5) write:

The women who end up in prison are amongst the most powerless and disadvantaged in society largely due to traumatic life experiences of: sexual and physical abuse, domestic violence, exploitation, periods of homelessness, institutional care, self-harm, educational disadvantage, trafficking, racism, drug and alcohol misuse and mental illness, underpinned by poverty and inequality.

### 3 Heterotopic spaces – the prison space and the creative writing workshop

Prisons are sites contained in Foucault’s notion of the heterotopia, which he outlined on three different occasions between 1966 and 1967 – firstly in the preface to *The Order of Things*, thereafter in a radio broadcast on the “theme of utopia and literature”, and lastly in a lecture to a gathering of architects (Johnson 2006: 75). In the radio broadcast, Foucault defined heterotopias in the context of children’s inventive play where playing “produces a different space that at the same time mirrors what is around them” in that it becomes a space that simultaneously reflects and contests, a “counter-space that are in different ways outside of the ordinary” (Johnson 2006: 76).

Johnson (2006: 77–78) explains that in the discussions of heterotopia, Foucault is focusing “on the formal, spatial qualities of certain places, which are both mythical and real, and (their) specific historic mutations” and that different examples of the heterotopia in essence all refer “to a relational disruption in time and space”, becoming “spatio-temporal units”. The prison is then mentioned in the context and descriptions of heterotopias where “the displacement of time is matched by the

disruption of space” and Johnson (2006: 79) uses the example of the regulated and “meticulously arranged enclosure” of prison with people constrained within this space that then exposes the “jumbled mess that we tend to live in on the outside”. Heterotopia is viewed as a space which “draws us out of ourselves” in unusual ways because it introduces and displays difference, a challenge to the spaces we might find familiar (Johnson 2006: 84).

With the focus on the action of writing in prison and the creative writing workshop, what becomes of interest here is that Foucault's (1986) discussions of heterotopia, whilst maintaining close similarities, denote different spaces. In his first reference to heterotopia, in the preface to *The Order of Things*, he considered heterotopias from the perspective of textual spaces, whereas in his radio broadcast and lecture, it was considered as social spaces (Johnson 2006: 75).

Progressing from the perspective of my research question, the creative writing workshops are viewed as the social space, whereas the prison writing and research writing then heralds the textual space. Writing in the context of my research thus functions as the placeless place, where the women's writing disrupts the mystery that enshrouds the hidden world of the carceral space with the focus on the particular in their lived experiences as opposed to generalisations.

From the perspective of the women's prison writings, I am then led into the textual space of their words where the heterotopia comes to “dissolve our myths” (Knight 2017: 142) in the reflection of prison as the placeless place in the social. What follows is a discussion of my approach, how I developed, implemented and at times adjusted the creative writing workshops.

## 4 Methodology – creative writing and the writing workshops

I wish that Pa was with me now. I would ask him how he would start to write the story I have embarked upon to-day. I would ask him how he would neatly tell the story of a prison [...] which has so many separate lives in it, and is so curious a shape, and must be approached, so darkly, through so many gates and twisting passages (Waters 2000: 7).

In coming to the process of writing, weaving together my writing, as researcher, with that of the writers in prison as participants, I drew on Ricoeur's (1984) three-stage process of mimesis, which views narrative as the basic structure of experience and time from which creativity and narrative identity spring (Rankin 2002: 2). Mimesis, or imitation, is viewed as the particular representation of human action and for Ricoeur it moved beyond the notion of merely copying reality, because of “an active creative element in composing that goes beyond mere reproduction” (Muldoon 2002: 66). For

Ricoeur, through his three levels of mimesis, there is a relation between life and art, because of the “dynamic circularity” between narrative and life. *Art/poiesis*, then holds the dual possibility of revealing, as well as transforming life (Wood 1991: 17).

In this three-stage process, Mimesis 1 refers to the understanding, the perception of the world and human action in a pre-narrative form; Mimesis 2 encapsulates the point where the pre-narrative form is configured into a narrative form through emplotment, i.e. the transformation of action into text such as the women in prison writing their own lived experiences or the researcher writing the article; and in Mimesis 3 the narrative transfigures ideas to the world, i.e. the interpretation, analysis or transformation of the creative writing research material as text into this paper (Rankin 2002: 4). Following from this framework, the key to my research, as a multi-layered writing structure, was divided into three mimetic parts, namely:

- i. locating the missing stories within the field of women’s prison and punishment
- ii. moving towards writing and reading together with women in prison
- iii. critically engaging with the women’s writing in the analysis.

In this paper, I focus on Mimesis 2, reading and writing together with the women in prison as writers, where Mimesis 2 as the stage of emplotment refers to creative writing as research method. Emplotment entails the writing and drawing together of a “heterogenous set of incidents, events and characters” which transforms these “disparate entities into a story taken as a whole” (Muldoon 2002: 67). It becomes the cog that mediates between Mimesis 1 as “our pre-understanding of the world of practical action”, and Mimesis 3, which entails “the reception of the plot by a reader” in the critical engagement with the women’s writing.

In this light, creative writing workshops were held over a 10-week period in two-hour sessions with imprisoned women in HMP Downview and HMP East Sutton Park and my participatory arts-based research sought to move beyond the boundary lines of a prison’s visual retreat to encounter what prisons “actually represent” (Jewkes et al. 2017: 293). However, the pursuit of aesthetic responses to incarceration becomes a challenge in and of itself in the circumstance of prisons, which are “seldom imagined as hotbeds of education, literacy, creativity, or the arts” (Lucas 2011: 193). The restrictive nature of incarceration, the noise and cramped conditions, “pose[s] significant challenges for those who wish to study, write, or make art” (Lucas 2011: 193).

The imprint of the prison environment on my research reflections is that of a brittle space filled with tension. Upon meeting the research participants and prison employees at the start of my research, I became aware that everyone was on their best behaviour. Yet, behind the shield of their effort, the heavy, sometimes chaotic atmosphere bristled and challenged my research aim of providing the opposite, a tranquil creative space in which to write and create.

I came to know the writers during three distinct phases in the research process. First in person as the research participants in the creative writing workshops, thereafter through their experiences as women living in prison in the transcription of their writing for the critical engagement and analysis, and lastly as editor reading their work for the compilation of the accompanying anthology to the research, *How Bleak is the Crow's Nest* (Whitecross 2021).

The writing group at Downview fluctuated between 11 and 9 writers initially and settled on 7 writers that completed all 10 workshops. The writing group at East Sutton Park started with 8 women, fluctuated between 6 and 5, and ended with 3 women who completed the 10-week course. In both groups the writers ranged in age from early twenties to sixties. The 18 writers chose their pseudonyms from the books of birds, flowers and trees that I had brought along to the workshops. In my research design it was a conscious decision to move away from using anonymised names in attribution to the women's writing. Instead, I used the books about nature, of plants, trees, birds and flowers for the writers to choose names that resonated with them. The writers and their writing are then identified according to their pseudonyms – *Yellow-horned Poppy* ~ *Oriental Redwood* ~ *Andromeda Marsh* ~ *Daisy Dove* ~ *Hearts* ~ *The Mallard* ~ *Baby Blue 79* ~ *Sea-Coral* ~ *Purple Rose* ~ *Yellowhammer* ~ *Rainbow Rose* ~ *Raven Hawthorn* ~ *The White Cow* ~ *Foxglove* ~ *Snapdragon* ~ *Wood Lily* ~ *Periwinkle* ~ *Tall Melilot*. As such, the words of the women's prison writing are italicised to afford them their own stylistic space within this paper.

Facilitating the creative writing workshops, I spent Tuesday mornings at HMP Downview, which is a closed prison and Tuesday evenings at HMP East Sutton Park, an open prison where the writers were near the end of their sentence and afforded greater freedom of movement. The group at Downview was more subdued and disciplined in their approach to the workshops, whereas the spirited group at East Sutton Park at times felt disjointed and less focused on their writing. On reflection, I came to realise this comparative experience as a consequence of the closed and open natures of the respective prison environments.

Whilst the workshops took place in the Education wings of both prisons, in Downview we spent the writing time in a classroom with a closed door and a guard patrolling outside. Every so often he or she would peer in at the window to observe our workshops and the librarian would check in bringing us tea and coffee at the halfway mark – a mug for me and plastic cups for the writers. The same level of surveillance was not present at East Sutton Park where the workshops took place in a classroom across a corridor from the library. The door was left open, and the writers could move about freely, going for smoke or bathroom breaks or using the computers in the classroom. In this more relaxed and often chaotic atmosphere, I had to work much harder to retain the group's focus on writing.

In the first workshop, I made it clear that I would not elicit any information about the writers and their convictions (Appleman 2013: 24; Michalski 2019: 73). This served the dual purpose of reinforcing a relationship of mutual respect and trust, to define the research participants as writers instead as prisoners and for the writers to organically explore their life journeys in writing without the fear of judgement, rejection or stigma. It further served the function of normalising the term ‘writer’ (Michalski 2019: 73) and redefine the women as writers within our co-constructed creative space, even though the thought of it made them laugh at first. But gradually, they began to show me the writing that they had done outside of the workshop at night on their own as illustrated here by Raven Hawthorn’s work:

*There I was sitting in misery, down and dark. My words evolved and I was created anew. Now I am laughing and transformed. I love the way that writing is always there. This is pure alchemy, from sand and grit to gold and jewels. I can be whoever I want to be. The magic of words. Writing has made an elemental space. I can see how I have grown each week. This has been more than writing, something has awoken within.*

My workshop design drew on Hunt’s (2013) work of “exploring the self in the learning process” through creative life writing. Hunt (2013) describes her experiences and reflections on teaching the MA in Creative Writing and Personal Development at the University of Sussex. From this flowed her observations on reconceptualising the self as a process to contain the different aspects of the self as revealed in writing, particularly by using fictional and poetic techniques (Hunt 2013: 43).

To frame the writing trajectory of reconceptualising the self as a process, I based the overall theme of the workshops on Campbell’s (2008) mono-myth story structure called the journey of life. I explained this conceptual process of writing to the research participants as centred on the main character (heroine) who leaves home and sets off on a difficult journey to then return home with a newfound wisdom. I contemplated whether to use this framing device or not, considering the critiques thereof (Murdock 2020: 2) particularly as Campbell did not envision it necessary for women to make the journey. Yet, I found that this structural framework resonated with the women as writers in prison, in the process becoming a counter-narrative to Campbell’s conception and perspective.

Hunt and Sampson (2006: 2) explain the contradiction found in this creative process as a symbiotic wave of push and pull, with writing constituting a deeply personal act connected to the writer’s self, but also involving a move away from the known self towards something impersonal and different. It therefore moves from a subjective experience towards something to explore objectively. Each research participant then embarked on an individual creative journey as writer within the framework of the collective journey of the group, which was broken down into episodes for each of the 10 weeks. In refining my approach, deciding on the writing

exercises and how to structure the workshops, I turned to the Amherst Writers and Artists method (AWA) (Schneider 2003) and later to Goldberg's (1991) *Wild Mind - Living the Writer's Life*. The syllabus and exercises focused on reconceptualising the self as a process and included the following writing prompts and exercises:

- Week 1 – Writing the self as a colour and an introduction to the river/tree of life metaphor and story structure using the freewriting writing technique.
- Week 2 – Writing the self as the seasons and describing a place.
- Week 3 – Writing in response to postcards of image stills of the animated film *The adventures of Prince Ahmed* made by Lotte Reiniger in 1926.
- Week 4 – Writing in response to music: Satie's 3 *Gymnopédies* 1 – 3, Talk Talk's *The Colour of Spring*, and bird sounds of the rain forest; Reflecting on sharing; Making a list.
- Week 5 – Reflecting on our colours at the halfway mark – what has changed, what has stayed the same; Writing about animals – familiar and unfamiliar.
- Week 6 – Revisiting our animals – swapping places; Writing about people – familiar and unfamiliar/strangers.
- Week 7 – Pools of reflection – self and others; Finding time.
- Week 8 – Writing the self as a character from a novel, namely Mrs Dalloway who said she would buy the flowers herself in the novel of the same name by Virginia Woolf; Patterns; Turning up and editing.
- Week 9 – Reflecting on the journey of the colours; Exploring kindness and the effects of reading out loud.
- Week 10 – An ending in one place is a beginning somewhere else... keep on writing; Freewriting exercise – I am a writer: What does that mean for you?; Handing out certificates; Celebrating the writers' work – reflecting on the writing that has stayed with us over the course of the 10-week period and asking writers to read it out loud one last time.

Based on the AWA method, the women were all then writers in a writing context and space with its own rules of conduct, ritual and support based on the notions of kindness, respect and listening to keep all the writers safe to find confidence in their own voices (Schneider 2003: 187). The housekeeping rules were set out as follows and reiterated throughout the workshops:

- Everyone in the group is a writer and writers write - writing is a very personal experience.
- There is no right or wrong way to write.
- All the writing is to be treated as fiction, with kindness and respect.
- Feedback is always to focus on the writing not the person, which sets the tone for how we interact as a group.

- Freewriting/sloppy copies will be shared only if the writer feels comfortable doing so and initial feedback from the group will focus on an image or sentence that has stayed with the research participant as reader and listener to the work of others in the group.
- Manuscripts are shared when the writer has spent some time editing and rewriting a piece - when giving feedback, always start with something positive, what you liked and why, before going into the detail of the piece of writing/paragraph/sentence/word that did not work for you.

The writing highlighted in this paper is drawn from the women's work in response to the abovementioned prompts and exercises. Each workshop started with the spreading of the tablecloth and the sharing of the day's writing agenda. During the 10-week period, the physical workshop classroom space in Downview changed three times, which meant that the tablecloth became the constant, the anchoring symbol of the creative space. Of this ritual of the tablecloth, Raven Hawthorn writes:

*I love this class. I love how the tablecloth gets us in the zone to write. Transforms the space. Feels like I'm not in prison for the time we are in here. The tablecloth adorned with reds and blues, oranges and green, becomes my parachute that saves me. Diamond, circle, flower and birds, repeat. A repetition before my eyes. I write.*

Following on from the tablecloth, breathing played an important role in the creation of the stillness to shift the research participants from their daily prison life to the contained space of the course, and to create a sense of acceptance for each participant. Once everyone was seated, I would ask the research participants to concentrate on their breath, to settle down and check in with themselves. Breathing became the embodied marker of the shift in space between the prison space and the writing space.

Following the breathing ritual, in the first workshop, participants had to ask of themselves and reflect on, How am I feeling right now? and then think of a colour, writing it down in their notebooks. We would go around in the group and say our colours out loud, one by one. In all workshops, the writers would thereafter refer to their colours in their writing when writing about themselves.

Once this reflective meditative practice was established, a freewriting exercise would follow where participants would use their colour instead of their names to write down a sentence or two or three. This freewriting approach (Elbow 2000: 85–88) gave the participants material to work with by opening up their thinking and finding a voice, with the writer not having to think about spelling or grammar, mechanics. The only constraint I imposed on the writers was that they had to keep their pens moving.

This approach proved a turning point for some of the writers who had initially been reluctant to write in fear that they might get it wrong, that they could not spell

or that they had nothing to write about. For example, in the first workshop Purple Rose turned away from the writing group and stared at the white wall; Daisy Dove kept leaving the room for bathroom breaks; Snapdragon and Foxglove passed rolling tobacco and paper back and forth across the table to one another; Periwinkle got up to use the computer to type a letter for another inmate. However, Oriental Redwood, who also struggled to write at first, most vividly illustrates the moment of wonder at having written a story in response to the prompt of writing about an unfamiliar animal after keeping her pen moving:

*The hedgehog forages for food after a long hibernation. It is now ready to travel to fresh habitats. It finds all sorts of places to relax and eat. She likes to sleep under leaves and sniffs everywhere she goes. It helps her to be aware of danger and to find a mate. There is a fly that hovers around her and she thinks it is highly annoying. This is an old dry leaf, disintegrating into the ground. A worm is intrigued by this leaf and crawls through it. The hedgehog comes along and eats him.*

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*I can't believe the week has gone by so fast and that creative writing is back already. Writing this mini story of the hedgehog was fun, but it took me the whole hour to write this, as I was unsure of what I was going to write. It surprised me loads!*

## 5 In their own words – writing the experience of narrative inclusion

The creative writing workshop became a space of narrative inclusion where I listened and learned from the writers, their writing and our conversations. In such a symbiotic space filled with patience and intuitive trust in the creative process, I tried to instil a sense of safety amongst the women, often “trapped in fear and self-protection”, being aware that individuals can come to write as deeply as they think and feel, “only if [they] are safe enough” (Schneider 2003: xx). Thus, as the researcher, I placed myself in the position of “letting the research and creativity unfold together” and the stories of creative writing emerge as the research outcomes (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014: 1). Because the writer's voice is:

an incredibly delicate instrument made up of all the places he or she has been, all the persons loved and lived with, all the cultural nuances of original neighbourhood, workplace, home, country, continent, historical period, and personal story. (Schneider 2003: 191)

Schneider (2003: 191) writes about the particularity of the experience in the workshop space, where people who write together affirm one another's work, and allows for the writers “to meet one another so vulnerably – to laugh and cry and laugh again”. Both Rainbow Rose and Raven Hawthorn acknowledge this process of

affirmation when they write about reading their work out loud. Raven Hawthorn writes:

*To listen to other people felt like a gift. Each time I wrote and read it aloud it became like a diamond added to the crown. Felt proud and became more and more sure of myself. Pushed passed [sic] the feeling of discomfort and found a magical place.*

Her reflection on the process of reading her work out loud resonates with Rainbow Rose's observation:

*When I read my work out, in a way I feel good about it, but on some of my work I feel uncomfortable, but I push myself to read it as it takes the weight of [sic] my shoulders.*

Hunt (2013: 137) points out that this embodied experiential learning through creative writing, which leads to the "opening up" and development of a "more bodily-felt space for the imagination", can be distressing at first. Reflecting on her writing in the first session, Snapdragon expresses this emotional moment referring to the moment she cried, threw down her pen and stood up from her chair to passionately speak out about her experiences in court whilst she was a university student, being out on bail while attending university lectures and completing assignments:

*I had a little blip where I broke a little about a situation and I am a little embarrassed and even stressed because it made me feel vulnerable.*

This acknowledgement of vulnerability and embarrassment becomes a determining factor in that the writing group needs to provide the collective holding space for these experiences and for the writing to be expressed through trust in, and by each of the writers contained by the group as a whole (Hunt 2013: 137). Oriental Redwood explains:

*I felt really calm and grounded but then a friend got upset and I started feeling sad and then started to think about my past.*

Writing, and the group's reading of the women's work, becomes a "containing matrix" within the disruption and chaos of imprisonment, and provides a space for Oriental Redwood on hearing Snapdragon's writing to reflect and make links with her own lived experiences in her own writing – a process which then inspires and preserves "a capacity for thoughtful judgment" (Shields 2009: 584). Snapdragon's emotions, her *little blip*, where she *broke a little*, function as a moment of influence, inspiring deeper reflection within Oriental Redwood on her own past as an acknowledgement of this writing development.

Listening to the other writers, the group gains an appreciation of each narrator's insight and courage. The affirmation, acceptance and reward come not from hearing

critique, but instead from the listener's responses to what has stayed with them, the laughter if they wrote something funny, the appreciation of an arresting or striking image, and/or the shared tears when their grief, emotion or frustration resonated with that of the listener(s) (Schneider 2003: 191).

In each workshop session, paradoxically then, the mood amongst the writers gradually lifts as the writing session progresses. As Sea-Coral reflects:

*My mood lifted during the morning. I felt low at first and got annoyed at myself for feeling emotional.*

Raven Hawthorn reiterates this reflection:

*Had a great day. When we first came in everyone had a lot going on. But we all grounded and it turned out really positive.*

To reaffirm the safe space, I did not follow the classic creative writing workshop model and the writers did not submit work in advance to receive written and verbal feedback from the others. Instead, everyone wrote together in the two-hour workshops itself, where all writing was treated as fictional without limitations of genre and form, because “when writing begins, it needs freedom to take its own form” (Schneider 2003: 117). Initially then, some of the writers wrote a few words, some a few sentences, some a short paragraph, some a whole page, and some a poem. Linked to freewriting as fiction, the final session ended with the reflective acknowledgement and reiteration that the research participants were all writers. The session and the workshops as a whole concluded with my message to each writer, to be read and reflected on after the workshops had finished:

Every morning as soon as you wake up and each night before you go to sleep, say to yourself, simply and clearly, “I am a writer.” It doesn't matter if you believe it. Just plant the seed. You might feel like a complete fool. That is okay. Step forward and say it anyway. (Goldberg 1991: 105)

## **6 Findings – art as social practice and prison writing as heterotopic space of narrative inclusion**

Through their work, the writers reveal the necessity of being able to express their emotions and of being given space to do so despite the intensity of the experience. One Tuesday morning, before the end of the session, Raven Hawthorn turned to me and said:

RH: *I'm surprised they've allowed you in here to do this.*

RW: Do what?

RH: *Let us write and talk about our feelings. In here no one ever talks about feelings.*

With this question, Raven Hawthorn leads the process of witnessing the prison experience when she voiced her surprise about being allowed to write and talk about her feelings, because, *In here no one ever talks about feelings*. Her words resonate with Lorde's (1984: 39) observation that:

For living within structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive.

Oriental Redwood, who struggled to write at first, explores opening up to the creative process in her reflection on feelings:

*The writing class has given me the chance to start using more of my imagination. It has helped me to find my true feelings. Almost, not quite, but I'm now learning to not be afraid of writing how I feel.*

*The Shadow People*

*Each shadow person represents an emotion:*

~ *Sad Shadow* – *This person sits with their head in their lap.*

~ *Anxious Shadow* – *This person stands against the well's wall twiddling their fingers.*

~ *Scared Shadow* – *This person stays in the foetal position.*

~ *Intrigued Shadow* – *This person is standing forward with their head tilted to one side.*

*Writing helps me understand myself.*

She observes herself from different perspectives as she names her emotions, asserting the multi-dimensionality of her self and begins to subvert the prison space as a space where feelings are not meant to survive or be shown. This is in sync with Ricoeur's (1991: 198) argument that narrative mediation brings to the fore self-interpretation as a characteristic of self-knowledge. The artistic process involved the choice of a medium, in this case creative writing, give expression to internal images, feelings and ideas, unique to the individual writers in prison to "then to make connections between these personal narratives and the cultural forces" (Mullen 1999: 145). This is evident in the White Cow's writing when she reflects:

*As a machine, I know little of this language. Although at times I am full of feeling. I am a robot.*

Here she captures an existence without recourse to discussing feelings in prison when she refers to herself as a machine who knows little of this language, namely the language of feelings. *Although at times I am full of feeling. I am a robot*. She acknowledges the existence of feeling, though the grain of naming the self is

dehumanized, industrial in its associated metaphors of a machine and robot where living does not draw on feeling.

Echoing Lorde's observation about dehumanization and death of feelings within institutional structures, Crewe et al. (2017: 1364) in their comparative study of the gendered pains of life imprisonment, which also included interviews with women in prison, remarked on the "extraordinary emotional burdens" that their research participants were carrying, and the "limited opportunities to process their feelings about their lives prior to imprisonment, their offences and the extremely long sentences that they were serving". The women's prison writing in my research extend these observations and reveal the enforced silencing of the women's lifeworld in prison, the repression of their feelings as an unexpressed and unprocessed perceptive aspect of imprisonment and their lived experience. Of writing feeling and the process of sensuous knowledge production O'Neill et al. (2017: 214) write that:

An awareness of the complex relationships that exist between thinking, feeling, and doing and their articulation within systems of knowledge, power and reason are central to PAR [participatory action research].

Therefore, in the context of art as social practice, women's prison texts become political in speaking for women in prison, silenced and hidden away (Scheffler 2002: xxii), because, as Melossi (2001: 407) points out, "punishment is deeply embedded in the national/cultural specificity of the environment that produces it". Within the wider context of women's imprisonment, an area of the social that Player (2014: 276) commented on as "so exhaustively researched to such little practical effect", this speaks to the slow progress in bringing about structural and systemic change. From these observations a picture emerges of the absence of the written stories of marginality and the suppression of telling what it feels like to live through these experiences of imprisonment in the wake of poverty, domestic abuse, homelessness, addiction and mental health pressures. Hunt (2013: 136) points to the significance of continuing to write past the difficulty initially experienced, because of the understanding of the damage that can occur to the writers themselves if uncomfortable feelings are pushed into the shadows rather than expressed. Writing in response to the exercise of viewing the self as reflections in mirrors or pools, Raven Hawthorn highlights that it is in the transformative space of the blank page, writing herself in her own words that the puzzle pieces of her self find a shape. When she looks into the mirror and begins to assemble herself, she writes:

*I walk past the glassy pool. Shocked by my reflection. How long has it been since I really saw myself?  
Who was this woman looking at me?  
I felt sadness at life lost. Where had it gone? Years that I can never get back. They are told on my*

*face, each line telling a different story. I didn't see them all. I hide from my reflection sometimes. I don't want to see my past. I feel scared of my future. I try to find the good in what has been. These are the same young eyes that once saw the magic and delight in all. When did it disappear? I try to carve a new shape.*

*This is my time to grow. I look in horror as I see what I have become. How do I get out of here? Tell me where the exit is please. I want to escape to be anywhere else where I am far away from me.*

*Strong dislike and battle with me. Somehow I've become my own worst enemy. The negativity swells up and the huge wave crashes against me. Wash away my fears and renew my self view.*

*King and Queen I can be. Master of my own destiny. Rise up and fight. The goblins that live under my bridge, sit with a riddle waiting for me. I never get it right. Maybe one day I will. The grotesque figure taunts me. She glides past me knowing one day she will defeat.*

*Don't be afraid anymore, know that I can look after me. I am the green of a tree, the wing of a magpie. Nature is part of me. Always my true friend, it has never deserted me.*

Lowrie (2008: 1) writes that the mirror as encountered in the narrative text mesmerizes in that the sightings of the self capture both spaces of fascination and fear. To view one self in a mirror holds the dual experiences of reflection and reflexivity (Lowrie 2008: 1). Raven Hawthorn is shocked by the sighting of herself – *How long has it been since I really saw myself? Who was this woman looking at me?* – where the lines in her face tell the story of her past. In the dissonance of the mirror reflection, the writers in prison experience the self as a process through reflexive writing and engagement with memories. The duality contained in the reflection and reflexivity leads into her confrontation with the narrative of shame and a desperate plea to exit from herself, *I want to escape to be anywhere else where I am far away from me*. She has become her own prison, where her punishment resides in the battle with herself, *Strong dislike and battle with me. Somehow I've become my own worst enemy*. With eyes that used to see beauty in life, she now hides from her past and fears for her future. The mirror becomes an infinite refraction of lived experience, holding expressions of the past, present and future. In order to make meaning of this refraction, Raven Hawthorn reverts to the style of the fairy tale which allows space for her narrative to explore this captivity of the self in the self through the metaphor of the goblin residing under her bridge, taunting her with the riddle to her life. She does not know how to make changes in her self for a different future, she does not know the answer to the riddle of her life, *I never get it right. Maybe one day I will. The grotesque figure taunts me. She glides past me knowing one day she will defeat*.

This affirms the research question of how the development of creative writing workshops can create a space for writing in prison as a transformative learning experience from the perspective of reconceptualising the self as a process for the

writer in prison. Particularly as Jose-Kampfner (1990: 112–113), in examining the double loss imprisoned women describe in losing themselves, as well as their outside worlds, points out that “most health professionals agree that individuals need to grieve in order to process the traumatic events that happen to them” and that “the denial, or blocking emotions will result in unresolved feelings that will affect the emotional wellbeing of individuals”. Daisy Dove scribbled on her writing, *I wish I was dead*. After reflecting on her past and the lived experience of homelessness and alcoholism, she writes of the present in prison:

*Roll check at ESP [East Sutton Park] at 11pm. The officers just check for the feet. Three pairs of feet. I'm writing this because I'm very lonely right now as I am going through therapy and a number of courses. This is helping to ease the trauma but my emotions are raw and unsettled. This is a natural progression to help me heal, but I feel cold inside and tired. This is an unnatural feeling for me as my default setting is positive and I struggle with being down and despondent.*

Of significance is Daisy Dove's mention of undergoing therapy and a number of courses related to easing her trauma and how she feels, *cold inside and tired*. When she writes that her emotions are raw and unsettled, I understand this as a natural consequence in the progression of the writing process and also of the therapeutic sessions. Writers acknowledge this process in what Sarton (1973: 13) refers to as “Cracking open the inner world again, writing even a couple of pages, threw me back in depression”. In relation to Daisy Dove feeling cold inside and tired following her trauma and therapy courses, Herman (1997: 211) writes that:

Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor's lifecycle.

Herman (1997: 211) points out that in the recovery process, “issues that were sufficiently resolved at one stage”, may later reawaken as new milestones are reached in the survivor's development. Yet, prison is not a space that allows for the expression of grief upon following traumatic events, as the women's prison writing shows. Instead, as Jose-Kampfner (1990: 118) observes, women are encouraged “to forget about their depression”, “to look at the positive aspects of their situation” so that they can “keep out of trouble”. Thus, what is encouraged in prison is an attitude where “one's depression will go away” if it is not mentioned or talked about (Jose-Kampfner 1990: 118). But it does not, as the high incidences of self-harm and suicide rates amongst women in prison in the UK show (INQUEST 2020).

Situated within the framework of art as social practice, this paper explored the language of marginalisation, and what it revealed of the creative writing workshops as a heterotopic space (Foucault 1986) of play within the institution of prison. It explored how entry into this space of play through writing draws the women as

writers out of themselves to reflect on prison, itself a heterotopic space, as a return effect of the placeless place and living on the edge, because:

I don't think it's just the writing or the art that does the empowering, but the overall educational process in conjunction with the creative effort – as well as the internal search for meaning and the external search for harmony. (Kendig 1994: 163)

The White Cow captures these aspects of creativity and writing together in a group as a contradictory process of growth in the prison space when she reflects:

*The time is ticking quietly in the background and each of us writing is like a droplet rolling down from the spout of a teapot into a cup that brings the liquid to the top and brims over with happy creativity and rolls onto the saucers and continues to flow. The bond is formed on our gentle thoughtfulness and creativity helps the bonds to form a web. The web springs from flowers and at the base warm them to flourish and grow.*

## 7 Conclusions

Following the findings of drawn from this research, it is important to state that “creativity is not a substitute for social justice” (Banaji 2011: 43), but rather that prison writing forms the bridge between the heterotopic space of prison into the social and cultural sphere in the publication and engagement with the women’s prison writing. Because, whilst the writers in prison reach out to colours, metaphors and literary styles such as the fairy tale, we are constantly confronted by the harsh reality of their lived experience of confinement. When addressing the narrative neglect of women in prison and their prison writings, the problems with prisons as a reflection of wider societal problems take shape in their words, in the narratives of their lived experiences. It becomes transformative in the personal sphere and disruptive in the social sphere where the internal gaze roams into new ways of seeing through the creative process of writing.

In the personal sphere, what does become clear is that for growth to occur, the writer in prison needs a continued and sustained period of time set aside for writing during her incarceration. When this happens in practice, the women’s prison writing revealed the depth of the transformative value for the writer persisting in the creative writing sessions over the 10-week period, which in turn became restorative as a restoring practice of the self. The turning points revealed in their individual prison writing would not have been possible through one-off contributions to writing competitions and/or magazines. Instead, growth as increased self-awareness through cultivating writing as a skill is nurtured over time, through individual commitment to the process, even though the writer might find it a difficult process at first. To support

the writer in prison, this approach to creative writing, art as social practice needs to be embedded at the institutional level. I conclude with Sea-Coral's words, presented to me in an unsolicited poem, written about how she experienced the workshops and what it had meant to her:

*Today is the day, Tuesday by name,  
Something is different, not the same.  
I won't be going to my favourite place,  
It's ended, finished, there's no more space.  
Purple book stays upon the shelf,  
No more creative writing today, I tell myself.  
I expect I will have to get used to this,  
I will miss the girls, I quietly hiss.  
No more Rosa, no more fun,  
But I have enjoyed 10 weeks with everyone.  
Thank you Rosa for all your ideas,  
Sorry everyone for my weepy tears.  
Thank you girls, your work was great,  
I will miss your stories that you will create.  
Carry on writing, it's not the end,  
It's the start of something you can depend.  
So pick up your pens, you can't go wrong,  
Your writing will make you very strong.*

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